

Toward a Work-Shoot Approach to Kayfabe in Professional Wrestling

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It's Extreme Championship Wrestling's (ECW) *Cyberslam* show in February 1996. Announcer Joey Styles stands in the ring. The lights go dark. When they come back on Brian Pillman, most recently a wrestler in the national promotion World Championship Wrestling (WCW), is in the middle of the ring with Styles. The crowd goes wild, chanting "PILL-MAN! PILL-MAN!" Three fans sitting ringside, directly across from the hard camera, pull out a sign that reads "Pillman – Don't Work Me!!"

"What are you doing here?" asks Styles.

Pillman responds: "I like you as an announcer, you know why? Because I just had an announcer in Atlanta, Georgia take away my Constitutional rights. I have been fired by Eric Bischoff!" referring to the Vice President of WCW. Pillman then shoots on WCW and Bischoff, revealing backstage business and his various irritations with the company. The crowd loves it. The ECW fans support the smaller, grittier, and more violent promotion. Like Pillman—or the version of himself he's playing in the ring—they also hate WCW, Bischoff, and "mainstream" nationally televised US wrestling.

But Pillman makes a turn. "You know what Eric Bischoff is? Eric Bischoff is each and every one of these motherfucking smart marks rolled up in a giant piece of shit!" The crowd goes silent and then starts a smattering of boos. "I guess you guys didn't get that--smaaarrt marks. Smart marks!" he says. The fans holding the

“Pillman—Don’t Work Me!!” sign start to chant “READ THE SIGN! READ THE SIGN!” Pillman doesn’t listen. He looks at the fans with the sign: “What’s a smart mark? A mark with a high IQ? Okay, smart marks. Ok. You know what a mark is? A mark is a guy that pays his last twenty dollars on crack cocaine! A mark is a guy that believes that O.J. didn’t do it! And a mark is every one of you sorry son-of-a-fucking bitches!” (“Brian Pillman”) Pillman then threatens to urinate in the middle of the ring. Now the fans are really booing. ECW owner Tod Gordon, booker Paul Heyman, and wrestler Shane Douglas run out to stop him. “This wasn’t part of the deal, brother,” Gordon says. Security comes to take Pillman away and he starts shoving everybody. Douglas’ declaration of “He’s shooting! He’s shooting!” gets picked up by Styles’ hot mic. As local police escort Pillman away, he breaks free and attacks one of the fans with the sign, drags him into the ring, takes a fork out of his boot and starts to stab him. Shane Douglas rushes back into the ring and chases off Pillman, who flees up the aisle with police chasing him (“Brian Pillman”).

Of course, the whole thing was a work, right? The sign, insulting a former employer, the turn against the crowd, the dog whistle racism, the threat of urination, Douglas yelling “he’s shooting,” the “local police,” the fork produced from the boot. It’s all a little too chaotic and too choreographed. But finding the exact line between the work and the shoot is always difficult—even for those who are ostensibly in the know and planning such things.

When Pillman said Eric Bischoff fired him, that was a shoot. He really was fired. Except that if you ask Eric Bischoff, he claims the plan was for Pillman to return to WCW after some time in ECW, and that the legitimate firing was a work to throw off the wrestling newsletters. As it goes, Pillman decided to flip the script, and rather than returning to Bischoff’s company, he signed with the World Wrestling Federation (WWF), WCW’s competition. As Bischoff explains, “I’m not sure if he was working me or if we were working everybody else” (qtd. in Shoemaker 334). Wrestler Chris Jericho, who was in ECW at the time, probably got it more right, writing about Pillman: “That guy is a genius. He’s working everybody” (298).

This in-ring moment, a worked-shoot inside a worked-shoot inside Brian Pillman’s chaotic genius, is a good place to begin this issue focused around working theories of kayfabe. In this one angle we see the multiple facets of kayfabe: the cooperation of the performer and the audience, the playfulness along the border between work and shoot, the ways kayfabe is “broken” but nonetheless left standing, the impossibility of ever really being a smart-mark, the overlaps and differences between wrestlers and the characters they play, the co-constitution of

work and shoot. The layers of work and shoot in Brian Pillman's *Cyberslam* debut challenge us to think through the structure of kayfabe. This play between work and shoot also offers an example of how kayfabe is never really broken and never really dies. Indeed, this tumultuous few minutes of pro wrestling from decades ago encourages us to think about kayfabe in and through time. We can try to parse each turn and chant, every word picked up by a mic, and speculate how much a fan knew. But the fact that even those involved aren't able to (or don't want to) share a clear picture of the events should press us beyond the idea that kayfabe is simply what is made up or fake in pro wrestling. But more than that, the "Pillman-Don't Work Me!!" sign stands as a reminder of all the other places in culture and society where we are getting worked and also where we have room to work ourselves or others. Understanding or at least being aware of these dynamics, we think, is what a critical engagement with kayfabe might enable.

Working Definitions of Kayfabe

Depending on who you ask, the term kayfabe might refer to a bit of wrestling jargon or it might be the singular term that spans and unifies innumerable and disparate fields and phenomena. In professional wrestling studies, kayfabe is a concept both widely understood and just as widely argued over. Interestingly, the term itself, broadly indicating some sort of fiction, whether deceitful or playful, is less contested than the potential reach of the term.

While it originates in professional wrestling's linguistic connections to carnival slang, kayfabe potentially describes and can be leveraged to analyze so much more—from politics to business to interpersonal communication to daily life. Quite simply kayfabe has been defined as "a con or a deception" (Mazer 22) and has also been described as the "Illusion of realness" (Smith 68), the "illusion of authenticity" (Pratt 140), and the "fictional world of professional wrestling" (Laine 192). Kayfabe can refer to "the practice of sustaining the in-diegesis performance into everyday life" (Litherland 531) and is "co-created and maintained" through "moment-to-moment engagement between wrestling fans and wrestlers" (Reinhard 31). Its use throughout pro wrestling history has shifted and changed, and "as a verb 'kayfabe' can be used as an imperative; as a noun it describes a code of behavior; as an adjective it describes someone who is aware of the inner workings of the industry" (Wrenn 154).

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) notes that the term is "of uncertain origin" and that there are a number of interpretations of its etymology and that some "are probably apocryphal," a problem examined by various wrestling scholars (Laine, *Professional Wrestling*; Mazer; Smith; Wrenn). The earliest use in print in

the *OED* entry is from the *Wrestling Observer* in 1988 (“The heels were told to stay away because of kayfabe violations, but few listened to the order.”), and the *OED* also notes that the *Los Angeles Times* defined the term for its readership in 1995 as “pro wrestling’s code of secrecy in never revealing that pro wrestling is scripted.” Popular definitions of the term mark related matters. On *Wikipedia*, the entry for kayfabe is regularly edited and updated and is currently construed as “is the portrayal of staged events within the industry as ‘real’ or ‘true’, specifically the portrayal of competition, rivalries, and relationships between participants as being genuine and not staged.” The top entry on *Urban Dictionary* (Bigrattus), with over five hundred upvotes defines kayfabe as a “Term in pro wrestling. Kayfabe was the unsaid rule that the wrestlers should stay in character during the show and in public appearances (sic) in order to maintain a feeling of reality (albeit suspended) among the fans.” The term remains fairly niche, yet Google Books’ Ngram analysis shows a near vertical rise in use since 2017 (“Kayfabe”).

Across these various attempts to define the term and trace its origins, kayfabe itself is often set as that which is false or fictional or illusory or deceptive. Whether these ideas of kayfabe rely on one group tricking another or everyone—fans, promoters, and wrestlers alike—playing along together, such a staging of kayfabe as a fiction implies something on the other side, a truthfulness or realness or actuality. Christopher A. Medjesky, in the dialogue in this issue, suggests that the field of pro wrestling studies is already “focused on the real,” perhaps in the ways we attempt to identify kayfabe and the various careful attempts to peel the work off to reveal the shoot. But as our opening example shows, the real and fake, the work and the shoot are deeply intermixed—this is kayfabe. Or as David Moon reminds us on Twitter: “there’s no shoot without the work” (@David_S_Moon). Conversely, there is no work without the shoot. That is, as Moon suggests and we should certainly keep in mind, the moment of “truth” or shoot itself emerges from a fictional narrative. However, given the intense physicality of professional wrestling and the stakes of revealing the inner workings of any business, let alone one historically premised on a series of cons, the work itself is only possible because of the threat of shoot. The hookers or shooters or enforcers existed in wrestling history in order to enact real violence, shoring up the fictional narrative (see Thesz).

So, if we might open this issue by positing a way forward for the study of kayfabe, it might be to look more closely at the messily complicated interplay between work and shoot that kayfabe entails. Of course, there is also an already significant body of work on fans and their work to both uphold and disrupt kayfabe in wrestling and in other areas (Canella; Ford; Jones; Hill; Martin; Moon,

“Kayfabe”; Norman; Reinhard) and calls for further critique and close analysis of storylines (Foy). Our proposal is that kayfabe itself encompasses both the work and the shoot. Even in some of our own previous writing, we have perhaps aligned kayfabe too closely with the work, despite the fact that it has proven difficult, if not impossible, to disentangle work and shoot. Kayfabe is made up of and sustained by both work and shoot. That is, there is not a dichotomy between work and shoot, but rather an interplay and co-constitutiveness that makes up kayfabe. In wrestling (and in life), something is never entirely worked or fictional nor is it entirely a shoot, truth telling, or actual enactment. So, with apologies to Saussure and Barthes, here we attempt to illustrate the relations of work and shoot (Figure 1). The kayfabe system is constituted by the work and the shoot.



Figure 1

The work enables the shoot and the shoot enforces the work. Sometimes performers, events, and storylines move quickly between the two, blurring the lines, yet kayfabe still manages to contain the mess. As Jacqui Pratt writes, drawing on the scholarship of feminist theorist Karen Barad, kayfabe “creates a complex, dynamic, and foundational ambiguity that permeates any and every wrestling narrative” (137). Chow, Laine, and Warden set this along the lines of performance and theatricality (3–5), and we might complicate our diagram here (Figure 2) by thinking of the physical and narrative work in relation to the physical and narrative shoot.

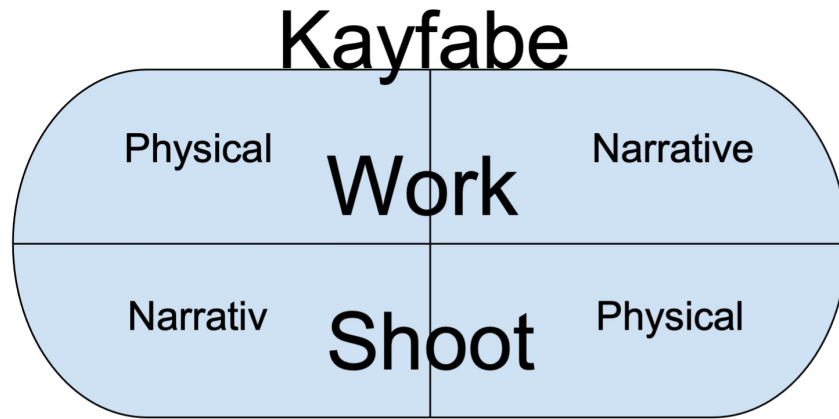


Figure 2

Here, the physical work is the acted agony of being in a figure four leg lock. The physical shoot is when that same leg lock actually breaks a leg. The narrative work is the fictional storyline that gives reason for the leg lock and the narrative shoot is the actual reason the leg gets broken. The narrative work thus supports and relies on the physical shoot, and the physical work is intertwined with the narrative shoot. Indeed even within the work and the shoot (both individual moments and longer arcs across time), the physical performance of a work or a shoot is held in relation to the theatrical narrative of the work or shoot.

Of course, we know kayfabe to encompass and explain more than individual moments in the ring. Kayfabe also works across and through time. As some of the articles in this issue attest, kayfabe regularly rethinks and reframes past events, which then in turn complicates and sets up future events (Figure 3). We might consider kayfabe to be a form of historiography that recasts moments and events and raises expectations of an imagined future.

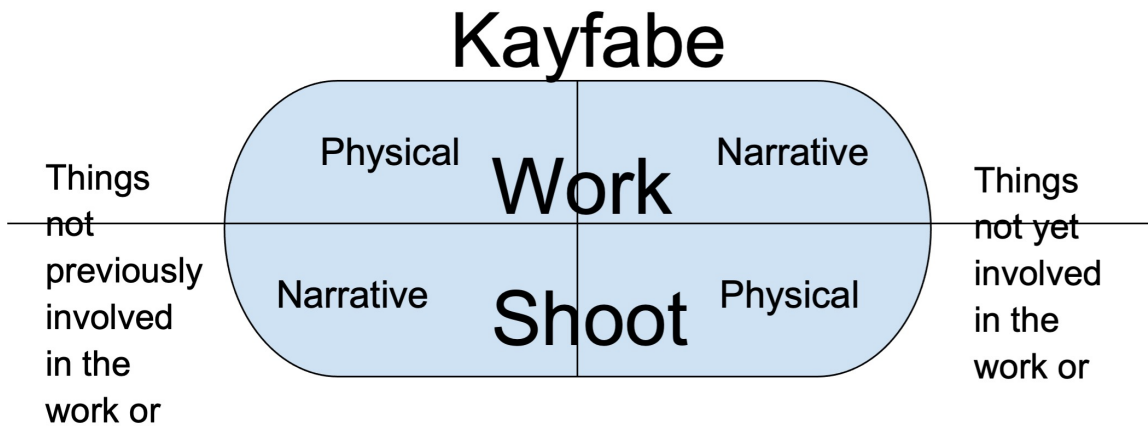


Figure 3

This is not to say that kayfabe is all encompassing; however, it can encompass just about anything it touches. Think of wrestler appearances on non-wrestling talk shows or celebrity appearances in matches and feuds with wrestlers and the ways they quickly become part of the media landscape and wrestling storyworld. Wrestling also has the ability to look back and declare something part of the storyline and motivation for what will happen in the ring next week or at the next pay-per-view.

Kayfabe might then be what cultural theorist Raymond Williams calls a “structure of feeling” or “structure of *experience*” (23). Williams, who approached culture as an everyday way of life, coined “structure of feeling” to describe and attend to the qualities and presences of social experience as they were actively lived and felt. To take kayfabe then, as a structure of feeling, is to approach it as a “forming and formative process” that draws upon shifting social, cultural, and material relationships, institutions, narrative and performance genres in the ongoing present (20, 22). Such an approach enables us to attend to the ways that kayfabe “exert[s] palpable pressures and set[s] effective limits on experience and on action,” even as its articulations change and remain unsettled (23). We *feel* kayfabe in an ongoing present in which “reality and fiction, authenticity and illusion... are always-already ambiguously entangled” (Pratt 149). Kayfabe—in pro wrestling and elsewhere—holds in tension social values and meaning, aesthetic and generic practices, and our material bodies, and shapes the affective tones or feelings of realness.

These structures of kayfabe are maintained through joint performance between wrestlers, between wrestlers and audiences, and between audience members, all sometimes willing and sometimes unexpectedly. R. Tyson Smith’s deployment of “passion work” draws attention to these dynamics within the match. Thinking with ethnographer Arlie Russell Hochschild’s influential analysis of “emotional labor,” which she conceives as the work required “to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (*The Managed Heart* 7), Smith explains “passion work” as a “joint performance of emotional labor conducted with the body” that “create[s] passionate feelings of contempt, indignation, and suspense among the audience” (67–68). To do this work, workers or wrestlers rely on a set of “feeling rules” to guide these exchanges. The “feeling rules” of the narrative work and shoot require that the wrestling performers draw awe, anger, and joy from the audience by sharing truths and fictions. While the “feeling rules” of physical shoot and work direct the wrestlers to navigate their “skilled coordination, control, trust, and empathy” to complete the performed moves (67–69), care and attention move

back and forth between the work and the shoot, between the wrestlers and between audience members and the wrestlers.

However, like other structures of feeling or affects, kayfabe is not deterministic. Following such feeling rules does not guarantee a particular affective response in an audience. Rather, kayfabe, as a structure of feeling, shapes “how you can move across [social and material] relationships, where you can and cannot invest, where you can stop/rest and where you can move and make new connections, what matters and in what ways” (Grossberg 313). Although it is deeply social, it is also highly contingent and is not experienced uniformly. Opposing articulations and experiences of kayfabe may occupy the same events. We see evidence of these conflicting experiences in ongoing debates around the death or reconfiguration of kayfabe, such as in the dialog in this issue, and in responses to the perceived realness of wrestlers’ gimmicks or finishing moves.

Breaking Kayfabe

Who controls the work and who controls the shoot? While the workers (and the bookers) are ostensibly in control of both the work and the shoot (in the moment of performance), kayfabe, as it is an interpretive device employed by all, has the ability to dictate what is work and what is shoot and more importantly, the relations between the two—not only in the present but into the future and retroactively. Thus, as DiArron M. points to in this issue, kayfabe acts as a social and “discursive space” for negotiating not only the dynamics between the work and the shoot, but “meanings and values” that extend well beyond the ring. In such negotiations, kayfabe might appear broken as appeals to realness, history, the industry, or broader social structures are invoked or expressed.

When we experience the sensations of kayfabe breaking, what we might be experiencing is not the end of kayfabe, either in the moment or more broadly, but our own misattunement to a performance or event. We are what Sara Ahmed refers to as “out of sync” with the event and its dominant corresponding narratives, claims, and affects of realness (*Living a Feminist Life* 41). Or, perhaps, we have attuned to a new or different dynamic of the event or narrative. We sometimes recognize these affective changes in the shifts of a live event’s sonic atmosphere. Claire Warden notes that silence is “a vital force in professional wrestling” that emerges when audiences have become misattuned or disinterested in an angle or narrative or when a real injury occurs (“Pops and Promos” 22). She writes, “Shock and concern added together breaks through the conventional kayfabe structures” (“Pops and Promos” 22). In these instances of injury, the audience is no longer attuned to the illusion of realness, but rather to the realness of the performers’ bodies. We become out of sync with one dynamic of kayfabe but find ourselves in

sync with another. We attune to the realness of the physical work rather than the worked illusion. For instance, in this issue, Marion Wrenn's analysis of a poem about the death of Owen Hart offers a study of just this sort of event. Similarly, in response to a heel's sexist, racist, anti-queer, anti-trans, or anti-fat promos some of us might find that we no longer share in kayfabe's dominant narrative, mood, or affective atmosphere. The shoot or lived realities of such discourse do not allow us to engage with the speaker as a heel working for heat or boos. We are misattuned to kayfabe's conventional feeling rules, or, rather, our commitments or attunements to different values, bodies, and experiences might mean that we no longer attune to kayfabe in the same manner (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 223).

However, even when we are misattuned, we remain in relationship to kayfabe. The "break" or moment of misattunement reorients our attention and affective relationship. Sensations of boredom, worry, disappointment, anger, and unwelcome all speak to forms of ongoing contact or attachment. Such misattunements offer opportunities for challenge or to rework kayfabe's affects and effects, its social commitments and processes. As Ahmed writes:

It is when we are not attuned, when we do not love what we are supposed to love, that things become available to us as things to ponder with, to wonder about. It might be that we do destroy things to work them out. Or it might be that working them out is perceived as destroying things. (*Living a Feminist Life* 41-42)

As such, "kayfabe, and the ability to recognise it" or to sense a misattunement "becomes not only a means for reading professional wrestling, but a mechanism to critique" (Laine, "Kayfabe," 202). When a misattuned audience turns to chants of "boring!" or worried faces and gasps of concern, they offer new openings to think and feel through an event.

Where is kayfabe?

Moments of misattunement and structures of work and shoot are not confined to professional wrestling. As the field of professional wrestling has shown, kayfabe can be taken out of professional wrestling and used as a term for analyzing layers of reality and the construction of those layers without ever having to authorize one particular reality. That is, instead of searching for the truth, or the shoot, at the heart of all the work trying to conceal it, kayfabe allows us to take cultural or social formations and pay attention to the play between various claims of authenticity, authority, or reality. It's not that we are all a mark for something; it's that we are all always moving between works, shoots, and worked shoots. Whether it's social

media, megachurch pastors, reality television, or politics, kayfabe turns our attention to the movement and tension between and within authenticity claims.

One of the lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic is that authenticity and authority are always constructed through and rely upon particular social and cultural formations of the real. News media bubbles, social media echo chambers, and a politically polarized society have produced competing realities that rely on competing authenticity claims seeking competing authority and power. More and more we find ourselves in a society where everyone is a worker and everyone is a mark. Kayfabe might provide some purchase for scholars interested in why people choose this reality over another, how they suspend their belief or disbelief in one situation but not another, and how so much disinformation has become real. To use kayfabe as a tool for analyzing and understanding, for example, why unvaccinated people can deny science as they lay in hospital bed dying is not to trivialize the tragedy but, on the other hand, to show how powerful the sorts of authenticity claims mediated by kayfabe can be. What is gained by theorizing that a group of political supporters at a rally that turns into a mob attacking a capitol building has worked themselves into a shoot? Kayfabe, taken from a world where producers, performers, and audiences work together to construct authenticity, can give us insights into why things that may not be true and might even kill us if we believe them can feel so real.

For example, revisiting the idea of “feeling rules” in her 2016 study of a Tea Party stronghold in Louisiana, Hochschild finds that feeling rules are governed by a “deep story” (*Strangers in Their Own Land* 16). A deep story is a “feels as if” story, “a metaphor in motion” that sets the rules of how we should feel about a particular situation (15–16, 323). The narrative patterning of kayfabe operates as a feels-as-if story. It is not separate from rational or interpretative analysis, though it incorporates those facts that fit the narrative while leaving out those that do not. Rather, a deep story patterns the experiences and goings-on of everyday life and the discursive and fictional worlds we encounter into a sensible and sensational narrative that makes sense of the past and directs our further affective responses and actions.

But these sorts of insight and analyses rely on scholars of professional wrestling to always be pointing their work toward a “third thing.” By “third thing” we mean something beyond the object of analysis (wrestling) and the analysis itself (the scholarly reading/critique/analysis of the wrestling) that is illuminated by the analysis of professional wrestling. Hochschild’s “deep story” is such a third thing, a theoretical term or category that can illuminate other examples beyond her study (Altman 14–19). Studies of kayfabe must be similarly comparative, even if

implicitly, opening up spaces where the things we find interesting, intriguing, or frustrating in professional wrestling can help us explain other things humans do. Kayfabe can be useful as a way to move from wrestling to that third thing insofar as it names and describes a discursive practice found elsewhere in human societies and behavior. In that sense, to paraphrase Brian Pillman, we are all smart marks.

Some work in professional wrestling studies has made that sort of comparative move toward a third thing. Ben Litherland, in dialogue with Tom Phillips and Claire Warden, reminds us that “*Kayfabe* is a useful term for understanding advertising or social media influencer culture or celebrity culture and all of these other things” (Litherland et al. 220). We can also observe the latent possibilities in the field today manifest in work on labor (Jansen, Moon, Zolides), branding and the media industry (Jeffries and Kannegiesser; McQuarrie), activist, feminist work (Bandenburg; Siegel), feuds (Chow and Laine), and related industries like bodybuilding (Hefferman and Warden), circus (Warden, “Glitter”), and drag (Westerling). As scholars continue to theorize kayfabe within professional wrestling the possible places one might find it outside of professional wrestling will continue to multiply. We can find workers and shooters all around us.

In this special issue authors both theorize kayfabe within various corners of professional wrestling and seek to extend kayfabe to new social forms. For example, David Moon uses kayfabe as a political analogy for the Proletkult movement of the Russian Revolution. Other articles in the issue trace the extensions of kayfabe across media forms. Carlos Cruz examines the extension and adaptation of kayfabe from the on-screen world of the WWE Universe to the YouTube world of wrestler Xavier Woods’s gaming channel UpUpDownDown. Similarly, Dru Jefferies analyzes the different ways comic book creators have tried to adapt kayfabe to the printed page. The final two articles offer theories of how kayfabe works. DiArron M. uses the #Kofimania social media movement of 2019 to argue that kayfabe is a “discursive space” between WWE producers and its audience. Meanwhile, Marion Wrenn turns to poetry about professional wrestling to explicate a poetics of kayfabe, by which she means it is a tool “poets use to make sense, make worlds, and make sense of the world.”

Along with these articles, the shorter essays that follow offered scholars in professional wrestling studies an opportunity to think out loud about kayfabe. We then invited other scholars to respond. Nicholas Davidson and Tim Wilson open a conversation on how the “threat of uncertainty” preserves the “kayfabe reality” in hardcore wrestling that Brooks Oglesby extends by thinking through how hardcore wrestling’s kayfabe might point to the malleability of kayfabe across

genres and over time. Benjamin Litherland also attends to kayfabe's shifting articulations across temporal eras and reconsiders the history of kayfabe as the history of celebrity culture. Fiona McQuarrie explores Litherland's argument within the context of creative industries and social media to further examine how distinctive kayfabe is to professional wrestling.

Finally, the issue closes with a dialogue on kayfabe with pro wrestling scholars, wrestlers, and journalists. The dialogue brings Joe Ciupik, Aris Emmanouloudis, Terrance Griep, Christopher A. Medjesky, CarrieLynn D. Reinhard, and Cory Strode together to define the term and the ways it is and has been used. The conversation takes up not only the way kayfabe is understood, but how changes in the wrestling industry have adopted different modes of engaging with the concept.

Returning to *Cyberslam 1996*, the genius of the sign (Pillman – Don't Work me!!) is its inscrutability. Who is the "me"? Who is "Pillman"—the wrestler or his character? Why would you come to a wrestling show to *not* get worked? Or is it that the fans with the sign want to be the only smart fans? But then we all saw the sign. Again, it is inscrutable. Perhaps that is what working theories of kayfabe provide; a way to describe this inscrutability and what it feels like. Indeed, inside and outside of professional wrestling we find ourselves living and navigating all sorts of works and shoots—kayfabe. Like Pillman we are working and shooting on everybody. But like that fan, we are also stuck asking people, institutions, politicians, and corporations not to work us—and if you're going to, at least don't stab us with the fork hidden in your boot.

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