



**PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING  
STUDIES JOURNAL**

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# PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING STUDIES JOURNAL

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# PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING STUDIES JOURNAL

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## Editor's Note

Welcome to the inaugural issue of the *Professional Wrestling Studies Journal*. The official scholarly publication of the Professional Wrestling Studies Association, the *Professional Wrestling Studies Journal* is dedicated to publishing scholarship on professional wrestling that is as evocative, stylized, and impactful as the sport(s) (entertainment) that so captivates us.

Often spectacular, frequently confounding, but never irrelevant, professional wrestling has long enjoyed a place of interest within the scholarly universe. Scholars of wrestling often trace our roots in the academy to Roland Barthes' seminal, oft-cited 1957 book *Mythologies*, in which Barthes observed, "What wrestling is above all meant to portray is a purely moral concept: that of justice" (19), elaborating:

What is portrayed by wrestling is therefore an ideal understanding of things; it is the euphoria of [humans] raised for a while above the constitutive ambiguity of everyday situations and placed before the panoramic view of a univocal Nature, in which signs at last correspond to causes, without obstacle, without evasion, without contradiction. (23)

In the sixty-plus years since, scholars have written about wrestling from a wealth of methodologies and theoretical perspectives. Wrestling-focused scholarship has appeared in journals dedicated to a diversity of disciplines such as film, folklore, history, performance, popular culture, psychology, sex and gender, and sociology. Scholars have located wrestling in the body, in mythology, in culture, and in politics, utilizing conceptual and theoretical approaches as diverse as content analysis of macro and micro narrative storytelling, dramaturgy, geopolitics, gender and sexuality, media effects, performance studies, and race and racism—to provide but a sample.

But as any wrestling scholar can attest, the project of tracking down and accounting for this heretofore scattered body of literature has rendered it difficult to unite these diverse voices in dialogue. With rare exception such as *The Popular Culture Studies Journal's* 2018 special wrestling issue, wrestling scholarship has lacked a home, a dedicated forum for the growth of our discipline. The *Professional Wrestling Studies Journal* strives to become such a home; the scholars, editors, and reviewers who contributed to this volume of original research have gifted us fertile ground on which to grow our shared understanding of wrestling and what it means.

And what a moment in time for our undertaking. That which Barthes once deemed a reflection of "perfect intelligibility of reality" doesn't always seem so intelligible these days. Our favorites wrestlers and promotions may antagonize us. They may confound us. They may infuriate us. We can only guess what "univocal Nature" Barthes might have perceived in 2003 when WWE world heavyweight

champion Triple H degraded challenger Booker T with racist evocations of black criminality, only for WWE to affirm the heel's mythic superiority with a WrestleMania squashing straight out of a Stormfront-hosted e-federation. If wrestling holds up a mirror to show us "an ideal understanding of things," what can we make of our own reflection in 2004's Eddie Guerrero-John "Bradshaw" Layfield feud in which the heel JBL rode an ethos of racism, xenophobia, and bullying of the most vulnerable among us to championship glory while the plucky Guerrero was brutalized, outsmarted and humiliated without a hint of comeuppance for his antagonist?

As Sharon Mazer observes: "Rather than simply reflecting and reinforcing moral clichés, professional wrestling puts contradictory ideas into play, as with its audience it replays, reconfigures, and celebrates a range of performative possibilities" (3). Beyond its enduring popularity and cultural resonance, pro wrestling warrants vigilant and ongoing scholarly interrogation because the diversity of its cultural contributions demands an appropriate multivocality of scholars to make sense of it all. I believe that not only will the articles in this volume contribute to our ongoing scholarly conversations about pro wrestling, they will begin new and vital ones.

Our inaugural volume begins in spectacular fashion with a discussion of the man who makes spectacle of everything he touches, Donald J. Trump. "Squared Circle, Oval Office: Vince McMahon and U.S. Politics" by Michael Scibilia explores the inextricable relationship between the WWE Hall-of-Famer's rise to power and the politics and persona of WWE CEO Vince McMahon. In an age when political discourse has traded in horseracing for pro wrestling, Scibilia's article is as timely as they come.

Moving from the body politic to the politics of bodies, "The Veiled Production of Debility in Professional Wrestling" by Brooks Oglesby critiques the WWE's role in breaking down the bodies of its performers through the concept of *debility*: the process by which expendable bodies are systematically worn down and broken down as commodities. I suggest that after reading Oglesby's article, which interrogates WWE's role in the breakdown and death of our favorite wrestlers while reproducing hegemonic able-bodiedness, readers will never look at even the simplest of bumps quite the same way.

We continue our exploration of political bodies with an in-depth discussion of one of the most unforgettable characters of the Territory Era, Kamala. In "Playing the Savage: Professional Wrestling's Portrayal of the Exotic Through James 'Kamala' Harris," Mario Alonzo Dozal analyzes the Kamala character's resonance within wrestling history for its place at intersections of race and colonialism. Dozal's critique of Kamala's character trajectory from monstrous to subjugated Other not only yields remarkable insight to a vital character but reminds us that the larger-

than-life wrestlers who inhabit our memories are always formed in crucibles of power and ideology.

Turning to the world of geopolitics, Adam Nicholas Cohen explores arguably the greatest source of wrestling controversy over the past decade: WWE's incendiary business relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In "WWE and Saudi Vision 2030: Professional Wrestling as Cultural Diplomacy," Cohen removes the façade of WWE's initial forays into running live events in Saudi Arabia, exploring issues of diplomacy, propaganda, and how WWE's business interests limit its stated mission of promoting cultural understanding and progress.

The first *PWSJ* concludes with a piece that promises not only to challenge our understanding of wrestling but our understanding of *how we talk about wrestling*. "Toward a More Objective Understanding of Professional Wrestling: The Multidimensional Scale for the Analysis of Professional Wrestling (MSAPW)" by Tyson L. Platt and Aaron D. Horton proposes an alternate quantitative model for rating wrestling matches to the fabled five-star system popularized by wrestling journalist Dave Meltzer, offering in its place a multidimensional scale accounting for expanded criteria for evaluation. Given the furor with which wrestling fans debate star ratings, I say let the debate over how we rate wrestling matches begin anew.

In the months that have followed the call from which this journal's first contributions spring, the wrestling landscape has changed profoundly. All Elite Wrestling, only a concept at the time of our journal's incorporation, has emerged as a thrilling, precocious second national brand of wrestling in the U.S.; the potential for scholarship in AEW's characters, stories, and ethos of opposition to WWE hegemony may provide scholars with myriad opportunities for scholarly inquiry. (Or AEW could go the way of Global Force Wrestling.) As I write these words, the developing COVID-19 pandemic has forced a radical restructuring of professional wrestling as we know it with live shows delayed indefinitely or recorded in empty buildings and WrestleMania 36 thrust into liminal space of both substance and spectacle. All we know about wrestling in 2020 is that there's so much we don't know. Yet we can be certain that wrestling in whatever form it takes will provide scholars plenty to talk about.

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**Squared Circle, Oval Office:  
Vince McMahon and U.S. Politics**

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*In November 2016, Donald Trump became the first member of the World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) Hall of Fame to be elected U.S. president. His exalted status within the professional wrestling company was the result of a series of appearances on WWE's global television programming, highlighted by a storyline feud with company chairman and CEO, Vince McMahon. This article examines the relationship between McMahon, WWE and Trump's 2016 electoral success. It uses McMahon as a case study to argue that he and Trump share a political and cultural lineage that highlights the significance of professional wrestling beyond being a form of popular entertainment. McMahon was directly linked with the pursuit of political power during the 2010 and 2012 Senate campaigns of wife and former WWE president and CEO, Linda McMahon. Though the campaigns were unsuccessful, Vince McMahon's relevance to U.S. politics emerged throughout the 2016 presidential race. Trump's rhetoric, demagoguery, strongman leadership, machismo and nationalist ideals created a post-truth political spectacle that resembled professional wrestling. This fusion of politics and professional wrestling took McMahon's brand and persona to the highest level of politics in America.*

*Keywords: media; Vince McMahon; entrepreneurship; Donald Trump; politics*

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The political ascendancy of U.S. president Donald Trump has seen conventional policy discussion and the notion of objective truth overshadowed by a media spectacle comparable to professional wrestling. Trump's brash personality and pitching to a white, blue-collar, nationalist America befits wrestling's exaggerated rhetoric and tendency to juxtapose working-class, patriotic heroes with privileged and foreign villains. Further underlining this intersection between U.S. politics and the spectacle of wrestling is the fact that Trump has made appearances for market leader World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) and is a member of the company's Hall of Fame.

This article examines the relationship between WWE and the pursuit of political power. While culminating with Trump's election, this power is contextualised through a case study of WWE Chairman and CEO Vince McMahon, who became directly associated with political power in December 2016 when his

wife, Linda McMahon, was nominated to head the Small Business Administration under Trump. Prior to her accepting this position, she ran for the U.S. Senate in 2010 and 2012 as a Republican candidate in Connecticut. Linda McMahon was previously WWE president and CEO.

The article posits a connection between the entrepreneurial power of Vince McMahon, the political aspirations of Linda McMahon and the political ascendancy of Donald Trump. McMahon is framed within a political and cultural context in which the subsequent political success of Trump can be located. Trump's political persona has a direct link with WWE given his prior involvement with the company as an on-air performer and is also shown to be reflective of McMahon's performances on WWE television as Chairman "Mr. McMahon" (hereafter, "Mr. McMahon" is used when referring to McMahon's scripted television character).

McMahon is contextualised within the history of the demagogue. The figure has a long history within U.S. politics and the employment of populist rhetoric that fits within the paradigm of "politics as spectacle" (Lasch). The demagogue emphasises a performative brand of politics, focusing on the power of oration in mobilising disenfranchised voters. Trump not only marks the return of the demagogue but does so through a strong man style of leadership that resembles Mr. McMahon. Comparisons are made between Trump's campaigning and the brand of machismo, violence and misogyny that has historically been associated with WWE and Mr. McMahon. This brand is also particularly white, with WWE and Trump both depicting the threat of racial otherness.

Several rhetorical analyses have recognised the connection between Trump's political persona and his WWE experiences. Theye and Melling's "Total Losers and Bad Hombres" demonstrates that Trump's rhetoric is characterised by repetition, single-syllable words and an attack on political correctness. His refusal to conform to conventional political rhetoric gives him a sense of authenticity in contrast to his opponents, whom he insults as being metonymic of a corrupt and dishonest political establishment. His performative persona is a significant part of his political appeal, and Theye and Melling acknowledge that "his many appearances on television shows like WWE helped him develop his boisterous, over-the-top political style" (331). Mendes' "Digital Demagogue" describes Trump's rhetoric as an amalgamation of political demagoguery and the "skill and style of a reality television star." She states that Trump's "demeanour at rallies and even on debate stages echoes the familiar tropes of professional wrestling" and "the violence of his rallies, his outrageous insults of his opponents, and his crass references to the size of his genitals ... make perfect sense in the context of Trump the WWE entertainer" (72). Hall et al.'s "The Hands of Donald Trump" combines rhetorical theory with cultural

anthropology and linguistic anthropology to consider Trump's comedic appeal. Gestural methods are shown to be a means of demeaning critics and opponents, with the authors attributing the pistol hand gesture—as well as other tactics such as imitating and nicknaming opponents—to his wrestling connection.

Though the studies mentioned here were rhetorical analyses of Trump, this study is drawn from a broader semiotic and document analysis of McMahon that illuminated his relevance to U.S. politics. The analysis explored the cultural and ideological meanings of McMahon, similar to other works on the mythologization of public figures such as Nick Trujillo's "The Meaning of Nolan Ryan" and Ellis Cashmore's *Beckham*. Trump emerged as a point of comparison in which the cultural context of McMahon extends to politics. The analysis endeavours to highlight the cultural significance of McMahon and WWE by showing its relation to politics through power and persona.

### **McMahons and Republican Politics: Linda McMahon in 2010 and 2012**

The McMahons' politics are aligned with the Republican Party. Vince and his wife Linda donated \$365,000 to the party during the 2011-12 election cycle. They also donated \$75,000 each to Restore Our Future, which was a pro-Mitt Romney Super Political Action Committee (PAC) (Vigdor). According to the OpenSecrets website, the couple's donations during the 2014 election cycle reached \$3.3 million, all of which went to Republicans and conservatives. As an organisation, WWE became politically active in 2000 when it hired political consulting firms. It reportedly wanted to improve its image after the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) investigated the advertising of violence to children (Beatty). WWE presented itself as socially responsible by launching a "Smackdown Your Vote!" campaign, which encouraged its audience to register to vote. Though Linda McMahon and WWE star The Rock were guests at the Republican National Convention that year, she claimed that her husband was an independent (Williams).<sup>1</sup>

Vince McMahon has been conspicuously quiet in publicly expressing political views, but in some instances his company has scripted characters on its television programs to make statements. Lana, the Russian manager/valet of Bulgarian wrestler Rusev, stood on stage during the 9 June 2014 episode of *WWE Raw* and criticised president Barack Obama (WWE, "Zack Ryder vs. Rusev"). She said Obama was a "sissy" who "oozes weakness." She labelled him a "girly man" before throwing to a video clip that had been leaked of him working out in a gym. The video showed the lean Obama lifting light weights in a manner that could be considered humorous. The implication was that Obama was a weak president because he did

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<sup>1</sup> The Rock and Chyna also appeared at the 2000 Democratic National Convention (Therre).

not signify hypermasculinity. The president, wearing a black tracksuit, did not possess bulging muscles like McMahon and was seemingly incapable of lifting anything heavy. Arguing on *Cageside Seats* that the segment was McMahon's way of taking petty shots at Obama, Harris said the WWE chief probably harbored a grudge against the president because it was the Democratic Party that held a Congressional inquiry into WWE's steroid policy in 2007. Harris claimed that McMahon verbally attacked Obama during backstage meetings with his creative writers, criticising him for the decline of the country's economy.

Another on-air disparagement of Obama occurred on the 16 December 2013 episode of *WWE Raw* when the commentary team was shown taking a group selfie during a live match. The joke was reportedly a means of mocking Obama for taking a group selfie with British Prime Minister David Cameron and Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt at Nelson Mandela's funeral a week earlier (Isenberg). Furthermore, on 21 April 2008, WWE aired a "Democratic Primary Presidential Smackdown" match during *WWE Raw*. An Obama impersonator wrestled a Hillary Clinton impersonator (accompanied by a Bill Clinton impersonator). There was no winner and both candidates were assaulted at the end of the match by wrestler Umaga, which was a telling way to symbolise the fate of two Democrat politicians. All of the segments mentioned here show that while McMahon does not overtly engage in political commentary, perhaps in an attempt to be an apolitical corporate leader, his programming instead provides a tool through which political opinions and views are expressed. It is reasonable to claim that WWE programming is reflective of McMahon's politics due to the control he exerts over the creative writing process. Though the company employs a team of writers, McMahon has final say over scripts. As his son-in-law and WWE executive Paul "Triple H" Levesque says, "The final call is Vince. He gets all these suggestions and ideas, and he weighs in on them. It's a collaborative effort, but there's one general" (qtd. in Snowden).

The McMahons' political allegiances and aspirations became clearer in 2010 and 2012 when Linda ran as a Republican Senate candidate in Connecticut. She had been a key figure in WWE, taking on the position of president in 1993 and CEO in 1997. She resigned from the chief executive position on September 2009 to run for the Senate (Satrang). Her political interest was said to have been activated by the 1994 federal trial which saw Vince McMahon indicted (and ultimately acquitted) for distributing steroids, later claiming the company was an "easy target" without any allies (qtd. in Beatty).

After announcing her first campaign, McMahon made a stark attempt to distance herself from WWE. Her initial advertising avoided direct mention of WWE,

instead making generic mention of the “successful company that’s traded on the New York Stock Exchange” (qtd. in Kraushaar). It was also apparent, however, that her connection to WWE would be used as political ammunition by her opponents. During the course of the campaign, 36-year-old former WWE wrestler Umaga died of a heart attack. The death drew attention to the history of drug-related deaths in the industry. Umaga had been released by WWE in June of that year after committing a second strike against the company’s Wellness Policy on drugs.

The Democrats referred to WWE’s drug-troubled history in their campaign advertising. In one advertisement the narrator declared, “Seventeen of her former workers under age 50 have died. Linda McMahon. A bad CEO. A worse senator” (qtd. in Farley). The party also focused on controversial content produced by WWE in its past. WWE had shifted to PG-rated programming the previous year. Vince McMahon said the move was a result of the company listening to its audience and offering “a more sophisticated product” (qtd. in Bauder).

These efforts ultimately proved unsuccessful in terms of the election result, however, with Richard Blumenthal receiving 636,040 votes to McMahon’s 498,341 (“Election 2010”). Linda McMahon returned to contest the 2012 Senate election but was again unsuccessful, receiving 637,857 votes to Chris Murphy’s 815,077. She reportedly spent nearly \$100 million over the course of the two campaigns (Altimari, “McMahon Spends”).

There was no showmanship in Linda McMahon—she sought conventional political credibility through an ostensibly sound economic plan and a personable image. Altimari (“Wrestling in New Ring”) observed in the early stage of her first campaign that her persona “contrasted sharply” with her husband’s, as she came across as an “intensely devoted grandmother” with “intelligence and warmth.” If she was ever defensive or aggressive during her first campaign, she was “gentler and easier to like” in 2012 (Reindl). Her husband’s wrestling histrionics contrasted with her attempts to construct an image of political respectability.

As the following sections demonstrate, the politics of the McMahons and WWE were closely connected with the 2016 U.S. presidential election through Donald Trump’s candidature. Whereas Linda McMahon shied away from WWE and her husband’s showmanship, Trump made it his brand. He provides a conduit through which the cultural influence of McMahon can be seen from a political perspective. Trump has a strong connection with WWE and marks the fusion between politics and a McMahon-like brand of entrepreneurship. The result is a political spectacle that discards truth in the same manner that professional wrestling discards the legitimacy of the sporting contest.

## Trump in WWE: The Beginnings of “Politics as Spectacle”

Vince McMahon—or “Mr. McMahon” as he is known when performing in WWE storylines as an egotistical, power-hungry company chairman—stood face-to-face with Donald Trump during a 2007 episode of *WWE Raw*. Trump brought the fighting words befitting a professional wrestling program. He told Mr. McMahon, “I’m taller than you. I’m better looking than you. I’m stronger than you. And I’m here to challenge you to a match in WrestleMania” (WWE, “Mr. McMahon and Donald Trump Announce”). Mr. McMahon expressed surprise at the challenge, saying, “Wait a minute. I know you have an ego, but I had no idea it was that big. You wanna challenge me to a match at WrestleMania ...” Trump confirmed, “Absolutely right. One hundred percent I will kick your ass.” The high-profile match set for WWE’s annual pay-per-view showcase event was not a direct contest between Mr. McMahon and the real estate tycoon and reality television star. Rather, the two chose a wrestler to represent them. Whoever’s wrestler lost would be forced to have his head shaved bald, a prospect presented as terrifying to both men. Trump had become recognisable for his distinct blond hairstyle and has reportedly been strongly opposed to the thought of ever going bald. He once said, “The worst thing a man can do is let himself go bald” (qtd. In D’Antonio 245). He has also previously undergone a surgical procedure to close a bald spot (D’Antonio 245). For McMahon, the fear most likely stemmed from the fact that he was known for sporting a muscular physique that belied aging. To lose his hair would be a sign of mortality that his image had otherwise sought to defy.

The feud meant Trump had a strong presence on WWE programming leading up to WrestleMania. Trump and Mr. McMahon held an in-ring contract signing to make their match official. Mr. McMahon came to the ring first and declared, “This is Vince McMahon’s world. I created this world. I created WrestleMania and I’ll just be damned if I’m gonna be embarrassed” (WWE, “Mr. McMahon and Donald Trump’s Battle”). He claimed that Trump would not come to the ring because he had “the grapefruits to give him a patented Mr. McMahon billionaire bitch slap.” Mr. McMahon was proven wrong as Trump’s music (a WWE-produced theme song titled “Money”) played, signifying his arrival. He walked to the ring with a WWE Diva on each arm. He was heavily cheered by the live crowd, which chanted “Don-ald! Don-ald!” Mr. McMahon responded angrily, yelling, “You people shut up!” The machismo continued with Trump stating, “First of all, Vince, your grapefruits are no match for my Trump Towers.”

Given the hypermasculinity at play, a physical confrontation between the pair seemed inevitable. After the contract had been signed, Trump asked Mr. McMahon to come back to the ring. Mr. McMahon returned and removed his suit

jacket. Trump pushed Mr. McMahon who fell backward over the top of the table set up in the middle of the ring for the contract signing. Announcer Jim Ross said excitedly, “Oh my God! Mr. McMahon just got shoved on his billionaire butt!”

Trump had chosen African-American wrestler Bobby Lashley as his representative for the WrestleMania match. Mr. McMahon had selected the “Samoan Bulldozer” Umaga. Lashley won the match and Trump shaved Mr. McMahon’s head. The event attracted 1.2 million pay-per-view buys, a WWE record (WWE, “WrestleMania 23”). The success of the event, along with Trump previously hosting WrestleMania 1988 and 1989 at his Trump Plaza in Atlantic City, New Jersey, meant he was inducted into the celebrity wing of the WWE Hall of Fame in 2013.

Trump returned to WWE television in 2009 as part of a storyline where he bought *WWE Raw* from McMahon. The storyline began with Mr. McMahon standing in the ring and telling the audience that he had done some “soul searching” and “sold the program to a man with whom I have a history with” (WWE, “Donald Trump Buys RAW!”). Trump then appeared via satellite on the big screen, revealing that his first act as owner of *Raw* would be to make the next week’s episode commercial-free. Indeed, he was ever the populist babyface (industry term for “good guy” as opposed to a bad guy “heel”), even showering the live audience with cash that fell from the ceiling on another episode of *Raw*. His unabashed populism was a harbinger of an entry into politics six years later.

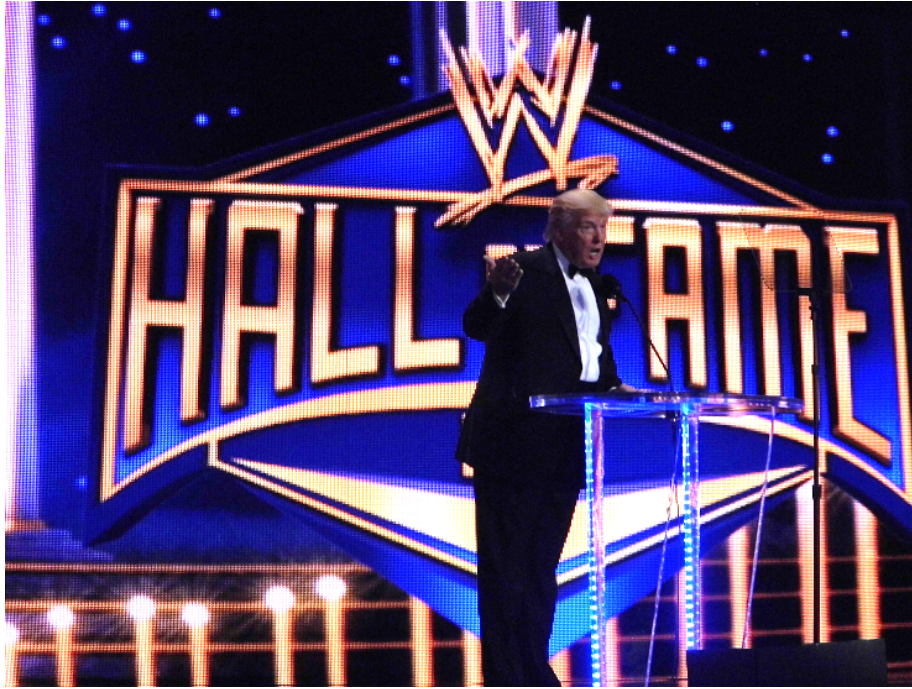
### **Trump Runs for President: Politics and Wrestling Converge**

When Donald Trump announced in 2015 that he would be running for the U.S. presidency as a Republican candidate, the spectacle of excess was projected into politics. Trump had signalled his interest in running for presidency in the past, including 2000 when he was a member of the Reform Party. The party had seen former WWE wrestler Jesse Ventura elected as governor of Minnesota two years earlier, forging a connection between the spectacle of WWE and U.S. politics. While serving as governor, Ventura appeared on WWE television as a special guest referee and became a regular member of McMahon’s XFL commentary team. According to Kranish and Fisher, Trump was keen to learn how Ventura managed to beat established politicians and become governor despite being portrayed as a “joke” (287). Though factional infighting meant Ventura resigned from the Reform Party and Trump chose not to pursue candidacy (Stone xxviii), Trump’s own WWE-like political persona became evident when he began campaigning for the Republican Party’s presidential nomination in 2015. Sam Nunberg, a Trump campaign aide until August 2015, said, “I would say to him (Trump), we’re going to be the WWE of the primary with the smash-mouth adrenaline pumping” (qtd. in Dawsey). He added,

“There are a lot of similarities between Vince McMahon and Trump.” Comparisons emerged between Trump’s persona and professional wrestling, and there was a perception that he had learnt from his WWE experience. His campaigning rhetoric became notorious for the ruthless mocking and insulting of his opponents in a style that resembled the way wrestlers speak when performing. Jim Ross, WWE’s lead play-by-play announcer at the time of Trump’s WWE involvement, said on Fox Sports that the Republican candidate was “vintage WWE” in the way he delivered his speeches. He said Trump, a “natural-born communicator (and) showman who seamlessly integrated into the WWE lexicon,” knew how to manipulate crowd reaction through his mannerisms, such as stepping away from the podium to encourage noise.

*Rolling Stone* also featured an article on its website headlined, “Donald Trump and WWE: How the Road to the White House Began at WrestleMania” (Oster). Covering Trump’s history with WWE, the article included a prescient quote from McMahon. When inducting Trump into the WWE Hall of Fame in 2013, McMahon told the audience, “When you think about it, second only to me, Donald might very well be a great president of the United States.” Though it was most likely intended as a flippant remark (I was at the ceremony and did not give it a second thought), McMahon’s comment spoke to a perception that the charismatic authority of an entrepreneur could be a legitimate pathway to public office. Furthermore, placing himself in that category showed the comparability of the two.

There are strong similarities between Trump and McMahon’s television performances as “Mr. McMahon.” Poniewozik, whose *Audience of One* shows how the Trump’s rise as businessman, reality television star and president is shaped by changes in U.S. media culture, says Trump’s campaign rallies “were pure WWE spectacle” (199). Moon wrote that Trump was “doing nothing more than what Vince McMahon and his WWE empire have been doing for decades.” He referred to the creation of binary oppositions of good and evil to stir an audience’s emotions. Norman argued that Trump’s speeches were a reflection of his “well-known affection for wrestling,” as he would pause to look towards a section of the crowd chanting his name at his rallies, which consequently encouraged the rest of the crowd to join in. Glassman said his experience at a Trump rally was “akin to a WWE match,” while Sucke said that Trump “learned his campaign persona from his experience in WWE.” Similarly, Lyons wrote that Trump’s campaign was “straight out of the WrestleMania playbook.” Zogby likened McMahon’s belief that his audience is a monster that he needs to keep feeding with Trump’s ability to play with his audience and know what it wants to hear.



*Donald Trump delivers his induction speech at the 2013 WWE Hall of Fame ceremony at Madison Square Garden, New York. Author's photo.*

### **Politics as Spectacle: The Demagogue, Wrestling and Anti-Elitism**

The Trump phenomenon marks the convergence of the spectacle of professional wrestling and politics. Through this phenomenon, it has become possible to identify the way politics and McMahon's presentation of professional wrestling blend. The type of politics at play resembles the formula of the wrestling genre and the characteristics of McMahon's persona on WWE programming. The formula defines babyfaces and heels through binary oppositions of good versus evil. It cultivates support through fantasies of subverting corrupt authority, jingoism and the threat of foreign otherness. The persona emphasises machismo and excessive performance rather than an empirically grounded reality. Linda McMahon detached herself from that persona, instead playing the part of an orthodox political candidate. Trump's candidacy showed the political potency of the formula and persona. The widely acknowledged similarity between Trump's rallies and a wrestling event has a historical context. Trump has been labelled a demagogue, including by President Barack Obama at the 2016 Democratic Convention (Lopez).

The demagogue refers to a populist orator. It is a performance-driven figure, seeking to mobilise and mesmerise audiences through speech. In the history of U.S.

politics, the figure can be traced back to the late eighteenth century. Luthin's "Some Demagogues in American History" documents the emergence of this form of politics in 1776 when Pennsylvania allowed men without property to vote. This constitutional change gave rise to populist orators who claimed to represent the interests of the "common man" who was now a voter to be lured. The fierceness of Trump recalls descriptions of early demagogues. Henry A. Wise of Virginia was noted for "rancorous jibes and biting invective" (Adkins) and as someone who "speaks excessively loud and twists his face into all kinds of shapes" (Eaton). Ohio politician Tom Corwin held rallies that were attended by up to 15,000-20,000 people. He was considered a stump orator, which referred to someone who would deliver loud public speeches that were emotive and populist. Auer argues in "Tom Corwin: King of the Stump" that the stump orator has scarce interest in discussing policy, instead favouring the derision of existing power structures and political opponents. At the 2016 Republican National Convention, Trump was accused of adopting the same characteristic and was criticised for spreading fear and a dystopian picture of American life (Waldman).

A demagogue considered influential in shaping American politics is William Jennings Bryan. A presidential candidate in 1896, 1900 and 1908 for the Democrats, Bryan became Secretary of State under President Woodrow Wilson. He was renowned for his powerful rhetoric as a skilled orator. He has been labelled the first "celebrity politician" and was a clear populist (Murphy 83-98). His most famous oration, known as the 1896 "Cross of Gold" speech, opposed the gold standard and advocated the use of silver instead. While he was pro-government and anti-business (unlike Trump), Bryan's significance to contemporary U.S. politics rests on the adoption of his populist tone by the Republican Party. The party, particularly through Trump, has adopted a blue-collar appeal that is contrasted with the Democrats as an untrustworthy elite and "limousine liberals" (Miller and Schofield 446).

The Republicans' positioning is consistent with McMahon's WWE texts, which have often featured babyfaces espousing blue-collar values opposed to aristocratic power. Mr. McMahon's arrival to arenas is often signified through a backstage shot of him stepping out of a limousine, instantly associating the character with privilege. As the Mr. McMahon character uses his authority to stack the odds against babyfaces or attempt to humiliate them, the wrestling text presents power in the possession of the corrupt and self-interested. Trump follows the same script. During the 2016 campaign, he constantly referred to Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton as "Crooked Hillary" and has since insulted rivals through nicknames such as "Sleepy Joe" for Joe Biden, "Cryin' Chuck" for Chuck Schumer, "Lyin' Ted"

for Ted Cruz and “Rocket Man” for Kim Jong Un (Silverstein). In this sense, Trump not only resembles Mr. McMahon from the perspective of being a brash billionaire; he is also appealing to U.S. voters through the populist appeals evident in McMahon’s WWE. He may not be the “smiling and waving white-meat babyface” that existed when there were purer distinctions in wrestling between good and evil (Solomon), but he is ostensibly virtuous in seeking to rid a system of deception.

### **Wrestling and Politics as Post-Truth Phenomena**

The conditions for a demagogue to turn politics into a spectacle resembling professional wrestling are part of a post-truth era of politics. The term is often attributed to David Roberts’ “Post-Truth Politics,” which described the process behind the Republican Party’s partisan opposition to the Obama Administration’s policies. According to Roberts, the Republicans’ opposition was tailored to the emotions of its supporter base instead of being argued on the basis of evidence. He claims that voters adopt the position of the party they affiliate with and then search for facts that can support their argument rather than objectively gathering facts to form an opinion. The result of this process in affective politics, whereby emotion and ideology play a stronger role in political arguments than evidence-based truths.

The sheer volume of information disseminated through media furthers the post-truth phenomenon. Andrejevic’s *Infoglut* states that it is difficult for consumers to process and ascertain an objective truth. He cites Žižek’s theory of “symbolic inefficiency” to describe the gap between symbols and what they claim to represent. While Andrejevic does not speak in semiotic terms, this equates to a semiotic gap between a sign and its intended signification. The disillusionment felt by consumers not knowing what to believe as a result of an “infoglut” encourages cynicism and oppositional readings. More than just symbols, the inefficiency of meaning also affects “the power of narrative, deliberation and explanation” as they are all looked upon with suspicion (Andrejevic, *Infoglut* 95). Such suspicion can be seen through the denunciation of “expert” opinion by political figures through populist rhetoric. Along with these attacks comes conspiratorial, fear-mongering politics and a focus on affective political performances rather than a concern for truth. It is a form of politics that paves the way for demagoguery—populist orators who cultivate mass support for speaking out against perceptions of corruption and self-interest in the political system, as well as threats of foreign otherness.

An important point here is that the concept is often associated with the Republican Party. The Democrats are typically considered pro-government because of their advocacy for what they can do for voters through services such as health care (Mayer 541-58). The Republican view, conversely, can often be summed up by

Ronald Reagan's famous claim, "Government's not the solution to our problem; government's the problem" (Mayer 543). A performative and charismatic leader can elicit emotion through ideological narratives laced with nationalist rhetoric. Any proclamation of truth sitting beneath simplistic ideological claims is deemed to be derived from vested interests (Andrejevic, *Infoglut* 66).

The McMahons' political allegiances are with the Republican Party, and though Linda McMahon was a conventional political candidate the connection between Vince McMahon and professional wrestling to post-truth politics became most vivid in 2016 when the Republican Party nominated a demagogue, Donald Trump, as its presidential candidate.

Trump embodies this distrust of truth, as seen through his partiality to conspiracy theories. He questioned the birthplace of then-president Obama and the eligibility for the presidency of Republicans Cruz, given he was born in Canada, and Marco Rubio, despite the fact he was born in Miami. Trump suggested the scheduling of his presidential debates with Hillary Clinton was "rigged" because two of them clashed with NFL games that were likely to reduce the debates' viewership (Lima). He also predicted the federal election would be rigged. Furthermore, despite controversies such as Trump's birther conspiracies, mocking of a disabled reporter, and divisive policies such as halting Muslim immigration and building a wall across the Mexican border, he still defeated Republican rivals for the party's presidential nomination before going on to become forty-fifth president of the U.S.

An explanation for Trump's capacity to survive gaffes and controversies is that the spectacle is paramount in post-truth politics. It is also a by-product of the internet age, which not only contributes to the copious amount of information that causes distrust but also encourages shallow representations of politics as a form of entertainment (James 49). Whether or not Trump's words are exposed for being misleading or overtly offensive misses the point. His brand is built on a spectacle that needs crudeness to be sustainable.

Professional wrestling provides an established cultural formula for Trump to emerge as a post-truth phenomenon. In wrestling, the question of whether the athletic contest is real or fake has never been of concern to its audience. In fact, its popularity only increased after WWE acknowledged that its matches were pre-determined in order to avoid paying taxes to state athletic commissions. Wrestling audiences are instead drawn into a simulation of an athletic contest. It is a mediatised performance that flaunts the excessiveness of spectacle rather than concealing it in an attempt to seem "real." Mr. McMahon is an individualised manifestation of this process. The character performs Vince McMahon, the legitimate WWE CEO and chairman, in an excessive manner that often borders on

comical. He does not walk to the ring—he struts in a signification of arrogance that is so profound it would be difficult to read it in any other way. He is braggadocios, but his character would be unrecognisable without hyperbole.

For Trump, a campaign without an excess of hyperbole would have seen him “play the political game” that he attempted to subvert. Competing on the conventional terms of policy discussion would be a validation of the system that he claims is corrupt and self-interested. His motive is to instead attack the entire system, such as allegations of the federal election being rigged or the news media having a bias against him. This approach establishes the narrative that mobilises the disenfranchised—the political aspiration of any demagogue.

The attacks described here are directed toward elitism and the establishment. Father Charles E. Coughlan, a populist anti-Semitic radio broadcaster in the 1930s, was seen as nativist and anti-elite through his isolationist lectures that attacked international bankers (Cremoni). Cremoni said Coughlan was “captivating” for the “man on the street” and had audiences said to be anywhere in the range of five to forty million people (27-28). His success showed the capacity for the marriage of media and a nativist, populist orator to enchant a significant number of Americans. Trump can be located within the same lineage of anti-elitism—as can McMahon. Rachman’s “How Donald Trump Has Changed the World” states that a theme of Trump’s presidential campaign was “a relentless assault on the ‘elite’, including Washington, Wall Street and the universities.” These attacks were reflective of Mr. McMahon. The character mocked Congress over its steroid investigations. He said “Wall Street can kiss my ass” when it responded negatively to the XFL, an unsuccessful football league he founded in 2001. He also disregarded critics as “out of touch moral crusaders who don’t have a clue and egghead professors with flimsy studies” (qtd. in McShane). He said a regular critic, *New York Post* journalist Phil Mushnick, was a “miserable S.O.B” (qtd. in Mooneyham). His theme song even mentions “greedy politicians buying souls from us.”

The mobilisation of the disenfranchised further connects the spectacle of Trump to the spectacle of professional wrestling. This resemblance is not just seen through the anti-elite tone but also the representation of racial otherness. Dolgert described Trump’s rallies as a “nightly spectacle of angry white Americans” who see government as deserting their interests in favour of “grumbling African-Americans, illegal immigrants, feminists, gays, Muslims, and intellectuals.” His anti-immigration stance included presenting Mexicans as “rapists” and “killers” who needed to be kept out of America via a border wall (qtd. in Sakuma).

The fear generated by Trump plays on professional wrestling’s characterisation of otherness as a threat. It emulates a nativist stance that has

appeared in various formations in the U.S. and constitutes a branch of paranoid politics that employs “exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy” (Hofstadter 77-86). There is a precedent for racial stereotyping on WWE programming. Taylor explores WWE’s whiteness through one of the promotion’s top babyfaces, John Cena. She contends that Cena embodies a brand of whiteness that signifies the merits of hard work, patriotism and “respecting white patriarchal authority” (309). In fact, Taylor states that Cena’s hip hop clothing and on-air rapping in the early years of his WWE career embodied a multicultural whiteness, in which racial inclusion is ironically signified through a white lead character. Indeed, she argues that this purported inclusion is countered by racial stereotypes. Describing these stereotypes, Guttman claims that African-American WWE wrestlers are likely to be characterised as “a rap star, racist, sex addict, All-American Athlete or animal of some sort” (181). This analysis is consistent with Hart’s *Textual Analysis of Class, Race and Gender in WWE Televised Professional Wrestling*, which finds that WWE’s African-Americans are often stereotyped as either minstrel entertainers (such as singing, dancing and making jokes) or angry and animalistic.

The 2003 feud between the white heel Triple H and the black babyface Booker T was an example of WWE’s offensive representation of African-Americans. Booker T was challenging for Triple H’s World Heavyweight Championship at the company’s biggest show of the year, WrestleMania XIX. During a segment on the 3 March 2003 episode of *WWE Raw*, Triple H (played by Paul Levesque, who is Vince McMahon’s son-in-law and currently a WWE executive) told Booker T, “Somebody like you doesn’t get to be a world champion” (WWE, “RAW 510”). In the same segment, he also said Booker T was in WWE to be an entertainer rather than a competitor and asked him to “do a little dance for me.” He added, “You’re here to make people like me laugh.” These comments further aligned WWE’s portrayal of blackness with minstrel entertainment. Triple H went on to win the match, meaning the feud did not end with a feel-good triumph of the unjustly vilified African-American underdog.

Booker T was also involved in another racially charged WWE segment in 2005. During the company’s Survivor Series pay-per-view event that year, Mr. McMahon and Cena were backstage. Mr. McMahon pretended to adopt a hip-hop persona similar to Cena’s, asking, “What’s good in the hood?” Cena replied, “Just holding it down, trying to take care of business.” Mr. McMahon responded, “Keep it up, my nigger!” Cena’s facial expression suggested confusion. As Mr. McMahon turned around, Booker T and his wife Sharmell were shown standing nearby. The African-American couple looked disgusted after presumably hearing Mr. McMahon’s remark. Mr. McMahon, sporting a smile, greeted them and walked

away, oblivious to the offence he had caused. Booker T looked at Sharmell and said his catchphrase, “Tell me he didn’t just say that!” (“Vince McMahon Says”).

During this period, WWE also had a trio of Mexican performers called “The Mexicools” on its roster. The group claimed to challenge the association between Mexicans and cheap labour in the U.S. by declaring upon their arrival, “We are not just about ... washing toilets. We are not just about crossing the river” (WWE, “Smackdown 305”). They were a self-parody of Mexican stereotypes, wearing overalls and making their way to the wrestling ring on a John Deere ride-on lawnmower, which group member Psicosis called the “Mexican Limo 2005” (WWE, “Smackdown 305”). As O’Brien found in her study of Latinos and Asian Americans in the U.S., the former are most commonly stereotyped as maids and landscape workers (144).

Mobilising audiences through narratives of racial otherness as a threat, in addition to the anti-elitism inherent in McMahon’s entrepreneurialism, shows how WWE becomes relevant to the body politique of the U.S. The WWE spectacle is highly significant as a form of politicised popular culture. It shows the modes of storytelling that came to resemble Trump’s brand of politics. Further underlying this point is the way McMahon and Trump perform this style of leadership in a highly gendered fashion.

### **Strongman Leadership and Misogyny**

Mr. McMahon and Trump exhibit a “strongman” style of leadership. For McMahon, being a strongman leader is signified through the muscular body, such as his front cover appearances on *Muscle & Fitness* magazine and his involvement in physical violence on his wrestling programs. Trump has shown how this form of authority fits within politics. Rachman’s “Trump, Putin and the Lure of the Strongman” identifies Trump as a strongman leader in the same ilk as Russian president Vladimir Putin, general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party Xi Jinping, Egyptian president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and Philippines president Rodrigo Duterte. He describes these leaders as indicative of a global trend whereby men “build up a cult of personality, emphasising the strength and patriotism of the new man at the top.” A commonality among these strongman leaders is “trading on feelings of insecurity, fear and frustration.” It is the mobilisation of a disenfranchised audience that has been a mode of McMahon’s entrepreneurship. He has presented a product that speaks to blue-collar resentment through babyfaces that rebel against authority figures and foreign otherness.

Part of the strongman persona shared by Mr. McMahon and Trump is the character trait of the misogynistic showman. Mr. McMahon’s humiliation of WWE

characters as part of the company's television storylines has included women. He has wrestled his daughter Stephanie and passionately kissed female wrestler Trish Status while his wife Linda watched on in a catatonic state due to a nervous breakdown. He also ordered Stratus to "bark like a dog" and strip to her bra and underwear ("Vince Strips Trish"). Trump, meanwhile, described Fox News host Megyn Kelly as a "bimbo" who could not be objective when she had "blood coming out of her wherever" (qtd. in Luce).<sup>2</sup> He called Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton "disgusting" for needing to go to the toilet during a debate, and when discussing Republican Carly Fiorina he said, "Look at that face. Would anyone vote for that?" (qtd. in Luce). He has even said he would date his daughter Ivanka if she was not related as she has "a very nice figure" (qtd. in Andrejevic, "Jouissance"). During the 2016 election campaign, a tape was also leaked where Trump was heard telling *Access Hollywood's* Billy Bush in 2005, "When you're a star ... you can do anything (to women)." Trump added he could "grab [women] by the pussy" (qtd. in Fahrenthold). The attitudinal similarities between Trump and Mr. McMahon suggest a style of chauvinistic leadership that is pitched at a male-dominated audience and in these instances displays power through the subjugation of women.

Mr. McMahon and Trump are also alike in inciting violence. In wrestling, it is a natural component of the genre for Mr. McMahon to either resolve disputes through physical combat or encourage others to do so on his behalf. Trump has encouraged the same practice during his rallies. He told his audience, "If you see somebody getting ready to throw a tomato, knock the crap out of them, would you? Just knock the hell ... I promise you, I will pay for the legal fees. I promise" (qtd. in James 86). There was another instance of Trump saying, "I'd like to punch him (a protester) in the face" (qtd. in James 86). This behaviour demonstrates that this brand of leadership is heavily gendered, providing a distinct masculine order that positions the male body as a weapon.

The similarities between Trump and McMahon underline the significance of the brash, hypermasculine media entrepreneur as culturally significant rather than an idiosyncratic novelty. It was pertinent that a speaker at the 2016 Republican National Convention was Dana White. The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) president, often outspoken, is another proprietor of a product that showcases violence and further aligns masculinity with an American brand of entrepreneurship. White used the metaphor of fighting to support Trump's credentials, saying he was a "fighter" who would "fight for this country" ("Watch UFC's Dana White").

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<sup>2</sup> Trump later insisted he was referring to blood coming out of Kelly's nose and/or ears, rather than menstruation (Bradner).

## **Conclusion**

This article has shown how the case study of Vince McMahon can be used to explain politics in a post-truth era and more specifically the period of Donald Trump's presidency. There is a strong correlation between the McMahons as Republicans and the post-truth spectacle that the party has come to embody through Trump. It is a spectacle of the binary opposition of good versus evil. It utilises similar narratives and rhetoric to mobilise an audience, such as a brand of nationalism that portrays foreignness as a threat and a style of strongman leadership that equates hypermasculinity with power.

Just as wrestling allows for its audience to revel in the subversion of corrupt authority, Trump's appeal includes speaking of authority in conspiratorial terms. For Trump, notions of truth are aligned with traditional sources of power that are purportedly corrupted by self-interest. The excessive frequency through which he causes offence shows that his performance has little interest in political tact and instead acts as a means to lure people into a spectacle. He is a product of a post-truth spectacle that long preceded him in the context of professional wrestling.

Though from a Trump perspective this article's scope was mostly contained to the 2016 election campaign, its analysis has remained applicable throughout his presidency. The demagoguery has continued with Trump staging rallies in predominately working-class regions where his populist, blue-collar storytelling is most effective. He has dismissed a litany of scandals in conspiratorial terms that are reflective of the post-truth phenomena described by this article and argued to be culturally linked to the characteristics of professional wrestling and Mr. McMahon. Indeed, the connection between Trump and the McMahons was solidified in December 2016 when the former nominated Linda McMahon as Administrator of the Small Business Administration. Though she resigned from the position in 2019 to join a Trump super PAC (Wagner and Dawsey), the 2020 presidential election will provide further scope for scholarly research into the continued significance of professional wrestling to U.S. politics.

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## The Veiled Production of Debility in Professional Wrestling

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*This paper examines the relationship between disability, debility, and World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) media texts such as “Don’t try this at home” public service announcements in order to interrogate the “early death” phenomenon that has pervaded the professional wrestling industry in recent decades. Through its production of images of disability, largely only through a paradigm of spectacular in-ring injury, WWE veils the ways in which such productions produce debility in its performers. Drawing from Jasbir Puar, debility addresses long-term and taken-for-granted wearing down of subjugated groups, a concept which, as seen in WWE, is tied to the expansion of corporate profits. WWE, in pursuit of greater profits, disappears its production of debility behind a veil of public relations messaging and limited disability representation that relies upon the reification of hypermasculinity and compulsory able-bodiedness in its performers.*

*Keywords: debility; disability; hypermasculinity; WWE*

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The rate of early death among WWE performers has far outpaced any professional sport (Morris). Although in-ring performances are designed to minimize the risk of overt injury and impairment, professional wrestlers notoriously suffer long-term bodily tolls. This wearing down of bodies—a “slow death” that accounts for “the debilitating ongoingness of structural inequality and suffering” (Puar, *The Right to Maim* 1)—is well-known among professional wrestling fans, so much so that popular sports blog *Deadspin* published a weekly “Dead Wrestler of the Week” column in the early 2010s (Shoemaker), chronicling professional wrestlers who have died early either directly, having died as a result of either a discrete in-ring injury, or through decades of wearing their bodies down in service of spectacle and corporate profit. Columns such as these mark not only that WWE has a problem with long-term debilitation of its performers but that discussions about this problem are largely taking place outside the company.

This issue of early death among professional wrestling is one of debility, which addresses forms of “injury and bodily exclusion that are endemic rather than epidemic or exceptional” (Puar, *The Right to Maim* xvii). Debility is “a collective or affective condition generated by institutional oppression” (Hsu 81), accounting for the shared bodily tolls of marginalized groups across time and space. By linking “the

discursive and rhetorical depictions of marginalized people and the material and embodied violence they experience” (De La Garza 95), debility is a crucial means through which we might recontextualize those whose bodies are routinely ground down and debilitated in the professional wrestling industry.

Disability studies provides numerous theoretical frameworks through which we might understand the bodily traumas suffered by professional wrestlers. The social model of disability places the disabling agent on one’s environment rather than one’s own body, defining disability as “the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation” (Oliver and Barnes 21). Impairment, in turn, refers to the experience of “lacking part or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ, or mechanism of the body” (Oliver and Barnes 21). Despite some marked improvements over past social conceptions of disability, disability theorists continue to update and challenge the social model. Essaya Nabbali, for example, notes that the social model does not substantively examine intersections of disability with other vectors of identity, drawing particular attention to the erasure and subjugation of “Mad” people even within disability studies circles. Further, Julie Mulvany suggests adopting a framework of embodiment when approaching impairment so as to not tacitly reduce one’s experience to an outside observer’s list of symptoms and to allow those with impairments to author their experiences.

Jasbir Puar expands the scope of the social model into a biopolitical project by examining how the disabling of entire populations can come to seem acceptable or even common sense. Debility, she explains, expands our understanding of disability economies as it addresses injury to populations that comes to be taken for granted (*The Right to Maim* xvii). Debility as a concept calls us to ask not only which populations of bodies can be impaired, maimed, or disabled for the service of the interests of state and/or capital, but also why the harm done to those populations is considered an acceptable, normal, or in some cases, even beneficial consequence of doing business.

Debility is thus no accident; in fact, it is “required for and constitutive of the expansion of profit” (Puar, *The Right to Maim* 76) for WWE executives. The production and maintenance of debility is a highly profitable enterprise, but corporations like WWE veil this process, leaving fans to account for this phenomenon through columns such as “Dead Wrestler of the Week.” Under a capitalist paradigm, debility becomes a “necessary supplement in an economy of injury that claims and promotes disability empowerment at the same time that it maintains the precarity of certain bodies and populations precisely through making them available for maiming” (Puar, *The Right to Maim* xvii). Thus, corporations like

WWE can carry out public relations projects that appear to empower people with disabilities and impairments while simultaneously producing debility in those who toil in professional wrestling performances. WWE provides a rich case study for the ways that disability and debility work symbiotically, as the excess profit generated by in-ring performances funds public relations initiatives that give the corporation a disability-friendly face while further masking the debilitating labor required of WWE's performers. To understand WWE's production and veiling of debility, I will examine three vectors: the company's public relations messaging, disparity in debilitation along lines of gender, and onscreen representation of disability.

WWE is not solely culpable in the industry's historical and continuing production of debility, but I focus on WWE in this paper as the majority of professional wrestling history in North America flows through WWE, from its monopolization of the territory system decades ago to its pop culture peak in the late 1990s to today. The industry is constantly in flux, with a new rival competitor in All Elite Wrestling teasing the eventual possibility of health insurance benefits for its performers and popular independent performers like David Starr openly calling for unionization among wrestlers, and moments such as these should provide robust opportunities for professional wrestling studies and disability studies to collaborate in the future.

As of 2019, WWE is a publicly traded corporation worth over \$3 billion (Giri), with programming that reaches over 650 million homes worldwide ("WWE Network Reaches"). The representations of injury, disability, and impairment produced by WWE, then, are of deep concern both for viewers of these media texts and for the well-being of the professional wrestlers in such media texts. Thus, I am interested in how WWE represents disability in its performances, and the resulting "economy of injury" serves its business interests at the expense of those who are taking on significant harm to their bodies in the ring. Chiefly, I will examine how WWE produces representations of disability as a means of veiling its production of debility by first turning to its public relations messaging.

## **Public Relations**

Prior to every World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) home video, a 30-second public service announcement plays. Each video, which viewers are unable to skip or fast-forward through, follows a similar script. The public service announcement opens with short clips of some of WWE's professional wrestlers writhing in pain or being stretchered out of an arena, interspersed with flashing images of chest, arm, leg, and skull x-rays. While the clips play, the viewer hears audio clips of announcers showing concern over a move gone wrong, as well as

testimony from the injured wrestler onscreen detailing the specifics of his injury. The wrestlers featured are nearly always men, and the videos typically spotlight the injuries of the more popular “main event” wrestlers rather than lower-card wrestlers or women wrestlers, who have historically been made to occupy a position of titillating sideshow rather than respectable performers of a comparable level to the men who perform in the ring. Once several injuries have been shown, the clips fade out and a narrator reads aloud the notorious tagline that appears onscreen: “Don’t try this at home.”

Professional wrestling performances are scripted; that is, the in-ring performers follow a set routine of maneuvers, surreptitiously working in collaboration to tell a story to the audience while maintaining a façade of legitimate combat. Performers adhere to a code known as “kayfabe,” which is the “illusion of realness” (T. Smith 54) in such performances, and sometimes even beyond the performances themselves. In the 1980s, wrestlers Jim Duggan and the Iron Sheik were arrested while traveling together, which was doubly scandalous at the time because they were feuding in kayfabe and were thus breaking it by sharing a car (Coulson). Though performers still typically uphold the artifice during shows, WWE’s protection of kayfabe has shifted and waned in its so-called “Reality Era,” and modern audiences, aside from perhaps the very young, “know that they are not watching a ‘real’ sport” (Jones 278) but rather a scripted representation of sport.

WWE’s “Don’t try this at home” announcements are significant in that they explicitly break kayfabe within their own product, marking these acts as imperative for WWE’s corporate goals. One such “Don’t try this at home” announcement proclaims, “Yes, this is entertainment, but the hazards are real” (WWE, “Don’t Try This At Home”), marking that the performances are entertainment rather than sport and thus not “real.” As such, these announcements imply that in the course of professional wrestling performances, no significant bodily harm occurs. They suggest that bodily harm is not endemic; rather, it is a rare but dangerous aberration and thus not in need of further consideration by viewers or the performers themselves.

These announcements exclusively situate bodily harm in professional wrestling performances as “hazards,” carrying with it the connotation of an accident, an unfortunate but unavoidable facet of such performances. An accident functions “as an alibi for the constitutive relations of force necessary to bring about something, an event that is in retrospect deemed an accident” (Puar, *The Right to Maim* 64); it masks the other forms of violence inflicted upon the body, and truly accidental injury is merely one way in which these performances impact, reshape, and punish the bodies of professional wrestlers.

As a publicly traded corporation, WWE has a vested interest in appearing as if it operates ethically in spite of its reputation as “low brow culture” (Hill 179). The “Don’t try this at home” videos are one way WWE accomplishes this, breaking kayfabe to remind its audience that such performances carry with them great risk, which is also, perhaps more importantly, an attempt at inoculation against lawsuits when young fans inevitably injure one another while replicating wrestling maneuvers. Another way WWE shores up this ethical corporate face is by partnering with organizations that address disability and impairment directly (just usually not the disability and/or impairment generated directly as a result of WWE’s business practices). In addition to long-running partnerships with the Special Olympics and the Make-A-Wish Foundation, WWE partners with the Muscular Dystrophy Association and various charitable organizations serving military veterans with disabilities and/or impairments (“Concussion Legacy Foundation”; Raymond).

The one exception to WWE’s focus on disability produced outside itself is its partnership with the Concussion Legacy Foundation, founded to “solve the concussion crisis by advancing the study, treatment and prevention of the effects of brain trauma in athletes and other at-risk groups” (“Concussion Legacy Foundation”). It is typical of nonprofit organizations and corporations like WWE to “dedicate money and time to the future” while ignoring concerns of the present, operating on an ideology of cure rather than care (Clare 87). By investing in a nebulous future that has “solved the concussion crisis,” WWE can claim an ethic of care while providing no such care to the currently living and recently deceased performers who have been debilitated by concussions and related injuries. WWE can then hide its role in the long-term production of brain and neurological traumas, even those that likely played a role in Chris Benoit’s highly publicized double murder-suicide in 2007, under a veneer of magnanimously working toward a better future.

In addition to debility, it should be noted that wrestlers have died suddenly in service of spectacle. At the Over the Edge pay-per-view event in 1999, performer Owen Hart fell over 70 feet to his death while being lowered into the ring via a faulty harness. The cameras turned away before the pay-per-view audience at home saw Hart’s fall or the subsequent panic of medical personnel swarming the ring attempting to revive him, but the 16,000 fans in attendance watched it happen and most continued to watch as the show continued on as planned a matter of minutes later. Hart’s death, even though it took place in the ring, is, of course, not featured in any of WWE’s “Don’t try this at home” public service announcements.

Though performers do sometimes die during wrestling performances, debility accounts for a far greater share of early death. Former WWE Champion

Eddie Guerrero, an active weekly performer at the time of his death at age 38, was found dead the morning before a show in a hotel room in November 2005. According to the coroner, Guerrero died of “heart failure ... presumably because of the toll that years of steroids and painkillers and street drugs took on his heart and, not incidentally, because he never went to the doctor for help and because nobody intervened to take him to the doctor” (Shoemaker, “Dead Wrestler of the Week: Chris Benoit”). Though Guerrero’s heavy use of painkillers is easily linked to a debilitating career of being slammed to the ground dozens of times upwards of 300 nights per year as part of these wrestling performances, Guerrero is routinely memorialized as one of the most beloved wrestlers of all time. He is not only featured in *Deadspin*’s “Dead Wrestler of the Week” column but is also the subject of mournful documentaries produced by WWE, and wrestlers to this day pay direct homage in their in-ring work. Guerrero is (many fans would agree, rightly) positioned as “gone too soon,” whereas other wrestlers are simply gone, made to not only die, sometimes brutally, sometimes slowly, sometimes both, but also to disappear.

In 2007, less than two years after Guerrero’s death, his close friend and fellow former WWE champion Chris Benoit, also an active weekly performer at the time of his death at age 40, was found dead in his Atlanta home along with his wife and young son. Soon after, it was determined by investigators that Benoit killed his wife Nancy and son Daniel before hanging himself in his home gym (Shoemaker, “Dead Wrestler of the Week: Chris Benoit”). Benoit was scripted to win the ECW Championship at WWE’s Vengeance: Night of Champions pay-per-view event the night they found his body (“U.S. House of Representatives” 81), demonstrating that he was still performing at a level that did not evoke any suspicion. Yet, an autopsy revealed that Benoit’s brain, having received dozens of concussions and other traumas over his wrestling career of 20-plus years, was comparable to “the brain of an 85-year-old Alzheimer’s patient” (Shoemaker, “Dead Wrestler of the Week: Chris Benoit”). The specifics of Benoit’s motive (and thus his culpability, as some fans argue the degree to which Benoit was even lucid while committing the murders) are still a contentious topic of debate over ten years later, and at the core of the debate is the extent of his debilitation, as fans hold that “the very wrestling skills that made Benoit one of the most respected professional wrestlers contributed to his brutal demise” (Cherney and Lindemann).

A 2004 “Don’t try this at home” announcement features a clip of Chris Benoit wincing as he lies in the ring and grips his shoulder as his voiceover explains “I ruptured a disc which fragmented into my spinal column” (WWE, “Don’t Try This At Home”). Here, WWE folds his experience of an in-ring injury into a public service

announcement as a way of building the corporation's public relations, demonstrating the immediate hazards of the in-ring performances, and situating the primary risk of such performances within the realm of impairment rather than the ongoing "slow death" of debility. After the deaths of the Benoit family in 2007, Chris was immediately removed from all such announcements and all programming altogether. To date, the final mention of Benoit in any capacity came from a live address by WWE chairman Vince McMahon the week after the deaths of Benoit and his family, in which McMahon tells the audience that "the facts of this horrific tragedy are now apparent. Therefore, other than my comments, there will be no mention of Mr. Benoit's name" ("Vince McMahon Statement"), a promise of tacit erasure that has remained true.

Thus, Chris Benoit's in-ring body of work is now recorded solely in columns like "Dead Wrestler of the Week" rather than through any official channel in WWE, with the career of Nancy Benoit, herself a retired onscreen manager, erased through omission even further. That WWE would promote a discrete injury suffered by Chris Benoit as part of a public service announcement but remain entirely silent on Benoit's debility, the slow, built-up traumas sustained "as a normal consequence of laboring" (Puar, *The Right to Maim* xvi), reveals the ways in which debility works to produce laborers that are available for maiming through a framework of individualized disability empowerment (Puar, *The Right to Maim* xvii).

In 2016, a group of 53 professional wrestlers (with a few estates representing the now-deceased) filed a class-action lawsuit against WWE, claiming the corporation failed to prevent and/or address repeated brain and neurological traumas that allegedly left numerous plaintiffs with memory loss, depression, and other cognitive issues. Mostly consisting of former wrestlers over the age of 50, the injuries they sought recourse for were within the realm of debility, which WWE runs on and profits from but does not openly recognize. The lawsuit also refers to WWE classifying all professional wrestling performers as "independent contractors," which, in the words of the lawsuit, are "contracts of adhesion intended solely for the benefit of WWE and VKM [Vince McMahon]" (Paglino). As independent contractors, WWE performers are not legally considered employees despite those performers being precluded from working elsewhere, and as such WWE does not provide its performers with health insurance.

WWE does openly acknowledge that its performers are independent contractors rather than employees, using it as a cudgel against such criticisms. In 2010, WWE released a "Setting the Record Straight" statement that responded to various published criticisms of WWE, notably released while former WWE CEO Linda McMahon was running for a seat in the United States Senate and receiving

criticism for WWE's business practices. In the release, WWE claims that the corporation "covers 100 percent of all costs associated with any in-ring related injuries and rehabilitation." Thus, WWE will only provide care for injury and impairment that occurs during the performance of wrestling, exercising a "right to maim," or a "right expressive of sovereign power" (Puar, *The Right to Maim* xviii) that allows the maiming of subjugated bodies while maintaining a humanitarian image and profiting on the wearing down of the very bodies it purports to be helping. To better understand the ways that WWE masks its production of debility, I now turn to the ways WWE produces debility along lines of gender.

## Gender

When WWE acknowledges disability and impairment, it has historically primarily focused on the men in such acknowledgements. Particularly in the hypermasculine world of sport and athletics, which I extend to the realm of professional wrestling despite its scripted quality, gender bias is compounded through intersections of disability (Haegele et al. 306). The construction of disability and gender is a continuing historical project, as "disability has been used to cast the form and functioning of female bodies as non-normative" (Garland-Thomson 7). Thus, disability and gender and both mutually constituted and deeply intertwined.

Feminist scholarship has called into question the Lacanian notion of the "flat mirror, which reflects women's bodies only as absence" (Inahara 48). The correlation of bodies as absent to professional wrestling is twofold: first, all disability, impairment, and even debility experienced by women is made to appear absent. Historically, WWE programming has been dominated by men's performances. Since 2015, however, WWE has made great strides in increasing the amount of television time and storyline opportunities given to women in the company, beginning with the "Women's Revolution" which led to an influx of women performers from NXT and the dropping of the "Divas" moniker in favor of the more equitable "Superstars." Further, WWE produced its first, and to date, only all-women's pay-per-view, WWE Evolution, in October 2018. WWE recently reinstated tag team championships for the women's division, as well, which had been absent since the 1980s, and for the first time in its 35-year history women headlined WrestleMania in 2019. Moments such as these are promising in terms of WWE's moves toward equitable promotion of women performers and a stark move away from depictions in the past few decades in which women were overtly sexualized in contrast to men, who were primarily presented as demonstrating "athletic prowess in a dangerous combat" (Mazer 106).

That said, the work WWE has in terms of gender equity writ large is compounded by the inequity of disability along lines of gender. WWE has indeed

created greater space for women to display their athletic prowess in the ring, but this broadening of opportunity for women largely stays within the realm of acute injury. For example, performers such as Becky Lynch and Shayna Baszler have recently utilized bloodshed, once a device exclusively utilized by men in the company, in their storylines, which unsettles the historical hypersexualization of women performers but nonetheless leaves intact the veiling of debility, likely even increasing said risk for women performers as they approach a comparable amount of bodily trauma in their performances.

Until the aforementioned Women's Revolution, women rarely if ever appeared in WWE's "Don't try this at home" public service announcements despite routinely experiencing broken bones, concussions, and slow wearing down of their bodies in comparable ways to the men who perform. This reinforces the ways that WWE has situated women's bodies as hypersexual, and in order to maintain that absent of disability, impairment, and/or debility, as is typical for mass media portrayals of sexuality for people with disabilities (Ellis 1). As the "assumption that disabled people cannot be sexual beings is a feature of disability oppression" (Hill 4), the ableist logic that has pervaded WWE media texts dictates that women cannot fulfill their hypersexual role if they have a disability, not only limiting the scope of women's sexuality but tacitly erasing the possibility of representing women with disabilities at all.

Professional wrestling is notorious as a hypermasculine spectacle, as "in the arena ... wrestlers play out assumptions of what real men are and do" (Mazer 116). The spectacular quality of these performances lay bare foundational elements of hypermasculinity such as promotion of bullying, homophobia, and control over women (Jhally). Even in training, professional wrestlers come to understand pain as "a testament to authenticity and realness" (R. Smith 141), flaunting limping, bleeding, and other indicators of pain as a means of legitimating their passion and sacrifice for the industry.

In producing cultural norms surrounding manhood and masculinity, these performances also produce meanings about womanhood, femininity, and disability, all subjugated by virtue of their distance from the hypermasculine athletic and violent ideal performed by the men in the ring. Despite attempts at marginalizing disability and erasing debility in certain bodies, a feminist disability studies approach reminds us that "disability, like gender and race, is everywhere, once we know how to look for it" (Garland-Thomson 28). This leads into the second correlation to professional wrestling: in such texts, disability writ large comes to be situated, similarly, as a lack or an absence. Under this paradigm, "the imaginary body is an able body" (Inahara 47), marking that even scripted, excessive spectacles

like professional wrestling reify able-normativity and reduce the imaginations of scriptwriters and audiences alike in ways that preclude full participation from performers with disabilities and/or impairments.

### **Compulsory Able-Bodiedness**

To clarify how WWE reifies able-normativity, “the ableist notion that being abled is not merely default but ideal” (Brown 32) in its onscreen narratives, I turn to Zach Gowen’s brief stint as a professional wrestler in WWE. Gowen, signed as an independent contractor at age 20 in 2003, was the first mainstream “one-legged wrestler.” His left leg had been amputated, and though he made use of a prosthetic leg as he walked to the ring, he wrestled without the use of the prosthetic. At first, Gowen may seem to subvert what is otherwise a pervasive ideology in WWE, that of compulsory able-bodiedness, an insistence that “what is both moral and desirable in the neoliberal social contexts of late capitalism is necessarily heteronormative and nondisabled” (Erevelles 83). Upon reflection, however, it becomes evident that this representation of disability in professional wrestling ultimately reinforces old tropes of “overcoming tragedy and lack,” which in turn, actually work to “reconsolidate the able body” (Puar, *The Right to Maim* 84).

I turn to a specific performance as a way of encapsulating the way in which WWE positioned and utilized Gowen’s body: a 2003 episode of WWE’s televised *SmackDown!* program in which Gowen, in his hometown of Detroit, was forced (in storyline) to wrestle Brock Lesnar, a brutal villain at the time. Gowen was presented as a hometown hero as he made his entrance, with local fans cheering as his entrance music attested, “Nobody’s gonna stand in my way. I’m gonna do this my way!” In addition to Gowen’s “one-leggedness,” the ring announcers draw the audience’s attention to the absurd weight discrepancy between the two wrestlers: the 6-foot-3 Lesnar billed at 286 pounds versus Gowen, less than 6 feet tall and billed at 155 pounds, barely half of Lesnar’s weight. Through this sort of narrativizing, WWE produces Gowen along stereotypical lines, in which characters with disabilities “shore up the boundaries of normality and humanness,” conflating the hypermasculine abled body with centrality and normality” (Ellis 1) rather than transgressing conventional masculinity.

When the bell rings, the villainous Lesnar leaves the ring to go menace Gowen’s mother and grandmother, both of whom are seated in the front row of the audience. Gowen takes advantage by vaulting over the ring ropes and sending Lesnar crashing to the floor. Through this hypermasculine act of protecting the women in his family through violence, Gowen takes up crip nationalism (Puar, *The Right to Maim*), a “conditional, tentative form of citizenship” (70). In the realm of

professional wrestling, Gowen attains this temporary citizenship by demonstrating his ability to perform the same hypermasculine function as the nondisabled wrestlers. This conditional citizenship “produces privileged disabled bodies in distinction to various ‘others’” (Puar, “Prognosis Time” 165), functioning primarily to reinscribe and expand hypermasculinity rather than loosening its grip over professional wrestling storytelling.

Gowen’s protective leap onto Lesnar is the last offensive maneuver he performs as Lesnar quickly takes control and does not relent. He specifically targets some attacks on Gowen’s leg, at one point tossing him leg-first into a steel ring post to the disgust of the audience and the ring announcers. Soon after, Lesnar uses a steel chair to, in professional wrestling parlance, “bust Gowen open,” hitting him in the head, which in a matter of moments produces a stream of blood down Gowen’s face. Bloodshed, it should be noted, is yet another example of the ways that wrestlers are made to maim and be maimed as a “normal consequence of laboring,” (Puar, *The Right to Maim* xvi). Despite fan speculation as to hidden “ketchup packets” or other means of feigning bloodshed, the most common way that wrestlers feign it is by actually slicing open their skin (Shoemaker, “Dead Wrestler of the Week”). Using razor blades hidden in their boots, wristpads, or tights, wrestlers who seek to add bloodshed to a match will covertly cut their vessel-rich foreheads. Wrestlers will usually do so just above the hairline, to make the cut less obvious, but as a result of these practices, foreheads with deep divots as well as diseases transmitted through blood are routine testimonies of the bodies of retired wrestlers.

Back to Gowen, the match ends with him on a stretcher, face covered in blood. As medical personnel start to remove Gowen from the ringside area, Lesnar pushes past them and tips Gowen off the stretcher onto the floor, adding one last insult and injury to Gowen as the fans and announcers verbally protest. Here, a ring announcer makes clear function of the performed destruction of Gowen’s body, shouting, “I know I’m supposed to remain impartial, but damn it, I hope Brock Lesnar gets broken bones at SummerSlam on Sunday! I hope Brock Lesnar gets what is coming to him!” The spectacle of so brutally punishing Gowen’s body, then, was in service of selling that weekend’s SummerSlam pay-per-view event, revealing both the underlying capitalist logic of the beatdown as well as the use of Gowen’s body to further highlight Lesnar’s. In such performances, “the able body cannot solidify its own abilities in the absence of its binary Other” (Mitchell and Snyder 368), so when WWE does use people with disabilities, it does so to re-center the able body and shore up the entertainment potential of able bodies at the expense of those with disabilities. Though at first Gowen’s brief run as a heroic character in WWE may seem to subvert compulsory able-bodiedness in WWE, the trauma inflicted on

his body in service of the able body reveals that Gowen has only been subsumed into an ideology of compulsory able-bodiedness. Considering Gowen's positioning within a such an ideology as well as his quick unceremonious release from the company shortly after, Gowen's role as performer in WWE demonstrates how performers with disabilities are made to "serve as the yardstick that resurrects social difference only to hasten its instantaneous disappearance" (Erevelles 83).

The match with Lesnar was the narrative peak of Gowen's WWE career, as it is the moment his WWE career is most often remembered by. He soon faded from the spotlight and was released from the company a few months later. Like so many wrestlers, Gowen turned to alcohol and painkillers to cope with the long-term damage inflicted on his body. A few months after losing his job, Gowen "lived with his mother, scraping money together for pills" (Dilbert). Though Gowen eventually returned to the independent professional wrestling scene, his WWE career exemplifies how representation alone is insufficient for people with disabilities under a regime of compulsory able-bodiedness. By merely representing disability through Gowen without seeking restorative and proactive justice for those impacted by debility, WWE maintains an image of care while expanding the limits of the bodies it will exploit and debilitate. WWE deemed Gowen "available for injury" (Puar, *The Right to Maim* xvi), another body to be exploited and debilitated as means of building up the credibility of the able body rather than Gowen's, and thus requiring and reproducing debilitation.

## Conclusion

WWE's production of debility and limited representation of disability exemplifies Jasbir Puar's central point that disability and debility are "necessary supplements" (*The Right to Maim* xvii) in order to maintain precarity for designated bodies such as those of WWE's performers. WWE performances rely on the production of debility, even as they attempt to mask its effects outside of kayfabe. Performers routinely suffer "the debilitating ongoingness of structural inequality and suffering" (Puar, *The Right to Maim* 1) as a result of both the punishing quality of the maneuvers they are expected to perform as well as the subsequent lack of redressive care such as health insurance or disability benefits upon release from the company. The necessity of outside columns such as "Dead Wrestler of the Week" demonstrates the extent to which WWE attempts to erase the impacts of debility even as it produces it. That professional wrestlers die young often enough for a long-running weekly column to proliferate indicates that such wrestlers as a population experience debilitation in the service of maximizing WWE's profits as a corporation.

Though representations of performers with disabilities are limited, it is worth noting that this is not equally true among all axes. Gowen is a rare example of a performer with a disability treated relatively seriously despite being folded into an ideology of compulsory able-bodiedness, which he accesses and assimilates into through hypermasculinity. WWE reproduces conventional gender roles in its performances, which has particularly bleak implications for women who have disabilities. As women wrestlers have been historically treated as “eye candy” or a titillating sideshow supplement to the athleticism of the men who perform, their (hyper)sexuality is paramount, and disability oppression dictates that women with disabilities rarely are allowed to access normative sexualities in media representations (Hill 4). Gowen’s masculinity allowed him to forego the perceived need to be presented as sexualized and sexually available, but such an option was not available for women with similar disabilities. Though WWE situated Gowen’s performances in deeply problematic ways, producing narratives that strengthen the able body at the expense of the disabled body, a woman performing Gowen’s role would likely never even have the chance to create such narratives, as a woman wrestling with a disability would have been fully illegible within the hypermasculine and able-normative context of WWE. That said, WWE’s representations of women have markedly improved in recent years, so that illegibility may fade with time if it has not already.

In all, WWE limits its representation of onscreen disability and impairment to moments in which such bodies can be used to reinforce a compulsory able-bodiedness. Further, WWE imposes debility onto its performers, denying healthcare while demanding performances that, considering the “Dead Wrestler of the Week” column, demonstrably lead to slow death. The sole means through which WWE overtly represents disability and impairment is through its “Don’t try this at home” public service announcements, which again limit the scope of disability and impairment to the realm of the accidental (Puar, *The Right to Maim* 64).

Debility also has a legitimating function in professional wrestling. Though debilitating injury that occurs during a show is highly disruptive in the moment, such instances work to blur the lines between reality and fakery, which “likely benefits the business of pro wrestling since spectators always experience a potential for real violence” (R. Smith 138). This expectation of “real violence,” compounded by a hypermasculine culture that valorizes pain, facilitates the continued production and veiling of debility in the industry.

Thus, WWE utilizes debility and disability in tandem to produce a friendly corporate image while harvesting profits from the debilitation of their performers’ bodies. For example, utilizing injuries suffered by Chris Benoit in public service

announcements but scrubbing them once the grim extent of his debilitation became impossible to ignore, WWE demonstrates the ability to control not only the extent to which the bodies of its professional wrestlers are debilitated but also which kinds of bodily harm are even acknowledged. Remembering that “the biopolitical distribution between disability as an exceptional accident or misfortune, and the proliferation of debilitation ... is largely maintained through disability rights frameworks (Puar, *The Right to Maim* 66), WWE positions itself as an advocate for cure and prevention of accidents that occur during wrestling performances while eschewing care for those debilitated over time by the very same performances. In doing so, WWE exemplifies the symbiotic relationship between limited disability representation and the relentless production of debility, with disability representations masking the myriad ways in which WWE debilitates its performers.

By recontextualizing professional wrestlers as a population of exploited workers who face debilitation and early death at significant rates, fans, scholars, and industry professionals alike may continue to work toward improved working conditions for these workers. The professional wrestling industry is ever-shifting, and though efforts toward better working conditions through unionization have been squashed in decades past (Shoemaker, “Dead Wrestler of the Week”), similar efforts are once again growing, with wrestling organizations like We the Independent seeking to “inform independent artists of their working rights” and “implement best practice for the conditions and working environment for independent contractors” (“What Are WE?”). By collaborating in this time of industry flux, professional wrestling studies and disability studies researchers can jointly account for the unique bodily traumas in the professional wrestling industry, chart out paths for better conditions within the industry, and work toward unveiling the production of debility on a wider scale.

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## Playing the Savage: Professional Wrestling's Portrayal of the Exotic Through James "Kamala" Harris

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*In the world of American professional wrestling, cultural performance has traditionally been used and reinforced for the sake of developing characters and stories that bring fans into the arena or into the mass audience of television and online viewers of wrestling shows. Historically, some of these cultural performances have constituted a xenophobic cultural space where people of color and foreigners are typically given the role of the villains, or "heels," while white performers of domestic origin are typically given the roles of the heroes, or "faces." These cultural performances enact racial, gender, and political ideologies that reproduce hegemonic relations of power. This study focuses on the career of African-American wrestler James Harris and the evolution of his cultural performance as "Kamala" to illustrate how ideologies of race and colonialism intersect to reproduce historical and evolving stereotypes in U.S. popular culture. Using content analysis, I examine a selection of performances that represented turning points in the career of Kamala, including the creation and introduction of the character to regional audiences in Memphis wrestling in 1982 and his introduction to national audiences with the World Wrestling Federation several years later. Additionally, Kamala is examined using Schudson's five dimensions for determining the strength of a cultural object to gauge the extent to which Kamala can be viewed as a cultural object.*

*Keywords: performance; colonialism; exotic; authenticity; culture*

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Professional wrestling is a site of study that has been generally overlooked by researchers, arguably due to its reputation as a low-culture form of entertainment. Wrestling evolved from a serious sport based on Greco-Roman and catch-as-catch-can competition styles in the early 1900s to what is marketed today by WWE as "sports-entertainment." Dubbed the "spectacle of excess" (Barthes 13), the original competitive concept of professional wrestling would be combined with other facets of entertainment—like the narrative story structure and drama of film—by

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wrestling promoters as a way of drawing in crowds and “legitimizing morality for a spectacle of pain and suffering, crusade and revenge” (Rickard 136). With this change, wrestlers were no longer two equally worthy competitors engaged in combat but rather protagonist and antagonist telling a story through their choreographed sequence of moves. As wrestlers traveled the world, the story performed in front of one audience could be retold in front of another audience. With the advent of televised wrestling, one performance could be broadcast to thousands in an area, and now through satellite and online streaming technology, wrestling is seen by millions around the world.

Much in the same way films and fictional television programs have been categorized as media texts worth studying for their impact on culture and society, professional wrestling performances must also be studied as texts with an impact on society, particularly as wrestling has grown from regional entertainment to a worldwide form of entertainment by way of organizations such as World Wrestling Entertainment. Similar to other narrative-driven forms of entertainment like film and fictional television shows, professional wrestling uses a wide array of characters from diverse backgrounds to tell its stories. Characters and performers in professional wrestling act as global cultural representations and often incorporate cultural stereotypes into the portrayals. According to MacFarlane:

In wrestling, such characters and their progressing narratives remain closely, if not inextricably, tied to the performer themselves, defined by their personal idiosyncrasies of physicality and capacity to author in-ring narratives that are simultaneously varied and familiar (152).

As a result, British wrestlers are portrayed as being highly civilized yet smarmy while black wrestlers rap and dance their way to the ring, Mexican wrestlers wear masks and wrestle the *lucha libre* style, and wrestlers with a southern United States accent are cast as beer-swilling, bar-fighting, blue-collar rednecks. Non-white characters are usually tasked with performing racial and cultural stereotypes while white characters are not typically burdened with stereotypical portrayals to the same extent. Race can play a part in the designation of the hero and villain roles. Non-white wrestlers typically assume more threatening roles as “heels”—the wrestling term for the antagonist—while white wrestlers often assume roles as “faces”—the wrestling term for the protagonist. However, race and stereotypes were not always concrete determinants of role as some non-white performers such as Junkyard Dog, Koko B. Ware, and Bobo Brazil were largely presented as fan favorites during their careers while white wrestlers such as the “Million Dollar Man” Ted DiBiase and “Ravishing” Rick Rude were predominantly heels during theirs.

Yet crafting narratives and characters that are “varied yet familiar” is how professional wrestling audiences are exposed to the exotic. To establish a narrative and create interesting characters, professional wrestling storytellers draw from a variety of sources, including cultures different from those of themselves and their audience. Root notes that “cultures from which aesthetic or ceremonial forms are obtained are usually deemed more interesting ... more authentic and exotic by those who are doing the taking” (70). Guided by Foster’s view of the exotic as a symbolic system, Huggan posits that exoticism is:

A particular mode of aesthetic perception – one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them and which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to immanent mystery ... a kind of semiotic circuit that oscillates between the opposite poles of strangeness and familiarity (13).

When applied to tourism Minca notes that the construction of exotic tourist destinations is largely dependent on “an increasing stratification of demand” (392) decided by outsiders. This results in what Prideaux et al. describe as the creation of “new spaces that conform to the current pattern of internationalized mass tourism in terms of structure, use of space, commodification of cuisine and attractions, often with only marginal concessions to the culture and heritage of the host society” (7). Foreign sites of significant culture and importance offer these authentic encounters through comfortable and familiar means so that tourists are “given the impression that they are embarking on an exotic adventure but within the confines of their own experiences of cultural normality” (7). Thus, the addition of the exotic adds to the spectacle of professional wrestling by allowing fans to experience something new, different, and authentic in a familiar setting: the conventional professional wrestling performance.

The broader research problem explored in this study is how non-white cultures are portrayed in televised wrestling: a mediated text that has typically relied on cultural stereotypes to develop characters and to construct an entertainment narrative. To accomplish this preceding goal, this study will focus on the construction and evolution of one character: Kamala. Standing 6 feet and 7 inches tall and billed as the “Ugandan Giant” and the “Ugandan Headhunter,” audiences would easily assume that Kamala really was a “savage” imported from Africa. Kayfabe aside, Kamala’s move set was unrefined, he was strong without appearing to have spent significant time in the gym, and his wrestling attire was little more than black trunks, a loincloth and tribal war paint on his face and chest. Kamala became one of the most colorful characters in the history of wrestling and, despite

being billed as a “savage” from Uganda, he was portrayed by U.S.-born wrestler James Harris.

Born in Senatobia, Mississippi in 1950, Harris made his wrestling debut in 1978. He began his career as “Sugar Bear” Harris but largely went unnoticed in the wrestling world until he moved to England in the early 1980s and adopted the heel persona of the “Mississippi Mauler” Big Jim Harris (LaRoche). As the “Mississippi Mauler,” Harris would intimidate his opponents by trash talking and pounding his chest during matches, much to the displeasure of English audiences. However, despite finding success in England as the Mississippi Mauler, Harris would return to the United States in 1982 after suffering a broken ankle. Upon being offered work in the Memphis wrestling territory, Harris and Memphis wrestler/promoter Jerry Lawler developed the character of “Kamala: The Ugandan Giant” (LaRoche). According to Harris, Lawler thought that the character was one that would make Harris “more money than you ever made in your life” (“The Rise and Fall”). Though the gimmick was outlandish and somewhat problematic for its time, Harris was not ashamed as he “felt at home” portraying the character and knew it was “just what I wanted” (“Emotional Kamala Shoot”). Kamala was heavily promoted as a “savage cannibal” who was rumored to be the former bodyguard of Ugandan dictator Idi Amin. Promotional vignettes showed Kamala clad in a loin cloth and face paint, walking barefoot through the Ugandan plains and tall grass as a narrator warned audiences of Kamala’s impending arrival to the Memphis wrestling territory.

Kamala would appear in front of crowds, making his entrance each time with African tribal music and a large tribal war mask and spear. Led to the ring by Friday (later renamed Kim Chee), a masked handler in safari expedition clothing (presumably to protect his identity as a smuggler and human trafficker), Kamala would be unleashed in the ring and ordered by his handler to destroy his opponent. According to Harris, adding the handler was something that had never been done before and it helped the character appear “more jungleish, African, wild, more of a savage ... it made me look uncontrollable back during the time people really believed it” (*Wrestling Epicenter*). Kamala’s savagery was displayed in his non-technical wrestling style, which consisted almost entirely of wild chops, body splashes, and bear hugs. His savagery was also evident in his lack of awareness for the rules of professional wrestling, as he often attempted to pin his opponents while they lay face-down on the canvas. Harris incorporated this detail into his performance of Kamala as he knew the character was a cannibal who was not aware of the rules so “as long as I’m on top of him, it didn’t make no difference which way he was turned ... I was thinking they was supposed to count him out” (“Kamala The Ugandan

Headhunter”). Once the savage had defeated his opponent, Kamala’s handler would subdue him once more and lead him out of the arena.

Eventually, Kamala would make his way to the national stage with the World Wrestling Federation (now known as World Wrestling Entertainment) for two runs with the company, once beginning in 1984 and again in 1992. Despite presenting professional wrestling as family-friendly fare, Kamala was still initially portrayed in the World Wrestling Federation as a “savage,” even going so far as eating a “live” chicken on one of the organization’s television programs (WWE, “List This!”). During his second run with the company, Kamala was given a sympathetic face role as a mistreated and misunderstood savage and subsequently paired with the organization’s resident man of religion, Reverend Slick. Slick would attempt to civilize Kamala by having him participate in acts considered to be “civilized” such as bowling. After his final run in the World Wrestling Federation, Harris’ Kamala would largely become a fixture on the independent wrestling scene until Harris was forced into retirement in 2012 due to complications from diabetes, which led to Harris having both legs amputated.

Kamala’s role as a memorable and mass-consumed culturally stereotyped character in professional wrestling makes him a relevant subject for the study, especially considering that wrestling audiences might never see a character like Kamala again due to the wrestling industry gradually inching toward becoming more reality-based, more socially aware, and more culturally sensitive.

## **Literature Review**

Though limited in number, the scope of academic studies on professional wrestling has been rather wide. From ethnographic studies on professional wrestling audiences and their emotional investment in wrestlers and storylines (Burke; Koh; Saayman and Kruger) to the meaning that wrestlers assign to “pain” as a culture (Smith), wrestling has served as a useful site for cultural studies. Particularly important is literature looking at how professional wrestling has impacted society and popular culture.

As professional wrestling is centered on characters settling their disputes through combat, several studies have examined sport-entertainment’s use of violence and the potential to bring out aggressive behavior in its viewers. As “naïve viewers,” Tamborini et al. examined 36 hours of World Wrestling Entertainment programming in fall 2002 and coded for the acts of violence that appeared in the programming, using coding schemas designed by the National Television Violence Study. Tamborini et al. found that “violence in professional wrestling is not only unremitting, but it is more likely to be portrayed as justified, unpunished, and

lacking extreme harm,” which in turn is likely to influence naïve viewers to view violent behavior as an acceptable trait that can be acted out without fear of admonishment (“The Raw Nature” 216). Using the same 36-hour sample of World Wrestling Entertainment footage from fall 2002, Tamborini et al. found that acts of verbal aggression were more likely to occur in televised professional wrestling than acts of violence. Furthermore, the three most prominent types of verbal attacks in professional wrestling were shown to be attacks on character, attacks on competence, and swearing directed toward a particular individual. Tamborini et al. also found that while anger-driven verbal aggression is a response to amusement-driven verbal aggression, the use of humor “undercuts the seriousness of verbal aggression,” thereby making it seem as if verbal aggression is not problematic (“Talking Smack” 253). In a separate study using the same sample, Lachlan et al. found that when acts of violent retribution were performed by faces, those acts were performed without approval from an on-screen authority figure and they tended to be larger in scale than the original violent act that was perpetrated on them.

In an examination of how race plays a role in character development in World Wrestling Entertainment, Taylor suggested that racialized gimmicks help non-white performers “gain visibility” and “appear different and deviant” from the other performers on the roster (311). However, while offering performers the chance to stand out and appear different, these racialized gimmicks also affect how high up the card a non-white performer can advance. If a non-white performer is saddled with a comedy gimmick, such as those of Korean-American redneck Jimmy Wang Yang or cross-dressing Italian Santino Marella, they have less of a chance of reinventing themselves, leading to a lack of consideration for a main event spot and of taking the company’s top championship.

White performers, however, are often allowed to reinvent themselves as edgy, goal-driven competitors free of stereotypes. An example is white performer John Cena, who first appeared in World Wrestling Entertainment in 2002 as a wrestler in plain tights who did not have a connection with the audience. Cena would soon adopt the persona of the “Doctor of Thuganomics” and perform many traits usually reserved for African American wrestlers. He began wearing “fitted caps and throw-back basketball jerseys” and traded in his tights and boots for jean shorts and high top sneakers (Taylor 316). He delivered freestyle raps insulting his opponent while walking to the ring, introduced his mantra of “Hustle, Loyalty, and Respect” and held various World Wrestling Entertainment championship belts—including the top title in the organization—which he often converted into spinner belts reminiscent of spinner tire rims that were popular in African American culture at the time (Taylor 317).

How nationalities and U.S. prosperity have factored into professional wrestling's presentation has also served as the basis for several studies related to professional wrestling. A prominent historical character in professional wrestling is that of Hussein Khosrow Vaziri, better known to wrestling audiences as "The Iron Sheik." The Iron Sheik's gimmick was that of an Iranian nationalist who touted the superiority of Iran while insulting America and spitting on her hallowed ground. The Iron Sheik would enter the arena carrying the Iranian flag, dressed in a robe with pointy Middle-Eastern inspired wrestling boots on his feet and Iranian headdress on his head. Rahmani's examination of the Iron Sheik looked at the character as one created out of response to the 1979 Iranian Revolution, with the Iron Sheik serving as a representation of Iran that could be defeated by American wrestlers like Sgt. Slaughter and Hulk Hogan to symbolically re-establish America's dominance in the eyes of wrestling audiences. Rahmani also pointed out that by entering the wrestling business, foreign wrestlers like the Iron Sheik are forced to become "caricatures that perpetuate ideas of American innocence and benevolence," while reinforcing jingoistic stereotypes of whatever country America is at war with (108). Rahmani also references the character of Muhammad Hassan, an Arab-American character introduced after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, who often spoke of being judged and mistreated for being an Arab in the United States but did so in a way that elicited anger from the audience rather than sympathy. Hassan's purpose was to play on the security fears of Americans post 9/11 and give audiences a figure that they could direct their anger and hatred toward. Just as Rahmani argued that the Iron Sheik was a representation of Iran used to raise American morale, Nevitt noted that Hassan was created for a similar purpose: to show that World Wrestling Entertainment was representative of the United States of America. Having a wrestler from the U.S. vanquish a foe like Hassan would be equivalent to the United States rising up and defeating terrorism within its borders, thereby raising national morale. However, the portrayal of Hassan caused much controversy, as images of Hassan performing a beheading gesture on his opponent and Hassan's unconscious manager being carried from the ring in a way resembling the "public funerals for suicide bombers" upset many viewers who felt art imitated life a little too closely (Nevitt 327). As a result, the creation of "foreign menace" heels took on a more traditional approach by relying on the classic formula that foreign threats should be "monstrous fighting savage(s) with a desire to inflict pain" (328).

Academic research on professional wrestling has certainly identified patterns in the representation of race and culture in the context of U.S. professional wrestling televised around the world. This study seeks to contribute to the literature by exploring identity construction in U.S. professional wrestling, especially how

minorities have been portrayed. This paper will further examine identity and race construction to reveal how the use of old and new stereotypes is still a dominant narrative strategy promoted by American professional wrestling organizations like World Wrestling Entertainment.

## Methods

Kamala will be analyzed as a media text in two parts. The first part will consist of a qualitative content analysis being performed on several YouTube videos relating to important points in the development and portrayal of the Kamala character. These videos have been viewed in chronological order and selected for their accessibility as well as the quality of the content. Rather than focus on the wrestling of the character, they represent the rhetorical presentation, performance of culture, and views that others have of Kamala. Upon viewing the videos, they were analyzed for the way that Kamala is presented visually, as well as for any dialogue that refers to Kamala. Dialogue found to reference Kamala will be examined for the content of the message and coded according to what the tone of the dialogue is, such as a white performer referencing the character in a way that could be considered racist.

Second, the character of Kamala will be analyzed according to Schudson's five dimensions for determining the strength of a cultural object: retrievability, rhetorical force, resonance, institutional retention, and resolution. According to Schudson, retrievability of a cultural object means that audiences should be able to access the object freely. Rhetorical force measures the impact and power that the cultural object has, while resonance refers to how the cultural object fits into discussions of society. Institutional retention refers to whether or not the object becomes ingrained in our everyday lives or has a larger impact on society. The last dimension, resolution, refers to whether or not a cultural object causes audiences to react to encountering the object. It is important to consider how Kamala fits these dimensions as he represents a cultural object in the world of professional wrestling and pop culture, and establishing his efficacy can only serve to improve the way the character is interpreted by other scholars.

## Analysis

To examine the evolution of the character chronologically, the first video analyzed was "Jimmy Hart offers Kamala watermelons and women! (8-28-82) Memphis Wrestling" (Memphis Wrestling Video Vault). Visually, Kamala is represented as a "savage" being distinctly out of his natural environment. Jimmy Hart leads Kamala into the studio, but when Kamala becomes distracted by the audience, Hart begins to clap his hands to regain Kamala's attention as if he were attempting to get the attention of a small child or animal. Kamala paces the studio,

never straying too far from his handler Hart, and when he sees that the camera is aimed at him he responds by raising his spear and pointing it at the camera in preparation to attack the potential threat. When Kamala is in the ring he begins pacing, similar to the way an animal paces when caged, as he waits for his opponent to arrive. Later in the video Kamala stands over the body of his subdued opponent, waving his spear to fend off other wrestlers from attending to and saving his fallen opponent. This visual is indicative of the savage hunter who fights off others, man or animal, from stealing the prey that he worked hard to obtain. Kamala only leaves the ring when Hart once again calls to Kamala and claps his hands to get the savage's attention.

From an aural standpoint, multiple allusions are made to Kamala's status as a foreign and ignorant savage. Kamala's handler Hart exclaims at the start of his promo:

"The man was mistreated! Can you imagine, this man, Kamala: The Ugandan Giant, has never ever tasted a watermelon in his life! He don't even know what a watermelon tastes like! Can you imagine depriving this giant of that? Can you imagine, Kamala has never even been with a woman in the United States! ... Can't you imagine: Kamala, a big watermelon party with Kamala, and all those pretty little girls? This man would go crazy! Watermelons and women, Kamala! Woo!"

Kamala's opponent, Jerry Lawler, later comes out and issues verbal threats to Kamala that include highly noticeable aspects of racism based on Kamala's appearance. Lawler refers to Kamala as a "big Ubangi," and threatens "I'm going to take that big Black jerk and I'm going to beat that paint off his face and then I'm going to wet his lips and stick him to that wall right over there" (Memphis Wrestling Video Vault).

In both Hart's and Lawler's dialogues, the racist and stereotypical overtones are overt. Though Kamala is being portrayed as a foreign savage, Hart's statement concerning Kamala's lack of experience with watermelons and his sexuality immediately links him to stereotypical portrayals of African-Americans in the media. Meanwhile, Lawler's threat (and the audience's subsequent cheers) to wet Kamala's lips and stick him to the wall is indicative of a Southern culture that has traditionally been prejudiced toward and used violence against black people. Thus the threat to stick Kamala to a wall by his lips is on par with threatening to lynch Kamala.

The second video analyzed, "Championship Wrestling from Georgia chapter 15," contains the debut vignette promoting the arrival of Kamala in Georgia Championship Wrestling in 1984. This video represents a turning point in the career of Kamala as initially he had been performed only in the Memphis wrestling

territory; however, two years after being created in Memphis with Lawler, Kamala had become a successful character that could now perform in different territories and draw a paying crowd. In a short interview segment preceding the vignette, Jimmy Hart proclaims that Kamala “doesn’t know a lot of holds, he doesn’t know a lot of moves, he just beats people, he beats them in the right way!” By referencing that Kamala has no technical proficiency as a wrestler but instead as a “savage” who beats people “in the right way,” Hart reinforces the idea that Kamala is a creature whose sole purpose in a wrestling ring is to hurt others and follow the directions of his handler. Visually, the debut vignette features Kamala in his natural surroundings, the “Ugandan Jungle,” and is shot to look as if it were part of a nature documentary. The audio portion highly supports the idea that Kamala is a savage as the dramatic voiceover references Kamala’s physical features, stating that Kamala is “the ugliest man known to professional wrestling today” and is “as strong as some of the largest animals known to man.” By equating Kamala’s strength to those of large animals, the savage stereotype is reinforced as it once again presents Kamala as a creature that is, much like an animal, driven entirely by instinct rather than logic.

In the third video, titled “Event Center – Kamala & Slick,” Kamala was now being presented as a face. Although beginning his second run with the World Wrestling Federation in 1992 as a heel, by late 1993 Kamala had gained sympathy from the audience and become a face. It should be noted that Harris has said this change in Kamala’s character was determined by WWF owner Vince McMahon, and it was not something that he enjoyed at all as he preferred performing Kamala as a savage heel (*IYH Wrestling*). Kamala’s character turn started when he began to be abused by his handlers as a result of losing matches. Eventually the abuse became too much and Kamala was “saved” by the Reverend Slick, who from that point on became Kamala’s manager and “spiritual advisor.” In the video, Kamala is still visually represented as a savage through the wearing of his war mask, shield, and loin cloth, as well as his unfocused movements and slight pacing while his new advisor addresses the camera. While Kamala does his guttural groans, it is through Slick’s dialogue we are taught to show compassion for the savage, as Slick explains that “the one of light ... mercy and compassion” has taken Kamala away from his former abusive handlers. Slick is also the first individual to refer to Kamala as “a human being ... a man” and states that his adoption of Kamala is “a mission of mercy.” Though the other media texts involving Kamala have portrayed him as a savage and an animal, it is only when Kamala is turned into a sympathetic face that he is acknowledged as being a man. By definition, Kamala should not be a “noble savage” as the entire premise of his character has been based on the idea that he was a savage before being brought over to wrestle others. However, with references to

religion and colonialism, it is clear that Slick sees Kamala's rescue and redemption as a result of God's will.

The fourth video examined for this study was "Slick teaches Kamala how to Bowl" (WWE). Visually, Kamala is no longer portrayed as a savage but rather as a simpleton still dressed as a savage. When Slick hands Kamala a bowling ball customized with his war paint, Kamala stares wide-eyed at the bowling ball, initially refusing to accept it but later cradling it as if it were a baby and refusing to have it taken away. Near the end of the video, Kamala finally rolls a bowling ball but not before stopping to comically shake his posterior prior to throwing the ball in the wrong direction. Ultimately, Kamala manages to throw a strike when no one is looking and a celebration ensues. Through the interview dialogue we find out that Slick is trying to teach Kamala many things, with bowling being one of them. The main thing that stands out in the dialogue is Slick's constant reassurance that he is Kamala's friend and would not do anything to hurt him. Slick's approach allows him to gain the trust of Kamala, who is uneasy about bowling. Though we cannot apply much in terms of dialogue other than Slick reinforcing that he is a true friend of the savage, the comical image of Kamala shaking his butt before rolling the ball definitively removes the savage label from Kamala. Without this label, Kamala can no longer be taken as a serious threat, and there no longer exists a reason to fear the savage.

Through stereotypical and racist presentations, the character of Kamala is a strong cultural representation according to the Schudson's five dimensions. When considering the level of retrievability as a cultural object, Kamala has become an easy cultural text to access due to online video sites like YouTube and the WWE Network, which contain many of the televised matches and video packages that presented him as an exotic savage. This access allows new generations to encounter the character of Kamala while allowing older generations to relive the cultural performance that Kamala provided wrestling audiences. Apart from video footage, there are numerous news stories about Harris' experiences as Kamala, his current condition, and the legacy of the Kamala character. More recently, Harris has been in the news discussing his new life path as a music recording artist and carpenter, and he also spoken about the complications from diabetes that forced him to retire after having both legs amputated.

As a rhetorical force, Kamala is an extremely strong cultural object. As a cultural marker in the world of professional wrestling, the character of Kamala represents a time when blatant racist portrayals were common in a wrestler's gimmick. Today, many wrestlers are still given gimmicks that have the potential to be controversial; however, they are toned down to an extent for the sake of not

offending audiences or, in the case of WWE, investors and advertisers. Additionally, Kamala is indicative that audiences are often driven by their curiosity to experience the exotic in a safe setting. Through his portrayal of Kamala, Harris offered wrestling audiences an opportunity to do just that, even if that opportunity was a problematic one in terms of cultural and racial understanding of African history and culture.

As a resonating force, Kamala's strength as a cultural object invokes social referents in the creation of the character. According to Lawler, creator of the character, Kamala was a character that in its early years connected with audiences because it was associated with newsworthy topics at that time. Kamala's link to timely real world figures like Ugandan dictator Idi Amin and the indigenous African tribes presented in *National Geographic Magazine*, as well as Frank Frenzetta's fantasy paintings, all make Kamala an inauthentically authentic exotic figure ("Steve Austin and Jerry Lawler").

In the world of professional wrestling, Kamala has most definitely achieved institutional retention. Kamala's memorable look and portrayal as an unstoppable savage have become so institutionalized that Kamala has served as the archetype for the look and portrayal of other savages in the wrestling world. Wrestlers portraying savages as recent as the characters Umaga, Great Khali, and Kongo Kong have relied on archetypes established with Kamala. If a wrestler wears war paint on their face, communicates only through unintelligible grunts and screams, wrestles a non-technical style, and is being led to and from the ring by a handler/representative, wrestling audiences are being led to believe that the character is a savage. Just as Kamala turned face in the early '90s, there continue to be attempts to civilize the savage and remove any threat they possess by making them fan friendly. While the savage being misunderstood is an explanation that is still used to draw sympathy from the audience, the comical route seems to be the primary one taken when removing the savage's threat. Much like Kamala's butt wiggle when bowling, more recent savages have also been tamed through comedic action, such as the Great Khali's desire to dance with beautiful women and be known as the "Punjabi Playboy."

Kamala also provided resolution as a cultural artifact through the spectacle of the exotic that the character displayed. According to Schudson, a cultural artifact with resolution must get a response from the audience. One possible response in this context is that the character of Kamala made audiences more culturally aware and educated. In order to fully comprehend Kamala's character one needed to know or learn certain aspects about the character's supposed origins, including why the savage originated from Uganda, why he was billed as a cannibal, and how much of an important figure Idi Amin was to warrant Kamala being billed as his bodyguard.

Thus it can be said that while Kamala was billed as an uncivilized and uneducated savage, he served as an inspiration for others to learn about the world cultures and events that inspired his creation.

## **Conclusion**

James Harris was not the first professional wrestler to portray the role of an exotic outsider in professional wrestling, but his portrayal of Kamala has become one of the most enduring and important throughout the history of professional wrestling.

Yet in spite of what can be learned about the foreign exotic from the portrayal of Kamala, some foreign characters in professional wrestling are still based on outdated stereotypes. In recent years WWE programming has seen two Puerto Rican wrestlers portray masked bullfighters from Mexico, complete with over-the-top Mexican accents and a little person in a bull outfit; years later the same two Puerto Rican wrestlers would lose the bullfighting gimmick and adopt one where they promoted a Puerto Rican timeshare scam; a Bulgarian bodybuilder espousing Russia's superiority to the U.S.; and three masked Mexican wrestlers with no prior association suddenly being paired together and given noisemakers and piñatas to carry to the ring. While stereotypes continue to shape professional wrestling narratives, studies on such portrayals can foster media literacy skills that allow for the critical reading of portrayals of minorities as comedy acts, and critical analysis opens space for looking at minorities as humans and competitors who have as much opportunity for success as their white counterparts.

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## WWE and Saudi Vision 2030: Professional Wrestling as Cultural Diplomacy

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*In 2018, World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) produced and aired two live pay-per-view wrestling events in Saudi Arabia. This article looks at the political economy behind the production of these two wrestling events. What is not widely known is that these pay-per-views are part of a state-sponsored, ten-year agreement between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and WWE, under the umbrella of a large economic development plan known as Saudi Vision 2030, launched on April 25, 2016, with the aims of reducing the country's reliance on oil while liberalizing its economy through the developments in infrastructure construction, recreation and tourism. By focusing on the role of sport mega-events in the context of generating a "nation branding legacy," this article investigates the limitations of WWE's presence in Saudi Arabia as an effort to promote economic growth and social change.*

*Keywords: cultural diplomacy; nation branding; sports spectatorship; consumerism*

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In 2018, Vince McMahon's World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) produced and aired two live pay-per-view wrestling events in Saudi Arabia. The events, called WWE Greatest Royal Rumble and WWE Crown Jewel, were the subject of media controversy in the U.S. due to WWE's agreement to abide by Saudi law, which prohibited women wrestlers from participating in the event, and due to the fact that one month prior to Crown Jewel, the CIA concluded that the journalist and *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Ahmad Khashoggi, who was critical of the Saudi royal family, had been assassinated by the Saudi government.

At the time of this writing, WWE has produced three additional shows in Saudi Arabia: Super ShowDown (2019), Crown Jewel (2019), and Super ShowDown (2020). What is not widely known outside of the wrestling community is that these five pay-per-views are not led by the invisible hand of the free market but are part of a state-sponsored, ten-year agreement between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and WWE, under the umbrella of a large economic development plan known

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as Saudi Vision 2030, launched on April 25, 2016, with the aims of reducing the country's "reliance on oil and promoting economic diversification and the development of sectors such as health, education, infrastructure construction, recreation and tourism" (Nurannabi 538). All of these events are significant in relation to WWE's involvement in KSA's nation branding campaign. However, this article will focus on the first year (2018) of the Saudi/WWE partnership. Though the shows in 2019 and 2020 had their own media coverage, the controversy surrounding the first year of the Saudi/WWE partnership was framed by the murder of Khashoggi. This article looks at the political economy behind the production of these two 2018 wrestling events. By focusing on the role of sport mega-events in the context of generating a "nation branding legacy" (Knott et al. 47), this article investigates the limitations of WWE's presence in Saudi Arabia as an effort to promote economic growth and social change. Has this partnership between WWE and KSA influenced how the two pay-per-view events showcased themes of nationalism, patriotism, or Islamophobia? Professional wrestling in the United States has a recognized history of relying on these themes, using exaggerated characters and real-life sociopolitical conflicts to construct what Roland Barthes refers to as a "spectacle of excess" (15). However, Saudi Arabia's plan to use WWE to promote its Vision 2030 plan seems limited by the company's desire to stay fiscally viable. Though WWE is more than happy to promote Vision 2030 under the right conditions of international politics, the company is ultimately concerned with protecting itself and its own image in the face of political controversy made public by international media discourse.

### **Background: U.S.-Saudi Arabia Relations and the Saudi Vision 2030 Plan**

According to historian Albert Hourani, the state formation of KSA in 1932 was based on a religious reformation known as Wahhabism. Wahhabism arose in the early eighteenth century, when Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, a religious reformer, "began to preach the need for Muslims to return to the teaching of Islam as understood by the followers of Ibn Hanbal: strict obedience to the Qur'an and Hadith as they were interpreted by responsible scholars in each generation" (Hourani 257-58). Discovery of oil in the region during the 1950s led to "a replacement of British by American influence but also made it possible for the patriarchal rule of the Sa'udi family to begin the process of turning itself into a more fully developed system of government" (Hourani 365).

However, relations between the U.S. and KSA have never been completely harmonious. According to the Council on Foreign Affairs, "Terrorism financing, the export of the kingdom's interpretation of Islam, human rights abuses, and the lack

of democratic representation, as documented annually by the State Department, have all caused friction” (“U.S.-Saudi Arabia Relations”).

On April 27, 2018, WWE produced and aired a live pay-per-view wrestling event at the King Abdullah Sports City Stadium in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The event, called WWE Greatest Royal Rumble, was the subject of media controversy in the U.S. due to WWE’s agreement to abide by Saudi law, which prohibited women wrestlers from participating in the event. In addition, WWE star Sami Zayn, a Canadian pro-wrestler of Syrian descent, was held out of Greatest Royal Rumble, reportedly due to KSA’s strained relations with Syria since the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2012 (Chiari). News coverage was mostly sequestered to insider sports publications. WWE released a statement on the matter, saying, “WWE is committed to embracing individuals from all backgrounds while respecting local customs and cultural differences around the world” (Chiari). The event occurred without much mainstream news media attention.

About six months later, on November 2, 2018, WWE produced and aired a second live pay-per-view wrestling event at the Saud University Stadium in Riyadh, the capital city of Saudi Arabia. The event, called WWE Crown Jewel, was also highly controversial and received plenty of news media attention as a result. Similar to Greatest Royal Rumble, WWE’s women wrestlers, as well as Zayn, were banned from competing at Crown Jewel. Despite media pressure to cancel the event, WWE decided to continue as planned.

As stated earlier, WWE’s Crown Jewel (2018) and Greatest Royal Rumble are the result of a ten-year contractual agreement between KSA and WWE and part of a large economic development plan known as Saudi Vision 2030. To help facilitate the sectors of recreation and tourism, a General Authority for Entertainment was created by KSA in May 2016, with the aim of keeping a large percentage of the billions of dollars currently spent each year by the Saudi population on tourism and entertainment inside the country (AlArabiya). For the purposes of this article, I will be focusing on the sectors of recreation and tourism, examining WWE’s presence in Saudi Arabia as an effort to promote economic growth in these two sectors.

The Saudi Vision 2030 plan is an 84-page document that describes Saudi Arabia’s mission to liberalize its economy by 2030. The document can be accessed via the Saudi government website. One particular section of importance is titled “Promoting Culture and Entertainment,” which states:

We consider culture and entertainment indispensable to our quality of life. We are well aware that the cultural and entertainment opportunities currently available do not reflect the rising aspirations of our citizens and residents, nor are they in harmony with our

prosperous economy. It is why we will support the efforts of regions, governorates, non-profit and private sectors to organize cultural events. We intend to enhance the role of government funds, while also attracting local and international investors, creating partnerships with international entertainment corporations. (22)

Goals by 2030: To increase household spending on cultural and entertainment activities inside the Kingdom from the current level of 2.9% to 6%. (25)

*The Independent* published a three-part piece on February 6, 2018 about how this economic plan is bringing long overdue social reforms to KSA, stating that “people in Riyadh seem bolder: teenagers roam around a new park on rollerblades while Justin Bieber blasts from cars stuck in traffic” (McKernan). Not surprisingly, these images are quite similar to those shown in a promotional video that aired during Greatest Royal Rumble, which I will later discuss.

## Literature Review

In this article, I will situate the partnership between KSA and WWE in the context of *nation branding*. Nation branding is defined as “a process by which a nation’s images can be created, monitored, evaluated and proactively managed in order to improve or enhance the country’s reputation among a target international audience” (Fan 101).

Nation branding opportunities through sport mega-events is a topic of scholarly conversation in the fields of marketing, media and communications. Knott et al. state that “there has been a growing awareness of the potentially significant impact that hosting sport mega-events, such as the Olympic Games and FIFA World Cup, can have on a country’s brand image” (48). With relevance to countries like Saudi Arabia who are progressively trying to liberalize their society in order to compete in the global market, Knott et al. state that sport mega-events “may provide an opportunity to create or promote an image and also *re-brand* a nation” [emphasis added] (48). Admission in the Saudi Vision 2030 document that “the cultural and entertainment opportunities currently available do not reflect the rising aspirations of our citizens” implies that KSA’s importation of WWE sport mega-events is an attempt to rebrand the nation.

As Silk and Andrews examine in “Beyond a Boundary? Sport, Transnational Advertising, and the Reimagining of National Culture,” transnational sports marketing can play a large role in reimagining national cultures. They state, “[a]lthough not wishing to deny the importance of the political and economic forces

in shaping the modern nation, it is within the cultural realm that the nation has had its most enduring influence and effects” (184).

By investigating the efforts of the U.S. State Department between 1945-1968 to showcase African-American athletes throughout the world as a means to mend the United States’ international reputation as an imperialist superpower, Damion L. Thomas, in *Globetrotting: African American Athletes and Cold War Politics*, provides a framework for examining how sports spectatorship becomes a form of cultural transmission. According to Thomas, it was easy for the U.S. State Department to hide its involvement in the tours “by partnering with private organizations that had been awarded international jurisdiction over amateur athletes” (3). This governmental sponsoring of athletes and athletic events effectively blurred the lines between public and cultural diplomacy. Thomas delves deeper into this issue, providing the work of propaganda theorist Jeremy Hawthorn as a framework for arguing that this tactic of soft propaganda’s effectiveness comes from its ability to position the spectator in an active, not passive, role. By not making explicit statements of racial progress in the U.S., “the athletic tours were able to maintain the illusion that the tours were sent abroad not for political reasons” (97). This, Thomas maintains, allowed the crowds to believe they were making their own conclusions about racial progress in the U.S., not being force-fed propaganda.

Professional wrestling has a historical precedent of being used to implement nation branding and diplomacy campaigns. In April 1995, Ted Turner’s World Championship Wrestling (WCW) co-produced a two-day event in conjunction with Antonio Inoki’s New Japan Pro-Wrestling (NJPW) in Pyongyang, the capital and largest city of North Korea. The event, known as Collision in Korea, is a close analog to WWE’s involvement in Saudi Arabia. According to Eric Bischoff, who was promoted to Executive Vice President of WCW in 1994, Collision in Korea, officially known as the Pyongyang International Sports and Culture Festival for Peace, was meant to establish WCW as a truly international brand, and a political move by Inoki to enhance diplomatic relations between Japan and North Korea (“Collision In Korea!”). It is speculated that North Korea, then led by Kim Jong-il, hosted the event as an attempt to remedy global post-Cold War tensions and to “win world respect” (Keller).

## Methodology

Communication scholars Andrew Billings and Lawrence Wenner define a process of *mediatization* by which what they call “mega-sporting events” become commodified spectacles, exchanging in political, cultural, and economic values. Billings and Wenner state that “it is this connection—to spectacle, and most

particularly commodified spectacle—that drives our interest in how mediatization plays out in the context of sports mega-events” (13). It is my position that WWE events serve as commodified media spectacles—albeit staged. Their economic value is based off the creation of aura, which is derived from the mediatization of powerful—and often controversial—cultural performances.

In “Selling Democracy: Consumer Culture and Citizenship in the Wake of September 11,” Greg Dickinson argues that U.S. advertisers directly after September 11 began promoting shopping as a civic duty that had the potential to heal the nation, thus framing the health of the corporation with the health of the nation and consumerism as an active mode of patriotism and citizenship. Dickinson outlines the theory of constitutive rhetoric as a framework for the critical analysis of advertisements. This theory emphasizes “rhetoric’s ability to create audiences” as a process that draws on preexisting discursive positions and is on-going (273). I find this framework helpful for analyzing how citizenship and consumerism intertwine, which is exactly what the Saudi Vision 2030 hopes to accomplish by promoting WWE events in their country.

WWE has a history of staging links between audience spectatorship and national citizenship. During a show in Belfast in November 2013, for example, Zeb Colter, manager of the “Real Americans” tag team as well as a somewhat satirical performance of white nativist anti-immigration rhetoric in the United States, told the crowd how happy he was to step off the plane and hear everyone speaking English, a statement which was met with rousing applause. He then tells the crowd that he would like to “give everybody in this building a chance to *become* [emphasis added] an honorary “Real American” by joining him and his tag team in a “We, The People” salute, to which the crowd complies (“WWE Live Tour”). The audiences’ performance at events such as this is not fixed to their political affiliations or social status; they are capable of performing *outside* of their individual identity, as well as their national identity, just as much as the wrestlers themselves are capable.

Thomas’s background in kinesiology shines the most in Chapter 2 of *Globetrotting*, where he juxtaposes the Harlem Globetrotters with the history of minstrel shows in the United States. He uses James Scott’s theory of “hidden transcripts” (63) to analyze the Globetrotter’s trickster routine. Thomas argues that while Goose Tatum’s seeming disregard for the contest reinforced popular notions of black peoples’ laziness and lower mental capacities, it could also be interpreted as a “mask” of inferiority utilized as a tool of resistance, a way for luring the opposing team by tricking them into perceiving Tatum as non-threatening. In passages like these, Thomas skillfully analyzes the cultural significance of these performative gestures.

Professional wrestling in the United States has a recognized history of relying on themes of nationalism, patriotism, and xenophobia, using exaggerated characters and real-life sociopolitical conflicts to construct what Barthes refers to as a “spectacle of excess” (15). The work of Gerald W. Morton and George M. O’Brien provides the foundation for how wrestlers engage their audience by performing exaggerations of socially recognizable characters: for example, the U.S. patriot and the “evil” foreigner. These staged performances are always tied to real social conditions; they *must* be, generally speaking, in order for the wrestlers’ performances to evoke a reaction from the crowd. In their book-length analysis of professional wrestling, *Wrestling To Rasslin: Ancient Sport to American Spectacle*, Morton and O’Brien emphasize this point by stating, “[wrestling] is low drama, drama for the masses, and the masses want to see villains they can recognize and therefore more easily hate” (128).

In most scholarship on the performative aspects of professional wrestling, a key aspect that is overlooked is the extent to which the audience is *also* performing a role—often tied to national identity and citizenship. Critics have examined how audiences play participatory roles in the spectacle of wrestling, but only in so far as to how the wrestlers’ performance entices the audience in order to elicit a response and how that response validates the wrestlers’ actions and influences their future performances. Morton and O’Brien lay the groundwork for the discussion of audience performance in professional wrestling, examining how fans boo and taunt the wrestlers whose poor athletic performance has jarred them out of their suspended disbelief. This examination, however, only speaks about the athletic performance and the phenomenon that wrestling fans are aware and yet do not *care* that the outcomes are predetermined as long as the athletic performances are believable to a degree. Morton and O’Brien go further to explain how wrestlers perform certain social roles as villains or heroes, the purpose of these roles being that “the audience immediately [knows] the role of the actor and what to expect from him [*sic*]” (116). Sharon Mazer takes this examination further, positing that the audience is actually an active member of the performance: “[i]nstead of leaving passive onlookers in the dark, wrestlers, through their play, make spectators an integral and essential part of the performance” (97). She points out that “[t]radition has it that a wrestler becomes a ‘good guy’ or a ‘bad guy’ because of the audience’s response to him” (108). Although it is true that the wrestling performance is completed by the audiences’ participation, I think that there is more to say about the audiences’ role in the spectacle.

By tracking the media coverage and subsequent greater controversy of Greatest Royal Rumble over Crown Jewel, I believe I can draw parallels to the dramatic degree in which pro-KSA propaganda dropped out of the latter event.

Even with these news sources, it is difficult for me, as a researcher, to gauge the local reception of Greatest Royal Rumble and Crown Jewel (2018). Unfortunately, I was not in attendance at either event and lack the resources to identify and interview audience members. Furthermore, I do not speak or read Arabic, greatly limiting my ability to track the reception of the events through Saudi news media sources. Another issue is that with exception to *Al Jazeera*, most news media outlets from the Middle East seem to be under strict state control. *Arab News* and *Al Arabiya*, two pan-Arab news broadcasters in which I was able to find reporting on WWE, are both closely overseen by the Saudi royal family. Though both were sold-out events based on attendance records, it is difficult to conclude whether or not the events were well-received, being that we do not know a great deal about what pressure might have been on Saudi citizens to attend. This uncertainty runs parallel to Collision in Korea, which, although it holds claim to the record of being the largest attended wrestling event of all time, is likely the result of state-enforced, mandatory attendance (“Collision In Korea!”). King Abdullah Sports City Stadium, which held Greatest Royal Rumble, has an attendance capacity of around 60,000. Based on the quarterly financial reports, as well as other media reports, WWE made \$45 million from Greatest Royal Rumble (Oster). Crown Jewel (2018) was also a sold-out event, yet the King Saud University Stadium only holds around 25,000, substantially less than the King Abdullah Sports City Stadium. Though one might be tempted to draw a conclusion that overwhelming media pressure against WWE to cancel or move Crown Jewel (2018) had something to do with the smaller venue, I am not so certain of causality in this case. As I understand, WWE events are scheduled up to a full year in advance. At this time, I cannot find a record that dates WWE’s booking of the King Abdullah Sports City Stadium for Crown Jewel (2018).

### **WWE Greatest Royal Rumble**

Greatest Royal Rumble was held on April 27, 2018 at the King Abdullah Sports City Stadium in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Unlike the live WWE event to be held in Saudi Arabia six months later, Crown Jewel, which I will later discuss, Greatest Royal Rumble was overtly propagandist. The event’s promotional video animation swirls the viewer around the sword of the Saudi Arabia flag before revealing the printed name of the event while a male voice-over reads: “Live from Jeddah, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia proudly invites the world to witness history.” The animation then cuts

to shots of the live interior or exterior of the King Abdullah Sports City Stadium. This animation occurs a remarkable three times before the first match of the event.

Often, WWE events begin with national anthems, or “America, the Beautiful.” Greatest Royal Rumble begins with the national anthems of Saudi Arabia and the United States of America, with flags and their respective colors on the TitanTron. After that, another introductory video, showing outside shots of the stadium and fireworks, exclaims in both English and Arabic that this is the “largest international televised event in WWE history.” The camera then cuts to two ring announcers, Corey Graves and Michael Cole:

Graves: Welcome, as we celebrate Saudi Arabia’s progression for cultural diversity in the Vision 2030 plan.

Cole: Yeah, and we’ll talk about that throughout the evening.

It should be noted that these are literally the first words spoken by the American announcers, leaving no doubt as to the purpose of this event. The role of announcers is crucial in relating the drama to the audience. Morton and O’Brien state that there is a “real parallel ... between the function of the Greek chorus and the function of the wrestling commentator” (121-22). In Greek drama, the chorus provides a context and conceptualization for how the audience should interpret the conflicts in the play. Their roles in the spectacle, however, are not the same as the wrestlers’, for whom there is a sense of distance from the audience. The announcers’ role is, by comparison, a step closer to the audience—the announcers view the wrestling performance but also assign a final context to which the audience will receive that performance (Cohen 195).

After a match in which John Cena defeats a veteran wrestler known as Triple H, Cena is provided a mic in the center of the ring, where he states: “It has been an honor and privilege to be allowed to be a part of today ... I want to send a genuine ‘thank you’ to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for its unmatched hospitality that extends far beyond this evening.” The sort of overt diplomacy displayed by Cena, Graves, and Cole, and the event in general, is fairly out of character for WWE events abroad.

Outside of WWE’s partnership with the Saudi government, wrestlers’ controversial gimmicks in other foreign countries have previously led to some infamous international controversies. One such incident occurred in 2004 when a wrestler known as JBL goose-stepped outside the ring at an event in Belfast and had to be privately escorted out of the country after the match. A similar incident occurred in 2012 when a wrestler named Chris Jericho thrashed the Brazilian flag at an event in Sao Paulo, and like JBL found himself in trouble with local law enforcement. The main difference between these two occurrences and those in

KSA is that WWE's involvement in KSA is state-sponsored. I believe this context makes a big difference in the staged performances of the show.

Of the many tropes common to American professional wrestling that Morton and O'Brien detail, one that is crucial to the following example involving the Daivari brothers, is the character trope of the evil foreigner. The evil foreigner is a character trope that utilizes American nativism to elicit the audiences' hatred towards a wrestler meant to portray a villain. Often, this villain performs exaggerated racial or ethnic characteristics. In cases like this, the audience is generally understood to be predominantly white, xenophobic, and nativist. Greatest Royal Rumble played off this trope in an interesting way in a segment involving the Daivari brothers, who are portrayed as Iranian pro-wrestlers, and four Saudi trainee wrestlers who were introduced at the event. The segment begins with the four young Saudi trainee wrestlers being introduced and entering the ring to rousing applause. Each wrestler takes a turn speaking on the mic, thanking the crowd, as well as KSA, when they are suddenly interrupted by the Daivari brothers, who make their walk down to the ring waving an Iranian flag. This segment, which plays on ethnic and perhaps religious antagonisms between Iranian and Saudi nationals, is interesting in that it would never work in the United States without altering the performance to suit a "typical" American wrestling crowd. Yet, it is a very familiar trope, one that WWE was successfully able to adapt to a Saudi audience.

The most notable evidence of KSA's sponsorship is a two-and-a-half-minute video that ran during Greatest Royal Rumble to explicitly promote the goals of the Vision 2030 plan. Two important members of KSA leadership speak in the video: Mr. Abdullah Bakhshab, the Sports Leader of Saudi Arabia, and Dr. Modia Batterjee, the Health Administration's Socio-cultural Leader. They proudly speak of the Vision 2030 plan as the "dawning of a new age" in which the people of Saudi Arabia are envisioned as "global citizens." The video contains numerous shots of bright skies and tall buildings, young people on skateboards, and clips of the first women to drive in Saudi Arabia. Despite the fact that WWE women wrestlers were not allowed to compete in the event, *Arab News* emphasized that it was a "landmark moment for Saudi Arabia" in reference to the fact that this was the first time in the stadium's history that "women were free to attend and enjoy the show" (Al-Mayman and Abid). This should not come as a surprise, however, since *Arab News*, as stated earlier, is heavily controlled by the Saudi royal family.

## WWE Crown Jewel (2018)

About six months later, on November 2, 2018, WWE produced and aired a second live pay-per-view wrestling event at the Saud University Stadium in Riyadh, the capital city of Saudi Arabia. The event, called WWE Crown Jewel, was also highly controversial and received plenty of news media attention as a result. Unlike Greatest Royal Rumble, Crown Jewel and WWE drew mainstream media criticism due to the fact that a month prior, Saudi journalist and *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Ahmad Khashoggi was found dead, with most fingers pointing to the Saudi government as the responsible party. Motive was established against the Saudi government, as Khashoggi had been in exile for his work uncovering corruption in the Saudi government and for being critical of Saudi Arabia's crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, and the country's king, Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. On November 16, 2018, the CIA concluded that Khashoggi had been assassinated by the Saudi government. Similar to Greatest Royal Rumble, WWE's women wrestlers as well as Zayn were banned from competing at Crown Jewel (2018). Due to these circumstances, two high-profile WWE superstars, Cena and Daniel Bryan, bowed out of participating in the event without issuing public statements as to why.

Multiple national and international news organizations pressured WWE to cancel or move the event. *The Baltimore Sun* criticized WWE not only on the hypocritical exclusion of women wrestlers but also brought up that "five human rights activists, including Israa al-Ghomgham, a woman, are under trial and could face execution" (Oster). *Stamford Advocate* (Schott) connected the controversial wrestling event directly to the disappearance of Khashoggi and also considered how this might hurt WWE's reputation, citing that since Khashoggi's disappearance—which had yet to be concluded as a murder—WWE stocks had dipped, and quoted Daniel Durbin, director of the University of Southern California's Annenberg Institute of Sports, Media and Society, as saying:

This might pose a problem for scripted entertainment purporting to be sport, while seeking legitimacy before the broader public ... That attempt to engage a broader public cannot be helped by continuing to plan their showcase event in a country under scrutiny for, among other things, the possible murder of a journalist.

WWE rarely addresses its program and its controversies in mainstream news media, but in this case John Layfield, also known as JBL, the same wrestler who goose-stepped in Belfast, appeared on Fox Business, stating that although WWE was "monitoring the situation," it [WWE] "has been at the forefront of change, and you want to change Saudi Arabia, you send someone like WWE there" ("WWE's Saudi Wrestling Events Should Go On"). His statement references a 2017 WWE event in

which the first women's match in Abu Dhabi was held. The larger implication of Layfield's comment, however, is that the Middle East is culturally regressive, and it is America's duty, à la Kipling's "white man's burden," to spread democratic freedom, a project that often couples ideologies of white supremacy with free market global capitalism and military intervention. A similar sentiment towards Saudi Arabia is expressed by American journalist Thomas Lippman in his memoir *Inside the Mirage: America's Fragile Partnership with Saudi Arabia*. Lippman begins the book with a take on how Saudi consumer culture and technology have been "Americanized" in the twenty-first century—pointing to shopping malls and familiar corporate brands that are populated in Riyadh. Lippman covers the period of 1930s—the point at which Americans first came to Saudi Arabia seeking oil—to the period just after September 11, 2001. His main argument is that Saudi Arabia was highly influenced by the U.S. in every aspect of contemporary life except religion, and that the Islamic faith remains the source of anti-American sentiment in Saudi Arabia (Lippman 5). In general, claims such as this couple a discourse of American exceptionalism with an Islamophobic ideology.

Despite media pressure to cancel, move, or postpone Crown Jewel (2018), WWE decided to continue as planned. The reasons behind the decision are understood to be financially motivated, as the company would certainly risk losing money if it decided to cancel, move, or postpone the event. However, WWE did make a dramatic attempt to do damage control by scaling back nearly all of the promotional elements of Crown Jewel that were displayed at Greatest Royal Rumble.

Unlike WWE's Greatest Royal Rumble, Crown Jewel contained nothing that reeked of propaganda, neither in terms of U.S. patriotism or Saudi patriotism. There is nothing to be found in terms of villainous American wrestlers or heroic Middle Eastern wrestlers, no speeches of gratitude towards KSA, and no promotional videos or mention *at all* of the Vision 2030 plan. Nor does the event begin with the national anthems of either country. In fact, without actively looking, viewers at home might not even recognize that the event even took place in Saudi Arabia.

However, two things do stand out in terms of nuanced depictions of America: Two wrestlers who embody a certain degree of American patriotism, Hulk Hogan and Kurt Angle, are similar in how their ages influenced their performances at the event. At age 64, Hogan, the host of Crown Jewel (2018), comes out at the top of the show to his entrance music, "Real American," gives a short promotional speech to introduce the event, and then leaves. Although he has achieved legendary status amongst wrestlers and fans of the wrestling community, he is not incorporated in any way into the storylines or conflicts of any matches. His presence at Crown Jewel (2018) adds a quality of nostalgia to the event, paying respect to the history of WWE

and professional wrestling. Though Hogan's presence may add prestige and legitimacy to the Crown Jewel event, at the same time his departure after his introduction is permanent; he does not return, and in that way holds no relevance on the matches themselves.

Angle was the other wrestler who embodied a sense of American patriotism. Angle was an actual Olympic athlete, winning gold medals in freestyle wrestling for the U.S. in 1995 and 1996. Unlike Hulk, Angle did, in fact, wrestle at Crown Jewel (2018). However, the age difference between Angle, 49, and his opponent, Dolph Ziggler, 37, frames the match and ultimately the outcome of Angle's loss. Both Hogan's and Angle's participation at Crown Jewel (2018) can be seen as a special occasion that gives legitimacy to the event in honor of Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, their performances can be understood as bastions of an American hegemony that has come to pass, a metaphorical passing of the baton to "younger" countries in the global market such as KSA.

## Conclusion

As Dickinson argues, following the attacks of September 11 corporate advertisements began rhetorically framing consumerism as a national civic duty that would heal the damaged nation. It appears as though KSA's partnership with WWE takes this framework and applies it to diplomatic U.S.-Saudi relations. *Al Arabiya*, for example, reported Crown Jewel (2018) "as a form of diplomacy, to offer an olive branch to Saudi Arabia and the Middle-East" (Yassin). Within the framework of nation branding, this diplomacy takes the shape of sports entertainment meant to liberalize not just the Saudi economy but the country's cultural norms. To return to Silk and Andrews:

sport is mobilized as a major cultural signifier of a nation that can engage national sensibilities, identities, and experiences. As such, sport is used as de facto cultural shorthand delineating particular national sentiments. That is, within the logics of transnational corporate capitalism, sport is seen as a globally present cultural form, but one that is heavily accented by local dialects. It is this notion of sport as a globally present but locally resonant cultural practice that advertisers seek to mobilize. (191-92)

However, Saudi Arabia's plan to use WWE to promote Vision 2030 seems limited by the company's desire to stay fiscally viable. Professor of kinesiology Ted Butryn states that the company is "not above morphing its product into whatever it sees as the most viable profit-making entity domestically and internationally. In fact, it has a keen sense of when the larger political and cultural ties are shifting" (285). Though

WWE is more than happy to promote Vision 2030 under the right conditions of international politics, the company is ultimately concerned with protecting itself and its own image in the face of political controversy made public by international media discourse.

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**Toward a More Objective Understanding of Professional Wrestling:  
The Multidimensional Scale for the Analysis of Professional Wrestling  
(MSAPW)**

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*The quality of professional wrestling matches has commonly been evaluated using the five-star system popularized by Dave Meltzer of the Wrestling Observer newsletter. Though useful for describing match quality in casual settings, the scale is insufficient for academic analyses of the perception of match quality. The present article proposes a multidimensional scale for evaluating professional wrestling across the dimensions of spectacle, in-ring technique, in-ring difficulty, storytelling, and spectator engagement. Each dimension is explicitly defined and can be assessed using an 11-point scale, which allows researchers to better understand how professional wrestling viewers interpret match quality. The scale can also be weighted in a manner that allows for comparisons across different categories of professional wrestling viewers. Information on the application and analysis of the scale are discussed.*

*Keywords: professional wrestling; pro wrestling; combat sports; fandom*

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*“When you break down what a five-star match is, what are you looking for?”*

*“I have no idea ...”*

Dave Meltzer, Wrestling Observer Radio Live Q&A

from Starrcast II, May 24, 2019

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The evaluation of professional wrestling has generally been based on the five-star system popularized by Dave Meltzer. The scale, first utilized by Norm Dooley in his *Weasel's World* professional wrestling newsletter, allows observers to rate match quality using quarter-star increments. Jim Cornette, who worked as a ringside photographer in Memphis and supplied photos to Dooley's newsletter, suggested in 1979 that Dooley adopt a star rating system akin to that used in *TV Guide* for movies in its listings. The scale was originally one to four stars until the pair witnessed a wild no-disqualification match between Jerry "The King" Lawler and Terry Funk in Memphis on March 23, 1981. Dooley, believing the match to be the best he'd ever witnessed, gave the match five stars in the next issue of his newsletter (Greene). This scale-breaking rating began the transition to the five-star system that is currently employed by many wrestling fans and journalists, which allows match quality to be assigned one of twenty-one values (excluding negative star values and DUD ratings). However, the scale is too flawed and subjective to be useful as a tool for understanding professional wrestling viewing as a form of behavior in scientific inquiry.

Any scale that requires viewers to make aesthetic judgements about performance will be inherently subjective due to factors such as preference, previous experiences and personality type contributing to judgements. In his introduction of the scale in 1985, Meltzer briefly defined the meaning of star ratings as such:

$\frac{1}{2}$ \* is for a terrible match, but at least there was a high spot or something. \* is a bad match,  $\frac{*}{2}$  is below average but tolerable; \*\* average;  $\frac{**}{2}$  kind of good; \*\*\* Quite good;  $\frac{***}{2}$  almost great; \*\*\*\* excellent;  $\frac{****}{2}$  better than you can ask for.

He also indicated that a five-star rating indicates that a match is "stupendous." To the authors' knowledge, the meaning of star ratings has not been re-published or expanded upon since its introduction in the 1984 Wrestling Observer Yearbook (Meltzer, *Wrestling Observer 1984 Yearbook*). Thus, while initially defined, the meaning of star ratings has largely been lost to time. This may be due to the inconsistency with which Meltzer often applies the scale. This can be observed in Meltzer's acknowledgement that he is uncertain of what contributes to his rating of a five-star match.

This is understandable, as the scale was originally created as a shorthand means of describing one observer's experience of a match. Over time, the scale has been adopted in some form by most wrestling journalists and many wrestling fans. It is useful to the extent that it provides journalists and fans with a simple numerical value that largely describes the extent to which they enjoyed the match. However, because of the lack of stated objective criteria by which each match should be

evaluated, it is difficult to make meaningful comparisons of ratings assigned between viewers. Furthermore, there are no anchor points from which deviation can be understood. Presumably, in a five-point scale a value of 2 ½ stars should represent a match that was neither perceived to be good nor bad. However, Meltzer originally indicated that a 2 ½ star rating reflects a match being “kind of good” (*Wrestling Observer 1984 Yearbook*).

Another issue related to the five-star scale is its occasional deviation from a 5-point system. Since the introduction of the five-star system, Meltzer has assigned negative values to some matches (e.g., minus-3 stars). While introducing the scale in 1985, he indicated that negative star ratings would be assigned periodically to indicate that a match was “obnoxiously bad.” The presence of negative star ratings illuminates the importance of anchor points; if the scale may take on values ranging from -5 to 5, with 0 representing “neither good nor bad”, any positive value should suggest that a match is perceived as being above average. However, a review of ratings assigned in the 1-2 star range consistently demonstrates that these matches are considered below average in quality. Furthermore, Meltzer will occasionally assign a rating of DUD to a match in order to indicate that a match has “no redeeming social value” (*Wrestling Observer 1984 Yearbook*). Presumably, a negative star rating (“not only was the match worthless, but obnoxiously bad”) indicates a worse evaluation than a DUD rating (“without any redeeming social value”). However, it is entirely unclear under what circumstances a particularly unappealing match will receive a low positive star rating, a negative star rating or a DUD rating.

The application of the five-star scale may less frequently result in ratings greater than 5 stars. As mentioned previously, the original Dooley four-star scale was converted to a five-star scale due to an exceptional match. Thus, even in its nascent stages, the highly subjective scale was subject to deviation from its stated parameters. Following the conversion to a five-star system, Dooley again deviated from his scale by assigning a 6-star rating to a match featuring Bill Dundee and Dream Machine vs. Wayne Ferris and Kevin Sullivan in May 1981. Meltzer first assigned a 6-star rating to a 1989 house show match between Ric Flair and Ricky Steamboat in the midst of their memorable series of televised matches that year. He again assigned a 6-star rating to a match between Mitsuharu Misawa and Toshiaki Kawada in June 1994 (Dixon). Since that time, he has assigned ratings greater than 5 stars to nearly 20 matches, including one (Kazuchika Okada vs. Kenny Omega; June 9, 2018) that earned an unprecedented 7-star rating (“Dave Meltzer 5 Star Matches List”). By deviating from his own scale, Meltzer has made it more difficult to interpret the meaning of star ratings. Meltzer has acknowledged this shortcoming and has indicated that the scale was never intended to objectively quantify the

performance of professional wrestling. Rather, it serves as a convenient means of describing his experience of the match and for communicating with others about match quality.

As a tool for describing wrestling fans' often-hyperbolic interpretation of match quality, the five-star system has been an invaluable asset for communicating issues of match quality. It has provided viewers with a means to quantify their viewing experiences for purposes of comparison with other viewers. However, the broad variability in ratings of individual matches speaks to the insufficiency of the scale as a means of understanding how individuals consume and understand the performance of professional wrestling. For instance, Meltzer assigned a rating of minus-4 stars to the main event of WWF's WrestleMania III, a long-anticipated showdown between champion Hulk Hogan and challenger Andre the Giant ("Andre The Giant"). Despite Meltzer's rating, the match is venerated by the WWF/WWE and its most loyal fans as one of the best and most historically relevant matches in history (Felstead). Though the match was undoubtedly relevant from a historical perspective, the differences in ratings of quality between Meltzer and many WWF/WWE fans must be attributable to differences in the aspects of the match to which different viewers assigned value.

Professional wrestling matches may be conceptualized as a *gestalt* event (Koffka). That is, they consist of interwoven parts that contribute to the entire experience of viewing the match. While non-fans may only consider bell-to-bell action as the substance of professional wrestling, seasoned fans recognize that the bell-to-bell action is only a part of a larger narrative. The bell-to-bell action is generally the primary criterion by which wrestling journalists and many fans assign star ratings. However, hedged into an interpretation of the action are assumptions about the characters performing the match, including their motivations to fight and their moral authority to do so. Because many of these assumptions may occur at a preconscious level, viewers may not be aware of how issues such as character and storyline development influence their match ratings.

The purpose of the present article is to propose a more objective model for evaluating professional wrestling matches. Given the shortcomings of the five-star system that is ubiquitously used, we propose a multidimensional model that allows for a more nuanced understanding of how viewers interpret pro wrestling matches. The model is intended to serve as a bridge between the present system and a more objective system that can be used for scholarly research into pro wrestling. As discussed below, some compromises were made in the development of the scale in order to balance usability with meaningful interpretation. The proposed model is theoretical in nature and has not yet been used to generate data on pro wrestling

match viewing. As such, it represents a model in its nascent stage that is intended to be modified and revised as a result of empirical observation.

### **Toward a More Objective Scale**

The Likert method was first proposed in 1932 as a solution to the problem of quantification of phenomena that had traditionally been investigated using qualitative techniques. By representing qualitative data as quantitative data, the data can be subjected to a variety of statistical manipulations that allow for more precise interpretation and greater generalization of findings. The original Likert scale was a 5-point system ranging from “strongly disapprove” to “strongly approve.” A key feature of the original Likert scale was the presence of an anchor point in the form of the response “neutral.” This item represented a midpoint from which deviation can be understood (Likert). Likert-based scales have since been modified for purposes of understanding a variety of phenomena ranging from attitudes toward sex (Spector et al.) to treatment of illnesses (Gutknecht et al.) to student evaluations of classroom content (Ivanov et al.).

Because of the wide variety of phenomena studied, the labels used for numerical values on the scale vary widely (Vagias), although most formulations include a neutral anchor point (e.g., neither agree nor disagree) from which deviation can be understood. Some modifications have adopted a “forced choice” approach in which the neutral anchor point is excluded in order to require some degree of bias in responses. The present scale includes neutral anchor points for each dimension because the authors believe that (a) a neutral response is both valid and reflective of the experience of the viewer and (b) a neutral point may assist viewers in more precisely considering his/her experience of a professional wrestling match.

The present scale differs from traditional Likert scales in two meaningful ways. First, the scale requires respondents to evaluate broader characteristics than are normally rated using Likert techniques. While Likert scales generally require respondents to rate the extent to which he/she agrees with a particular statement, the proposed scale requires respondents to rate predefined dimensions of professional wrestling. Though the scale could be represented as an expansive series of statements, we believe constructing the scale in such a manner would be overly cumbersome and would dissuade use of the scale. By folding such statements into dimensions, we believe the scale is both easily accessible and useful for the interpretation of professional wrestling viewing. Second, only the values of the two extreme endpoints (1 and 10) and the neutral point (5) are explicitly defined. Though this introduces some ambiguity regarding the specific meaning of intermediate

values, we believe that it is more consistent with the manner in which viewers currently interpret professional wrestling. As the five-star system does not explicitly define the meaning of any values, professional wrestling fans are accustomed to assigning values based on gut feelings rather than objective criteria. We believe that allowing a level of subjective interpretation makes the scale more accessible to casual users and allows us to better capture the subjective aesthetic experience. As we will discuss later, the absence of defined intermediate values may also permit statistical analyses that would not be permitted with traditional Likert scales.

In order to better understand the consumption and interpretation of professional wrestling, a scale that is more objective and expansive than the five-star system will be required in order to distinguish between elements of professional wrestling matches. Such a scale should (a) be multidimensional, (b) clearly define the nature of each rated dimension, and (c) provide anchor points for determining how each dimension should be understood and assessed. We propose a Likert-derived scale based on five dimensions: spectacle, in-ring technique, in-ring difficulty, storytelling, and spectator engagement. Each dimension can be rated using an eleven-point scale in which a value of 5 represents a neutral anchor point. Any deviation away from a value of five can be interpreted as indicative of increasing or decreasing quality.

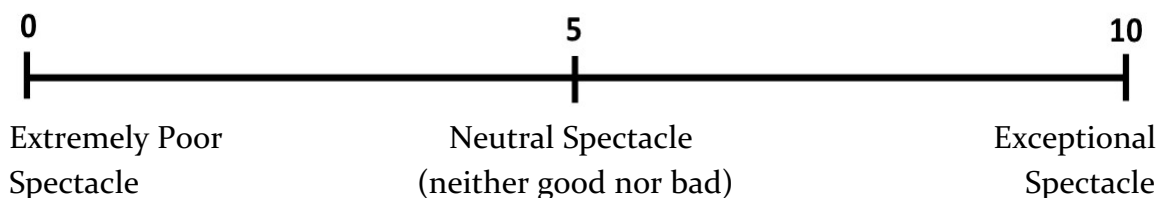
### ***Spectacle***

The dimension of spectacle is related primarily to out-of-ring aspects of professional wrestling used to create interest in the in-ring performance. This includes pre-match promos, interviews, match introductions, post-match events, match stipulations, outcomes of previous bouts between the performers and aspects of the venue where the match is held. The dimension of spectacle has been a key element of professional wrestling since its infancy. As professional wrestling is promoted primarily for the purpose of generating revenue, spectacle is the key element in match promotion. For instance, in promoting a 1911 rematch between Frank Gotch and George Hackenschmidt, Hackenschmidt accused Gotch of relying on “dirty tactics” in their 1908 match and claimed to have suffered an illness that left him unable to compete at a high level (Trowbridge). The combination of the accusation of cheating and claims of illness were used to promote the need for a rematch. The rematch at Comiskey Park in Chicago drew 30,000 spectators, an increase of nearly 24,000 compared to their 1908 match (“George Hackenschmidt Bio”).

The value of spectacle in the interpretation of professional wrestling matches is apparent in reviews. For instance, a match between commentators Michael Cole

and Jerry Lawler at WrestleMania 27, built entirely around spectacle and interference, was the culmination of a lengthy storyline in which Cole had repeatedly insulted Lawler, including making light of the latter's mother's recent passing. Most fans expected that the match would be short and feature Lawler quickly defeating Cole as comeuppance for the latter's consistent harassment over the months leading to the match. Instead, the entire spectacle lasted nearly fifteen minutes, with interference from guest referee Steve Austin. Scott Keith emphasized the match's excessive length, giving it a minus-3 star rating ("Wrestlemania Countdown 2018") while in his one-star rating Meltzer seemed to find parts of it entertaining, especially a good-looking dropkick from the 61-year-old Lawler, though he also noted that the match lasted too long given its performers' limitations (*Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, April 11, 2011). This discrepancy highlights the inconsistency of the scale, as reviewers occasionally employ negative star ratings to criticize a match they find particularly awful; though Keith saw nothing of value in the match, Meltzer found parts of it entertaining enough not to resort to a negative star rating.

Only promos and interviews that are directly related to the match should be considered when evaluating this dimension. Though promos and interviews may serve as an important element of storytelling, they should not be considered part of the storytelling dimension as that dimension applies only to bell-to-bell elements of the match. The scale ranges from Extremely Poor Spectacle (0) to Exceptional Spectacle (10) with a value of 5 indicating Neutral Spectacle (neither good nor bad). Generally, matches that have been built around clearly defined characters and conflicts and in which the consequences of the outcome of the match are clear to viewers will be scored high on the spectacle dimension. Matches in which there is no discernable reason for the match and/or the consequences of the outcomes of the match are unclear should be scored low on the Spectacle dimension.

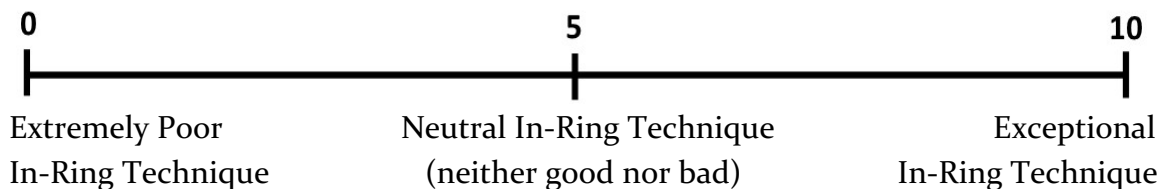


### ***In-Ring Technique***

The dimension of in-ring technique is related to the execution of in-ring moves independent of the difficulty of the moves being performed. Instead, it is related to how well moves, holds and strikes are executed. Because professional wrestling matches are generally designed to suggest that a legitimate fight is

occurring, in-ring technique should be evaluated based on crispness of execution and realism. In-ring technique is a key dimension of many current reviews. For instance, in his review of the match between Chris Jericho and Kenny Omega at AEW Double or Nothing (May 25, 2019), T.J. Hawke emphasized the bout's botched reversal spot, in which Jericho tried to escape Omega's One-Winged Angel finisher and ended up dropping the latter on his head, and gave the match 2 ½ stars. In contrast, both Meltzer (*Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, June 3, 2019) and Keith ("The SmarK Rant for AEW Double or Nothing") praised the match not only for its in-ring action but for its storytelling, with each awarding the match 4 ¼ stars, a very high score. Hawke clearly valued the perceived lack of in-ring execution in the match while Meltzer and Keith focused on its overall storytelling value.

As the performance of moves often requires the coordinated execution of sequences by both protagonist and antagonist, this dimension should be used to evaluate quality of execution as a function of all parties involved in the match. The scale ranges from Extremely Poor Technique (0) to Exceptional Technique (10) with a value of 5 indicating Neutral Technique (neither good nor bad). Matches that contain interactions between performers that suggest realism and that contain consistently crisp execution of moves, strikes and holds will be scored higher on the in-ring technique dimension. Matches that contain disjointed interactions between performers, lack realism and/or contain inconsistent execution of moves, strikes and holds should be scored lower on the in-ring technique dimension.

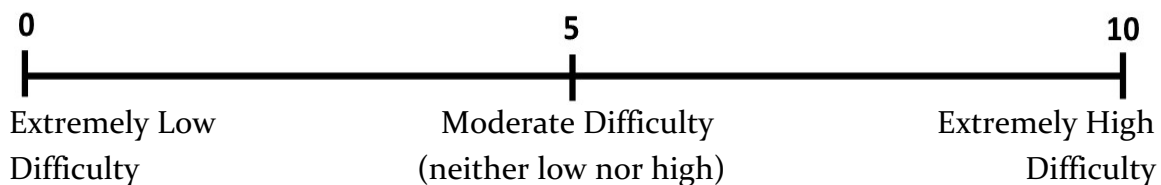


### ***In-Ring Difficulty***

The dimension of in-ring difficulty is related to the complexity and difficulty level of the moves performed in a match irrespective of the quality of execution of the moves. Due to the variability in the moves employed by wrestlers over time, in-ring difficulty must be assessed relative to the moves that are common at the time the match was held. Thus, in-ring difficulty may be considered a rating of a performer's move set relative to the moves most commonly observed during that performer's era. As the moves performed are the fundamental ingredients of any professional wrestling match, in-ring difficulty is often addressed in match reviews. For example, in his review of the Kazuchika Okada-Tetsuya Naito IWGP Heavyweight Championship match at WrestleKingdom 12 on January 4, 2018,

Meltzer praised the match's technical qualities, with both wrestlers using a series of difficult and impressive moves and sequences throughout, giving the match a near-perfect 4 ½ star rating (*Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, January 15, 2018). Kevin Pantoja of 411Mania was, however, less impressed, and seemingly prized storytelling over in-ring difficulty, as Meltzer had. Pantoja was disappointed that Naito lost the match, and felt the match was “missing something,” giving the match 3 ¾ stars (“Kevin’s NJPW Wrestle Kingdom 12 Review”). In this instance, Meltzer clearly valued the high level of difficulty and technical execution in the match and did not seem to factor the match result into his overall evaluation of it, while the fact that Naito lost clearly affected Pantoja’s overall score, indicating that storytelling was a more influential factor.

The dimension of in-ring difficulty is primarily related to the degree of athletic skill and timing required to execute a move set within a match. As the performance of moves often requires the coordinated execution of sequences by both protagonist and antagonist, this dimension should be used to evaluate in-ring difficulty as a function of all parties involved in the match. The entire repertoire of a wrestler should not be considered when evaluating this dimension. Instead, only the moves performed in the match under evaluation should be considered. Across time, this dimension should be considered the most variable of all dimensions. As professional wrestling has developed over time, the level of difficulty in the execution of moves has increased greatly. For instance, in the 1980s the moonsault (top-rope back flip splash) was considered a very difficult highspot. Today, such a move is performed routinely by a wide variety of performers. For this reason, in-ring difficulty is difficult to compare over time. The scale ranges from Extremely Low Difficulty (0) to Extremely High Difficulty (10) with a value of 5 indicating Moderate Difficulty (neither low nor high). Creative matches that involve a high level of athletic skill and timing will be scored above a value of 5, whereas matches that rely on less athletic skill and timing will be scored below a value of 5.

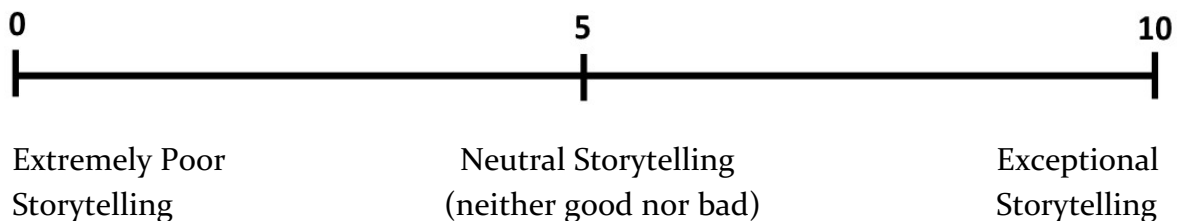


### ***Storytelling***

A key aspect of professional wrestling matches is the story that is conveyed in the ring. Attention to the narrative of professional wrestling matches is often noted in reviews. For instance, Keith panned the Miz-Shane McMahon falls count

anywhere match at WrestleMania 35 (“The Smark Rant for WWE Wrestlemania 35”), claiming it was “just two guys walking around the arena” and that it was generally terrible, awarding it a 1-star rating. Similarly, Meltzer emphasized the poor execution of moves, particularly on the part of McMahon. Though he did acknowledge that the highspots “got over” with the live crowd, Meltzer gave the match  $1\frac{3}{4}$  stars (*Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, April 15, 2019). However, Pantoja of 411Mania gave the match  $4\frac{1}{4}$  stars, calling it an “incredible match” for its highspots and storytelling elements, including the involvement of Miz’s father (“Kevin’s WWE WrestleMania Review”). In this instance, Keith clearly valued the match’s workrate and in-ring action over storytelling, while Pantoja seemingly prized the latter element above all else.

The dimension of storytelling is related to how well a match conveys its intended narrative. The dimension is associated with the order and manner in which moves and breaks between moves are executed in order to tell a story. It also involves non-combative aspects of matches such as facial expressions, expressions of physical and emotional turmoil and taunting. In some cases, storytelling may be aided by non-wrestlers such as managers and valets. Additionally, storytelling may be aided or diminished by play-by-play/color commentary during the match. In many cases, match stipulations may contribute to storytelling, although in some cases match stipulations may be used solely as contributors to the spectacle dimension of the scale. The viewer should only consider match stipulations as an element of storytelling if they are exploited to convey the match narrative. The narrative of matches can be wide-ranging and may include conflicts between babyfaces (virtuous) and heels (villainous), competition to determine which wrestler is more skilled, and matches intended to establish the skills and personal characteristics of wrestlers (e.g., “squash matches”). The scale ranges from Extremely Poor Storytelling (0) to Exceptional Storytelling (10) with a value of 5 reflecting Average Storytelling (neither good Nor bad). Matches in which a clear and cohesive narrative structure can be understood by viewers should be scored a value greater than 5, whereas matches lacking in a clear narrative structure or inconsistent in their conveyance of a narrative should be scored a value lower than 5.

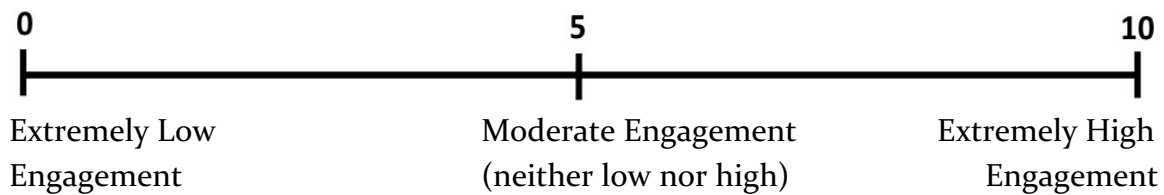


### ***Spectator Engagement***

The dimension of spectator engagement is related to the extent to which the live viewing audience appears to be actively engaged in the viewing experience. It should be viewed as a measure of the excitement that is produced by the live viewing experience. The degree of spectator engagement is frequently noted in match reviews. For example, in his review of the Triple H-Batista match at WrestleMania 35 (“The Smack Rant for WWE Wrestlemania”), Keith not only criticized the match’s slow pace but also the crowd’s seeming lack of interest. He gave the match half a star, a very low score. In contrast, Steve Cook of 411Mania awarded the match 3 ½ stars, calling it an “impressive showing” despite perhaps running too long. Cook indicated his enjoyment of the match and did not make any mention of the disengaged audience. Pantoja of 411Mania went even higher, calling it an “absolute spectacle of a match,” and rated it 4 stars by virtue of its highspots, making no mention of the fans’ interest or lack thereof (“Kevin’s WWE WrestleMania Review”).

The variability in ratings may be attributed to the fact that this dimension is difficult to assess outside of live settings. That is, because cameras generally focus on the wrestling ring, it may be difficult for viewers of recorded matches to assess this dimension. When this is the case, the dimension should be excluded from analysis.

It is relevant to note that there are cultural differences in the expression of excitement. Thus, though the loudness of crowd responses may be considered when evaluating this dimension, it should not be the sole factor considered when evaluating spectator engagement. Other factors such as proportion of the audience who appears to be actively viewing the match and the number of viewers who are involved in non-viewing activities (e.g., talking to neighbors, using phone or other device, playing with beach balls) should also be considered. Similarly, though crowd size may be considered when evaluating this dimension, it should not be the primary factor considered. The level of active engagement of the spectators present should be considered a more important criterion than the total number of spectators viewing the event. The scale ranges from Extremely Low Engagement (0) to Extremely High Engagement (10) with a value of 5 reflecting Moderate Engagement (neither low nor high).



### Calculation of Match Ratings

The proposed scale is highly flexible due to its ability to account for viewers' expectations in assigning match ratings. In its most basic form, the scale assumes that viewers equally value each of the five dimensions of the scale. Thus, the standard application of the scale can be stated as:

$$(\text{Spectacle} + \text{In-Ring Technique} + \text{In-Ring Difficulty} + \text{Storytelling} + \text{Spectator Engagement}) / 5 = \text{Rating}$$

For instance, a match may be rated by a viewer as follows:

Spectacle – 6  
 In-Ring Technique – 9  
 In-Ring Difficulty – 7  
 Storytelling – 8  
 Spectator Engagement – 4

The rating for the match would be calculated as:

$$(6 + 9 + 7 + 8 + 4) / 5 = 6.8$$

In this application, each dimension contributes 20% to the overall match rating. While the scale allows for assignment of a single value that describes the overall perceived quality of a match, it preserves the elements that contributed to the rating. This allows for a more accurate understanding of how matches are interpreted by viewers. For example, two viewers may assign an overall rating of a match a score of 5. Using a unidimensional scale, observers may conclude that the two viewers interpreted the match identically. However, using a multidimensional scale, observers can better understand differences in how the two viewers interpreted the match. Consider the following ratings for two viewers:

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Viewer #1</b>	<b>Viewer #2</b>
Spectacle	6	6
In-Ring Technique	3	3
In-Ring Difficulty	1	8
Storytelling	8	1
Spectator Engagement	7	7
<b>MATCH RATING</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>

In this scenario, identical match ratings can be observed to be a result of different interpretations of the match. Both viewers interpreted the spectacle, in-ring technique, and in-ring difficulty dimensions identically. However, they profoundly differed in their interpretation of in-ring difficulty and storytelling dimensions. By relying on a match rating that is derived as an average of the five dimensions, observers can reach a general understanding of an observer's overall impression of a match. But by using a multidimensional scale, observers may disambiguate identical ratings, thus better understanding how professional wrestling is interpreted by different viewers.

Furthermore, the multidimensional scale allows for viewers' previous assumptions about the nature of professional wrestling to be accounted for prior to match evaluation. This can be accomplished by differentially weighting scale dimensions. For example, consider the presentation of professional wrestling by WWE. WWE identifies itself as "sports entertainment" rather than "professional wrestling." In doing so, it has influenced its fanbase's interpretation of professional wrestling by emphasizing the importance of the spectacle and storytelling dimensions of professional wrestling at the expense of the In-Ring Difficulty and In-ring technique dimensions. Thus, professional wrestling fans who view WWE exclusively may evaluate matches with a bias toward the spectacle and storytelling dimensions. In order to better understand how WWE fans interpret match quality relative to their expectations, a modification of the standard scale may be required. This can be accomplished by differentially weighting each dimension to reflect viewer expectations. In a restated form, the standard scale can be represented as:

$$(Spectacle \times 0.2) + (In-Ring Technique \times 0.2) + (In-Ring Difficulty \times 0.2) + (Storytelling \times 0.2) + (Spectator Engagement \times 0.2) = Rating$$

Because WWE fans may value spectacle and storytelling, the scale might be reweighted to better reflect the relationship between the viewers' expectations and their experiences. Such a reweighting might be stated as:

$$(Spectacle \times 0.275) + (In-Ring Technique \times 0.15) + (In-Ring Difficulty \times 0.15) + (Storytelling \times 0.275) + (Spectator Engagement \times 0.15) = Rating$$

In this case, in-ring difficulty, in-ring technique and spectator engagement are assumed to be 45.5% less valuable in the interpretation of a match than the spectacle and storytelling dimensions. If we apply this modified model to the ratings assigned by Viewer #1 in the previous example, we would obtain the following rating:

$$(6 \times 0.275) + (3 \times 0.15) + (1 \times 0.15) + (8 \times 0.275) + (7 \times 0.15) = 5.5$$

Whereas the rating for Viewer #2 would be expressed as:

$$(6 \times 0.275) + (3 \times 0.15) + (8 \times 0.15) + (1 \times 0.275) + (7 \times 0.15) = 4.625$$

Thus, by reweighting the scale in a manner that reflects the assumptions of the viewers, the identical ratings obtained using the standard scale are no longer identical. Again, such weighting allows for a better understanding of the relationship between viewers' expectations and their experiences.

The valid weighting of individual dimensions can only be determined empirically. For instance, surveying WWE fans on the relative importance of each dimension in their expectation of matches would allow for the determination of the appropriate weights for each dimension. Those weights could then be applied when interpreting how self-identified WWE fans experience both WWE and non-WWE matches. Differential weighting is acceptable under the following conditions:

- 1) The reviewer or researcher indicates explicitly how dimensions are weighted. This can be accomplished by placing the weights in italicized parentheses: (.05, .3, .3, .3, .05)
- 2) The sum of the weights is equal to 1 (i.e., .05 + .3 + .3 + .3 + .05 = 1)

### Statistical Analysis

There is considerable debate regarding the nature of Likert-derived data, with the more conservative argument being that Likert-derived data represents ordinal rather than interval data. This is an important consideration as it dictates the statistical analyses that are permissible during data analysis (Jamieson). The issue is ultimately related to whether or not the distances between values are equivalent. Because traditional Likert scales qualitatively define the meaning of each value, a conservative interpretation suggests that we should not assume equivalent distances between values. For instance, we may not assume that the distance between "neutral" and "agree" is perceived as being equivalent to the distance between "agree" and "strongly agree" by respondents. If we adopt this assumption, interval-based analyses such as mean calculation cannot be employed. Instead, median values are considered an acceptable measurement of central tendency. As a result, tests such as Kruskal-Wallis test and the Mann-Whitney U test are sometimes employed to compare medians.

Because the proposed scale does not explicitly define the meaning of intermediate values, we believe that the assumption of equivalence between values is more justifiable. For instance, users should interpret the distance between a value of 1 and 2 as equivalent to the distance between 5 and 6 on the Storytelling dimension by users. For this reason, the scale can be considered to produce interval

data. This assumption allows for the calculation of a mean as an appropriate measure of central tendency and permits the use of a t-test or ANOVA for the comparison of means across individuals.

## **Conclusions**

Professional wrestling has often been overlooked or simplistically reduced by academics due partially to its neither-fish-nor-fowl status: it is often disparaged as being less-than-sport by sports enthusiasts and dismissed as lowbrow by entertainment experts. However, professional wrestling represents a unique and enduring worldwide phenomenon that deserves more careful consideration and analysis than it has generally received. One missing element in the careful analysis of professional wrestling is the proper tool for understanding the consumption of professional wrestling.

The issue of quantifying the aesthetic experience of viewing and interpreting professional wrestling is difficult but necessary for a better, more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. For nearly 40 years, the five-star system has served as the gold standard for quantifying the experience of professional wrestling viewership. The scale has been incredibly useful for purposes of describing the extent to which viewers enjoy professional wrestling matches, but it fails to disambiguate the reasons for the enjoyment. The present article represents the beginning of the construction of a more useful model for evaluating professional wrestling. As such, it will be modified and refined as a function of empirical observation.

The proposed Multidimensional Scale for the Analysis of Professional Wrestling (MSAPW) represents an attempt to introduce a better tool for the quantitative analysis of professional wrestling viewership. By requiring viewers to rate professional wrestling matches across five dimensions (spectacle, in-ring technique, in-ring difficulty, storytelling, and spectator engagement), we believe that researchers will be better equipped to understand the pro wrestling viewing experience. Though more expansive than the commonly employed five-star system, we believe the proposed scale is sufficiently simple to allow for application in both casual and academic settings. Professional wrestling fans are often enthusiastic and dedicated, and we believe that they will welcome a more sophisticated means of describing their experience of pro wrestling. Similarly, academics may use the scale to more thoroughly investigate the phenomenon of professional wrestling. To the extent that a lack of useful quantitative tools prohibits insightful quantitative research into pro wrestling, the proposed scale may also help to stimulate interest and meaningful research in the field.

The five dimensions of the scale were derived from extensive reviews of match evaluations by a variety of sources. Aspects of spectacle, in-ring technique, in-ring difficulty, storytelling, and spectator engagement were both directly and indirectly addressed in reviews from a variety of reputable reviewers. Because of their frequent appearance in reviews, the dimensions were selected as key elements of professional wrestling match analysis that could be disambiguated from each other. However, the authors recognize that data collected on use of the scale may result in an expansion, reduction or reinterpretation of each of the dimensions.

One goal in developing the proposed model was to find a balance between usability and objective interpretation of matches. We were sensitive to the fact that an overly complex scale may be perceived as overly cumbersome and, as a result, would not be commonly used, and an unused scale is of little value in understanding match interpretation. The purpose of the proposed scale is to serve as a bridge between the tool that is currently used (the five-star system) and a more formal and objective scale (MSAPW). As such, some compromises had to occur to produce a scale that is both usable and more objective. One such compromise was the decision to allow users to rate whole dimensions rather than creating sub-items for each dimension. Though we considered representing each dimension as a set of up to five ratable items, we believe that the requirement to rate up to twenty-five individual items would be perceived as burdensome by reviewers and would ultimately dissuade use of the scale. However, future empirical observations may necessitate the development of sub-scale items. This may prove especially true if researchers attempt to investigate the assessment of individual dimensions of the scale. The authors intend to apply and refine the scale based on data acquired from a wide variety of reviewers who use the MSAPW, and we strongly encourage other researchers to use and refine the scale in order to create a more meaningful empirical knowledge base about professional wrestling viewership. The authors claim no ownership of the scale, and it may be used freely for academic or personal use.

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## Reviews

Barthes, Roland. *What Is Sport?* Translated by Richard Howard, Yale UP, 2007. 96 pp. \$16.50 pbk.

Before professional wrestling became a recognized area of academic study, it was common, in the humanities, to reference Roland Barthes as a legitimizing move. In “The World of Wrestling,” the opening essay in Barthes’ *Mythologies*, Barthes sets up the paradigmatic moves for the study of wrestling in the university:

- Barthes sets up the space of wrestling as a space of theater: “Here we find a grandiloquence which must have been that of ancient theatres.” (15)
- Barthes sets up the split between boxing and wrestling (significant at least in the American Midwest because some early wrestling promoters were also boxing promoters). In so doing, he sets up the difference between sport and wrestling: “This public knows very well the distinction between wrestling and boxing; it knows that boxing is a Jansenist sport, based on a demonstration of excellence. One can bet on the outcome of a boxing-match: with wrestling, it would make no sense.” (15-16)
- Barthes sets up the wrestler as a performer: “Thus the function of the wrestler is not to win: it is to go exactly through the motions which are expected of him.” (16)
- Barthes sets up the wrestling body as semiotic system: “As in the theatre, each physical type expresses to excess the part which has been assigned to the contestant.” (17)
- Barthes maps the narratives of wrestling: “What is thus displayed for the public is the great spectacle of Suffering, Defeat, and Justice.” (19)

The Barthes essay, then, is foundational to much of what became the first generation of professional wrestling studies, mapping the key areas for analysis and some of the key research questions. (Since then, of course, the field has widened to include areas of analysis he never imagined—the behaviors of fans, the media industry and media ecology of wrestling, and analyses in terms of gender and race that Barthes only began to see.)

Barthes did not return to wrestling—this gesture served (much like Umberto Eco’s analysis of *Superman* comics did for comics studies) as a plaintive assertion of validation. Barthes set the table for our work, but he didn’t stick around for dinner.

So, it is with curious eyes that I review *What is Sport?*, a text commissioned for a Canadian documentary film directed by Hubert Aquin. Written just three years after the publication of *Mythologies*, I read *What is Sport?* with an eye toward what it might do to extend the work of the “World of Wrestling” essay, and with an eye toward what it offers the teacher and scholar in contemporary professional wrestling studies.

The first chapter (on bullfighting) has much in common with Barthes’ discussion of wrestling. Bullfighting is sport, in that the bullfighter is in real danger from the bull, but it is also theater. “The bull entering here will die; and it is because this death is inevitable that the bullfight is a tragedy. This tragedy will be performed in four acts, of which the epilogue is death” (3-4). Bullfighting, like wrestling, is theater. But in bullfighting, “this theater is false theater: real death occurs in it” (3).

Where, in wrestling, Barthes saw the narratives of Suffering, Defeat, and Justice, in bullfighting, he sees a narrative to “tell men why man is best”—his courage, his knowledge (“the bull does not know man; man knows the bull”), and style” (8-9). In enacting this narrative, the bullfighter “has made his victory a spectacle, so that it might become the victory of all those watching him and recognizing themselves in him” (9).

Scholars of professional wrestling have, over the several decades since Barthes gave us the “World of Wrestling” essay, pluralized the narratives that Barthes initially mapped in Suffering, Defeat, and Justice—but *What is Sport?* reminds us that looking long and deep at the narratives in other sports-spectacles (like bullfighting) may push us further. We might explore the extent to which wrestling might encompass narratives like the tragedy of the bullfight, or perhaps the narratives in other sports spectacles, like racing—the subject of the next two chapters.

Barthes uses the chapter on bicycle racing to distinguish “competition” from “conflict.” The distinction, for Barthes, is that in racing, “man must conquer not man but the resistance of things” to arrive first at the finish line” (37). (At moments, the theater of wrestling tries to become both competition and conflict—the ladder match and the steel cage match incorporate the “resistance of things” within the conflict between men.)

Subsequent chapters, about car racing (a narrative of man and machine, conquering space and time) and about hockey, offer seeds of insight that could be drawn into scholarly reflection on wrestling. Barthes claims that hockey illustrates the way that “sport returns to the immediate world of passions and aggressions, dragging with it the crowd, which came precisely to seek purification from it. Sport is the entire trajectory separating a combat from a riot” (55). The shouting, the

homemade signs, the passion at a pro wrestling event: the social tensions about race, class, and gender that are worked through in the ring also “separat[e] a combat from a riot.” Barthes’ insights into hockey can illuminate wrestling studies.

In the final chapter, Barthes returns to the trope of theater: “At certain periods, in certain societies, the theater has had a major social function: it collected the entire city within a shared experience: the knowledge of its own passions. Today it is sport that in its way performs this function” for a city or even a nation. Professional wrestling may also have become the site for this kind of cultural work.

*What is Sport* is short—less than 100 pages, heavily illustrated, and (as text to accompany a documentary) it is not loaded with technical terminology nor with the literary allusions that make Barthes inaccessible to students. As a teacher, I value this book immensely for the ways it could open diverse conversations in my undergraduate classes. And as a scholar, I value the ways that it opens up new avenues in my thinking. Barthes set the table for professional wrestling studies in the “World of Wrestling,” and he left a spread of appetizers in *What is Sport?* Priced at less than \$20, it makes a useful addition to our syllabi as well as our libraries.

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Aaron D. Horton editor. *Identity in Professional Wrestling: Essays on Nationality, Race and Gender*. McFarland, 2018. 309 pp. \$39.95.

*Identity in Professional Wrestling*, edited by Aaron D. Horton, is a book that is well overdue. Professional wrestling as a topic of scholarly enquiry is crying out for credible research which finally seeks to answer long-held questions. The book itself comprises eighteen individual essays, excluding introduction, each grouped into four themes. The themes, in order, are: Race (I), Gender (II), Culture and Modernity (III) and Wrestling and Media (IV). The individual chapters are related to the themes rather than chronological, although it is safe to say that most decades of the twentieth century are covered in the analysis up to the present day. It should be stressed that this is not just a study of American wrestling. Naturally, Japan and

Mexico are studied both singularly and comparatively, while the historical contexts of South African, Brazilian and French wrestling are each afforded their own individual chapters. The editor is evidently sending a message that wrestling is a global sport, despite the obvious domination of WWF/E since the 1980s.

Horton is a historian based at Alabama State University whose work has focused predominantly on soccer. Like many entering this empirical field, he is a fan of wrestling who is seeking to establish it as a serious topic of scholarly study. In his own words, “the biggest hurdle may be achieving greater respectability for pro-wrestling within my own discipline (history), as most scholars who currently write about it come from disciplines such as media studies, communication, or anthropology” (“Author Interview”). However, herein lies an opportunity; wrestling offers openings for genuine interdisciplinary scholarship. This book shows that in spades. Its contributors are drawn from anthropology, international studies, English, physical education, and psychology. If anything, Horton should be commended for the ambitiousness of this project. Most of the chapter authors are academics from the United States; however, there is a good pool of international authors from countries like Canada, UK, Japan, South Africa, and Brazil.

In terms of content, the chapters on the then-WWF and the so-called “Rock ‘n’ Wrestling Connection” period from 1984 to 1993 are when the book really comes alive. Specifically, Zara Miramek’s chapter on the national identity markers demonstrated by the Iron Sheik, Kevin Hogg’s analysis of cultural appropriation, Tyson L. Platt’s study of the transmission of cultural values, and Damion Sturm’s examination of key wrestlers during what he calls the “halcyon days” of 1984 to 1993 particularly stand out. The heightened visibility of wrestling because of its link up with popular music and MTV, the utilisation of cable television and the increased use of gimmicks provide fertile ground to examine questions of identity, nationality and stereotypes, whether that is national, sexual and/or gender. Miramek achieves this successfully with a focus on the Iron Sheik and his overtly stereotypical dress; for instance, keffiyeh, iqal, and curly, genie-like, boots. Strum, while predominantly analysing fan memories of wrestlers like the Ultimate Warrior and “Macho Man” Randy Savage, offers a similar lens on Hulk Hogan and Hacksaw Jim Duggan. More than anything, these chapters offer a glimpse into what can be achieved through a study of wrestling. Yet, they also reveal the flaw of this book; some chapters are too brief to offer any substantive contribution.

Miramaek’s analysis, while frequently mentioning the Iron Sheik’s curly boots, does not go into sufficient analytical detail about either the man, Ali Vaziri, or character. For example, if Vaziri’s Iranian character was legitimate because he was actually Iranian what explains his depiction of Colonel Mustafa, a supposed

Iraqi general and ally of Sgt. Slaughter, one year after the end of the first Gulf War and only four years after the end of the Iraq-Iran war, in 1992? This level of analysis is missing from the chapter. Its inclusion would add an extra layer which would show that the Iranian gimmick was more disposable than implied and Vaziri was willing to do what is “best for business.” For Vaziri, it is likely that wrestling and the WWF came first rather than the nation. Greater use of primary research could help to get to the bottom of this.

It would be fair to say that many of the contributors in this book use online research as their core method of data collection. This is because of the lack of scholarly material on professional wrestling and the scope of the focus; for example, wrestler profiles, interviews given online through mediums like podcasts and fan reactions to characters. As mentioned, Damion Sturm utilises Facebook forums as a way of gauging “mediated memories” of the “halcyon days” of WWE. While this is not an illegitimate methodological approach, and Sturm justifies in detail his choice of method, the way that this was used throughout the chapter felt problematic. His citing of verbatim fan comments, which often involved swearing, vulgar language and/or spelling and grammatical errors, while raw and authentic, must be challenged for their empirical value. Facebook forums can be unwieldy and largely unmoderated. Therefore, memories of real value can be overshadowed by ranting and exaggeration. Such methodologies will undoubtedly become more frequent in the years to come but a strict set of criteria should be observed; for example, Eun-Ok Im and Wonshik Chee offer credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability as such criteria for the use of forums as a research method.

What was most lacking in this book was a common thread to knit the chapters together. Each chapter sits apart from one another linked only by a broad theme. This gives the collection a lack of coherence. For example, the reader’s progress through the book is slowed as a chapter repeats information already stated earlier. Definitions, explanations of so-called “wrestling parlance,” and the difference between a heel and face are outlined by numerous authors. Also, the example of Sputnik Monroe was used in both chapters on “Rock ‘n’ Wrestling.” This is not a problem per se, but the references essentially told the same story. A personal preference would be for fewer chapters with greater depth of analysis within a single conceptual framework. This would enhance the empirical impact of the book.

Overall, this book has achieved what it set out to do; the themes highlighted demonstrate the immense value of wrestling for broader questions which cross academic disciplines. While it is questionable whether this book has made a meaningful contribution, owing to the lack of a common thread and the brevity of

some chapters, it has certainly issued a call to action for further research on wrestling related themes. Here's hoping that scholars heed this call.

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## About the Professional Wrestling Studies Journal

The *Professional Wrestling Studies Journal* invites contributions of scholarly work from any theoretical and methodological lens that are rigorous, insightful, and expands our audience's understanding of professional wrestling past or present as a cultural, social, political, and/or economic institution.

All submissions must be original scholarly work not under review by another publication and should be free of identifying information for blind peer review. Written articles should be submitted as Word documents no more than 8,000 words, inclusive of a 200-word abstract and a works cited list. MLA citation style is required. Any images that are not original require copyright clearance. Articles will be converted into PDFs for online publication, so hyperlinks should be active. For multimedia productions and experimental scholarship, please contact chief journal editor Matt Foy (foym38@uiu.edu) to verify length and proper format in which to send the piece.

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