

**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-slammings, 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 is 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 incomprehensible 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 be 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 be 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's 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 "Usos 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 Fifta 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 Fifta 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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