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All-American Babyfaces, Un-American Heels: Race and Nationalism Inside the Squared Circle

Professional wrestling began broadcasting on television in the United States of America in the late 1940s. While it has fluctuated in terms of popularity, professional wrestling remains a mainstay on U.S. television to this day. At its highest point of popularity it has been an entertainment giant that has produced crossover pop culture icons such as Hulk Hogan, The Rock and Stone Cold Steve Austin,¹ while even at its lowest point it maintains the ability to sell out arenas in major cities all across the United States. Throughout the past seventy years or so, there has been an abundance of companies that have produced professional wrestling for U.S. television; however, through a long and interesting series of mergers, bankruptcies, and buyouts, U.S. professional wrestling is now dominated by World Wrestling Entertainment² (WWE, formerly WWF, and WWWF). As such, the oligarch of modern pro wrestling is the majority owner, Chairman, and CEO of WWE, Vince McMahon.

The WWE is a publicly traded 'sports entertainment' conglomerate which produces five weekly in-ring wrestling shows and one monthly pay-per-view mega-show. It is also the owner of much of the history of recorded U.S. professional wrestling. This paper is a critical examination of the content produced or otherwise owned and distributed by WWE. While there are many ways one could analyze professional wrestling as a media text, this research is an examination of various depictions and performances of race in professional wrestling through the

¹ Michael Atkinson, "Fifty Million Viewers Can't Be Wrong: Professional Wrestling, Sports-Entertainment, and Mimesis," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 19, no. 1 (2002): 47-66.

² The scope of this essay is too narrow to adequately address this history. For a detailed look at the history of professional wrestling see: David Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle: Life, Death, and Professional Wrestling* (New York: Penguin, 2013), Kindle edition. Scott Beekman, *Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling in America* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006).

lens of U.S. nationalism and patriotism. Professional wrestling is often described as a dramatic morality play where two or more forces meet in a violent altercation in which ‘good’ and ‘evil’ clash to see which force prevails.³ My primary aim is to understand how, or perhaps more importantly why, race, ethnicity, and nationality factor into the performance of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ in professional wrestling. It is my contention that the mainstream, hegemonic rhetoric surrounding nationalism and patriotism in the United States has a profound effect on the lives of individuals that are racially marked as non-White. Most often, this effect is the further ‘otherization’ of people of color from the national identity. This process of further marginalization of the ‘other’ is easily visible in the racial fantasies presented in professional wrestling. It is my hope that this paper is covering new ground by critically examining the role nationalism plays in the presentation of race in a popular form of media such as professional wrestling during specific historical moments. Because professional wrestling is a pop culture phenomenon that has drawn in millions of viewers every week for decades, it is important to look at the images of race it is presenting as well as to whom they are being presented in order to gain a better understanding of popular notions about race and nation in U.S. society. Popular culture is both a purveyor and a reflection of popular ideas. By critically examining pop cultures like pro wrestling, we have an opportunity to observe popular notions about race, both as they are being perceived by a company trying to profit off of them, and as they are being presented to be consumed by a mass audience. Professional wrestling’s longevity allows us to get an idea about how popular notions of race and nation have changed (or have not changed) over time.

Methodology

³ Roland Barthes, “The World of Wrestling,” *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*, Ed. Nicholas Sammond (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005):23-32 (Original work published 1957).

The aim of this work is to analyze the ways in which WWE's creative team and the wrestlers themselves utilize race in their character presentation. This work uses qualitative analysis of various case studies in which race, ethnicity, and nationality play a primary role in the presentation of the wrestler. In addition to this paper's primary aim, the following questions were taken into consideration with each analysis: How does the context of the performance (i.e. the city in which the show is being taped, or which characters are wrestling each other) affect the performer's character presentation? What do the reactions of the fans in attendance to particular depictions and performances tell us about U.S. nationalism and patriotism? And what are these characters performing (i.e. gender, class, sexuality) in addition to race in order to elicit a response from the audience?

Scope and Limitations

Due to the limitations of this project, any real type quantitative analysis was simply out of the question as the history of professional wrestling is extensive and the amount of characters that have been portrayed is daunting. It is important to reiterate that this project is looking at professional wrestling as a visual representation of the ways in which race and mainstream nationalism interact. This does not purport to be a study that analyzes the ways in which the performance and presentation of specific characters makes the observer feel, or how these depictions affect the attitudes of the audience towards particular racial identities in general. Professional wrestling fans often view themselves as part of the performance, therefore they are apt to boo those whom they know they are expected to boo and cheer for those whom they are expected to cheer. A single look at a discussion on the internet of a former professional wrestler reveals that even the most despicable villains that generate the loudest boos from the crowd are

fondly remembered.⁴Such a study is desirable, but it would need to be more than just a project that analyzes the content of professional wrestling. Also, while this paper contains brief engagements with depictions of other facets of identity in professional wrestling, such as gender, class, and sexuality, it does not deal with any of these issues extensively. For more on these topics see Oppliger,⁵ Soulliere,⁶ Mazer,⁷ and Jenkins III⁸ among others.

On Race, Nation, Nationalism, and Patriotism

Scholarship on nation, bordering, nationalism, and patriotism is diverse and continually changing. While there is a wide range of theories on nation and the development of nationalism, this research relies heavily on the definition of nation that is presented in Benedict Anderson's book *Imagined Communities*.⁹ The definition that Anderson proposes is that the nation is "an imagined political community — and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign."¹⁰ When Anderson calls the nation imagined, he is referring to the fact that "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."¹¹ Not only is the nation itself imagined, but the members within a given nation have the ability to imagine the values of said nation. Through the myths they tell about national history and contemporary action, each nation creates a national identity which is assumed to exist in the minds of each inhabitant

⁴ Logan Horton, comment on, "Where in the Hell Are They?: Muhammad Hassan A.k.a. Mark Copani," Bleacher Report, December 16, 2009, <http://bleacherreport.com/articles/309892-where-in-the-hell-are-they-muhammad-hassan-aka-mark-copani>

⁵ Patrice A. Oppliger, *Wrestling and Hypermasculinity* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003).

⁶ Danielle Soulliere, "Wrestling with Masculinity: Messages about Manhood in the WWE," *Sex Roles* 55 no. 1/2: 1-11.

⁷ Sharon Mazer, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle*, (University Press of Mississippi, 1998).

⁸ Henry Jenkins III, "Never Trust a Snake:WWF Wrestling as Masculine Melodrama," *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*, Ed. Nicholas Sammond (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005):33-67.

⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1991).

¹⁰ Ibid. 6.

¹¹ Ibid.

regardless of other facets of an individual's identity. Nationalism, then, is the individual or collective affinity for the nation, and the national identity, in spite of, or perhaps because of its imaginedness. Patriotism refers to the outward expression of the affinity for the nation.

In all countries, especially in one like the U.S. which has rhetorically prided itself on being a 'melting pot' for much of its existence, it is difficult to articulate the exact make up of a mainstream national identity. One way in which we can begin to do this is to look at what Anderson calls "the cultural products of nationalism"¹² in order to see which traits of identity are most often associated with the mainstream identity. These cultural products can include poetry, music, and yes — professional wrestling. We will return to Anderson's theories on nationalism as they arise in the analyses of our case studies. However, there is one more characteristic particular to U.S. nationalism that must be considered which relates to how those marked as 'other' from the mainstream identity experience marginalization, which is a vital aspect of this paper.

In his book *Ethnonationalism*,¹³ Walker Connor asserts that nations wishing to enact political control over racially heterogeneous populations must contend with an ethnic minority population's resistance to assimilation because "political and ethnic borders seldom coincide."¹⁴ Connor explains that the exception to this rule is the U.S. due to its unique history, he states:

the American policy of conquest eliminated the indigenous people as cultural competitors; the pattern of early settlement created a dominant, almost exclusive Anglo-Saxon culture; upon this firmly entrenched cultural base, representatives of other cultures, on their own initiative,¹⁵ were periodically added in relatively small numbers. As a result, ethnic problems in the United States have not been primarily

¹²Ibid. 141.

¹³ Walker Connor, *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994).

¹⁴ Ibid. 4.

¹⁵ Connor notes here that the glaring exception to this rule is the transatlantic slave trade.

characterized by minorities resisting assimilation, but rather by the unwillingness of the dominant group to permit assimilation at the tempo desired by the minorities.¹⁶

The notion that not all individuals in a nation experience the nation in the same way is a central premise for this work. To reappropriate Connor's words, this paper will use professional wrestling to demonstrate how the nationalist discourse among the dominant (white) group affects the experience of non-Whites in relation to the nation and national identity.

On Professional Wrestling

As previously alluded to in this text, the number of ways in which professional wrestling can be examined might very well be innumerable. One can look at it as a traditional morality play,¹⁷ as a masculine melodrama,¹⁸ or as something else entirely. The WWE describes its brand of television as 'sports entertainment,'¹⁹ which can be defined as a sport like spectacle in which competitors perform a violent combat sport (not unlike boxing or mixed martial arts) with predetermined outcomes that privileges pure entertainment over competition. There is debate amongst observers of pro wrestling about whether or not professional wrestling started out as 'real' and many writers who do not specialize in covering pro wrestling and casual observers alike poke fun at fans of pro wrestling for *still* thinking it is real.²⁰ There is compelling evidence that suggests that professional wrestling, since its days as a carnival sideshow event, has always been scripted or based in "unreality,"²¹ and there is no debate that the only ones not 'in on the joke' of pro wrestling are the ones still poking fun at fans of pro wrestling for not being 'in on

¹⁶ Ibid. 21.

¹⁷ Barthes, "The World of Wrestling."

¹⁸ Jenkins III, "Never Trust a Snake: Professional Wrestling as Masculine Melodrama."

¹⁹ In 1989 Vince McMahon admitted to the New Jersey Legislative Committee that wrestling was staged in order to avoid the regulations of state athletic commissions.

²⁰ Peter Kerr, "Now It Can Be Told: Those Pro Wrestlers Are Just Having Fun," *New York Times*, February 10, 1989, <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/02/10/nyregion/now-it-can-be-told-those-pro-wrestlers-are-just-having-fun.html>

²¹ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*.

the joke.’ In order to understand how pro wrestling television presents images of race in a U.S. nationalist context, one must first understand the basic fundamentals in how it works from the perspective of a fan.²²

Professional wrestling television consists of several storylines — or the series of events that tells the story of a feud between two or more competitors.²³ There are two main aspects to these feuds, the build-up and the blow-off. The build-up of a feud is the sum total of all of the events that lead to the blow-off match. The build-up of a storyline typically takes place during the weekly content that is broadcasted on cable television. This build-up in the feud can contain any number of elements; the two characters could be feuding over a championship belt, they can be fighting for their families, they can be engaged in (an almost always explicitly heterosexual) love triangle, they can be defending American values, or any other reason imaginable. These feuds can develop during in-ring competition or during back stage segments. The purpose of this build up is to generate enough interest in the viewer to compel her or him to watch the blow-off match that typically is featured on one of the WWE’s monthly mega-shows, which has traditionally required fans to purchase a pay-per-view event, but now can be viewed through a subscription to the WWE Network.²⁴ Understanding the concept of the blow-off match is the key factor in understanding professional wrestling. For one to watch professional wrestling, one must be able to suspend disbelief to such an extent that one can accept that a feud which has been going on for weeks (and sometimes even months) that consist of hatred, animosity, and violence can be settled in one regulated physically violent competition. For this is the way in which pro

²² This project relies on the more than fifteen year professional wrestling fandom of the author when it comes to explaining the function of professional wrestling.

²³ Competitor, character, and wrestler are all used interchangeably.

²⁴ Seth Berkman, “WWE Network Is Loud Introduction to the Video Streaming Ring,” *New York Times*, March 30, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/31/business/media/the-body-slam-is-buffering.html?_r=0

wrestling typically works; there is a problem between two or more characters and said problem is solved inside the ring.

Another clarification which is necessary for the understanding of this project is in the nature of these conflicts. Often when discussing pro wrestling, scholars and writers alike have a tendency to talk about opposing wrestlers in terms of their signification of good and evil (even this text has used this description). However, as sociologist Brendan Maguire points out, “the traditional good and bad guy routine has been largely shelved.”²⁵ This could have happened for a number of reasons; most likely the WWE realized that they could only tell strict dichotomous stories for so long before fans grew tired of such basic storytelling. Furthermore, these subjective value based terms have always left something to be desired, and they are perhaps simply a consequence of professional wrestling kayfabe.²⁶ For most of its history, the professional wrestling industry has used more functional terms that have become widely known to fans in the Internet age. Instead of good guys and bad guys, we can speak of wrestlers as *babyfaces* (or simply *faces* for short) and *heels* respectively. As we will see, the characteristics of a babyface and a heel can vary widely, but the function of each wrestler does not; the face is the wrestler who is supposed to get cheered by the crowd while it is the heel’s job to get booed (also referred to as getting *heat*). These tasks are accomplished in a variety of ways, including how the wrestler performs in the ring, how the wrestler interacts with his or her fellow wrestlers, and how a wrestler interacts with the fans. Generally speaking, a face will follow the rules of the match unless compelled by the intolerable actions of the heel to do otherwise. A face is usually

²⁵ Brenden Maguire, “American Professional Wrestling: Evolution, Content, and Popular Appeal,” *Sociological Spectrum*, 25.2 (2005): 155-176.

²⁶ Kayfabe is the process of making professional wrestling appear to be real. Kayfabe has always existed in pro wrestling and continues to this day. Even though it has been long understood that professional wrestling is scripted entertainment, acknowledging this on camera is the equivalent of Al Pacino admitting that he is not a drug kingpin midway through *Scarface*.

someone with whom the fans can relate, or at least someone they can respect. Before and after the match, babyfaces are apt to embrace the crowd in order to get them involved in the show. The face is also almost always presented as the ideal of (hyper-) masculinity.²⁷ The heels are notorious rule breakers, they are viewed as cowardly (which is to be interpreted as a departure from the masculine ideal), they are oppressors of the faces, and they are happy to insult the people in the audience at every turn. The identities of these various faces and heels are largely dependent on the people to which the creative team is trying to market. Whether or not the desired goal of having the faces cheered, and the heels booed is accomplished depends largely on the quality of the gimmick that the writers provide the wrestler, and that wrestler's ability to perform the gimmick effectively (or get the gimmick 'over'). Regardless of the outcome, the intent is always the same, figure out what the audience wants to see (as well as what they do not want to see), and give it to them.

The audience serves as the collective center in professional wrestling from which both belonging and 'otherness' is projected onto the characters by the writers. For this reason, it is worth knowing who constitutes the WWE's main audience, especially if we want to use the images presented in professional wrestling as gauges of popular notions about race, nationalism, and patriotism.

According to the WWE's statistics,²⁸ WWE programming reaches 15 million viewers every week, 78% of their audience is 21 or older, with the largest percentage of viewers being ages 18-49. 65% of their viewers are male. People who identify as White constitute 56.3% of their audience, people who identify as Black constitute 24.5%, people who identify as "Hispanic" constitute 10.5%, and 8.6% of their audience identify with other racial or ethnic

²⁷ Sharon Mazer, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle*.

²⁸ "The WWE Audience," WWE, accessed May 1, 2014, <http://corporate.wwe.com/company/overview.jsp>

groups. The WWE's audience is overwhelmingly male, is a majority White, though there is a large audience of people of color that the WWE seems to notice.²⁹ The majority of the audience is also older than 21, despite WWE's 2008 shift to a TV-PG rating and their recent commitment to "family friendly entertainment."³⁰ For the purposes of this paper, it is less important to measure the accuracy of these demographics than to identify the target audience that the WWE wishes to reach because the WWE decides to promote images based on whom they believe is going to receive them.

The Nation of Domination, Black Nationalism, and Conflicting Ideologies

On November 18, 1996, the man who was once the first ever Black world heavyweight champion in professional wrestling history, Ron Simmons, returned to WWE (WWF at the time) cable television on an episode of *Monday Night Raw*.³¹ However, this was not the same beloved face wrestler that celebrated in the ring with his newly won title four years earlier,³² but a new heel wrestler named Farooq who is identified by the announcers as the leader of a group called the Nation of Domination. Farooq walks menacingly to the ring led by two White men wearing gold chains, sunglasses, and hats that say "NOD" who are rapping lyrics over Farooq's entrance music and intermittently yelling "by any means necessary!" He is also accompanied by a man who wears a gray suit, a bowtie, and thick glasses. Farooq himself is wearing a leather jacket, leather pants, and a leather hat with red, black, and green stripes on it. Farooq and the man in the suit enter the ring while the White rappers remain on the floor outside, then, Farooq faces the

²⁹Ibid. The corporate website notes the viewing trends of both people who identify as Black and people who identify as "Hispanic." They post statistics like, "Raw (WWE's Monday night show) is the #1 most-watched regularly scheduled Monday night program on cable among male Hispanic viewers, Hispanic Men 25-54, and Hispanic Men 18-49."

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹"The Nation of Domination Forms: Raw, November 18, 1996 (1:59)," *WWE*, Accessed April 15, 2014, <http://www.wwe.com/videos/the-nation-of-domination-forms-raw-november-18-1996-26022311>

³² Jason Deadrich, "Ron Simmons," *Online World of Wrestling*, May 10, 2012, <http://www.onlineworldofwrestling.com/bios/r/ron-simmons/>

two rappers and raises his right fist in their direction. On this cue, the rappers drop to their knees and return the gesture. In the one minute and thirty seconds it takes for all of this to happen, Farooq does not say one word, but he has already satisfactorily performed his identity for the crowd.

Farooq's appearance is unmistakably intended to signify a particular type of Blackness to the crowd. Whoever chose Farooq's attire and entrance wanted to make it absolutely impossible for one to not associate Farooq with any number of Black Nationalist movements. His leather outfit is reminiscent of the uniform of the Black Panthers. The red, black, and green stripes on his hat represent the Pan-African flag symbolic of Marcus Garvey's Back-to-Africa movement. The man in the gray suit with the glasses appears to be representing the Nation of Islam. The rappers yell out "by any means necessary!" a quote from former Nation of Islam member, and one of the most important figures of the Black Power movement, Malcolm X.³³ Finally, the raising of the fist is meant to evoke the image of John Carlos and Tommie Smith giving the same salute on the medal podiums of the 1968 Summer Olympics, an iconic symbol of the Black Power movement in the United States. All of the aforementioned groups and individuals had ideas about how to best improve the condition of Black people living in the United States, some of them were similar, and some were quite different. However, this is not what matters in Farooq's signification of them in the WWE; all that matters is that each of these groups explicitly and boldly challenged the mainstream imagination of American national identity in such a way that angered those who had a belief or investment in the main stream imagining. For this reason, Farooq is a heel.

³³Adam Pachter, "Any Means Necessary," *PBS*, May 5, 2005, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/malcolm/sfeature/sf_means.html.

While every facet of Farooq's gimmick was meant to signify Black Nationalism in some form or another, it is important to note that his gimmick was not just a nod to the somewhat distant past. If this were the case; it would be unlikely that it would have any kind of currency with the audience. Observers of the WWE are familiar with the fact that WWE is known to borrow material for their stories from "yesterday's headlines,"³⁴ and in November of 1996, "yesterday's headline" was Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam's 1995 Million Man March on Washington D.C. At the time, Hamil R. Harris of the *Washington Post* wrote that Farrakhan called for "1 million African American men to march on Washington D.C. saying that the Black community is decaying morally and Black men need to 'straighten their backs' and lead their families."³⁵ This notion that Black people are the best candidates to empower their own communities in many ways appealed to the mythologies of U.S. society. Farrakhan's call for Black men (Farrakhan's exclusion of women is problematic and was the source of many of the critiques against him) to march on Washington as a symbol of the Black community's commitment to take control of their own destinies was something that was supported, at least rhetorically, by many mainstream journalists. Although in time, it became clear that Farrakhan's brand of leadership was not to be preferred.

In an article from September of 1995, *Washington Post* writer Richard Cohen offers his critiques of the march and its organizer, Farrakhan, whom he calls "a virtual Renaissance man of hate."³⁶ Many of Cohen's critiques of the Nation of Islam and Farrakhan are fair. However, the notion that he perpetuates when he states that, "only a fool could deny the intractability of

³⁴ David Shoemaker, "Survivalist Series: WWE vs. Glenn Beck," *Grantland*, February 28, 2013, <http://grantland.com/features/dissecting-wwe-feud-tea-party-glenn-beck/>

³⁵ Hamil R. Harris, "March of Black Men is Planned in District; Farrakhan Seeks a Turnout of 1 Million," *Washington Post*, July 19, 1995.

³⁶ Richard Cohen, "Marching Behind Farrakhan," *Washington Post*, September 19, 1995.

American racism,” but that “it also takes a fool not to notice that things are changing,”³⁷ is equally as telling as the critiques he makes. Cohen’s buffer statement that acknowledges that racism is a complex issue in the U.S. that continues to plague its inhabitants is immediately followed by the assertion that things are getting better for the Black community whom, Cohen implies, have historically been subjected to institutional racism. He presents the evidence for his claim by writing, “the ubiquitousness of Colin Powell — so popular he could be king — cannot be easily dismissed. The man’s a hero — not just a military one but a racial one as well.

Americans respect him for what he is — a black man, born poor but gone far.”³⁸ Cohen employs a textbook example of Black exceptionalism³⁹ to prove his point, and to reinforce the mythology of the ‘American Dream,’ which is that everyone in the United States can succeed if only they work hard enough. Black exceptionalism, and exceptionalism of other people of color, has been used in recent history by those who are willing to acknowledge the destructive affects that institutional racism has had on communities of color, while also maintaining that we are currently living in a U.S. that is increasingly post-racial. It allows for the reconciliation of the nation’s past with its present without forcing those who have an investment in the organization of U.S. society to reimagine their community. It allows said individuals to spurn consideration of Walker Connor’s notion that not every person within a nation experiences it in the same way.⁴⁰ Furthermore, Cohen’s example of Colin Powell seems to suggest that the dominant group is happy to allow non-Whites to assimilate, but only if they do it in such a way that is conducive to their own imagining of the nation.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Kristen West Savali, “Poison Ivy: Typical White Stereotypes and Black Exceptionalism,” *Clutch Magazine*, April 3, 2014, <http://www.clutchmagonline.com/2014/04/kwasi-enin-typical-white-stereotypes-black-exceptionalism/>.

⁴⁰ Walker Connor, *Ethnonationalism*, 21.

Farooq's first feud under the Nation of Domination gimmick with face wrestler Ahmed Johnson is close to a perfect visual representation of these conflicting ideologies. Farooq's nuance-lacking caricature of Black Nationalism which is presented to the audience as, "nothing but a glorified street gang,"⁴¹ is intended to be seen as evil. While Ahmed Johnson, on the other hand, plays the hard working example of how to be upwardly mobile as a Black American making him an admirable character. This feud continued for a number of months, but their first blow-off match at the 1997 *Royal Rumble*⁴² is indicative of how their feud was presented.

Before the match starts, there is a video package played.⁴³ In this package Farooq exclaims that it is people like Ahmed Johnson, "the Uncle Toms of the world," that he hates the most. Ahmed Johnson is shown at the 1996 *Slammy Awards*⁴⁴ accepting his "New Sensation Award" where he graciously proclaims, "This is not my award. This is your award. I wouldn't be here — I would be nothing without you." We are then shown how Johnson was attacked unprovoked by Farooq because he was a "target in a turf war."⁴⁵ This attack ruptured Johnson's kidney in the storyline, thus threatening his health and his career. Johnson courageously fought through the pain for some time, but he would have to undergo emergency surgery to save his life. Upon his return, he was on a mission to seek retribution. After all, since both men were "from the streets,"⁴⁶ Johnson could not allow Farooq to just walk around after what he had done. Johnson then attacked Farooq which prompted Farooq to form the Nation of Domination. We are left with a question, "can the power of one overcome the strength of a rather dubious nation?"⁴⁷

⁴¹ "WrestleMania 13," *WWE Network*, original air date March 23, 1997 on pay-per-view.

⁴² "WWE Royal Rumble 1997," *WWE Network*, original air date January 19, 1997 on pay-per-view.

⁴³ This is typical of a pay-per-view match, it is intended to refresh the viewer's memory on what has already taken place in the feud in order to give the match more meaning. We can also see it as a way of discerning what the WWE believes is important as it relates to selling the match.

⁴⁴ The WWE's annual kayfabe award show.

⁴⁵ "WWE Royal Rumble 1997," *WWE Network*.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

The stage for the match has been set. Though both are said to have come from a similar situation, Ahmed Johnson represents the man who did it the right way. He is gracious, he works hard, and he follows the rules established by the powers that be (unless provoked by gross injustice to do otherwise). Farooq, on the other hand is bitter, hateful, and despicable. In the video package, he plainly states that if he wants something, he takes it, an indication of Farooq's immorality.

The match itself adds to what we already know about these two. Farooq attempts to gain an unfair advantage by beating Johnson with a leather strap which is met with boos. Johnson is able to get a hold of the same strap and use it against Farooq which is met with a chorus of cheers, and Vince McMahon, who is doing the commentary of the match, exclaims, "I don't think Ahmed gives a damn if he's disqualified!"⁴⁸ Minutes later, Farooq grabs a chair and begins to hit Johnson with it, Jim Ross, another man on commentary asks, "can you imagine what kind of individual Farooq is? To try to hurt this man's kidney one more time!"⁴⁹ The match ends when the other members of the Nation of Domination rush the ring and attack Johnson. Johnson is able to dispose of them quickly, but it gives Farooq enough time to run out of harm's way. One of the members of the Nation is separated from the rest as they flee, Johnson corners him and throws him through one of the announce tables.

This match is a visual expression of conflicting ideologies where we see two characters whom we already know all about, acting in the way in which we already knew they would. We are meant to celebrate as the face wrestler wins, even though it was in such a way that was not definitive (thus the need for the continuation of the feud). We also have a smaller victory that sees one of our antagonists get what is coming to him. The character who fits nicely into the dominate narrative of what we imagine to be America overcomes the oppressive force of a

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

character whom complains, who cheats, who is a coward, and who overall, does things the wrong way. Through the fans, the writers project a sensationalized image of how a Black person in America is supposed to act, and conversely, projects the further ‘otherization’ of a character that does not fit into the narrative. It is worth noting, that both characters break the rules of the match, Farooq uses the chair, Johnson uses the strap, and he also throws a non-combatant through a table. The key difference is how we are supposed to interpret these actions. Farooq does these things because he is a bad person; while Johnson only does them because he is provoked by the nefarious Nation of Domination.

Muhammad Hassan and U.S. Nationalism after 9/11

Foreign born heel wrestlers are almost as old as professional wrestling itself.⁵⁰ It is a time tested gimmick that has been effective for many years. In fact, it can be such an effective gimmick, that when promoters want to introduce a “foreign menace”⁵¹ to their show but do not have any foreign born wrestlers in their company, they simply invent one out of the wrestlers they already have. One region of the world that seems to exclusively ‘provide’ the U.S. with heel wrestlers is the part of the world that we typically describe as the Middle or Near East. Sometimes these characters are mysterious wrestlers that signify the mystique of the East — a product of the Western Orientalist imagination. These wrestlers have included the Michigan born wrestler known as The Sheikh who was presented as being from Syria; and the Canadian wrestler Abdullah the Butcher who was billed from Sudan. Other times these wrestlers signify the prototypical anti-American Middle Easterner, which is a product of the Cold War era. These characters are billed from countries with which the U.S. is engaged in geopolitical conflict. For example The Iron Sheikh was billed from Iran and saw great success as a heel in the 1980s after

⁵⁰ David Showmaker, *The Squared Circle*.

⁵¹ Ibid.

the Iranian Revolution of 1979.⁵² In the fall of 2004, three years after the events of September 11, 2001, and more than one year after the U.S. military invaded Iraq, the WWE introduced a new spin on the Middle Eastern heel in Muhammad Hassan⁵³ and his manager Khosrow Daivari. Unlike most Middle Eastern heels, Hassan and Daivari were not portraying evil foreigners who, based on their foreignness alone, signified anti-American sentiment. Instead, they were depicted as Arab-Americans who felt as if their ability to navigate the U.S. without being discriminated against had been compromised since the September 11 attacks. Hassan's tenure in WWE would only last for 8 months, but the character he played would be one of the most controversial characters ever presented on WWE television, and one of the most telling depictions of the impact that post-9/11 U.S. nationalism had on the perception of so-called Middle Eastern and Arab-American identity. Unlike with Farooq and the Nation of Domination, it is not possible to demonstrate the affects U.S. nationalism had on the presentation of Muhammad Hassan's character by examining only one storyline in which he participated. In order to see how his character evolved in relation to U.S. nationalist discourse, we must examine both the beginning of his career and its end.

In a 2011 interview Dara Daivari, the man who performed as Khosrow Davarai in WWE, said that the introduction of him and Hassan was some of the best work WWE has done. He elaborated by saying that he and Hassan were lucky because they came in to the WWE at a time when the WWE was spending a lot of money and effort to create video vignettes to play on television in order introduce characters to the audience before that character ever debuted on

⁵² In somewhat of a rare example, the man that performs the Iron Sheikh is actually from Iran.

⁵³ Hassan's real name is Marc Copani, and he is actually an Italian American from Syracuse, New York. See: Colin Hunter, "Muhammad Hassan is back, sort of," *Slam Sports*, April 5, 2011, <http://slam.canoe.ca/Slam/Wrestling/2011/03/27/17775686.html>

television.⁵⁴ These vignettes are essential to understanding how the viewer was supposed to interpret Hassan and Daivari upon their debut.

The three vignettes that played on television before their arrival showed Hassan and Daivari speaking in a suburban U.S. neighborhood, a convenience store, and an airport (which will be referred to as the suburb, store, and airport vignettes respectively). These vignettes had similar formats; Hassan would begin by discussing how he had experienced the U.S. in the past, he would attempt to demonstrate his claim to the national identity, and then he would explain how his experience changed after September 11, 2001. With each subsequent vignette, his tone becomes angrier, and his words become increasingly replete with threats against those whom he accuses of discriminating against him. In the suburb vignette Hassan says (*italics added for emphasis*), “This is where I grew up — right next door to all of you. I went to the same schools, I ate the same food, I even watched the same television shows. And there was never *any* animosity between us.”⁵⁵ He states that he has been viewed differently ever since 9/11, and he ends the vignette by saying, “all I want is a chance. Don’t judge me because I’m of Arab descent. Judge me because of my talent, my skill, judge me for me. I just want the opportunity to represent you in the WWE.”⁵⁶ In the store vignette, Hassan tells of his uncle Akhbar who “came to this country with just a few dollars in his pocket, and after a short amount of time, he achieved the American Dream, and he bought his own store.”⁵⁷ The store vignette does not end with the same plea to represent America in the WWE that ended the suburb vignette. Instead, Hassan threatens those who discriminate against him by saying, “if need be, we will *beat* the prejudice out of all of

⁵⁴ Dara Daivari, interview by Colt Cabana, *The Art of Wrestling Podcast*, Ep. 1, 2011.

⁵⁵ “Vignette #1,” [n.d.], video clip, accessed May 10, 2014, YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VTXgQ8GV07U>

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ “Vignette #2,” [n.d.], video clip, accessed May 10, 2014, YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W3etK_hfjVY

you!”⁵⁸ He continues by saying, “no one will get away with treating us like this anymore! And if necessary, I will lead a *revolt* against our very own country.”⁵⁹ The airport vignette begins with Hassan stating that as a professional wrestler, he knows he will have to travel a lot, and he says that “since 9/11, airport security has changed, and justifiably so.”⁶⁰ He admits that everyone should have to endure a certain amount of increased inconvenience, but the harassment that he and Daivari have to withstand simply because of their perceived identity is intolerable and unjust. He ends this vignette by again trying to take autonomy over his own identity one last time, and by issuing another threat. He says, “We are *Arab-Americans* and we demand the same rights that *any* American has. And if you don’t give the respect that we demand, then I will beat it out of anyone that gets in my way!”

In the beginning of each of these vignettes, Hassan is attempting to appeal to the ideals which we have concluded are part of the mainstream imagination of the U.S. as a nation. However, just as Connor suggests, Hassan is not allowed to assimilate because the dominant group will not allow him to do so due to his non-White (in this case Arab-American) status.⁶¹ The story he tells about his uncle sounds incredibly similar to the description Cohen gives about Colin Powell in his article about Louis Farrakhan,⁶² and this evocation of the American Dream is exactly what made Ahmed Johnson a babyface in his feud with Farooq. But we are not supposed to sympathize with Hassan in the same way that we are with Powell and Johnson. This is because during the crisis of the United States’ Global War on Terror (GWOT) the “fundamentally bad”

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Vignette #3,” [n.d.], video clip, accessed May 10, 2014, YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DkLnJvpJC4o>

⁶¹ Walker Connor, *Ethnonationalism*.

⁶² Richard Cohen, “Marching Behind Farrakhan.”

concept of racism is seen as justified and perhaps even necessary.⁶³ As a result of the GWOT, “the nation is constructed as being at risk and Arabs as threats to the nation, therefore such arguments,” as the ones Hassan is making, “for civil rights cannot be sustained when the nation is in crisis.”⁶⁴ Hassan’s status as a heel in the world of the WWE should be viewed as a result of his willingness to challenge this notion. Therefore, his other aggressive tendencies should be viewed as the result of his heel status.

There is one other important aspect of each of these vignettes which, to this point, have not been discussed. After all three of Hassan’s diatribes, Daivari repeats what Hassan says in Persian. While the purpose of this is never explicitly stated, the effects of this practice are two-fold; one is certainly intentional, while the other is perhaps unintentional. The first effect of this practice is to further present Hassan and Daivari as ‘other’ from the viewer. As Anderson points out in *Imagined Communities*, “there is a special kind of contemporaneous community which language alone suggests.”⁶⁵ Though there is no official language in the United States, many Americans, and certainly those of the majority group, have imagined English as the language that all U.S. citizens should speak. This privileging of English is why we are intended to interpret Daivari’s use of Persian as somehow un-American. The second effect is the demonstration of a Western Orientalist ideology which conflates the identities of a vast region, a region which contains heterogeneous populations that often conflict with one another, into one identity that is called “Middle Eastern.”⁶⁶ This is what makes it possible for a viewer to not second guess that a

⁶³ Evelyn Alsultany, “The Prime Time Plight of the Arab Muslim American after 9/11: Configurations of Race and Nation in TV Dramas,” *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects*, Ed. Amaney Jamal and Nadiene Naber (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2008) 207.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 224.

⁶⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 145.

⁶⁶ Ralph Locke, “Cutthroats and Casbah Dancers, Muezzins and Timeless Sounds: Musical Images of the Middle East,” *19th Century Music Vol. 22, No. 1.* (Summer, 1998), 20-53.

Persian speaking man, who is named after a late-Antique era Persian King,⁶⁷ is somehow of Arab descent.⁶⁸

On December 13, 2004,⁶⁹ the months of building Muhammad Hassan and Khosrow Daivari's personas finally come to fruition. *Monday Night Raw* is in Huntsville, Alabama and the beloved White babyface and semi-retired WWE Hall of Fame wrestler Mick Foley is in the ring announcing that he will be traveling to perform for the U.S. troops in Baghdad, Iraq — even though he has “never been called a big pro-war guy and [he’s] still got a couple of cases of John Kerry for President stickers in [his] garage.”⁷⁰ This notion that all U.S. Americans should support the military even if they do not support the war, regardless of their political affiliations, permeates U.S. nationalist discourse. In fact, it is one of the most important aspects of the imagining of the U.S. It tells each member of the community that regardless of their divisions, they can be united behind this singular cause. Foley continues his monologue about going to perform in Iraq for a number of minutes, then, as he pumps his fist in the air to drum up support from the audience and says, “I look at it as what will be one of the great privileges of my life — to travel overseas and entertain the brave men and women who put their lives on the line for us, every single day...”⁷¹ music that vaguely sounds like the Islamic call to prayer interrupts Foley, despite the attempts of the audience to drown it out with a continuing and intensive chant of “U.S.A.! U.S.A.!” Both announcers wonder aloud what is happening, and then Hassan and Daivari appear. What follows is an argument between the two heels and Foley. The

⁶⁷ Fred Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 8.

⁶⁸ Dara Daivari's parents are both Persians from Iran. See: Dara Daivari, interview by Colt Cabana.

⁶⁹ Jason Deadrich, “Muhammad Hassan,” *Online World of Wrestling*, April 21, 2012, <http://www.onlineworldofwrestling.com/bios/m/muhammad-hassan/>

⁷⁰ “The Debut,” [n.d.], video clip, accessed May 10, 2014, YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KgcXO5aAoA0>

⁷¹ Ibid.

overwhelming majority of what Hassan says could have been found in any of his vignettes which is why it is important to note exactly when in the show Hassan makes his debut. If he were going to simply give the same speech he had been doing in his vignettes, then he could have ostensibly done it at any point in the program. But he does it right after a Liberal Mick Foley patriotically embraces the troops in front of an audience in a highly Conservative city, and thus, he embraces a large part of the national identity. The audience is presented with two individuals with whom they presumably have ideological differences, but they are intended to get behind the one that signifies the mainstream national identity. Hassan takes the performance of his heel identity further by saying, “I’m glad I interrupted you! Because I’m sick of hearing you express your admiration for these troops. These gutless cowards! These heartless infidels!”⁷² For Foley, Hassan has gone too far, and though he continues to embrace the imagining of U.S. values by saying he is happy to live in a great country like the United States where Hassan is free “to express [his] views no matter how stupid they sound,”⁷³ he invites Hassan to the ring to settle things the way they are settled in the world of professional wrestling. Hassan gets all the way to the ring, removes his suit jacket and button down shirt to indicate to Foley (and the viewer) that he is ready to fight, but at the last minute he refuses and walks away, proving that he is the cowardly heel that the crowd already knew he would be.

For the next few months, Hassan and Daivari would continue building their heat (animosity) with the crowd. In what was billed as an Arab-American debate, Hassan tells the crowd that “America, at its core is a *racist* nation.” “After all,” Hassan says, the U.S. was “founded on slavery.”⁷⁴ This accusation is met with boos from the crowd because, as previously

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ “The Arab-American Debate,” [n.d.], video clip, accessed May 10, 2014, YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S0PIJ4yz07M>.

mentioned, accepting this accusation would force U.S. citizens to reimagine their community. His opponents, the WWE commentary team, are intended to represent U.S. ideals. One responds by saying that there are indeed racists in the U.S., but he also contends that there are “idiots” in every country. The other responds by saying that the U.S., like all countries, is not perfect, but Hassan and Daivari have two options as it relates to the U.S., “[they] love it, or by God [they] leave it!”⁷⁵ The response of the announcers demonstrates how the majority group never truly has to consider their actions when dealing with a non-majority group, and often times, they can place the onus on the ‘other’ to prove their American identity. As Hassan continued to complain about racism every week, the narrative switched from ‘debate’ about the Arab-American condition, to the lamentation of how, as one announcer put it “the world has more important issues to worry about than Hassan’s feelings getting hurt.”⁷⁶ This reinforces the notion of justified racism during times of crisis.⁷⁷

There are two more important developments that occurred between Hassan’s debut and his last feud that are worth noting. The first is that Hassan as a competitor was having great success in the ring. In typical heel fashion, he would take every opportunity to brag about how he had never been pinned or submitted, and in even more typical heel fashion, he won most of his matches by breaking the rules. The other development that occurred in this time period was that his ring attire changed in such a way that was used to further mark him as ‘other.’ He and

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ “WrestleMania 21: Wrestlemanina Goes Hollywood,” *WWE Network*, original air date April 2, 2005 on pay-per-view.

⁷⁷ Evelyn Alsultany, “The Prime Time Plight of the Arab Muslim American after 9/11.”

Daivari began wearing keffiyehs⁷⁸ unless competing in a match; and Hassan began wearing a thawb⁷⁹ to the ring.

Muhammad Hassan's last feud before leaving the WWE was with the future WWE Hall of Famer, The Undertaker, and his last appearance on WWE cable television was on *Smackdown*, July 7, 2005.⁸⁰ Daivari, who only wrestled sparingly since the two debuted, and who is never presented as a serious competitor, is scheduled to wrestle the physically imposing Undertaker. Hassan tells a visibly frightened Daivari that he has to wrestle this match for he is to be a "sacrifice for the greater good."⁸¹ The match does not last long as Undertaker dispatches of Daivari with ease. After the match, Hassan who has been grinning throughout the match, drops to his knees and looks to the as if to pray, and five men who are dressed in khaki camouflage pants, black sweaters, and black ski masks rush to the ring and incapacitate the Undertaker. After the beat down, Hassan and the masked men exit the ring carrying Daivari above their head which the commentary team described as martyr-like.⁸² This dark turn in Hassan's character was interpreted by many as Hassan's embracing of terrorism. In a *New York Post* article, Don Kaplan wrote that UPN's *Smackdown* "aired what appeared to be terror-themed hijinks last Thursday."⁸³ He described the scene of the men carrying out Daivari as "images of Arabs in ski masks carrying a fallen Arab wrestler over their heads after he had 'sacrificed' himself, evoking imagery similar to a suicide bomber's funeral."⁸⁴ He also described the incapacitation of The

⁷⁸ A keffiyeh is commonly referred to a head scarf. Keffiyehs are often associated with Arab male identity, and are commonly seen in the Arab Gulf.

⁷⁹ A thawb is a long, often white, robe like article of clothing which is also commonly seen in the Arab Gulf region.

⁸⁰ Jason Deadrich, "Muhammad Hassan," *Online World of Wrestling*.

⁸¹ "The Undertaker vs. Daivari (Iranian Desert Nightmare Attacks The Undertaker," [n.d.], video clip, accessed May 10, 2014, YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sw6naWylTrI>

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Don Kaplan, "'Terrorist' Wrestles After Bombing," *New York Post*, July 12, 2005, 86.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

Undertaker as “a scene that looked eerily like a beheading.”⁸⁵ Hassan’s character was subsequently banned by UPN because coincidentally, this episode of *Smackdown* aired the same night that 50 people died in London from what was described as “terrorist bombings.” The WWE filmed this episode of *Smackdown* two days prior to the London bombings, and they edited Hassan’s segment out in Europe but it aired everywhere else.⁸⁶ His match with The Undertaker at that month’s pay-per-view would be Muhammad Hassan’s last.

The promo package that aired before Hassan and Undertaker’s match⁸⁷ re-showed the events that led to Hassan’s banishment from UPN’s television broadcasts. While Hassan’s music always vaguely sounded like it, during the re-screening of the beat down of The Undertaker, the Islamic call to prayer⁸⁸ was actually playing in the video. The match ends quickly for one that has a stipulation that if Hassan wins the match, he would become the number one contender for the World Heavyweight Championship, and if he loses, he was to never show his face again. After the match, the victorious Undertaker is attacked by Daivari along with Hassan’s masked “sympathizers.”⁸⁹ Undertaker subdues them quickly and then catches Hassan at the top of the steel stage where wrestlers enter the ring. Undertaker delivers a wrestling maneuver called the “power-bomb” to Hassan in which he throws him through the stage to the concrete below. After Undertaker disposes of Hassan, he walks to the back, vindicated. As the camera turns to Hassan, he is bloodied. He convulses for a moment, and then he lie motionless as a medical team carries him out on a stretcher. It is unclear if we are supposed to believe Hassan has died, though in the world of professional wrestling, Hassan did die that night. It is fitting that a character who

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ “WWE Great American Bash 2005,” *WWE Network*, original air date July 24, 2005 on pay-per-view

⁸⁸ Translated and interpreted by the author.

⁸⁹ “WWE Great American Bash 2005.”

signified the fantasy of Arab anti-American sentiment met his demise at a pay-per-view called *The Great American Bash*. At the *Bash* we see the end of the evolution of Hassan's character from disgruntled Arab-American to 'Islamic Extremist.'

In real life, the socially constructed nature of race and identity in general, assures that an individual's assumptions about your identity are more socially meaningful than your own conception of it. In other words, if enough individuals think of you as something, then that can effectively be what you are. Post 9/11 U.S. nationalist rhetoric began associating Arab, Muslim, and for lack of a better word 'Middle Eastern,' identity with a threat. In the sensationalized and signifying world of professional wrestling, we can see through the presentation of Muhammad Hassan and Khosro Daivari, the evolution of this discourse.

Alberto Del Rio, Class, and White National Identity

While this paper is about professional wrestling in the U.S., it is worth noting that there is also a rich history of pro wrestling in Mexico (see: Monsivais⁹⁰ and Levi⁹¹). The popularity of wrestling in Mexico typically means three things for U.S. wrestling. The first is that there are numerous companies in Mexico where U.S. wrestlers can go and get experience in front of audiences that might be smaller than the WWE, but that are bigger than the audiences of most U.S. independent companies. The second is that U.S. pro wrestling companies like the WWE benefit from the ability to add well-experienced wrestlers from Mexico to their shows. Since the *lucha libre* style that is common in Mexico is faster than the typical U.S. style, and since it relies heavily on aerial maneuvers, the (often times masked) *luchadores* who perform it can add a new

⁹⁰Carlos Monsivais, "The Hour of the Mask as Protagonist: El Santo versus the Skeptics on the Subject of Myth," *Steel Chair to the Head*, 88.

⁹¹ Heather Levi, "The Mask of the *Luchador*: Wrestling, Politics, and Identity in Mexico," *Steel Chair to the Head*.

and exciting dimension to U.S. wrestling shows. Perhaps most importantly though it helps the WWE increase its appeal to its Latino fan base.

In his article, “Not Quite Heroes,”⁹² Phillip Serrato states that “the meaning of an idealized masculinity in professional wrestling has come to be equated with the brute force and excessive violence of huge white superstars.”⁹³ He goes on to argue that most often in professional wrestling Latino wrestlers are positioned to embody a masculinity that is inferior to the “monolithic masculinity” that larger White wrestlers embody.⁹⁴ Given that any deviation from the hyper-masculine norm is typically a signifier of a heel status, professional wrestling companies must look to other facets of identity that can make a wrestler the type of babyface that both Latinos and non-Latinos can get behind. Henry Jenkins convincingly posits that class conflict is a primary structure of professional wrestling,⁹⁵ and Serrato builds from this premise to show how the presentation of Latinos as underdogs in a class-conflict can make them viable faces because, due to their own working-class status, the fan’s allegiance to the underdog is “powerful enough to result in the transcendence of the prevailing racist attitudes and hostilities that may otherwise inflect interracial relations at a given social moment.”⁹⁶ In 2010 a new Latino heel character named Alberto Del Rio whose character would be based on his national identity debuted in the WWE. The fact that U.S. nationalist sentiment has been historically constructed in

⁹² Phillip Serrato, “Not Quite Heroes: Race, Masculinity, and Latino Professional Wrestling,” *Steel Chair to the Head*: 232-259

⁹³ Ibid. 235.

⁹⁴ Ibid. 233.

⁹⁵ Henry Jenkins III, “Never Trust a Snake: WWF Wrestling as Masculine Melodrama,” *Steel Chair to the Head*, 33-67.

⁹⁶ Phillip Serrato, “Not Quite Heroes: Race, Masculinity, and Latino Professional Wrestling,” *Steel Chair to the Head*, 237.

opposition to Mexico,⁹⁷ and as such it was necessarily constructed as explicitly “Anglo-Saxon.”⁹⁸ It should theoretically be easy to present Del Rio as a heel to the White audience through an opposition to U.S. national identity. But in order to ensure that Del Rio was accepted as a heel by the Latino fans, the WWE had to insert a strong class narrative into the presentation of his identity.

Alberto Del Rio’s first match on WWE television was on an August 20, 2010 episode of *Smackdown*⁹⁹ where he wrestled in the main event. As it turned out, this was an exercise of foreshadowing. Unlike Farooq and the original incarnation of the Nation of Domination who had a multi-month feud with another wrestler which was fueled by animosity, and Muhammad Hassan who was seeking retribution for his mistreatment, Alberto Del Rio almost immediately began competing in multi-man matches with championship titles on the line instead of engaging in feuds for more personal reasons. Ostensibly, the WWE did this because they wanted a new heel wrestler to insert himself into the title picture in order to add a new element to its product. It makes sense then, that the WWE would want to establish him as a heel as quickly as possible, and on his television debut, they took all necessary steps to do this.

Alberto Del Rio makes his debut by interrupting another Latino wrestler, Rey Mysterio who is addressing the crowd after losing a match for the World Heavyweight Championship the night before. At this point in his career, the masked luchador Mysterio is a well established face wrestler. Given his relatively miniscule size¹⁰⁰ he has been embraced by the fans as WWE’s

⁹⁷ Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1981).

⁹⁸ Ibid. 217.

⁹⁹ Jason Deadrich, “Alberto Del Rio,” *Online World of Wrestling*, <http://www.onlineworldofwrestling.com/bios/a/alberto-del-rio/>.

¹⁰⁰ He has been listed as small as 5’3”, 140 pounds. See: Phillip Serrato, “Not Quite Heroes,” *Steel Chair to the Head*.

quintessential underdog. He has also made his Mexican-American identity a staple of his performance. Mysterio is billed from San Diego, California (a city with a large Latino population), his finishing maneuver is called the 619 (San Diego's area code), and his entrance music repeats the phrase, "Booyaka! Booyaka! 619!"¹⁰¹ It is never clear exactly why Del Rio interrupts Mysterio, but as he gets in the ring, he begins to speak of his own accolades while simultaneously belittling Mysterio. Del Rio claims to be a Mexican "national hero," who is admired by his country because he is "handsome," "rich," and "powerful." He places Mysterio on the opposite end of both the class and the masculinity spectrum, derogatorily stating that Mysterio is a "joke of a man" that is just like the people in the crowd, and adding that his blood is "from the *horrible* streets of *Tijuana*." By pejoratively speaking of Mysterio's class status and associating this status with that of the crowd, Del Rio is presumably attempting to present himself as a heel to the Latino viewer. The emphasis of his masculinity as a Latino man, can be seen as a non-normative practice that upsets the established hierarchies of professional wrestling, which is reason enough for those who are invested in the White as ideal masculinity model to view him as a heel. Although Mysterio is the wrestler who first engages in physical violence in this segment, we are expected to interpret Del Rio's actions as deserving of physical punishment. Before Mysterio hits Del Rio, Del Rio calls him a "*little cockroach*," bends over as if to mock his size (and therefore his masculinity), and winks in his face.¹⁰² After this 'unscheduled' skirmish, the two are placed in a match in the main event of the evening.

The match itself does little to further the story between the two competitors, and it does not indicate much about Del Rio's character either except that like most heels, he is willing to

¹⁰¹ "Alberto Del Rio's WWE Debut, October 4, 2013, video clip, accessed June 1, 2014, YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sPGo2n9LRpw>

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

break the rules to get an advantage. However, Del Rio's match entrance, which he uses throughout this "Mexican Aristocrat" gimmick,¹⁰³ is meant to further mark him as 'other' from the viewer. In order to further signify his upper-class status, Del Rio drives into the arena in a Rolls Royce (he is said to have a collection of fifty classic cars that are worth over ten million dollars), which he pauses for a minute to admire before heading to the ring.¹⁰⁴ He also has his own personal ring announcer, Ricardo Rodriguez, who introduces Del Rio in Spanish. There is a long history of Latino wrestlers, such as the Hall of Fame former Intercontinental Champion Tito Santana and Rey Mysterio himself, giving bi-lingual interviews in order to be inclusive of the Spanish speaking audience and signify pride in their heritage.¹⁰⁵ Del Rio's use of Rodriguez is not meant to signify this inclusion though. This is meant to demonstrate that not only is Del Rio too good to be introduced by the same announcer who introduces all the other wrestlers, but he is too good to be introduced in English.

To be fair, there are several ways we can interpret Del Rio's heel status as it relates to mainstream U.S. nationalist discourse. The first is that his upper-class heel status might just be a reflection of the working-class status of many pro wrestling fans, and not a reflection of U.S. nationalism. In fact, much of the U.S.'s mainstream nationalist discourse does emphasize the working class (the G.O.P.'s use of the "Joe the Plumber" image in the 2008 Presidential Election immediately comes to mind). The heel-ish pompousness with which he demonstrates his class-status could also be a reason that his aristocrat gimmick is so detestable and therefore effective. Lastly, his heel status could be a reflection of Del Rio challenging the imagining of a continental White supremacy which the U.S intentionally created during the era of imperial expansion in the

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Phillip Serrato, "Not Quite Heroes," *Steel Chair to the Head*, 240-241.

1840s when the Secretary of State and future President James Buchanan stated that “The Anglo-Saxon blood could never be subdued by anything that claimed Mexican origin.”¹⁰⁶ In all likelihood, all three of these explanations are probably at work, and the importance of each is probably dependent on the person that is interpreting the depiction. It is also worth noting that one would think that Del Rio’s wealth would theoretically move him closer to a status of whiteness and therefore closer to assimilation. Instead, the racial fantasy Del Rio depicts asserts the supremacy of Mexican identity and therefore demonstrates resistance to assimilation as Connor suggests is common in other nations with racially heterogeneous populations.¹⁰⁷ Instead of being marked as ‘other’ through the viewer, Del Rio ‘otherizes’ himself by rejecting assimilation. Alberto Del Rio’s heel gimmick would continue for several months, and when he began performing a babyface character, he would participate in a feud that at first glance, seems to be problematic for the central argument of this paper.

All-American Heels?

This paper has been an attempt to demonstrate the way in which we can view the presentation of racialized heels in professional wrestling as a representation of the ways in which U.S. nationalist discourse can often project ‘otherness’ onto people of color. While it is true that professional wrestling has a long history of playing on the audience’s national identities to present a non-White heel, any professional wrestling observer can attest to the fact that there is an equally long history of White heel wrestlers using blatantly racist language against their non-White opposition in order to get boos from the crowd. David Shoemaker traces this practice back to the late 1970s and 1980s when, for example, White heels would refer to beloved Latino

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. 217.

¹⁰⁷ Walker Connor, *Ethnonationalism*, 4.

wrestler Tito Santana as a “Mexican wetback,” and an “ignorant garbage picker.”¹⁰⁸ The pioneer of this White racist heel archetype is perhaps the Canadian wrestler billed from Glasgow, Scotland, WWE Hall of Famer Rowdy Roddy Piper. In perhaps his most notorious act of using blatant racism to get heat, Piper called star of the television show *The A-Team* and part time wrestler Mr. T’s fans monkeys, mock-fed bananas to a poster of Mr. T, and told him that he would “whip him like a slave.”¹⁰⁹ This history of blatant racism as heel behavior laid the foundation for a more bizarre phenomenon of the 21st century — White heels pairing blatant racism with an appeal to national identity in order to get heat from the crowd.

One character which performed a heel status while simultaneously attempting to appeal to nationalist ideology is the Texas born turned Wall Street millionaire John Bradshaw Layfield (or JBL). In a feud with Latino WWE champion Eddie Guerrero, JBL filmed a promo on the U.S.-Mexico border where he is seemingly appealing to the nationalist convictions of the audience while also performing a heel gimmick. He blames U.S. social and economic problems on “illegal immigrants,” something which Serrato indicates has been commonplace against Latinos in U.S. popular culture since at least the 1970s.¹¹⁰ JBL states that “they take advantage of our health care system, our welfare system, and they send all *of their money* back to Mexico — and look to people like me to have to support people like *them*.”¹¹¹ His monologue continues until he comes across a family which he concludes is trying to cross the border, he stops them, sends them back and tells them, “you better tell everybody south of the border that they better

¹⁰⁸ David Shoemaker, “A (Very) Concise History of Racism in Wrestling, 1980-Present: An Encyclopedia of Stereotypes, from Virgil to Kamala to Mr. Fuji to the Mexicools, and Many More in Between,” *Grantland*, November 6, 2013, <http://grantland.com/features/excerpt-david-shoemaker-new-book-concise-history-racism-wrestling/>.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Phillip Serrato, “Not Quite Heroes: Race, Masculinity, and Latino Professional Wrestling,” *Steel Chair to the Head*.

¹¹¹ “JBL Kicks out Illegals,” [n.d.], video clip, accessed June, 3, 2014, *Dailymotion*, http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x119jd_jbl-kicks-out-illegals_news

stay south of the border. Because on this side of the border, John Bradshaw Layfield will be waiting!”¹¹²

Another example of the all-American heel archetype can be seen in the slight gimmick change that occurred when “All-American American” Jack Swagger became a “Real American” with his manager Zeb Colter in their 2013 feud with Alberto Del Rio and his new face gimmick.¹¹³ Swagger’s new gimmick was introduced through a series of videos on the WWE’s *YouTube* channel where he and Zeb Colter would stand in front of a wooden fence with the Gadsden flag, which has become synonymous with the Conservative Tea Party movement, behind them. The content of all of these videos are similar. They start with Colter speaking of U.S. societal ills in the same manner that JBL did in his promo, for instance he might say, “the land of opportunity has turned into a desert of despair.”¹¹⁴ In Colter’s words, this is because, “we have allowed a bunch of *greedy, selfish*, criminal delinquents to cross our borders and rob this great country of all its wealth.”¹¹⁵ Just like JBL, Colter accuses immigrants of looking for a handout, which he responds by saying him and Swagger are generous people and they will gladly hand them a “one-way ticket back to *wherever* [they came from].”¹¹⁶ They end their rants with a quote from the U.S. Declaration of Independence as they put their hands over their hearts and say “we the people.”¹¹⁷

What is it about JBL and Swagger’s gimmicks that makes them heels? They are both large, masculine, White males which we have established is the professional wrestling norm

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Jason Dadrach, “Jack Swagger,” *Online World of Wrestling*, accessed February 22, 2014, <http://www.onlineworldofwrestling.com/bios/j/jack-swagger/>

¹¹⁴ “Immigration,” February 18, 2013, video clip, *YouTube*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RuI2uag0lsl&list=UUXZItYfQ8cJcOAxWXQ1gHtg>

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

(Swagger with his 6'6 frame and blonde hair has been described as an example of philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's ideal man, the *Übermensch*).¹¹⁸ They also both make overt appeals to the audience's nationalism. Immigration reform is such a widely discussed political issue that the White House website has sections dedicated to "border security," "strengthening enforcement," and how immigration affects the economy.¹¹⁹ Therefore, their heel status must be generated elsewhere.

The characterization of JBL which makes him a heel is fairly easy to pin point. In many ways, his character is just like the heel character of Alberto Del Rio. Sure, he rhetorically makes appeals to nationalism, but his status as a Wall Street millionaire prevents him from being accepted by the viewer. JBL's statement that people like him are most affected by undocumented immigration privileges the perceived negative economic consequence that the rich deal with over the concerns of the middle and working-class. The viewer is supposed to see JBL as little more than a whining rich person, a person with which they cannot relate. Jack Swagger's characterization, though, is not as simple.

The thing that makes Jack Swagger's heel identity so exceptional is that other than his in-ring tactics, he has none of the characteristics of a heel which we have discussed so far. He is large and masculine, he appeals to nationalist sentiment, and, as Conservative pundit Glenn Beck laments,¹²⁰ he is meant to represent a working-class political movement to which many of the WWE fans are assumed to be sympathetic. How can we then explain his representation of a heel identity? Marc Ambinder attempts to answer this when he writes that "WWE's reps concede that they're promoting a storyline that makes anti-immigrant politics look bad because a significant

¹¹⁸ David Shoemaker, "Survivalist Series," *Grantland*.

¹¹⁹ "Immigration," accessed June 9, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/immigration>

¹²⁰ David Shoemaker, "Survivalist Series," *Grantland*.

and growing portion of their audience domestically and in Latin America is Hispanic.”¹²¹ This is a fair point, but it still does not explain how the still overwhelmingly majority of non-Latino WWE fans are expected to interpret him as a heel. Ambinder, who is responding to Glenn Beck’s prognosis that the WWE is alienating its own largely conservative fan base with Swagger’s character, further argues that, “wrestling might not seem ‘progressive’ to [Beck], but wrestling fans are young. They’re of the Obama generation. They like to be on the right side of history.”¹²² This is also likely one reason for which Swagger’s heel status is accepted, but the largest reason for why it is effective lies in the imaging of the U.S. as nation.

Colter and Swagger’s jingoistic language, and the history of explicit White racism in wrestling in general, is effective facet of a heel identity because it allows those who identify with the U.S. national identity to condemn racism in one situation without reconsidering how racism is itself a fundamental part of the U.S. national identity. In other words, it satisfies a desire for those who are invested in the notion of a ‘color-blind,’ post-race society to demonstrate their disapproval for racism, without actually needing to adjust anything in their daily lives or in their institutions. This desire is present in how the announcers respond to Hassan’s charge that the U.S. is built on racist principles in their Arab-American debate, and it is present when Cohen employs Black Exceptionalism as evidence of how racism in the U.S. is beginning to dissipate. When accused housing discrimination practitioner, slum-lord, and then NBA’s Los Angeles Clippers owner Donald Sterling was universally condemned and subsequently banned from the NBA for making racist comments about Black people attending his games, social justice blogger

¹²¹ Marc Ambinder, “Glenn Beck Does the Impossible,” *The Week*, February 24, 2013, <http://theweek.com/article/index/240525/glenn-beck-does-the-impossible#axzz34N9sljGU>

¹²² *Ibid.*

Jay Smooth wondered, “Why do racist words bring more accountability than racist practices?”¹²³ One answer might be that it is easy to condemn racism in an isolated and easily identifiable situation because it does not require U.S. Americans who are invested in the imagining of a nation that preaches inclusion and equality, to reconcile their imagining with a history of gross inequality and exclusion. This same answer might also explain the long history of White racist heels in professional wrestling.

Conclusion

Popular culture and media has increasingly become a topic of study for academic research because they reflect mass societal values in a way that is not always possible in other forms of culture. Media and pop culture also play a part in the formation and the constitution of the things they reflect.¹²⁴ Professional wrestling television has long been a relevant part of popular culture, yet it remains comparatively understudied. This paper is an attempt to critically study the depictions of race in professional wrestling as they relate to U.S. nationalism because, like all pop culture, professional wrestling can often be a “cultural product of nationalism.”¹²⁵ By critically examining these cultural products of nationalism, we are able to begin articulating the mainstream national identity which otherwise proves difficult. Moreover, by analyzing depictions of race in pro wrestling, particularly heel depictions of race, we are able to see the ways in which mainstream nationalist discourse affects bodies that are marked as non-White in the United States. Professional wrestling television can then act as a visual representation of “the unwillingness of the dominant group to permit assimilation [into the national identity] at the

¹²³ “Three Things About the Donald Sterling Tape,” April 28, 2014, video clip, accessed April 28, 2014, YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FhhKQ0P9x9A>

¹²⁴ Stuart Hall, “The Origins of Cultural Studies,” *Media Education Foundation*, transcript, accessed April 4, 2014, 6.

¹²⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 141.

tempo desired by the minorities,” which Connor presents as uniquely the cause of racial problems in the U.S.¹²⁶

¹²⁶ Walker Connor, *Ethnonationalism*, 21.