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IDEOLOGICAL “SMACKDOWN”: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF CLASS, RACE AND GENDER IN WWE TELEVISION PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING

by

Casey Brandon Hart

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2012
ABSTRACT

IDEOLOGICAL “SMACKDOWN”: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF CLASS, RACE AND GENDER IN WWE TELEVISION PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING

by Casey Brandon Hart

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The focus of this study is an in-depth intertextual examination of how the WWE in 2010 and by extension contemporary professional wrestling in general represents a microcosm of modern cultural ideology. The study examines three major areas in which this occurs. The first of these areas is that of class values. This section focuses on the establishment and extension middle-American values, defined as those values generally shared by the middle-class of the United States. The second section of this study focuses on how the WWE uses racial commodification in the treatment of people of color. Using concepts of Marxist power and Critical Race Theory this section breaks down the use of stereotypical imagery connected with Blacks and Hispanics and theorizes to possible social effects such representations may cause. The final section within this analysis focuses on female representation within the masculine melodrama that is professional wrestling as epitomized by the WWE. Specifically, the section examines the use of mean girl imagery through the lens of Marxist power theories. The section theorizes that by building on a mean girl archetype within villainous characters, the WWE essentially creates a target that embodies most/all of those characteristics deemed unattractive or unappealing in females. Considering the finding and analysis of the main three sections the final discussion extends the study by suggesting further research to test audience recall and response to the imagery and representation examined within this study.
The University of Southern Mississippi

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by

Casey Brandon Hart

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate School of The University of Southern Mississippi in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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May 2012
DEDICATION

To my best friend, inspiration, and love of my life Kimberly. For believing in me when I have doubts, encouraging me when I lack certainty, and putting up with me the rest of the time. Thanks for all the little things you do and don’t even realize; I’m not sure I could have done it without you.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

For most of its existence, professional wrestling has held a social position of ignobility regardless of the culture in which it exists. Be it Western Europe or North America this form of sports entertainment has seldom been categorized as anything but farcical and base. This is thanks in large part to the strong overtones of machismo and the grandiloquence with which the performers act out scenes of suffering, revenge, decadence and aggression. For decades these scenes were relegated to high school gymnasiums and seedy parlors, but as the years have passed organizations like World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE, formerly World Wrestling Federation) have grown tremendously. Professional wrestling has become a multi-billion dollar enterprise generating over $400 million in 2006 alone (Guthrie, 2007). The spectacle of staged wrestling may at first glance appear to be simplistic and crude. To the casual viewer it may appear to be little more than grown men pretending to fight. Upon further examination of this modern day spectacle, however, one would see that there is far more at play. The purpose of this study is to conduct an in depth textual analysis of contemporary televised professional wrestling as on display in the WWE. This study will specifically focus on the televised representations of sex, class and race.

In the 1950s, sociologist Roland Barthes wrote a book titled *Mythologies* (Barthes, 1972 (translated)) within which he examined various cultural facets of French society. The first chapter in this book examined what he referred to as Parisian parlor wrestling. This parlor wrestling was an early contemporary of what would eventually become the professional wrestling industry in the United States. To begin his analysis,
Barthes makes clear one of the most significant aspects of this spectacle, namely that it is not a sport in the most common sense of the term. That is not to say that it is not athletic or does not require some form of advanced physical prowess, but rather to make the argument that it is as Barthes puts it stage-managed. To put this argument in a different context, consider the spectacle of *Cirque du Soleil*. Though technically a circus and acrobatic show, *Cirque* often packages their bevy of performances within an overarching theatrical performance with acrobats, strongmen/women and clowns all performing within an overarching theme. This theme is usually something exotic or at very least categorically different from that of a traditional circus. In fact, whether taking the form of rabbits, bugs, pixies or any other fanciful creature, *Cirque du Soleil* refers to their form of performance as *artistic entertainment* (*Cirque du Soleil*, 2011). In the same way, professional wrestling then and now is not referred to as a sport per se, but rather as sports entertainment (Mazer, 1998) indicating that the concept of sport and entertainment are inextricably linked in a similar fashion as art and entertainment in the presentation of *Cirque du Soleil*.

When he wrote of Parisian wrestling in the 1950s, Barthes pointed out that the audience was not drawn to the spectacle because they presumed the event was real combat, nor were they expecting to see real suffering or injury. In fact, Barthes pointed out that, should a real injury occur or some form of actual suffering take place, the audience of such events would most likely react very negatively. It is the illusion of suffering and struggle, and the connection of meaning that audiences flocked to. French (and consequently American) audiences did not simply want to see suffering, but rather they wanted to see an affirmation of their cultural values. This is to say that Barthes
identified that it was important for the right individuals to suffer regardless of wins and losses. For example, a hero who represented the virtuous *working man* could be beaten by the insidious, upper crust villain who represented oppressive upper class values and the audience would react with “great heat” (Mazer, 1998, p. 63). This is because they relate to the hero’s struggle of trying hard but being beaten by the often-unfair practices of the ruling class. In this hypothetical example, the real conflict is not man versus man, but rather class versus class.

The current WWE operates within the same basic construct. Whereas Barthes’ parlor wrestling drew crowds eager to seek affirmation of their cultural norms, the WWE draws astounding weekly television audiences for the same reason. In fact, for contemporary WWE professional wrestling the televised product/program is the cornerstone of the business’s success. While Barthes focused on parlor wrestling as what might be described as a small-scale curiosity, the current WWE is anything but. Attracting audiences of every race, age and sex, the current WWE uses their weekly product as a primary revenue vehicle with over $520 million per year according to market research for the year 2009 (WWE Television Power, 2009).

According to the Nielson Company’s research in 2009, over 15.6 million unique viewers tune into one of the two major WWE programs (*RAW* or *Smackdown*) every week. This effectively means that these programs consistently rank among the most viewed cable programs every week regardless of what they are pitted against. Furthermore, if the most recent 2010 U.S. Census data is correct, of 308 million Americans, roughly 1 in 20 is a regular viewer of weekly WWE programming. According to the same research, of these 15.6 million unique viewers, approximately
62% are White with the rest evenly split between Black and Hispanic viewers (approximately 20%).

<table>
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<th>Diverse Audience</th>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>62.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black/African-American</td>
<td>20.2%</td>
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Figure 1. WWE Fan Demographics. This is a breakdown of WWE viewer demographics for the broadcast year ending in March 2009. The figure illustrates the age distribution of viewers is fairly balanced. Additionally, it illustrates that while males do still constitute over 60 percent of the viewers, female viewership is strong (Nielsen Media Research, 2009).

While not necessarily being considered a sport, RAW alone consistently drew more weekly viewers than NBA and MLB broadcasts combined. Similarly, being a prime time/late night program, RAW drew more weekly viewers than The Tonight Show with Jay Leno, The Late Show with David Letterman, or any other late night program aired in a similar time slot. Weekly viewers of WWE programming consist of 36.2% females, and among their target demographic of viewers 18-49 the programs rank higher or at least competitively in weekly viewership than almost any other program on network or cable television.

While Barthes analysis focused on parlor wrestling held in small venues, current televised WWE programming is aired 52 weeks a year in 145 countries and in 28
different languages and has featured guest appearances of a wide variety of celebrities and professional athletes using the programs to cross promote their own projects. Examples would include Academy Award nominee Mickey Rourke participating in matches and verbal confrontations with WWE performer Chris Jericho in order to promote his movie *The Wrestler*. This fictitious rivalry was primarily conducted out of the ring in televised cut-scenes on *Raw* and *Smackdown*, and even in an interview with CNN in 2009. Other celebrity appearances include Donald Trump, Seth Green, a wide variety of professional athletes including football players, boxers, NASCAR drivers and even Miss USA Rima Fakih has appeared in the televised programs. Recently in 2011, Snookie from the television show *Jersey Shore* even made an appearance as a guest host on *RAW* which led to a rivalry between the reality show celebrity and several WWE *Divas*. This rivalry resulted in weeks of cross promotion between *Jersey Shore* and all televised WWE brands leading to a dramatic showdown at the *WWE Wrestlemainia* pay-per-view broadcast. This illustrates that while the current WWE is, in form, similar to what Barthes observed over a half century ago, it’s current televised incarnation is much different in many respects.

Then and now, the heart of professional wrestling is a discourse of cultural values (Barthes, 1972; Mazer 1998). Within the realm of professional wrestling it is not just enough for two unknown individuals to *beat each other up* (Mazer, 1998). Wrestling is at its core a populist form of entertainment so a wrestler/performer must convey to the audience their roles within the discourse of any particular match. This is to say that the audience must understand whom they should cheer and who is the “*salaud* or bastard” (Barthes, 1972, p. 17). This dynamic is key to the cultural discourse of the wrestling
phenomenon. Barthes argued that even in this early form of wrestling a variety of messages are transmitted to the audience through the look, body, attitude and verbal proclamations of each wrestler. Some became the embodiment of French values and ideologies; others were effectively monsters, cads, or heels (Lachlan et al., 2009). In any case, the audience knew who was supposed to be the good guy and who was the bad guy.

Modern wrestling operates in much the same way. While Barthes’ wrestling, however, was relegated to dimly lit second-rate halls, modern wrestling vis a vis the WWE is viewed primarily through the filter of the television broadcast. As a text, contemporary WWE broadcasts depend as much (if not more) on what happens outside the ring and is expressed via cut-scenes, interviews and commentary, than what necessarily occurs within the ring. Even from the earliest days most successful entertainers wore the culture as a uniform. From the out of ring escapades of Ted The Million Dollar Man DiBiase who regularly appeared out of the ring proving that “every man has his price” during the uber-capitalist 1980s, to Stone Cold Steve Austin and Degeneration X in the 1990s who were the poster boys for the Good-ole-boy NASCAR culture and Generation X cultures respectively, WWE performers have always been more than wrestlers. In a sense, they have been actors and embodiments of the culture in which they exist. This being said, even the in-ring action is viewed through the lens of the television camera. This means elements such as camera angles and composition can aid in expressing not only the immediacy Barthes argued was key in the spectacle, but drawing the audience into the constructed reality of the developing plot and storyline.

This study will focus primarily on how wrestling via the WWE, operating as a text similar to other television programs, features archetypal characters that embody
cultural ideology. From this perspective, this study will examine many such characters as they were featured in the most recent 2010 broadcast year of WWE programming. Within each examination the textual analysis will be conducted from the standpoint that every character may be read in numerous different ways depending on the perspective of the viewer.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study will be a textual analysis of the top performers during the WWE’s 2010 broadcast year. More specifically, this analysis will examine each of the more prominently featured characters within the televised WWE programs as cultural texts. Studied along the same lines as Burns and Thompson’s (1989) early work in television studies, WWE programming in general will be considered herein as a “popular text” (p. 3). As such, and using their definition, a popular text is considered one that “appeals to a large, heterogeneous audience… and must of necessity be polysemic, full of a variety of potential meanings” (p. 3). Professional wrestling has always been populist in nature, appealing to what is popular and often setting the people against some elite or socially unacceptable other. This is especially true within televised professional wrestling in the fact that through televised representation of particular characters, the audience is essentially led to draw particular conclusions about certain wrestlers and ideologies.

While this study will examine professional wrestling from a semiological perspective, intertextuality will play a key role. Popular texts such as televised professional wrestling must appeal to a very diverse audience and be first and foremost polysemic (Fiske, 1989). Intertextuality, as introduced by Julia Kristeva (1980) is the study of how texts or symbols relate and interrelate with one another. Within the overall structural text of televised professional wrestling each performer may be analyzed as a text unto themselves. Kristeva argued that every text can/should be analyzed along two axes. These include the axis of author and reader and the axis of text against text (1980). Within this study this takes the form of analyzing the performer as a stand-in or
embodiment of some cultural trope, John Cena as the blue-collar workingman for instance. Then also analyzing what text said performer is pitted against. An example might be Cena’s feud with Chris Jericho who could be viewed as elitist. In this case the intertextual reading according to Kristeva’s definition would state that the first axis would be that of performer and audience, while the second axis would be performer versus performer.

Within textual analysis of television programs including the WWE’s RAW and Smackdown, it is of utmost importance to understand that while a program might have a dominant demographic group of viewers (white males in this case) television programs often succeed or fail based on their ability to reach audiences across demographic lines (Fiske, 1989). This means that a successful program must create an overall text that is recognizable and contains meaning for people in and outside their dominant audience group or provide meaning that is so intrinsic to the culture at large that meaning is almost universally shared (Burns & Thompson, 1989).

Within any textual analysis it is important to understand the polysemic nature of media as text. This is to say that every text may be comprised of many different symbols and each amalgamation of symbols potentially has numerous readings (Fiske, 1989; Hall, 1980). In addressing this concept, Stuart Hall argued that due in part to the fact that communication along textual lines is a process of encoding and decoding meaning, how a person reads a text is in large part derived from the individual’s sociological position. To put it simply, depending on where a person stands culturally or ideologically they may read a text differently than someone from a different social or cognitive position. Hall (1980) described the three basic textual readings that will be used within this study. The
first he described as the dominant (or hegemonic) reading. This represents the full understanding and acceptance of the text’s preferred meaning. This reading is what many would deem obvious or normal. The second is referred to as the negotiated reading of a text. This reading tends to accept many of the dominant interpretations of a text, but leaves the door open for contradictions, personal biases and experiences, and exceptions. The third reading is referred to as the oppositional reading of a text. This is wholly anti-hegemonic. This reading is a necessary addition to any textual analysis insomuch as it represents the inevitability that some individuals will react in an opposite way than the dominant audience. A person reading a text from this perspective will not only read a text in a different way than the dominant reading might suggest, but essentially will read it with a contradictory meaning than that of the dominant perspective (Hall, 1980).

Professional Wrestling as Televised Entertainment

Since the times of ancient Greek outdoor theater, tales and myths of great struggle, suffering and eventual victory have been present in western society. In such early theaters, it was not uncommon for spectators to gather in order to watch performers reenact the heroic deeds and battles of heroes or the sinister schemes of villains. Scenes of joy, tragedy, comedy, conflict and strife were all played out before spectators in outdoor theaters under natural light (Barthes, 1972). In ancient times, this overtly dramatized spectacle of pain, conflict and victory represented a staple of cultural construction and entertainment. Furthermore, from the theatricality of the theater to the more gruesome real combat of the Roman coliseum spectators have always been drawn to conflict and combat set in grand arenas. However, while combat has been a staple of populist entertainment for literally millennia, in the relatively short span of the last half-
century a form of entertainment has swept the globe (and especially the United States) that has been dubbed professional wrestling. Centuries ago audiences thrilled to the dramatic spectacle of Heracles’ twelve trials at the hands king Eurystheus, these days spectators across the country and around the world tune in week after week to WWE programming to witness contemporary spectacles like blue-collar hero John Cena facing the nefarious group the NEXUS led by the cruel and manipulative Wade Barrett.

In today’s culture professional wrestling, as epitomized through the television programs of the WWE, represents a form on entertainment unlike any other. In attempting to find parallels one runs into an obvious difficulty in definition. Professional wrestling is known by most as a purely televised phenomenon. This is not to say that there are not substantial crowd that attend the weekly live WWE events, but rather that the number of television viewers week after week dwarf those in attendance. This may not be surprising, after all the same is true for live sporting events. When a team is on the road it can be argued that very few home fans are actually in attendance at the visiting arena.

WWE events are not and should not be considered true sport though (Barthes, 1972). Conflicts are staged for the camera, performers act out roles, and the audience follows the drama inherent in the weeks of struggle the wrestlers endure rather than the statistics of wins and losses.

From this perspective, perhaps the WWE is more closely linked with modern soap operas. After all, action, emotion, and melodrama are at the heart of televised professional wrestling. There are heroes and villains and even the most socially deplorable actions like wanton violence and sexual promiscuity are somehow portrayed
as justified through the development of storylines (Jenkins, 2005; Mazer, 1998; Tamborini, et al., 2005).

Even this is not necessarily an accurate parallel though considering that WWE programming is live and in front of a studio audience (so to speak). The televised success of professional wrestling depends, in part, to the performer’s ability to “generate heat” with the live fans in attendance (Mazer, 1998, p. 63). Performances must be acted out with skill and reactions must be elicited with immediacy (Barthes, 1972). From this perspective, perhaps staged programs like *The Jerry Springer Show* or even certain game shows might be more analogous, but obvious differences immediately appear in this comparison as well. Ultimately, it must be considered that WWE programming is in a hybrid category with very few peers.

While a debate might be had concerning the nature of WWE professional wrestling as a true television program, it may be of immediate importance to analyze how the WWE views itself and how it is viewed in the broadcast industry. The WWE recognizes that the lion’s share of their success is derived from their broadcast presence. This includes not only the weekly television programs, but home videos, pay-per-view events, video games, music releases, and even feature length movies released featuring their performers. The broadcast industry itself has recognized the unique position that WWE programming has within the realm of television insomuch as its ability to generate enormous dedicated viewership which then has led to equally impressive advertising revenue (McAdams, 2001; Raney, 2003; Schlosser, 1998).

Another unpublished study released in 1999 for the television program *Inside Edition* by Dr. Walter Gantz analyzed the WWE as a televised program. In this study he
analyzed a year’s worth of episodes of *RAW*. He conducted his quantitative analysis on the televised occurrences of deviant behavior within the broadcasts. His report found that there were over 1,600 televised incidents of wrestlers or fans pointing or grabbing their crotches, which broke down to about one occurrence per every four minutes of programming. Many of these were in direct response to then popular tag-team Degeneration X who used that act as a symbol. He also found over 1,000 uses of the word *hell*, about 500 uses of the word *ass*, and over 300 televised references or depictions of sexual activity (Gantz, 1999; Raney, 2003).

Televised Violence and Linguistic Aggression

The spectacle of WWE programming draws millions of Americans every week to their televisions including a burgeoning number of women (Lauria, 2009) and an audience that crosses racial, cultural, socio-economic and national lines. While some scholars have looked at this entertainment phenomenon and noticed a myriad of cultural and sociological discussions at play, unfortunately, many have simply seen violence, base morality, and lowest-common-denominator appeal. Those who see more in this form of “sports entertainment” (De Garis, 2005, p. 210) than violence for violence sake may be open to the understanding that a great deal of psychological and ideological interplay occurs between the wrestler and the audience (Barthes, 1972) and that in every headlock or choke slam there is far more meaning than meets the eye (Mazer, 1998).

Much of the research (Gerbner, 1999; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002; Lachlan et al., 2009; Maguire, 2000; Tamborini, et al., 2005) dealing with professional wrestling and the WWE in particular focuses on the fact that violence, or rather the depiction and allusion to violence, is at the heart of this form of
performance. One study in particular, conducted by Lachlan et al. (2009), focused specifically on measuring quantitatively the rate of violent exchanges within the television broadcasts. Additionally, however, their study examined the reasoning behind the exchanges. Their theory was that within the cultural realm of professional wrestling most acts of violence would be, however tenuously, justified. This did provide some difficulty (Tamborini et al., 2005). One of the main difficulties in such a study was the definition of “justified” (p. 207). When examining professional wrestling one must in many ways approach it as a world unto itself. That is not to say that it does not interact with the real world or may not cultivate ideology or culture (Gerbner, 1999; Gerbner et al., 2002), but rather that it operates under its own set of internal cultural rules as is normal in many television programs. While it has been argued that being a spectator of this form of entertainment may lead viewers to more aggressive and socially unacceptable behavior in the real world (Arms, Russell, & Sandilands, 1979), critical viewers must inevitably look past the surface and see that violence stands in for something else. Namely, this something else tends to be power and control over one’s self, circumstances, and opponents.

Power and control is gained or lost based on very different rules than in real life and thus what is and is not regarded as justified becomes twisted to conform to the world in which the acts are taking place (Maguire, 2000). The viewers of a televised WWE broadcast do not want to see combatants/performers go through lengthy, detached discussions and debates concerning money, contracts, advertising, location and rules as is commonly the case in boxing before a championship bout. Much to the contrary, they are not concerned with the logistics but rather the meaning. Why is it imperative that
performer ‘A’ face performer ‘B’ at the next pay-per-view? What would a victory here mean for a particular performer? These are the questions that wrestling fans posit while understanding that strength and violence is the vehicle by which the sought after power and control is obtained.

To summarize the last two paragraphs, Lachlan et al. (2009) and others doing similar research (De Garis, 2005; Maguire, 2000; Tamborini, Skalski, Lachlan, Westerman, Davis, & Smith, 2005) find it difficult at times to define what is and is not justifiable. This is primarily due to the fact that acts of violence that would be inherently unjustifiable in the real world are portrayed as normative within the world of professional wrestling (Maguire, 2000). Additionally, research (Tamborini et al., 2005; De Garis, 2005) has shown that it is just as difficult to classify many violent exchanges as inherently popular or unpopular due to the fact that the spectators seem to understand that within this realm of perpetual perceived conflict respect is earned and violence is typically the only currency. In short, it is easy to identify that professional wrestling is founded on the illusion of conflict and violence, but it is often very difficult to come to any definitive conclusion as to the overall meaning derived from such acts apart from the context of who is committing them (De Garis, 2005).

This concept of relativistic perception concerning violent acts within the realm of professional wrestling ties in closely to Barthes’ (1972) observation that it is not the actuality or reality of pain that appeals to audiences, but the immediacy of the externalized symbolic meaning of pain or suffering. The real questions then revolves around how much violence is exhibited and how is that violence portrayed? The Lachlan et al., study (2009) found that over the 36-hour sample of programming there were over
1100 individual acts of violence perpetrated. Strictly speaking the level of violence portrayed was close to 32 violent interactions an hour. Of that number over 73 percent were depicted as un-mandated acts or acts of violence not directly tied to the performers’ in-ring matches (Tamborini et al., 2005). Furthermore, a staggering 95 percent of acts were categorized as “over-equivalence” (Lachlan et al., 2009, p. 65) which was defined as “situations in which the inherent qualities of the reprisal exceeded [direct and equal reciprocation of violence]” (p. 64). It is very interesting to note, however, as the concept of violence as text or as a characterization tool is discussed there was a marked difference between the instances of those performers who were characterized as faces (good guys) and those categorized as heels (bad guys). Of those instances of violence perpetrated within sanctioned, legal in-ring events 49 percent were initiated by faces as opposed to just 33 percent initiated by heels. Conversely, un-sanctioned events were perpetrated 46 percent of the time by those performers described as heels (Face = 42%). These margins, while not hugely significant do indicate, not surprisingly, that the actions of the performers do play into their overall personas.

The findings of the Lachlan et al., study (2009) do corroborate that both modern WWE and 1950s Parisian parlor wrestling share similarities. In much the same way as Barthes argued that it is not the reality of combat, but the illusion of struggle (Mazer, 1998, 2005) that appeals to the audience the Lachlan study found that the more overt, over the top acts of reciprocity convey what they coined a “spiral of violence” (Lachlan et al., 2009, p. 69). Within this spiral of violence acts of violence must not be covert, nor must they be subtle. As Roland Barthes (1972) put it, “Suffering which appeared without intelligible cause would not be understood; a concealed action that was actually cruel
would transgress the unwritten rules of wrestling and would have no more sociological efficacy than a mad or parasitic gesture” (p. 19). In other words, gestures of violence and suffering, no matter how insignificant in truth must be portrayed as grandiose and excessive or the meaning behind such gestures and reason for such suffering would be unintelligible to the audience.

The Arena of Public Discourse

For years scholars and media critics (Battema & Sewell, 2005; Chamberlin, 2001; Devine, 2000; DuRant, Champion & Wolfson, 2006; Guthrie, 2007; Lachlan et al., 2009; Lemish, 1998) have attempted to categorize or redefine how this unique form of entertainment should be discussed. Is it sport? Is it combat? Should it perhaps be defined more closely to a circus or spectacle of that sort? For the last 20 years, at least, professional wrestling by way of the WWE/WWF has occupied a place in a special niche of contemporary American pop culture. WWE Monday Night Raw has been a staple of Monday night primetime television for years and has remained successful regardless of competition (Raw ratings history, 2003; Tamborini et al., 2005) boasting tens of millions of viewers every week. This is in spite of the fact that, during much of the 1990s, the Parents Television Council (2001) ranked WWE programming as among the worst shows on both network and cable television. This was mainly due to its location securely within a primetime-viewing slot. This criticism has bolstered the claims that professional wrestling is among the lowest forms of televised entertainment (Devine, 2000), but the fact remains that it is still hugely viable and immensely profitable. This has led many scholars to wonder what should be taken from the phenomenon and what meaning could or should be derived from the spectacle?
The critique of contemporary televised professional wrestling has not just been centered on the fact that it is inherently the repetitive depiction of violent acts set along what some see as a thin storyline. One of the most obvious and highly criticized aspects of modern professional wrestling is what some refer to as *smack talk*. Smack talk a slang term for the linguistic act of using highly aggressive and derogatory terminology to presumably degrade and demoralize one’s opponent(s) (Infante & Wigley, 1986, p. 61; Tamborini, Chory, Lachlan, Westerman & Skalski, 2008). The concept of smack talking is relatively new to the realm of professional wrestling. While Roland Barthes certainly recognized the more subtle forms of character building and establishing such as the wrestlers’ body and mannerisms, when he wrote his analysis in the 1950s, he did so after watching a spectacle confined mainly to the ring.

In modern televised wrestling what is done and said outside the ring is just as important (if not more so) than what occurs inside (Mazer, 1998). Apart from the addition of pyrotechniques and entrance music that usually accompanies WWE *superstars* (currently used instead of the term *wrestlers*) to and from the ring, the ability to speak, act and “generate heat” (Mazer, 1998, p. 63) is key to the effectiveness of any modern day wrestling performer. This concept of linguistic sparring, however, has been the center of a great deal of debate. Most important to this discussion is the questions of what, if anything, does it contribute to characterization and by extension the establishment of ideas concerning race, class and sex? Some scholars have argued that the excessive egotistical smack talking and derogatory language inherent in such linguistic acts may contribute to spectators (particularly children) adopting a more chilled understanding of human dignity and the value of cooperation and diplomacy (DuRant et al., 2006; Raney,
While other scholars have suggested that much of the derisive language classified as smack talk is sports talk and has effectively become a somewhat innocuous part of everyday conversation (Shapiro, 1989), others fear that the overtly aggressive nature of such lexical devices may lead to racial reductionism, class conflict and subsequent aggression on the part of spectators. Taking a page out of Gerbner’s theory of cultivation (2002), it is the fear of many scholars and parents alike that exposing children to expressly aggressive programming will inevitably lead to a normalizing of violent behavior (Gerbner et al., 2002). In other words, there is a fear that children exposed to the aggressive language and subsequent actions featured in WWE primetime programming may be led to believe that such behavior is normal and acceptable in real life.

The alternative analysis of smack talk, however, is that it plays an essential role in the development of character roles and personas as well as contributes greatly to the parasocial relationship between fans/spectators and the performers. This helps create what is known in the business as “logic” (De Garis, 2005, p. 202). The term logic in this context refers to the ability of the audience to understand not just what they are seeing, but what the meaning is behind it. To put it another way, Barthes wrote that it is essential that every move perpetrated or rivalry must be “intelligible” (1972, p. 16) to the spectator. This means that the audience must understand who the performers are insomuch as it relates to what they might do in a match, their motives, their personalities and what they stand for. Maintaining this logic is key to progressing the various storylines within the WWE Universe. Smack talk in this sense is a key way in which performers more explicitly position themselves within the sphere of the WWE. It is also a
means by which the performers generate heat while simultaneously furthering the storyline (De Garis, 2005; Mazer, 1998).

Masculine and Feminine Power

Professional wrestling has long been analyzed from the perspective that it is a vehicle for the propagation of a particular type of alpha-male masculinity. This is to say that while relatively few scholars have specifically studied the cultivation of masculinity or femininity via professional wrestling, most scholars studying the subject inevitably give a nod to the idea that such cultivation occurs. Much of the research (Battema & Sewell, 2005; De Garis, 2005; Devine, 2000; DuRant et al., 2006; Guthrie, 2007; Jenkins, 2005; Kuper, 2004; Maguire, 2000; Mazer, 1998, 2005; Raney, 2003; Serrato, 2005) dealing with sexuality and gender roles as they relate to professional wrestling has focused specifically on masculinity, but in recent years female wrestlers have taken a more prominent role within organizations like the WWE. More females are viewers, performers, managers, and occupy various other roles within the traditionally male-dominated spectacle and business of professional wrestling (Lauria, 2009). This means that we must question some of the preconceived notions about gender roles concerning the sport or at very least re-examine the landscape. This study will examine the current representation of women as is evident through the depiction and characterization of the WWE Divas. The Divas (WWE’s female performers) are said to be Sexy, Smart, and Powerful, but this study will examine where that power comes from. It is the contention of this study that the female empowerment that is often accredited to the Divas is not, in fact female power, but instead is male power transferred to female performers.
To begin this discussion, a broader perspective on male and female power is necessary. Much scholarship in recent decades that could perhaps be considered parasexual or otherwise focused on gender roles and representations has focused primarily on the female form (Feuer, 1984; pp. 4-16; Fiske, 1987; Modeleski, 1982). Such research posits that the female form is often objectified within sport and media. The more pervasive concept of mediated femininity is that while a woman may be shown as physically powerful, her power is directly linked with either her sexuality (Edwards, 2004) or is defined in such a way as it reduces her role as a woman (Heinecken, 2003). Essentially, one of the standard criticisms many feminist scholars have with the contemporary media representation of female power is that it is, in fact, based on masculine values. The current mediated representation of female power requires her to be small, thin, and sexy before she can be accepted as powerful (Bordo, 1993; Heinecken, 2003). To clarify, within what Marxist Feminists would refer to as the patriarchal superstructure that operates within American society, a woman’s role is to promote and fall in line with the male agenda. From this perspective women are expected to strive to be sexy, small and non-threatening to men. A woman can be powerful though if said power is offset by sexuality, but not so powerful or in such a way as to challenge the male patriarchy. It is interesting that in the WWE’s description of their female performers the term powerful takes a backseat to their description as sexy.

Since what is being discussed here is the concept that female power within televised professional wrestling is defined in an inherently masculine way, perhaps the best place to begin is by examining what values and concepts masculine power is predicated on. Contemporary professional wrestling has been described as a masculine
melodrama in which the socially constructed tenets of hyper-masculinity are symbolically discussed and forced to compete within the public arena (Jenkins, 2005; Mazer, 1998). This competition is symbolic in that rarely does one character overtly take the stand of Hyper-Masculine Man nor are characters explicitly labeled Mr. Beta-Male. The symbolic competition occurs more subtly in how the various performers interact with one another and are portrayed overall. It is true that in contemporary professional wrestling hyper-masculinity does run rampant and, as opposed to previous generations of performers, modern televised performers are very muscular and often have defined physiques. Many scholars, however, have written that it is not necessarily the physical representation of a man that justifies his masculinity, but rather his actions and motives (Eckert, 1989).

At this point, it is valuable to branch out from the realm of professional wrestling specifically and instead examine the cultivation of sex/gender roles in general. Numerous studies have found that within contemporary American culture men and women are cultivated and nurtured to their respective gender roles in very different ways. Ethnographic research (Cameron, 2007; Eckert, 1989) has found, for example, that females tend to be socialized to seek gender legitimacy via adherence to socially constructed images. Conversely, males tend to seek gender legitimacy through how well they are able to perform acts that are in line with the cultural trope of masculinity (Cameron, 2007; Eckert, 1989; Gilmore, 1990). To put this concept another way, this is to say that women achieve gender legitimacy by essentially *doing* what is expected of females within their sphere or culture while men achieve gender legitimacy by *being* what is expected of them within their sphere or culture.
Research dealing with the establishment of gender roles has always been conflicted in regards of nature versus nurture, but in recent decades feminist scholars and media scholars alike have shifted dramatically toward the direction of nurture. Scholars like Kilbourne and Jhally (1999), LaFrance (2000), Shugart (2008) and others posited that while some traits or characteristics are possibly a product of sexual biology or physiology and are inherently natural, many more are a product of the culture in which a child is raised. Essentially, the argument is that while humans (male or female) have within themselves the capability of exercising the entire spectrum of human experiences, cultural expectations often have the effect of limiting not what an individual is capable of doing per say, but rather what they feel they can do while maintaining their gender identity legitimacy (Farrell, 1993; Kilbourne & Jhally, 1999; LaFrance, 2000). Thus, with regard to the media, the concepts of gender are cultivated from a very young age based not only on authoritative learning from parents, teachers, and the like, but also through repeated media representations (Gerbner et al., 2002; Heinecken, 2003).

Support for this line of thinking has been found in a wide variety of anthropological research focusing on masculinity tropes around the world. It was once argued that there was what was sometimes referred to as a Universal Male (Gregor, 1985). This theory posited that all males generally share the same concepts of duty, aggression, role and responsibility. In other words that regardless of culture, men and concepts of masculinity (the culturally accepted role of males) remain constant. Many scholars have recently shifted to more of a cultivation model of masculinity (Gerbner et al., 2002; LaFrance, 2000) that is in line with feminist scholarship of the last forty years (Farrell, 1993). This model argues that in much the same way that feminist scholars have
maintained that concepts of femininity are culturally specific, masculinity too is an acculturated condition (Gilmore, 1990).

While this argument does suggest that masculinity is constructed differently in cultures around the world, anthropologist David Gilmore (1990) has found that many cultures do share common expectations of legitimately masculine males. The expectations Gilmore discovered that cross culture lines include strength, the ability and willingness to fight, hyper-sexuality, an affinity toward alcohol and drug use (in some cases) and an often unhealthy fixation with money. In addition to this he discovered that in many cultures masculinity is an honored position, but one that is tenuous and often challenged (Raphael, 1988). Unlike femininity, which often requires a woman to look a certain way or adhere to some cultural construct of behavior (Cameron, 2007; Eckert, 1989), legitimate masculinity must often be won (Kriegal, 1979). This preoccupation with winning and maintaining masculinity, whatever it is culturally, is what Gilmore describes as being of utmost importance for young males in almost every culture. As Norman Mailer put it in 1968 referring to Western concepts of masculinity, “Nobody was born a man; you earned manhood provided you were good enough, bold enough” (p. 25).

With regard to professional wrestling, the discussion of masculinity and femininity as acculturated conditions is a key foundational concept. If we understand the condition of masculinity being predicated on a cultural understanding of what it means to be a man, televised wrestling then acts as a vehicle for showcasing what a legitimate man should be. Then if, as feminist scholars have argued, feminine power within said culture is defined in terms of masculinity (Heinecken, 2003) understanding one leads to understanding the other. Professional wrestling operates as a spectacle of excess (Barthes,
As such, not only are moves and actions perpetrated in hyperbole, but representations are exaggerated as well (De Garis, 2005; Mazer, 1998). Thus, hyper-masculinity, and some concepts of hyper-sexualized femininity, is expected so that the tenets of gender being propagated are intelligible and instantly recognizable to anyone watching (Barthes, 1972).

From this perspective, it is not surprising that contemporary male wrestlers tend to have overly defined physiques and wear very little, thus emphasizing their male form and the meaning that is associated with it. This is sometimes referred to as negotiating meaning through the male gaze (Patterson & Elliot, 2002). To expand on this point, American/Western masculinity is typically defined through conflict, strength, and dominance (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Gilmore, 1990). Within the sphere of contemporary professional wrestling a performer symbolically wears these attributes within his very form. It has been argued that female who are portrayed as powerful in the media (including professional wrestlers) operate within a similar dynamic.

So far the focus has been on aspects of gender as a culturally constructed element propagated through media and cultural authorities. It has been explained that when discussing female power it is often defined in terms of masculine power, but it is important to understand that there are very key differences. Dawn Heinecken (2003) argued that in cases in which women are shown as fighters, heroines and generally as powerful the image is usually shown in conjunction to her status as a sexual object. This is not the case with male representations of power. In her book Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle (1998) Sharon Mazer includes a chapter titled From Beefcake to Cheesecake in which she documents the experiences of Sky Magic, a female body builder
turned professional wrestler. Within this chapter she describes how Magic was expected to walk a fine line between dominant cultural expectations of traditional femininity and what she describes as more deviant sexual fetishes. The most common of these fetishes being that of S&M (sadomasochism). For clarification, sadomasochism is a classified medically as a system of sexual gratification in which a person attains gratification by either inflicting pain, humiliation or dominance on another (sadism) or attaining such gratification by being the recipient of such treatment (masochism). Magic describes that she and all her contemporaries understood that they were expected to perform within this dichotomy. She even suggests that the organization she worked for appreciated her muscular definition and strength, but encouraged her to down play it in favor of a more culturally accepted femininity. This is not to say that she or her fellow performers were necessarily limited to just one role. To the contrary, at one point she could be playing the girl next door, but at any moment she could be asked to shift into a more dominant (perceivably sexual) role.

The concept of female empowerment through physical strength has been a tenuous subject for years. The issue so far as scholarship is concerned is the fact that female power is often shown in terms of male gaze and masculinity (Heinecken, 2003; Schubart, 2006). This is to say that while women can certainly be physically powerful in their own right, the representation of this power is usually mitigated by their sexuality. This often leads scholars argue that women are only shown to have power in such ways as it appeals of some male sexual desire or fetish (Edwards, 2004). Among the most common sexualized representations of supposed female power are those of bondage and sadomasochism. Characterized by women in form fitting latex or leather catsuits or other
forms of restraints and presented in acts of dominance over males and females alike, this form of sexualized power is common in representations of action girls (Edwards, 2004; Heinecken, 2003; Schubart, 2006). With regard to the wearing of form fitting or constraining, sexually suggestive clothing we see an interesting dichotomy. First, scholars have pointed out that in the media this garb (particularly the catsuit) usually shows off the woman’s lean and often-muscular body (Edwards, 2004), but carries the added role of reducing her. She effectively can kick your butt, but is constrained and takes up less space (Kilbourne & Jhally, 1999).

The concept of taking up space (Kilbourne & Jhally, 1999) is an issue that many feminist scholars have examined throughout the years. Simply put, the question revolves around how a woman can achieve power within a system that prefers her to be small and somewhat invisible. A woman’s sexuality is one of the only mitigating factors to this insomuch as scholars have found that a woman can be culturally accepted as powerful so long as she is not too masculine (Rahilly, 2005). This may seem like a contradiction to the arguments posited previously, but the example of brief career of the WWE’s Chyna is a case in point. Lucia Rahilly wrote the chapter Professional Wrestling as S/M Narrative (2005) in which he described the issues surrounding this controversial female performer. Chyna, a former weightlifter/body builder was marketed as the 9th Wonder of the World by the WWE. She was unusually strong compared to other female performers. So much so, in fact, that she rarely competed with females due presumably to the fact that the audience did not see the competition as fair. In his discussion of this wrestler who was objectively stronger than perhaps any other female performer he wrote that Chyna, who regularly wore chains, spikes and clothing that emphasized her size and muscles was
often accused of being a lesbian, dyke, or simply more masculine than some of the male wrestlers she would sometime compete against. In the later years of her career the WWE attempted to soften her and make her more attractive to male spectators. She was featured in swimsuit matches and was even portrayed as the girl friend of one of the more popular male performers, but unfortunately her size and intimidating stature seems to have lampooned her viability as a female performer in the WWE. Simply put, she took up too much space.

Racial Representation

Within professional wrestling race has always been a means by which characters are created and defined. Some scholars (Monsivais, 2005; Raney, 2003; Rowe, McKay, and Miller, 1998; p. 128; Serrato, 2005; ) have studied how professional wrestling, which has traditionally been dominated by Caucasian performers, has made of practice of using minority performers in special or limited roles. Professional wrestling has a history of emphasizing the difference between white wrestlers and non-white wrestlers by playing up stereotypical aspects of the culture from which they come. In 2005, Phillip Serrato wrote about this dynamic with regards specifically to Latino wrestlers. Serrato wrote that though professional wrestling (aka. Lucha Libre) has a long and storied history in countries like Spain and Mexico, during the 1970s and 1980s organizations like the World Wrestling Federation began to hire such performers as sideshows or oddities more than serious competitors. They were portrayed as exotic sideshows to be admired for their athletic prowess and acrobatic skills, but never to be truly taken seriously. In 1998, however, Rowe et al. argued that most artifacts of popular culture tend to require consumers to presume that race, gender and class differences across a society either do
not exist or at least do not play an important role. They continued by stating that viewers of professional wrestling were different in that they not only recognized these differences, but also embraced them. Their point was that while in much of society racial reductions, superficial sexism and other stereotypical representations were being phased out and opposed by society at large, within the world of professional wrestling these representations were thriving.

While currently there are few studies (Adeline, 2000; Chamberlin, 2001; Serrato, 2005) that have specifically studied racial representation in professional wrestling, the scholarship that has been done can be summarized in several key points. First and perhaps most recognizably is the fact that wrestlers who are members of a minority group within the United States are often portrayed as overly stereotypical (Adeline, 2000; Serrato, 2005). The performers know and understand the role they are supposed to play in much the same way male and female performers described in the last section understand what gender characteristics they are expected to exhibit (Chamberlin, 2001). Performers tend to become the embodiment of their race’s culture, misconceptions, and stereotypes.

The concept of mediated reinforcement of racial stereotypes has always been a point of contention among media scholars. Issues like assimilation, difference, reduction and commodification are at the heart of many conversations on the topic. Within professional wrestling any of these may be readily debated, but within this study commodification is of paramount importance. The idea of commodification is essentially the concept that elements of a race or ethnicity may be bought and sold (Balaji, 2009; Hurt, 2006). For example, it has long been asserted that Black culture in particular has been a victim of commodification (Balaji, 2009; Bogle, 1989; Collins, 2005; Dyson,
2004; Guerrero, 1993; hooks, 2003; Jackson, 2006; Richardson, 2007). It has been argued that Black culture has been equated with rap culture for example. As a result an entire diverse group of people has been reduced to a singular stereotype that is easily bought and sold. This means through the media Black culture in some ways has become not a diverse experience shared by a group with a common ethnic background, but rather something a person can do provided they wear the right clothing, use the right words, listen to the right music or drive the right car.

Black culture is by no means the only culture to fall victim to the process. Tenets of Latino and Asian culture have also been commodified throughout the years. Images like the cholo (Mexican thug), and the wide proliferations of Eastern culture (martial arts/meditation, tattoos, food, dress, etc…) are examples of this. Most scholars agree that the media is at the heart of this process insomuch as its tendency to revert to preconceived cultural notions when representing members of these ethnic groups (De Garis, 2005; Hurt, 2006). Invariably, what results from the process is a kind of spectator shorthand for the cognitive miser. When a media consumer with a properly cultivated mental predisposition sees a person wearing a certain thing, using particular linguistic devices (i.e. slang) or exhibiting adherence to any other aspect of a commodified culture, they tend to fill in the blanks concerning what they have been taught regarding personality, interests and intentions. This might take the form of seeing a young black man wearing baggy clothing and assuming he is a “thug” (Balaji, 2009, p. 30) or perhaps the assumption that an Asian might know kung fu. While these stereotypical and commodified images are exhibited in much of mainstream media and reality television
(Orbe, 2008), they tend to be even more readily on display within much of professional wrestling.

Commodification, while carrying with it the potential of strengthening or reinforcing stereotypes of race, also has the benefit of making the performer’s role almost instantly recognizable. While it may take an otherwise generic white performer months to establish a persona, a Latino male may have the ability quickly become the embodiment of the *cholo, bandito,* or simply the stereotypical *Mexican* by simply taking upon themselves the cultural stereotypes of that image (Serrato, 2005). As Barthes argued, the spectacle of professional wrestling is contingent on the ability of the spectators to quickly understand the meaning behind the actions and instantly recognize what role each performer plays in the performance (Barthes, 1972). This makes stereotyping very effective in professional wrestling because a stereotype, positive, negative, or otherwise, carries with it the inherent cultural expectations the spectators have about the race the individual represents (Hurst, 2007). When white viewers see Black performers like R-Truth, JTG, or Shad in oversized clothing with gold teeth and talking about committing crimes, those spectators can quickly connect that image of the performer with the expectations and meaning the stereotype carries. Thus, so long as the performer remains in character much of the work of character building is essentially done by default (Serrato, 2005).

This leads to the second key point that the limited research in the field of professional wrestling addresses. Namely, the fact that while both the performers and spectators are usually aware that stereotyping and commodification is occurring, both parties are happy to accept the spectacle of it all (Chamberlin, 2001; Rowe et al., 1998; p.
Research has found that even the most blatant stereotypical performers tend to receive a great deal of parasocial interaction (Serrato, 2005). In fact, while in other sports fans tend to more or less ignore the race of an individual and embrace a more ambiguous relationship regarding class or ethnic identification (Rowe et al., 1998) professional wrestling tends to do much the opposite. Spectators appear to enjoy the hyperbole inherent in the racial representation just as much as they enjoy the exaggeration in action within the spectacle of excess that is professional wrestling.

Mythology

Professional wrestling in and of itself is does stand as a curious artifact within the realm of media entertainment. Specifically this is because of its unique amalgamation of storytelling and mythmaking devices. Mythology plays a strong role within the construction and execution of the WWE’s weekly television broadcasts. Classical mythology like the hero’s journey is combined with the contemporary mythology and ideas of modern society, but what is mythology and why is it important to this analysis?

Mythology is not simply fanciful stories of heroes and villains. Myths have played a key role in the development of human societies and cultures for centuries (Leeming, 1990). Through myth humans transfer and translate values, ideologies and sensibilities across time and space. In other words, it is one thing to tell someone these are our values, it is quite another to use a story or legend to illustrate the virtues of a particular ideology and the consequences that could result from violating the tenets of that ideology.

When many people use the term mythology they usually tend to be referring to stories from societies and cultures that are pagan and usually long since gone (Leeming,
Example of this would include Greek, Roman, and ancient Egyptian mythology. Many today use the term mythology as a caveat to indicate a lack of substance or applicable meaning inherent in the stories being conveyed. From an anthropological standpoint, however, myths essentially carry the culture with them (Leeming, 1990; Levi-Strauss, 1969). This is to say that by examining the great deeds of Hercules or analyzing the works of Homer, one would be able to surmise a great deal about the Greek culture within which these stories initially resonated. The values, sensibilities, norms, and mores are carried within these stories. Similarly, if one were to examine the tales of King Arthur, Uther Pendragon, the Knights of the Round Table, or Robin Hood in their original forms (Bulfinch, 2004) one would get a sense of how Britains during the decline of the Roman empire and the Crusades generally believed and lived.

One might argue that myths should be taken with a grain of salt by serious scholars because most are generally full of unbelievable feats and miraculous happenings. While it may be true that mythology does tend to carry a certain degree of fanciful excess with regard to character traits, powers, dangers, and the like, some scholars (Frye, 1963; Leeming, 1990; Levi-Strauss, 1969; Oropeza, 2005; Vogler, 2007) argue that it is the excessive qualities inherent in myth that tell more about a culture’s fears, desires and values than those inevitably mundane elements. This is to say that modern mythological figures like Superman represent an ideal. He represents perfect strength and morality according to a particular culture’s sensibilities (Oropeza, 2005). For decades Superman carried the cultural values in his credo to fight for truth, justice and the American way. In this explicit example, Superman, as a modern Herculean character, ties the values of truth and justice with the inherent ideology of the American culture.
Christopher Vogler (2007) made the argument that there are certain archetypal characters within human mythology that tend to carry almost universal meaning and can even cross cultural lines. The struggling hero, the deceitful villain, the beautiful princess, and the wise mentor are just a few of the characters he identifies as archetypal. Furthermore, he explains that in most human mythology there is a dynamic pattern he refers to as the hero’s journey. This is a journey from a location or even state of being that the protagonist is comfortable with or which is familiar to them, to adventure, struggle and eventual success. Within this journey the hero does not generally succeed habitually. Much to the opposite, the hero’s journey must be rife with struggle and pain. This creates for the reader/viewer a universe that they can relate to on the grounds of shared struggle and injustice (Propp, 1927; Vogler, 2007). If a hero were allowed to always win, they would represent a concept that most humans are unfamiliar with. Furthermore, the argument has been made (Propp, 1927) that the appeal of mythology would not exist within common culture, but rather the concept that only certain people (extraordinary ones) can succeed. The general appeal of mythology then is that most humans upon being exposed to mythological stories, be them classical myths (Greek, Roman, etc...), religious myths (Christian, Muslim, Hindu, etc…), or even modern myths (television shows, movies, comic books, novels, etc…), can relate to the struggles and hardships most protagonist figures endure.

Within professional wrestling, mythology plays a distinct role insomuch as many performers tend to play characters constructed under basic narrative mythological lines. There are heroes and villains constructed in much the same way Vogler (2007) and Propps (1927) identify. These characters carry within themselves certain aspects of the
culture which help them to either relate to the audience and viewers, or which through perversion or violation of social norms cause revulsion. These cultural elements can and do include general aspects of morality like being honest or working hard, but also include commodified representations of race, ethnicity, gender, and even religion in some cases, which are culturally specific to the United States. To clarify this point, professional wrestling operates as a form of modern mythology in that it does not usually represent world as it is, but rather as it might be perceived through the ideological lens of the culture in which it operates.

Furthermore, professional wrestling exists as a contemporary form of mythology in that it makes full use of the dynamic pattern of the hero’s journey (Vogler, 2007). As Barthes (1972) argued, a hero cannot be expected to win all the time within staged professional wrestling. It is not the story of a man winning that the audience, or television viewer in the case of the WWE, wants to see. It is instead the struggle and hardships that a protagonist character must endure than then legitimizes their eventual victories. While an audience might enjoy seeing their hero win the title, it is the fall from grace, struggles and eventual return to glory that viewers tune in to see week after week.
CHAPTER III

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND RATIONALE

The purpose of this analysis is to fill a gap within the research concerning professional wrestling as a television program. As illustrated previously, most earlier research on the subject of televised professional wrestling has focused primarily on one of three narrow areas: violence, revenue, and sex/language. In each of these areas research has been conducted primarily through quantitative means. This gives a broad numerical concept of what is occurring within contemporary professional wrestling as well as in some cases an understanding of with what level of approbation viewers view the programming as a whole.

What is missing in the research is an analysis of the mythology created within the realm of WWE televised programming. This study will attempt to crystallize how this mythology relates to the culture within which the stories exist. This study will be a qualitative examination of the WWE as a television program in which characters are archetypal representations of cultural ideology. The analysis will be conducted along textual and semiological lines in that the WWE storyline will act as the text to be read and the characters will be analyzed as cultural symbols. Roughly one in twenty Americans consume televised WWE programming every week. This places WWE programming ahead of most other televised programming in terms of viewership. With this in mind questions must be asked concerning what stories and concepts are being proliferated week after week concerning how the culture operates and what concepts and ideologies deserve deference.
Some have argued that it is only violence that televised wrestling promotes, but this is ultimately short sighted in so much as this study will show that violence stands in as a means by which social ideologies and myths may, literally in this case, combat with one another. With this assertion as the base thesis of this study, certain question must be addressed. In what ways does the WWE establish or re-establish characters as personifications of race? How does intertextuality come into play in this process? How does the WWE handle race? In what ways do they potentially exercise contemporary forms of racism in the characterization and storylines of their performers of color? What mythology is constructed within the WWE concerning class, money and power? How does the WWE address post-feminist concepts of sexual and social empowerment with the representation and roles of their female performers? These are questions that cannot be answered by simple quantitative process, and are the basic questions this study examines in depth.
CHAPTER IV

METHODOLOGY

This study is a textual analysis of the WWE’s 2010 broadcast year. Specifically, it will focus on the primary characters and story arcs within this time frame. The sample for this study has been compiled from over 150 hours of footage which comes from the 2010 weekly broadcasts of RAW and the Best of Smackdown DVD collections as well as all twelve pay-per-view events. The Best of… collection was chosen to be used in this study specifically because the full year’s broadcasts were unavailable, but this compilation focuses primarily on the out-of-ring exploits of WWE characters. This is to say that it focuses on story arcs, rivalries, and character development rather than specifically on in-ring action. As this is a study concerning professional wrestling via the WWE as a television program, it seemed a natural choice to focus on the more television exclusive elements featured in these compilations. Additionally, the Best of… compilation as well as the pay-per-view events were chosen because they specifically focus on primary characters. The WWE as a whole employs over 100 different performers at any given time. During the weekly broadcasts any of these may make appearances, but according to the purpose of this study, only those performers who appear regularly week after week are of interest. Also, these primary characters are typically those who perform at pay-per-view events.

As the author of this study I will be in taking on the role of a critical researcher on this topic. This is to say that I am making a concerted effort throughout this study to view this topic from a detached perspective. It is my intention to analyze the various examples from a perspective that takes into account multiple readings by diverse
audiences. That being said, it must be stated that at times it is difficult to completely eliminate a personal voice from the research as much of the analysis is based on a primary reading, namely my own. In future research it would most certainly be beneficial to use numerous audience interviews to test the readings and perspectives examined herein. As for this study, however, it should be noted from this point forward that a certain degree of subjectivity may be expected, but an attempt has been actively made to eliminate or counteract as much as possible through multifaceted readings of examples following Kristeva’s (1980) and Hall’s (1980) theoretical approaches.

As explicated above there is a complex web of elements that contribute to the development of characters and meaning in televised professional wrestling. In the following chapters examples will be given and analyzed in order to examine the overall social and cultural messages purveyed within this form of popular televised media. Before getting to this, however, it is important to once again discuss the concept of intertextuality as it relates to this form of media entertainment and how it will be utilized within this textual analysis as a template for this study. Intertextuality, as explained by Hall (1980) and Kristeva (1980), is the concept that texts can and usually must be examined from different perspectives and along different axes.

Hall (1980) argued that there were three basic perspectives from which a textual analysis might be conducted. Essentially this means that he recognized three points from which media viewers might decode the meaning of a text. Quickly reiterated, these include: dominant (what most people read from a text), negotiated (recognizing the dominant reading but allowing dissention or contradiction), and oppositional (reading a meaning from the text that is mostly opposite the dominant). For the WWE these play
very important roles. Professional wrestling has always been a populist form of
entertainment.

This leads to the second concept of intertextuality that will be used for this
analysis. Not only is it recognized that there are numerous ways in which a text might be viewed, Kristeva (1980) argued that there are two axes along which a television viewer might read a text. She argued that in most cases intertextuality (the interrelation of texts, authors, and consumers) might be analyzed by comparing how a text is transmitted from author to reader and how one text relates to another. In terms of the WWE, the texts being analyzed are the performers and their developed character personas. Along the first axis (author to reader) this would be examining what a performer does, says, how they are portrayed individually, and how the fans are shown to respond to them. All of these facets deal specifically with how the author, in this case the performer who is embodying an ideology, relates to the audience specifically. Analysis along the second axis (text against text) would consist of examining who a performer’s rival is, how other performers relate to them, what is said about them by others including commentators. This axis deals with what context the performer’s character is placed in within the overall story of the program.

Character Development in the WWE

To analyze the contemporary state of televised professional wrestling it is important to establish a basic understanding of the terminology and structure of a normal program. It is maintained herein that while similar in form and function, modern televised professional wrestling as it exists within the WWE is a creature unto itself. This spectacle relies on, and is essentially built around a televised product. This product then uses
elements specifically designed for television airing as a means by which character
development, intertextual meaning making, and cognitive immediacy may take place. To
put this another way, while these elements have existed for a long time within staged live
wrestling, the WWE via their television product has expanded these elements and shifted
their implementation to a more television intensive/centric formula.

It is not simply enough for two unknown individuals to pretend to fight but rather
some meaning must exist behind the confrontation (Barthes, 1972). The audience must
understand not only what is happening before them, but why it is necessary within the
constructed world of professional wrestling (De Garis, 2005). This construction of
meaning has been at the heart of professional wrestling for most of its existence. Within
the trade it is referred to as *logic*.

Logic in this context does not mean that the actions, words and events perpetrated
within the average WWE (or any other brand) program must follow a logical progression
within the reality of the real world, but rather that they must logically operate within the
constructed world in which they occur. To reference another form of entertainment, this
is similar in operational structure to pornography. Within the world of pornography,
sexual escapades are free, easy, intense and frequent (Merskin, 2006). Within that world
there is an expectation that any desire or sexual attraction may and can be acted upon
with little if any repercussions. Furthermore, within this realm it is expected that at any
given time any performer will be willing to have sex with almost any other performer.
Most would agree that this is not the world of reality in which we live, but within the
constructed world of pornography there is a certain logic (Mazer, 1998; Merskin, 2006).
Similarly, televised professional wrestling operates within a world with very different rules than those of reality. Any disagreement can be sorted out through violence. It may, in fact, be more correctly argued that any disagreement must be sorted out through violence. Any slight against a performer requires immediate reprisal. Acts of violence in and out of the ring occur with very little social or legal repercussions and even unsanctioned fights are permissible and encouraged. Logic also refers to how believable the bouts, attacks, and suffering appear inside and outside of the ring. Causes must have appropriate effects, and perceived painful maneuvers must be accompanied with the appropriate struggling, suffering and facial/body expressions. It is not the world of reality, but within the world of professional wrestling these rules remain constant and are generally understood by audiences (De Garis, 2005).

Apart from establishing logic, professional wrestling depends on performers generating heat. In this context, heat refers to a visceral and energetic reaction from the audience (Mazer, 1998). This may certainly be either positive or negative, and may change at any time. John Cena, who will be discussed at length later in this paper, is a performer who regularly gets both booed and cheered by fans around the world, but as the current face of the WWE, he generates a great deal of heat during every appearance. He uses symbolic gestures, an energetic, thumping intro video, low camera angles, and colorful graphics/clothing to connect with the audience (especially children) and elicit powerful reactions from fans around the world. Today, Cena appears to be loved by most, hated by some, but very few fans are ambivalent when he takes the stage.

Heat is essential to the art of wrestling (De Garis, 2005). It is imperative that performers elicit a reaction from their audiences, but it does not usually matter what kind
of reaction. It could be argued that there are generally two types of performers within the WWE at any given time, those performers whom audiences love, and those they love to hate. Both establishing logic and generating heat have been a part of professional wrestling from the beginning, but how these two elements are created and maintained has changed significantly as professional wrestling was taken out of the gymnasiums and became multi-million dollar televised products.

Knowing the Show

In contemporary televised professional wrestling as epitomized by the WWE, every program can be separated into two separate but equally important parts. The first of these parts is what will be referred to herein as the out-of-ring (OR) action. The second is in-ring (IR) action. While a variety of activities might be classified as OR, this analysis will focus on three major categories of OR action. These three categories include: cut-scenes, introduction sequences, and commentary. OR action is the biggest difference between what might be considered traditional professional wrestling and modern televised professional wrestling. OR action generally constitutes the greatest part of logic and heat building within televised broadcasts and is usually shot and displayed only for the benefit of the home viewing audience. Commentator posturing, for example, is only heard by the audience viewing the televised product and is not broadcast to the fans at the live events. The same is true in smaller degrees of interviews, cut-scenes, and entrance videos. While live audiences may sometimes be shown these elements, the production quality and overall ambiance makes it clear that these are meant to increase the televised product’s overall value.
The first of the three OR elements mentioned above is the cut-scene. Cut-scenes are televised elements showing the performers backstage or somewhere else not in the arena. These scenes usually depict the characters interacting, plotting, or posturing and provide the audience at home with some behind the scenes information about the performer’s motivation or intentions for the evening’s program. Cut-scenes in the WWE take three forms. Most of these scenes are from an omniscient third-person perspective in which there is obviously a camera present, but the performers do not indicate any awareness of it, nor do they acknowledge the presence of another individual. This is important because during this first form of cut-scene the television audience can be shown secret meetings between performers, verbalized internal exposition about what the characters are thinking or feeling, and even may see certain performers attacked and left beaten on the floor. In all these scenes, the audience is essentially treated to some exclusive element of the night’s program that is beyond what the performers themselves are privy.

The second form of cut-scene is the interview. This form of cut-scene has been present since the earliest days of televised professional wrestling. During these cut-scenes a performer is usually interviewed by some member of the broadcast staff. Questions are usually asked as a setup for the performer to issue some form of threat or challenge, or to display bravado before everyone in the arena and at home. The main difference between this cut-scene and the last is that the interview cut-scene is formatted in a familiar televised style similar to sideline interviews in other sports like football and basketball. There is also a difference in that during these interview cut-scenes it is clear that the other performers hear and often respond to what is said. The camera is not in this case
invisible, but rather it represents a tool or pulpit from which the performers can grandstand, construct logic, develop their characters and generate heat.

The third form of cut-scene, which has only truly been utilized extensively in the last few years, is what will only be referred to herein as *specialized content*. The specialized content cut-scene perhaps started years ago in a very limited degree with content like *Piper’s Pit* in which *Rowdy* Roddy Piper, a noted loudmouth and instigator during the 1980s, would be featured in an interview/talk show styled segment with another performer. During these television-ready segments Piper would posture and rant and more often than not instigate some fight in which the faux-studio in which his show was being shot would be destroyed. Recently, the WWE has added a great deal more of this style of cut-scene with much higher production value. Elements like the WWE Draft, Raw Roulette, as well as several other talk-style shows featuring WWE performers are all examples of this style of cut-scene. They further the storyline and often add a special element of excitement to the programs and are specifically designed for the television audiences. While not as prevalent as the previous two forms of cut-scenes these specialized content scenes are important to the overall development of characters and storylines.

Another element that is specialized for television broadcast is the video introductions of performers. In the current incarnation of the WWE, each performer is welcomed onto the stage, as it were, by a specific song and accompanying video. In the live performance these elements are piped through the venue’s speakers and displayed on a giant video board called the *Titantron*. The full effect of these introductions, however, is only seen via the televised broadcasts. Audiences at home are shown the full video in
high resolution which features a montage of shots of the performer posing for the camera and clips him/her doing that which they have become known for. Accompanying this video is music which usually compliments the video in some way. For some performers this video may be a montage of him lifting weights and slamming opponents while posed shots of him flexing are interspersed throughout. His music may then emphasize his bigness or power. For another this might mean a montage of a sexy female performer posing seductively for the camera while clips of her giving enticing gestures or doing jumping or flipping moves. Her music might then feature a male singer expressing how attracted he is to her or a female singer talking about how unattainable she is. As will be explained in greater degree later with specific examples, these introduction music videos essentially play the role of an external memory for the viewer. Instantly and every time the performer takes the stage their music/video lets the viewer know what their internal characteristics are and what their external textual role is within the program/story as a whole.

The final OR action element that is predominately television specific is the presence of commentators. Typically there are two or three commentators in every program. In circus parlance, these individuals act predominately as ringmasters for the program. They set the scene, describe the rivalries, and build the characters’ personas from the perspective of the conscientious observer. What makes commentators a television specific element of professional wrestling is that their commentary and discussions are only present in the televised product, not the live performance. To describe the prominence and role of the commentators from a different perspective, their
role is to help tie the audience at home into the story and clarify which performers are playing which roles in the story arc.

There are usually a minimum of two commentators operating at any given time during the broadcast. In a similar manner as other professional sports, one commentator plays the role of the *play-by-play announcer* as it were, while the other plays the role of the *color commentator*. The play-by-play announcer’s role is generally to explain what is going on in the ring in a very factual manner. He acts as a detached reporter or journalist usually telling the audience at home what move a performer is executing, what it is supposed do, and why it is painful. This essentially builds logic for the home viewing audience. The color commentator’s role is usually very different. He is usually a former wrestler and brings personal experience to the broadcast. His role is typically to help build heat in the broadcasts. Instead of being detached, he openly shows excitement, support, repulsion or distain for what the performers are doing during the broadcast. He tells the audience at home why they should love, hate, or fear certain performers and usually acts as a guide directing the emotions of the viewing audience.

In the sample being used for this study, the 2010 year of WWE Raw and Smackdown, the commentators have played key roles in the development and evolution of both characters and storylines. For WWE Raw, Michael Cole (play-by-play) and Jerry "The King" Lawler (color) spend the broadcasts arguing with each other about the merits, virtues, and motivations of the various performers. Lawler, a WWE Hall of Famer and former bad boy of the wrestling world, has evolved into the arbiter of the new, softer, more family-friendly WWE. During the 2010 broadcast year, he adamantly supported performers like John Cena whose *Hustle, Loyalty, and Respect* mantra resonated with
WWE fans. Cole, on the other hand, spent much of the year playing the antagonist. Cole supported almost every villain (heel/bastard to use Barthes’ terminology) during this timeframe. In doing this, Cole essentially helped to build audience solidarity against these performers and further develop their characters.

In-Ring Action

The second element of every WWE program is in-ring action. For the purpose of this paper, IR action will be defined as those elements of the weekly broadcasts that actually occur within the ring during matches. It is important to understand that as professional wrestling via the WWE has moved from the small venues to the global television product it has become, the IR action has remained fairly unchanged. The most pronounced difference is that through a television package certain elements can be emphasized in order to build the immediacy that is at the heart of professional wrestling.

To take a step back a moment for clarification, Barthes (1972) wrote that within professional wrestling each moment carried its own unique and important meaning. This is to say that each moment of suffering or triumph can potentially operate as a text in and of itself. Each match is a “sum of spectacles” (Barthes, 1972, p. 16) during which meaning is derived from the event rather than the outcome. From this perspective, professional wrestling lends itself very readily to television broadcast. Consider the following. For those fans watching an event live, their perspective of suffering, combat, rivalry and victory are dictated in various degrees by where they are seated and what is occurring around them. While some fans certainly are seated at ringside, in an event that usually attracts thousands, most will be greatly detached from the action simply because of where they are seated. Conversely, viewers at home watching the televised product are
not subject to this detachment. Much the opposite, they are exposed to the IR action in a much more intimate way than even the ringside spectators. Through the use of tight camera angles, replays, quick cuts and the like television viewers are connected very personally to what is occurring in the ring.

For example, if two performers are in the ring competing, it is very common for there to be tight shots of just a performer’s face if they are in a painful submission hold. This emphasizes the suffering of the performer and builds the intrinsic immediacy/meaning of that moment in time. Similarly, large performers like The Big Show (supposedly 7 feet tall, 485 pounds) are shot during matches from very low angles thus emphasizing their size and dominance. Small acrobatic performers (known as High Fliers) like Rey Mysterio and Evan Bourne on the other hand are sometimes shot from high angles to emphasize their diminutive size compared to their larger opponents. This often creates a type of David and Goliath perception about a given match. These cameras shift, however, from high and wide angles to low and tight again, when these performers prepare to execute a high-flying maneuver. In this case, low camera angles are used to emphasize the height, danger, and impact of the maneuver. They are also routinely used to essentially hide the fact that the performer’s victim centers him or herself (often off camera) before the move and then braces themselves before impact. In these ways, the television viewer of the WWE broadcast is immersed in the fantasy of the performance to a much higher degree than those watching live. The WWE can essentially show the viewers what they need to see, emphasize those elements that increase logic, heat and immediacy, and hide those elements that take away from the fantasy of the conflict.
Each of the following chapters is intended to discuss one or two of the primary questions defined earlier through a careful examination of the possible readings of the characters and storylines as text. Examining these characters and storylines from a dominant hegemonic, negotiated and oppositional point of view will provide a more comprehensive analysis of what mythology is being promoted via the WWE broadcasts and better allow answering of the basic questions of this study. Most of the characters will be examined on the two basic intertextual axes defined by Kristeva (1980). First, they will be examined on the basis of pure characterization insomuch as they establish themselves directly toward the viewers/audience. The purpose of this first axis of analysis will be to discuss what traits and ideologies are internalized to each character, or rather what they stand for. Second, they will be examined in terms of their relationship to/with other performers. As the thesis of this study states it is the assertion herein that televised professional wrestling has become an arena in which ideologies may compete. With this in mind, the second axis of examination will discuss how character or storyline may pit competing ideologies against one another.

Chapters V, VI and VII will use these techniques to examine the representations of class values, race and sex respectively. Regarding class values this study will focus on analyzing what the WWE says/shows the audience concerning the importance of money, power, honesty, hard work and a host of other values. This study will examine how adherence to or perversion of these concepts is used to separate classes and in doing so heroes and villains. Regarding race, this study will focus on the reduction of non-white performers to stereotypical commodities that are then palatable to predominantly white audiences and easily marketed to the culture as a whole. Concerning the representation
of sex, or more specifically gender roles and characterizations, this study will primarily focus on the representation of females as either *mean girls* who use their beauty and sexuality to manipulate men and demean their fellow performers and gain significant power within the realm of professional wrestling, or girls next door who often are represented as victims or casualties of their mean girl counterparts. This discussion will explore how the WWE in essence represents female empowerment and influence as something to be treated with skepticism and trepidation, unless it is achieved within the confines of a male gaze.

The final chapter of this study will attempt to bring the research together into meaningful conclusions concerning WWE programming as a television program and a vehicle for the proliferation of cultural mythologies. Within this chapter the basic questions that this study was intended to answer will be re-examined and will try to be definitively answered. It is understood and anticipated that even after the analysis is conducted in the previous three chapters, definitive answers may not be possible to the broad questions upon which this study is based. This is acceptable, however, because within a qualitative, textual analysis such as this, the discussion of the text is of more importance than a definitive, universal answer to a question. The questions used herein are intended to guide the analysis and discussion. Truthfully, the overall possibility of definitive answers in this particular type of study is suspect at best from the beginning.
CHAPTER V

NEGOTIATING THE ARENA OF CLASS VALUES

Class warfare has been a part of professional wrestling since its earliest days of prominence. Barthes (1972) described his Parisian parlor wrestling as a cultural competition between the values of the working class and a perceived ruling class. More to the point the difference was generally between a virtuous common man and a typically nefarious, conniving and controlling antagonist. Through its evolution amateur wrestling replicated and propagated a code of populist cultural values and norms. This is to say that from the earliest days of wrestling in the United States there has been a general dynamic existing within the storylines pitting performers that embody the values of the populous, against other performers that stand in opposition of those values and sensibilities.

An us-versus-them dynamic has perpetually existed at the heart of professional wrestling. It is what performers use to build linguistic logic and audience/viewer heat. At the core of every virtuous character must be a strong connection to and appreciation for the audience. He or she must essentially carry within themselves the embodiment of what the majority of the audience either consider themselves to be or would wish to be. Conversely, every fiendish character must essentially revile the rank and file viewer or audience member. He/she must oppose the norms and mores of the average man and in doing so represent not only a competitor that opposes a hero, but an ideological avatar that stands in opposition to the values and sensibilities of the populous.

In his writings about 1950s Parisian wrestling, Barthes argued that it was not so much classes that were in competition, in a true socio-economic or even socio-political manner. Rather, the conflict in class is more a conflict in perceived class values. Barthes
described this in the 1950s in relatively simple terms. “Suffering, defeat, and justice” (Barthes, 1972, p. 19) were the primary elements of negotiated social value. In Barthes’ time, however, class and values stood somewhat separately. Even then, he described how spectators developed certain expectations of action based on how characters related to the crowd as a whole. Those performers who carried within themselves the persona of the everyman were expected to be good, virtuous, and honorable (Mazer, 1998, pp 50-92). Conversely, those performers who were cruel, and dishonest cheats generally also carried with them contempt for the crowd that was then naturally reciprocated.

Parisian wrestling of the 1950s, and subsequently its American counterparts of the time, were relatively simple compared to the modern spectacle of professional wrestling. There were clearly good guys and bad guys, faces and heels to use accepted wrestling terminology, but the values and storylines were rather two dimensional in nature. Due to the fact that the extended storylines of today were limited if not ultimately non-existent during this early period, performers like Killer Kowalski (performed from 1947-1977) and Jack Brisco (performed from 1965-1985) were more often than not pure, simple representations of good or evil (not necessarily respectively). As the spectacle of professional wrestling evolved with the evolution of the media, professional wrestling left the small halls and moved into larger and grander arenas. Additionally, in much the same way that television changed what a politician should look like with events like the Kennedy-Nixon debate, it also changed what wrestling performers should, or perhaps could, be in and out of the ring.

Instead of pure representations of good versus evil, many performers began opting for more nuanced representations of cultural values tied with perceptions of class and
intrinsic American values. At the heart of these perceptions is deference to the sensibilities of the blue-collar, workingman, who still makes up a large part of the WWE’s weekly television audience. Similar to what Kuper (2004) describes in his analysis of British soccer as a working-man’s sport, there is a perception within the WWE of the overall virtuousness of the blue-collar superstar. This is to say that even though professional wrestling may be a massive moneymaking machine with viewers from every socio-economic sector, there still exists the perception that it is preferable to be a workingman than a workingman’s boss (Jenkins, 2005).

To explain this, it may be first important to understand more extensively what was pointed out concerning values and class in a previous section. Specifically, that professional wrestling is generally representative of the culture and class-based value perceptions that exist therein (Jenkins, 2005; Mazer, 1998, p. 16-49; Sammond, 2005). For example, Barthes’ (1972) examination of Parisian parlor wrestling in the 1950s showed performers who embodied the values and perceptions of that time and that place. Contemporary WWE programs and performers, therefore, are representative of contemporary American values and class perceptions. These basic values or preconceived notions include, upward mobility (rags to riches), rugged individuality, capitalism, virtuous democracy (or populism), patriotism, humility, Judeo-Christian religious dedication, unselfishness, and heroic self-sacrifice. Larson and Bailey (1998) refer to these characteristics as “middle-American values” (p. 489) signifying that these are the values that middle-class America aspire to and respect in their heroes.

Regarding these values, it is important to understand just how they are accepted before shifting into an analysis of how they are represented within the WWE. It is not
enough, for example, for a performer simply to be an individual. In other words, both heroes and villains are often portrayed as individualistic. The difference exists in how various middle-American values are combined within the performer that creates the matrix of the hero and villain. A heroic character may be individualistic in that he relies primarily on himself and his own strength to win the day. He can be expected to use that personal strength to stand up for the fans and even other performers. His honesty often prevents him from playing politics, but will regularly place him in situations where he must endure pain, suffering and betrayal. In most cases, however, this heroic individualism results in some form of triumph for the character thus supporting the values and virtues of the middle-class work ethic.

The flipside of this particular coin would be villainous individualism; perhaps more accurately described as dedicated self-interest. While a villainous character may also objectively carry many of the same characteristics as the hero, they are balanced very differently and the motivations are worlds apart. A villain may claim to be a lone wolf, a rugged individual who never needs help from anyone, but in most cases this is perverted into a value system that is arrogant, selfish and cruel to viewers, fans and other performers alike. This perversion of the value of individualism in many cases serves as a basis for heat being built against a villainous performer. In other words the distortion of middle-class values may be just as much of a catalyst of audience revulsion as opposition to such values might be.

Middle-American Values Illustrated

When discussing the concept of middle-American values as they are displayed during the 2010 broadcast year of the WWE, one could literally pull examples from every
program, every week during the year. For the purpose of this study, however, analysis will be limited to several key rivalries or events during this time period. These events or rivalries were chosen because first and foremost their inclusion or resolution is indicative of a negotiation of one or more of the middle-class American values discussed earlier. Furthermore, these artifacts were chosen because they themselves were (in the case of rivalries) main week-to-week story elements, or (in the case of a single event) stood as pivotal plot twists that then affected the entire scope of the program storylines.

*Rugged Individualism – Cena Versus Batista*

In early 2010 (February) a heated rivalry began between John Cena and David Batista. The rivalry began at the *Elimination Chamber* (February 21, 2010) pay-per-view with *The Animal* Batista brutally attacking Cena after he was victorious in a long bout with six other performers. After the victory, Cena was celebrating his new championship in the ring, although he was barely able to stand, when owner Vince McMahon (a noted nefarious character) came out and made a match between Cena and Batista to happen immediately. Though beaten and possibly injured, Cena, true to his self-sacrificing and heroically individualistic character, valiantly prepared to fight the fresh and rested Batista. Batista sauntered down to the ring complete with tight shots of his cocky smile and sweeping pans of audience members showing disapproval of McMahon’s manipulation and Batista’s betrayal of their trust and love. Batista was once, very recently, a stalwart hero in the eyes of the WWE fan base, so the fact that he would betray his, and their values, by cheating to win against another of their heroes was notably shocking.
When the ill-fated match began, Batista quickly dismantled John Cena leaving him broken and supposedly unconscious in the ring. He finished the match by subjecting Cena to the Batista Bomb, a vicious slam move, which the commentators referred to as unnecessary and overkill. After winning the match while not even breaking a sweat, Batista raised the championship victoriously and pretended to thank the audience as an actor might bow for the audience after a well-received performance. Over the next several weeks Batista continued to punish Cena with brutal low-blows (illegal kicks to the groin) and shots with steel chairs. These events culminated on March 1, 2010 (Cena & Batista, 2010) when the two performers faced each other verbally and Batista finally explained why he did what he did.

John Cena came to the ring as he usually does, in jean shorts, a brightly colored t-shirt emblazoned with the motto Never Give Up and the words Hustle, Loyalty, Respect, and a baseball cap. As he arrived on stage he saluted to the audience and viewers at home, a gesture that he has said is a show of respect to military personnel at home and abroad. When he was given a microphone, he began by saying that several people had told him that at the Elimination Chamber event Batista had stolen the championship from him and that he had been screwed. He quickly addressed this by taking full responsibility for what happened and saying that it was just the way the business goes. He explained this as Batista being smart enough to align himself with McMahon and that it wasn’t the first time and wouldn’t be the last time he was taken advantage of by the system.

This nod toward an inherently unjust system has been a part of professional wrestling’s deference to the working class viewer since the beginning. It is at the heart of heroic middle-American individualism. The idea that there is a system at work designed
to be unfair and make life more difficult for the person who chooses his/her own path to success is an American trope replicated in movies, television shows, books, and even the news (Kuper, 2004). It is therefore not surprising to find that it is also at play within the story arcs of the WWE. Cena, who has been from the beginning, a working class hero literally wears the mantra of middle-class American virtue on his chest. He also, in this case and others, refuses to take on the role of the victim. This is another value intrinsic in the hero individual. He takes responsibility for what happens in his life and essentially pulls himself up by the bootstraps and continues on. The crowd cheers as Cena talks about everyone wanting to be champion and wanting to get ahead in life, but then boos Batista as Cena expresses his lack of understanding as to why someone would cheat to do it.

As Cena finishes his speech about loyalty, fair play, and standing up for yourself, the crowd begins to chant his name as the camera cuts to fans holding pro-Cena signs and women and children dressed in his merchandise staring with adoration and chanting *Hustle, Loyalty, and Respect!* Essentially, these shots show that Cena is the voice of the people. They show that he is the hero of children and desirable to women. To these cheers Cena excited declares, “See you guys are like me! You see the silver lining in everything! … I’m going to Wrestlemania against Batista!” (Cena & Batista, 2010) This is the dynamic than is at play when Batista takes the stage when Cena finishes.
After Cena’s passionate speech, Batista’s music and introduction video begins to play. The crowd goes wild to the idea of a confrontation between the two men. Then, instead of Batista taking the stage, menacing men dressed in black shirts, slacks and shoes begin to take their places at the top of the entry ramp. Jerry Lawler (commentator) states “Be careful what you wish for… You just might get it!” (2010) as it appears that perhaps these men intend to attack Cena. Then Batista enters slowly to the music stating, “No one follows me, I walk alone!” (2010) In short order Batista reveals that these men are his bodyguards and private security. He states that he doesn’t need them, but they are there to keep him from hurting someone else (particularly John Cena). To this the crowd boos and shows their disapproval. Batista then proceeds to make a speech about how little respect he has for Cena and how mistreated he has been in the WWE. Batista talks about how he is a lone wolf and never needs to rely on anyone, to which Cena points out the deals he’s made with McMahon and others to get ahead. To these allegations, Batista then begins to recount how he has been passed over for being the face of the WWE. He makes excuses for his deals and conniving, and then maintains once again that no one is
more of a self-made-man than he is. The camera once again pans to the crowd who show utter revulsion for what Batista has become. He then addresses the negative response from the crowd by stating that he came to the WWE not for the fans but to, “win championships and make money” (2010).

After Batista had made numerous excuses for his actions, Cena responded in the following way.

Things did work out differently for us Dave, ya wanna know why? I work my butt off for this company. I’m the first one to show up and the last one to leave. You’re so cool you can’t even show up on time. Every single person in the WWE Universe knows I have given my freaking life for this business, and you stand up there expecting the business to be given to you. Dave, you’re all about yourself. You need to look in the mirror. You’re selfish. You always have been. You always will be. That’s real talk.

(Cena, 2010b)

Batista responds in agreement to this statement. He says he doesn’t care about them (the fans) and reiterates that he is there to make money and doesn’t care if they cheer him or
boo him. He chides that Cena can continue “kissing babies and hugging fat girls” (2010) while he trains to beat the hell out of him.

This exchange between Cena and Batista is representative of a dynamic that happens regularly within the WWE. During such exchanges it is made clear which performer will be playing which role within the story arc of the next several months. In this case, Cena very clearly becomes the embodiment of most of the previously enumerated middle-class values, while Batista becomes the antithesis of those values. Primarily, in this case, the values of honesty, hard work, loyalty and especially rugged individualism are at play. The proof is illustrated in the camera angles that regularly showed the difference between Cena who stood by himself in the ring humbly espousing hard work and honesty to the approval of the crowd while Batista postured, saber-rattled and claimed to be self-made and self-reliant while surrounded by bodyguards.

Within this exchange a clear line is drawn for the viewer at home concerning which performer is the hero in this rivalry and which is the villain. Batista becomes the villain in this dynamic by both perverting some values and openly opposing others. The value of individualism is perverted as he argues that he is a lone wolf and self-made-man after making backroom deals to win championships and then surrounding himself with protection. This creates a dissonance between what the audience expects of one who claims to hold this value and what Batista shows them. Furthermore, he openly opposes the values of humility, and populism by stating unabashedly that he cares nothing for the fans or viewers at home. This carries with it a certain degree of irony in that by making himself more and more hated as a villain (generating heat) the crowd then wants more and more to see him perform. In other words, there are those performers whom the crowd
loves (like John Cena in this case) and others whom the crowd loves to hate (like David Batista).

*Perverted Religion – The Straight Edge Society Recruits a New Member*

The performer known as CM Punk has made a career based on the concept of a *Straight Edge* lifestyle. Several years ago when Punk made his début, he did so as a heroic figure presumably intended to be a role model for younger viewers and fans. The term *straight edge*, as it refers to Punk’s lifestyle means a life free of alcohol, tobacco, drugs, sexual promiscuity and other vices. Tattoos, piercings, and extreme sports, however are not only acceptable, but encouraged. Thus, straight refers to following a straight and narrow path of abstaining from detrimental activities and substances, while edge refers to the edginess of the lifestyle in general. Punk spent several years espousing this straight edge message, but never seemed to connect with the fans who deemed him as somewhat sanctimonious and preachy. In recent years, however, Punk has shifted from an edgy hero, to an almost cultish leader. The message of straight edge has been transformed from one of cool, trendy abstinence to religious fanaticism with Punk as the chief prolocutor.

During the 2010 broadcast year this new role as the leader of what he referred to as the *Straight Edge Society* was in full effect. Throughout the year Punk regularly made grandiose speeches about faith, dedication, hope and morality. One would expect these speeches to resonate with the middle-American sensibilities described above, but much to the opposite his speeches usually resulted in almost uniformly alienating audience members and viewers alike. This was not so much in the values he espoused, but rather in his disingenuous characterization of such values. Punk did not simply say that abstaining
from alcohol, tobacco, or drugs (even prescription drugs) was a preferred way of life, but rather that it intrinsically made straight edge practitioners morally superior to all other people. He placed himself in the role of the sole arbiter of morality, right, wrong, and general decency, a role that he regularly used to insult and degrade the viewers at home he regularly referred to as fat addicts slipping into drug induced comas.

To complete the role of religious zealot, Punk regularly referred to himself as savior and redeemer of the lost WWE universe. Larson and Bailey’s (1998) analysis of American values in television news, Judeo-Christian values are still considered a staple of middle-American sensibilities. This obvious attempt to draw a parallel between himself and Jesus Christ or perhaps Moses was shown to draw strong negative reactions from the crowd as camera shots of audience members booing and calling him a false prophet showed.

One of the starkest examples of one of CM Punk’s rants came early in 2010 as he was recruiting audience members into the Straight Edge Society. Punk would saunter to the ring proclaiming his values and morals while simultaneously shaming and chastising the viewers at home. He would then regularly extend an invitation to the crowd (another homage to typical Judeo-Christian church liturgy). During such invitations several WWE audience plants would stand up and beg to be saved. These plants would on several occasions be more than just crew or staff disguised as audience members, but rather new rookie WWE performers. This practice of introducing rookie performers into the WWE storylines as audience members is an old technique that has been used numerous times over the last several decades.
On January 22, 2010 (Punk, 2010), Punk and new recruit Luke Gallows arrived on the stage in their standard fashion. Gallows made prayer signs with his hands while Punk waxed eloquent about the depravity of the average WWE fan and maintained that even though they loudly booed him, they really were begging him to save them. He walked slowly to the ring while directly talking to several audience members including senior citizens and children in attendance. During this speech Punk spread his arms wide making the sign of the cross and proclaimed the following into the camera:

You can boo all you want, but I see you people for what you really are. You’re cowards. You hide behind bottles of pills, cans of beer, cartons of cigarettes. I look out here and see this sea of depravity. I see you morally corrupt people rotting in front of my very eyes. I see parents carelessly drinking and smoking in front of their children ensuring that the next generation will be as hopelessly addicted as this one is…. I see this majority reach out and beg and they plead for a savior to reach out and grab them by the hand and lead them to the Promised Land! (Punk, 2010)

Again, along the first line of intertextual analysis (text to audience), Punk set himself up as a savior and messianic figure to be worshiped by the audience and viewers at home. In doing so, he essentially perverted a core middle-class value system that resonated with the viewers. It was not necessarily that audience members generally disagreed about the issues of drugs, alcohol, or tobacco, but rather that Punk was a disingenuous messenger who used those core values as a means by which to silence or condemn another key value, virtuous democracy (populism).
Punk continued his tirade in a manner reminiscent of a television evangelist by stating that, “I and only I can wash away your problems and save each and every last one of you if you pledge allegiance to my Straight Edge Society!” (Punk, 2010) As most fans were shown to be revolted by his self-aggrandizement and messianic complex, one woman jumped the barriers surrounding the ring and began begging Punk to save her. She cried, she pleaded with him, and she just so happened to be mic’ed. Even when the lavaliere mic fell off during her escapades she was audible to the television audience via boon mics and shotgun mics on the cameras. As she pleaded, while security attempted to escort her up the ramp leading out of the arena, Punk called for Gallows to go and bring her to him. Gallows somberly and penitently exited the ring, held the woman by her hand and gently walked her down the aisle to the waiting CM Punk.

What ensued next was one of the most dramatic events associated with the cultish Straight Edge Society and one of the defining moments of CM Punk as a false messianic figure. After explaining to Punk that she was tired of her life of alcohol, prescription pills and “meaningless relationships,” Punk consoled the woman, now known as Serena, and stated that he knew just how meaningless and depressing her life was. He said he knew she was just like the rest of the losers in the crowd and viewing on television, “hopelessly addicted” (Punk, 2010) to alcohol and pills, and he knew that he was the only savior for such a lifestyle. As she stood in adoration of Punk, he looked at her and lovingly said that he was the only one that cared about her, and asked her to “pledge allegiance and her life to him and the Straight Edge Society” (Punk, 2010). This crescendo in his speech was met with a wave of disapproval from fans and tight camera shots of women and children frowning, booing and shaking their heads.
Serena accepted his offer, pledged her allegiance to him, and then was told that in order to join his Society she must have her head shaved as a symbol of her new life. In the middle of the ring Serena proclaimed, “I accept CM Punk as my savior!” (Punk, 2010) and was shaved bald by CM Punk and Luke Gallows as the commentators discussed how Punk has the ability to brainwash the weak-minded and how Serena appeared virginal. After shaving Serena’s head Punk referred to a shaved head as the sign of a Straight Edge soldier. This is ironic and may be read as further religious hypocrisy considering that while Gallows and Serena had shorn scalps, Punk himself wore long black hair and a bushy beard.

This event was indicative of the actions that Punk has become known for and demonstrated during 2010. His character has become a representation of false and of oppressive religion. Week after week Punk portrays himself as prophet, a savior, or a redeemer, while simultaneously being one of the most underhanded and generally insulting performers in the WWE. The duplicitous nature of Punk falls in line with his perversion of the middle-American, Judeo-Christian values. In much the same way as Batista claimed to be individualistic and self-reliant but then violated those traits, Punk claims to be in support of faith, sobriety and abstinence, but propagates that position with such venom, self-righteousness, and intolerance that he becomes a vile character rather than a virtuous one.

When examining an act like this it is important to keep in mind that the goal of professional wrestling is to generate heat and provide a certain degree of logic and immediacy. The image of the grandiose preacher or perhaps the televangelist is common within the media. After real life example of questionably moral high profile televangelist
leaders like Robert Tilton, W.V. Grant and Larry Lea who were all investigated during the mid-1990s to the recent sex scandals involving the Catholic church, part of American society looks at over-the-top religious leaders with skepticism. Punk setting himself up as a religious icon promising salvation in exchange for complete obedience may from a negotiated perspective resonate with fans (by building negative heat) because it plays on an underlying distrust of self-appointed religious leaders. This may be strange considering the strong influence of Judeo-Christian values and sensibilities within certain sections of the nation, but then it is not the use of religious language that seems to be shown as generating heat, but rather the self-importance and self-righteousness of Punk that seems to ignite the flames of disdain.

*Heroic Self-Sacrifice – Cena Joins the NEXUS*

Even in Barthes’ (1972) early analysis of Parisian parlor wrestling one of the most common and often powerful dynamics was the heroic struggle of the protagonist. This struggle and ultimate victory is a constant theme of most western narratives. Vogler (2007) refers to this struggle as the hero’s journey. Within this struggle it is important to understand that a heroic character is not victorious in all circumstances. More to the point, he or she cannot be allowed to be habitually victorious. Much to the opposite, for a heroic character to truly resonate with an audience they must struggle, suffer, endure and only after all this may they legitimately gain victory.

Vogler identified a variety of different archetypal characters that were usually present within the dynamic of the hero’s struggle. First and foremost is the hero himself. Vogler describes the classic protagonist hero as the very embodiment of our most aspirational values. This is not to say that the hero is necessarily representative of who
the audience is in reality, but rather who they would aspire to be. Other characters would include the Threshold Guardian who stands as an often-neutral obstacle for the hero to confront. The Threshold Guardian usually forces the hero to confront a difficult dichotomy or make a difficult choice, but confronting and dealing with the guardian usually symbolizes or represents a major turning point in the life and struggle of the hero. Another archetypal character Vogler identifies is the Shadow. The Shadow is usually the hero’s opposite. In many cases this character represents a diametrically opposed social or ideological position. The Shadow’s role is typically to oppose the hero and act as the main or primary antagonist. It is not uncommon for the Shadow to confront the hero with his own failings or to orchestrate situations in which the hero may doubt his own resolve or values. Beyond these, Vogler identified a final archetypal character that is important in this analysis. This final character he refers to as the Herald. The herald’s role in the story is to verbalize the importance of events for the audience, reader or viewer. Essentially this character fills in the blanks of emotional connection and situational significance that might otherwise be explicated through internal dialog or omniscient narration.

Within the WWE these archetypal characters were in full display during the hero’s journey that was the conflict between John Cena and the group referred to as the NEXUS. John Cena often represents the idealized embodiment of middle-American values. This puts him squarely in line with Vogler’s classic protagonist hero. He does not necessarily represent the viewers at home, but rather represents an ideal that they might aspire to be. Much to the opposite, the NEXUS and their leader Wade Barrett represented a direct antithesis of the values Cena routinely stood for. Barrett and his followers were
ruthless, cruel, disloyal, arrogant and dedicated to nothing but their own power. This made them, and Barrett specifically, the perfect Shadow to Cena’s hero archetype.

In August 2010, NEXUS rose to prominence within the various story arcs of the WWE by randomly attacking performers. These attacks were almost exclusively televised via omniscient cut-scenes in the locker rooms and other locations around arenas. In addition to these attack cut-scenes, they were regularly shown plotting and planning against other performers from low angles and with lighting that would cast shadows over their faces or display them in a dark or foreboding manner. As these attacks carried on, John Cena stepped forward and attempted to build a consensus against the NEXUS. Throughout September, Cena made speeches about loyalty, respect, and standing up to bullies like the NEXUS in the hopes of garnering support from other performers. Ultimately, however, he was betrayed, abandoned and deceived again and again thus intensifying his struggle.

On October 3, 2010 (Cena & Barrett, 2010) at the Hell in a Cell pay-per-view Cena faced a moment that defined his struggle and created a major point of conflict with regards to the middle-American value of self-sacrifice. Up until this point Cena sacrificed himself to betrayal and sometimes-weekly beatings at the hands of the NEXUS while trying to save others from their brutality. On October 3, Cena put his values and sensibilities on the line as he competed directly against NEXUS leader Wade Barrett. If Cena won NEXUS would be forced to disband, but if he were defeated he would have to join their ranks. Cena valiantly fought against Barrett as the crowd showed their support shouting Never Give Up! For the television viewers, tight shots of women and children cheering, worrying and praying for Cena’s victory over Barrett created a good versus evil
dichotomy that would potentially be otherwise nebulous. During the fight commentator Michael Cole exclaimed to the viewers at home, “Ladies and gentlemen you are looking at the hopes of World Wrestling Entertainment! … He embodies everything this company stands for!” (Cena & Barrett, 2010) As the fight wore on, Cena appeared to have the advantage, when two unknown individuals emerged from the crowd, distracted the referee and knocked Cena unconscious giving Barrett the win. Days later it would be revealed that these individuals were part of Barrett’s plan to beat Cena. Viewers at home were shown tight shots of devastated fans and shocked children as commentators (again in the archetypal role of the herald) explained what Cena’s loss and forced admission into NEXUS would mean for them, for fans, and for the WWE as a whole.

Figure 4. Fans Shocked at Cena’s Loss “No, not this way! Cena can’t lose this way!” – Michael Cole (October 3, 2010 “Hell in a Cell”). (WWE, 2010c).

For much of the rest of the year Cena was again forced into self-sacrifice as week after week he was humiliated by the smug, aristocratic Barrett. As a member of NEXUS Cena was forced to violate his values in servitude to Barrett or be fired from the WWE. This placed Cena into a classic heroic conundrum. He was forced during this time to either sacrifice the values that he espoused every week and formed the basis of his
persona, or sacrifice is life (or rather livelihood in this case). Barrett treated Cena like a child, forced him to become a cheat as referee in matches Barrett and other NEXUS members competed in, and do demeaning tasks for him that were featured in televised omniscient cut-scenes.

In a parallel story arc, performer Randy Orton, had become WWE Champion and was set to compete against Barrett at the Survivor Series pay-per-view. From October 4, 2010 through the event on November 21, 2010, John Cena, Wade Barrett, and Randy Orton took on the roles of the hero, the shadow, and the threshold guardian respectively. Wade Barrett had given Cena the ultimatum to either, as referee of his match against Orton for the championship, ensure his victory or be fired. During this time period, John Cena was confronted numerous times by Randy Orton, whom he had competed against continuously for much of 2008 and 2009, concerning what decision he would make at Survivor Series. Television viewers were exposed week after week to vignettes designed to dramatize and emotionally connect viewers to the pain and hardship Cena was experiencing due to conflict. Essentially over the seven week period the WWE used videos, cut-scenes, and commentary exclusively produced for television audiences to build the drama and emotion of this weighty decision.

In the weeks leading up to Survivor Series Orton stepped fully into the role of the threshold guardian. On November 11, 2010 Orton confronted Cena stating that if Cena helped to ensure Barrett’s victory he would be spitting in the face of all those who have legitimately won the prize. He also argued passionately with Cena that if he helped Barrett to cheat he would be the “biggest fraud in the WWE” (Cena & Orton, 2010) and would never again be able to take the moral high ground of loyalty, respect, self-reliance
and honesty. On November 15, 2010 the WWE held what they called “WWE Monday Night Raw Old School” during which they featured a wide variety of past performers along with vintage 1970s and 1980s graphics, music, costumes and production elements (interview segments, props, camera effects, etc…). During this program Orton once again confronted Cena along with several past champions and well-known performers. During this confrontation the topic of sacrifice was of key importance. Several of the past performers spoke to Cena and the viewers about sacrificing for what you want. They explained that to succeed in life you must sacrifice many things, but never your values. This is a message that resonated strongly with the crowd.

After weeks and weeks of building drama and emotion specifically connected with the suffering and sacrifice Cena was forced to endure at the hands of Wade Barrett and the challenges made by Orton and others. On November 21, 2010 the Survivor Series pay-per-view finally arrived. Throughout the program television viewers were exposed to numerous vignettes building and reprising the events that led up to the inevitable decision Cena would be forced to make, sacrifice his values or sacrifice his livelihood. In one particular vignette which led the program Cena is overheard in what was couched as a conversation with himself. As a montage of shots from the last seven weeks as well as from Cena as a child is shown he first speak about being free from NEXUS and what he’d have to do to earn his freedom. After a cut-scene in which WWE Legend Roddy Piper extols Cena to do the right thing, he then is heard talking about doing what is right and accepting the consequences.

Tonight, I will be free from the NEXUS. I will compromise my integrity just this once. I can do it. I will raise Wade Barrett’s hand in victory. I will
turn my back on every superstar who’s worn the championship, and I’ll be free. The fans will forgive me and I’ll forgive myself, right? Right?

<Piper Break>

Tonight I will be fired, I will do the right thing. I will refuse to let the NEXUS rise. I can pretend my career doesn’t mean anything to me, and I will walk away. I can hang it up, and move on. Or can I? (Cena, 2010a)

Figure 5. “Free or Fired” Vignette – Survivor Series (November 21, 2010). (WWE, 2010a).

Tension was built throughout the program and finally during the match between Orton and Barrett, Cena makes the decision to call it fair. Barrett threatened Cena throughout the match as the crowd could be heard chanting contradictory cheers, Let’s go Cena and Cena Sucks! Orton pins Barrett, Cena counts slowly 1, 2, 3 and chooses to sacrifice his career to do the right thing. As Orton celebrates his victory Cena is shown holding his head in the corner presumably contemplating this being his last night as a WWE performer. Before making a long, slow walk from the arena, the crowd explodes with approval for John Cena and the chant, Thank You Cena. Their thanks can be attributed to both his time as a performer, and the fact that he re-enforced their belief in the middle-American value of sacrifice in order to do the right thing. Once again the commentators
acted in the role of the herald to place Cena’s actions and career within the proper context for the television viewer and to explain how heroic and selfless Cena was.

Ultimately, though he was fired (and later returned), this story arc and its heart wrenching conclusion was represented as a major victory for Cena. From a purely dominant perspective it was a battle between Cena and Barrett, but from a negotiated point of view there was far more at play. Tenets of good versus evil, right versus wrong, sacrificing one’s values versus sacrificing one’s life. All of these were played out during this seven week period of time in a style reminiscent of the hero’s journey in classical literature like Homer’s *Odyssey* or Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. While professional wrestling has a reputation as a low-brow form of entertainment, in it’s contemporary form there are many intricate layers of meaning being negotiated within the performances of the wrestlers as well as the production of the television program itself. While at one point characters were, in fact, mostly two-dimensional, today they are generally far more complex, as are the storylines. Middle-American values such as those enumerated earlier in this section form much of the basis for this more complex and protracted negotiation. While early amateur or professional wrestling, like Barthes’ (1972) analyzed, often focused on simple elements of good versus evil, contemporary WWE storylines regularly pit class values against each other in much the same way as Marxist philosophy argued for a battle between a proletariat value system and that of the bourgeoisie ruling class.
CHAPTER VI

RAW RACIAL REPRESENTATIONS AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF MINORITIES IN THE WWE

Racial and ethnic stereotyping has been used within professional wrestling for years in much the same way as it was in circuses many years ago. For much of its early existence Blacks, Hispanics and members of other races were not allowed or at least not prominently featured within professional wrestling in the United States. It is true that in other countries, like Spain and Mexico, the spectacle of staged wrestling developed a large and dedicated following, but in the United States non-white performers were often used as objects of wrath or intrigue. While in Mexico, for example, Lucha Libre (Free Wrestling) and its practitioners, the often-masked luchadors, have for many decades been an iconic form of entertainment, in the U.S. they have often been presented as foreign oddities.

This is not a unique dynamic to professional wrestling. The use of non-white individuals as symbols of an other to be reviled or astounded by has been common in entertainment from the earliest circuses and even minstrel shows. The famous Barnum and Bailey circus was well known for touting wonders from around the world. In many cases these would include exotic animals, but usually they also featured exotic individuals. Egyptian women charming snakes, Russian gymnasts, German strongmen, and others typically adorned with their native land’s American stereotype. They were exotic; they were different; they represented something foreign from traditional American sensibilities, and ultimately played into the pre-existing stereotypical image many fans had about their cultures.
Closer to home, the legendary *Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show* conducted a similar exhibition of the other in their representation of the American Indian. This show was famous for their use of extravagantly dressed Native Americans who would whoop and yell while fighting cowboys and re-enacting scenes from some of the popular western adventure books of the day. In many ways, the popularity of the show and its largely fabricated and stereotypical image of the Wild West Indian has formed the basis of what contemporary American society thinks regarding Native Americans.

The spectacle of professional wrestling has historically operated in much the same manner. As pointed out previously, the performance depends on the immediacy of meaning. This is to say that meaning, character, motivation and action must be immediately understandable and accessible to the viewer. This creates the logic necessary for professional wrestling to make sense. The commodification of race is one of the most common techniques utilized in professional wrestling, but also inherently carries the tendency to reduce individuals to spectacles or stereotypes.

**Racial Representation and Commodification**

Racial representations within the WWE in 2010 might most accurately be described as residing in the realm of contradiction. On one hand minority performers are still stereotyped in many ways that will be explicated later, but on the other their roles are not generally cast as exotics. There is more normalcy. Whereas there was a time not too long ago where the role of minorities in American professional wrestling was to be little more than an exotic obstacle to the white protagonists, many non-white performers today are portrayed as working class heroes. As will be explained in the following analysis, many such performers including Rey Mysterio and R-Truth are often cast as conscious
elements in relationship to white performers. They are shown to be sounding boards and moral compasses for their white partners or friends. Others like Kofe Kingston and Yoshi Tatsu literally wear their supposed cultural background on their bodies as they are adorned with Jamaican or Japanese flags and images respectively.

While it has become far more common for performers of color to be represented as heroes, this is not to say that the old concepts of difference have disappeared. It essentially is the difference between these characters and the other Caucasian performers that usually builds the basis of their appeal. It is still common for the commentators, cut-scenes and televised intro/outro elements to emphasize the difference of these performers. This is a dynamic similar to what Campbell recognized within the news media in his book *Race, Myth and the News* (1995). In this book, Campbell identifies two myths that are proliferated through the news media regarding individuals and will be of importance to this study. These are the myths of difference and assimilation.

When considering the myth of difference, as it is described by Campbell (1995, pp. 59-84), it is important to understand that cultural norms and preconceptions form the basis of this more subtle form of racism. It is argued that within the contemporary American culture there exists latent, underlying tropes concerning people of color as they might be compared to whites. This is to say that while many individuals may not consider themselves racists per se (and might actively attempt to avoid prejudicial tendencies), there is an underlying cultural model at play that alludes to an inherent difference between a white baseline culture and non-white cultural minorities. Within this dynamic it could be argued that an us-versus-them environment is created within the dominant white cultural superstructure. In other words, minority success, failure, achievements and
infractions are often couched within an aversive context of dominant white values versus those of the minority. Minority crimes are often depicted as deviations from a virtuous Anglo-Saxon norm, and minority success is often thought of as either a strong adherence to dominant norms or as resulting form natural talent inherent to that racial group.

Anglo-Saxon (or American Caucasian) culture serves as a baseline for social and cultural normality. There are concepts and notions as to the strengths, weaknesses, virtues and limitations of the average normal white person. All minority activity is consequently judged against those characteristics. Within this system, perceived minority excellence in certain areas is even then considered an aberration due to some inherent genetic advantage of that racial group rather than hard work or individual exceptionalism.

Similarly, any perceived failings of individuals of a non-white racial group are then seen as indicative of some generalizable racial trait that prevents them from conforming to the white cultural norm. Campbell argues that this dynamic has led to an expectation of Blacks in particular as athletes and entertainers. Campbell (1995, p. 63) references Hacker (1992) who wrote, “White America still prefers its black people to be performers who divert them as athletes and musicians and comedians” (p. 34). This is to say that those perceived racial traits of black individuals that serve the members of the white superstructure are welcomed and, in their own way, celebrated. In doing this, however, a dynamic is created in which black individuals may be accepted by either conforming to the dominant cultural standard, or playing a stereotypical role in which they serve some function (entertainment for instance) for the dominant cultural structure.

Within the WWE this myth is active but within a different context. Historically, most performers are essentially shaped by the organization in which they perform. That is
not to say that they have no influence over their character, but rather to acknowledge that many companies like the WWE groom performers into certain roles that are advantageous for the storylines and arcs. It actually very common for performers to even be re-characterized by an organization if an initial character persona does not seem to resonate with the viewers. Once a character role is crafted, however, it is mostly up to the performer to develop the part. Scenes are staged, exchanges are scripted, but there is always room for the performers to improvise within the scope of their character.

As described briefly in an earlier chapter, many performers of color have characters built on the perceived stereotypes and cultural expectations associated with their race. This might take the form of black performers being represented as thugs, hoods, or rappers, or Latino performers as Mexican gang members, cholos, or banditos. Each representation serves the purpose of creating or emphasizing racial difference within the microcosm of the WWE Universe. For years, so called high fliers were exclusively Latino luchadors or Asian kamikazes. Even the famous Ricky Steamboat, who was born and raised in West Point, New York but was of Pacific Islander descent, was transformed by the WWF during his career to Ricky The Dragon Steamboat. Within this persona he dressed in elaborate Japanese or Hawaiian costumes, spat fire, and was often described in terms of an animal, lizard or kamikaze by commentators. Even though he was born into a family and raised in an area that conformed strongly to white cultural norms, because of his ethnic appearance, he was given the gimmick of the Hawaiian Dragon by the professional wrestling machine (WWF).

The second myth that is of importance to this analysis is what Campbell referred to as the myth of assimilation (pp. 85-112). This myth is predicated on the concept that
many television programs or other media artifacts attempt to combat traditional (overt) racism and the limitations on people of color that came with it by portraying a false equality. Campbell references *The Cosby Show* as an example of this myth at work. This program depicted a world in which racism and social injustice appeared to be a thing of the past and was rarely if ever talked about. The Huxtables, a black family, lived in a world in which there were no limitations or obstacles for black individuals to overcome, and where racism might have just as easily never existed at all. Jhally and Lewis (1992) analyzed *Cosby Show* and by extension the world in which the Huxtables lived. Within this world the Huxtables, as a black family, were completely integrated into the society. Both Cliff (husband/doctor) and Clair (wife/lawyer) had high-profile careers and were regularly shown interacting naturally and organically with their white neighbors and friends. Within this world racism or social injustice based on race were relatively invisible. Furthermore, Jhally and Lewis (1992) argued that within the show the American dream of upward mobility and overall accessibility to opportunities was not mitigated in any way by race.

The *Cosby Show* illustrated a form of enlightened racism (Jhally & Lewis, 1992) in which racism, rather than being addressed directly, was pushed aside and replaced with a more rose-colored view of the world. Within this form racism all success and advancement was only limited to hard work, determination, and education. Additionally, education was a general concept that appeared universally accessible. The point of contention within this form of racism is chiefly that by constructing a world in which racism and the social/societal effects thereof are obscured, the media portrays a fictitious world that viewers might construe as reality. While some might view this dynamic as a
positive step toward the perceived goal of a culture without racism, Jhally and Lewis describes it as more of a form of escapism than an honest addressing of the issue. By denying that there are factors in society which in some ways limit people of color Jhally and Lewis maintain the media may be doing more harm than good.

Within the WWE, this enlightened racism is far less common than the previous, more overt form of racial stereotyping, but has begun to play a role in storylines and character interactions over the last several years. While it may be a stretch to argue that any WWE characters routinely act fairly toward one another, it may be more accurate to argue that they are usually treated and represented equally. It is very common in 2010 for characters of every ethnic group to play just as many heroes as villains (if not more so), and it is typical for all heroic characters regardless of race or ethnicity to espouse the same cultural values of honesty, hard work, sportsmanship and loyalty.

This is where the contradictions in the WWE begin to come into play. It is very common for characters to take on the more extreme physical and social stereotypical characteristics of their ethnicity, but this adherence to a stereotype is often portrayed as having little or no effect on values or intercharacter relations. This is to say that a character might be openly portrayed as a thug and a criminal, but this doesn’t necessarily prevent him from also being a hero who promotes the typical virtuous characteristics listed above. It is an interesting dynamic in which both adherence to and deviation from dominant cultural norms may be embodied within the same character and result in little, if any, cognitive dissonance within the viewer. Characters personas are built to accentuate racial difference, but heroic and villainous characterization is usually determined based on the performer’s adherence or rejection of dominant values.
In the following sections the two most common minority groups within the WWE (Hispanics and Blacks) will be examined based on the characterization of representative performers. The performers analyzed are those that were most popular (most regularly featured) and thus most indicative of how that group is represented in the overall scope of the WWE.

The Boyz in the Hood: Representation of Blacks in the WWE

While black performers have been present within professional wrestling for years, with only a few exceptions they have usually played the role of the villain or foreboding antagonist. Many black performers were portrayed as angry, cruel and nefarious. Exceptions to this representation would often be more minstrel like in nature. A prime example of this would be Leroy Rochester who performed during the 1980s under the gimmicky persona of The Junkyard Dog. He came to the ring wearing a dog collar attached to a long chain leash. He barked, sang, told jokes, used colorful urban slang, danced for and with audience members (specifically white children), but ultimately became known as a safe, funny, representation of black culture. While many wrestling fans of the time may have regarded him as a beloved personality/character, from a purely socio-cultural perspective much of this representation was somewhat disturbing.

In 2010, within a much more racially cognoscente culture, the real question is, are these representations of black culture still in practice within the WWE Universe? The answer to this is yes, but in a more contemporary and refined way. The two most common black character types within the WWE during 2010 are the minstrel and the angry black man. Within the context of this study, the term minstrel refers to those performers who wear stereotypical black culture as a costume. These performers not only
wore a commodified version of the culture, so to speak, but also tend to represent
themselves as playful, silly, flippant or shallow. Ultimately, the WWE minstrel is the
black performer that embodies a stereotypical, presumably white perception of black
culture, and does so in a way that is generally safe, gratifying and useful to white
viewers.

The angry black man image, however, is in many ways the direct antithesis of the
minstrel. Very rarely do performers with this character type necessarily wear the
stereotypical elements of the culture, but rather they take on the more traditional persona
of the powerful, angry, foreboding villain. In this way a separation is made between the
silly minstrel whose outlandish outfits, actions and antics please the crowd, and the
intimidating angry black man who stands as an obstacle to be overcome or to be reviled
by the overwhelmingly white viewers at home.

To begin, one of the most high profile minstrels of the WWE during 2010 was the
performer known as R-Truth. Along Kristeva’s (1980) first axis of intertextual analysis
(author to reader), R-Truth represents a very strong commodification of rap/hip-hop
culture. Physically, R-Truth has very dark skin that is covered with piercings and tattoos.
While it is true that many of his white counterparts also have tattoos, for R-Truth these
affectations create a more urban image that he tends to embrace. Add to this character
oversized jeans with his name graffitied down the leg, exposed boxer shorts, garish gold
or silver chains, bracelets and watches, and short dreadlocks that often appear dirty,
greasy and unkempt and R-Truth becomes the physical representation of rap culture. This
characterization plays directly into the concept of commodification insomuch as it creates
a somewhat convenient box in which to place Truth. He is a spectacle to be cheered,
boood, laughed at, and ultimately marginalized, but very rarely is he in a role in which he is meant to be taken seriously. From the perspective of a white male social superstructure, this builds on a dynamic cognitive construct that perpetuates the idea of black men as a people group to be enjoyed as entertainers, but to otherwise be ignored or even feared (as is the case with the angry black man construct that will be discussed presently).

Figure 6. R-Truth (WWE, 2010r).

It is not enough, however, to simply focus on the physical. R-Truth stands out as a minstrel within the 2010 WWE not specifically because of his appearance, but more specifically because of his actions and characterization. Still focusing on the first intertextual axis of analysis, R-Truth connects with the reader, in this case the audience through his entrance and exit routine. R-Truth comes onstage rapping a song that instructs the audience to chant *What’s Up?* and *Let’s Get Crunk* with him as he dances for them, tells jokes, and takes pictures with members of the audience. His appeal and connection to the audience at home is further developed as his entrance video aired featuring both *What’s Up* and *Get Crunk* as well as his name in brightly colored pulsing graffiti letters and depicting him dancing with children at times, making amusing facial
expressions and showing off his bandanas, chains and other jewelry. Additionally, as he enters the arena, low camera angles, quick changing color filters, and sweeping pans through the audience of spectators of every race and gender dancing, singing and holding up signs creates a feeling that the audience at home is now watching a music video rather than a wrestling program.

R-Truth’s actions toward the audience, physical appearance and televised representation only make up half the story though. Kristeva’s second axis of intertextual analysis focuses on how one text might relate to another. In terms of the WWE, the text in question would be the developed character of a particular performer. Therefore, the second line of intertextual analysis would focus on how one performer might relate to others. To explain, it is not enough just to say that R-Truth or other characters represent a particular culture or ideology, for true intertextual analysis one must determine what is then being said about that culture or ideology based on that character’s relationship to others.

*The Minstrel*

One of the defining characteristics of the character type being referred to herein as the minstrel is that not only do they represent internally a very stereotypical version of a culture, but that externally they tend to be heroes, safe, fun, and more often than not a protector or conscience for their white friends. It has already been illustrated that R-Truth, as one of the most popular and therefore visible minstrels, tends to connect strongly with white viewers, but part of this connection has to be thanks to how his character connects with other white performers. If the first axis (author to reader) builds
on the myth of difference, the second axis (text against text) builds the myth of assimilation.

During 2010, R-Truth teamed up almost exclusively with white performers. John Cena, Randy Orton and John Morison were among the most high profile performers he partnered with. In all three cases he played the role of team cheerleader or conscious. In late 2010, John Cena was placed in the precarious position of sacrificing his values and morals in order to keep his career by declaring evil NEXUS leader Wade Barrett WWE Champion at WWE Wrestlemania. During this story arc R-Truth acted as a diplomat, making excuses for Cena to other characters and attempting to reason with him. During an interview cut-scene exchange with Randy Orton (Nov. 15, 2010), R-Truth attempted to reason with Orton by stating the following:

Yo check dis out. You know I hate to say this, but last week John Cena knew exactly what he was doin’ when he counted yo shoulders down for the one, two, three. Ya see people like to think that Cena has a choice, free or fired. That’s not a choice, it’s gonna be free. But you have too choices. You can let it happen or you can do something about it. It may not be right… but it’s the truth. (Truth, 2010a)

During this and many other exchanges like it over several weeks, R-Truth attempt to act as John Cena’s conscious. On November 11, 2010, he is shown in an omnipotent cut-scene to be attempting to sway Cena to be honest even if it costs him his job. Saying that Cena got punked into a bad situation, R-Truth lays out the options and consequences of his actions. In this way, he is depicted as Cena’s moral compass.
In another situation on October 25, 2010, R-Truth comes to the rescue of white WWE Diva Eve Torres who was being verbally accosted by two other white performers. During this exchange, R-Truth enters the ring and immediately Torres begins dancing with him. He proceeds to stand up for Eve’s honor and defend her against her attackers by asking the audience in a sing-song fashion “Who would like a piece of the Miz? I would like a piece of Mr. Kermit!” (Truth, 2010b) In this case “Mr. Kermit” is used to refer to the Miz as a way of making fun of the silly, superior facial expressions the performer regularly makes. As the exchange goes on, R-Truth responds by making silly, exaggerated faces of his own and dancing around the ring acting almost childlike.

During the fight that followed between Miz and R-Truth, the commentators, Jerry Lawler and Michael Cole, who often represent a dominant and oppositional reading respectively, have a conversation regarding who should be respected within the WWE. Lawler, who usually voices to the viewers at home a dominant reading of the performer’s characters, comments about how naturally talented and fun to watch R-Truth is. Cole, on the other hand, spends the match talking about the audacity of R-Truth to interrupt the Miz and how he should know his place. Ultimately, R-Truth ends up losing the match against Miz due to his underhanded tactics and the interference by Miz’s manager during the fight. It was also R-Truth’s excessive celebrating and dance-based moves that led him to a defeat in this and many other matches.

This tends to be another common occurrence within the activities and representations of the minstrels within the WWE. Be them R-Truth, JTG and
Shad (who form the team *Cryme Tyme*), or MVP, most black performers within the WWE who would fall into this category have a style over substance depiction that generally leads them to be ultimately impotent characters within the WWE storyline. Such characters usually play well-meaning but otherwise harmless clowns (to use circus parlance). For example, for most of their partnership including their roles on Smackdown during the first few months of 2010, JTG and Shad played street hustlers who also wrestled. During appearances in February and March of 2010 they were shown in interview and omnipotent cut-scenes to be discussing how to *run game* on other characters and steal anything they could get their hands on. Their appearance, adorned with gold chains, bulletproof vests, do-rags, sagging jeans, opulent *grillz* (gold teeth caps) and motto *Money, Money, Yeah, Yeah* was indicative of their overall representation as criminals and hooligans. Even with this representation though, the team of *Cryme Tyme* was a fan favorite until their breakup on April 2, 2010 during which Shad booted JTG in the head after feeling *played*.

*Figure 7. JTG (member of Cryme Tyme) (WWE, 2010q).*
The fact that JTG and Shad are openly depicted in their characters as criminals can be analyzed in its own right. The concept of the black man as a criminal is a strong and pervasive form of modern racism. Within movies, video games, television programs and even the news, the image of a black man as shady, conniving or simply a criminal of some kind is repeated regularly (Balaji, 2009; Bogle. 1989; Campbell, 1995) In the same way, though, as Balaji (2009) argues that in many forms of media Black masculinity is often defined as a never ending struggle for authenticity, the team of Cryme Tyme regularly justifies their underhanded behavior and criminal mischief as just *keeping it real*. From this perspective a *real* black man is essentially defined through his avoidance of and even distain for the law.

This characterization is further constructed through the team’s entrance video and music. This sequence begins by featuring a voice over speaking very properly, and compared with how JTG and Shad generally speak, might be construed as being white. As an image of a *Parental Advisory* sticker is shown the voice over states in a parody fashion, *Yo Yo Yo Yo! Pop a forty and check your rolly it’s Cryme Time!* As rap music begins images and video clips of Shad and JTG on security cameras robbing convenience stores, throwing money into the air, picking their afros, showing off their grillz (presumably diamond encrusted teeth caps) and drinking are shown to the audience at home. From a dominant perspective this could be a nod to rap and hip/hop culture which commonly uses such imagery as a means by which to characterize legitimate, or real, black masculinity (Balaji, 2009). From a negotiated perspective, however, this imagery plays into the socially normalized image of black masculinity as being synonymous with criminality. Furthermore, by having a presumably white announcer introduce the duo in
an ironic fashion the concept is conveyed to the viewer that these are parodies of rap culture. One might argue that by making the characters a parody one removes the meaning, but it could also be argued (perhaps more legitimately) that the status of JTG and Shad as parody characters speaks to the overall value placed on the societal role of black men as a whole. Essentially, it could be argued that JTG and Shad are little more than straw men created by an organization (WWE) operating within a hegemonic white male superstructure for no other purpose but to strengthen stereotypes and to ultimately be torn down in such a way as to strengthen the dominant ideology.

Montel Vontaneous Porter (MVP) is similar to Cryme Tyme in that he is portrayed as a former criminal who spent time in prison. During the 2010 year, however, he had exchanges with several superstars including Chris Jericho and The Miz in which he claimed to have cleaned up his life (January 11, 2010). This redemption story was/is key to his persona within the WWE and also makes him a somewhat high profile character. Still, during the 2010 year, MVP was beaten again and again after trying to stand up or many times for other characters. His apparent need to show off in the ring, like his Ballin’ maneuver which essentially is an elbow drop to the chest preceded by a lengthy trot around the ring accompanied by excessive hand and facial gestures, appeals to the crowd, but usually results in him being cheated out of wins or violently countered by his opponents. Porter also wears do-rags, gold chains, and often dances or prances for the audience as he makes his way to the ring. In essence, he is depicted as a character who is well meaning, entertaining, athletic but usually harmless in the ring. The perfect safe black man.
In general, this representation of black men within the WWE was far more common than any other during 2010. R-Truth was by far the most visible of these examples in that he played a part in RAW almost every week. JTG, Shad and MVP were less visible, but often played specialized roles on Smackdown during the year. These often included playing playful antagonists to guest hosts or visiting performers from RAW (in the case of Cryme Tyme) or being the first to stand up for Divas or other performers in the case of MVP or R-Truth.

This proclivity for protecting or standing up for female performers (particularly for white female performers) is an interesting dynamic in and of itself. Within many facets of the media including news broadcasts black men are often represented in derogatory ways (Bogle, 1989; Guerrero, 1993; Richardson, 2007). Of the many representations that exist, the over sexualized predator may be considered one of the most common. Historically, there was once and perhaps still is a socialized fear of black men preying on white women among the dominant white ideological superstructure of the United States. Though without audience analysis it is difficult to say for certain, perhaps a dominant reading of black male performers regularly come to the aid/rescue of white female performers would be that the WWE is attempting to counteract social stereotypes of predatory black male sexuality. They fight for and defend the female performers, usually with no sexual overtones or expectations in return.

A negotiated reading of this dynamic would have to take into consideration the motivation of the male performer. In most cases where a black male perform came to the aid of a female performer during the 2010 year, the female performer was at least partially white (Eve Torres and Melina are supposedly part Latino). There were no
instances of any male performers coming to the aid of a black female performer like Alica Fox. Considering this, one could argue that WWE is the perpetuating of the idea that black men are more attracted to white women than black. At very least this dynamic seems to support the concept that black men are willing to pursue and stand up for white women more than women of color.

In all cases, however, it was far more likely that each of the black male characters would get in over their heads, be beaten, or rely on an additional white performer to come to their aid. From a dominant perspective, this might simply be a representation of teamwork, individual impetuousness, or perhaps when talking about the overt showmanship of all these performers, just a desire to have fun and please the crowd. From a negotiated perspective, however, one must consider the historic role of blacks within the entertainment industry and the historic representation of black men in the media as a whole (Bogle, 1989; Guerrero, 1993; Richardson, 2007). As cited earlier in Campbell’s work (1995) many theorize that the myth of difference, which is certainly in full effect regarding these performers, opens the door for them to be showoffs, clowns, athletes, and live up to any other stereotypical role so long as they are also not shown to be too powerful, too assertive, too intimidating or wielding too much control.

This appears to be the case with this classification of black performer. They are often crowd favorites, as is shown to the television audience through a myriad of a crowd shots of people of different ages and races, but they are rarely champions, nor do they frequently exert any real control or influence over the program’s development. Perhaps from an oppositional standpoint one might argue that if the WWE is in fact a cultural microcosm of American society, such representations are actually commentaries on how
difficult it may be to be a black man in the U.S. Under this guise one could point out that so long as the performer is serving his purpose, and as Michael Cole stated *playing his role* he can move up in the world. This advance is mitigated however by the dominant white superstructure which sets the rules and determines the roles. Conversely, under the same guise one could make the counter argument that the WWE as a predominantly white organization essentially are creating black characters as palatable straw men to be put on display as oddities or clowns before predominantly white audience. Within this concept one could argue that black minstrel characters tend to play roles that fall within and thus strengthen dominant white cultural beliefs. In essence, by showcasing caricatures of black masculinity the WWE creates an environment where dominant white sensibilities concerning race may be negotiated and wear underlying fears may be abated.

*The Angry Black Man*

What could be considered the polar opposite of the minstrels are what will be referred to herein as the angry black man (ABM). The ABM stereotype is one that has been perpetrated for decades within the society at large and is one of the most longstanding representations of black men within professional wrestling. Playing strongly on the myth of difference, but in a different way than the minstrel, the ABM character is usually portrayed as intimidating, powerful, serious, savage and generally scary. He essentially plays into the traditional racist fear of what could happen if a black man became too powerful. Along the first axis of intertextual analysis, the ABM is usually portrayed as a loner who may appear at anytime or anyplace to attack a performer who has somehow gotten on his wrong side. He often opposes the crowd and in doing so opposes the viewers at home as well. Most ABM in the WWE are massive, hulking men
who, rather than becoming fan favorites like the minstrels, become the personification of the indomitable obstacle. They rarely play to any flamboyant stereotypes of rap or contemporary urban cultures, opting rather to take on a more militant disposition that is threatening to the other performers, fans, and commentators and thus vicariously threatening to the viewers at home.

Along the second intertextual axis, these characters are usually portrayed in one of two major ways. First, they are depicted as animals or beasts roaming the corridors of that week’s arena. Besides being a dramatic reduction, this creates the concept of black men as less than human and thus easily marginalized. It could be argued that as the AMB performer symbolically stalks that week’s prey he becomes the embodiment of socialized white fear concerning black power and influence. Other performers step aside at the ABM character’s often cruel and savage stare. They fear his power and air of brutality. This character is rarely shown in conversation with any other character and is much more likely to appear, so to speak, during an interview or other cut-scene and simply stare down more talkative and fan friendly characters. In this way, this first, savage representation of the ABM places the character in a role of wanton destruction and power based primarily on fear and unpredictable violence.

The second representation of the ABM that is common in the WWE during 2010 was that of the enforcer. This representation is very similar in many ways, but instead of being the consummate lone wolf, in this representation the ABM is manipulated by some other character. In many cases, such as those that will be described presently, it is the ABM’s very nature as a creature dominated by anger, revenge, and retribution that leads them to be little more than pawns within the storylines of the WWE. In many cases it is
an arrogant, verbose, white performer who effectively pulls the ABM’s strings in order to advance within the ranks. The ABM, however, usually gets no benefit in the partnership other than to fight and inflict the pain that is this character’s main driving force.

In both representations of the ABM is it key to understand some basic dynamics before unpackaging the meaning of such characters. First, it is a rare thing for any ABM character to be in the running for any single’s championship. This is to say that during the 2010 year, neither on RAW nor Smackdown, did a character who could be described as indicative of the ABM model hold titles within the WWE. To the opposite, in many cases such as in the group NEXUS and with the two most visible ABM characters, Mark Henry and Ezekiel Jackson, these performers were instrumental in other’s success rather than enjoying any of their own. One might simply interpret this as the business of professional wrestling. It might be argued that these characters simply did not garner enough lasting appeal to compete for highly visible championships. This would seem odd, however considering that all of the afore mentioned characters played prominent roles within their respective story arcs, just not primary roles.

Easily the most visible of all the ABM characters in the WWE during 2010 was Mark Henry. A hulking, intimidating man with very dark skin and an equally dark disposition, Mark Henry has been a part of the WWE since the early 1990s. Billed as the World’s Strongest Man, Henry arrives on stage dripping with sweat, with what sometimes appears as spit or foam in his thick black beard. Through this he sometimes appears like a rabid dog, thus building the animalistic representation of the ABM. As he appears on stage a rough, angry, rap song performed by the group Three 6 Mafia proclaims,
Somebody gonna get they ass kicked. Somebody gonna get their wig split.

…. <Repeat>

Beat 'em up, beat 'em up, break his neck, break his neck. Beat 'em up, beat 'em up, break his neck, break his neck.

…. <Repeat>

I never need bod, how could I be scared of a man? I walk through this land like I run this land. Never can you imagine the pain that I bring. If I said I'm a do it in the streets it's the saying. It's the K-I-N-G in here. Wildest man in the world and I have no fear. I'm the mean in the mean, the nightmare dream. The root of all evil, the weak fear me, yeah! (Three 6 Mafia, 2010)

Henry, building his character, flexes his massive arms and often stares menacingly at his target. While minstrel performers are generally known for interacting with the audience as they make their way to the ring, Henry rarely acknowledges that they exist. He lumbers to the ring with an intense stare and spit dripping from his beard. His could easily be imagined as a great beast moving slowly and methodically into a circus ring rather than a man. He is generally shown to television audiences via low tight angles, which emphasize his size and similarly build his intimidating ABM image.
Regarding his relations with other characters (text against text), Henry tends to play the two major roles explicated earlier. He is either the beast or the bodyguard. His roles are either that of the monster stalking the hallways, or the enforcer protecting another performer at his own expense. For much of 2010, he was partnered with characters that were more crowd-friendly (the high flying and charismatic Evan Bourne or the previously discussed MVP for example). In such teams he played the role of enforcer and powerhouse. Henry was an intimidating, powerful, to the point element, which usually contrasted his partner’s showy, fun and more carefree demeanors. In either of these cases, Henry stood apart from the crowd and was regularly referred to by the commentators as scary, savage, angry, or intimidating. An example of this characterization is the match between Henry and Bourne and the team of Ted Dibiase and Cody Rhodes (*Legacy*) (January 11, 2010). During this match the energetic Evan Bourne interacts with the fans and shows off for the crowd as Mark Henry focuses on effectively destroying his opponents. Regarding the inter-character relations during this exchange, Legacy is shown to fear Henry while beating up on the much smaller Bourne. This
infuriates Henry even more who once tagged in roars, slobbers, and destroys the Legacy members until he is thrown out of the ring thanks to the underhanded tactics of his opponents. He is then defeated and angrily stalks around the ring and close up shots of his opponent show their disdain for him and how impotent his supposed anger and power actually were. Henry then leaves the ring appearing confused at how he could have lost. After he is defeated he is shown walking away from long, wide shots making him seem small and insignificant compared to the low tight shots used before the match.
Similar, techniques are used in the representation of other ABM performers including Ezekiel Jackson, Darren Young and to a lesser degree David Otunga. This representation is far less common than the minstrel representation, but is still used commonly with larger and more intimidating performers. Within this representation difference is established based more on the personality and disposition of the performer than it necessarily is based on clothing or language like the minstrel. In much the same
way as Campbell (1995) points out that black athletes are often referred to as naturally talented rather than hard workers or smart players, it is much more likely for these ABM performers to be referred to by the commentators or in cut-scenes by other performers as beasts, animals, forces of nature, or scary, rather than smart, strategic, clever, or other terms usually reserved for white characters. It is also a rare occurrence for any of the cut-scenes, advertisements, PSAs or commentaries that are present within WWE broadcasts, which often feature performers visiting military personnel, sick children or participating in charity work (ex. Make A Wish or the B.A. STAR anti-bullying program) to feature any ABM characters. In this way, their role is thus further limited within the scope of the WWE Universe to the two-dimensional angry, hulking, beastly stereotype.

Figure 10. Ezekiel Jackson (2010). (WWE, 2010a)

The lack of black male performers in promotional videos and clips is a point of particular interest. One must question why ABM performers rarely appear in such televised elements. A dominant analysis would argue that because of the savage, animalistic and often villainous representation of ABM performers, they do not
necessarily represent the quality the WWE would seek to display in such promotions. This analysis tends to ring hallow, however, upon considering the fact that during the 2010 broadcast year other villainous white characters like Chris Jericho, Sheamus, The Miz, and CM Punk regularly made appearances promoting charities or programs supported by the WWE.

To approach the topic from a negotiated perspective one must consider what has been discussed previously with regard to how the WWE generally treats black performers within their storylines. Specifically, they are not generally powerful individuals within the arcs in which they appear. The black performer may be entertaining to watch or serve some role within a story, but ultimately they tend to be impotent. Perhaps this is why minstrel performers like MVP or R-Truth do occasionally appear in promotional videos for programs to help inner-city kids or to stop bullying, but physically powerful and intimidating ABM characters like Mark Henry or Ezekiel Jackson do not.

In general, it can be said that black performers make up the largest non-white group performing in the WWE in 2010. Their representation, however, remains overall tilted to stereotype and racial myth. It is important to note that there are a few black performers that don’t readily fit into any of these categories. Dwayne The Rock Johnson, for example played a role within 2010, but does not fit into the minstrel representation. He is not a stereotype of rap/hip-hop culture, nor does he exhibit those tendencies and characterizations listed for the Angry Black Man stereotype. Compared to many of the other performers Johnson has a very light skin tone and is a crowd favorite often shown jovial, well-spoken, and well-dressed in suits or other fashionable clothing. It may be interesting to note, however, that despite objections Johnson was cast early in his career
by Vince McMahon as Rocky Maivia. Within this character he wore a tribal looking necklace with long streamers and operated as a part of a group which was called the *Nation of Domination* which had strong black Muslim overtones. Similarly, there were others featured in 2010 including Kofi Kingston who don’t necessarily fit into either of the major categories listed above. Rather, many of them fit into a category that might be referred to as *Internationals*. Kingston, for example, was originally said to be from Jamaica, as is still apparent in his music and intro graphics which once prominently featured the Jamaican flag and camera filters of greens and yellows. From 2007 until roughly early 2009 this was how Kingston was depicted, wearing dreadlocks and speaking in a caricature of a Jamaican accent in the few cut-scenes and interviews in which he was featured. In 2010, however, he is introduced to the viewing audience as being from Ghana, West Africa. During 2010 he no longer used the accent and no longer exclusively wears the green, yellow, and black of the Jamaican flag.

As a group, it does seem that the WWE is attempting to put more black performers in more high profile positions within their programs. This may be an attempt to connect with the growing number of non-white viewers of their weekly programs. Black viewers currently make up over 20 percent of the unique viewership of both RAW and Smackdown each week (Nielson Media Research, 2009). Unfortunately black performers are still more often than not either represented as animals or a caricature of rap/culture. This is not surprising when one considers that many television programs, movies, and music over the years have used rap culture or hip-hop imagery as a commodification black culture as a whole. By doing this black culture with all its cultural diversity is reduced and limited to an easily identified and socially accepted parody of
itself. Within the WWE this serves as a shorthand way to connect with the audience, and future research focusing on an analysis of audience reaction to such images would be fascinating. It is one thing to analyze the imagery itself, as this study is intended to do, but it is quite another thing to investigate how such imagery effectively reaches the audience.

For *La Raza*: Representations of Hispanics in the WWE

Easily the second most common, or at least second highest profile, racial group represented in the WWE during 2010 is Latinos. Latino performers are not necessarily a new addition to professional wrestling. The luchador has made appearances within American professional wrestling for decades. Usually his high-flying, daredevil antics and highly scripted maneuvers serve as an intriguing and unique spectacle even within the overall spectacle of the professional wrestling show itself. Traditionally, luchadores are known not only for their acrobatics, but also for their brightly colored costumes, nods to religion, faith and mysticism, and of course their trademark masks. First appearing in Mexico in the early 20th century, luchadores have generally stood for the common man. That is not to say that there were not bad guys within Mexican Lucha Libre, but rather that there was always a rigid concept of what a luchador *should* be and what values they should exhibit.

From the beginning, the most popular luchadores were those that stood up for the *little guy* and carried with them an air of magic or mystery. From the earliest Mexican luchadores like Rodolfo Guzman Huerta who performed in the 1920s under the name *Murcielago* (the Bat) and often released a bag of bats at the beginning of every match (Monsivais, 2005), performers of this art displayed a unique kind of showmanship. Many
luchadores became combinations of magicians, acrobats, and actors. Furthermore, the David versus Goliath dynamic has always been key within the overall mythology of the luchador. Carlos Monsivais (2005) alludes to this perhaps being a reflection of the populist ideology of the Mexican culture and the tumultuous political and social environment that has existed over the last 100 years in Mexico. As Barthes (1972) argued that Parisian parlor wrestling was a microcosmic representation of European (specifically French) ideological values, the luchador became a representation of the struggle of the virtuous common man against oppression and cynicism.

Within the WWE during 2010 this tradition continues in its most visible Latino character, Rey Mysterio. Even in his name, Mysterio carries the mantel of mystery and illusion that has long been a part of lucha libre. Mysterio, however, has also carried with his character the virtue and common man appeal that was key to the Mexican luchador. Along the first axis of intertextual analysis (text to audience), this appeal becomes very apparent as Mysterio regularly stands as an advocate for the audience and viewers at home. His entrance music proudly proclaims to the television viewers that he does it all for the 6-1-9 and That’s my Pueblo (or That’s my community). 619 in the case of Mysterio refers to the southern area of San Diego that is home to a large Mexican immigrant population. His dedication to the fans expands significantly past just his music though. Mysterio is known as a crowd favorite for his intense and personal interaction with fans on the way to and from and outside the ring. This is another tenet of lucha libre and is highly visible in the fact that Mysterio regularly looks for fans (specifically children) who have purchased and are wearing his mask and touches the Spanish cross on his forehead to the one on the child’s. The fans are shown through low tight shots to be
enthralled with the performer. Similarly, during Mysterio’s entrance the television audience is shown sweeping shots from within the crowd itself. This effectively places the viewer within the people or the community Mysterio represents.

Figure 11. Rey Mysterio (2010). (WWE, 2010s)

Figure 12. Mysterio interacting with kids (May 14, 2010). (WWE, 2010h).

This intense interaction with the audience is unique to Mysterio. It is not uncommon for other performers to shake hands with audience members or toss a cap or shirt to them, but Mysterio actually touches his head to theirs, talks to them one on one and makes it very clear that he is performing specifically for the fans. In addition to his actions, meaning behind this gesture is further developed by the regular comments made by the
commentators at ringside. These comments are only heard by the television viewing audience. So not only do the viewers see Mysterio interacting with the crowd, but the commentators then add additional context to the action by explaining the motivation and intent. Commenting on this one WWE presenter stated on May 14, 2010, “I always wonder what [Mysterio] says to the young members of the WWE Universe when he touches his head to them. That’s where Mysterio gets a lot of his fire, a lot of his fuel. It’s from the love and adulation as the WWE Universe comes alive for Rey Mysterio!” (Mysterio, 2010)

Mysterio effectively plays on the Latino concept of community La Raza (the people) that has been part of Lucha Libre tradition since the beginning, but beyond that he displays other traditional luchador characteristics in his dealings with other performers. There are very few pure heroes within the WWE. That is to say that there are very few performers that are dedicated to being virtuous in all cases. Mysterio can be included as one such performer. Early in 2010 (January – March) Mysterio was betrayed and brutally beaten by his former teammate David Batista. The hulking, beastly Batista then became self-absorbed, egotistical and sought to injure Mysterio for what he considered Rey stealing his spotlight by winning the championship in a three-way match. Mysterio’s response to this was to state during an interview cut-scene, “I considered Batista my best friend in the world… You decided to throw away our friendship. I’m willing to let bygones be bygones. That’s how much our friendship means to me. If I would have known this would have interfered in our friendship I would have never done what I did” (Mysterio & Batista, 2010). This built a stark contrast as Batista later responded, “I’m not thinking about you or us… I’m thinking about me!” (Mysterio &
Batista, 2010) Essentially, during this story arc, which lasted several weeks, Mysterio continued to try and redeem his former friend in a series of omnipotent cut-scenes. These scenes usually ended with Batista beating Mysterio or at very least dismissing Rey’s values as cheap and naïve.

Another value of traditional Latino society Mysterio embodies is his deep and overt commitment to the Catholic faith. During 2010, it was not uncommon for Mysterio to discuss having faith in a *higher power*, talk about how judgment for his actions came from above, and kneel while making the traditional sign of the cross across his chest. In some interview cut-scenes he would even make comments alluding to the idea that he was only accountable to two entities, God and the WWE Universe (the fans and viewers at home). As always though, it is not just enough for a performer to display a set of values or characteristics, they must occasionally be challenged. This builds logic and conflict essential not only to the show, but also to the basic story arc itself. This conflict between faith was on display beginning on December 25, 2009 when Mysterio faced the Undertaker. The Undertaker, sometimes referred to as *The Deadman* has made a career of embodying demonic or pagan imagery. He appears surrounded by dark smoke and the slow and frightening gong of a lone church bell. The Undertaker has become known for referring to himself as the devil’s favorite demon as well as other similarly dark pseudonyms. This is in stark contrast to Mysterio who appears on stage in a flurry of lights, energetic music, quickly shifting camera angles and pyrotechnics. The difference in faith between the two characters, however, became a main point of contention in the rivalry. Mysterio effectively represented the light while the Undertaker became the very embodiment of the dark. As Mysterio entered the arena during this first major match
between the two performers the commentators made numerous comments regarding Mysterio *having faith in miracles* and that his faith will have to *sustain* him. Over the following weeks Mysterio battled the Undertaker, Batista, and CM Punk (who then was the leader of the fanatical cult-like team known as the Straight Edge Society). In each exchange, Mysterio’s dedication to the fans, faith, and virtuous nature were all points of contention.

For most of 2010 Mysterio was the dominant representation of Latino values and culture. It was fairly simple and overtly virtuous. This is not surprising considering that according to 2009 Nielson research cited earlier, Hispanic viewers are one of the fastest growing demographics watching WWE programming. Late in 2010, however, the cultural waters began to become murky. In September 2010 a self-proclaimed *Mexican Aristocrat* named Alberto Del Rio came on the scene. He claimed to be the product of a rich Lucha Libre heritage, but openly rejected many of the tenets of that heritage. He did not wear a mask, nor was he a man of the people like former WWE luchadores like Eddie and Chavo Guerrero, or Rey Mysterio. Much to the opposite, Del Rio arrived in the arena week after week in expensive automobiles, honking the horn and proclaiming his own superiority. Del Rio related to the audience and viewers only in that he claimed to be able to *buy and sell* them. He repeatedly claimed to be *destined* for greatness, something none of the little people in the WWE Universe would understand.
Alberto Del Rio represents a form of Latino culture that is unconventional within American professional wrestling. He is an aristocrat. For much of the history of American professional wrestling Latinos were depicted in one of two ways. The first and perhaps most common were cholos. Cholos generally were depicted as lazy, sneaky, greasy, and underhanded. The Guerreros would generally fall into this category. While the cholo was historically more common, the pure luchador (like Rey Mysterio and the more recent Sin Cara) also made regular appearances within American professional wrestling.
Figure 14. Chavo Guerrero Sr. (1980s). (WWE, 2010m).

Figure 15. Eddie Guerrero (1990s). (WWE, 2010n).
Both the cholo and the luchador had several key characteristics in common. They were all colorful, energetic, and dedicated to the people. This final point was a defining characteristic of the Latino in American professional wrestling for much of its existence. Perhaps this was because for much of the existence of American professional wrestling the Latino community was viewed by the dominant white demographic as just that, a small, colorful, exotic community of non-white individuals. According to the same myths associated with black performers in the previous section, it is not surprising that Latino performers were relegated to either the stereotypical image of lazy, sneaky, cholos or the overtly foreign luchador with his highly acrobatic and entertaining maneuvers and exotic costumes (Serrato, 2005).

In 2010, however, it could be argued that the WWE took a progressive step forward with the introduction of Del Rio. He is neither criminal nor traditional luchador. The typical viewer would not quickly associate him with the barrio (a name commonly associated with tightly knit, often middle-to-low class, Spanish neighborhoods, particularly in the Southern part of the United States. e.g. Los Angeles, San Diego, San
Antonio, Tx and many other cities towns and communities with a high Hispanic influence/population). Rather, he represents an arrogant, rich, aristocratic nature that reviles both the poor (usually defined as anyone who is not as wealthy as his character is supposed to be) and the culture of the United States as a whole.

During the summer of 2010, viewers at home were shown short films depicting Del Rio in palatial mansions supposedly in Mexico. He would smile condescendingly at the camera, straighten his tie while showing off his expensive three-piece-suits, and comment that when he made his debut in the WWE he was going to take back the image of the Mexican for Mexico. This was a common theme during these videos. Del Rio claimed that performers like the Guerreros and Mysterio had made Mexicans spectacles and that it was his destiny to show the beer drinking little people in America what a real Mexican looked like.

In August he made his debut, attacking Mysterio and claiming that the virtues espoused by Mysterio were the false security of the common people and that he was anything but common. Over the next several months Del Rio was scripted to injure Rey Mysterio, Matt Hardy, and Christian, all of whom were well-known fan favorites and all of whom were known for supporting and interacting with the audience. During this time, and subsequently for the rest of the year, Del Rio was not only known for his boasting and insulting attitude toward the fans, viewers, and other performers, but also for the underhanded tactics he used to win matches and gain prestige within the WWE Universe. He would often rely on his personal ring announcer, Ricardo Rodriguez to distract the referee or the other performers allowing him to gain advantage over his foe.
Overall, the most obvious and visible representations of Latinos within the WWE in 2010 were those of Mysterio and Del Rio. From a purely dominant perspective one could argue that this is simply the same populist rivalry that has existed between advocates of the people and self-centered individuals within the WWE for decades. Mysterio obviously represents the common man, but what then could be made of the high profile addition of Del Rio late in the year? In negotiating the meaning of this rivalry and the character of Del Rio as a whole, it could be argued that the WWE recognized that Hispanics in America were no longer considered a separate, small, exotic people group that could just be thought of as a curious other. Rather, with the understanding that not only do Hispanic viewers represent a growing demographic of their audience, but also a growing demographic of the United States population as a whole, the addition of Del Rio could be seen as an attempt to create a dynamic more reminiscent of those in traditional Lucha Libre rivalries.

From a more oppositional point of view one should take into account critical race theory in the analysis of this rivalry between Mysterio and Del Rio. According to some explanations (Mills, 2003; Taylor, 2004) one aspect of critical race theory that may be at play in a dynamic such as this is that of racial combativeness. According to some scholars, one way the dominant white social superstructure maintains control is to orchestrate situations within which members of particular races compete. To expand on this, a Marxist perspective (Mills, 2003) would argue that within a white sociopolitical system, non-white races are sometimes expected to compete for legitimacy within the social arena. This is to say that in certain circumstances a hegemonic split of fissure may occur wherein non-white individuals exhibiting certain pro-dominant hegemonic
tendencies/characteristics may be described as good members of a race, while others would be described as bad. What is generally then seen is that because the good (so to speak) characteristics are seen as inherently white traits that are adopted by the members of the race in question, the bad characteristics are generally construed as the norm for that people group. It is easy to see how this dynamic is problematic.

Within the rivalry between Mysterio and Del Rio, Mysterio is generally considered one of the good ones (Mexican/Hispanic performers) as opposed to Del Rio who is habitually a heel within all 2010 storylines. Within professional wrestling, however, an interesting dynamic occurs with regard to race. As was discussed with the minstrel in the previous section concerning black performers, general ideas of good and bad can sometimes be flipped within the world and logic of the WWE. For example, Mysterio is a masked man. To date no one has seen his face as a performer. He is covered in tattoos that resemble those of street gangs, an element he often intensifies by espousing that he is in fact from the streets. Within most forms of media many of the characteristics would be enough for viewers to at very least approach Mysterio with suspicion. Much to the opposite, Mysterio is a crowd favorite and displays in his character an unflappable morality. Conversely, Del Rio is handsome, debonair, well-spoken, rich and extremely capitalistic in his speeches and presentations. These characteristics generally align with white, middle-American sensibilities, but Del Rio is a primary villain within the later half of the 2010 WWE broadcast year. Perhaps it is the fact that Mysterio plays a morally exemplary version of an expected Mexican/Latino role and thus is one of the good ones, while Del Rio essentially acts as a mirror of the most selfish and egocentric American
values and sensibilities tainted by the fact that he is expressly not American nor does he strive to be.

One might also see the addition of Del Rio as a changing of the guards in a sense. Del Rio’s character is a far cry from what has come before with regard to the representation of Latinos within American professional wrestling. He is smooth, clean, wealthy, and aristocratic. Again, acknowledging the changing demographics in viewership and population, the WWE may be attempting to segue their representation of Latinos from a more stereotyped and two-dimensional image to a more complex characterization similar to those now on display in many white performers. Perhaps this is the first step toward a more even-handed characterization of Latinos as more than just gang members, cholos, or luchador-spectacles.

Over the next several years it will be very interesting to see what the WWE does with the characters of both Mysterio and Del Rio. It will also be interesting to see if they incorporate more Latino performers into their story arcs and if so what roles they may play. Will further steps be taken to diversify the roles and characterizations of Hispanic performers, or will the WWE revert back to more limited and stereotypical representations? Will the WWE make strides to limit the emphasis on racial difference as it concerns Latino performers, or will they continue to use that difference as a commodification shorthand in developing the characters of such performers? Furthermore, it would be valuable in future research to conduct similar audience-centered research to evaluate how viewers decode the meaning of such characters as Mysterio and Del Rio. This intertextual analysis really is the first step to understanding the greater meaning that exists behind the performers of the WWE.
The Other: Other roles of minorities in the WWE

It is important to understand that though black and Latino performers represent the most common non-white races within the WWE, the programs themselves are still very Caucasian heavy. Of the more than 150 contracted performers within the WWE stables (all brands/programs) around four-fifths of each stable’s roster (male, female and injured or inactive) could be more or less described as white. This is not to say that there are not numerous nationalities represented, but rather to explain that much of the ideology represented within these characters are still North American or Western European in nature.

Beyond that and before closing this section it is important to understand that there are other races represented like Italians, Indians, and Asians. Where blacks and Hispanics are represented by numerous characters showcasing variously nuanced, albeit stereotypical, depictions of their races, however, these other races are generally represented by single characters. These lone characters are generally highly commodified and parodied representations of the race or nationality and rarely play any part within the programs other than the clown or the freak. When using the term clown in this context, the term refers to such characters as the hairy, uni-browed, and clumsily womanizing Italian stereotype of Santino Marella or Yoshi Tatsu who, in his rare cut-scene appearances wears wrestling tights featuring the Japanese flag while bowing constantly and repetitively saying HAI! (in Japanese, Yes). These and other similar characters are used more for comedic effect than for any other reason.

Conversely, the term freak in the context of this analysis is taken from circus parlance meaning those characters with peculiar appearances who are generally depicted
as something less than human. These characters often display a deviant sensibility or ideology from what dominant white American society might accept. The starkest example of this during the 2010 year was *The Great Khali*. Reportedly standing over seven feet tall and hailing from India, Khali wears a stoic expression on his face during cut-scenes in which he is featured. He has an extremely defined chin and jawbones that give him a harsh, somewhat barbaric, and almost alien appearance. Within cut-scenes and matches he plays up this image as he hulks to the ring and is referred to at times as a monster, freak, or barbarian by other performers or the commentators.

![The Great Khali and Ranjin Singh](image)

*Figure 17. The Great Khali* and Ranjin Singh. (WWE, 2010k).

In short, it has always been part of the spectacle of professional wrestling that minorities are represented in simplest and often most stereotypical terms. It has also been true that they are typically utilized in an as-needed capacity. In much the same way as the uber-American performer Sergeant Slaughter, took on a new pro-Iraq persona during the early 1990s to serve as an object of cultural wrath during the Gulf War, other performers
of color are sometimes added as little more than avatars of a politically significant culture or nationality.

It could be argued that within the WWE of 2010 minority performers fall generally fall into one of the four stages of minority representation (Clark, 1972; Josey, Hurley, Hefner, & Dixon, 2010). Specifically, most non-white races are still subject to the first stage, non-recognition. For this reason, it is difficult if not impossible to make any true analysis or generalizations based on trends of representation because, simply put, many races are nearly invisible within the WWE. This would include Native Americans, Asians, Middle-Easterners, Pacific Islanders and many others. Beyond this first stage is wear the majority of non-white performers fall. Within the second stage of ridicule would exist performers like Marella, Khali, Singe, as well as others that exist on such a fringe of the WWE Universe they don’t bear mentioning here. These races exist for little more than comedic relief or as objects of revulsion. The third stage of regulation encompasses most black performers. Within this stage the race is represented with some regularity, but is typically represented as one-dimensional. Regarding the minstrel and ABM representations this would be easily identified as accurate. Furthermore, according to Clark (1972) within this stage the roles and opportunities for advancement and success are limited. As described earlier, within the 2010 year of WWE broadcasting this is certainly true concerning black performers. Finally, the fourth stage of racial representation is respect. It could easily be argued that currently Hispanic performers like Mysterio and Del Rio as well as international black performers like Kofi Kingston may be shifting into this stage of racial representation. Within this fourth stage the race becomes less of a parody and enjoys a more even, multi-dimensional representation than
in the other three stages. They are referred to with more respect and adoration by media observers (for instance commentators within the realm of the WWE), and are less limited in their capacity for success.

Ultimately, it is apparent that the WWE is attempting to advance some races (Hispanics for instance), but still fall back into using old practices of constructing many non-white characters using racially stereotypical shorthand. It would be valuable to conduct audience interviews for future research regarding how the viewers decode the intrinsic meaning of such performers. Do viewers recognized the stereotypical construction of many minority performers and what is their reaction to such characters?
CHAPTER VII

WRESTLING WITH GENDER AND LEGITIMATE FEMININITY

From the earliest days of parlor wrestling and amateur wrestling in high school gymnasiums, the defining and displaying of gender has been inextricably linked with the spectacle of professional wrestling. Barthes (1972) wrote that in Parisian parlor wrestling the body of the performer was the first place to look for cultural signs and symbolism. It is there first the audience sees the strength, weakness, frailty, dominance or inadequacy of the performer. It is within the body of the wrestler, be them male or female, that the appeal or revulsion is first built. In most cases, this is to argue that it is the acceptable or preferred masculinity or femininity inherent in the performers’ bodies that holds the first meaning for the audience.

In the 1950s Roland Barthes (1972) described a performer going by the name Thauvin. He described him as fifty years old, obese, with a sagging body. Beyond these descriptors he immediately linked the body with the performer’s gendered representation calling him asexually hideous. Barthes goes on to describe how Thauvin, a heel within the performance, carries his persona within his flesh and that his appearance and deportment is the vehicle within which his status within the act as well as the minds of the audience is developed. Even at that time, Barthes points to the importance and the role of gender within the performance spectacle of staged wrestling. He lists several performers and describes their appearance and role.

…Reinieres (a tall blond fellow with a limp body and unkempt hair) the moving image of passivity, Mazaud (short and arrogant like a cock) that of grotesque conceit, and Orsano (an effeminate teddy-boy first seen in a
blue-and-pink dressing-gown) that, doubly humorous, of a vindictive salope, or bitch (for I do not think that the public of the Elysee-Montmartre, like Littre, believes the word salope to be a masculine).

(Barthes, 1972, p. 17)

In this passage he points out that several different forms of masculinity elicit different responses based on the audience’s perception of what a true man should be. Orsano is “doubly humorous” (Barthes, 1972, p. 18) therefore because his depiction is counter-intuitive to what is expected. A male performer must be a masculine combatant, but he (Orsano) is portrayed as effeminate. This conceptual juxtaposition is described as being the basis of appeal. Perhaps a better way of putting this is that the drastic deviation from what is expected provides immediacy in the reading of the sign and heat within the audience/viewers.

The same obese, or at very least realistic, performers Barthes described in Europe were seen in early American professional wrestling as well. Acceptable masculinity was defined as genuine. Performers were built as it was considered normal men should be, though perhaps more physically fit.
As is apparent, in the early days of American professional wrestling masculinity was defined more by genuineness in appearance that it is today. Much of Wladek *Killer* Kowalski’s appeal was that he was fit, but accessible. He represented an achievable norm. In fact, in many of his interviews at the time he chided viewers that they must be more fit like him. While by no means all contemporary wrestlers look like John Cena, it is telling that the modern face of the WWE exhibits a masculine body that is what many would consider perfection. Cena is strong, perfectly toned and virtually symmetrical in his musculature. Others including Batista, John Morrison, and Chris Masters exhibit this same perfectly sculpted body.

The change in masculine representation would seem to have occurred in the 1980s with the introduction of Rick Rude. Rude was considered by many to be the first performer to exhibit the more modern, sculpted body-type. WWE commentator Matt Striker, being interviewed for their list of the 50 most influential WWE superstars stated, “*Ravishing* Rick Rude brought a new appeal to wrestling. From the neck down he was everything a man wanted to be and everything a woman wanted to be with. That alone
made you just want to watch” (Dunn, 2010). Other commentators identified him as the new personification of what a man should be. Rude was the first superstar to truly embrace and publicize what many would consider an unrealistic masculine body. He would regularly shame the males in the audience by telling them that this (his body) is what women want and what they could never be. At that time the change was not well received. Males in general hated his cockiness, posing, and preoccupation with his looks. Many women, on the other hand, flocked to his image and seemed to respond positively to his antics.

Masculinity in the WWE would no longer be the same because the concept of masculinity, and gender roles in general, were rapidly changing and being discussed in the public arena. What it meant to be socially acceptable and preferable males and females was being discussed at great length in the social arena and media at large. During this period of time and on into the 1990s masculinity in professional wrestling transformed from what was always considered masculine, to what would be described by many scholars as hyper-masculine. Masculinity in the WWF (what would become WWE) and many of its competitors during the time period from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s was predicated on stereotypes of manhood rather than some heightened form of reality (Battema & Sewell, 2005; Jenkins III, 2005).

Setting the Stage

During the 1980s and 1990s era of professional wrestling such uber-masculine characters as the Macho Man, the Million Dollar Man, Hulk Hogan and others embodied a new more two-dimensional masculinity. Sex, money, drinking, avarice, sculpted male bodies and generally masculine excess of any kind were on display. Women, who had
had minor roles within professional wrestling up to this point, became more prominent in the storylines as property to be won, managers who would be conniving at ringside, or sex symbols for the males in the audience. This created an interesting gender defining dynamic. Masculinity was not being defined in professional wrestling based on how men compete and interrelate with each other, but also how they related or in many cases dominated women. This might be seen at the time as a backlash to more contemporary and forceful forms of feminism.

As females became more common in professional wrestling still occupied relatively two-dimensional roles as bit players and objects. While they did compete occasionally, their roles were mainly as objects to be won or conniving temptresses to ensnare the male superstars (Jenkins III, 2005). In 1993 the WWF/WWE built what would become a women’s division and in doing so debuted a much larger and more diverse stable of female performers. While during this time male performers maintained the same basic hyper masculine characters, female performers began taking on a wide variety of roles corresponding, intentionally or unintentionally, with traditionally recognized archetypal female positions.

As the stories within the WWF/WWE became more complex, and the presentation became more centered on the television audience rather than specifically the live audience, the female’s role in these storylines became more and more pronounced and diversified. During the 2000s the WWE developed two different programs/brands, *WWE RAW* and *WWE Smackdown*. Each of these brands had their own stable of female wrestlers, and each developed unique storylines and roles for their female competitors.
Male performers still in many cases can be described as uber-masculine, and scholars and media researchers (Battema & Sewell, 2005, Guthrie, 2007; Jenkins III, 2005; Mazer, 1998) over the years have looked at how masculinity is defined and built within professional wrestling. What has been lacking in much of this discourse regarding gender definition and marketing is the relatively new popularity of female wrestlers as performers in and of themselves, and the rise of the female fan of professional wrestling. The rest of this section will focus primarily on examining the new roles females play within the WWE, how femininity is defined internally in the characters females play, and how it is defined externally in how other performers relate to them.

It could easily be argued that at least some women have always enjoyed professional wrestling. Even though the spectacle is sometimes thought to be for men, by men, a certain percentage of the average crowd has always been female. In the mid-to-late 1980s, however, female viewership jumped tremendously with the introduction of more beefcake male performers (Salmon & Clere, 2005). Female viewers swooned over Rick Rude, Hulk Hogan, Chris Jericho, The Rock, and Val Venis, but many wanted to see strong women take the spotlight as well.

With the rise and development of intricate storylines featuring specifically female performers, the WWE has seen their market share with females increase dramatically over the last several years. With the development and prominence of new storylines showing empowered women not exclusively as sex symbols, but rather competing in their own right, some studies have shown that viewing gratification among female viewers has increased (Lemish, 1998). Viewing among females is still not at the same level as among males, and perhaps never will be, but currently a little over a third
(approx. 36.2 % according to Nielsen Media Research, 2009) of the weekly audience for WWE programming is estimated to be female.

Archetypal Amazons

While entire studies could, and perhaps should, be conducted regarding the archetypal representation of females within the contemporary WWE, that would involve far more time and analysis that could be done in this section. More to the point, in 2010, the sheer variety of female roles and performers was simple too large and diversified to adequately analyze point by point. The female performers within the WWE tend to fall into archetypal tropes like Beth Pheonix’s powerful, and quazi-masculine appearance and action could be construed as being representative of the Amazon, Kelly Kelly’s blonde, innocent and approachable demeanor might be negotiated as the All-American Girl, Maryce’s preoccupation with fashion, money and sexual manipulation makes her easily identified in the archetypal role of the seductress or gold-digger, and Mickey James’s playfulness, dress, and demeanor make her very obvious tomboy archetype. These are but a few of the over 30 female performers that were active during the 2010 year of WWE programming. Though several different characters associated with several different archetypal tropes are listed here, it is valuable to understand that no one female performer has exclusive rights to one particular characterization. Much to the opposite, within each of the brands, there are at any given time several performers who represent each of the archetypes. Perhaps future research could be conducted analyzing intertextually each archetypal characterization and the characters who represent them, but within this study the focus will be slightly different.
While there are numerous archetypes at play within female performers in the WWE, they can all generally be placed into one of two major categories. Within this study these two categories will be described as either the Girl Next Door or the Diva. Before operationalizing these two terms it is important to make a clear delineation between the term Diva that will be used here and the term used by the WWE to describe their female performers as a whole. The WWE refers to all female performers within their organization as WWE Divas, describing them as Sexy, Smart, and Powerful. Herein, the term Diva will be used to specifically refer to the group of female performers who routinely act as villains within the WWE storylines in which they are featured.

Diva performers, regardless of their archetypal character tropes, all share similar general characteristics. Diva characters do not generally interact with the crowd, nor do they show deference for the viewers at home. Much to the opposite, similar to their male counterparts, they regularly show disdain for the viewers at home and insult those fans in attendance. They derive power and influence within the WWE through exploitation of their sex appeal rather than hard work, and they are often represented to television audiences as two-faced and manipulative via omniscient cut-scenes showing backstage activities. Performers who fall into this category are generally cruel to other female performers both physically and verbally opting in many story arcs to assault their more innocent and often naïve Girl Next Door opponents with insults, innuendos and betrayals.

The second of the two major groups represented in the WWE so far as the female performer is concerned is that of the Girl Next Door. Herein, this term refers to the more relatable and good-natured female performers. Usually, characters who fit into this category are still attractive, but while Divas use their beauty as a tool to manipulate and
as a weapon to demean, the Girl Next Door tends to treat her appearance as a secondary or tertiary characteristic of who she is. This is to say, that in much the same way John Cena represents an embodiment of middle-American male virtues, the Girl Next Door generally mirrors those same characteristics from a female perspective. Girl Next Door performers are in general, powerful but kind, energetic and fun, strong competitors but humble, caring, and loyal to the fans and other performers.

The dichotomy between these two groups seems to parallel a social dynamic which was brought to light in the early 2000s with the release of the film *Mean Girls*. With the release of this film, scholars and news professionals alike began investigating the relational dynamic of teenage girls. Specifically, concept of legitimizes femininity or rather socialized power derived from meeting an acculturated feminine standard. Scholars found that films like *Mean Girls*, which focused on the games teenage girls play to jockey for social position, undermine others they deem threats, and generally define themselves within the male/female social structure of high school, college or the working world resonated with viewers because it mirrored a reality they were familiar with (Simmons, 2011).

Upon further investigation, however, other scholars argued that perhaps the representation of such negative features of female friendships (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008; Meyer, Stern, & Waldron, 2008) may do more harm than good. Regardless of this, most of these studies found that in a large variety of different media sources the concept of passive or active social aggression seemed almost inextricably linked with female relationships during the teenage years and beyond. Behm-Morawitz and Mastro (2008) referenced a 2005 *New York Times* article on the subject which stated, “In recent
years, girls have been increasingly portrayed in everything from serious journalistic studies to light comedies like 'Mean Girls' as tyrannical, bullying and devoted to a ruthless caste system” (p. 132).

Considering the fact that this representation seems to be common within most other forms of media and entertainment, and consequently appears to represent a dynamic many believe to mirror reality, it is not surprising to find that the WWE has fully integrated it into their storylines. Meyer et al. (2008) argued that in many cases, while strength and physical prowess may be the most common source of competition and control among males, among females body-image and perception tends to be the target/weapon of choice. This is to say that while aggression is thought to be common among males, an “alternate aggression” (Meyer & Stern, 2008, p. 1) has taken a prominent place in representations of female competition and interaction. In such cases, it is not uncommon for control to be exercised based on physical appearance as compared to a socialized concept of perfection. As will be illustrated shortly, this dynamic was prominently on display during the 2010 WWE broadcast year. Divas were the consummate mean girls of the WWE while the Girls Next Door were usually their targets.

*Flawless* Divas – LayCool and Natalya

In late 2009 and throughout 2010 the team of Layla and Michelle McCool, rose to prominence within the storylines of the female performers within the WWE. During 2010 they became the predominant Divas or *mean girls* on both Raw and Smackdown. Each week they would come to the ring or be shown to television viewers via backstage cut-scenes criticizing or manipulating other female or male performers based on their
appearance. What supposedly gave them grounds for such criticism was their physical appearance which they repeatedly referred to as flawlessness. Along the first line of intertextual analysis, text to audience, the team of LayCool regularly represented themselves as chatty, snide, shallow valley-girl stereotypes reminiscent of those seen in films like Mean Girls. Their regular use of interjection phrases like like and for sure became a source for scorn and distaste vocalized by the commentators and echoed by the fans. In much the same way Deborah Cameron (2007) describes the use or lack thereof of useless language as being a means by which many high school girls differentiate themselves, such language patterns became a primary source of differentiation between LayCool and those performers they routinely criticized. While LayCool would regularly be shown walking to the ring pointing and laughing at members of the crowd while chattering mindlessly back and forth to each other, their targets were routinely shown to be deliberate and precise with their words.

Besides using useless language and acting in the expected aloof and dismissive way toward the viewers and fans most heels tend to do, the real source of characterization and subsequent analysis herein comes from the actual interactions between LayCool and other performers. While the team was present on most episodes of WWE Raw and Smackdown during 2010 (thus the importance of using them for this analysis) one rivalry in particular stood as generally indicative of most competitive meetings between Divas and Girls Next Door.

In late 2010, a story arc involving LayCool and the performer known as Natalya began as LayCool, in what had become their normal routine, began to publicly criticize Natalya’s weight and physical appearance. Natalya, as is another trait common for Girl
Next Door characters, has a much more athletic build than either Layla or McCool. She is shorter and more muscular. She was also very much the tomboy at this time, usually coming to the ring as part of the Hart Dynasty which included her and two male performers. When Natalya won a match on November 27, 2010 and became the Number One Contender for LayCool’s shared championship, the rivalry began.

Over the next several weeks, every episode of Raw or Smackdown included some exchange between LayCool and Natalya. Specifically, most of the exchanges revolved around one major concept, what a woman should look like. McCool and Layla repeatedly ridiculed Natalya for being fat, speaking with a slight lisp, or being too boyish. During one episode of Smackdown on October 22, 2010, Layla even appeared in the ring with a beard and mustache, speaking in a low and raspy voice as a parody of Natalya. During this parody, McCool, playing the role of Brett Hart, called Natalya an embarrassment, barely female, and proceeded to explain how he worshiped LayCool because they were real, beautiful women who were flawless.

![Layla as “Natalya” (October 22, 2010). (WWE, 2010e).](image)

In truth, Natalya actually played very little role in this rivalry other than being the target for petty and often cruel ridicule from LayCool. In one of the few exchanges where
Natalya actually responded to LayCool’s criticism, she began speaking about how her uncle Brett Hart had taught her to stand up for herself, when LayCool’s introduction music interrupted her and LayCool came to the ring to once again criticize and demean her based on her appearance. Appendix #1 is a full transcript of the conversation which ended with Natalya saying that LayCool had proven with their insults that their “IQ’s were as low as their combined, non-existent, waist sizes” (Neidhart, 2010). The exchange ended as other Girl Next Door performers including Eve Torres, Melina, and Gail Kim came to the ring and chased LayCool into the stands where cameras caught the fans booing and rejecting the duo.

This exchange, and numerous others like it, is representative of the general way most of the female oriented storylines were carried out during 2010. In a way similar to what scholars have recognized within films like Mean Girls or even have recognized in female high school social interaction (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008; Cameron, 2007; Meyer et al., 2008; Simmons, 2011), there is usually a clear interaction between beautiful, talkative, manipulative, conceded and cruel Queen Bees and the more modest and reserved average girls. This was clearly the case in 2010 within the WWE’s female oriented storylines. As this exchange illustrates, the modest Girl Next Door character rarely occupies much space, insomuch as it is usually her Diva competitor(s) that spends a great deal of time posturing and insulting while, she quietly endures. From a dominant reading one might argue that this simply speaks to taking the figurative high road in such interactions. From a deeper negotiated reading, however, the fact that heroic female performers rarely speak on the mic unless they are directly challenged, and even then usually very briefly, might indicate a preference for more quite and less domineering
women. After all, as is the case of LayCool in this example, the villainous Diva character in such exchanges is usually represented as shrill, chattering, and domineering in that she is usually shown to interrupt the program any time she pleases. If these traits are indicative of the villain, it is not surprising that the heroic female is often the direct opposite.

Another differentiation between what could be described as the preferred female and the reviled female would be in intellect. As the exchange between Natalya and LayCool illustrates, there is a strong tendency for WWE story arcs involving female competitors to draw a line between a vicious pretty girl and a virtuous smart girl. Cameron in her book (2007) focused on the difference between male and female social interactions found that in many cases conflict among high school girls may often fall along these lines with popular, pretty, or mean girls being categorized as stupid or shallow, while less popular or more average looking girls strove to be smart as a means by which to clearly differentiate themselves. In the case of Natalya and LayCool, this dichotomy is clearly made with LayCool flippantly and incessantly chattering about Natalya’s appearance, and Natalya criticizing their IQ. In such an exchange, which again is illustrative of other female interactions during 2010, a clear commentator and audience preference is shown for Natalya who is humble, smart, and has an average/athletic build rather than LayCool who have physiques more akin to fashion models but are mean, shallow and regularly represented as lacking in intelligence.

The Meaning of Mean

It is telling that within the WWE’s 2010 broadcast year, the basic dynamic illustrated in the conflict between Natalya and LayCool was duplicated numerous times.
Other examples included Melina (hero) versus LayCool (villain), Gail Kim (hero) versus The Bella Twins (villains) and Eve Torres (hero) versus Maryse (villain). In each case the heroic character was represented as being kind, at least relatively humble, and fairly silent in the overall interaction. The villainous character, however, was in each case talkative, cruel, egotistical, and materialistic. This differentiation between the heroic Girl Next Door and the villainous Diva may be generalized as indicative of a preferred form of femininity.

Historically, many feminist scholars have argued that the media has propagated an image of the preferred female as being thin, passive and most importantly not taking up too much space (Kilbourne & Jhally, 1999). While within the WWE it could be argued that steps are being taken to advance the image of females as powerful and more than sex symbols with the rise of more full-figured performers like Natalya and Mickie James, it still must be acknowledged that the single most obvious trait all female villains have in common is that they take up very large amounts of social space relative to their heroic counterparts. This is to say that while it is a rare thing for a heroic, Girl Next Door character to appear on camera or in the ring to talk to the audience or viewers at home, almost every week within the WWE some female villain is shown interrupting the program to insult some other performer or the viewers. While it can’t necessarily be argued that heroic females are invisible within the WWE, they seem to be relegated to a certain role and do not regularly challenge that role. Villainous characters operate very differently. While their heroic counterparts generally remain exclusively in female oriented storylines, they regularly make appearances within the greater male oriented story arcs as temptresses (Melina), amazons (Beth Phoenix), seductresses (The Bella
Twins), or gold-diggers (Maryse). Thus it could be argued that within the WWE there is an underlying message that women can be powerful, influential, and successful so long as they stay within their proper roles as women. Once they begin to dabble within the affairs of men, women become impediments or villains.
CHAPTER VIII
DISCUSSION

Though the spectacle has gone by many names over the last six decades, parlor, amateur, or professional wrestling has always been more than just two individuals fighting. It has been more than a staged conflict between two men. Within the performance there has always existed a framework of social or cultural meaning that gives the conflict significance. In much the same way as the meaning of theatrical plays are rarely limited to the denotative actions of the performers on stage, the meaning intrinsic within the spectacle of staged wrestling goes beyond the performers in the ring.

Barthes (1972) argued that within the very bodies of the performers there was social and cultural meaning, and that through their movements and actions cultural conflicts were negotiated and social norms and mores were reinforced. In the early examples of staged wrestling examined by Barthes the stories were simple and the meanings were basic. Movements and motivations needed to grand and instantly recognizable. Due to the fact that the extended story arcs common in contemporary professional wrestling did not exist in the early days of the spectacle, immediacy of meaning was of vital importance. Spectators needed to be able to immediately understand who was the face (hero) and who was the heel (villain). Furthermore, in order for meaning to be negotiated, they needed to be able to recognize what social structures or cultural values were being represented by each of the performers. Body type, costumes, props, and speeches (though far less common then) formed the basis for this understanding of meaning.
Throughout the years, the art of professional wrestling has evolved and changed to keep up with contemporary values, sensibilities and technology. As television became more universally accessible small organizations, which put on wrestling exhibitions in high school gymnasiums and small arenas expanded and grew into massive, television-oriented corporations like the WWE. The spectacle of staged wrestling itself changed as the years went by as well. As professional wrestling became more of a regularly televised masculine-melodrama rather than a centralized event-based production, storylines and character development expanded tremendously. Meaning associated with popular characters became more complex and cultural conflicts that once took minutes to resolve within a single match, could now be built, shaped and resolved over literally months of action and interaction. With the rise of pay-per-view events, professional wrestling was given an effective vehicle for both making money and resolving these extended story arcs. Television audiences would tune in week after week to be exposed to the antics and struggles of their favorite performers, but then would be forced to pay additional money to witness the possible resolution of such struggles.

Professional wrestling has been categorized by the news media and scholars as base, crude, simplistic, vulgar, low-brow, and as having little or no redeeming value. In 2010, however, the WWE took steps to make their particular product more family oriented and perhaps, in some regards, more progressive. The truth remains, however, that professional wrestling relies not on being a vehicle for social, cultural, or political change, but rather being representative of the culture in which it exists. The spectacle of professional wrestling today, operates on the same basic principle Barthes recognized in the 1950s. In order to succeed and resonate with viewers and fans, it must be populist in
nature; it must re-enforce those values and sensibilities of the masses. For this reason, whether in the realm of class values, racial representation, or female gender roles and characteristics, it is not surprising to find that the WWE in 2010 was in many ways behind the social curve with regard to progressive ideology.

Class Values

It is important to understand at the onset of any discussion of class as it relates to the WWE or professional wrestling in general that class rarely refers to actual socio-economic level of the performers, viewers, or audience. Rather, class refers to a set of perceived class values. What is perhaps the most similar socio-cultural parallel to this would be Marxist concepts of bourgeois values and sensibilities versus those of the working class proletariat. It is not necessarily the fact that one person is wealthier than another, but rather that one believes to be of a higher or lower social class or caste than another.

This dynamic is one of the oldest means by which performers either connect with or build heat with the spectators. A performer who espouses the middle-American values of hard work, loyalty, honesty, rugged individualism, self-sacrifice and then genuinely acts such characteristics out within his or her story arc will generally become a heroic figure within the broadcasts (Larson & Bailey, 1998; Mazer, 1998, pp 50-92). Conversely, most villains separate themselves from the viewers and audience by rejecting or perverting such values. During 2010, in almost every rivalry, whether male or female, it could be argued that one character represented all or some of the values identified in that section as middle-American, while the other (villainous) character rejected and perverted at least one of those values.
Considering that this differentiation based on class values formed the basis of almost every rivalry and conflict within the WWE in 2010, and has historically existed even as far back as Barthes original analysis in 1950s Parisian parlor wrestling, it is very unlikely that such cultural conflict will disappear from the spectacle as time goes on. It is important to recognize, however, that while in the early days of staged wrestling this form of class warfare was simplistic and relied on two-dimensional, instantly recognizable tropes of high, middle, and lower class values, contemporary wrestling has become much more complex in this regard. Performers have weeks in most cases to develop themselves as the embodiment of a particular matrix of social values. They have the ability to not just become the embodiment of good or evil, but rather develop a more nuanced character who relies on legitimate reasoning and motivation within the constructed reality of the WWE Universe, rather than simply playing a pre-ordained role.

Similarly, story arcs involving such conflicts of class values have become infinitely more complex as the extended story arc of Cena versus the NEXUS illustrates. Viewers are now exposed to internal dialog and private conversations via omniscient cut-scenes. They are brought into the motivations, reasoning, and contextual repercussions of events via made-for-television vignettes and weekly recap montages. Through all of this the viewer is exposed to not only the immediacy of what happens within the ring, but a far broader context within which such struggles occur. It is reasonable to conclude that as time goes on that the stories and class value struggles that form their basis will continue to gain complexity, but it would be surprising if they ever shifted away from the basic middle-American values that resonated strongly with fans during 2010.

Racial Representation
Though both black and Hispanic audiences are growing for the WWE weekly broadcasts it must be acknowledged that representations of such performers still tend to rely on generally accepted stereotypical images. During 2010, it was very common for black performers to either be represented as the commodified amalgamation of rap/hip-hop culture or as angry savage animals. Within this representation many were depicted as criminals, in the case of JTG and Shad, or as at very least having a criminal past and tendencies such as MVP. Similar in form to what scholars (Balaji, 2009; Bogle, 1989; Campbell, 1995; Dyson, 2004; Guerrero, 1993; Hurt, 2006) have identified in the news media, movies, television shows and music, the minstrel representation in the WWE appears to serve as a means by which to couch black performers within a construct that is socially palatable to predominantly white audiences. This is to say that while the performers who are represented in this way may be shown as criminals or scallywags, they rarely hold any real power, are often the sources of their own defeat, and usually serve as little more than comic relief within the storylines in which they are featured. This essentially keeps the black man in a safe place as he relates to the predominantly white audience while allowing him to serve as a token performer of color.

Apart from the myriad of depictions of black individuals as minstrels or criminals, the second most common representation was that of the beast or animal. Generally speaking this was the stereotypical Angry Black Man image. Brooding, angry, cruel, ominous and tremendously violent, these characters rarely spoke and stood as either impediments for white characters or pawns to be use by other performers for their own advancement. While not as common within the WWE as the minstrel, this representation of black masculinity is frequently mirrored within movies, television and music (Balaji,
The message inherent in the representations of the Angry Black Man within the WWE was clear, fear the black man who is too powerful. Often these ABM characters were shown as beasts or monsters who, when left to their own motivations, would randomly prey on other performers for no other reason but for the joy of causing pain. As opposed to minstrels who were seldom shown to have power, ABM characters were powerful (at least physically, but abused their power by acting like cruel, mindless animals. This representation of black men as something less than human is certainly not new, nor is it limited to professional wrestling, but it is troubling to see it perpetrated in such an obvious way within contemporary culture.

Hispanic performers enjoyed a more even handed representation during 2010. They could be heroes or villains, and they could win or at least compete for championships, but it must be acknowledged that be them the Guerreros, Rey Mysterio, or Alberto Del Rio, there were only a handful of Hispanic performers active at any given time and they usually played very limited roles. Furthermore, the roles that these Hispanic performers did play were usually influenced, though subtly in most cases, by many of the traditional stereotypes of Latin American culture. The image of the bandito still existed within Chavo Guerrero Jr., concepts of the luchador, la raza (the community/people), and adherence to the Catholic faith practices were carried within Mysterio, and Del Rio represented a brash, pro-Mexico over U.S. ideology that generated a great deal of heat within the WWE fan base. Overall, Hispanic performers within the WWE in 2010 appeared to be subject to less stereotyping, but it is important to recognize that some commodification of culture did still occur.
As 2010 came to a close the WWE, perhaps recognizing that their viewers of color were increasing, quickly began introducing more performers of color into their stable of active performers both male and female. This trend continued into 2011 and is currently still in effect with new Hispanic luchador performers like the hugely popular Sin Cara, Pacific Islander Diva Tamina (who was first featured in 2010), and the newly debuted India performer Jinder Mahal. Though in many cases the WWE does still appear to fall quickly back into more two-dimensional representations of people of color, in 2010 it appears that the organization began taking proactive steps to include a more diversified male and female stable of performers.

Female Gender Representation and Roles

It could be argued that within 2010, female performers were perhaps more prominently showcased than any other time in the history of the WWE. Every week on each brand there was some female-oriented story arc at play. In addition to this, on Raw in particular female performers regularly played central roles within cross promotion of the WWE brand and others via interaction with guest hosts. This heightened level of visibility of female performers was a unique development during 2010 and has continued on into 2011 on both Raw and Smackdown.

During 2010, however, it must be acknowledged while female visibility was perhaps higher than ever before and their roles were more diversified than previous years, they basically did fall into two basic categories. Within this study these categories were described as Divas and Girls Next Door. Divas were by far the most prominently visible female performers during 2010, but were commonly represented in an overtly negative light. They were selfish, egotistical, cruel, and manipulative. They regularly used their
physical beauty and sex appeal as either a means by which to control events within the WWE or as a weapon to demean and destroy other female performers. Subsequently, these performers’ beauty was usually also accompanied with a tendency to act shallow, unintelligent and ditzy. These representations stood in stark contrast to their Girl Next Door counterparts/targets who were regularly characterized as being smarter, more loyal, and perhaps more down to earth and accessible. These Girl Next Door heroines were also regularly played by female performers who were more average in appearance than their counterparts.

Unfortunately, it must be said that along with the virtuous characteristics embodied by the WWE heroine came a drastic reduction in visibility. More often than not in 2010 villainous Divas appeared on either brand week after week taunting the viewers at home, audience member and other performers until a Girl Next Door character was forced to stand up to them. In most cases, like that of Natalya and LayCool, the heroic female performer, however, did not receive much screen time, nor did she converse very often either live or in cut-scenes. Much more often, Diva performers were set up as figurative straw men to be knocked down eventually by a Girl Next Door character. These Diva characters essentially were used to embody many of the negative mean girl stereotypes discussed by scholars studying media representation of female social aggression over the last several years (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008; Meyer et al., 2008; Simmons, 2011).

Whether intentional or unintentional, the discursive dynamic that is created by such characterization lends itself to the negotiated reading that preferred femininity can be strong, assertive, honest, accessible and legitimate regardless of physical size.
Legitimate femininity, however, must not be too visible. A woman can be powerful within her sphere, in the WWE this would be either as a competitor for the *Divas’ Championship* or the *Women’s Championship*, but should not venture into the affairs of men where they may simply become chattering, empty-headed, impediments. This is a very disturbing concept to see played out in contemporary society, but was present numerous times during the 2010 WWE broadcast year on both Raw and Smackdown.

At very least it must be acknowledged that some steps forward have been made, even if they were small and faced with contradiction. Perhaps the most encouraging sign regarding female representation to come out of 2010 is the acceptance of a more realistic female body image. In 2009 performer Mickie James was ridiculed on air and challenged behind the scenes for her real life weight issues. In 2010 and 2011 more performers like Natalya, Tamina and the much heavier Karma have become prominent figures within the WWE. It is unlikely that the thin, sculpted, fashion model body type will ever disappear from the WWE or professional wrestling as a whole, but during 2010 the first steps were taken to legitimize the acceptance a more diversified female form.

**Future Research**

This study has focused primarily on conducting an intertextual analysis of performers’ roles and characterizations within the WWE. It has also focused on the WWE as primarily a television product. Ultimately, this study is designed to be a form of introductory analysis on the current state of professional wrestling. The WWE, as easily the most successful professional wrestling organization, makes a perfect vehicle for such an analysis. Using this analysis, conducting future research in several key areas would be very interesting and useful in developing a greater understanding of professional
wrestling not just as fake fighting, but as a highly popular and successful form of American theater and cultural creation.

First and foremost, conducting several audience analyses based on the findings of each section of analysis contained herein would be able to test audience perception of character roles and representation. As is usually the case in such intertextual analysis, it is one thing to examine the text, but it is something different to examine directly how an audience decodes the meaning of the text. From an academic perspective we essentially know what we’re looking for which might tint the results. By conduction further studies including perhaps focus groups of weekly viewers or exit interviews at live events a more complete picture of the overall effect of WWE characterization and story development may be gained.

Additionally, one or more content analyses of the actual television broadcasts could reveal interesting results. Specifically, as the WWE has seen dramatic growth in viewership of both people of color (around 40% in 2009 according to Neilson Media Research, 2009) as well as women (around 33.6% in 2009 according to Nielson Media Research) it would be interesting to see how prevalent each group is shown via tight crowd shots during the weekly broadcasts. By comparing contemporary episodes to those of the past it might reveal that the WWE has increased representation of a female and non-white fan base during their programs in response to rising viewership. If such a correlation were shown then it could perhaps be argued that by showing more female fans and fans of color to viewers at home, the WWE is attempting to make their programs more accessible to such demographics.
Similarly, a content analysis focusing on the presence of children in WWE broadcasts might be interesting as this study has found that shots children were prominently used to develop character affiliation and indicate audience reaction to viewers at home. By conducting a more formalized inquiry into the presence and use of children in WWE broadcasts it could be determined if, as some press releases from the WWE have indicated, they are attempting to make their programs more family friendly in nature.

The WWE and other professional wrestling organizations generate hundreds of millions of dollars each year just from ad revenue based on their televised products/programs. This does not even take into account the revenue generated from their merchandise, live events, web presences, video games, movies, television shows and other cross promotional ventures. As indicated early in this study, if the numbers are correct, roughly one in twenty Americans tune in each week to see the exploits of their favorite professional wrestlers. They love some, and love to hate others. One way or another though, they tune in and are exposed to an intricate, complex negotiation of racial stereotypes, gender representation and role legitimacy and class values. All of this is couched within the context of sports entertainment that, with the advent and evolution of cable, satellite television and the Internet is accessible across the country and around the world. As scholars, it is not enough to simply write off this spectacle as unimportant or a splash in the pan. It is time to recognize the evolution and cultural significance of this form of unconventional cultural theater.

It is clear that professional wrestling should be viewed by scholars as more than base entertainment, fake fighting, shock media or simple masculine melodrama. The
spectacle is and has been at its core an ideological smackdown within which concepts of social normality and moral prerogatives are embodied by performers and pitted against one another. More research into this novel form of televised entertainment should certainly be conducted, but scholars should not make the mistake of limiting the scope of their research to just the functionality or obvious aspects of the performance. This would be akin to studying art by simply focusing on either the subject the artist chose to paint or the techniques they chose to use without recognizing that the two are interconnected and without analyzing the broader meaning and social context of the piece as a whole. From the 1960s on into contemporary society, professional wrestling in America has been more than just a television show. In a very real way it has been a pop culture phenomenon, and today it represents a social juggernaut that both reflects culture and modifies it through amplification.

As a researcher, recognizing the special and unique role professional wrestling plays within society is key. From fashion to linguistic cues professional wrestling has traditionally interconnected with American society. It operates via hyperbole and commodification of ideology. With this in mind, professional wrestling represents a special breed of television animal within the cultural landscape of contemporary media. While many other programs may generally attempt to represent more progressive ideology by challenging social roles, and combating or trying to eliminate stereotypes, professional wrestling uses these elements for sake of immediacy. It is difficult if not impossible to imagine professional wrestling operating in any other way when one considers how inextricably these dynamics are woven into the fabric of the spectacle. After examining the state of professional wrestling as represented in the WWE, and
considering the immense market appeal it still enjoys, one might consider it a kind of cultural anchor slowing progressive ideology. While there are signs that professional wrestling is coming around in some respects concerning race, gender and class, all indications appear to point to this form of popular entertainment perpetually existing behind the social curve now and into the future.
Well for two divas who call themselves flawless, LayCool you are about as cheap as the high heels Layla threw at me at Hell in the Cell. You know my uncle Brett has taught me a lot in life, but the most important thing he ever taught me was to stand up for myself. So in two weeks at Bragging Rights, the only thing LayCool is going to be throwing is a big ol’ temper tantrum because I’m walking away the Unified Divas Champion!

(LAYCOOL MUSIC BEGINS) “You’re not enough for me!”

(Natalya)

(LayCool in unison)
“…Blah!” <Giggles>

(McCool)

In all seriousness though Natalya, we want you to know that we “totally” respect you… You have courage that no other Diva has, right Lay?

(McCool)

I mean week after week, month after month, day after day, you come out on national television knowing we’re in HD right? <Commentator Cole laughs>

(Layla)

Michelle… I don’t think she knows what that is!

(McCool)

Obviously, it’s high definition Natalya which means the whole world gets to see all your flaws!

(Layla)

…and yet you stand there and expose yourself despite clearly inheriting your dad’s facial hair gene… Bravo! We commend you!
(McCool)
Good Job!

(Layla)
But what these people don’t know is that you have to shave yourself before every single show. Otherwise she’d look like…

(LayCool in unison)
…This!

Natalya Comparison Television Graphic (October 11, 2010). (WWE, 2010i).

(Commentator Cole)
<laughs> Wow! That’s great!

(McCool)
Between that picture and your figure Natalya you have no problem looking exactly like…

(LayCool in unison)
… “The Anvil”

(Natalya)
Well congratulations both of you. After last week’s headset fiasco, you’ve both proved to be the most annoying divas in the WWE…

<crowd explodes in cheers>
(Commentator Cole)
  That’s rude…
(Commentator Lawler)
  That’s true!

(Natalya)
  … and after tonight’s great experience you’re only going to confirm that your IQ
  is lower than your combined, non-existent, waist size…

(McCool)
  That means we’re skinny!

(Layla)
  Did I lose weight?

(McCool)
  You’re like a size zero!

(Layla)
  No way! You’re like a minus zero!

(McCool)
  Your like a minus zero infinity!

(Layla)
  I’m so happy! Thank you!

(McCool)
  Um, jealous much Natalya?

(Layla)
  Yeah! A little Jelly?

(McCool)
  We are the greatest Divas in WWE history!

(LayCool in unison)
  DUH!!!

(Layla)
  Oh yes we are! And I mean, the best there is, was…

(LayCool in unison)
  and ever will be! <Giggles>
(McCool)
    Though you and all these idiots out here might be too ignorant to show it… All
    the Divas respect us! In fact…

(LayCool in unison)
    … They love us!

<CROWD BOOS>

(McCool)
    Now hit our music!
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