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Editor's Note

Welcome to the second issue of the *Professional Wrestling Studies Journal*, the official scholarly publication of the Professional Wrestling Studies Association. One year ago, the *PWSJ* entered the arena as the first scholarly publication dedicated to furthering scholars', fans', and professionals' (and all betwixt and between) shared understanding of professional wrestling as a cultural, historical, and economic institution.

Our inaugural issue coincided with what has been beyond comparison the strangest year in the history of pro wrestling (and think of the ground that covers). One year ago, I wrote in this space:

> 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.... All we know about wrestling in 2020 is that there's so much we don't know.

And so it was that seemingly each worst-case scenario came to pass. Live audiences, the lifeblood of the industry and artform, disappeared. Wrestling organizations big and small scrambled to adapt and survive. We tuned in to wrestling in empty arenas, with sparse audiences, and with virtual audiences. In the oddest year in wrestling history, Verne Gagne's "Team Challenge Series" being the link to wrestling's past that protected its future ranks right up there.

Major promotions canceled or dramatically scaled back live events. House shows ceased to exist. WrestleMania 37 is scheduled to be the first WWE event with a live audience since March 2020 ("Stephanie McMahon Says"). Independent promotions were forced into hiatus; without WWE's deep pockets, many are still struggling to make up the momentum lost in what had been a boom of fan interest in independent wrestling (Barrasso). Unmoored to a live audience or linear progression of time, both WWE and All Elite Wrestling leaned into cinematic wrestling. Both companies garnering accolades for their triumphs (The Boneyard Match; Stadium Stampede) and scorn for ultimately riding the trend into the ground (or into the swamp … or into a dumpster … or down to its final beat). Time will tell if the trend endures or will become a footnote to the strangest period in wrestling history, but for fans interested in the ever-fluid relationship between wrestling and reality, this year foregrounded a compelling, or confounding, aberrant approach to in-ring storytelling.

Despite the heartbreak and anxiety, there was good news in wrestling this year. AEW continues to thrive as a strong number-two U.S. promotion, accumulating talent, putting on scintillating fast-paced matches, and pulling out what appears at press time to be a narrow victory in the winding-down Wednesday

Night Wars with NXT (but don't take my word for it: read on). And even in a midst of a global pandemic characterized by hunkering down and keeping to our own, AEW tantalized wrestling fans by opening the fabled *forbidden door*, forming and flashing an alliance with New Japan Pro-Wrestling. And as of this writing, there are reports that the forbidden door might open further still, as WWE announced that AEW's Chris Jericho is scheduled to appear on Steve Austin's WWE-affiliated "Broken Skull Sessions" (F4WOnline). In the ring, professional wrestling adapted and survived, building new stars and putting on great matches, making us love it and miss being there in ways we couldn't have predicted a year ago.

Wrestling also hurt us, as it so often does. The #SpeakingOut movement of Summer 2020 revealed just how deep harassment and abuse run in the wrestling industry, with no major promotion spared from accusations of horrific misconduct directed toward at least one performer. WWE courted fan outrage by firing vulnerable employees mid-pandemic and seizing performers' third-party social media platforms, stretching definitions of *independent contractors* beyond translucence. And even a year characterized by loss couldn't numb the pain of the tragic deaths of Hana Kimura, Shad Gaspard, and Jon "Brodie Lee" Huber. The cover of this journal, strikingly rendered in Dark Order purple and silver by the PWSA's own Mario Alonzo Dozal, pays tribute to their loss.

As wrestling has been forced to persevere this year, so too have scholars of wrestling. This will come as no surprise to our readers who call the academy home, but the pressures of pandemic living came for us, as well. Some lost their jobs. Some were forced to take on additional duties to cover for others who did. For many, a seemingly endless torrent of Zoom meetings, along with adjusting to teaching from home and balancing family and professional duties in real time, forced scholarship to the backburner. This issue also pays tribute to those who endeavored to find the time, energy, and inspiration to continue their scholarly agendas this year, and to those who will begin again.

The issue of the *Professional Studies Wrestling Journal* before you offers four unique articles, all undertaking the study of professional wrestling from remarkably different methodological approaches. Our first article, "Samoan Submission Machines: Grappling with Representations of Samoan Identity in Professional Wrestling," explores how Samoan identity has been constructed in wrestling, often problematically, through characterization and storytelling. Author Theo Plothe charts the history of Samoan representation (authentic and faux) from High Chief Peter Maivia to the Tribal Chief Roman Reigns, observing recurring tropes, appropriations, conflations, and erasures. With Reigns boldly foregrounding his

Samoan heritage while sitting as the Head of the Table of the world's biggest promotion, the article couldn't be timelier.

Speaking of timely, our second article, "Facing the Heels: Fannish Producers Constructing an Alternative 'Shoot' History of Professional Wrestling through New Media," explores the productive tension between WWE's hegemonic construction of wrestling history and the alternative historical narratives constructed by historians, interviewers, and producers from outside the WWE bubble. At press time, WWE has recently outsourced its streaming library to NBC's Peacock streaming app in the U.S., and fans are up in arms about Peacock erasing controversial moments from WWE's video archives with WWE's cooperation (Cramer). In "Facing the Heels," S.M. Walus and Connor D. Wilcox offer readers insight into the mindsets and practices of six influential producers of wrestling counter-history, helping contextualize their unique roles in wrestling's discursive ecosystem while reminding readers of the danger, to borrow a phrase from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, of WWE's quest to write its own single story.

For over a year, wrestling fans have witnessed the Wednesday Night Wars between *AEW Dynamite* and *WWE NXT*. In our third article, Vincent Smith takes stock of the numbers in the article "AEW and WWE's Wednesday Night Wars: An Early Analysis." The P*WSJ*'s first article to feature AEW, Smith's quantitative analysis translates the AEW-versus-NXT head-to-head battle into hard data, demonstrating how the two programs fared in direct competition while discussing potential factors that influenced the outcome. With *WWE NXT* reportedly moving from Wednesday to Tuesday in the near future (Otterson), Smith's masterful analysis of the numbers is a great way to make sense of a fascinating period in wrestling history.

The issue's fourth article marks another new chapter in *PWSJ* history, as we are thrilled to take our first foray into staged scholarly performance. In "Legdropping the Iron Sheikh: An AutoEthnographic Performance Selection from *Burnt City: A Dystopian Bilingual One-Persian Show*," performance scholar<->practitioner Josh Hamzehee employs autoethnographic performance to interrogate family, history, and identity through the lens of the iconic 1984 Iron Sheik-Hulk Hogan WWF championship match. In addition to reading about it in these pages, we invite you to follow the article's YouTube link to a video of Hamzehee performing *Burnt City: A Dystopian Bilingual One-Persian Show*. We could not have asked for a more compelling performance to guide us into this new territory.

On behalf of the authors, book reviewers, and *PWSJ* editorial board, thank you for sharing our love of wrestling and scholarship. May the next time we meet come in a new era of sold-out supercards where we can leave the masks to Rey Mysterio or the Lucha Bros.

— Matt Foy, Chief Journal Editor
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Samoan Submission Machines: Grappling with Representations of Samoan Identity in Professional Wrestling

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Amongst the myriad of characters to step foot in the squared circle, perhaps no ethnic group has been as celebrated or marginalized as the Samoans who have made their names in professional wrestling. The discussion of Samoan identity in the context of sport has examined Maori identity and masculinity in New Zealand, among other topics, but there has yet to be work which considers Samoans within professional wrestling. This research investigates Samoan identity through a content analysis of televised wrestling matches. This research identifies six primary stereotypes under which Samoan identity is portrayed. These portrayals of Samoan characters, I argue, flatten the representation of this ethnic group within wrestling and culture at large.

Keywords: Samoans, identity, representation, gimmicks

Introduction

Among the myriad of characters to step foot in the squared circle, perhaps no ethnic group has been as celebrated or marginalized as the Samoans who have made their names in professional wrestling. This research investigates the identity of Samoans within professional wrestling, and the different ways they are constructed and presented to audiences. "Gimmicks," characters portrayed by a wrestler "resulting in the sum of fictional elements, attire and wrestling ability" (Oliva and Calleja 3) utilized by Samoans have run the gamut from the wild uncivilized savage, to the sumo (both in villainous Japanese and comically absurd iterations), to the ultra-cool mogul who wears silk shirts and fancy shoes. Their ability to cut promos, an important facet of the modern gimmick allowing wrestlers to address their opponents and storylines, varies widely as well, but all lie within their Samoan identity. Perhaps only one wrestler, The Rock, has transcended his "Samoan-ness" so much that the audience does not receive him as such. For many other wrestlers

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within World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), however, their identity representations remain stereotypes.

The concept of Samoan identity has been tackled from a variety of perspectives in scholarship. Anae examined individuals with Samoan identity living in New Zealand. Within this collection of work, the "identity journey" of Samoans is positioned as a pan-ethnic identity often constructed by other dominant groups. Studies examining Samoan identity often consider their place as immigrants and outsiders (Grainger) who have issues within their own diaspora in defining what is truly Samoan (Macpherson). In the context of sport, the evictions of the Samoan diaspora in the 1970s in New Zealand are contrasted with the group's current status as an important part of rugby culture (Grainger). Closely related to this, the understanding of Maori identity and masculinity has also been examined in the context of sport in New Zealand (Hokowhitu). Despite the understanding provided by this line of research, there has yet to be substantial work which considers Samoan identity within professional wrestling. This research investigates Samoan identity through a qualitative study of the performance of these wrestlers' racial identity in professional wrestling events.

Jason Edward Black and Vernon Ray Harrison have noted the ways that professional wrestling and the WWE specifically have relied on "stereotypes, ethnic harm, and cultural appropriation" (173), particularly for non-white and non-American characters. Black and Harrison describe stereotypes of Native Americans specifically; in creating the character of Tatanka, for example, Vince McMahon turned Chavis's Lumbee identity into Plains Indian imagery, using "the most grossly constructed generic images and parlayed them as a synecdoche for all Indianness" (Black and Harrison 180). David Shoemaker also argues that Polynesians have more recently replaced Native Americans in these problematic representations, relying on exaggerated characters as a "witch-doctory substratum" of "unhinged prehistorics" (99). In many of these cases, exaggerated aspects of Samoan culture, or other Asian and Pacific Islander traditions, stand in place of more complex ethnic identity representations.

As Henderson notes, Samoans are actually "disproportionately represented" (279) in professional wrestling since the 1970s. Henderson argues that while the stereotypes of Samoans used within the WWE are not that much more extreme than those other ethnic groups, these representations are important because the mainstream American audience might not have other points of reference for Samoans: "the body-slamming, pile-driving, fearsome giants of World Wrestling Entertainment may represent the extent of what is known about Samoan populations as a whole" (280).

This research inquiry is related to Henderson's work on the mythogenesis of Samoans in popular American culture, similar to that of other minority groups throughout the history of the United States. Manea defines mythogenesis as "the development, reproduction and transformation of a narrative that dramatizes world vision" (89). Henderson lays out a compelling argument for conceptualizing the representation of Samoans in a way that presents a specific narrative. She builds from Clyde Taylor's work describing the ways that American culture creates "layered fictions" of Black men that "are produced by others" (169) and create long-lasting cultural myths. Henderson notes that Samoans have undergone a similar process, mythologized as athletic giants, which provides them with "a narrow range archetypes of Samoan masculinity: the Football Player, the Wrestler, Bouncer or Bodyguard" (277). This representational paradigm is rife for exploration, and this article continues to expand on this mythogenesis of Samoans within the world of professional wrestling.

Methodology

This study examines the performance of these wrestlers' Samoan identity through a content analysis of their performed personas, sometimes known in the industry as gimmicks, considering how these wrestlers are represented through biographical and promotional material, and most importantly, in the ring and the ways that these representations build a cultural narrative about Samoans through mythogenesis. To these ends, I examined televised wrestling matches found through digital collections, including on YouTube and the WWE Network, which includes an archived library of wrestling organizations including World Class Championship Wrestling (WCCW), World Championship Wrestling (WCW), American Wrestling Association (AWA), National Wrestling Alliance (NWA), and Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW) broadcasts. I developed a list of all of wrestlers of Samoan heritage who had wrestled professionally and then sought out representative matches based on match records, knowledge of their careers, and of their gimmicks. I then watched and analyzed these representative matches for each wrestler. I identified and analyzed twenty-two professional wrestlers in total. I categorized these representations holistically as falling into six different representative categories: wild, sport, sumo, family, cool, and washed.

In qualitatively coding these representations, I used Bogle's work as a model; Bogle performed a content analysis of early American film to categorize the portrayal of African Americans in film into five broad categories: toms, coons, mulattoes, mammies, and bucks. Similarly, Henderson provides related categorical representations of Samoan men in her survey of popular media, suggesting that physical body mass of Samoan men reifies a number of these representational

narratives. Her categories included "the Football Player, the Wrestler, the Bouncer or Bodyguard, and the Gangsta" (252). The categories I developed are similar but specific to professional wrestling. In my analysis, then, I categorized each performance as adhering to one of these larger identity categories. Through mythogenesis, I argue, these stereotypes present specific and narrow categories for Samoan ethnic identity.

These categories are defined below:

Wild: The wild category identifies the wrestler as an ethnic Samoan, as being from the Pacific Islands, and this representation emphasizes nativeness. In this representation, the wrestler as marked as "the other" and has qualities that mark him as different from Western culture. The wrestler will have language issues and may have little or no knowledge of English. When these wrestlers speak Samoan, it was also often referred to as "gibberish." This wrestler is likely to wear a sarong or other ethnically marked clothing or accessories into the ring, such as bones on a necklace. As Linnekin argued regarding Samoan cultural identity and tourism, in this example, the Samoan identity becomes a stereotype and a commodity for a Western audience to consume (215).

Sumo: In this category, the wrestler is not portrayed as Samoan, but is instead identified through Japanese cultural markers. In this representation, the wrestler is seen primarily just as a large, fat athlete in the style of sumo wrestlers. In some cases, this wrestler is only ambiguously identified with Japanese culture, and in other examples, he is identified as Japanese rather than Samoan. While this category reflects Henderson's argument that Samoans are often portrayed as athletic giants, this representation also presents all Asian Pacific Islander cultures as monolithic.

Sport: The athletic quality of sports entertainment is often stressed, complementing superstars on their skill and strength to further edify them as athletes in the mind of the viewer. Doing so confers a sense of legitimacy to the proceedings despite the results already preordained. In addition, Samoans in the WWE are often seen with having this athletic talent preternaturally. Contrary to the large, fat wrestler in the style of Sumos, these Samoans are cast as "gifted" athletes, predetermined by Samoan birth of being athletically inclined by virtue of their numbers in mainstream professional sports.

Family: The Anoa'i wrestling family is quite extensive with a number of athletes wrestling professionally across multiple generations. As such, one representation of Samoans in professional wrestling has followed a hegemonically constructed identity that all Samoans are related. By reducing the ethnicity to a single family or group of families, all variation is lost, and only the homogenized individual remains. This category is in contrast with the cool category, which

indicates a corporate-friendly and urban identity, but one in which the wrestler's Samoan heritage is sanitized for consumption.

Cool: Representations of this category draw attention to a wrestler's Samoan identity in a more subtle way. Overall, this identity representation is more urban and hip hop influenced than other representations. Samoan-ness is presented in a non-threatening, post-racial way, as a small part of this wrestler's influence, but by no means a defining characteristic. Overall, this is an identity representation that performs a "cool" urban style.

Washed: This category includes Samoan wrestlers who are presented not as Samoan, but as an ethnic "other," whether it is Arabic, Mexican, or another ethnicity. In this category, the wrestler's physical Samoan characteristics are seen as just being ambiguously ethnic, and the wrestler, then, can perform a character with a different ethnic background. In this representation, the wrestler's Samoan identity is erased and another ethnic identity replaces it.

Results

Wild

The *wild* category is by far the most extensive category, with nearly every Samoan wrestler surveyed in this study exhibiting these traits at one point in their careers in professional wrestling. A number of these wrestlers never grew beyond these representations, never speaking on camera in anything but an unintelligible growl and a few words in their native tongue. The Samoans, Afa and Sika, later known as the Wild Samoans, were sometimes just called Samoan #1 and Samoan #2, dehumanized to the point of not even having names. Considering the lengthy history of professional wrestling as a television product, and its relative popularity for the last forty years, it is the author's hope to examine the larger diversity of this representation than just the dominant portrayal of Samoans in such "wild" and "uncivilized" terms.

One of the earliest Samoan wrestlers to make it big in the United States was High Chief Peter Maivia, who made his debut with WWF at Madison Square Garden in 1977. Standing in the ring with an ornate tuiga, majestic lava-lava, and deadly looking spear, Maivia drew from exoticized stereotypes. In his match against Baron Mike Scicluna, WWE owner Vince McMahon also worked as the play-by-play announcer for his regional wrestling territory. "This is one rugged Samoan, this Maivia," McMahon commented. "As long as he has that spear in his hand, I don't think we'll see any chicanery out of Mr. Scicluna." As Maivia removed the headdress, his *pe'a* (intricate tribal tattoos which cover every inch of the legs of Samoan royalty) could be seen. "There you see the tattooed body. That is not warpaint. That is a tattooed body as if you've probably never seen before" ("WWWF"). For an audience

possibly unfamiliar with Samoans or their culture, this representation of the wild, exotic, and ultimately dangerous tribesmen remained the prescript for any Samoan entering the squared circle.

In another example, at WCW Halloween Havoc 1989, the team known as the Samoan Swat Team, Samu and Fatu, teamed with the Samoan Savage (real-life brother of Fatu) to take on The Midnight Express (Bobby Eaton and Stan Lane) and "Dr. Death" Steve Williams in six-man tag team action. The Samoan Swat Team, (storyline brothers, real-life cousins) had just lost their championship titles the previous evening, and new manager "The Big Kahuna" Oliver Humperdink was in the midst of "regression therapy" in order to make them more vicious and "wild":

> Jim Ross: I think we can safely say that Humperdink has regressed the three Samoans back to their tribal state. They are a long way from Wall Street and Humperdink's managerial abilities may be very compatible, and seemingly is for these men.
>
> Bob Caudle: The Big Kahuna, Jim. That's what he is now, the Big Kahuna, the big boss, the leader, you know. . . . I don't know, Jim. They're so wild, I don't know if you can teach or train guys like this anything or not.

The announcers send a message that a loss in so-called civility comes with a loss in intelligence. They imply that the more primitive these Samoans became, the less sophisticated, the less cultured, and ultimately the less human they became.

Jim Ross and Jim Cornette also described The New Samoans language use in much the same way during Starrcade '89:

> Cornette: You know we said earlier The Samoans don't speak English. I'm beginning to wonder about the Steiners.
>
> Ross: Or they speak broken English. I said Rick Steiner is kinda like peanut brittle: he's half nuts and I think that's what you gotta be to survive against the Wild Samoans and the Big Kahuna.
>
> Cornette: That's true, and you talk about nuts. Brother, their heads are as hard as the coconuts on those trees they used to climb. None of these guys are gonna win a Nobel prize right now in the ring. You know what I'm saying. NASA ain't putting out no classified ads for these people. [...] The Samoans are a warlike people; they're very fierce warriors. But hold on [as they hug] I guess they've been Americanized just a tad.

In this example, not only do the variations of uncivilized wild Samoans speak a foreign language, it is reduced to nonsense, nearly infantile in its linguistic simplicity. If they were speaking French, German, or even Portuguese, would their incomprehensive speech be described as "gibberish?"

Known as the Headshrinkers in the World Wrestling Federation, Samu and Fatu eventually turned face and earned the adulation of the crowd. At WWF SummerSlam 1994, legendary manager Lou Albano played the role of Humperdink, the white master to Samu and Fatu. Distinctly, though, Albano was shown speaking Samoan to his wrestlers and fellow advisor and original Wild Samoan Afa, who had lent credence to the group. Popular and well known, Afa "gave the rub" (an act of social capital) to his nephews, providing them with instant legitimacy as title contenders. But in the commentary on their match, McMahon and Jerry "The King" Lawler construct a narrative of unintelligent savages who cannot speak a proper language:

> Lawler: What did he say?
>
> McMahon: Uh, really, I'm not sure. He's fluent in the—in whatever language that was.
>
> Lawler: That's right. *Gibberish*. That's about all these two idiots can understand anyway. Look at the size of their heads. I've never understood how two such humungous heads can hold such puny brains. Look at them!

This commentary leans into the "savage" myth by presenting the Samoans as unintelligent, not speaking a real language, and even having large and hard heads.

This savage stereotype persisted in the WWE until at least 2009. In a promotional message advertising his appearance on a *SmackDown* program on January 16, 2009, Ross can be heard describing Umaga (Eddie Fatu) over violent images of the wrestler destroying the competition and using his deadly finisher, the Samoan Spike, a throat strike with the thumb. "He's big. He's dangerous. He has no fear! A dangerous savage!" ("Episode 491"). Nicknamed "The Samoan Bulldozer," Umaga was a throwback heel, portrayed as impervious to pain or reason. He was introduced as the lackey of a fast-talking Cubano, Armando Alejandro Estrada (Hazem Ali), reminiscent of the cartoonish savages of the 1980s as with Kamala (James Harris), controlled by Kim Chee (usually played by Steve Lombardi) and the painful sting of his riding crop. In Umaga's debut on *WWE Raw* and his first pay-per-view (PPV) at 2006's Backlash just a few weeks later, both Lawler and Ross referred to him as a "freak" ("Episode 671").

During the WWE Network special *WWE 24: Roman Reigns Never Alone,* Reigns alludes to the wild savage stereotype, albeit in a positive manner: "I've done enough study in my head, now I can just cut loose and attack it. *That's when my wild comes out*, that's when my dad comes out, and I'm just pure instinct. It's time, trust it, go." Reigns trusts that fans are keen to his family connections as the son of an original Wild Samoan and will excuse him for trading in stereotypes with a wink and nod. Though not dressed in board shorts and grass weavings, Reigns still exhibits his father's wildness in his long hair, extensive tribal tattoos, and a primal roar before delivering his finishing move: the spear. He not only identifies with his familial history but with the performative identity in the portrayals of Samoan in professional wrestling.

Samoa Joe's portrayal also uses elements of the wild category. Before his November 23, 2005 "Bound for Glory" pay-per-view match against Japanese legend Jushin "Thunder" Liger, Samoa Joe made his entrance ramp to the percussive sounds of the Tirare Polynesian Dance Troupe to generous applause not only for Joe's position as a crowd favorite and arguably TNA's most popular babyface, but also the spectacle of the occasion.

Though introduced as "a different kind of Samoan," the Usos also utilized a similar performative act known as the *siva tau,* (a choreographed dance and chant, literally translated as *war dance*, or "three nations go to war"). The *siva tau* is a crucial part of Samoan culture (Arthur and Chadwick 296), performed at ceremonies and before sports matches. The Usos' cultural pride is important to note, but it should understood that the commercial effect of the *siva tau* helped to launch their career into the uppermost portions of the card. In their special *The Usos: 10 Hours to Houston*, the Usos describe children excitedly performing the *siva tau* and young fans often painting their faces in imitation of their heroes. The WWE took what originally was personal tribute to the twins' late uncle Eki Fatu (Umaga) and appropriated the cultural artifact of Samoan war paint into fan participation and t-shirt sales. Therefore, placing the wild savage outside the realms of modernism and cultured society portrays the Samoan as "sub-human" and worthy of derision despite the many babyface Samoans in professional wrestling over the years. The stereotype or myth of the Samoan savage, then, lives on.

Sumo

A few of the larger Samoans have been recast in the role of sumo wrestlers, in an erasure of their Samoan identity that will be discussed later in the section on *washing*. Likely the most famous and highly regarded of these sumos was Yokozuna

(Rodney Anoa'i). Commentary by McMahon during the 1996 Survivor Series represents a typical comment:

> McMahon: Take a look at this. Take a look at the girth. Take a look at 505 pounds of Yokozuna. This man is huge. Yokozuna obviously having skills on the sumo style, managed by Mr. Fuji. This will be very interesting to see what Yokozuna can bring to the sort of catch-as-catch-can style all over the rest of the world.

In this example, McMahon, as the owner and promoter of a televised product, is most interested in setting a narrative that will entice fans to watch and ultimately buy pay-per-views and purchase branded merchandise. The story he tells, though, is often void of reality. In kayfabe, Yokozuna trained in Japan and was mentored by the Japanese heel manager Mr. Fuji, who could often be seen carrying the Japanese flag and a bucket of salt to the ring, both of which were often used nefariously. The term *yokozuna* is in reference to the highest possible rank in Japanese sumo, with sumo wrestlers known as *sumotori* (sumo practitioners). Anoa'i had received no training as a sumotori, but that didn't stop the WWF from promoting Yokozuna as a true sumo wrestler.

Interestingly, McMahon had a former *sumotori* on the WWF roster at the time. Before his career as Earthquake in the WWF, Canadian-born John Tenta competed out of the Sadogatake stable under the *shikona* (ring name) *Kototenzan* (Heavenly Mountain Harp). He started his career 21-0 before the difficulty of adapting to life in Japan became too much. On the May 16, 1994 episode of *Monday Night Raw*, Yokozuna and Tenta (as Kototenzan) met in a sumo match to determine who was the greater *sumotori* as a matter of pride. For McMahon, the dominant characteristic of both wrestlers was size:

> McMahon: These two behemoths are gonna collide and we're gonna see it for the first time ever *Monday Night Raw*, Yokozuna and Kototenzan. […] And now look at the gargantuan size of both men. ("Episode 63")

When not talking about the storyline Japanese identity of these Samoans, there was often a discussion of body consumption, an issue that would never gain traction in a Japanese context of the sport. When Rikishi (Solofa Fatu, Jr.) was reintroduced as a sumo-sized Samoan, again, his representation remained solely that of a sumo without the Japanese identity it carried with it.

Much like his first cousin Yokozuna, Solofa Fatu Jr.'s reintroduction into the WWE came with a name and gimmick change to a sumo wrestler named Rikishi, *rikishi* itself being a common synonym for the term *sumotori*. The *kanji* (Japanese pictograms) used in the word mean "strength/power" and "gentleman/samurai" (Deutsch 57). Yokozuna wore a traditional mawashi (sumo belt), but unlike real

sumotori, he wore tights to cover his exposed buttocks. McMahon regretted this choice, according to WWE producer Bruce Prichard, who noted that when developing Fatu Jr.'s Rikishi gimmick, he wanted the character to have more of a sumo look:

> He wanted him to be a real sumo. Vince says one day, "You know, I am looking at [Fatu's then-gimmick] The Sultan, that a** is getting bigger every day, now he can be a great sumo. He can be better than Yoko because he is not as big as Yoko and my God it would be great, but he has to have those a** cheeks out. (qtd. in Kelly)

Fatu. Jr.'s Rikishi character, then, was specifically developed to look like a sumo wrestler in an echo of Yokozuna's earlier gimmick.

Sport

Much like Bogle's discussion of the hyper-sexualized consumable bodies of black athletes as bucks, so too does the representation of Samoan as superior athletes appear in professional wrestling. In a Dallas-based WCCW match in October 1982 between The Samoan (Samula Anoa'i) and Gran Marcos #2, Jay Saldi said in reference to Samoans, "big-boned people, you know. Large areas to put a lot of muscle mass [on], which, if we could show his father and uncle, they're both gigantic men, both over 280 pounds." This comment was in response to Bill Mercer, the play-by-play announcer, who said, "you think of Samoans as having great agility, those that we've seen in action" ("WCCW").

During a 1984 match at Madison Square Garden between fan-favorite Samoan #1 Afa Anoa'i and Dick Murdoch, "Mean" Gene Okerlund and Gorilla Monsoon had this exchange:

> Okerlund: The Samoan people, as we have found out in collegiate and professional football, for that matter some track and field sports, are really very athletically inclined in general.
>
> Monsoon: Absolutely, and from what I understand from speaking with the Samoans that wrestling is one of the most loved sports in their country, of all sports, if not #1. ("WWF")

This athletic construction of Samoan identity is bolstered by the announcers "inside knowledge." That they have spoken to an indeterminate number of "the Samoans" is of consequence, and speaks to their own reliability. Of course we know that this is patently ridiculous, but in storyline world of professional wrestling this illusion must be contained and managed.

In order to bolster kayfabe, real-world tidbits of information are often dropped into commentary to steer the course of this fictional narrative, many times to offer the viewer a sense of legitimacy. In the following case of Matthew Anoa'i from *Raw* in 2002, wrestling under the name Rosey as a member of the nefarious heel tag team 3 Minute Warning, announcers Michael Cole and Tazz informed the viewing audience of Rosey's legitimacy as an athlete:

> Tazz: This Rosey, man. Six-foot-five, 375 pounds.
>
> Cole: Four-year letterman at the University of Hawaii on the offensive line for the football team.
>
> Tazz: I mean this guy's a pro athlete. Did a little bit of research on him: he ran the 40 in 4.8 seconds. ("Episode 478")

The WWE wanted viewers to know that Rosey, despite his rather rotund and unathletic appearance, is a more-than-capable competitor in the staged sport of wrestling. Sports entertainment may not be a legitimate competition, what with its preordained finishes and its planned spots with certain moves, actions, or outcomes, but there are still exceptional athletic feats to be had, and the wrestlers are talented athletes and should honored and respected as such. Mentioning that 375-pound Rosey runs a 4.8-second 40-yard dash is just one way to do that.

Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson was also portrayed as an athlete, especially when he made his debut at Survivor Series in 1996. Ross states, "Now there's going to be the man right there. That's a blue-chipper right there" ("Survivor Series 1996"). Ross first refers to Johnson as a "blue-chipper," giving him legitimacy through his status as a college football player. Later in the match, Johnson is praised for his athletic prowess. Ross notes his height at six-foot-five, and McMahon remarks, "Unbelievable agility, yes sir!" These comments continued six months later, on *RAW* in 1997:

> Ross: Well, I'll tell you what, Rocky Maivia is a quality human being. We know he's an amazing athlete. We've talked about him being a— only playing two years of high school football yet he was *USA Today* first-team high school All-American. ("Episode 212")

In these episodes, Ross referred to Johnson's specific athletic history, rather than his heritage as a Samoan. It is Johnson's past as an athlete that is more important than his ethnic identity.

The growth of combat sports such as mixed martial arts (MMA) has given rise to pro wrestlers with backgrounds and histories in MMA, thus conferring legitimacy upon these wrestlers by proxy. Wrestlers such as Steve Blackman and

Ken Shamrock used their backgrounds in martial arts to confer a good deal of success in professional wrestling as MMA first rose to prominence in the 1990s. Few have arrived in pro wrestling with as much martial arts hype as Samoa Joe in Total Nonstop Action (TNA) after a highly successful stint in Ring of Honor (ROH). Announcers Mike Tenay and Don West emphasized this background at his debut in TNA in 2005:

> Tenay: He's notorious for this. He's got a Muay Thai background. He's known for all of his kicks. He's known for his knee strikes. Ladies and gentlemen, in a word, Samoa Joe takes the style of a UFC fighter, of someone from the ultimate fight, and brings that kind of mentality to the professional wrestling ring. [...] Samoa Joe, a trainer at the New Japan Pro Wrestling Dojo in Los Angeles, California and absolute intimidating force in the ring. ("Slammiversary")

This background in combat sports is a near-constant in interviews. On the WWE-affiliated *Steve Austin Show* podcast, Joe talked about his background in football, as well as his judo and jujitsu training. Austin investigated Joe's background further, mentioning "But I was reading that you avidly train Brazilian jujitsu, judo, which we talked about, and Muay Thai at the L.A. boxing in Costa Mesa California" ("Samoa Joe"). The popular epithet for Samoa Joe is "The Samoan Submission Machine," and Austin was aiming to find out if the moniker itself was legitimate. Samoa Joe's legitimacy and reputation, then, is based in part on his wider martial arts training, though Joe himself describes this training as distinct from more serious training in the sport.

Family

If Samoans are genetically predetermined to become great athletes, as some of these representations would have you believe, it would certainly stand to reason that this is because they are all related. While a number of families have contributed to the roster of professional wrestling organizations throughout the years, there has been a decided focus on the Anoa'i wrestling family. What is troubling is the reference to this family as a progenitor for wrestlers, so much so that nearly every family member is defined as such. This homogenizes Samoans in their representation, one that does not seem to label or limit prominent white families with multiple generations competing in the ring.

In the previously discussed WCCW match, Jay Saldi commented, "his father and his uncle have been a very successful tag team over a number of years known as The Samoans. He's just livin' in the family name, like the Von Erichs" ("WCCW"). What Saldi fails to acknowledge in his commentary here is that "Samoan" is not a

surname, unlike the Von Erichs. It is as if to say that all the Fatus, Maivias, and Anoa'is are homogenized, all part of the same genetics.

During Rocky Maivia's (Dwayne Johnson) debut in the 1996's Survivor Series, this exchange was heard by viewers between announcers Ross and McMahon:

> Ross: Looked like a Rocky Johnson drop kick to me.
>
> McMahon: The former Dwayne Johnson taking the name of his father and his grandfather, Rocky Maivia as a tribute to them.
>
> Ross: No, there's going to be the man right there. There's blue chipper right there. McMahon: First third-generation superstar ever. His father really made a name for himself here, and so did his grandfather, Rocky Maivia.

Later McMahon continued the discussion of Maivia's lineage, more troubling in terms of a pedigree, as with horses or greyhounds: "This man is a thoroughbred. There's no doubt about it" ("Episode 176"). While drawing attention to his physical size, McMahon's comment has other connotations for the connection to family, but in the reductive manner of genetics. At the following year's WrestleMania, McMahon continued his discussion of Maivia as a product of breeding: "And he brings all that heritage into the squared circle. Yes, the first third-generation WWF Superstar in Rocky Maivia" ("WrestleMania 13").

A number of families have achieved long-term success in the professional wrestling, including the Harts, the Armstrongs, and the aforementioned Von Erichs, but none of these families are emphasized as sharing a common cultural core like the Samoans. That has led in no small part to the homogenization of Samoans earlier in this paper. In speaking of his sons the Usos in 2015, former star Rikishi noted, "They do have their own look. Everybody knows they've come from a Samoan Dynasty. But I think they've brought fashion representing the new era" (*The Usos: 10 Hours to Houston*). The Phoenix Times interviewed Jimmy Uso before a WWE event, asking, "Vince McMahon and the WWE has always been good to your family over the years, whether it's been your dad Rikishi or wrestlers like Yokozuna, Umaga, and even The Rock. Why has he always had a soft spot for Samoans?" Uso didn't delve too much into the McMahon psyche, but responded:

> I think we're just bred to do this, man. We're huge, we're athletic, we're agile, and we've just been here from day one with wrestling. I think this is just what we're supposed to do and we enjoy doing this. We love doing this, you know? (Leatherman)

Uso suggested that Samoans in general, not just those in pro wrestling, share these common traits. Even at WrestleMania in 2015, the announcers tied Reigns's performance into this notion of a Samoan dynasty. Witness this exchange between Lawler and John Bradshaw Layfield, (commonly known as JBL) during Reigns's title match against WWE champion Brock Lesnar:

> Lawler: That Samoan pride…
>
> Layfield: That great Samoan dynasty that Roman Reigns is a part of have never faced anything like Brock Lesnar. […] Roman is angry at Brock because he won't quit, he won't give up. He won't seem to quit.
>
> Lawler: What? Is he laughing?
>
> JBL: It is that Samoan pride. That's for world champions like Yokozuna, like The Rock, like Peter Maivia, That is the Samoan dynasty speaking. It may get Roman hurt. ("WrestleMania 31")

This family assumption is reflected in an interview Michelle Beadle at ESPN conducted with Reigns during the build-up to WrestleMania: "So you and Rock are from the same family? Do you wanna crush movies like he's crushing movies?" Though there is no actual blood relation between the Maivias and the Anoa'is, the WWE seemingly exploits this cultural notion of Samoan American of family. According to McGrath and Edwards, Samoan Americans defined family relationships by social roles, "an individual raised as a brother was identified as a brother whether or not there was a biological basis to the relationship" (7). This even extends to adopted children gaining blood status, as is the case with the Rock's mother, Ata, the adopted daughter of Peter Maivia. I would argue that WWE has monopolized this cultural affect and as result, homogenized all Polynesians in this regard for its own narrative and financial gain.

Samoa Joe, though not related in any way the Anoa'is, sees this family connection as positive, yet also wants to remain distinct from the family, as discussed on Chris Jericho's podcast:

> Joe: But that's all Samoans, that's a positive stereotype, that we're all related.
>
> Jericho: Yeah, that's right.
>
> Joe: And uh, so I mean, uh, you know, coming up through the business everyone constantly wanted to say, oh, are you an Anoa'i? Are you an

> Anoa'i? Are you an Anoa'i?
>
> Jericho: Or a Fatu.
>
> Joe: Yeah, a Fatu. I thought it, yeah Maivia, you know, and I thought it would be and they've paved the way. No doubt. They have paved the way for all Polynesian wrestlers, not just Samoans, Polynesian wresters in general that come into the business. I mean, you know, before High Chief Peter Maivia nobody even knew where Samoa was. ("Episode 123")

While Samoa Joe does not want to be wrongly associated with the family, he acknowledges that he also benefits from this family tradition. Samoa Joe frames this connection as a "positive stereotype," yet the idea that all Samoan wrestlers are related also as the effect of homogenizing them for a mainstream audience.

Cool

A number of Samoans were portrayed as cool—at the height of cultural relevance and of urban cool. One such event was the debut of Samoa Joe to the world of Total Nonstop Action wrestling at the 2005 pay-per-view Slammiversary. Play-by-play announcer Tenay introduced Samoa Joe in this way: "How do you have an answer when a 280-pound Samoan submission machine, and that's exactly what he is, drops down on you, beats you with power moves, and he sets you up for submission?" ("Slammiversary"). Not only does the broadcast provide viewers with instant recognition and legitimacy of Samoa Joe, he's given a cool nickname and an opponent who can showcase his skills. Better yet, a number of *smarks* began chanting a phrase in sing-song that has followed Joe since his days in Ring of Honor: "Joe's gonna kill you. Joe's gonna kill you." To the uninitiated fan, Samoa Joe just became one of the coolest wrestlers ever.

As mentioned previously, the ability to cut a promo is perhaps the essential element to being seen as cool. Venerable wrestling announcer Gordon Solie interviewed Samu Fatu, known as the Tonga Kid, early in his career in an exchange that demonstrates this stereotype:

> Tolofa. [Trans: Hello in Samoan]. All you people all over the world thought the kid was gone, huh? No the kid ain't gone. The kid is back, the kid feels good, the kid is ready to get down and boogaloo. My breakdancers know what I'm talking about, and I'm sure you know what I'm talking about, and there's a little rumor going around that said Ric Flair and the Tonga Kid or Harley Race. It don't matter who it is. Let me explain one thing to you people out

> there. You see this little world right here? The kid has been all over that world and that's what I'm made for. I'm eighteen years old. I've got a long way to go and I want you people to know one thing, I'm fly, and I'm hot. I'm ready to get down and get funky.

The Tongan Kid's use of pop culture slang and reference to "my breakdancers" showing group inclusion and affinity, but they also rely on markers of African-American culture to perpetuate that image.

By 1998, Rocky Maivia had turned from fan favorite to reviled bad guy as he took on a pompous approach and an egotistical affect, declaring his new moniker of The Rock and himself as the People's Champion despite infuriated fans' constant boos. Joining the top heel faction, the Nation of Domination (NOD), a Black separatist group modeled on the Nation of Islam, The Rock slowly began to ingratiate himself with the other members and ultimately usurp the group's leader at the time, Faarooq (Ron Simmons). As he did so, The Rock transformed into the epitome of urban style and of the cool, suave professional. During an episode of *Raw* in 1998, dressed in an expensive silk shirt all while wearing sunglasses indoors, The Rock gave three of the four members of the NOD $15,000 solid gold Rolex watches. ("Episode 249"). In the boldness of the gesture, the audience booed him just minutes before gasping and cheering at the offering.

In a more recent gimmick, the Usos have presented a different, harder cool persona as part of a distinct heel turn. On the October 3, 2017 edition of *SmackDown* ("Episode 946"), the Usos marked a clear distinction from their opponents New Day just a few days before the Hell in a Cell pay-per-view. Dressed in black tank tops bearing "Down Since Day One Ish," the Usos cut a ferocious promo marking these new personas, describing how they were going to lock New Day in the "Uso Penitentiary" by using streetwise hard-edged imagery and hyper-aggressive language. This more aggressive approach was modeled on the real-life Sons of Samoa street gang. Similar tag teams like WXW's Sons of Samoa (aka Afa Anoa'i Jr and Lloyd Anoa'i) and the 2017 edition of the Samoan SWAT Team (Jacob Fatu and Journey Fatu aka Lance Anoa'i) used the same trope. The SST also has a known branch out to the Samoan Dynasty in MLW where Jacob Fatu is the current heavyweight champion. Whether the more suave image of The Rock, or the harder new iteration from the Usos, this "cool" persona and category merges Samoan identity with American urban culture.

Washed

The Rock achieved his coolness in no small part due to his connections with his African American heritage, which sometimes came at the loss of his Samoan

background. White meat, babyface Samoan Rocky Maivia de-emphasized his South Pacific heritage in embracing the cultural politics of the Nation of Domination, a Black-separatist faction led by Faarooq, which he rebranded as "bigger, badder, better and Blacker" (Petrie). In discussions about his identity as a member of the group, Maivia references a Black/white racial binary erasing his Samoan heritage. As he commented on *RAW*:

> Maivia: This isn't about the color of my skin, this is about respect.... It's not a black thing. It's not a white thing. I became the youngest Intercontinental champion in WWF history, and what did it get me? In arenas across the country, I heard chants of "Rocky sucks!" Well, Rocky Maivia is a lot of things, but "sucks" isn't one of 'em! You know, hey, it's not a black thing, it's not a white thing, and hey: let's talk about a racist faction. You want to talk about a group that's prejudiced? Let's talk about the DOA. The DOA epitomizes racism, but ... hey, you know what: to hell with the DOA! I want to make one point to all you jackass fans out there: Rocky Maivia and the new Nation of Domination lives, breathes and dies respect, and we will earn respect, by any means necessary. ("Episode 223")

While he rejects the racism of the Disciples of Apocalypse (DOA) in this discussion, he does not make mention of his Samoan at all. Much like other ethnicities that are erased in these wrestling performances, in order to turn heel and enrage fans who were tired of his "bluechipper" schtick (and no doubt reactionary to the WWF's constant promotion), Maivia had to wash himself clean of his Samoaness. For the next part of his career, Maivia wasn't Samoan: he was all Black.

The WWF in particular has had a distinct problem with washing. Harkening back to an earlier discussion regarding Yokozuna, to complete the *sumotori* connections, despite being billed as being from Polynesia, McMahon claimed in 1992 that he was "indeed, the pride of the rising sun for sure" ("Superstars").

Solofa Fatu, Jr. had already performed as the Wild Samoan Headshrinker and in a terrible gimmick of "Make a Difference" Fatu. He then donned a mask and performed an offensive Arabic character. Though the character of The Sultan was short lived, Fatu did face his cousin Johnson for the Intercontinental Championship at WrestleMania 13. In the Sultan's debut match on *Raw* in 1996, manager and former WWF champion Bob Backlund, announcers Ross, Kevin Kelly, and Lawler had this exchange:

> Lawler: Let me tell you a little bit about The Sultan. Look at that drunk Jake the Snake! But the Sultan, you know, tensions are heating up right now over in the Middle East with the dispute between United

> States and Iraq, and legend has it that the Sultan was captured once held hostage! And when he wouldn't talk they cut his tongue out.
>
> Kelly: What?!
>
> Lawler: that's right. And now he's here in United States where we have freedom of speech and he can't talk! ("Episode 176")

This conversation established the Sultan's kayfabe narrative and connected the Middle East, Iraqi disarmament, and the Iron Sheik's Iranian past with the fabricated Sultan who was somehow mutilated as a prisoner of war. Rooted in stereotypes of the Middle East, the reality of the wrestler's ethnicity and history disappeared. Finally, other Pacific Islanders were "washed" as well and homogenized as Samoan. Despite being born in Fiji or Tonga, a number of individuals were billed as being from Samoa, or somehow related to the large presence of the Anoa'i family.

During Survivor Series 1987, announcers Monsoon and future Minnesota governor Jesse "The Body" Ventura had this exchange about the tag team The Islanders, made up of (Samoan) Tama and (Tongan) Haku, participating in a twenty-man tag team Survivor Series elimination match:

> Ventura: You know, there's something about those South Sea Island boys. They've got stamina, they got strength, and they got hard heads.
>
> Monsoon: Oh, but they don't have hard elbows.

In naming them The Islanders and describing them as the "South Sea Island boys," the two distinct cultures are presented as one and the same. Many other WWE wrestlers have been conflated with Samoans also and washed into one Pacific Islander/Samoan identity, including Haku and the Snukas.

Along with this homogenization and marginalization comes the negative representations of Samoans littered throughout this paper. With The Islanders, it was Ventura's assertion that *all* Pacific Islanders have hard heads. On the July 22, 1996 edition of WCW Monday Nitro, it was the suggestion that Samoans were cannibals:

> Eric Bischoff: You know what I found out today, as you look at Meng?[2] The Samoans, these are some of the most vicious people. And really, 100 years ago, these people were still cannibals? I mean, you talk about being a meat eater.

[2] Tonga 'Uli'uli Fifita was known as Haku in the WWE and Meng in WCW.

> Bobby Heenan: You wouldn't have surprised me if you had said maybe said Thursday. One hundred years ago: that's nothing.
>
> Bischoff: Anyone who has ever been in the ring with Meng still thinks he's a cannibal. This is one bad dude, let me tell you what.
>
> Heenan: And there's so many different ways he can beat you. He's so powerful, he's so focused, the man knows martial arts. He was a sumo. He's just a massive man.
>
> Bischoff: And his ancestors were cannibals.

Tonga 'Uli'uli Fifita was actually born in Tonga, but as he was with The Islanders, the announcers just presented him as a Samoan savage capable of cannibalism.

As I have detailed, some of the representations of Samoans seem to be rather innocuous; talking about family and prior athletic achievement sound positive. But the underlying racial tones of an institutional system are still there, and together these stereotypes create a unified myth about Samoans as wrestlers. In fact, in an episode of *RAW* that aired in 2014, Road Dogg Jesse James referred to the Usos' Samoan heritage, saying, "They pay homage to the Samoan family legacy" ("Hulk Hogan"). As YouTube and now the WWE Network act as portals to an era of wrestling gone-by this mythogenesis is ongoing, and these representations do not just remain in the past. During dueling promos for pay-per-view on June 15, 2006, Scott Steiner took the witty banter and repartee associated with the build-up to a pay-per-view match with Samoa Joe to a much darker and offensive place:

> Samoa Joe: Don't eyeball me? I'll eyeball whoever I want. Who are you? Who are you in my world, Scott Steiner?"
>
> Steiner: "I've got a problem with Joe calling himself Samoa Joe. You're a freaking *half breed*, and I'm going to treat you like a half breed this Sunday. I'm going to beat you like a little [bleeped].

Not only is Steiner's casual racism common throughout professional wrestling, the easy availability of this material through digital archives broadens its impact twenty years after it aired.

Representations of Samoan Women

Of interest to note, there are very few female wrestlers of Samoan descent in the history of professional wrestling. Only Nia Jax and Tamina Snuka have played significant roles of the women's division in WWE. Snuka was introduced as the

valet/manager for the Usos with their introduction to the WWE. Her father, Jimmy "Superfly" Snuka, was Fijian, billed as "from the Fiji Island" but often conflated as part of the "Samoan Dynasty." He was never able to escape the "Wild Samoan" portrayal, often coming to the ring to the beat of tribal drums, wearing animal-patterned trunks and a flower-adorned headband. Although Tamina Snuka came in as the hyper-cool athlete like the Usos, eventually her portrayal was attached back to her father as a wild Samoan, never far away from the headhunting savage Polynesian Islander mythologized in American popular culture. For example, WWE announcers frequently referred to and reminded viewers of her father during matches. In a 2013 episode of *SmackDown*, JBL remarked, "Unbelievable genetics; you gotta love Tamina," and then described her as "very aggressive here."

WWE broadcasts frequently described Tamina's wrestling style as aggressive. Before wrestling Tamina for the WWE Divas Championship at 2013's Elimination Chamber, Kaitlyn described her in a pre-match segment as, "The most terrifying competitor (she's) ever faced." During the match, announcer Cole stated, "There's some of that vicious attitude Jimmy 'Superfly' Snuka used to bring to the ring, probably rubbed off on his daughter, Tamina." The use of the word "vicious" to describe Tamina, combined with a reference to her father, demonstrates how the wild stereotype was projected onto her as well.

But Nia Jax, whose cousin is The Rock, is never portrayed in a similar way because of her family connections. As a relative of the "jabroni beating, pie eating, trail blazing, eyebrow raising" epitome of cool Rock, Jax has been conferred with his appropriation. As the largest female wrestler in recent memory, Jax is often portrayed as a monster heel, but she foregoes the more deleterious aspects of just such a character, such as not speaking, or emoting only grunts and growls. She instead falls under the cool stereotype as a strong female athlete for the new millennium: confident and cool, but still kicking ass when she needs to. She avoids the portrayal of the larger sumo archetype of Samoan men despite relative size, even walking the runway during New York's Fashion Week ("Nia Jax Walks").

Recent Developments

Finally, of note is the most recent heel turn of popular babyface Roman Reigns. Though introduced as a heel, for much of his career Reigns has been one of the top stars of the WWE. In the second half of 2020, Reigns debuted a villainous persona as the "Head of the Table" of the Samoan dynasty in professional wrestling. Reigns has surrounded himself with a willing lackey in cousin Jay Uso and former manager of the Samoan Swat Team Paul Heyman. Heyman, as mouthpiece and heel manager, boosts Reigns credibility as a serious heel and legitimate threat to all who face him whilst providing historical lineage to Reigns's uncles and Uso's father. On the

February 5, 2021 episode of *SmackDown*, announcer Cole introduces Reigns, "He's still the champion. He's still the head of the table. The ever confident, the ever aloof, Roman Reigns, is on *SmackDown*!" This description is interesting because while it implies the fetishization of the mythogenesis of the Samoan dynasty and family, it does so without the trappings or motif of the wild Samoans of the past. Reigns's position as "Tribal Chief" was cemented at Hell in a Cell 2020, defeating his cousin Jey Uso in the main event, and having his uncle and father, WWE Hall of Famers Afa and Sika, present him with a traditional lei, embracing him as the Tribal Chief.

On the previously mentioned episode of *SmackDown*, Reigns questioned Royal Rumble winner Edge's desire to challenge him for the title, snarling in an opening promo:

> Me, the tribal chief, the head of the table, the best of the best, the WWE Champion, the main event. Why in the hell are you gonna visit *Monday Night Raw*? Why you gonna waste your time on Wednesday going to NXT, when you already know you should bring your ass right here, to *SmackDown*, Roman Reigns' show. You should grovel at my feet, beg me, sell me, on why I should allow you on the island of relevancy. That's what you should be doing.

Reigns deftly alludes to the island of Samoa, the familial nature of the culture, and the position in history of his people in the sport, but manages to do so without speaking Samoan, wearing face paint, or performing the *siva tao*. Remarkably, he's been able to blend the positives of Samoan culture without the cultural baggage of problematic tropes. Additionally, Reigns has debuted a new, more visually visceral finishing maneuver to further distance himself from his fun-loving, Samoan persona. Traditionally, Samoan professional wrestlers have not relied on submission moves, save The Rock's use of the sharpshooter and Samoa Joe's well-known moniker of the Samoan Submission Machine. In his use of the guillotine choke, Reigns is differentiating himself as a new kind of Samoan wrestler. This more recent persona on the part of Reigns demonstrates how the categories described in this article may be blurring in new ways.

Conclusion

These six categories (wild, sumo, sport, family, cool, and washed) have created and perpetuated an overall myth about Samoan culture in professional wrestling, particularly in WWE. These categories repeat in different forms but are persistent and continue to influence the wrestlers currently in the industry. While WWE may wish to distance itself from its more offensive stereotypes of wild Samoans, its persistent archive and back catalog continue to recirculate these myths. As Henderson argued, these representations matter as one of the few places in media

that many Americans would encounter portrayals of Samoans.

In a Prime Time Wrestling event in 1986, Jake "The Snake" Roberts was slated to fight Siva Afa but refused. He said, "I'll tell you something. As far as I'm concerned, you can give this coconut picker the match, because I will never wrestle again in Toronto until I get a chance at Ricky Steamboat in my kind of match" ("Prime Time Wrestling"). Roberts uses the epithet of "coconut picker" and the loaded term "savage." This coarse language is typical of the ways Samoans are represented in the WWE. While the images they represent may be a bit more diverse now, the "coconut picker" savage isn't far behind.

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Facing the Heels: Fannish Producers Constructing an Alternative "Shoot" History of Professional Wrestling through New Media

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Few phenomena have the enduring cultural reach and economic durability of professional wrestling. One company, World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), effectively controls the majority of its recorded history owning the tape libraries of nearly every North American wrestling organization from before the year 2000. Through this ownership, it provides a flattering corporate history in an Orwellian manner. However, through new media content, fans have constructed an "alternative history" (Dawson and Holmes) of the hegemonic "worked" history provided by WWE. To investigate this, we conducted in-depth interviews with seven of the best-known producers of dirt sheets, podcasts/vodcasts, and shoot interviews in the industry. Their content is seen in over 200 countries by an audience of millions. Their "fannish productions" (Jenkins; Watson) focus on the "shoot," or factual elements of the industry and demonstrates the power of fannish producers to disrupt hegemonic messages.

Keywords: professional wrestling, producer studies, new media, fandom, fan media, alternative history

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Professional wrestling has an enduring cultural reach and economic durability. After years of increasing earnings, World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) reported revenues of $960.4 million, which is the company's most profitable year to date ("WWE Reports 2019 and 2020 Business Outlook"). In 2020, WWE media reached

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900 million homes worldwide with programming translated into twenty-eight languages for more than 180 countries ("Company Overview"). In addition, WWE boasts partnerships with big-name corporations like Coca-Cola, Microsoft, Mars, and Kentucky Fried Chicken that have quadrupled in revenue since 2011 (Santana). Despite the nearly century-long popularity of professional wrestling, few fandoms carry more stigma. Professional wrestling fans generally begin watching at a young age as enthusiastic fans ("marks") and their fannish roles and activities shift with age as they get "smart" to the business (Koh).

The modern era of wrestling has experienced two boom periods: during its nationalization (1984-1988) and during the television wars of the late '90s (1997-2001). For each period of extended popularity, professional wrestling had mainstream visibility, incredible television ratings, and multiple companies in competition with one another. The World Wrestling Federation (WWF) competed with the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA) and American Wrestling Association (AWA) in the 1980s and World Championship Wrestling (WCW) and Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW) in the 1990s (Hester). By 2001, the WWF had bought out every major competitor, including the complete tape library of each. By 2014, in preparation for the launch of its over-the-top video streaming on demand (OTT VSoD) service, the organization had amassed the tape libraries of twenty-two major wrestling territories dating back to the 1930s from all over the United States and Canada. According to a 2015 presentation by WWE Chief Strategy and Financial Officer George Barrios, the company holds the master tapes and rights to 150,000 hours of television broadcasts, pay-per-views, and live event footage. These tape libraries contain nearly all of the televised wrestling in North American history with only a few exceptions. Effectively, WWE owns the recorded history of professional wrestling and now selectively represents the previous century in a manner flattering to its brand.

From the 1980s to the early 2000s, each WWF/E video, pay-per-view, and telecast began with a graphics package of the WWF/E logo with a voiced over slogan such as "The WWF: What the World is watching" and "The World Wrestling Federation: For over fifty years, the revolutionary force in sports entertainment." In 2005, the company began its current practice of using its video library to construct a twenty-second introduction video of footage and audio quotes of the most important individuals in the history of professional wrestling. The first video package featured the iconic footage of Hulk Hogan and Mick Foley falling off of a steel cage at the 1998 King of the Ring, and the voice of the WWF/E Jim Ross calling the action. However, each time that an employee did something outside of the WWE bubble, they were written out of wrestling's history. Ross found himself on

the other side of the WWE bubble after being pulled from WrestleMania 26 and, ultimately, replaced by commentator Michael Cole (Ross and O'Brien). Other notable examples of WWE's revision of history include the reintroduction into WWE packages of footage of the Ultimate Warrior, who had been omitted from all previous packages before reconciling with WWE. The contentious and negative 2005 DVD *The Self-Destruction of the Ultimate Warrior* altered the wrestler's transmedia story by reshaping perceptions of history in a way that benefitted WWE's corporate interests (Medjesky). As part of the reconciliation, WWE yet again altered history releasing 2014's celebratory *Ultimate Warrior: The Ultimate Collection* and the flattering posthumous *Ultimate Warrior: Always Believe*. In that same timespan, all mentions of Hulk Hogan were deleted from WWE programming, merchandise, and web content when recordings of Hogan using an unforgivable racial slur surfaced on TMZ (Fears and Lehman). Most recently, the WWE's momentary erasure of superstar Roman Reigns's memory over his refusal to participate in WrestleMania 36 (Hampi) further shows that the official history of professional wrestling is ultimately malleable.

However, beginning in the 1980s, fans began producing publications called "dirt sheets" that focused on independent reporting of wrestling events, especially the business and relational portion (McBride and Bird). With the proliferation of the Internet, dirt sheets spread and gave birth to new media content such as podcasts (on-demand audio broadcasts) and vodcasts (video on-demand broadcasts) discussing the art and business of professional wrestling as well as "shoot interviews" (interviews with wrestlers who usually no longer work for the WWE, who comment on the behind the scenes elements of historical events) where wrestlers discuss the actual occurrences of wrestling history out of character and without corporate pressure. Fans produce these media texts independent of WWE's massive influence in order to provide an alternative history of professional wrestling.

This study examines how the individuals who became fans during these periods in their youths spend their adulthoods constructing an "alternative history" (Dawson and Holmes) of the hegemonic version of professional wrestling's history provided by WWE. Though the hegemony, in this case WWE, cloaks its version of reality in a fabricated, naturalized feeling of "common sense," the less powerful subaltern group may form an alternative to the dominant "reality" only when it has the means and distribution to disrupt the hegemony (Gramsci). By engaging with authoritative industry voices free from dominant organizational pressure and distributing these productions, fannish producers effectively construct "an alternative, or 'counter memory,' to dominant industry discourses" (Dawson and Holmes 445). Though the alternative histories presented may differ, bring about

arguments, and prioritize prominent alternative voices like Dave Meltzer (Greene) over others, the very existence of these alternative histories challenges WWE's hegemonic control over wrestling's past and present.

And while youth fandom focuses on the in-ring "kayfabe" (fictional storyline) history for "marks," adult fandom calls attention to the "shoot" (unscripted, non-fiction reality) history and encourages "smart" fandom and "fannish production" (Jenkins; Watson). The "shoot" history provided by WWE is ultimately as Orwellian and "worked" as a fictional act meant to advance the current corporate narrative, one that would circulate unchecked without the alternatives provided by fannish producers. These fannish producers offer an alternative history by preserving and re-airing original broadcasts (many from video tape, before they were edited by WWE/F), producing and circulating "shoot interviews," and demonstrating the manipulations of the WWE's version of wrestling (such as raw cell phone videos of live events). Through interviews with these content creators, this article examines how construction of an alternative history stands in contrast to the current hegemonic pro-WWE narrative. This study extends our understanding of media and professional wrestling as well as the importance of fannish practices in the absence of an alternative voice.

Wrestling with Binaries

Any examination of professional wrestling should begin with Barthes's seminal 1957 piece in *Mythologies.* Barthes approaches Parisian wrestling in the same manner as he reads *Elle Magazine,* Einstein's brain, or toys for children: by examining the binaries that construct its cultural meanings. Few phenomena are so driven by its binaries as professional wrestling, and a review of the somewhat sparse amount of research on it is filled with binaries. Barthes reads Parisian professional wrestling as a cultural manifestation of the binary between good and evil. Thirty years later, Sorkin found the same types of recurrent symbols in American culture where wrestlers are "rapidly comprehended [as] a force for good or ill … from a combination of literal enormity (of muscle, of hairiness, or avoirdupois) with excessively schematic presentations of personality" (164). Barthes, Sorkin, and other subsequent authors (Ball; Carter; Leverette) focus on the good/evil binary found in the kayfabe, or fictional storyline component, of professional wrestling.

Other research on professional wrestling focuses on the binary of masculinity/femininity. These studies are also limited to the on-screen kayfabe content. Of note, Soulliere found through a content analysis of 118 WWE television programs and pay-per-views that wrestling circulates a hegemonic masculinity. "Real men" are aggressive, they settle differences through violence, they are confrontational, they take responsibility for their actions, they are winners, and not

whiners. This demonstration of masculinity occurs through "a soap-opera type serialized structure" (Leverette 32), a "ritual drama" (Ball), a "masculine melodrama" (Jenkins), a spectacle (Morton and O'Brien), and in "classical theatre" (de Garis).

Violence/non-violence has been the other dominant binary in professional wrestling research, with notable scholars turning their attention to the purported effects of wrestling violence. DuRant et al. found a correlation between viewing wrestling and self-reports of conflicts with romantic partners, fighting in and out of school, as well as bringing weapons to school. Tamborini et al. analyzed the verbal aggression present in wrestling. Most scholarly investigations of professional wrestling's on-screen content have focused on the meanings and effects of violence. Maguire suggests that wrestling's prolonged popularity may be due to wrestling celebrating violence while culture generally seeks to curb it.

There has been limited research on professional wrestling fandom and fannish activities, generally centered on the binary of "mark"/"smart." McBride and Bird examined the negotiation process by which "marks," defined as individuals who respond to the text in the dominant manner, turn into "smart" fans, defined as individuals with perceived knowledge about the backstage processes of creating wrestling content, as well as how the "smart" community is bolstered by positioning themselves above the unaware "marks." Koh extended the previous study by demonstrating how "smart" fans felt a "relative insider-ness [as] they consume the WWE spectacle at a deeper level [and a] critical/cynical affect mobilised around the binary of 'real' and 'fake' [remaining] captured by the spectacle" (4). This spectacle is the unending search for knowledge on the inner workings of WWE. Only Burke went to observe individuals interacting with a text. She challenged the passive/active audience binary of wrestling fans by observing a group's viewing practices during the late 90s Monday Night Wars where *WCW Monday Nitro* and *WWF Raw* would air head-to-head on Monday nights. She found that they interpreted as a group in creative and adaptive ways "to shape their understanding of the world, and to bind together their particular, shared viewing culture" (Burke 5). While observing their viewing practices, Burke noticed that they would personalize and clarify meanings by visiting web pages, chat rooms, magazines, and wrestling biographies. These support texts profoundly impacted how they understood the on-screen action as well as allowing them to invest further into the content. This study examines the contemporary versions of the fannish productions that guided these viewers' interpretations.

The Producers

The goal of this study was to gain an understanding of the function of popular fannish productions and well as how they structured their alternative histories. In

order to understand how they understood the current context of professional wrestling, we used in-depth interviews. In professional wrestling, audience studies are surprisingly rare. Burke's observational study on fans viewing *WCW Monday Nitro* and *WWF Raw* during the Monday Night Wars was the last professional wrestling study with qualitative audience data. This study was conducted in a manner similar to that of Dawson and Holmes. They examined the alternative histories of British film and television by interviewing a wide range of media workers in the industry who, unlike directors, actors, and producers, are generally omitted from the dominant history.

The first author conducted in-depth interviews with seven of the most popular producers from the United States and United Kingdom of alternative wrestling texts. Their texts in total have amassed over a billion views and have been viewed in over 200 countries. For dedicated fans of professional wrestling, these dirt sheets, pod/vodcasts, and shoot interviews provide essential paratexts (J. Gray) in order to interpret the official on-screen content of professional wrestling organizations. The reach and influence of these fannish productions extends far beyond what Jenkins or Watson initially envisioned.

We sought to include a wide range of types of fan productions including shoot interviews (both audio and video), video compilations, podcasts/vodcasts, archival sites, and news sites (both video interviews as well as dirt sheets). As such, six in-depth asynchronous interviews were conducted via e-mail with the following six individuals:

Sean Oliver – Co-owner and president of *Kayfabe Commentaries*. The New Jersey-based company has released hundreds of "shoot" interviews with some of the most famous names in wrestling providing unmatched insight into the inner-workings of the wrestling industry. Its model of the shoot interview heavily influenced the structure of the WWE Network.

Telly Bistis – Founder of *Title Match Wrestling*. Based out of Houston, Texas, the site provides exclusive video news and interviews about the wrestling industry. Its content has millions of views and has been remediated on ABC, NBC, Fox, and the CW.

Matthew Gregg – Founder of the famed compilation show *Botchamania*. Based out of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne U.K., the episodic show features unedited fan footage from events, mistakes (or "botches") from major and independent organizations, and matching "shoot" information to the original broadcast. *Botchamania* is also notable for its lively and active digital community that selectively shares wrestling-based humor, opinions, and information (Dozal and

Morales). These fans frequently bring signs to wrestling events which reference the program.

Graham Cawthon – Founder and editor of *TheHistoryofWWE.com* based out of Shelby, North Carolina since 2003, the site has provided reviews and analyses of WWE, TNA, ROH, ECW, and WCW/NWA content. Additionally, it provide an archive of results and an audio shoot interview section. The WWE frequently credits the site for research on videos.

Luke Washington – Founder and owner of *piledriverwrestling.net*. Based out of Portland, Oregon, *Piledriver Wrestling* is both an episodic podcast examining wrestling industry news and content as well as the parent company of U.K.'s OSW Review vodcast. It seeks to report unbiased information and critically analyze current and historical events. The podcasts and vodcasts garner millions of views and downloads worldwide.

Dave Scherer – Owner of *PWInsider.com*. Based out of Las Vegas, Nevada, *PWInsider* is the sequel to *1Wrestling.com* (founded in 1997 with Joey Styles and Bob Ryder). This "dirt sheet" is one of the most-read sources for breaking wrestling news.

Brunsdon suggests four considerations that a researcher who acts as an instrument should retain throughout the research process. First, a researcher should provide their autobiographical starting point and continue self-reflection throughout the research process. Second, a researcher should engage with texts and individuals with which they both do and do not identify to avoid privileging one text or individual over another. Third, the researcher should consider historical factors while examining all data. Finally, the researcher should attempt to map future possibilities in regard to both theory and the cultural phenomenon. Throughout the process, we questioned our own assumptions about professional wrestling as well as the functions of fans and fannish productions. Additionally, these questions were constructed as non-directive to avoid coercing respondents into one position or another (McCracken) and to decrease the distance between researcher and respondent. These interviews resulted in sixty-two single-spaced pages of content which were coded openly and axially with extensive memoing (Corbin and Strauss) with the goal of understanding the perceived functions of and motivations for these alternative media texts. As these individuals had been fans for multiple decades and were immersed in the world of professional wrestling and media, a large amount of their direct quotes were selected to demonstrate the overall phenomena. Upon completing multiple rounds of analysis, for validation we engaged in member checking (Lindlof and Taylor) a summary of initial findings was sent back to two of the participants to check for resonance and quality. The results are found in the following section.

Fannish Producers and History Outside of the WWE Bubble

As Barthes suggested in *Mythologies,* professional wrestling is an industry steeped in binaries. The split between good/evil, brave/cowardly, and attractive/grotesque continues from 1950s Paris in today's product. However, binaries such as truth(shoot)/storyline(work) and mark/smart that were so prevalent through the 1980s have shifted by what is now known as professional wrestling's 'reality era' between 2014 and 2016 (Jeffries). This era was defined by a notable increase in social media platforms, which fostered a proliferation of fannish producers and information that undermined much of WWE's kayfabe content ("Goodbye, PG Era"). Additionally, new binaries such as curating (selecting in order to construct an image)/archiving (pursuing an accurate and complete history via a multiplicity of texts) emerged during this time period.

For the first eighty years of professional wrestling, it was considered to be a legitimate athletic contest. Its secrets were tightly held by those "smart" to how the business worked and the storyline or "kayfabe" had to be protected from any non-wrestler. This storyline continued in every facet of the wrestler's lives. If they were a good guy (or "babyface") in the ring, that is how they would go through everyday life. The opposite was true for bad guys (or "heels"). According to NWA and ECW champion Terry Funk, promoters of territories would even prohibit heels and babyfaces from being seen together in public. Beginning in the 1980s, this divide began being dissolved by fannish producers such as *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* (*WON*) publisher/editor Dave Meltzer and *Pro Wrestling Torch Newsletter* (*PWTorch*) creator Wade Keller. Dirt sheets, like Meltzer and Keller's humble 1980s do-it-yourself newsletters, began reporting on "shoot" information outside of storyline. The long-form interviews and insider information published like *WON* and *PWTorch* saw dirt sheets pick up in production and distribution over the next several years (Rupar). In 1994, the dirt sheets received further legitimation when Vince McMahon testified in front of a federal court that pro wrestling matches were a work, referencing wrestlers as performers (Assael). By the late 1990s, the Internet provided a highly accessible forum for dirt sheets to circulate quickly, and suddenly anyone with a modem could become "smart" to the backstage information of the industry. For those lacking a modem, they could call either the WCW or ECW 1-900 number to get their "dirt." By the end of the 1990s, all wrestling was intentionally breaking kayfabe in the ring, discussing backstage "dirt" now as a part of the storyline. Terms such as a "worked shoot" (combining the two elements in a promo so that it seems real) and "working the boys" (not telling wrestlers about a storyline) arose to describe the situations that sought to blur the divide of reality and storyline (Reynolds and Alvarez; Bischoff).

The fannish producers interviewed describe themselves as existing in three in-between positions: in-between shoot/work, audience/performer, and mark/smart. In the divide between shoot and work, they seek to provide archives of occurrences, to integrate backstage information into the analysis of in-ring content, and to debunk popular myths about the wrestling industry. The form and function of these fannish archives, and the liveliness of the surrounding community, is what sustains fan engagement (de Kosnik et al.). Far beyond a simple storage space moderator, this in-between archivist role is one that is crucial to the counter-hegemonic alternative history infrastructure. Though a complete alternative wrestling archive is an impossible concept (Lothian), the act of archiving can be both powerful and transformative.

In addition to that of shoot/work archivists, fannish producers also live in the in-between of the audience/performer binary and dissolve and reconstruct the divide between mark and smart. These independent producers look to extend the life of an industry where the magic trick has been exposed and the boundaries been deconstructed and pushed to their logical extremes. However, in deconstructing these binaries, fannish producers also construct a new binary, the "WWE bubble"/independent.

Fannish producers often site the divide between the sanitized corporate narratives in contrast to their independent analyses in pursuit of a definitive truth. Matthew Gregg, of the show *Botchamania,* uses a pastiche of popular culture and wrestling texts in order to demonstrate humorous mistakes and provide shoot insights into historical situations. He discusses the attempt of the WWE to construct a bubble around its product:

> WWF/E has an interesting version of current history. Their preferred method is for fans to watch their weekly shows but forget the things they then change/omit. The weekly shows become rough drafts for history and the video packages that air before the important PPV matches become the real history. They sometimes shift and change events so it constructs a superior narrative… WWE wants to live in a WWE-sized bubble where the outside world only exists when they tell you it exists.

In the WWE bubble, WWE uses only resources within the bubble to construct history, and it deploys these resources to construct history. History becomes fluid rather than archival. WWE utilizes a tape library, or archive, to construct an ever-changing narrative presented as history. Luke Washington, the owner and content creator of the podcast and news site *Piledriver Wrestling* contrasted sites like his with the WWE bubble:

> It's unbiased, looks at industry trends worldwide, and compares the different approaches of other promotions. You can't analyze the industry in a "WWE bubble," because if you do, you will never have a full understanding of how things work, nor learn any real lessons…. Some of WWE/WCW's most successful periods in business have been directly because of observations and ideas that they took from other promotions that often fans feel are unimportant, or WWE has conditioned them to believe is unimportant. WCW's most successful storyline was inspired by the NJPW vs. UWFI interpromotional feud, the WWE Attitude Era was a mix of taking the WCW Nitro format, and looking at what smaller promotion ECW was doing at the time. ECW, in turn, was inspired by a host of Japanese promotions, most notably FMW.

The "conditioning" of fans in the WWE bubble minimizes the contributions of intellectual properties not started in the WWE bubble (ex: WCW, ECW) and omits the contributions of intellectual properties not held by WWE (e.g., Japanese wrestling like New Japan Pro Wrestling and Union of Wrestling Forces International). The audience only receives a simplified history without depth or nuance.

Williams suggests that culture activates both media text and audience by "setting limits [and] exerting pressures" (32) on the meanings produced and negotiated. The corporate culture at WWE has its own unique set of pressures and limitations. Graham Cawthon, who has constructed an archive of news, event results, and interviews at *TheHistoryofWWE.com* details some of the more minor changes that the WWE does to its archives:

> From the original music to the promotional clips during the broadcast to even the production faux pas, I love the WWE Network, but it's footage that's been cleaned up. You won't catch many mistakes on there. In regard to the weekly TV during the 1980s and prior, the original footage usually included hype packages for upcoming events in your area. You won't find those on the Network. But I think they're fascinating. You get to see how the events were sold to the fans of that time period.

While seemingly inconsequential, music, production issues, and ephemeral promotions provide essential information about a phenomenon. Popular music usage demonstrates a relationship to popular culture. Production mistakes emphasize the liveness of the broadcast. The promotions demonstrate the shifting nature of how audiences were sold on professional wrestling. These seemingly minor changes fundamentally change a text as the minutiae impart a unique character. As Telly Bistis of *Title Match Wrestling* suggests, circulating the original and unedited

version of these events "preserves history … and it doesn't allow anyone to change the narrative. What you see is what you get. There is no time to go into post-production and chop it into whatever story you want to be told." As these tapes are digitized and delivered via the WWE Network, they go through the filter of 2010s production. The fannish producers serve the role as stabilizers and archivists in contrast to the constant and subtle shifts performed by the WWE. As Sean Oliver suggests, "Show it to me the way it was when I was five years old staring into my thirteen-inch color TV." This filter extends beyond the seemingly minor into the larger binary of curating/archiving.

The fannish producers demonstrate a supreme interest in providing an accurate and inclusive archive of professional wrestling while WWE uses the materials it owns to curate a history that aids in building a positive corporate image. As Dave Scherer from *PWInsider.com* suggests, "We give the straight story, without bias. For people that want as honest accounting of the news as possible, they come to us." Though the completely neutral accounting of history as described by Scherer may be an impossibility, these dirt sheets are valuable for providing a first draft of history. In the current media environment, shoot interviews, archive sites, and podcasts/vodcasts then ultimately seek to provide a diverse and stabilized, though not entirely objective, version of history. Producer perceptions of objectivity speak to the importance of these producers place on their roles in creating and circulating alternative histories. Indeed, the fannish productions offer the original broadcast on the thirteen-inch color television, a comparison to the edited version, insight into backstage elements, and insight into its relationship to other historical wrestling events. As professional wrestling lacks the traditional reporting of sports such as baseball and football, these fannish productions ultimately fulfill the function of traditional press in an atypical manner. Washington of *Piledriver Wrestling* details the importance of independent reporting and providing an alternative viewpoint:

> Whilst much maligned at the time, the dirt sheets in the 1980s began to break this wall down exposing many of the industry's secrets. Unscrupulous promoters found it more difficult to lie to talent about pay-offs once dirt sheets began reporting legitimate attendance numbers, live gate figures and more. Dubious business tactics like false advertising came under scrutiny. If done correctly, unbiased and accurately, independent reporting of the industry is an essential element. The profession is largely ignored by the mainstream media, and in the rare instances when a pro-wrestling story is reported, the quality of the journalism and understanding of the industry by outsiders can be extremely low.… In addition, fans are able to get information on promotions other than ones with cable TV exposure like WWE or TNA,

> so they can be a vital source in helping smaller companies gain exposure and notoriety.

For fannish producers, the circulation of accurate information ultimately improve the industry and fulfill functions similar to that of journalists. These individuals do not have the same pressures and limitations as WWE, and therefore can focus on elements that they feel can improve the wrestling industry, including having fans view multiple wrestling promotions. "It's a mutual respect there and we absolutely respect the wrestling business," stated Bistis about the relationship between fannish producers and professional wrestling. These individuals are fans first and wish for professional wrestling to have longevity, for fans to invest in its history, and to help improve its on-screen content.

The pressures and limitations of the WWE bubble privilege corporate image over historical accuracy. Oliver, founder of *Kayfabe Commentaries*, conducts in-depth shoot interviews with wrestlers and other workers with direct involvement in the events that WWE. He discusses the current pressures and limitations of the WWE bubble:

> The history of pro wrestling is now largely owned by WWE. The history of pro wrestling is always being addressed in some fashion by them in their programming and DVD releases, but it's always a very neatly packaged, easily digested and saccharine morsel they serve. Their attempts to emulate shoot style programming, and specifically many of our shows, will always fall short because as a public company there is a whole host of things to consider before telling "the truth" about wrestling history or even shining a spotlight on certain things in wrestling history. Shareholders have to be considered. How can one tell their own history … good, bad, and ugly … if one's image is tantamount to the narrative?

As such a lucrative publicly traded company that targets younger viewers, the WWE will always have a set of pressures and limitations absent from independent fannish producers. Oliver notes that WWE, keenly aware of the credibility attached to the mediated characteristics of dirt sheets, attempted to create similarly stylized content that conforms to its narrative. Examples include WWE's 1997-2006 webcast *Byte This!*, which sought to replicate gritty behind-the-scenes longform dirt sheet interviews, or its the recent *After the Bell with Corey Graves* podcast, which features supposedly unguarded conversations with a revolving cast of retired and active wrestlers. To those like Oliver, this dirt sheet-style content provided by WWE will always be a hollow emulation of independent fannish production. Though WWE attempts make these mediated textual forms "feel real," each still adheres to the

organization's overarching script. Oliver puts his comments on WWE's economic pressures into further context by discussing the controversial wrestler Chyna:

> Chyna's place in WWE history is made so much more complex because of the nature of WWE's company being a publicly traded organization, with responsibilities to investors and share price. Should Chyna be in the WWE Hall of Fame? The short answer is "yes, of course." There are women wrestlers in there now, and I don't think any had the impact that she did. She was beating on dudes and was a featured part of the Attitude Era and she changed the perspective on women at ringside and in the ring. So it's a no brainer, right? Not so fast. The Hall of Fame, as we all know, is a show and is constructed for entertainment value first and merit second. Putting Chyna on that big show and touting her accomplishments and putting together that great promo package might make a ten-year-old girl Google her, while watching that Hall of Fame show with dad, who happens to be a senior investment banker at Citigroup. When his daughter's computer search returns write-ups and still images from her venture into adult films with Vivid, he may walk into the office the following day with a skewed perception of the company his firm might have been considering buying 10,000 shares in. His little girl was introduced to gangbangs courtesy of the WWE Hall of Fame show. Extreme example? Maybe. But this is the kind of liability that has to be considered as a publicly traded company and a slave to share price and performance alone. Period. That's all that matters.

When individuals engage in detrimental acts outside of the WWE bubble, such as making an adult video with nine sexual partners, WWE adjusts its dynamic history to accommodate. The fannish productions target and reach a largely male (e.g., Bistis from *Title Match Wrestling* reported a 93% male viewership) and adult audience. The content of these alternative sources are not broadcast safe examining topics such as mysterious deaths, horrific injuries, infidelities, sexual acts, substance abuse, insider business information, and general tales of chaos. For example, Oliver's *YouShoot* series includes the good, bad, and ugly of every story in the individual's own words.

Chyna is merely one example of an individual whose roles has been minimized over the course of history by the WWE. The most famous example happened when Chris Benoit murdered his wife and son over the course of a weekend before hanging himself on a Bowflex (Kirkland). Early in the investigation, only the news of Benoit's death was released. *Monday Night Raw* started with a five-minute tribute video package celebrating Benoit as a person and his accomplishments. However, as the gruesome details of the case emerged, the WWE

engaged in the Orwellian act of literally deleting Benoit from its history (Cortez). It deleted his title reigns and immediately removed all merchandise and mentions of him on its website. While Benoit still remains on some archival media pertaining to this past wrestling events, footage of him does not resurface in new WWE content. Though WWE stopped short of fully excising Benoit from all media, major mentions of him were scrubbed from digital media and new WWE-sanctioned histories will never tell his story.

In contrast to the wild diversity in interview subjects (and the subjects of those interviews) found in shoot interviews, the selectivity and omissions in WWE begin before the camera rolls. Bistis from *Title Match Wrestling* describes the omission process as well as the coaching process during the on-screen interview:

> WWE has done a great job of interviewing names from the past on their documentaries and network specials. There are hundreds of past employees for whatever reason, never get their story told. Those are the people we want to speak with—the ones who aren't being directed to say anything specific. We want the best stories, unfiltered. As a producer, I can tell when an interview subject is being authentic or not. I look for things like that in documentaries—the inflection in the voiceover. What facts are included and which ones are dismissed? Who are these interview subjects? What is their history? Is there a good balance? What images are being displayed throughout? It's near impossible to give a completely unbiased version of history. Sometimes we succeed, other times we don't but we always try.

As Herman Gray discusses race on television, there is no perfect singular form of representation. Only through a wide variance of individuals being portrayed can a diverse and more complete representation occur. Bistis's approach to archiving the complete history of professional wrestling mirrors this philosophy. A more complete history can only be told by way of a diverse sample of individuals with differing perspectives. This diversity extends to subject matter as well, as previously discussed. Rather than simplifying disparate events down to a single historical narrative, fannish producers contribute to a rich and complex history of professional wrestling.

The alternative histories provided by the fannish producers are in a perpetually subaltern position against the dominant history of the WWE. Washington from *Piledriver Wrestling* describes this struggle:

> The WWE version, even when its accounts have been completely discredited, will always continue to exist as the commonly held belief. Wrestling myths like the fictional attendances at WrestleMania will continue as long as WWE continues to insist on the legitimacy of their claims publicly. All you can do

> is provide a medium where fans that want to learn the real facts and stories can do so, but you aren't going to be able to change the popular misconceptions.

The tension between "fictional" and "real facts" continues the binaries of work/shoot and curating/archiving. The pressures and limitations of each entity (WWE and fannish producers) provides two distinctly different motivations and platforms for their competing histories. For the fannish producers, the divide between "mark" and "smart" no longer refers to individuals who believe that wrestling is a genuine athletic contest and those who do not. Getting "smart" now refers to getting "educated" from sources outside of the WWE bubble. Cawthon from *TheHistoryofWWE.com* sees the role of these alternative media to provide information to supplement the prevailing stories and ultimately to educate fans:

> I think a lot of pro wrestling is based in hype, myth and legend. Wrestlers will talk about the time they beat (insert name here) at a major venue or major event. Or discuss how they sold out a major venue against a top name. What I do is designed not only to educate fans and those within the industry but also disprove several of these myths and legends that have circulated for years or decades with no factual basis aside from what one person once said in an interview. If someone is telling a story about a backstage altercation they had with someone at the Atlanta Omni in 1986, you can easily check out my website and at least narrow down which specific event and date that altercation took place at based on the show's results. Some wrestlers lie because it promotes their brand. Others just don't remember things clearly because they were working twenty-eight days straight and events run together. And so rather than completely relying on their bad memory, you have a website to double check these events and come to your own conclusion.

Cawthon's site of historical reports differs from Oliver's shoot interviews, which are first-hand, and unedited, versions of historical events told by the individuals who lived them. As Cawthon points out, memories fade and wrestlers often have agendas as well, such as increasing their worth for bookings based upon their importance in a historical situation. Thus, getting "smart" refers to considering a variety of sources of information. "People need to do their own research. You don't ask a company to give you its history," stated Scherer of *PWInsider.com*. In contrast to learning how a magic trick is done, getting "smart" to contemporary professional wrestling is an activity rather than a one-shot inoculation. Having the singular perspective ultimately limits fannish activities. The active fandom promoted by these fannish producers is the equivalent of fantasy sports; it allows for investment, speculation,

and enjoyment long after the broadcast has ended. In an odd twist of circumstance, getting "smart" allows people to "mark out."

"Marking out" refers to a temporary state rather than a permanent one. Audience members lose themselves in the text for a moment in a manner similar to a science fiction film, a romance novel, or a competitive sports game. According to Cawthon, we all have the desire to "mark out":

> We're all marks. The wrestlers are marks, too. We want to be captivated and enthralled and taken on an emotional roller coaster ride and not know how it's going to end. I think the term "mark" has been taken to mean "stupid," but that's not the case if we're discussing diehard fans as marks.

A "mark" can be "smart" under the contemporary understanding of the phrase. Oliver of *Kayfabe Commentaries* continues this division:

> "Marks" don't really exist anymore in the truest sense of the word, not any more than a passionate Dallas Cowboys fan could be called a "mark." The term "mark" suggested gullibility. I think the average wrestling fan knows what they are seeing. The distinction that I think exists today is between the passive observant fan (watches John Cena, cheers for him, buys the t-shirt) and the active student of wrestling (critiques decisions on *Raw*, listens to podcasts, watches Kayfabe Commentaries programming, is interested in the machinations of the business of wrestling).

The equating of a passionate wrestling fan to a passionate professional football fan is an interesting one. According to a Harris Poll ("Pro Football"), for over thirty years football has been the most popular sport in America. According to the 2015 report by the Fantasy Sports Trade Association, Americans spend about $15 billion in total annually playing fantasy football and Forbes (Goff) estimated its economic impact to be around $70 billion dollars. People "mark out" to football on a Sunday and lead healthy productive lives. They have civilized discussions about the politics of the league and health of the players, and their investment in learning about the game strengthens the popularity of the league and its support shows. A professional wrestling fan can "mark out," but in order to get "smart," there is no ESPN equivalent for professional wrestling. They must seek out these fannish productions to get educated.

For fannish producers, the mark/smart binary reflects the age-old media binary of passive/active audiences within media studies. Active consumption of media means that individuals use media in order to gratify needs that they have identified (Katz et al.). Being a "smart" and active viewer, allows for a crucial type of fandom for the wrestling industry: as Gregg of *Botchamania* stated, "fans who want to enjoy wrestling as an art form." Focusing on the art form of wrestling allows for a

new appreciation of in-ring action as well as the shoot elements not depicted on television. Washington suggests that when a fan gets "smart," he or she "becomes fascinated by an industry where the actual truths, secrets and stories that occur behind the camera, are even more intriguing than the product featured on TV." Active consumption opens up these new avenues of fandom and fannish productions provide the only conduit by which to do so.

Shoot Summary

Professional wrestling lives in the middle of multiple binary tensions. Somewhere between work/shoot, smart/mark, curating/archiving, and passive/active lies fannish producers. In an industry lacking traditional press, where the vast majority of the video library is controlled by a single company, these fannish producers perform an essential duty for the wrestling industry. They compile a nuanced archive that does not allow individuals or moments to be written out of history completely. Instead of a discourse ecosystem dominated solely by one organization, fannish producers serve to democratize the space by disseminating new information and safeguarding wrestling history against profitable Orwellian revisions. This history undergoes deliberation and serious thoughtful analysis mixed with a pastiche of popular culture. By doing so, they extend the televisual texts of wrestling and promote an informed and active audience that can explore multiple avenues of fandom. The active fandom encourages the reading of wrestling as an art form, in a manner similar to multiple academic studies such as Ball, Gutkowski, and Jenkins.

Though pressures and limitations are minimal when compared to those of WWE, it is worth noting that there are still pressures and tensions at play for fannish producers. For example, in a recent case of market pressure, prominent fannish producer Wade Keller of *PWTorch* was driven to part ways with veteran pro wrestling writer Bruce Mitchell after he incorrectly suggested wrestler Brodie Lee died of coronavirus in a column (Bupp). The column was deleted, an apology was issue by Keller, and Mitchell was released all within the span of three days. Similar to alternative histories' susceptibility to external pressures, fannish producers' idealistic perceptions of objectivity in their work should also be noted. Though not free from subjective bias or external constraints, these fannish producers are spurred to construct this complex alternative history primarily out of a love for the wrestling industry.

The popularity and impact of these fannish producers speaks to the possibilities afforded through new media to provide alternative histories. Video compilations, podcasts, vodcasts, and independently produced and circulated interviews have the ability to disrupt a sanitized corporate narrative with a far lower budgets than the main wrestling companies. The alternative productions,

alternative histories, and alternative analyses ultimately strengthen professional wrestling and encourage a global, yet primarily male, community where every fan has the duty to be "smart" and to be active audience members.

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AEW and WWE's Wednesday Night Wars: An Early Analysis

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All Elite Wrestling (AEW) and World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) are two of the biggest names in the sports entertainment industry. Currently, AEW's Dynamite *and WWE's* NXT *both debut at the same time slot on cable television and are in direct competition. AEW's* Dynamite *has been on the air for over a year now; predictive analytics are used to see if AEW's* Dynamite *can continue to produce needed viewership numbers and ratings. A t-test found a significant difference in AEW* Dynamite *and WWE's* NXT *viewership and ratings. A regression analysis of AEW's* Dynamite*'s viewership numbers and ratings found a significant result as well. Details of these results are thoroughly discussed. Limitations of this analysis are considered including the impact of COVID-19 on the sports entertainment industry.*

Keywords: All Elite Wrestling, AEW, World Wrestling Entertainment, WWE, Sports, Television, Dynamite, NXT, company, business, comparison

Background

All Elite Wrestling (AEW) is a new wrestling entertainment promotion that was recently formed and signed to a major television station. Currently owned by Tony Khan, AEW is advertised as an alternative to mainstream wrestling. AEW features two weekly shows: *AEW Dynamite* on TNT and *AEW Dark* on YouTube. Pay-per-view events are also featured throughout the year. The mission of AEW is to provide the best wrestling matches and entertainment to fans; the product is meant to be inspiring, memorable, and spectacular ("About All Elite Wrestling").

Although both companies seem to deny it at times, AEW's biggest competition is World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) (Konuwa, "WWE and AEW"). After AEW Dynamite was advertised to be shown on TNT weekly Wednesday at 8:00 p.m., WWE moved *WWE NXT* to the USA Network weekly Wednesday at 8:00 p.m. (Konuwa, "WWE and AEW"). *WWE NXT* premiered on the USA Network two weeks prior to *AEW Dynamite*'s debut (Konuwa, "WWE and

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AEW"). Although AEW is a brand-new company, WWE has been around for many years, with an already established presence worldwide (Eckerbom et al., 2019). Previous work has analyzed some of the qualitative data on the competition between AEW and WWE (Eckerbom et al.). Many comparisons are drawn between AEW and WWE (Eckerbom et al.), including many quantitative variables that can be analyzed.

All Elite Wrestling's *Dynamite* must be able to have high ratings and high viewership in the future while being able to compete with direct competition to maintain a profit. This is a problem because new television shows can quickly fail if their viewership numbers decrease significantly. This is also a problem because if another business creates a similar product that consistently outperforms another company, the company that is underperforming is likely to fail. Strong competition decreases a new business's ability to survive and grow (Mengistae). For the longevity of the company, solving the two aspects of this problem is crucial.

Variables

Nielsen television ratings have been a quantitative way to measure the success of a television show for around seventy years ("TV Ratings"). Nielsen ratings provide the number of viewers and an overall rating for the program each week ("TV Ratings"). This data is important to producers of television shows since they can actively view information on how well their show is performing (Otterson). Nielsen ratings also allow for comparisons of different television shows (Otterson). It should be noted that many factors, such as time of broadcast and day of broadcast, greatly influence these variables (Otterson). Data used for analysis is the number of viewers and the Nielsen rating for the target demographic (ages eighteen to forty-nine). Data was retrieved from ShowBuzz Daily, a website devoted to posting information on television shows and movies. It should also be noted that this is the website that many popular wrestling news stories cite for where they obtain their viewership and rating numbers.

Since the problem statement specifically deals with profit, financial reports of revenue from All Elite Wrestling would be used for analysis, but since the company is so new, it is likely that the data from these reports would be limited. Finding out what divisions of All Elite Wrestling produce the most money along with what divisions need the most improvement would be very beneficial to the company. Unfortunately, there are currently no public reports from AEW to analyze; the company does not have shareholders and is not required to publish an annual report. The company likely maintains records of all revenue and accessing this information would allow for a comparison between different types of revenue along with predictions on what types of revenue will be most profitable. However, at this time, individuals involved with the company's data analytics are likely the

only ones with access. Thus, financial information will be omitted from this research. Similarly, merchandise sales of individual wrestlers would be an interesting related research topic, but the publicly available data for this is limited, as well.

Methods

There were three weeks (*WWE NXT* debuted two weeks before the debut of *AEW Dynamite*, and *AEW Dynamite* did not have an episode on Christmas) that *AEW Dynamite* did not have a show to compare to *WWE NXT*. In addition, between the weeks of August 19, 2020 and September 9, 2020, *AEW Dynamite* and *WWE NXT* did not air at normal times due to the NBA and Stanley Cup playoffs. Those weeks were removed from the comparative analysis. After removing these cases, this left a sample size of 65 weeks to analyze (between October 2, 2019 and January 27, 2021). Data was coded per hundred thousand viewers since viewership numbers are rounded to the nearest hundred thousand.

AEW Dynamite's maximum viewership occurred on the premiere night with 1.4 million viewers. This night was also the highest-rated show with a rating of .68. The lowest viewership for *AEW Dynamite* was 633 thousand viewers on June 24 2020. The lowest rating for *AEW Dynamite* was .22, which occurred on June 24, 2020. The average number of weekly viewers for *AEW Dynamite* is about, 819.55 thousand with a standard deviation of 123.13 thousand. The average rating for *AEW Dynamite* is .32, with a standard deviation of .07.

When considering the competition's viewership, *WWE NXT* had a maximum viewership of 916 thousand and the highest-rated show had a rating of .32 (note that *NXT* did have a higher maximum viewership and rating that was not included in the analysis since it was prior to the debut of *AEW Dynamite*). The lowest viewership and rating for *NXT* was 542 thousand (March 18, 2020) and .12 (December 30, 2020), respectively. The average number of viewers for *NXT* is 701.68 thousand with a standard deviation of 82.13 thousand. The average rating for *NXT* is .20, with a standard deviation of .04.

Histograms were created to examine if the variables used were normally distributed. A histogram showing *AEW Dynamite*'s viewership and Nielsen rating is shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2, respectively, in the appendix. As can be seen in these figures, there is a single outlier; the initial week of viewership, *AEW Dynamite* had viewership and a rating that was higher than three standard deviations above the mean. Thus, this outlier will be removed in further analyses. A histogram showing *WWE NXT's* viewership and Nielsen rating is shown in Figure 3 and Figure 4, respectively, in the appendix. After the removal of the outlier, *AEW Dynamite*'s viewership and rating is approaching normality without any data transformation;

WWE NXT is approaching normality for both viewership and rating without any data transformation.

Scatterplots created for *AEW Dynamite*'s viewership and ratings to further confirm the outlier in the data set. Removing outliers before analyses can improve various types of estimation (Krauledat et al.). Since there is a multitude of techniques for identifying outliers, it is best to confirm the existence of outliers with multiple procedures (Krauledat et al.). After the outlier was removed, scatterplots were created for *AEW Dynamite*'s viewership and ratings and can be found in Figure 5 and Figure 6, respectively.

Models and Results

The first analysis performed was a dependent samples t-test to see if there is a significant difference in the weekly viewership of *AEW Dynamite* and *WWE NXT*. There was a significant difference in the viewership, $t(63) = 7.29$, $\bar{d} = 111.77$, $s_d = 122.61$, $p < .001$. Since there was a significant difference shown, the means and standard errors (in thousands) were compared which showed *AEW Dynamite* (M = 810.48, SE = 12.48) had a significantly higher average number of viewers than *WWE NXT* (M = 698.72, SE = 9.90). A bar graph showing the comparison can be found in Figure 7 in the appendix.

The next analysis performed was a dependent samples t-test to see if there is a significant difference in the weekly Nielsen rating of *AEW Dynamite* and *WWE NXT*. There was a significant difference in the Nielsen rating, $t(63) = 15.46$, $\bar{d} = .13$, $s_d = .07$, $p < .001$. Since there was a significant difference shown, the means were compared which showed *AEW Dynamite* (M = 0.32, SE = 0.01) had a significantly higher average Nielsen ratings than *WWE NXT* (M = 0.19, SE = 0.01). A bar graph showing the comparison can be found in Figure 8 in the appendix.

The third analysis performed was a regression analysis to see if there is a significant linear or non-linear relationship in *AEW Dynamite*'s viewership over time. It should be noted the time was entered as the week of the debut; after the outlier was removed, this means the variable consisted of 2 through 68 (note that Christmas day 2019 was the only week skipped). For this analysis, weeks that *AEW Dynamite* was moved to a different day or time were still included. Since the scatterplot shown in Figure 5 does not necessarily well represent a linear relationship, three models were proposed. In the first model, linear regression was performed; a significant regression equation was not found, $F(1, 66) = 2.59$, $p = .11$ with an $R^2 = .04$. In the second model, quadratic regression was performed; a significant regression equation was found, $F(2, 65) = 5.54$, $p = .006$ with an $R^2 = .15$. In the third model, cubic regression was performed; a significant regression

equation was found, $F(3, 64) = 4.77$, $p = .005$ with an $R^2 = .18$. The quadratic regression model was accepted; the number of viewers (in thousands) is approximately equal to $0.10x^2 - 7.80x + 933.52$ where x is the week number. A scatterplot with all three regression lines can be found in Figure 9 in the appendix for a comparison. Additionally, the scatterplot with the quadratic regression line can be found in Figure 10 in the appendix. Although higher degree polynomials may better fit the equation, the choice was made to not accept the cubic polynomial (or a higher degree polynomial) due to overfitting. In addition, the coefficient of the cubic term in the regression equation was very close to 0.

The last analysis performed was a regression analysis to see if there is a significant linear or non-linear relationship in *AEW Dynamite*'s Nielsen ratings over time. The week variable remained the same as in the previous model. Since the scatterplot shown in Figure 6 does not necessarily well represent a linear relationship, three models were proposed. In the first model, linear regression was performed; a significant regression equation was not found, $F(1, 66) = 1.59$, $p = .21$ with an $R^2 = .02$. In the second model, quadratic regression was performed; a significant regression equation was found, $F(2, 65) = 13.15$, $p < .001$ with an $R^2 = .29$. In the third model, cubic regression was performed; a significant regression equation was found, $F(3, 64) = 12.76$, $p < .001$ with an $R^2 = .37$. Again, the quadratic model was accepted; the Nielsen rating is approximately equal to $0.0001x^2 - 0.006x + .41$ where x is the week number. Although the cubic model performed slightly better, this is likely due to overfitting.

Conclusions

The results of the t-tests suggest not only is *AEW Dynamite* able to compete with *WWE NXT*, but it also has significantly higher viewership and ratings on average. This implies that although there is direct competition from a major worldwide business, All Elite Wrestling still maintains high viewership and ratings for *Dynamite*. The current business models allow All Elite Wrestling to maintain a strong presence through the difficult contest. When comparing week by week, *AEW Dynamite* has lower viewership numbers than *WWE NXT* only once. That single week is also the only week that *AEW Dynamite* lost in ratings to *WWE NXT*.

The quadratic regression analysis suggests that although *AEW Dynamite* had an overall decline in viewership until around week 28, the viewership numbers did increase after this dip. It is possible that this dip is COVID-19 related due to the time that the viewers were decreasing. In addition to this, shows filmed during this period were not in front of a live audience, which may have some impact on viewership. On the other hand, due to these restrictions, many sporting events have been completely canceled; this means that there may be an open market for professional

wrestling companies to gain new viewers that would otherwise be watching sporting events. Another potential reason for this dip could be that the pattern may continue to increase and decrease like a cosine function. Since there were less than seventy data points included in the analysis, this trend may have not fully developed yet. To better view possible seasonal relationships, an analysis of *WWE Raw* or *WWE SmackDown* data may be beneficial. Since *AEW Dynamite* continued to have higher ratings and viewership than *WWE NXT* during this time, this implies that direct competition from another company was not the main factor in the decline.

Limitations

While *AEW Dynamite* is doing well against *WWE NXT*, WWE has two other shows (*Raw* and *SmackDown*) that bring in many viewers and have high ratings. If *AEW Dynamite* is to be compared to these shows, it is likely that *AEW Dynamite* would not look as strong; however, since these shows premiere at different time slots, it would not be an accurate comparison. WWE's *SmackDown* and *Raw* also have been established longer with a larger loyal fanbase. Although *AEW Dynamite* is winning in the single show competition between *Dynamite* and *NXT*, this does not imply that All Elite Wrestling is doing better as a company than World Wrestling Entertainment. More thorough analyses would be needed to compare various company statistics (Dixon).

Another limitation of the comparison is the unfair advantage of time. WWE is a popular business that has been established and had popular television shows for many decades, but AEW has had a television show for under a year at the time of analysis. All Elite Wrestling is growing; the company plans to release another show on cable television sometime in the future (Oestriecher). Although many comparisons are being made about the companies, these comparisons may be of more value years in the future once AEW has established itself in the business (Konuwa, "AEW"). The difference in any well-established global company and a new business is likely to be drastic; however, the fact that AEW is doing so well against this type of competition makes this a unique case to study. The limitation here also directly ties into the statistical issue of the current analyses having a small sample size.

One more limitation of this study is the lack of social media information provided. It has been shown that social media and television ratings are related (Cheng et al.). Future analyses examining this relationship, specifically for professional wrestling, could give more information that could be used to find potential solutions to the stated problem. Social media use is of great importance to the wrestling community in many different ways; it allows wrestling promotions to advertise, it allows a look into the personal lives of wrestlers, and for some, it allows

for wrestlers to continue to use kayfabe (presenting staged performance as genuine) outside of the ring (Olson). Allowing fans to connect through social media allows for a closer relationship which hopefully increases loyalty and, ultimately, increases viewership and ratings. A thorough analysis of the social media performance of All Elite Wrestling would likely lead to a plethora of information that could be used to help increase profits.

Future Work

While this work does come to some quantitative conclusions about the "Wednesday Night Wars" and the future of AEW, there is still much work to be done. Future work comparing viewership and ratings during the pandemic and post-pandemic could yield exciting results. Similarly, looking at the possible impact that having a live audience has on viewership and ratings may also be a future direction. As more data is collected on viewership and ratings of AEW, it is likely that more models could be proposed that would more accurately fit the data. Since this initial analysis had a limited sample size, it is likely repeating the regression analyses in the future will produce a different model.

More advanced models that include social media data may also be useful to help predict the future of AEW. Specifically, sentiment analysis on how shows or companies are perceived on social media platforms could be of interest. Data visualizations could be included to show keywords. In addition, a new sentiment dictionary may need to be formed to include common wrestling terms used on social media. Sentiment analysis is just one way that social media data could be analyzed; if enough data was collected, machine learning models could be useful to scholarly research in wrestling as well.

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Appendix

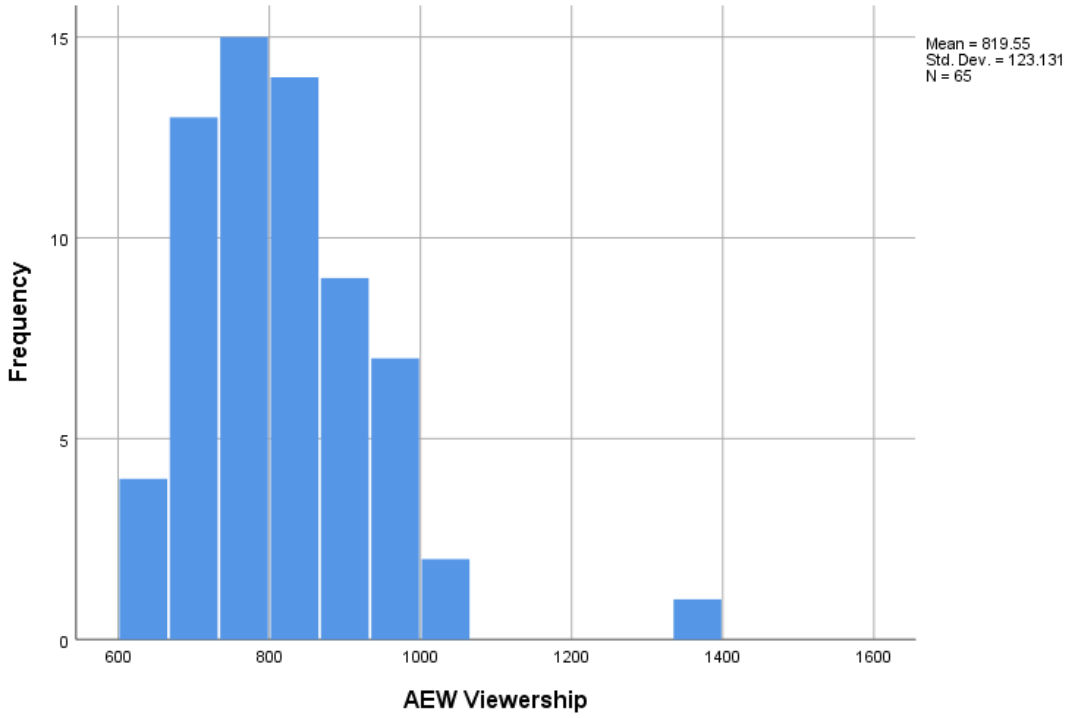

Figure 1. Histogram of *AEW Dynamite* Viewership

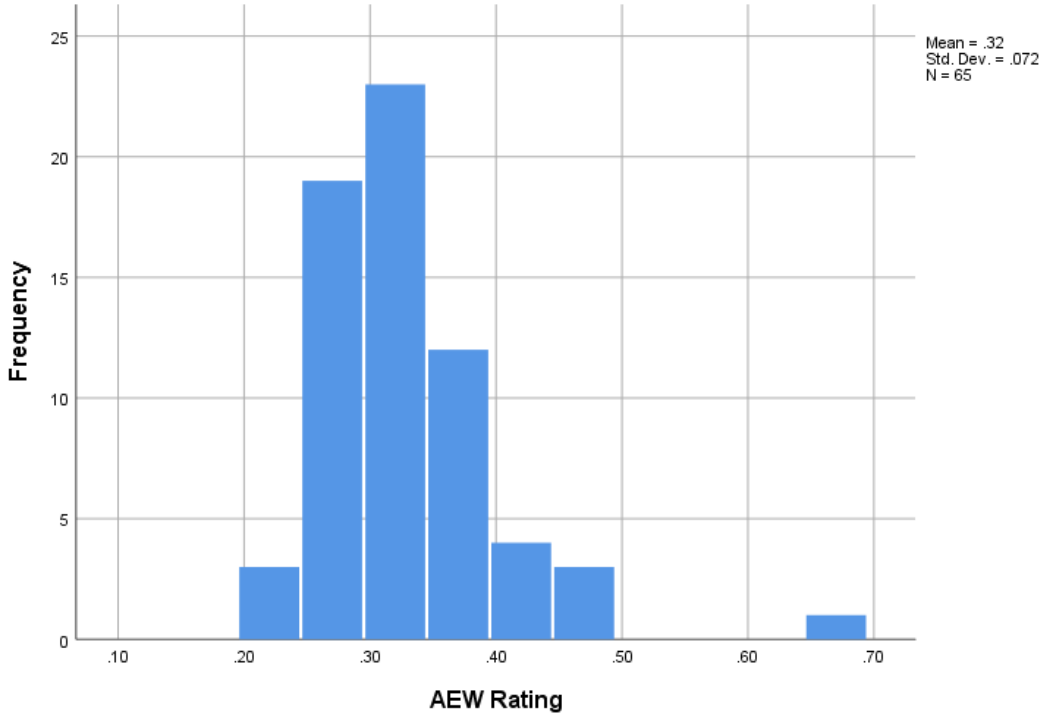

Figure 2. Histogram of *AEW Dynamite* Nielsen Rating

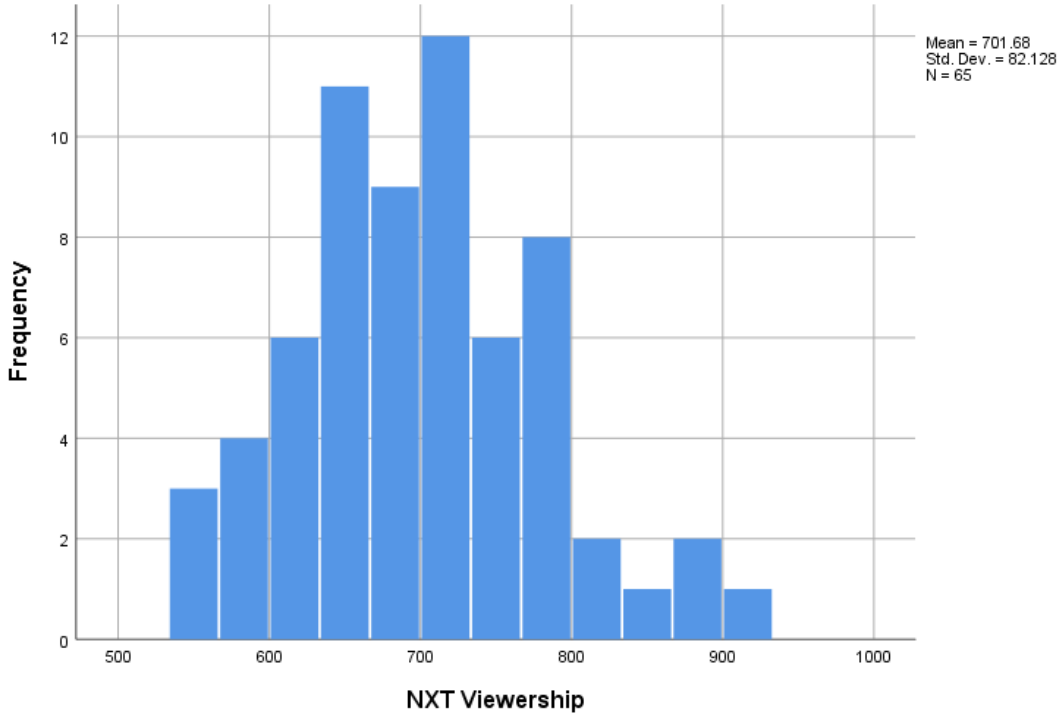

Figure 3. Histogram of *WWE NXT* Viewership

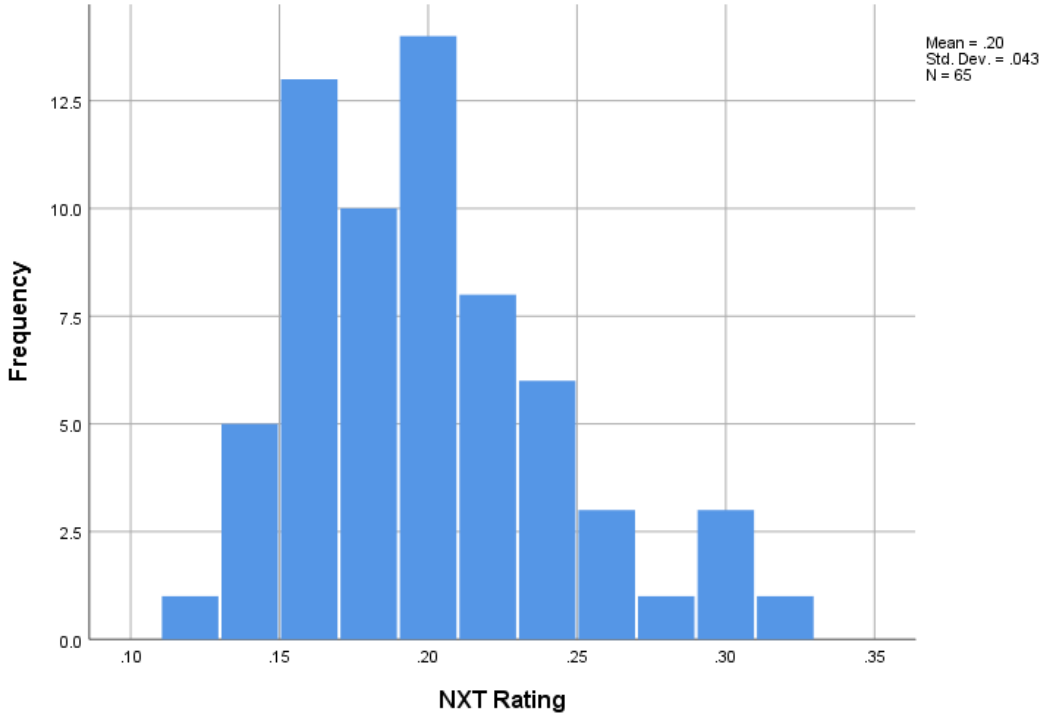

Figure 4. Histogram of *WWE NXT* Nielsen Rating

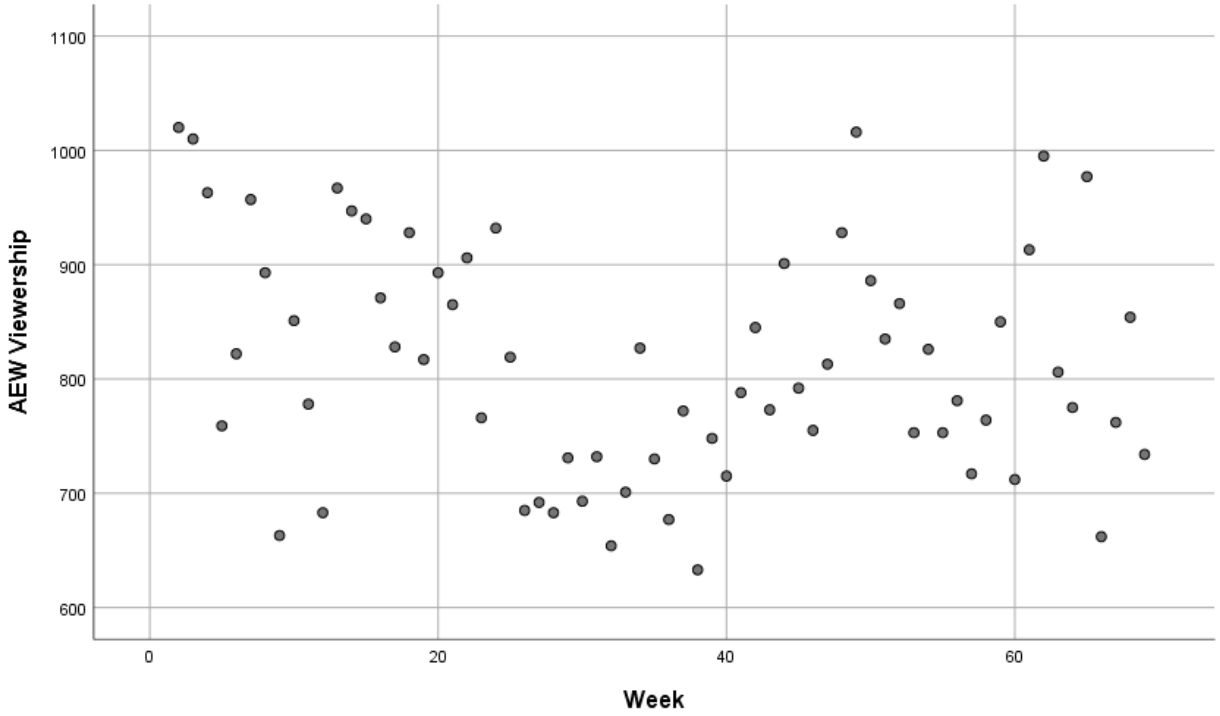

Figure 5. Scatterplot of *AEW Dynamite* Viewership over Time

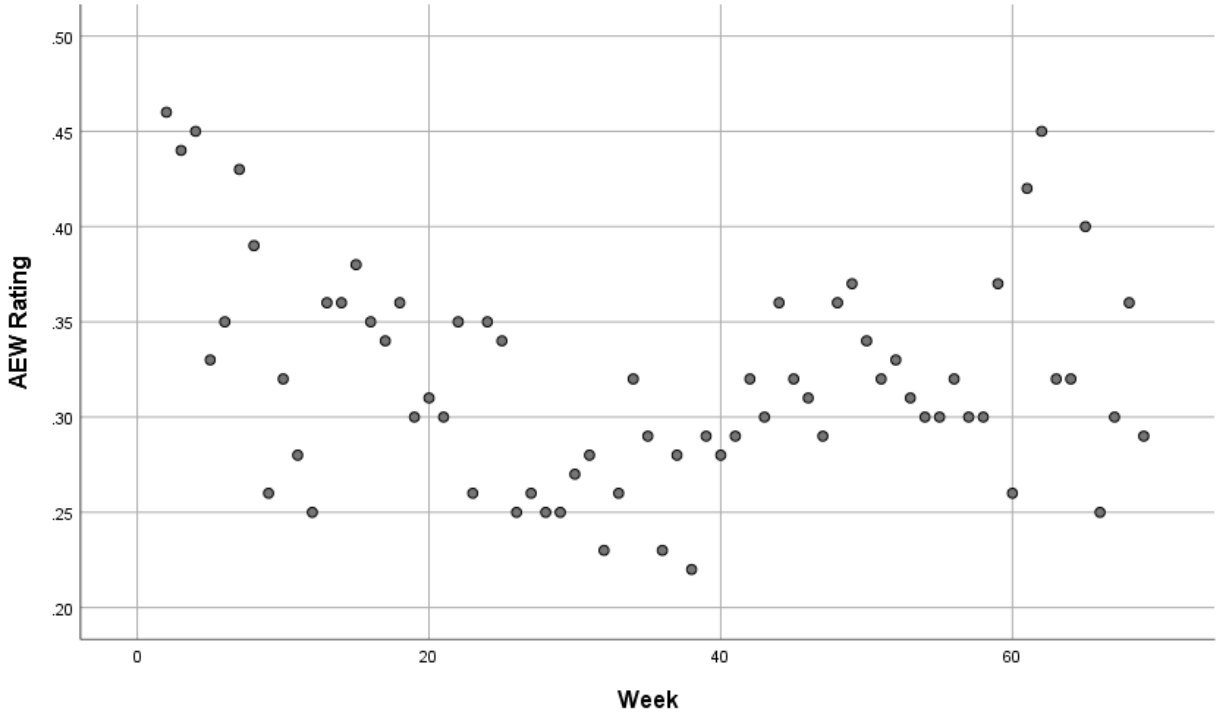

Figure 6. Scatterplot of *AEW Dynamite* Rating over Time

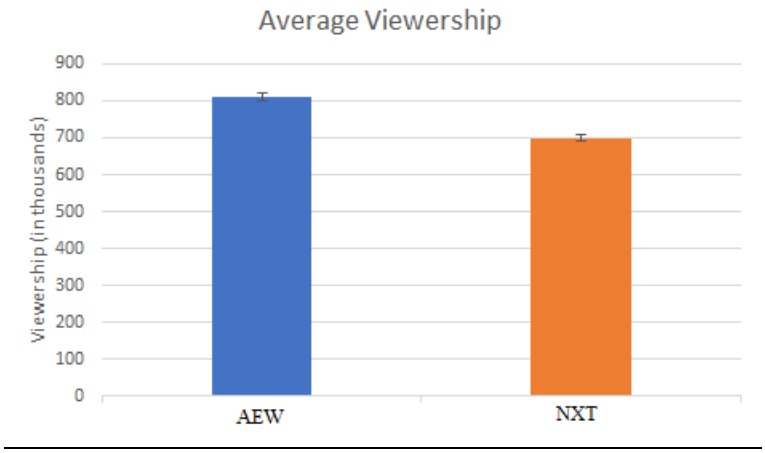

Figure 7. Bar Graph Comparing *AEW Dynamite* and *WWE NXT* Viewership

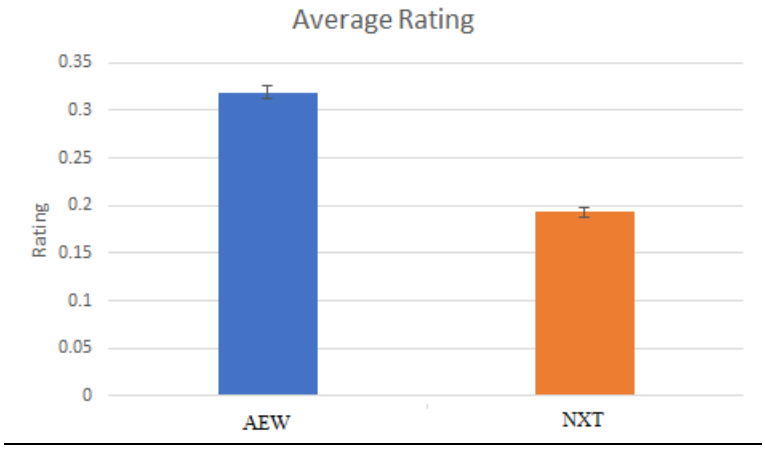

Figure 8. Bar Graph Comparing *AEW Dynamite* and *WWE NXT* Ratings

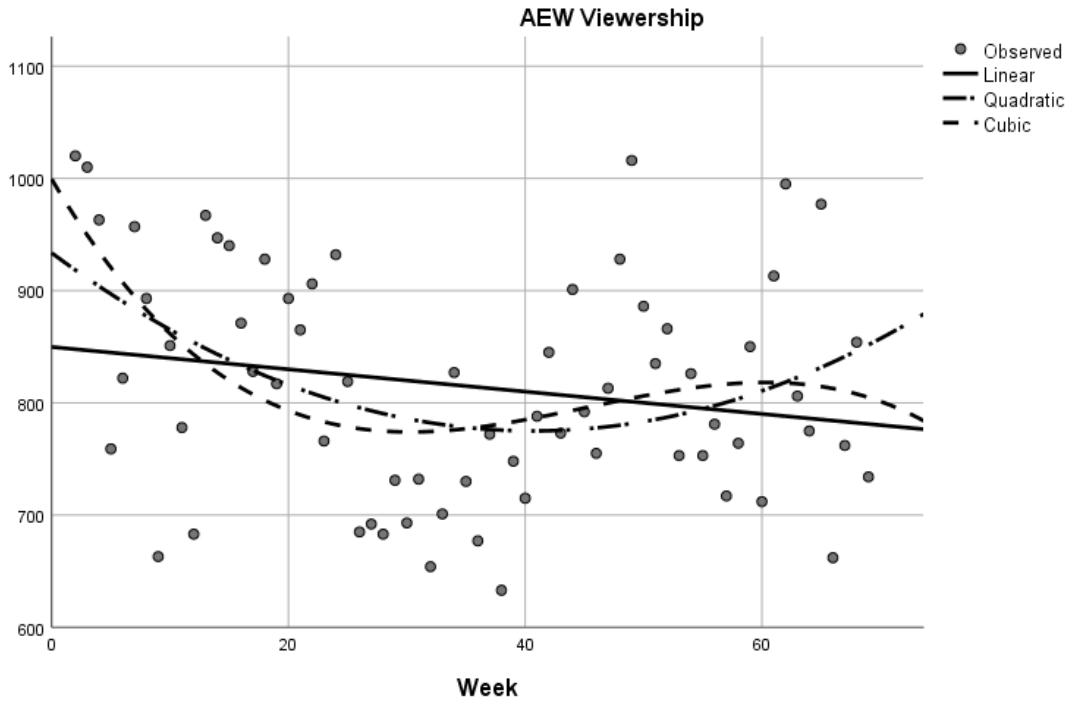

Figure 9. Scatterplot with Lines of Best Fit for *AEW Dynamite* Viewership over Time

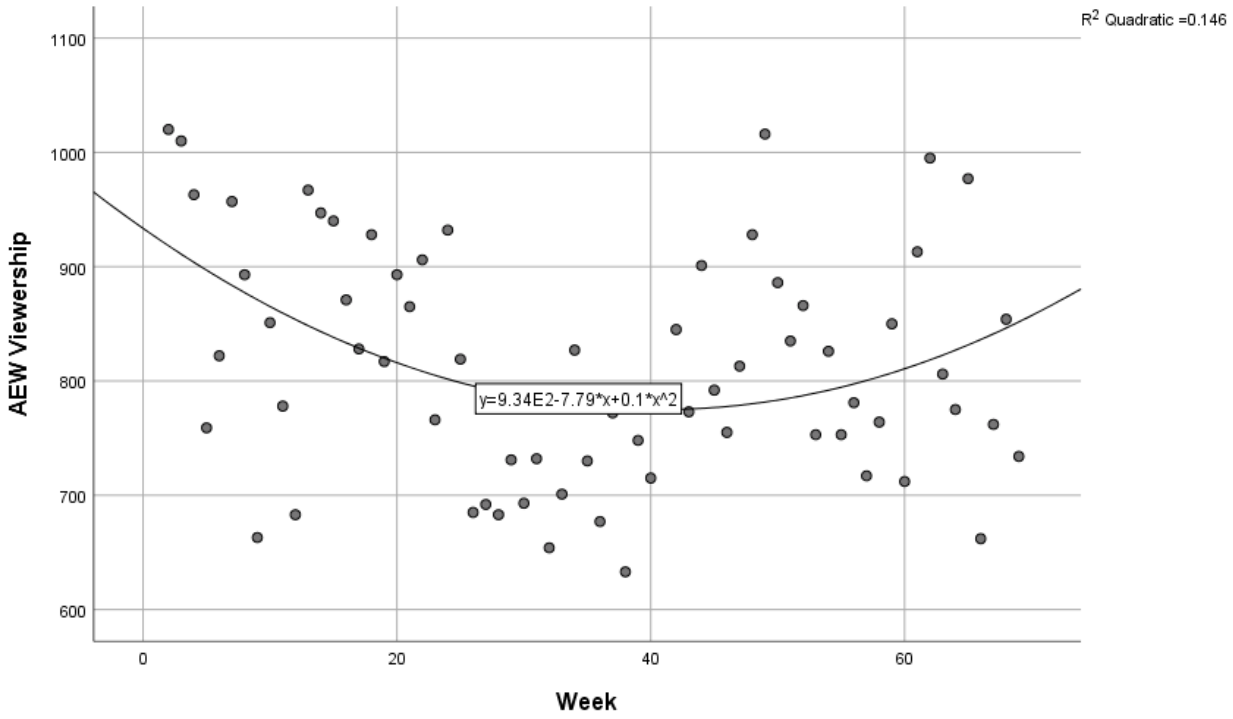

Figure 10. Scatterplot with Quadratic Regression Line for *AEW Dynamite* Viewership over Time

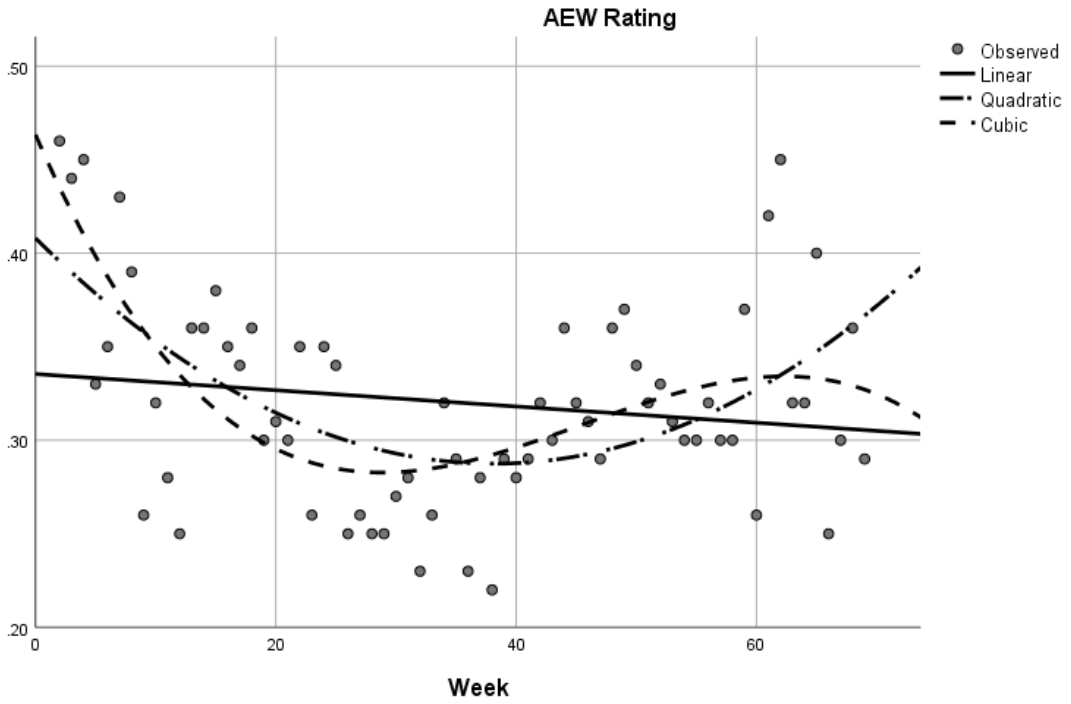

Figure 11. Scatterplot with Lines of Best Fit for *AEW Dynamite* Rating over Time

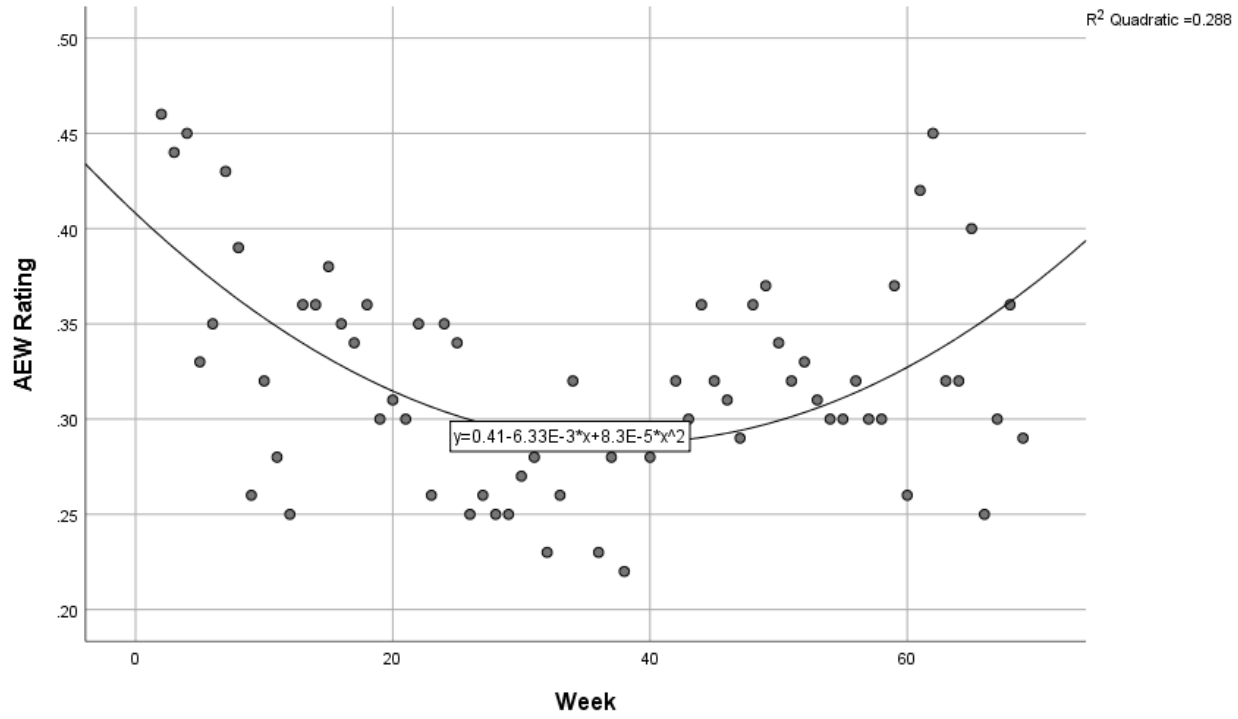

Figure 12. Scatterplot with Quadratic Regression Line for *AEW Dynamite* Rating over Time

Legdropping the Iron Sheikh: An AutoEthnographic Performance Selection from *Burnt City: A Dystopian Bilingual One-Persian Show*

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Legdropping the Iron Sheikh *is an autoethnographic performance selection from* Burnt City: A Dystopian Bilingual One-Persian Show. Burnt City *(or* شهر سوخته*) is a solo performance about United States-Iran relations. This performance uses poetry, humor, video, and the Farsi language to excavate how domestic abuse at home is congruous to violence inflicted by governments on citizens. In* Legdropping the Iron Sheikh*, the fifth scene from the production, Hamzehee juxtaposes parallels between his father's U.S. arrival during the 1979 Iranian Revolution with the Iron Sheik's 1980s' battles with the All-American Hulk Hogan. This autoethnographic performance is backgrounded by an edited and x-ray'd video of the January 23, 1984 Madison Square Garden telecast of Hogan-Sheik's WWF World Championship title match. This creative essay, script, and performance provides insight into this match as a critique of 1980's U.S.-Iran relations, as well as Hamzehee's relationship with his Persian father, arguing that the impacts of domestic abuse felt at home have parallels to those inflicted by homelands. A video of the performance is included as a hyperlink.*

Keywords: Iron Sheik, Wrestling, Autoethnography, Performance, Iran

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Please click the following link to access a video of Josh Hamzehee performing *Burnt City: A Dystopian Bilingual One-Persian Show!*

In *Legdropping the Iron Sheikh*, Khosrow Vaziri's infamous 1980s professional wrestling character becomes an entry point for me to performatively interrogate how presentations of United States-Iran relations reflected and impacted my relationships with my Iranian-born father and the cultures I was born into. This

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eight-minute scene from *Burnt City: A Dystopian Bilingual One-Persian Show!* is an example of how the then-World Wrestling Federation employed the Iron Sheik to reify xenophobic stereotypes, appealing "to a politically conservative audience, and that this appeal closely mirrors the cultural politics in the public arena" (May 80). By using wrestlers like Hulk Hogan and the Iron Sheik to bring charged political events into the ring, the WWF did not need "to create and define its own heroes and villains" (Mondak 145). Instead, the WWF relied on a blur of convergence, drawing upon real life conflicts and stereotypes to blend reality and fiction (Reinhard and Olson). They used real world consequences to manufacture stakes and backstory, otherized non-white bodies like Vaziri's Iron Sheik to heighten tension amongst its majority-white viewership, and family televisions were exposed to a melting pot of ethical implications that occupied "the larger reality beyond the squared circle" (Castleberry et al. 77).

In this article, I bridge creative essay, show script, and live performance to help articulate the impacts xenophobic cultural characterizations can have when the representation is utilized as bonding in father-son relationships. I, Joshua/Kurosh, use this autoethnographic staged performance to acknowledge that professional wrestling's famous January 23, 1984 hero/villain battle between Hulk Hogan and the Iron Sheik is one way I continue to understand how I navigate my Persian and white identities. And what better way to wrestle with staged performance than with a staged performance about wrestling! Throughout this essay, I weave the performance text I created with an analysis of my methods, research process, and reflexive observations. After setting the stage for this performance, I structurally break up *Legdropping the Iron Sheik* into four corners: Part 1: Video Introduction, Part 2: From Parts Unknown, Part 3: Ach-Ptew!, and Part 4: Heels and Faces.

Setting the Stage for the Sheik

Legdropping the Iron Sheikh is an eight-minute performance selection from my 2019 full-length production of *Burnt City: A Dystopian Bilingual One-Persian Show. Burnt City* (or شهر سوخته) is a 45-minute solo performance about how United States-Iran relations have historically impacted familial relationships, how political divides between the two nations have magnified over time, and how the adversarial relationship presented through popular culture representations can impact identity formation. And, yes, it is a comedy … of *horrors*! In *Burnt City*, I use poetry, humor, video, and the Farsi language to autoethnographically excavate how domestic abuse at home is congruous to violence inflicted by governments on citizens. By diving into my bi-racial cultural upbringing, I provide audiences experiential insight into *how* abuse and gaslighting by homelands parallels domestic abuse at home. The show's program lays out the plot:

> It's 2032 (or ۱۴۱۲). *Burnt City* takes a trip through U.S.-Iran relations, into an ahistoric understanding of the past, and warning of a future that might be closer than we would like to admit. Deported to *Shahr-e Sukhte*, Iran, U.S.-born Kurosh is alarmed: It's an apocalyptic graveyard! To escape ghosts, gaslights & gods he must unearth: WHAT'S BLOOD GOT TO DO WITH IT?

In *Burnt City*, I use several vignettes, performance methodologies, and diverse style and staging choices to both disentangle and complicate how I, Joshua/Kurosh, have come to understand the Persian and U.S. cultures I was born into.

Legdropping the Iron Sheikh is a particularly rich vignette of *Burnt City* that explores familial bonding and cultural representation through one of the most pivotal hero/villain moments in wrestling history, the January 23, 1984 WWF World Championship title match featuring Hulk Hogan versus the Iron Sheik. While this article focuses on *Legdropping the Iron Sheik* and 1980s wrestling consumption, I must note it cannot be completely separated from the broader exploration of Iran-U.S. relations offered by the full performance of *Burnt City*. After a lifetime of memories, six months of concept development, and five weeks of rehearsal, I first performed *Burnt City* in February 2019 for a sold-out four-show run at Louisiana State University's HopKins Black Box theatre (Advocate Staff). Later, *Legdropping the Iron Sheikh* was accepted to the 2019 National Communication Association conference as part of the performance panel, "Democracy *IS* a Spectator Sport!: Using Performances of Identity to Interrogate the Polarizing Impacts of Sports on Political and Interpersonal Discourse." The YouTube video presentation of *Burnt City: A Dystopian Bilingual One-Persian Show!* was recorded during its March 2020 four-show production run at University of Northern Iowa's Interpreters Theatre (Weber). The portion of the performance featuring *Legdropping the Iron Sheikh* begins at 17:42 and ends at 26:00.

In *Legdropping the Iron Sheikh*, I use spoken word poetry and creative staging to juxtapose my father's U.S. arrival during the 1979 Iranian Revolution with the Iron Sheik's 1980s battles with the All-American Hulk Hogan. *Legdropping the Iron Sheik* uses embodied and digital performance techniques to turn the conceits of wrestling outward in order to critique the content of its form. My performance interacts with an edited x-ray'd video of the January 23, 1984 Madison Square Garden telecast of Hogan and Sheik's WWF World Championship title match. My x-ray'd video editing technique is a combination of effects that first turns video into shades of green, white, and black, and second plays with a slow motion tempo to heighten the visuals of bodies and movements. WWE Network's online streaming service (where you can find this match in full) refers to this battle as the "birth of Hulkamania." Wrestling scholars like Jeffrey Mondak go further, stating "wrestling's resurgence in the 1980s

can be traced" to the moment the American Hogan legdropped the Iranian Sheik (140). By complicating the Sheik's narrative on stage with my own, I actively work against essentializing culture, against presenting "a simplistic, xenophobic interpretation of international political events" that was a characteristic of 1980s U.S. wrestling (Mondak 146). The x-ray'd video editing, then, becomes analogous to how I x-ray'd experiences and research through spoken text and live embodiment.

In "Wrestling with the Revolution: The Iron Sheik and the American Cultural Response to the 1979 Iranian Revolution," Rahmani remarks how U.S. "antagonism toward the Middle East is crystallized" in the Sheik" (95), producing a dangerous exploration of cultural hatred. Dozal notes the Iron Sheik served "as a representation of Iran that could be defeated by American wrestlers … to symbolically re-establish America's dominance" (47). In the 1980s, power and pride seemed to go archaically hand-in-hand in both American patriotism as well as the traditional conceptions of Persian masculinity. During that time period, wrestling characters often depicted:

> A world where might makes right and moral authority is exercised by brute force.... It evokes racial and ethnic stereotypes that demean groups even when they are intended to provide positive role models. It provokes homophobic disgust and patriarchal outrage against any and all incursions beyond heterosexual male dominance. (Jenkins 64).

The career of the Iron Sheik is a clear example of WWE-promoted xenophobia, crystallized antagonism, and patriarchal outrage. The implications of these portrayals are magnified because they are often packaged for audiences with "implicit (and frequently explicit) instructions … on how to orient to attending phenomena" (Foy 173). In professional wrestling the Middle East is often conflated as one barbaric region, and brown performers are shuffled between nationalities to increase audience vitriol for the sake of conflict and to support the character that is most American. A clear example of this happened in 1991: the Iron Sheik returned to the WWE after a hiatus and then proceeded to perform as the *Iraqi* Colonel Mustafa. There was "nary a flicker of public outrage" (Rahmani 98), inferring audiences either did not understand the difference between Iran and Iraq, they did understand and encouraged the conflation, or they did not care.

Growing up, the Iron Sheik was one of the only Persians I saw on TV! I learned, when a crowd chants "U.S.A" *at* you, they are often screaming at what you are not. When the Sheik spits back at the U.S.A., he cements himself and his homeland of Iran as heels to the audience, feeding political tensions outside the confines of the wrestling arena and encouraging audiences to hate him back. Dozal writes, "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" (42). When a face is victorious over a heel, it reinforces the face's virtues while outcasting whatever the heel represents. This face/heel binary becomes extremely complicated when cultural and familial relationships of the audience are shared with the culture a heel represents and further problematized when positive media representations of that culture are rare. Through *Legdropping the Iron Sheikh*, I explore impacts of an anti-Persian wrestling narrative consumed by a Persian parent and child in a Los Angeles home. While I was not born when the Hogan-Sheik match aired, bootleg VHS's were regularly acquired and re-acquired by my father from local video stores, so this specific match became a recurring part of my upbringing.

Legdropping the Iron Sheikh, Part 1: Video Introduction (0:00-3:24)

> [The Iranian National Anthem plays as the scene begins, sung by a female vocalist. On the projection screen, a heavily distorted/x-ray'd video appears showing the January 23, 1984 Madison Square Garden telecast of the WWF World Championship title match, Hulk Hogan vs. the Iron Sheik. In the locker room, commentator Mean Gene Okerlund interviews the Iron Sheik's manager, the *white* Ayatollah Freddie Blassie. Then, the Iron Sheik is interviewed:]
>
> Blassie: [Inaudible].
>
> Okerlund: Alright, let me talk to the man who is currently the reigning World Wrestling Federation champion, from I-ran, the Iron Sheik. Undoubtedly, the stiffest test of your short career as the world champion.
>
> Sheik: [In Farsi: Greetings and polite words to the world.]
>
> Okerlund: Wait a minute, I know you speak English—[*know you speak, know you speak, know you speak English. Speak English. I know you speak English*]—Sheik. Please.
>
> Sheik: Okay, now, Mr. Hogan, you are bitch, but remember—
>
> Okerlund: Gentlemen, Fred Blassie, I'm sorry gentlemen, I apologize, we are out of time.
>
> Blassie: [Inaudible.]
>
> [Video of match begins, as Hamzehee enters the arena.]

I begin *Legdropping the Iron Sheikh* with a pre-match interview featuring longtime commentator Mean Gene Okerlund interrogating the Iron Sheik and his handler/manager, the *white* "Ayatollah Freddie Blassie." Mondak writes about this

wrestling warm-up ritual, stating "the nature of each competition between hero and villain is verbalized during pre-match interviews with the combatants, while non-verbal signals including wrestlers' dress, mannerisms, tactics, and ethnic identification further clarify the nature of the wrestling drama" (140). Several aspects of this pre-match interview pop out: the white handler speaking *before* the Sheik; the refusal to correctly pronounce Iran; the foreshadowing of Sheik's short championship reign. Most notable to me is the disregard for Sheik's Farsi greeting and subsequent cutting off as it echoed how I felt as a kid about speaking Farsi in public. This silent voice of my father telling me, *"Engleesee harf bezan." Speak English* to fit in. Seeing my Iranian-born father navigate his Americanness in ways like the Iron Sheik navigated the Americans around him helped to make my younger self shy away from the Persian culture I was born into.

In *Legdropping the Iron Sheikh* I staged autoethnographic performance to help articulate the overwhelmingly inarticulable that connects the universal experience of being in-between cultures with the specific circumstance of my in-betweenness. Negotiating the origins of identities, positionalities, and struggles within a body we are born into is a messy, complicated process. Like autoethnography, negotiating identity is a process where more answers always lead to exponentially more questions. Bochner and Ellis write autoethnography "depicts people struggling to overcome adversity" and displays a process of how people figure out "meaning of their struggles" (111). In "How is Home, a Performance Autoethnography in Four Parts," Iranian-Iraqi Jewish-American scholar Desiree Yomtoob writes:

> I grew up confused about double cultures and knowing that something was left behind.... More just erased, more like there was a step that I stood on that others could not see or would not acknowledge. I would say, "I am Persian, and then try to explain. My parents are from Iran," to mostly blank faces that looked back at me. (458)

For myself, as Joshua/Kurosh, whenever asked about my heritage, I would say, "My father is from Iran." The asker would usually say "*I-ran*?*"* No, I would say, Iran. *"Eye-ran?*" And then I would feel, *Iran!*

To create and stage *Legdropping the Iron Sheikh* for live audiences, I used aesthetic imagery of staged professional wrestling (like poses, ring sounds and stomps, common phrases), methodological excavation of autoethnographic embodiment (allowing parallels and conflict to emerge through textual experimentation), technical aspects and craft of spoken word (to hone, edit, and add impact), the potential for disassociation provided with digital video editing (to focus, distort, and illuminate), and a historical understanding of a specific strand of

the Persian diaspora (the hyphen between U.S.-Iran relations is where I find myself located). I merged these aspects to comment on the geopolitical and personal impacts of choices often made in 1980s professional wrestling performance. By articulating performance in this manner, I aim to turn staged professional wrestling tactics back on itself. Through staging wrestling's constructedness I inherently argue there is potential for its reconstruction.

Legdropping the Iron Sheikh, Part 2: From Parts Unknown (1:40-3:25)

They said wrestling was fake,
But wrestling was not fake
It's performance.

In this corner:
From Parts Unknown, Iran,
A former military man now serving tables in Tehrangeles under an easier to pronounce Americanized name,
Q!

My father, Q, loved Hogan.
Babaeman, Kayoumars Hamzehee, *ashegheh* Iron Sheikh *bood.*
Hussein Khosrow Ali Vaziri—
Greatest heel in history.
Heat so hot he was *lavash* out the clay kiln.

To Q—who arrived in the U.S. at the height of Sheikh's fame
And the heart of the Iranian Revolution—
This twirly handlebar-mustached, sultan-shaved head, thick Farsi-speaking, Iranian flag-waving, hyper-masculine Shiite Muslim caricature
Equaled American dream.

He was a bodyguard for the Shah (who was jealous of Vaziri's popularity).
Like Kayoumars, Vaziri ran from Tehran in fear of his life.
Here, Americans *shot* at him,
Spat at him—
But he loved America so much he performed the demonized exotic enemy inciting Hulkamania nationalism to prosperity, brother;
While me and my *brother*

> Watched.
> Back then we bootlegged VHS matches from at the videostore.
> Oh, a videostore is like a Chipotle, but for Netflix.
>
> [Hamzehee goes to watch the match, responding to the action in Farsi. Then, Hamzehee as the Iron Sheik enters, belting the Iranian National Anthem.]

In this performance that articulates my past life, my father's real life, and the Sheik's wrestling life, what stands out to me is what I am *not* saying: the sound of stomps on the stage; the shreds are Persian rug that remain from other parts of *Burnt City*; what wrestling clichés like "from parts unknown" can represent to audiences who do not know; the characterization that emphasizes how Iran is portrayed by western media, the recognizable wrestling poses and actions I embody. As I watch this past version of myself performing about a past version of himself, I wonder who am I talking about/to: is it the Sheik? My father? Or my little brother? I know I'm talking about me, but I only see the word "me" once in this passage. Or am I talking about/to myself now through/with the people I describe? The Iron Sheik was a character played by Khosrow Vaziri. My father was a role performed by Kayoumars Hamzehee. How I choose to remember the past changes depending on if it's Joshua or Kurosh who is remembering it, who is performing it. Joshua often remembers the heel his father was. Kurosh sometimes remembers how his baba would buy wrestling action figures as a way of bonding, of forgetting the match his dad had with his step-mom the night before.

Growing up, other than my small Persian family in Los Angeles, the few depictions I saw of Persian men were much like the stereotypes of how the Iron Sheik was presented to me. Specifically, at home, I associated my alcoholic and physically abusive father with an unhinged wrestler. Sharing a home with him as a single father from ages one to seven—then from seven to thirteen with him, my eventual ex-step-mother, and younger brother—frequently felt like we were stuck in a steel cage wrestling match with no way out. I equated his actions, his violence, with Iran, as it was an Iranian who was doing it, and most of my Persian male examples acted similarly. As I grew older, I noticed the similarities of the Sheik's televised depiction with how I remembered my relationship with my father. I also keyed in on how their individual narratives paralleled each other as *they* grew older. When crafting *Legdropping*, I asked myself, was my own father a *heel*, or was I the *heel* for viewing him that way? I wondered where does the character of the Iron Sheik start, and the person who performed as him, Khosrow Vaziri, end? I also

pondered, where do the select memories of my father end, and the whole person he was, begin?

In the following section of *Legdropping the Iron Sheikh*, I catalogued over thirty hours of Iron Sheik text spoken in matches, interviews, and documentaries, and over my rehearsal process the text whittled down to under two minutes, coinciding with the edited video. While many processes go into constructing a text like this to fit within the context of a bigger production, I structured the text of this section using the *six C's of script construction*. The six C's are chopping, chunking, coding, cutting, checking, and chipping. *Chopping* is the first step to making a project like this manageable. After compiling my texts, I chop out everything I know I will not need. *Chunking* means isolating key pieces of information and tensions I know will provide visceral performance potential. *Coding* places the data remaining into overflowing thematic bins. *Cutting* selects what should stay and what should be discarded from those bins. Often, cutting can involve deciding among what to keep when there are duplicates of the same idea or when a bin does not have enough information to warrant being a pattern. During *checking*, scripters make hard choices, textual connections are threaded, and aesthetic options come into focus. *Chipping* removes unnecessary repetition, chisels content for efficiency, and tweaks choices to key in on connections and moments of resonance.

Chipping as refinement and polishing often occurs up to and including the days of performance. This section has taken many forms throughout its many lives, and the process of chipping has not ended. For example, in the 2019 version of *Burnt City* at LSU's HopKins Black Box Theatre, I embodied the Iron Sheik, his dialect and mannerisms, and treated the audience as if they were at a wrestling event. I *Ach-Ptew*'d at them and the U.S.A.! Following that show run, my technical crew gifted me an Iron Sheik action figure as a director's gift. In the 2020 version of the show—which traveled to the Patti Pace Performance Festival in Savannah, Georgia and was later presented for a five-show run at University of Northern Iowa's Interpreters Theatre—I disembodied the Sheik from myself, and placed his persona into that action figure, which I puppeted and voiced. Instead of embodying the character of the Iron Sheik, I hoped to contrast the childlike nature of play with the tone of misplaced Persian pride and masculine traditionalism.

Legdropping the Iron Sheikh, Part 3: Ach-Ptew! (3:50-5:40)

> *Ey Irān, ey marz-e por gohar!*
> I'm not American!
> I'm from Tehran, Iran!
> I spit on USA! *Ach-Ptew*! I suplex *you*!
> I fuck the Hulk Hogan, make him humble.

Don't be jabroni, *baba*.
I put him in camel clutch,
Break his back,
That *koskesh*.
I sit on him—

No, that's not gay, I am Shiite I cannot do that!
I'm first Middle Eastern 1968 I come to America, assistant coach for Olympic, first Iranian AAU champion five times.
Thank you! Thank you.

Oh, I paid my dues.
Old generation Hossein Khosrow Ali Vaziri.
Nobody beat Mr. Bob Backlund,
I put 'em in camel clutch!
They said don't lose your belt to that Hollywood jabroni Hogan.
But hand feed me I don't burn that hand, *nemeesoozam*.

Hogan came in locker room,
We steroid, cocaine,
He hug me, kiss me, say Sheiky baby I love you,
I owe you one, do me this favor,
Be American.
Hogan lied …
America double-cross me.

I was first Iranian human being come to America
Big Apple Madison Square Garden
toughest roughest area
and America double cross me.
I am not brother,
I am not jabroni.
I was the Iron *Sheikh*."

[Sheik turns, sees himself in the match, then exits. Hamzehee returns, responding in Farsi to the climax of match. The match plays parallel to the Iranian National Anthem, belted by a male vocalist.]

The match ends with Hogan legdropping the Sheik, and, of course, "pride and joy has been restored to the American name as the Iranian has been defeated" (Rahmani 96). Yes, the focus of my performance here is the Iron Sheik, but it is notable that while Hogan is adjacently present, his curated nationalism by the WWE hovers ever-present. As if the Persianness of everyone involved—the Sheik, my father, and myself—only exists in opposition to Americanness. But the hyphen holding U.S.-Iran relations together is double-sided because, as Yomtoob describes in her own previously mentioned four-part Persian autoethnography, it is a "double culture" (458). This autoethnographic performance is a performance of borders and how I navigate and understand the faultlines my identities are placed upon. Gloria Anzald*úa* reminds that those within culturally liminal spaces "continually walk out of one culture and into another" because we are in "all cultures at the same time" (77). When power and pride are involved as traditional tropes of masculinity in two or more of those cultures, and only unhealthy role models are consumed at home and on screen, an internal battle with cultural connection is a natural development.

As the Hogan-Sheik match reaches its climax on the x-ray'd video behind my performance, the audience hears a male-vocalized recording of the Iranian National Anthem to parallel the machismo showcased by the on-screen wrestling gladiators. In *Legdropping*, the audience ultimately hears four different versions of the National Anthem (female-led, male-led, sung by me as the Iron Sheik, hummed by me as myself). As the audiences for the live shows in Louisiana and Iowa were predominately white at predominately white institutions, most had no idea what they heard was the national anthem. My Persians attendees all recognized it. However, all attendees were able to recognize the familiarity and repetition of the beat and sounds. Not until collaging this creative essay did I realize I completely stopped consuming wrestling around eleven years old, after too many encounters with the Iron Sheik and having to act as a real-life referee.

Performing this show and collaging this essay have worked to teach me to connect back to the part of my Persian self I had left behind. I was able to admit, even with a complicated past and cast of characters that I grew up with, there are Persian parts of me that make me proud, like music, dancing, hospitality, physicality, food. By sharing this autoethnographic performance, I met new Persian friends in Baton Rouge and Cedar Falls, and understand more about my culture through our post-discussion chats in Farglish. I was able introduce audiences to a Persian culture they have only probably been exposed to with the Iron Sheik, *Shahs of Sunset*, and hyper-masculine terrorists in TV shows. While this performance did not bring me closer to my father, it did bring me closer to where both he and Vaziri came from, their first home: Iran. My performance and the process behind

constructing it also taught me much about why they left, as well as what they experienced in/from the United States of America.

Legdropping the Iron Sheikh, Part 4: Heels and Faces (7:00-8:10)

Halla, he calls himself the Sheik—
K—
Because Americans refused to pronounce the *kh* sound.
In his old age,
He struggles for money, waddles from generations of abuse,
His Persian pride is a volcano: American ex-wife left him, kids won't talk to him,
He blames
Others.

I wonder,
What happens to military veterans
Of *other* countries?
If governments
Give citizens PTSD?
If that trickles
Down
To childhood
Memories—

I wonder
If our heels
Make us
Who we are.
Or
If they're the faces
Of who
We
Become.

[Hamzehee hums Iranian National Anthem as match ends with slow motion/x-ray'd video of Sheik and Hogan's intertwined bodies.]

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Reviews

Edwards, Douglas. *Philosophy Smackdown*. Polity Books, 2020. 164 pp. $16.95/Pbk

As an introduction to philosophy for wrestling fans, *Philosophy Smackdown* is a fun, engaging, thought-provoking, and all-around lively introduction to big-picture questions in philosophy. Keeping in line with popular philosophy texts, Edwards introduces, in an eminently accessible way, questions that philosophers have discussed for as long as the discipline has existed. The book is broken up into six chapters, each touching on core themes in philosophy: (1) Reality, (2) Freedom, (3) Identity, (4) Morality, (5) Justice, and (6) Meaning. The book concludes with a "dark match" pitting philosophy against the spectacle of professional wrestling. Edwards explores the ways philosophers can learn from professional wrestling and uses professional wrestling to illustrate to newcomers how philosophy *should* be done. Utilizing his passion for, and knowledge of, wrestling and its history, Edwards illustrates perennial philosophical problems. At times, however, he gets almost too caught up in the wrestling side, making some of the chapters feel uneven.

The first two chapters of the book perhaps suffer the most from this unevenness. The book opens with a discussion of how Plato's cave mimics the different "layers of reality" in professional wrestling. From the infamous "Montreal Screw-Job" to WWE's proprietary "reality" shows, Edwards teases out some of the core challenges in making sense of reality both in, and outside of, the ring. Just as Plato introduces the allegory of the cave in the context of his political treatise, *The Republic*, Edwards turns to a brief discussion of politics, news media, and democracy in this chapter. Yet, the turn seems to come like an RKO, "out of nowhere," and the result is a disjointed finish to the first chapter.

The discussion of freedom in the second chapter also comes across as a little unfocused. To be sure, there are a number of related discussions regarding the nature and questions about freedom and utilizing the semi-scripted nature of pro-wrestling as a foil for exploring those questions is a particularly ingenious angle. But the chapter touches very quickly on many topics, from Jon Moxley's exit from WWE (and subsequent arrival in AEW), to the stoics' views on the scope of personal freedom, to social pressures, women's wrestling, and intergender wrestling. The through-line is, of course, the question about whether something scripted can still allow for genuine freedom. The chapter is short and these are huge questions, so it comes off as a little quick and unfocused.

By the third chapter, *Philosophy Smackdown* starts to turn the corner. Chapter three concerns personal identity, and the focus is on Razor Ramon/Scott

Hall. The discussion of the differences (or lack thereof) between person and character in wrestling raises interesting and important questions, and the pages fly by. Despite the rich subject matter, this is the shortest chapter in the book, and I was left wanting more on the interrelated problems of personal identity. But where the first three chapters left me wanting more, the last three delivered. Without a doubt, the chapters on ethics, justice, and meaning are the strongest, most thought-provoking, and most important chapters in the text.

Chapters four and five pair nicely. Chapter four introduces the face/heel dynamic and explores the rise and fall of wrestling heroes in terms of virtue and vice. Slotting various wrestling personae into the Aristotelian framework of vice and virtue, Edwards offers helpful discussions of why we love Stone Cold and why we hate the Super-Cena run. This rich discussion of good and evil gives way to a careful, direct, and important discussion of social ethics (questions of justice, commodification, prejudice, and bias) in professional wrestling, both as a business and as a form of entertainment. Edwards does a brilliant job of addressing the ugly side of wrestling head-on, and forces readers to consider their role as consumers of wrestling as a product.

The final chapter turns to a conceptual analysis of professional wrestling. Edwards considers whether it is merely entertainment, a sport, and what exactly "sports entertainment" might mean. Edwards finally concludes that pro-wrestling is a "monster" akin to Frankenstein's. It is something *sui generis*, composed of pieces taken from other forms of entertainment but not quite the same as any of them. Conceptual analysis is, to my mind, a critical starting point for philosophy, and this chapter expertly discusses the unique challenges professional wrestling presents philosophers as it seems to defy analysis. This is a particularly strong finish for the book, but I wish it would have been the opening salvo – having an analysis of what wrestling *is* right at the outset would provide readers a powerful entry into just how deep the rabbit hole goes and would have introduced philosophical tools prior to engaging specific questions. Nonetheless, this is a fun main event.

The book concludes with a "dark match" pitting the practice of philosophy as a dialogical and seemingly combative discipline against professional wrestling. It's a shame the dark match was relegated to the very end of the text, as it is arguably the strongest chapter. Metaphilosophy (the philosophy of philosophy) is often alienating and inaccessible, but Edwards cleverly employs the aims and purposes of wrestling to illustrate how philosophy *ought* to be done. In a shocking heel-turn, Edwards calls academic philosophers to task for often forgetting that, like professional wrestlers, we ought to see philosophy as a collaborative effort. He writes, "It takes two to tango, and wrestlers need to work together to achieve their

goals. The same should apply in philosophy. Philosophy is not about winning arguments; rather a philosophical discussion should be a collective enterprise where people work together to pursue the truth" (150). This serves both as a reminder to philosophers, and a cautionary note to newcomers that while it might *appear* that philosophers are combative and fighting, but we are actually working together to get closer to the truth. It is a shame this "dark match" was buried; it is a co-main event quality chapter.

Philosophy Smackdown provides a compelling and accessible introduction to philosophy, grounded in a passionate discussion of the history of professional wrestling. Despite some initial unevenness, the ideas are sharp and compelling. It provides a strong introduction to philosophical thought and uncovers the deep questions lying beneath the glossy veneer of professional wrestling.

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Laine, Eero. Professional Wrestling and the Commercial Stage. Routledge, 2020. 148 pp. $160.00/hdc

Professional Wrestling and the Commercial Stage is a short, well-researched academic book. Laine's introduction makes clear the intended audience, "This book, then, intervenes in theatre studies to examine a century-old, embodied narrative form that extends from its local places of performance through globally mediated live events" (4). This book is of great relevance to theatre scholars, students of theatre and performance, as well as scholars in cultural studies, economics, and marketing. Professional wrestling here is examined as a publicly traded, transnational theater company. For Laine, "the logic of professional wrestling at the business level is not unlike any other commercial theatre" (21). Throughout the book, Laine looks behind the curtain to consider the economics—supply chains and institutions—necessary to stage a live performance that travels and circulates. Although Laine has many research questions, one that remains constant is: How can one circulate and sell something like a theatrical performance that is ephemeral and not replicable? (11).

Chapter One, "Productive Theatre and Professional Wrestling," explains that professional wrestling functions within a theatrical business model where live events drive sales and profits. Laine draws on Marx's *Theories of Surplus Value* to describe how professional wrestling is still "productive" even though it does not

always produce tangible goods (22). This chapter also offers an etymology of the concept "kayfabe," which non-wrestling fans may find helpful.

In Chapter Two, "Form and Content," Laine acknowledges sometimes professional wrestling content reinforces racist and sexist tropes. This chapter offers case studies of plays about professional wrestling such as *The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity* and *Trafford Tanzi*. These case studies help support the point that, despite professional wrestling's potential to be critiqued, wrestling can also be something "…approaching progressive, left, feminist, and maybe even socialist politics" (55) to be commended as well.

In Chapter Three, "Hardcore Wrestling," Laine presents an economic explanation for the rise of the hardcore wrestling style: international market forces and deregulation efforts that emerged in the late 1980s (63). Laine suggests the financial benefits of deregulation encouraged wrestling promoters to claim wrestling is entertainment (67). If professional wrestling was entertainment (and not sport), promoters paid less taxes and incurred less state oversight. By this logic, deregulation opened the door for more extreme stunts and human cost. For Laine, hardcore wrestling can thus be read as a violent application of the market economy with low wage workers taking on often extreme risks (69).

Chapter Four, "Trading Likenesses," considers the material effects on pro wrestlers' bodies, the legality of likenesses, and trademark law. Laine's research on WWE trademarks highlights just how complicated it is to determine: where do rights to protect a WWE character begin and end? Ultimately, Laine concludes, "likenesses are just one way of codifying and monetizing the process and circulating the labor of the wrestler beyond the ring" (97). Although making substantive contributions, this chapter highlights one of the book's greatest flaws (openly recognized by Laine): the lack of images. The book would greatly benefit from rights to use images that illustrate excessive, bloody injuries such as those central to what Mick Foley did as a performer.

Chapter Five, "Stock Theatre Company," considers the impact of shareholders and public stock on WWE. For Laine, it is "a surprisingly traditional theatrical business model" (103). WWE hosts live events with audience interaction and special effects. WWE storylines are reliant on live events, the actions of spectators, and the connections between theatrical entertainment and finance. Laine observes storylines like the Vince McMahon Kiss My Ass Club demonstrate the impact of financial markets on the wrestling product—which sometimes play out in the ring itself (117). This chapter hints at what some may call a flaw of the book: the lack of attention to other wrestling companies. For me, he justifies his choice to focus on WWE sufficiently by explaining WWE is "the largest and

currently most profitable professional wrestling company," (11) and has "with surprising consistency bought out or beat its competition" (103).

In the conclusion, like many who have come before him, Laine argues pro wrestling studies offers promises (and challenges) for interdisciplinary scholarship. He urges further archival research on professional wrestling. Laine remarks, "The field has not yet fully engaged, I think, with this massive trove of material" (126). The biggest takeaway of this chapter was Laine's recommendation, "There is a lot of work to do in professional wrestling studies" (128).

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