GRAPPLING WITH RACE: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF RACE WITHIN THE WWE

BY

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ABSTRACT

Race and representation has been a leading issue in the history of television. Racialized narratives present themselves within film and television through scripting of content. World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) is the world’s leading wrestling promotion. The WWE has become the juggernaut of the wrestling industry because of its programming. The WWE has used racialized content to advance the storylines within their content. This study has examined the scripted nature of the WWE and how racialized narratives have entered the content of the WWE. In this thesis, I argue that the WWE constructs an audience that accepts the racialized narratives and that those narratives have possible implications on the perception of black men. The thesis is structured to have done this by examining first what race is, then providing a history of the WWE and an examination of the production behind the WWE’s content. In the third chapter, there is the examination of the racialization within the WWE and the final chapter concludes with the findings within the study.
Chapter 1: Race and Racialization

A lack of diverse representation in the media has caused an adverse effect on how individuals conceptualize identity. A personal example highlights how representation, or lack thereof, can have lasting effects. Saban Entertainment Company’s Power Rangers series has been a staple in children’s television for nearly thirty years. Growing up, I was a huge fan of the series. Each Power Ranger possessed special powers, and were represented by a different color: red, blue, green, yellow, and pink. The leader of the group was the Red Ranger, typically played by a white actor. The Power Rangers went through a series of rebranding efforts, and in each iteration the lead Power Ranger was a white actor. In 2005, the Power Rangers brand launched “Power Rangers: SPD.” This iteration of the Power Rangers was the first to have a black actor to play the lead role as the Red Ranger. The Red Ranger was always my favorite ranger because he was always the leader. For some reason I felt discomfort in the new Red Ranger. I was so accustomed to seeing a White actor play the Red Ranger, that I immediately felt the Black actor was not fit to play the same role. The expectation of a White actor playing the leader was a precedent set from the beginning of the Power Rangers series. When the expectation was violated, with the insertion of a Black actor in the role, it created an unsettling feeling for me as a child. Setting the expectation led me to feel as if someone who looked like me was not fit to be in such position. If there had been prior incorporation of diversity into the role of the Red Ranger, I would not have felt a distaste for the black Red Ranger.

Television has become a powerful source in the formation of attitudes toward identity. Part of identity formation is thinking about the type of person you want to be (Arnett 2010). Television provides a constant flow of information, which can be a guide...
for social comparison (Worsham 2011). The images and narratives on television work
together to cultivate associations with different identities, often affecting the way
individuals see themselves and their position in society. The self-concept, which is the
knowledge of who we are, combines with self-awareness to develop a cognitive
representation of the self, called identity (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 2010). Television is
an external factor that plays a role in the formation of self-identity. Along with other
media, television is considered an “extension of everyday life and a tool of cultural
change” (Singh 2010). Notably, George Gerbner’s “Cultivation Theory” states that high-
frequency viewers of television are more susceptible to media messages, believing that
they are real and valid. Cultivation theory is essentially based on the premise that
television viewing is the primary source of storytelling in American society, and those
stories and representations have implications on how individuals understand broader
social dynamics. (Bryant & Miron 2004) point out that cultivation theory is one of the
three most-cited theories in mass communication research. As of 2010, over 500 studies
directly relevant to cultivation theory have been published (Morgan & Shanahan 2010).
Cultivation theory has become a major component in analyzing television’s impact on
identity. This is particularly salient when it comes to depictions of race.

Race

The modern meaning of the term race with reference to humans began to emerge
in the 17th century. Most definitions have come to a common ground by attempting to
categorize people primarily by their physical differences. In the United States, for
example, the term race generally refers to a group of people who have common physical
traits, such as skin color, hair texture, facial features and eye formation (Wade, Takezawa
When individuals are categorized by seemingly biological differences, we start to see that race is a discursive system, through discourses provided about the biological differences. The notion of race that we have become familiarized with has been rooted in the basis of racism. Racism, as a philosophy contends that there is a natural connection between variations of people’s physical features with how intelligent they are, whether they are good athletes or not, good dancers or not, good workers, civilized or not (Hall 1997).

The modern definition of race has become the staple of how we interact with one another. Scholars and scientific research has refuted such definition, but the association of the definition has been used to fuel racism. Cultural theorist and political activist, Stuart Hall, emerged as one of the leading and most respected theorists. Hall was passionately concerned with the psychological, cultural, and physical violence that racism inflicts on people of color. Hall believed a preferred way against the violence of racism would be to first understand the logic of how racism works as a process. In order to understand the concept of race, Hall argues that we have to pay attention, not only to the objective facts of physical difference, but to the cultural production that plays a role in the process of racialization. Scientific advances in the 20th century demonstrated that human physical variations do not fit a “racial” model (Wade, Takezawa & Smedley 2015). There are no genes that can identify distinct groups that accord with the conventional race categories (Wade, Takezawa & Smedley 2015). Hall argues that there are indeed inherited visual markers of “color, hair, bone” among millions of other inherited visual markers and some of them may denote what he prefers to call ethnicity (Hall 1994). The process of racialization, however, is a distinct cultural practice that
perpetuates racism and racial violence. Hall believed the concept of race was something consciously constructed by the “will to power” and describes a manufactured “chain of equivalences” about intellect, abilities, behavior, and character of people based on irrelevant visual markers (Hall 1994). The concept of race is contradictory to scientific research, but a colloquial understanding of race has such a powerful control of society and the way in which we perceive relations amongst humans. Race is a sliding signifier of metaphorical power that seeks to limit both the freedoms and identities of individuals by using simplistic markers of “color, hair, bone” and origin (Hall 1994).

Hall in his lecture “Race-the Floating Signifier,” argues that the propensity to classify sub-groups of human types is a cultural impulse. Hall (1997) states, “until you classify things, in different ways, you can’t generate meaning at all”. In other words, humans label and categorize and also attach rhetoric to those labels. Hence a critic needs to interrogate how race as a floating signifier gets attached to various narrative and cultural artifacts, in order to understand why we have created the notion of race that we have. Systems of classifications are used in order to divide populations into different ethnic or racial groups and to ascribe characteristics to these different groupings and to assume a normal behavior or conduct about them (Hall 1997). The consequences of these systems of classifications become evident in the different identity positions that we have created. Classifications led to formations of identity both internally and externally. Television has had a major impact on manufacturing the different identity positons. Stereotypes depicted on television become a contributing factor of how different identity positions are manufactured. Systems of classification are particularly important when they become objects of the disposition of power.
Racialization

The term “racialization” can be used to understand how the history of the idea of “race” is still with us and impacts us all. The term “racialization” emphasizes the ideological and systemic, often conscious processes at work. Institutional elements of racism, become clear through racialization. Racialization is the very complex process through which groups come to be designated as being of a particular “race” and on that basis subjected to differential and/or equal treatment (Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre). Narratives created by racialization create representations that affect how others view those that ascribe to a particular race. Racialization is produced and reproduced through ideological, institutional, interactive, and linguistic practices that support a particular construction of difference (McCallum 2005). The interactive and linguistic practices that are commonly found in racialization again can be found in television.

In particular we see racialization commonly happen through the media. Stuart Hall’s Policing the Crisis, becomes a testament of how overrepresentation in particular narratives affects an audience. Audiences can be influenced by overrepresentation to particular narratives by inheriting those narratives as true and making them their real perceptions. In Policing the Crisis, Hall identifies the Encoding/Decoding theory. The theory suggests that audiences derive their own meaning from media texts, based on the perception of the narratives presented. These meaning can be dominant, negotiated, or oppositional. A dominant reading of the text is the way that its creator wants an audience to understand and respond it. An oppositional reading of the text is when an audience completely rejects the message. A negotiated reading is when the audience interprets the text in their own unique way, which may not be the way its producer intended. The
Encoding/Decoding theory suggests that there can be different interpretations that are applied to media texts.

For example, crime in America has been heavily racialized. Black men in America are overrepresented as perpetrators of crime in the U.S news media (Sun 2018). One study of evening news outlets in New York City in 2014 found that the media reported on murder, theft, and assault cases in which black people were suspects at a rate that far outpaces their actually arrest rates for these crimes (Sun 2018). The overrepresentation of black men in crime reports creates the narrative that black men are violent and aggressive. News media vilifies black people by presenting black crime suspects as more threatening than their white counterparts. This is done by showing the mug shots of black suspects more frequently than those of white suspects; depicting black suspects in police custody more often; and paying greater attention to cases where the victim is a stranger. This kind of racialization is problematic because it can lead to the audience can decode the representation as a need to have a fear of black men. A narrative that evokes fear toward black men would insinuate that black men are violent and aggressive, which is already a common race narrative that we see in television today.

Overrepresentation in the prison population and acts of policing are examples of consequences that media representations have on the public. Certain groups in the prison system are overrepresented, not because they are higher offenders, but because they are over-targeted. Discriminatory policing is coupled to the systematic portrayal of crime by the media. In the media, crime is attributed to the culture of certain communities (Howart 2018). The discriminatory policy is especially aimed at the black minority group. African-Americans are over six times as likely to be incarcerated as whites (Hartney
The targeting and policing of blacks stem from the representation of black people as criminals.

**Racialization in Television**

Television has been the primary vehicle delivering various indicators of racial progress whether real or fictional (Nama 2003). Television desensitizes us to stereotypical narratives and images that are harmful to the African-American community. We have become accustomed to seeing black actors given roles that portray drug dealers, pimps, and gang members. It has become almost second nature for black men to be given these roles. In a 2016 study, an astounding 62 percent of all actors who were credited as “gang member” are black (Crockett 2016). These roles have become a common occurrence in American film and television. Research shows that audiences exposed to various depictions of race and ethnicity meaningfully impacts their cognitions, emotions, and behaviors (Mastro 2009). The representation of certain ethnic groups create stereotypes and mindsets about ethnic groups from the public. The perception of race is shaped for audiences from what they view on television. Characters who embody negative stereotypes about black people have dominated the U.S. media and entertainment industry throughout history (Allen & Bielby, 1977; Allen & Thornton, 1992; Jackson 2006). Researchers have argued that repeated exposure to television shows that feature stereotyped black characters create negative perceptions of black people by others (Berry 2000; Brown & Witherspoon 2002; Gorham 1999). The criminalization of blackness (Davis, 1998; Alexander, 2010; Muhammed, 2010) allowed for white supremacy to use black bodies as their scapegoat for all problems, real or fictional. In spite of social advances, there remains within the television and film industry a practice
of presenting negative stereotype images of black people scripted from early characters predicated on the racial inferiority of black people (Allen & Thornton, 1992; Bogle, 2001; Gorham, 1999; Jackson, 2006). Dates (1990) argued that black images in television may cause viewers to conceive, alter, or even reinforce their beliefs and opinions about black people.

The history of American popular culture is permeated with images and events surrounding the meaning and consequences of racial difference (Lipsitz, 1998). From the film Birth of a Nation (1915) to the media’s coverage of the O.J. Simpson trial, there are numerous examples as to how media characterizations of the African Americans shape ongoing debates about American race relations (Nama 2003). There are two primary dimensions to research on race in the media: the existence of representation in media and the conditions of that representation. Even though there has been increase in the amount of representation in the media, there is no guarantee that such representation promotes positive images and avoids negative stereotypes. Even the roles that blacks have in films produced today are sometimes reminiscent of those degrading roles originally given to black actors (Horton, Price, Brown 1999). As James Curran (1996) notes in his article “Rethinking Mass Communication” that:

A considerable body of evidence suggests that ethnic minorities are liable to be presented in the media as a problem or a threat; they are often featured in association with crime or conflict; and that racial conflicts and disadvantage tend not to be contextualized in terms of their causes. (p. 135)
Curran’s statement is a testament to the representations that African-Americans are given in the media. There has been a troubling history of dehumanizing and stereotyping of African-American males in mainstream media. In the 19th century, images of blackface became prevalent in television. White actors popularized minstrel shows, depicting stereotypes of black people as foolish, messy, and overall comedic at the expense of black culture (Lhamon Jr., 2000; Strausbaugh, 2006). Blackface was one of the first tactics used to dehumanize black people and black life. Growth in black economic mobility sparked a change in media representations. This growth in power challenged white supremacy and created white fear in black mobility (Smiley and Fakunle 2016). Freed black people became competition for poor whites in terms of labor. Thus, further media depictions that employ stereotypes of aggressiveness and violence in black people, became the result of the competition. The argument moved from black people being inhuman to them being naturally more prone to violence and other aggressive behaviors (Smiley and Fakunle 2016). There was a push for equality and social wealth for black people, thus the instruments of racism found a new way of oppression and discrimination. Stereotypes have always been a part of blackness in American media, but there have been efforts made to conquer such stereotypes.

Since the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, there has been an increase in positive images of African-American representation. Images represented in television series such as Mod Squad (1968-1973), Roots (1977), Miami Vice (1984-1989), In Living Color (1990-1993), Roc (1991-1994) and The Cosby Show (1984-1992). These were just the trailblazers of television series that promotes the liberation of African-American actors in the entertainment industry. Contemporary shows like Black-ish (2014-current),
Atlanta (2016-current), and Dear White People (2017-current) provide an even more complicated depiction of race in America. While there has been much progression for African-Americans in television, these are only examples of the positives that television can produce for the Black community.

Although these shows do suggest progress in resisting stereotypes and offering better representation, the production of the show still consists of many problems. For example, Kenya Barris, the creator of Black-ish, chose to leave the show after his episode dealing with race relations in America was canceled. ABC was reported as to not wanting to air the episode and it displeases Mr. Barris. Barris’ leaving speaks volumes to how far the production of racial narratives still have to go.

Production of Racialized Narratives

In Hall’s Policing the Crisis, Stuart Hall explores the political economy of how production choices create a racialized narrative. The institutional structures of broadcasting, with their practices and networks of production, their organized relations and technical infrastructures, are required to produce a program (Hall 1977). Production, here, constructs the message or at least frames it. Production in television allows for the encoding and decoding of messages that are presented through narratives. Hall believes that even though the production of television originate the television discourse, they do not constitute a closed system. The material aspects of production such as scripts and actors play a cumulative role in the framing of messages. The networks behind the production of television draw topics, treatments, agendas, and images of the audience,
from other sources and other discursive formations within the wider socio-cultural and political structures.

Production choices can create racialized narratives, depending on the agenda of the network. Production of racial narratives also ignore the problematic narratives and even casually engage in racialization to drive the drama. Rhetorical choices impact the perceptions that are created about certain demographics of people. When there is an overly racialized narrative presented in content, it calls into question the motives behind the production. The WWE is a prime example of the content that produces these narratives.

**Why Wrestling?**

World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) is considered the juggernaut of the professional wrestling world, surpassing competition such as, World Championship Wrestling (WCW), Total Nonstop Action (TNA), and National Wrestling Alliance (NWA). Professional wrestling is a business that generates billions of dollars in revenue from live shows, film, music, video games, product licensing and direct product sales. As recently as 2015, the WWE generated $801 million in revenue, its highest revenue in company history (Haden 2016). WWE serves as the world’s largest professional wrestling promotion, which holds over 500 events per year.

The WWE has become the world’s largest wrestling promotion in the world, by buying out competition and using storylines to advance the product. The WWE has created the most popular wrestlers such as Hulk Hogan and Ric Flair. They create these larger than life superstars through their character and storylines. While the WWE has had
success in creating popular wrestlers, the WWE’s content is home to racialized narratives that are also shown in the television and film. Black wrestlers in the WWE are not elevated to the level of stardom that is largely reserved for white wrestlers. This suppression of black wrestlers reflects the WE’s problematic perceptions of race. It is important to bring attention to how the WWE uses racial narratives and how the narrative choices racialize wrestlers.

The WWE plays on the performance of athleticism. The use of athleticism provides a real emphasis on the body of the performers. Wrestler’s physique are an important part of the creation of their role within the WWE. The portrayals of the body reveals a lot about the process of racialization. The physical features of a wrestler often becomes the focal point of the character of the wrestler. The characters are given to wrestlers, thus provides an example of the reliance on the scripted nature. The WWE’s content is heavily scripted and the winners and losers within the content are chosen to tell dramatic stories. The lack of success of black wrestlers in the WWE is a historical problem for the company. The WWE traffics racialized narratives that come particularly troubling when considering that the WWE has consistently had an audience that indulges in the narratives.

Professional wrestling is a program that attracts a high rate of young African American vieweship. The World Wrestling Entertainment Company, also referred to as the WWE, has an avid fan base of millennial African-American viewers. According to demographic analysis of viewership, it is noted that 26% of WWE viewers identify as African-American (Scarborough 2015). Viewers 18-29 account for 29.1% of the WWE audience (Scarborough 2015). Given the rather high proportion of Black youth
viewership, and studies that suggest media socialization can have harmful effects on Black youth, it is important to explore depictions of race in the WWE. The results from examining the WWE’s viewership demographic, inspired the idea of a textual analysis of the WWE. There is need for exploration in the process of racialization within the WWE.

**Methods**

Narratives and scripting are essential to WWE content as mentioned before. Narratives are what resonate with us on a moral/ethical level. Walter Fisher’s narrative paradigm highlights that storytelling is an effective and meaningful mode of communication amongst people. As Fisher argues, we are storytelling creatures and our value structures often develop through the use of narratives. We have the ability to evaluate and judge stories, and through narrative criticisms we can unpack the value structures and ethical claims made in the stories. Being that narratives are so important, a narrative analysis would be the most effective way to conduct this research. Narrative analysis works well with Hall’s discussion of Encoding/Decoding in unpacking how these narratives function in public arguments about the process of racialization. The WWE’s narratives and the way it tells a story is important because it is how they frame the audience’s perceptions of particular wrestlers.

An examination of how the WWE structures its storylines and creates its characters will be rooted in a narrative analysis, highlighting how the narrative choices characterize race. This study will use narrative analysis to explore how race is depicted amongst Black wrestlers, using WWE wrestler Booker Huffman (Booker T.) and Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson. Booker T. and The Rock are two of the WWE’s most
well-known black wrestlers and both have had the opportunity to play a big role in the history of the WWE. Both wrestlers have garnered success in the WWE, but The Rock was able to gain a substantial larger fame and notoriety than Booker T. This study aims to examine how the WWE racializes narratives involving black wrestlers and provide a demonstration through Booker T and The Rock. Storytelling is important to the WWE’s narratives and an analysis of how the WWE tell its stories, will reveal how the narratives are racialized.

This thesis will first explore the history of the WWE and give insight about the production process, which is driven by scripted narratives. Secondly, this thesis will explore how that production results in the racialization of Booker T and The Rock, two of the WWE’s most popular black wrestlers. Finally, a conclusion of how the narratives impact audiences and those who do not watch the WWE.
Chapter 2: History of the WWE

The WWE, originally operating under the name Capitol Wrestling Corporation (CWC), was founded in 1952 by now owner Vince McMahon’s grandfather, Jess McMahon, and partner Toots Mondts. The company underwent several name changes from Capitol Wrestling Corporation (CWC) to World Wide Wrestling Federation (WWWF), to World Wrestling Federation (WWF), and now World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE). The CWC originally began as the northeastern territory of the National Wrestling Alliance, but severed itself from the alliance, when McMahon and Mondts wanted more control. The WWWF was then created, which formed the roots of the modern-day WWE. McMahon and Mondts were able to bring in talent that catapulted the WWWF into mainstream wrestling conversation. In the 1980’s when the WWWF transitioned into the WWF, the company faced its biggest challenge, WCW. WCW was owned by Ted Turner and had been the most popular wrestling promotion in the mid 90’s.

The animosity between the two companies started when Vince McMahon acquired a monopoly on all nationally televised wrestling broadcasts by purchasing a stake in Georgia Championship Wrestling, whose flagship show aired on WTCG. WTCG was the television network owned by Ted Turner. Turner became displeased by McMahon’s handling of programing on his network and forced McMahon to sell his time slot. The heated feud continued and displayed itself on television. The battle for professional wrestling supremacy was a turning point for owner Vince McMahon. The two brands clashed in what was called “Monday Night Wars,” considering that both brands’ flagship shows were aired on Monday nights. Vince McMahon and the WWF
would eventually win the battle and McMahon bought WCW and essentially destroyed his own competition. In 2002, the WWF was rebranded into the WWE to appeal more to a family friendly audience. While being on top of the wrestling industry, WWE has had immense success, but it has not come without controversy.

In 1993, the WWF was charged with endorsing illegal substance abuse and put on trial (O’Sullivan 2015). Chairman and CEO Vince McMahon was accused of routinely obtaining anabolic steroids for his wrestlers, while also employing a corrupt doctor who made the steroids accessible to the wrestlers. The scandal of steroid usage demonstrates the importance the appearances of wrestlers. Steroids, unlike in other sports, does not give a competitive advantage in wrestling, but does help develop powerful physiques. Vince McMahon likes to have very muscular and athletic builds for his wrestlers, which sparked the allegations that wrestlers were using steroids to enhance their physique. Although sloppy legal errors and underwhelming witness testimonies led to a McMahon acquittal, there is still much public speculation believing that Vince McMahon not only allowed his wrestlers to use steroids and illegal substances, but also encouraged them to do so.

The WWE has also had an issue with reports of sexual misconduct in the locker room. In 1999, a female wrestler, by the name of Rena Mero, filed a $110 million lawsuit against the WWE, at the time referred to as World Wrestling Federation (WWF). The lawsuit was fueled by allegations of sexual harassment and unsafe working conditions. Allegations of misconduct are a common trend throughout the history of the WWE, suggesting that the WWE is not a clean organization that prioritizes hospitable working conditions for its employees. Scandals and investigations have been a major part of the
WWE’s history, but WWE does on occasion would be incorporate these instances into their content.

An examination of the WWE’s content begins with an analysis on production process. The WWE is a scripted program. The creation of the script lies in the hands of the WWE’s creative writing team. The creative team consists of many members that serve different positions. Some of the positions would include a Senior Vice President of Creative, Creative Assistant, Lead writers for shows and secondary writers for shows. The members of the creative team collaborate and design the product that the WWE produces on a weekly basis. In a statement given to Bleacher Report in 2015, WWE’s Executive Vice President of Talent, Live Events and Creative Paul Levesque (aka WWE Superstar “Triple H”) stated, “We have a whole department, a creative writing department. We have more than 20 writers at this particular time.” Levesque would further state that, “They come from everywhere. From soap operas to late-night television to movies to theater to former wrestlers. Storytelling is storytelling.” Levesque’s statements are a testament to how diligent the WWE is about the creation of its content.

Intentionality is an important concept to note when considering the process of WWE’s writing. The creative team writes the script, but is not put into action unless approved by the lead writing team and WWE Chairman and CEO Vince McMahon. “At some point it gets to Vince, and Vince goes, ‘here’s what we’re going to do.’ And that’s what we go do,” says Levesque. Although the WWE has created a 20-person team to create its content, what actually airs is dependent on the decision of one man in power.

Vince McMahon’s vision for the WWE’s narrative comes through in the storylines. McMahon has stated that he prefers to acknowledge that his product is “sports
entertainment” and not “professional wrestling”. “Years ago, the [wrestling] promoters tried to tell the world that this was 100 percent sport. It was an insult to the audience. Professional wrestling has always been a show,” stated McMahon in a 2005 interview with *Esquire* (Shoemaker 2016). In a 2008 interview with *The New York Times*, McMahon also states “We coined the term sports entertainment, people love it because it’s an escape from the drudgery and stress of their regular lives. They get charged by the action and the humor, caught up in the drama, like a soap opera or reality show.” McMahon’s statements are indicative of the reality of wrestling, which is that it is not real. He concedes that his product is fictional and mirrors more of a reality television series than a professional sporting event.

Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm, highlights the importance of the storytelling within the WWE’s content. The WWE’s focus on the storytelling speaks to the intentionality of having their audience participate as observers of the narratives. The WWE’s storylines are created for the amusement of the fans, but the WWE also constructs their audience. The WWE’s masculine and violent nature appeals to a demographic audience that is interested in that nature. The storytelling within the WWE drives the audience in which they construct.

The WWE has made it clear that the storylines and storytelling are what they value the most in their company. “The hardcore fans cringe when we say this. But the reality of it is, the story is the magic...and the truth is, though all of our storylines have to end up back in the ring and the wrestling part has to deliver to the point fans say, ‘that was awesome, what a payoff,’ we’re not boxing. It’s about characters and their relationship. That’s a storyline. We are more like the *Rocky* movie than we are like a
sport. The storylines are what’s important,” Levesque states. Characters and storylines are at the forefront of WWE’s content, even taking spotlight over the actual performance of wrestling itself. The WWE places little emphasis on the wrestling within the ring, but pays more attention to the acting that goes into creating the match. These storylines drive the WWE’s product, but become problematic when relying on problematic stereotypes.

The WWE has produced storylines that have been insensitive and offensive to audiences. In November of 1997, when the WWE was referred to as the WWF, the content generated during that period was known as the “Attitude Era.” In order to compete with other wrestling promotions such as WCW and ECW, who produced edgier content, the WWE adapted the concept of “attitude”. The content of WCW and ECW appealed to more of an adult audience and adult themed situations, which gained popularity amongst wrestling fans. The Attitude Era was defined by a radical shift in programming content. In contrast to the more traditional, family-friendly content that was common in WWF programming, the Attitude Era sought to attract the young adult demographic by transforming the product into edgier and more controversial form of entertainment. Traditionally heroic characters were replaced with anti-heroes and family friendly storylines were replaces with controversial stories based on shock value. For example, in 2002, the WWE created a storyline that involved wrestlers Kane (real name Glenn Jacobs) and Triple H (WWE’s current Executive Vice President of Talent, Live Events and Creative Paul Levesque), which ended in Triple H involving himself in necrophilia. Necrophilia is just one of the many examples of the WWE creating content that is insensitive and offensive.
Another issue that the WWE’s content and storylines create is the blurring of the line between what is fictional and what is real. Vince McMahon himself has stated that some fictional storylines have real-life implications that follow them. Vince McMahon does not only serve the roles of lead to the creative team and CEO of the company, but he also serves as an on-air talent. Mr. McMahon’s character on television is quite intriguing in itself. Vince McMahon plays a fictionalized role of himself as the overarching villain of the WWE. His character is power hungry, egotistical and manipulative over those in which he has power over. The character Vince McMahon has done heinous things to his employees and associates just for the sake of his own interests. In 2001, Vince McMahon, the character, created the “Kiss my Ass” club, which consisted of members who were ordered by McMahon himself to kiss his butt. The act of kissing his butt was written to show respect towards him. The issue with McMahon’s on air character is that, it draws a lot of similarities to the actual Vince McMahon. “On television, I play this demagogue who’s so powerful. Some people say I’m one and the same,” admitted McMahon in an interview with The New York Times in 1999 (Shoemaker 2016). McMahon is the person that is in full control of his character’s storyline and chooses to display the perception that others have about the real Vince McMahon, through the fictional character. New York Magazine in 1998 interviewed McMahon about his character and he replied, “My god. Some of the things I have said and have done. [Mr. McMahon is] the most reprehensible individual on the plant. He is uncaring, a power monger, manipulative, and always trying to get what I want and being very clever about it. Art imitating life and vice versa. It’s fun because some of it’s true, you know what I
mean?” (Shoemaker 2016). These comments speak volumes to the intentionality that McMahon has within the insertion of his character.

An example of a storyline that blends the real-life McMahon with the fictional McMahon occurred in 2000. Vince McMahon scripted a storyline that included his real-life wife Linda McMahon. In this storyline, Linda McMahon, the character, had went into a coma, as result of a mental breakdown. Vince McMahon’s character was delighted by the announcement that his wife was in a coma because he was able to have complete control of the company, while having public extramarital affairs. Vince McMahon’s character was involved in a public affair with WWE diva Trish Stratus. Although the affair was fictional, in 2001, McMahon gave a candid interview with Playboy Magazine where he admitted to having multiple real-life affairs on his wife Linda McMahon. Vince McMahon is in full control of the storylines and subjected his wife to fictionally relive a real life experience of his infidelities. Although McMahon would argue that these storylines are fictional only, they become problematic when they cross over into real issues. It is a common narrative practice in the WWE to allude to real-world events.

The personal lives of wrestlers have been incorporated into storylines for entertainment purposes, which is an example of controlling harmful narratives. Real life manipulations integrated into fictional storylines represent how the WWE is able to capitalize on controlling the narrative. In 2005, wrestlers Matt Hardy, Edge (Adam Copeland), and Lita (Amy Dumas) were involved in a storyline that blended real life events with the scripted nature of the program. Matt Hardy and Lita were a real-life couple and had been dating for months. Lita also had a real-life affair with wrestler Adam Copeland. The WWE was made aware of the situation, due to Matt Hardy’s outbursts
upon hearing of the affair. The WWE decided to make the situation public by having Lita’s fictional character turn on Matt Hardy’s character and side with Edge. The scripting of this event served well as entertaining television, because of the soap opera like drama, but shows how the WWE exploits real life situations for their gain. Individual and personal experiences are woven into the narratives, but there are also broader social/cultural themes that play out in some of the scripted events.

An example involves current President, Donald Trump. In 2007, on the heels of Trump’s heavily publicized feud with Rosie O’Donnell, the WWE aired a segment that featured a fake Rosie O’Donnell and a fake Donald Trump in a wrestling match, which resulted in the fake Trump victorious over the fake Rosie. The segment between the two was not intended to be a long term storyline, but it set the stage for Trump to make a return to WWE programming. The reasoning behind having the fake Trump segment was to plot for the real Trump to be enraged about his depiction on live television. Trump retaliated by sending a letter to chairman Vince McMahon, which McMahon read aloud on an episode of “Monday Night Raw.” McMahon then sent a response letter the following week, which was the beginning of the storyline that the WWE would later name “Battle of the Billionaires.”

Trump’s character was built by winning over the fans. Trump would talk about the fans in a positive light, unlike Vince McMahon who opposed the fans. Trump’s character became the fan favorite, where McMahon’s character was the villain. The character the WWE decided to use for Trump was that of a populist outsider who promises to come in and break up the “dark forces” (Vince McMahon) that were conspiring to work against the people, which is a political persona that has been recurring
in American politics since the founding of the republic. In this role, Trump was a hero, saving the people, from the villainous McMahon, who is only concerned with his wealth. The WWE capitalized on the traditional American mindset of work meaning success and without work, there can be no success. Trump would boast and brag about how much richer he was than McMahon, which Trump used as evidence his hardworking and successful persona. Trump wanted to show his dedication to being successful through the wealth that he already accumulated.

Trump was presented as the populist billionaire. For the majority of his on-air career, McMahon has served in the role of the villain, which he does in the storyline with Trump. Although they are both billionaires in the story, McMahon’s character does not care about the fans, unlike Trump. Trump “gets the people.” Trump is the representation of the potential we have if we work hard enough. Trump even dropped real money from the ceiling on an episode of WWE’s Monday Night Raw. He also “bought” Monday Night Raw for a night, which was aired commercial free. He did these things “for the people”, things that McMahon would have never done. The same way that Trump planned to save WWE’s fans is the way he intended to save American citizens.

Trump’s involvement in the WWE is an example of the significance of characterizing persona in wrestling programming. The WWE is very comfortable with storylines that blur fiction and non-fiction. Trump’s involvement is also indicative of the importance of a persona. The WWE was able to make someone who had has been unfavorable viewed by the public, even before his presidency, into a hero-like character. The over the top caricatures and stereotypes presented by the WWE highlights the points of contact between fiction and nonfiction. The way the WWE wants viewers to interact to
a particular wrestler determines the content of their character. This becomes problematic when analyzing the characters of black wrestlers.
Chapter 3: Racialization in WWE

A common underlying issue that has been in the WWE’s content since its earliest days has been racialized narratives. The WWE’s content has often blurred the lines between what is real and what is fake, but it becomes troubling when notions of racism are exhibited through the storylines. The WWE has had a long history of accusations of being racist and oppressive to black wrestlers. Former WWE superstar Tony Norris, commonly known as Ahmed Johnson, is one of many former WWE superstars publicly air his grievances with the WWE’s handling of race. In an interview conducted by PerfectPlex Radio, Norris claims that Vince McMahon himself is a racist “from the word go.” (Eazay 2013). Norris also states that he dealt with racism from other performers and even had a racial slur keyed onto his car. Norris’ experiences of racism within the WWE correlates with the stories of other former black WWE superstars.

Theodore Long, a former wrestling personality that portrayed roles in WWE as a manager and referee spoke on a popular wrestling YouTube series about his experience with WWE Hall of Fame wrestler Ric Flair, arguably the most popular wrestler of all time. In the interview, Long stated that Flair walked up to him and referred to him as the N-word. Being referred to as this particular racial slur was a frequent experience for Long, who accounts several other former wrestlers referring to him in the same manner. James Harris, another former WWE superstar, who wrestled under the name “Kamala,” spoke about his experiences of racism in the WWE, on his YouTube channel in an episode entitled, “WWE No Place for a Black Man”. In his video, Harris speaks on what it was like to be a black wrestler in the WWE. Harris recalled a conversation with fellow wrestler, Jerry Lawler, in which Lawler stated “Blacks are on top in baseball, basketball,
football and boxing, but a black man will never be on top in wrestling.” Jerry Lawler is a highly respected individual in the wrestling industry as a wrestler and a promoter, but his comment is troubling especially when examining the validity of it.

The personal accounts of black former wrestlers speak to the real life racism that they encountered behind scenes. Some of those same racist notions have been shown in the WWE’s content and part of their storylines. In the WWE, there has been a lack of positive representation for wrestlers of color, specifically African-American wrestlers. Black wrestlers have not been promoted and represented to the same degree of their white counterparts. Characters such as Hulk Hogan, “Stone Cold” Steve Austin, and Ric Flair, all white men, have become household names in the wrestling industry, while black wrestlers have not been given equal popularity. Racialized narratives have been the downfall in the progression of black wrestlers within the WWE. There are three features to the narrative production of WWE that help us understand the process of racialization in the WWE. Those three elements are dialogue, gimmicks, and scripting of champions. Vince McMahon and the creative writing team decides how each element enters a storyline.
Dialogue

Dialogue, much like in other television programming, is important to the WWE’s storyline because it shows the personality, emotions, and actions of a character. Dialogue enables writers to demonstrate the character instead of describing the character. Dialogue is the seemingly less scripted expression of a character. In the early days of wrestling, promoters and producers realized it wasn’t enough to just show wrestlers in action. The personality of the professional wrestler became vital to selling out arenas and attracting an audience to tune in every week. Wrestlers use dialogue to become objects of hate, admiration, or identification. Dialogue is intentionally used to mold an audiences’ perception of particular wrestlers. Dialogue in the WWE’s content is communicated through what is called a “promo.” In wrestling, a promo is short for “promotional interview,” a dialogue used to advance a storyline. Promos are also designed to help the audience identify or dislike a wrestling persona.

Wrestlers who are created to be the bad guy, often antagonizes the audience and also their opponent, which is referred to as the process of “generating heat” or having “heat.” Wrestlers who are supposed to be in opposition of fans will say anything controversial or offensive that creates heat from the audience. For example, after the death of former WWE superstar Eddie Guerrero, his death was incorporated into several promos that generated heat for WWE superstar Randy Orton. Guerrero’s longtime friend and fellow wrestler Rey Mysterio was in a storyline feud with Orton. During a promo, Orton antagonized the fans and Mysterio and even stated “Your friend Eddie is not in heaven watching you, he’s in hell”. While the promo was highly insensitive to the fans and family of Guerrero, it was effective in garnering dislike for Orton’s character. The WWE
and Vince McMahon are not afraid to push the boundaries on what wrestlers say to generate heat, but it comes at cost. The dialogue and promos become particularly damaging when black wrestlers become subject to racialized dialogue.

Black wrestlers have spoken about the real-life racist remarks they have been subjected to, but the WWE has had instances of where racism has been inserted into their on-air dialogue. Promos that often feature a white wrestler antagonizing black wrestlers have racial overtones that play along with typical racial stereotypes. Racial stereotypes are fixated within the storylines because racism is so offensive and guarantees heat for a wrestling character that aligns themselves with it. In 1990, superstar “Rowdy” Roddy Piper conducted a promo against his opponent, “Bad News” Brown, where notions of race were only inserted into the dialogue because “Bad News” Brown was a black man. The promo was to build hype around their match at WrestleMania. Not only did Piper’s comments have racial epithets behind it, he also performed the promo in half blackface, with half of his face painted black. In the promo Piper states, “Brown is so proud of being from Harlem, but Harlem does not care that Brown is black or white, they only care that he is a jerk.” Piper’s comment racialized the dislike that the audience had for Brown. The notion that the audience would even dislike “Bad News” Brown because of his race is created by Piper. Being that Brown was black, it became the focal point behind everything Piper communicated during the buildup of the match. Racialized dialogue also creates stereotyped characterizations of black wrestlers.

In 2009, WWE superstars Randy Orton and Kofi Kingston (real name Kofi Sarkodie-Mensah) were involved in a storyline feud that featured Orton subjecting Kingston to racial characterizations. On an episode of WWE Monday Night Raw,
Kingston and Orton were involved in a promo that also featured allies for the respective superstars. Randy Orton, a white man, was scripted into an alliance with two other white wrestlers, Cody Rhodes and Ted DiBiase Junior. Kofi Kingston was allied by two other black wrestlers, MVP and Mark Henry. During this promo, Randy Orton and his allies characterized Kofi and his allies as thugs, criminals, and people who did not belong in the WWE. These characterizations are harmful because they are the stereotypical representation in which we see on television of black men. The constructed audience of the WWE take the characterizations as true. The label of thug and criminal has been engrained into our society and a hard label for black men to shake. The WWE takes advantage of these labels and uses them to villainize Randy Orton. The WWE’s use of these racialized dialogue is not necessary. The dialogue in the WWE has proven to be oppressive and unfair to black wrestlers.

**Gimmicks**

In order to be a successful wrestler in the WWE, wrestlers typically must have an on-air character that captivates the audience. The character given to wrestlers is the role in which they play in the narrative. Wrestlers are equal parts athletes and method actors, individual characters in the grand performance of professional wrestling. To be convincing, a professional wrestler must understand his/her character. In wrestling, the terms “heel” and “face” are used to describe the good and bad characters. The term heel refers to the bad guy in wrestling who antagonizes the fans and their favorite wrestlers, in order to be disliked by the audience. A face character is the good guy, often a crowd favorite. The character that wrestlers portray are given to them and often referred to as a gimmick. The terms “character” and “gimmick” are interchangeable in professional
wrestling. Gimmicks are multifaceted, involving different parts that come together to create a character. In professional wrestling, a gimmick refers to a wrestler’s in-ring persona, character, behavior, attire and/or other distinguishing traits. Gimmicks drive who the wrestlers are and what they do. Each element that is unified under the gimmick is intricate to the wrestler’s identity. The elements that make up a gimmick work together to become whole that creates the wrestler.

The elements that combine to create a gimmick are interdependent with each other to create a more coherent persona. The character, attire, and behavior must correlate in order to create a gimmick. Small details of a character have a strong impact on the gimmick, even down to the backstory of a character. A wrestling gimmick needs a backstory to explain why the character acts the way it does inside and outside of the ring. For example, if the WWE wanted to have a gimmick that embodied a police officer, the attire of that gimmick could not be a fireman. This kind of discrepancy creates confusion about who the character is and damages the audience’s reaction to that character. Vince McMahon and the WWE’s creative writing team has the full control on what gimmicks get assigned to what wrestler.

The WWE contributed to the explosion of gimmicks by becoming the most well-known wrestling brand because of its child-oriented characters, soap opera dramatics, and cartoon-like personas. The vision in which they have for a character gets played through the wrestlers’ gimmick. One of the more prominent and recognizable gimmicks in the history of the WWE would be the “Real American” Hulk Hogan. The gimmick is portrayed by Terry Bollea and debuted in the 1980’s. Bollea was handpicked by ownership to be the company’s main star due to his charisma and name recognition. The
Hulk Hogan character was created by Vince McMahon’s father, Vince McMahon Sr., in hopes of having an Irish-American character, thus the creation of the last name Hogan. The physique of Terry Bollea was often compared to Marvel superhero, The Incredible Hulk, which became the inspiration for the name “Hulk”.

Hulk Hogan is arguably one of the most well-known and recognizable gimmicks in wrestling history, simply because of the cartoon-like superhero appeal of the character. The backstory of the character started from humble impoverished beginnings. Hogan was born into a poor family and lived under miserable conditions due to their lack of money. When Hogan became of age, he worked hard and trained himself to become a professional wrestler. Hulk Hogan the character was designed to be an American patriot that inspires the youth. The concept that Hogan worked hard and trained hard, was used to inspire children to do the same. Hogan told fans that he lived by what he called the three “demandments” and if the fans lived that way too, they would be as successful as he was. Those demandments included training hard, saying prayers, and eating vitamins. The WWE used Hogan to embody their characterizations of a “Real American”. A white man, who overcomes struggle and hardship to become a success, living the American dream, was exemplified through Hogan. The Hulk Hogan character was created to be the leading star of the company and therefore had to have a positive relationship with the audience.

In order to create Hulk Hogan as a hero, his opponents would often be villainous foes from foreign countries. The majority of Hogan’s feuds seemed to be centered on foreigners who wanted to harm Hogan as a way of harming our American way of life (Becker 2012). Evil Russian characters were the first featured in the evil foreigners trope,
but the most popular enemy of Hulk Hogan was the Iranian, Iron Sheik. Khosrow Vaziri, an Iranian immigrant, intended to use his amateur wrestling background as a stepping stone to the Olympics, but he opted to go pro (Becker 2012). With the Iran hostage crisis of 1979, Vaziri was given the gimmick of an evil Iranian, capitalizing on his actual Iranian heritage. His character became the Iron Sheik, an evil Iranian, out to destroy the American way of life. He would mock and antagonize fans for being Americans, using terms such as “slobs” and “lazy”. The WWE used the American hero Hulk Hogan to battle the evil foreigner who did not like what America represented. The scripting of an Iranian man as evil creates that narrative that all people like him are evil, thus racializing the narrative. It is also racialized because if the individuals wanted to be successful they were forced to adopt the personas.

Racialized gimmicks are no stranger to the WWE’s content, especially gimmicks given to black wrestlers. Similar to the dialogue in WWE, gimmicks play into stereotypical narratives that we have become accustomed to in television. Roles such as thugs, criminals, pimps, and savages are common actor portrayals written for black actors in television and have become gimmicks in the WWE. Black wrestlers have also been subject to “entertainer” gimmicks. Dancing is a common theme in the characters of black wrestlers. Former WWE superstar and current WWE writer, Michael Hayes, allegedly stated that “Black wrestlers don’t need gimmick because being black is their gimmick” (Joseph 2019). Although the statement by Hayes was alleged, there is truth behind the statement and evident of the WWE’s gimmicks for lack wrestlers. Racialized gimmicks are problematic because it reinforces stereotypes onto black wrestlers.
James Harris, a former WWE superstar, is a black man who wrestled under the gimmick “Kamala”. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Harris is one of many black former WWE superstars to be vocal about their experiences in the company. Harris began wrestling for the WWE in the early 80’s. Harris, in an interview with Bleacher Report, states “I originally wanted to be a truck driver, never planned on being a wrestler”. Due to an inability to find a job, Harris was approached with the idea of becoming a wrestler. One of the people that persuaded Harris was WWE Hall of Fame wrestler/promoter, Jerry “The King” Lawler. In the interview, Harris not only credits Lawler as being an inspiration to get into the wrestling industry, but also Lawler presented Harris with the gimmick “Kamala: The Ugandan Giant”. The character Kamala was created as an African savage who terrorized the WWE locker room and audience. Kamala did not speak, he only conversed in loud yelps and grunts. Kamala was characterized as a monster and not human. The attire of Kamala consisted of white tribal face paint, and moons and stars painted on his chest. A ritual African mask and spear were items that Kamala carried to the ring. Barefoot and draped in an animal skin loin cloth, Kamala has a large stature at 6-foot-7 and would intimidate opponents by having them believe he would eat them. The appearance of Kamala created fear in fans and opponents alike, which was why Kamala was scripted as a heel. The villainous creature that terrorized everyone in the WWE, would often be put into matches against hero characters such as Hulk Hogan.

The caricature of James Harris as Kamala is highly offensive and insensitive. Although Harris himself admitted that he never had a problem with the gimmick because he only viewed it as acting, the racial overtones of the gimmick are impactful. It is
important to note that this gimmick would not have been effective if not portrayed by a black wrestler. The tribal African savage gimmick draws a similar comparison to the brute image that black men have been characterized as in American history. The brute image of black men became significant moving into the early 20th century, when fear was reinforced with depictions of black men as harmful (Smiley and Fakunle 2015). The film *Birth of a Nation*, made in 1915, shows black men as savages trying to attack white women. Their brutality was met with propaganda depicting the Ku Klux Klan as heroic and honorable. Similar to the scripting of *Birth of a Nation*, the WWE scripts a black man as a harmful savage that is attacking the audience and must be stopped by a heroic white man. The similarity between the scripts is problematic, especially considering the amount of time passed. It is also problematic when examining who is controlling the narrative. The production of *Birth of a Nation* was in the primary control of white men, which led to the misrepresentations of what it means to be black. Jerry Lawler, the creator of the Kamala gimmick, was quoted earlier about his disdain for the success of black men in sports and ensured that black men would not be successful in wrestling.

Another example of a harmful gimmick given to black wrestlers would be the tag team duo, “Cryme Tyme”. The tag team featured two black wrestlers, Shad Gaspard and Jayson Paul. The two men were paired together in 2005 in the WWE’s development program *Ohio Valley Wrestling*, under the tag team name “The Gang Stars”. The two men would later be featured on *WWE’s Monday Night Raw* in 2006, where they made the switch to Cryme Tyme. While Gaspard used his real name within the gimmick, Paul’s character was known as “JTG”. Before Cryme Tyme’s debut on *Monday Night Raw*, the WWE released an official statement regarding the gimmick, stating “In an effort to
humor and entertain our fans, the tag team known as Cryme Tyme will parody racial stereotypes” (WWE.com). The WWE intentionally created a gimmick that was demonstrative of racial stereotypes for entertainment purposes. The members of the team were classified as “thugs.” The attire for both superstars would incorporate a style of dress that was commonly seen in the hip hop culture. Bullet proof vests, hats, bandanas, jewelry, and sagging jeans were heavily featured as accessories to Cryme Tyme’s character. Cryme Tyme’s rhetoric would often include examples of coded language that were used to refer to or speak of blackness without overtly sounding racially prejudice. Terms such as “ghetto”, “hood”, “sketchy”, and “shady”, were all used to identify Cryme Tyme with the black community. As indicative of their name, the actions of Cryme Tyme involved robbing and mugging WWE employee and fellow superstars. Cryme Tyme would steal items from the superstars and then try to resell those items to the audience.

The Cryme Tyme gimmick was for all intents and purposes offensive and racially charged. The WWE’s official site even states that the gimmick would be a “parody” of racial stereotypes. The WWE cannot claim that this gimmick was a parody to real life stereotypes, because just like stereotypes this gimmick was a harmful representation of the black community. Racism is no laughing matter and the WWE’s creation and reasoning for this gimmick shows a lack of understanding of the impact of racial stereotypes.

**Scripting of Champions**

In addition to a wrestling gimmick, the pinnacle of success in professional wrestling is winning a championship. The WWE has created categorizations of wrestlers
based on their fan reaction, charisma, and who Vince McMahon decides to carry the weight of the company. Each categorization of superstars serves in a detrimental role for the WWE’s content. The WWE uses a card system, similar to boxing, in scripting matches and levels of classification for superstars. The card system is divided into three levels, with the bottom level being the “low card”, the second level being the “mid card”, and the highest level being the “upper card”. The matches that appear in the lower card are typically the matches that opens the start of the show. The wrestlers in the low card are lesser known and do not get much air-time. The mid-card level features more known wrestlers and also features several championships, such as the United States Championship, Intercontinental championship, and Tag-Team Championships. The upper-card is home to the main event superstars. The main event stars are the most well-known out of the other cards and also features the two most prestigious championships in the WWE, the WWE World Heavyweight Championship and the WWE Championship. The two championships that belong to the upper-card have gone through changes in appearance, but the value of the championships have stayed the same.

The official WWE website posted the significance of being a champion in the company stating, “A title win serves as the reward for years of training and hard work.” Vince McMahon and the creative write team scripts who the winner of matches will be, but they also script which superstars will get to be champion. The most important championship of them all would be the WWE Championship. The WWE Championship is the oldest title in WWE’s history and it’s most prestigious. The WWE Championship over the year has been featured on the WWE’s flagship show, Monday Night Raw. The WWE championship is given to the WWE’s biggest star and that wrestler becomes the
leading representative of the company. Hulk Hogan, Ric Flair, and Shawn Michaels are some of the biggest superstars in WWE history and they have each held the WWE Championship. The person who holds the WWE championship becomes the wrestler that the WWE sells the most and is the “top guy” in the company. The WWE champion is featured on majority of the WWE merchandise and becomes the biggest star within the company.

Race becomes involved when there is an examination of the WWE’s history of champions. There have been many black WWE superstars that have won the mid-card championships, such as the United States Championship and Intercontinental Championship. Black WWE superstars, Kofi Kingston, Bobo Brazil, R-Truth, D-Lo Brown, and Ahmed Johnson are just some of the superstars to have won the mid-card championships. While there have been some levels of success obtained by black superstars in the WWE has mid-carders, there is a substantial lacking of black representation in the upper card level. WWE’s official site states, “Winning a title indicates superiority over a class of competitors, and it is also a sign of advancement”, but with a lack of black wrestlers winning championships, the notion that black wrestlers are inferior become more obvious.

Throughout the 50- year history of the WWE, there has only been 4 black wrestlers to hold championships in the upper card. Before the WWE had the brand change to WWF, the WWE championship had switched hands a total of 57 times between 1983 and 2002 (Clark 2011). When the WWF became the WWE, the title switched hands 37 times between 2002 and 2011 (Clark 2011). As of 2011, the WWE
championship had been held by a total of 40 different men, changing hands a total of 94 times. As of 2011, only 1 of the 40 men to hold the WWE championship were African-American. Hall’s Encoding/Decoding theory highlights the problem of the statistics of black wrestlers winning the WWE Championship. The lack of black WWE champions can create a perception in two fold. It can create the notion that black wrestlers are not marketable enough to be the number one superstar in the company or that black wrestlers are inferior to their white counterparts and are not worthy of the WWE Championship.

The first black WWE champion was Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, who won the championship for the first time in 1998; he is of African-American and Samoan decent. Johnson’s by far as had the most successful career in the WWE as a man with black heritage. Johnson held the championship on eight separate occasions, while serving as the face of the company. The WWE proved to be pivotal to Johnson’s career, with all the fame and success he received while with the WWE, he was able to launch himself into the film industry. While Johnson has reached a high level of success, other black wrestlers are not afforded the same opportunities. For example, former WWE superstar Booker T. (real name Booker Huffman), has also been an upper card champion winning the WWE World Heavyweight Championship in the 2006. Unlike The Rock, Booker T. only held the World Heavyweight Championship once and his reign only lasted 4 months. Although both wrestlers are of black ancestry, they are racialized differently and thus the levels of success stems from the narratives presented about each wrestler.

Black wrestlers within the WWE are rarely given an opportunity to be the main attraction for the content. Black wrestlers are normally categorized in the lower and mid cards of WWE’s content. Since the 1980’s black professional wrestlers have been
struggling to reach top guy status in the WWE (Joseph 2019). As mentioned before, historically, black wrestlers have always been broad stereotypes or subtle ones. The gimmicks that black wrestlers are normally given hinder their credibility to become a major star within the company. Scripting black wrestlers as entertainers opposed to credible wrestlers damaged the perception of what black wrestlers could do. Characterizations of savages, thugs, and dancers created notions that black wrestlers were not fit to be WWE champions and the lead face of the company. The racialization within the WWE’s scripted content oppressed black wrestlers to limited amounts of success. Racialized narratives presented through dialogue, gimmicks, and scripting of champions did not allow it to be possible for black wrestlers to be considered worthy to lead the company. The way in which the WWE chooses to racialize black wrestlers determines the amount of success that they are able to reach. Booker T. and The Rock are perfect examples of how racializing a particular wrestler manages the success of that wrestler.

Robert Tio Huffman (Booker T.) is one of the most successful black wrestlers in wrestling history. Booker T. began his wrestling career in WCW, WWE’s former rival wrestling promotion. WCW, unlike WWE, created content that allowed for the success of black wrestlers. WCW crowned its first black World Champion in 1992, only 4 years after WCW’s inception and 6 years before the WWE crowned its first black WWE Champion. While in WCW, Booker T. held the WCW World Championship five times and the WCW Tag Team Championship ten times, with his brother Stevie Ray. After WCW was bought by the WWE in March 2001, Booker T. made his debut at the WWE’s King of The Ring pay-per-view event. Booker T. was a well-known star before debuting
in the WWE and upon his arrival in WWE his character stayed the same, but he was not scripted as a main event star.

In 2003, Booker T got his first opportunity to fight for an upper card championship in WWE. On the February 24th, 2003 edition of Monday Night Raw, Booker T competed in a battle royal match, with the winner having an opportunity to become the number 1 contender for the World Heavyweight Championship. Booker T would go on to win that match and become involved in a storyline feud against Triple H. Booker T was a logical choice to face Triple H because he was an already established and decorated superstar from his days in WCW. By 2003, Booker was hitting on all cylinders as a face performer and was extremely popular (Dennis Jr. 2018). Booker T’s character in the feud was built as an underdog that had a long shot at winning the championship. Booker T’s opponent was Triple H, a dominant champion, who had not only defeated all competition put before him, but also berated and humiliated his opponents. Racial epithets were the focal point of the rivalry between the two. The WWE has had a lack of black wrestlers represented as champion, as mentioned before, so it was not hard for the WWE to incorporate this into the storyline that featured a black wrestler.

In the first promo between the two competitors, Triple H launched a dialogue that was saturated with racial overtones and coded language. Triple H states in the promo:

I think you’re a little bit confused about your role in life here. You’re going to get to go to WrestleMania, but the fact is, Booker … somebody like you doesn’t get to be a world champion. People like you don’t deserve it. That’s reserved for people like me. That’s where the confusion is. You’re not here to be a competitor. You’re here to be an entertainer. That’s what you do. You entertain people. Hell,
you entertain me all the time. Go ahead, do a little dance for me. Go ahead. Give me one of those Spinaroonies. Entertain me. That’s your job. Don’t be embarrassed. You’re here to make people like me laugh. With your nappy hair and your ‘suckas.’ Hell, I was laughing all week long after you won that battle royal.

Triple H’s statements racialized the narrative and the feud between him and Booker T. The narrative presented by Triple H would not have been effective if a black wrestler was not involved. The statement “Somebody like you doesn’t get to be a world champion. People like you don’t deserve it” can only be used when speaking to a non-white wrestler. At that time, there had never been a black wrestler to hold the World Heavyweight Championship. Referring to people “like” Booker T, demonstrates the WWE’s understanding of their own scripting. The WWE acknowledges that they had never had a black World Heavyweight Champion and creates the narrative that black wrestlers did not “deserve” to be champion. Notions of discrimination were also highlighted within the promo. Triple H refers to the World Heavyweight Championship as an item that is “reserved” for people like him. Just as race was implied with the people like Booker T, race is implied when Triple H speaks to people like himself. The rhetoric of Triple H indicates that the WWE only wants white wrestlers to be champion.

Triple H and the WWE furthered racialized the narrative by using the statement, “You’re not here to be a competitor. You’re here to be an entertainer.” The gimmicks that are typically given to black wrestlers become evidence for this statement. Former black wrestlers such as the Junkyard Dog and Koko B. Ware, were given gimmicks that required them to dance for the audience’s entertainment. The action of dancing has been
a common action given in black wrestler’s gimmicks. Triple H classifying Booker T as an entertainer only provides clarity on the intentionality of place black wrestlers in these roles. Triple H would also racialized Booker T’s appearance by labeling his hair as “nappy.” The term nappy has been used as a negative connotation for black hair (Walker 2018). Using the term nappy continues the stereotype placed onto Booker T’s character.

Weeks after the promo, the WWE continued to racialize the narrative by incorporating Booker T’s real-life arrest. Booker T was arrested as a teenager for an armed robbery and it became the focus point of Triple H’s rants as to why he was not fit to be champion. Triple H even went as far as stating that Booker T would be better fit to carry his bags. The WWE’s use of racialized narratives would seem to begin a beautiful moment for Booker T. He was ridiculed and subjected to public harassment though racially charged narratives, just to overcome the odds and become the champion and prove the narrative that “people like him” did not deserve to be champion wrong. Unfortunately, the WWE did not allow Booker T to beat the narrative. Not only did Booker T go on to lose the match against Triple H at WrestleMania 19, he lost in humiliating fashion. Booker T was dominated throughout the entirety of the match and never shown signs of resilience during the match. The WWE reinforced the narrative presented by Triple H by not allowing Booker T to become champion. Booker T proved that people like him did not deserve to be champion because of his poor performance in the match. The WWE also did not allow Booker T to remain in the upper card, after the loss he was sent back to the mid card. The WWE has also situated Booker T in other racialized narratives that did not involve his character.
In 2005, during the WWE’s pay-per-view event Survivor Series, Vince McMahon scripted arguably the most offensive segment in the WWE’s history. The segment also included the then current WWE Champion, John Cena. Cena’s character in itself played along the lines of cultural appropriation. Cena’s gimmick was reminiscent of the hip hop community. Cena dressed in sneakers, wore a gold chain, and used rhetoric that included coded language that were commonly represented through black characters. Terms such as “gangster” and “thug” were used to identify Cena’s character. In a sense, Cena’s character was a thug wrestler who battled rapped against opponents during promos. John Cena, a white man, being scripted into this role demonstrates the WWE’s exploitation of the hip hop culture and the black community, in order to create fan interest for Cena. During the aforementioned segment, McMahon went up to Cena, comically asked “what’s good in the hood” to which Cena replied that he was just taking care of business. McMahon replied with “keep it up, my ni**a” as Cena had a puzzled look on his face. Then McMahon walked past Booker T and his wife Sharmell, who is also African-American. Booker T and his wife were both stunned by what was said which led to Booker T saying his famous catchphrase: “Tell me he didn’t just say that”.

The use of the N-word in any context in the WWE’s content is offensive. WWE has claimed that Vince McMahon’s use of the N word was “an outlandish and satirical skit involving fictional characters, similar to that of many scripted television shows and movies” (Canton 2015). The WWE’s reasoning behind the use of the word does not help its case at all. The WWE does not present a narrative that is necessary for the use of the N word. The WWE used Vince McMahon’s rhetoric to make him seem relatable to a character that appealed to the black community. Using terminology such as “hood,” while
speaking to John Cena’s character, highlights the WWE’s understanding of the racial overtones of the word. The WWE also scripting Booker T to be bystander during the dialogue even further highlights their understanding of what the N word represents. The WWE chose to use the pain associated with the N word for black people, for entertainment and totally ignored the violence associated with the word. In either case the WWE, has chosen to continuously racialize narratives and incorporate black wrestlers into those narratives.

The WWE misused Booker T when racialized narratives were a part of his gimmick and storylines around him. However, when given a gimmick that was not racialized, Booker T reached his highest success in WWE. In 2006, Booker T was the winner of the WWE’s 18th King of The Ring tournament. After winning the tournament, Booker T would transition into his new gimmick as “King Booker”. King Booker was scripted as an actual monarch ruling “The Smackdown Kingdom”. King Booker’s mannerisms and attire were that of a stereotypical English-style king as part of the character. While portraying this gimmick, Booker T reached his highest level of success within the WWE. Booker T was able to reach main event status for the first time since his feud Triple H at WrestleMania. The King Booker gimmick relied on another racialized narrative. King Booker was performed as a white British royal, and only in adopting that persona does Booker T become successful. Although Booker T was able to reach his stardom with the King Booker gimmick, he never reached a level to be considered the WWE’s most valuable superstar. The scripting of Booker T was similar to that of The Rock, but the success of The Rock is substantially different than Booker T’s. The WWE
chose to not make Booker T into a main event star, but decided that The Rock would be better suited for the role.

Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson is a third-generation wrestler, having a father and grandfather that were both professional wrestlers. The Rock’s grandfather, Fanene Maivia, was a Samoan-American professional wrestler, who wrestled under the name “Peter Maivia”. The Rock’s father, Wayde Douglas Bowles, is a Canadian black former professional wrestler, who wrestled under the name “Rocky Johnson”. The Rock’s bi-racial heritage has a significant impact on his wrestling character. The Rock debuted in the WWE in 1996 under the gimmick “Rocky Maivia”, which is a combination of both his father’s name and grandfather’s name. His character was often referred to as a third-generation superstar and was scripted as a clean cut face character. Maivia was able to gain success as a mid-card talent and his heritage was a scripted in a positive light. He eventually went on to win the Intercontinental Championship, but after losing the championship in April of 1997 and suffering a legitimate knee injury, the WWE decided to change his character.

In August 1997, Rocky Maivia returned to WWE television, but with a new persona. His persona began the transition into the gimmick of “The Rock.” He was transitioned into a heel character, no longer a clean-cut good guy. He aligned himself with the heel wrestling team, the “Nation of Domination.” The alliance with this group is where the WWE began to racialize The Rock’s character. At the time he joined, the Nation of Domination consisted of four black wrestlers: The Rock, Farooq, D’Lo Brown, and Kama Mustafa. The group was based loosely on the Nation of Islam and coded as a black extremist group that were pro-black and against the oppressive treatment of black
people in America. In retrospect, the Nation of Domination could have been a progressive gimmick for the WWE’s content and audience. The team could have used their platform to bring awareness to real life issues for the black community, instead the WWE decided to vilify the group’s intentions. Casting a black group that spoke about the liberation of black people as heels says a lot about the WWE’s opinion on the issues that the Nation of Domination brought up. The WWE also subjected the Nation of Domination and The Rock to the same racialized narratives as Booker T. The Nation of Domination’s most popular feud was against the team “Degeneration X”. Degeneration X was a team that consisted wrestlers, Triple H, Shawn Michaels, X-Pac, Billy Gunn, and Jesse James. The feud with Degeneration X was rooted between a rivalry between the two leading members of each respective team, Triple H for Degeneration X and The Rock for the Nation of Domination.

Similar to Triple H’s feud with Booker T, Degeneration X used racialized narratives to antagonize the Nation of Domination, even going as far as to dress up in blackface. In 1998, on an episode of *Monday Night Raw*, Degeneration X came to the ring impersonating each member of the Nation of Domination. All the members of Degeneration X, who are all white, were dressed in blackface mocking the Nation of Domination. Degeneration X not only wore blackface, but acting in a demeanor that mocked the behaviors of the Nation of Domination, incorporating stereos and gold chains into their attire. The WWE’s scripted use of blackface is yet another testament to the WWE’s insensitivity towards the black community. The WWE also had Degeneration X vandalize the locker room belonging to the Nation of Domination. The locker room was covered in racist propaganda that highlighted stereotypes of the black community. Unlike
Booker T, the racialized feud did lead to main event status for The Rock. After the feud with Degeneration X, The Rock’s popularity with fans as an individual grew. The crowd chanted The Rock’s name, created signs with The Rock on it, and also repeated his catchphrases after him. Although portraying a heel character, The Rock received cheers and adoration from the loud crowds, which led to his turn from heel to face.

In order to turn The Rock to a face character, the WWE had him part ways from the Nation of Domination. The WWE recognized The Rock’s potential to be a main event superstar. The WWE realized the marketability of The Rock due to his popularity and started to separate his character from his blackness. In 1998 the WWE scripted the Nation of Domination to assault The Rock, initiating his separation from the group itself. The removal of the Rock from the group transformed The Rock’s character from a pro-black extremist to a main event star that had no notions of race imposed on his character. The WWE began to remove the racialized narrative from his gimmick and storylines as his popularity increased. His storylines are no longer based on his race but more so about himself as an individual. Parting The Rock’s character from being black, is also racializing his character. Neoliberal whitening is happening once he is distanced from any reference of being black.

Booker T and The Rock are prime examples of how WWE racializes narratives and how they determine success. The WWE has shown its ability to use black wrestlers and not racialize narratives that they are incorporated into. The WWE’s content has historically subjected black wrestlers to stereotypical gimmicks. The stereotypes damage the representation of not only the wrestler portraying the gimmick, but also the black community.
Chapter 4: Conclusion

Upon examination of the WWE’s production and scripting, the WWE has asserted a value on the use of storytelling and characters. The characters drive the product that the WWE produces and also drive the WWE’s other sources of revenue. The WWE’s content is scripted from start to finish, but in many ways the WWE’s content is not fake at all. The performers are real people and wrestling is their job, and WWE is a real company that generates a lot of real money. There are real life implications behind the dialogue, gimmicks and scripting of champion in the narratives of the WWE, especially for black wrestlers.

The WWE’s issue with racialized narratives become clearer when examining the production of the product and the intentions behind the content. The historical issue of black wrestlers dealing with real racism behind the scenes, becomes fictionalized into the WWE’s content. The WWE is a white male dominated organization, that allows for racial stereotypes to not only be presented onto black wrestlers, but is trying to erase the historical implications of the stereotypes. There’s real-life drama and then there’s fictional drama, as is real-life racism and fictional racism. The WWE’s response to racist content has always been the same and it is the notion that everything is fictional. McMahon himself has been quoted stating, “Everything we do is outlandish, outrageous, making fun of ourselves. The take-away is, this is a hoot and our fans totally understand it” (Elliot 1999). McMahon’s notion that the fans understand that their actions are “a hoot”, wears thin when the fictional racism lines up perfectly with the real-life racism. Classifying these racialized narratives as a “hoot” or for entertainment purposes, sheds light on how the WWE constructs their audience to be receptive of their narrative. The
WWE also erases the historical implications of these racialize narratives for their audience to adopt. The treatment of black men in America as savages was a common theme in television, but the WWE using the same characters for entertainment, erases the historical offensiveness for their audience. The audience constructed by the WWE does not see the racialized narratives as harmful, but as jokes. The organizational structure of the WWE’s company and the construction of race in their content, aligns with Stuart Hall’s testaments of race.

Referring back to Hall’s notion of race, he notes that the system of classification that is race was constructed through power. Those who have the power are able to construct the narratives and the perceptions of race that become a commonality in society. Examining power in the WWE, it is easy to see who is in full control. Vince McMahon and his creative team determine the narratives that are presented within the WWE, thus the perceptions of race within their content. Creating dialogue, gimmicks, and scripts that do not feature black champions, damages the overall representation of black wrestlers to an audience. Non-fans of the WWE should also be concerned with the implications of the WWE’s racist rhetoric. Non-fans concern should be with the audience that the WWE has constructed. The WWE’s audience has been receptive to these narratives, thus demonstrating that they also hold the values of the WWE. Non-fans should be concerned with the WWE’s racist content promoting an audience and fanbase that holds these kinds of values.

In a statement to The Atlantic, a WWE spokesperson wrote, “WWE is a global entertainment company committed to embracing and celebrating individuals from all backgrounds as demonstrated by the diversity of our employees, performers and fans
worldwide” (Beary 2014). The WWE has contradicted this statement, by not actually “celebrating” diverse backgrounds, but instead exploiting the historical stereotypes that have already been perpetuated about those backgrounds. The stereotypes that the WWE has shown in its content, has drawn similarities to stereotypical representations that we have seen in television. The WWE’s use of a creative team that comes from backgrounds of television and film, also sheds a light on their racialized content. Television has constantly been a distributor of racialized narratives and content. The WWE has referenced to the racialize content in their programming as being a form of entertainment constantly seen in film and television.

The WWE can fix their problem of racialize content by incorporating a more diverse background for the creative writing team. The WWE’s creative team currently has diverse experience in writing, but they do not have diverse cultural differences. The more representation of people of color on the creative writing team, the better the on-air representation for black wrestlers and wrestlers of color. The WWE can also get rid of racialized narratives all together and actually expose the wrestler as an individual. The WWE has a long way to go to make up for the historical mistreatment of black wrestlers, but the first step would be to make changes to their organizational structure.

Changes to the organizational structures begins with Vince McMahon. McMahon’s opinion of who is marketable must include black wrestlers. The racialized content within the WWE, has allowed for a possible translation to other domains. In American film and television, there has been substantial lack of black actors given star roles. The WWE’s racialization goes into hand with the racialization of film and television, especially considering the demographic of the WWE’s creative writing team.
The creative writing team has members of various producing positions in the television and film industry. Much like the lack of black main event wrestlers, there is a lack of black leading roles in film and television compared to white actors. Films such as *Black Panther* and *Get Out*, are evidence that a majority black cast can be popular movies in the film industry.

In a working case study, the WWE has just crowned their first black, non-mixed-race, WWE Champion in Kofi Kingston. Kofi Kingston’s rise to stardom was built upon the basis of Booker T’s 2003 rivalry with Triple H. The storyline involving Kofi Kingston saw heavy mentioning of the WWE’s lack of WWE champions and a need for change. The audience was receptive to Kofi Kingston and his character, which forced the WWE to elevate Kingston to main event status to begin. Just like the rise of The Rock, the audience played a pivotal role in McMahon believing that Kingston was a marketable star. Black wrestlers have proven themselves worthy and capable of leading the WWE’s product, the WWE has to continue the push for better representation of the black wrestlers.
Bibliography


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PERSONAL STATEMENT
A highly motivated and hardworking individual, who has recently completed their Masters degree. Seeking an apprenticeship in the communication industry to build upon keen research interests and start a career in communication. Eventual career goal is to become a fully-qualified and experienced sports commentator.

KEY SKILLS
• Communication
• Public Speaking
• Writing
• Photography

EDUCATION HISTORY

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<td>- Edit broadcast material electronically with computer software (Media Touch and Adobe Audition)</td>
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<td>- Controls audio equipment to regulate the volume and sound quality during radio broadcasts</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 2015 to May 2017</td>
<td>Sports Broadcaster</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Commentated the Elizabeth City State University football games</td>
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