

## Wrestling with Race: #Kofimania as Social Movement and Kayfabe as Discursive Space

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*In early 2019 #Kofimania began trending on Twitter. This hashtag helped to bring about only the second Black WWE Champion in the company's nearly seventy-year history. Kofi Kingston, the subject of the hashtag, had been a reliable performer for the company for eleven years, but he had never had the opportunity to challenge for the belt. Kingston's career followed a long history of racialized booking decisions which routinely overlooked Black performers. In this article I analyze #Kofimania as a fan-based social movement in which fans used #Kofimania to communicate a desire for WWE to change its racialized booking practices. I argue that professional wrestling's unique history and relationship with its fans position WWE (a production) as decoders of messages encoded by fans (the audience). Through this lens I argue that beyond simply being an illusion, kayfabe is a discursive space in which fans speak and promotions are expected to listen. In the case of #Kofimania, fans expected WWE to decode and respond accordingly to audience calls to see racialized booking practices changed.*

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On April 7, 2019, Kofi Kingston won the WWE Championship at *WrestleMania 35*. His victory made him only the second Black person to hold the belt in its more than 65-year history. It was also not the original plan (Lambert). WWE producers<sup>1</sup> scrapped the original plan after Kingston emerged as one of wrestling's biggest babyfaces following the #Kofimania movement, in which fans communicated to WWE their decade-long desire to see Kingston become champion. Fans also engaged a much deeper ongoing conversation surrounding how Black performers are treated within the promotion. #Kofimania, then, became a movement designed to communicate two things: (1) support for Kofi Kingston to be WWE Champion,

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<sup>1</sup> "WWE" is used as a catch-all in this article to refer to the producers, writers, and bookers that contribute to the final booking and storyline decisions within the company.

and (2) desire for WWE to change its racialized and racist<sup>2</sup> booking practices. WWE's response of making Kofi the WWE Champion raises an opportunity to study how kayfabe's modern manifestation engages encoding and decoding in a potentially unique way.

In this article I analyze tweets that employ #Kofimania as a fan-based social movement. I explore kayfabe as a discursive space in which wrestling promotions and fans negotiate meanings and values. To accomplish this, I first provide a review of existing literature surrounding kayfabe and imagine kayfabe as a discursive space instead of simply an illusion. I also engage fan studies and encoding/decoding literature to establish how kayfabe as a discursive space might function. Next, I examine WWE's history of racialized booking and the treatment of Black performers in pro wrestling, centering WWE's booking practices. I then turn to social movement studies to begin drawing connections between kayfabe and #Kofimania. Next, I explain the methodology used to gather and analyze the #Kofimania tweets. Finally, I analyze #Kofimania tweets to establish how fans used the hashtag to both express general support for Kingston and engage a conversation about race in wrestling.

### **Kayfabe**

Of late, many scholars have theorized about what exactly kayfabe is. Noting wrestling's need for spectators to suspend their disbelief, Lisa Jones describes kayfabe as "a fictional world" in which "events are presented to us in the fictive mode, i.e., with the intention that we adopt a fictive stance towards them" (248). Tyson Smith contextualizes this fictitious world, explaining that kayfabe and wrestling itself find their origin in "the vernacular of carnival workers" who used kayfabe to mean "the illusion of realness" (55). Within this illusion a transaction occurs between a wrestling promotion and its fans. As George E. Kerrick argues, wrestling's "jargon reveals that the first goal in the sport is to make money" and "the second ... is to entertain" (142). Wrestling, then, is fundamentally an interaction between a wrestling promotion and its audience. Unlike many other sports, which maintain purpose even in the absence of an audience, wrestling needs some sort of audience to exist by its very nature. From that perspective, kayfabe becomes more

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this article I employ the term "racialized booking" to refer to a wider phenomenon of booking performers in storylines or card positions based on race. This practice is often racist. I certainly would describe most the examples I provide in this article as racist. However, racialized booking is quite different than racist booking. Professional wrestling often engages pertinent and meaningful storylines that are drawn from the real world. To engage race in a storyline would certainly be racialized booking but not necessarily racist. In fact, when done with respect and care, racialized booking may have the potential to be anti-racist. I choose to sometime use "racialized" alongside "racist" in this article to acknowledge this possibility.

than an illusion. It is a meeting place for a wrestling promotion and its audience. Beyond simply being a world in which fans suspend their disbelief, kayfabe is a location where wrestling promotions give fans something to believe in.

Historically wrestling promotions have shrouded their portion of kayfabe's territory in secrecy. Through various tactics "the sport is handled from the inside so as to create a distance between the athletes and those who buy their product" (Kerrick 145). Some have rightly deduced that this distance is designed to allow wrestling to maintain the illusion of being a pure competition instead of "a scripted, athletic mode of storytelling" (Jones 279). However, as is evidenced through the scores of wrestling specific media outlets such as *WhatCulture Wrestling*, *WrestleTalk*, *The Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, and many more, this illusion is not a prerequisite to fandom or enjoyment. Though many fans, pundits and commentators point to Vince McMahon's February 1989 admission that wrestling has predetermined outcomes as the day that the illusion died, a great mass of people came and continues to come to that conclusion all on its own (Hoy-Browne). Why, then, does wrestling continue to be one of the most popular forms of entertainment, "watched by millions around the globe" (Jones 276)?

Kayfabe is simply more than the illusion. In fact, wrestling's continued popularity speaks to the sport's ability to transcend the illusion while continuing to be a shared space between wrestling promotions and fans. As CarrieLynn D. Reinhard explains, kayfabe is a mutual creation between fans and wrestling promotions through "moment-to-moment engagement." I argue that beyond being a meeting place, kayfabe is a discursive space in which wrestling promotions attempt to communicate to fans through entertainment and fans attempt to communicate with wrestling promotions about their entertainment. The question then becomes, what is the nature of this relationship? To explore this question I turn to encoding/decoding and fan studies.

### **Fan Studies and Encoding/Decoding**

In *Watching Television Without Pity: The Productivity of Online Fans* Mark Andrejevic explores how "Fan culture is ... deliberately and openly embraced by producers thanks in part to the ability of the internet not just to unite far-flung viewers but to make the fruits of their labor readily accessible to the mainstream" (25). Here, he argues that "fan sites ... can serve as an impromptu focus group, providing instant feedback" to producers "even as they help to imbue the show with the kind of 'stickiness' coveted in the online world by creating a virtual community as an added component of the show" (25). Andrejevic's foundational article highlights how online fan communities become a space for fans to discuss and provide feedback to show creators in a similar way that I argue kayfabe functions.

Perhaps a point of divergence between Andrejevic's work and Kayfabe is the expectation of impact. While he finds that "savvy" participants in his study "did not have any illusions about transforming or improving the culture industry" (36), I argue that wrestling's very foundations dictates that fans impact the product. They subsequently expect to actively contribute to storylines.

Unlike most television shows, wrestling is most naturally performed in front of a live audience. Long before the advent of television, wrestling executed its primary task by selling tickets to live local audiences. Promotions gauged a performer's ability to effectively execute babyface and heel roles through the cheers and jeers of the live. The audience, then, has always served as an active participant in wrestling. These productions are uniquely built on an expectation of instantaneous fan feedback and performer/promoter response to that feedback.

Around the time #Kofimania appeared online, WWE had begun a pattern of overtly acknowledging fan feedback. Just two months before #Kofimania appeared on social media WWE's top officials participated in an in-ring segment in which they promised to "change with the times," acknowledging that they had neglected "the most important thing ... listen[ing] to our audience" ("The McMahons Control Raw and Smackdown"). The expectation of listening positions kayfabe as a space in which the audience encodes messages that they expect the promotion to decode. Through this expectation fans and promotions collaborate in the process of producing meaning. As Stuart Hall explains, "Producing meaning depends on the practice of interpretation, and interpretation is sustained by us actively using the code - encoding, putting things into the code - and by the person at the other end interpreting or decoding the meaning" (62). As John Fiske states, "The value of [this] theory lies in its freeing the text from complete ideological closure, and in its shift away from the text and towards the reader as the site of meaning" (65). Much of the current scholarship that employs encoding/decoding understands it similarly to how Tamir Salibian explains it. "There is a tension between the "encoder" who is the producer of these messages, and the "decoder" who is the audience member" (66). I argue that kayfabe as a discursive space has at its core an additional inversion of this relationship. The promotion, the producer of the text, takes the role of the decoder and is not only expected to decode messages from its audience but implement those decoded messages into the production. This opens up spaces for discourses about culture that may mirror, defy, and even seek to impact conversations outside of wrestling's bounds. In the case of #Kofimania, kayfabe encapsulates an ongoing and evolving discussion concerning histories of Black oppressions and advancements.

## **Race in Wrestling**

As an artform dependent on audience interaction, wrestling's messaging often seeks to tap into and mimic consumers' experiences and expectations. Thinking specifically about wrestling in North America, Sam Migliore says that wrestling "reflects and reinforces a particular version of North American values and assumptions," which allow for it to serve "as moral commentary" (66). As a result, "Professional wrestling in the United States has a recognized history of relying on themes of nationalism, patriotism, and xenophobia, using exaggerated characters and real-life sociopolitical conflicts" (Cohen 63). American wrestling, then, not only historically has sought to mirror the cultural norms of its perceived audience but has un begrudgingly furthered negative depictions of marginalized communities and identities (nations, races, genders, religions, etc.) with the ultimate goals of making money and entertaining.

Wrestling's race discourses have been particularly toxic. In fact, Charles Hughes explains that "Wrestling's emergence coincided with the height of blackface minstrelsy, which provided a template for both the exaggerated caricatures and historical resonances of wrestling performance" (165). Mario Alonzo Dozal found that "Non-white characters are usually tasked with performing racial and cultural stereotypes while white characters are not typically burdened with stereotypical portrayals to the same extent" (42). This messaging that reifies whiteness mirrors what promotions perceive audience expectations to be. Migliore explains:

values [wrestling] presents serve as moral commentary on American (and to a certain extent Canadian) assumptions, fears, and prejudices. Through this moral commentary, wrestling identifies key issues for public consideration. It also interprets those issues and constructs a rationale to guide people's understanding of them. (72)

Therefore, when Dozal asserts that "Characters and performers in professional wrestling act as global cultural representations," those cultural representations are not merely a one-sided interpretation of non-white/non-male cultures (42). Rather, they are a result of a transaction occurring between a promotion and its audience in which the promotion attempts to characterize the non-white to tap into perceived audiences' assumptions, fears, and prejudices. Here, "non-white wrestlers typically assume more threatening roles as 'heels'" and "white wrestlers often assume roles as 'faces'" (Dozal 42). The audience then accepts or rejects the promotion's interpretation. Dozal's study of Kamala captures not only a moment of characterization by a promotion but by the audience as well. However, arguing that audiences are themselves performers within kayfabe, Cohen asserts that their performance "is not fixed to their political affiliations or social status; they are

capable of performing outside of their individual identity, as well as their national identity” (62). I take that argument a step further, positing that the cultural expectations audiences bring to the discursive space also shifts.

Throughout wrestling’s history, racial characterizations have worked to create barriers for performers of color and more specifically for Black performers. Kofi Kingston becoming only the second ever Black WWE champion in the belt’s 65+ year existence evidences that. One of the earliest Black professional wrestling stars was Viro “Black Sam” Small who began his career in 1874. Wrestling while Black in late days of reconstruction and early Jim Crow America proved to be restrictive and even dangerous. Scott M. Beekman asserts that despite being one of the most successful Black wrestlers of his era, “the racial attitudes of the time prevented [Small] from ever competing for the American championship in [Vermont collar-and-elbow] style or for the world title in Greco-Roman or mixed styles” (29). Hughes further explains that Small “made his name against white opponents,” which was unusual for his day. It was so unusual in fact that “one white opponent became so enraged after losing to Small that he shot the [B]lack wrestler after a match” (166). Danger for Black wrestlers persisted even late into the twentieth century. Edward Salo’s examination of race in Smokey Mountain Wrestling (SMW) reveals that in the decades following the 1950s and 60s southern promotions, hoping to not anger white fans, typically avoided booking Black wrestlers. This created fertile ground for the tag team The Gangstas to antagonize SMW’s overwhelmingly white audience in the 1990s by stoking racial tensions. Salo cites the group congratulating OJ Simpson shortly after his acquittal as an example (33). As Gangstas member New Jack reveals in his *Dark Side of the Ring* documentary, the group, much like Small, lived with and capitalized on a persistent threat of violence (“The Life and Crimes of New Jack”). Small and The Gangstas give a glimpse into the many and varying hurdles that Black wrestlers have faced since the sport’s inception. What The Gangstas reveal, however, is the way that wrestlers and promoters began to tap into existing discourses about race to connect with or anger audiences.

In the midst of a declining threat of violence for outside wrestlers, racial stereotyping and its by-products remain. In their analysis of the Godfather, a Black pimp within early 2000s WWE, Douglas Battema and Phillip Sewell observe that racial stereotypes could be read as providing a platform for Black wrestlers to “make fun of the stereotype and be well paid doing so” (268). Wrestling’s racialization practices, such as invoking stereotypes, “while offering performers the chance to stand out and appear different ... also affect how high up the card a non-white performer can advance ... leading to a lack of consideration for a main event spot and of taking the company’s top championship” (Dozal 46). However,

understanding racialized booking practices in terms of the opportunities they provide “may make it more potent or resistant to challenge [oppressive practices], especially because a Black man is profiting economically from the exploitation of this stereotype” (Battema and Sewell 269).

However, Kofi’s seemingly abrupt reign points towards something resembling a shift specifically within WWE. After all, as Dozal notes, “wrestling audiences might never see a character like Kamala again due to the wrestling industry gradually inching toward becoming more reality-based, more socially aware, and more culturally sensitive” (45). Is Kingston’s reign an example of this inching? Developments such as WWE’s Women’s Revolution offer examples of what might, at the very least, be an awareness within the promotion that presenting marginalized groups in ways that align with problematic and disrespectful tropes is less advantageous in modern kayfabe.

My analysis highlights the work-shoot nature of the build to Kingston’s reign, which incorporates racialization that occurs outside of the illusion into the storyline. Said another way, usually within kayfabe’s illusion, Kingston would not have opportunities to become WWE champion restricted because of race. However, Kingston’s narrative seems to subtly point to race as a potential cause. Analyzing kayfabe as a discursive space allows us to explain how the racial practices underlying the striking lack of Black WWE champions can be incorporated into the ongoing conversations within and outside of the illusion. Through examining how the wrestling audience communicates with the promotion about cultural values and expectations we can better understand how something outside of the illusion can have such a profound impact on a story told within the illusion. To explore how an audience might communicate with a promotion, I turn to the study of social movements.

### **Social Movement**

Social movement scholarship has, from its genesis, been concerned with the interaction between sources of power and the affected parties of that power. Social movements often cut to the heart of cultures values. As Charles Stewart, Craig Allen Smith, and Robert E. Denton Jr. explain, “Social movements may have to confront and adapt to traditions” (52). Social movements exist, therefore, within a context while simultaneously challenging some aspect of that context’s traditions or norms.

Recent scholarship has turned its attention to the emergence of social media in social movements. Andre E. Johnson, for instance, explores how social media outlets, such as Facebook, can be used as tools to broadcast protest action to activists in a local area, which subsequently can lead to more people joining demonstrations occurring outside of social media (107). Other scholars such as

Kevin Michael De Luca and Elizabeth Brunner have studied social media as a platform to resist governmental infringement on citizen rights and safety. This scholarship exhibits not only the many ways that scholars are studying social media in social movements but also the multiplicity of ways that practitioners employ social media in social movement strategy and action. Social media outlets provide organizations and individuals with “the power to speak to millions of people, and function as a call of action, outside of the scope of traditional news media” (Satchel and Bush 173). In these efforts, “the Internet’s decentralizing technologies create opportunities for politics and activism that exceed the control of any centralized government” (DeLuca and Brunner 239). Centralized governments, however, are not the only powerful entities against which collectives of people protest.

This article engages social movement studies as a lens to understand the interaction between a promotion and its fans. Wrestling is a unique conversation between a powerful entity (promotions) and a group of individuals that draws its power from collective action (fans). The question then becomes, what does a social movement within wrestling look like? Ashley Hinck’s study of activism in the Harry Potter Alliance (HPA) and other fan-based social movements provides a meaningful launching point to approach this question.

Hinck finds that “While fan-based social movements have existed historically, they have no doubt exploded within the digital age.... The Internet has made it easier than ever for fans of the same popular culture text to find each other” (192). She further argues that in fan-based social movements “fans function as active audiences and negotiate meaning within and from their fan object text” (195). Fandom, in this case, functions as a common space in which people connect via a mutual interest. That space then also serves as a platform in which those fans can engage social issues.

What differs between Hinck’s study and #Kofimania is the location of the social movement. Hinck is primarily concerned with HPA activity regarding issues outside of (albeit connected to) Harry Potter fandom. However, #Kofimania as a fan-based social movement provides an opportunity to answer Hinck’s call for rhetorical scholars to study how “fan-based social movement organizations counter, minimize, or repair problematic discourses within the fan object” (202). Through the #Kofimania movement, fans sought to tap into power that wrestling’s discursive nature already awarded them. As kayfabe as an illusion becomes more of a relic in the 21st century, kayfabe emerges as more of a discursive space between promotions and fans than ever. The question remains, however, what does a social movement in kayfabe and wrestling look like?



### #Kofimania as Social Movement

#Kofimania is the product of an institutionalized rhetorical function in professional wrestling, the occasional but explicit fan rejection of certain storylines and the related expectation that the promotion respond accordingly. Wrestling history, even in just the past ten years, is filled with examples of wrestling audiences rejecting a storyline, promotions decoding the message and promotions then responding accordingly. One such example, the 2014 Royal Rumble result is connected directly to the #Kofimania storyline through Daniel Bryan, who would be Kingston's *WrestleMania* opponent. In a story that has been either claimed or coopted by WWE, Bryan was a fan favorite going into that year's *WrestleMania* homestretch. Bryan was either inexplicably or quite intentionally left out of the Royal Rumble match, thus seemingly ending his chance to challenge for the world titles. In response, the live crowd booed both the decades-long fan favorite Rey Mysterio and the Rumble's winner, Batista (*Royal Rumble 2014*). Four months later Bryan won both world titles at *WrestleMania 30* (*WrestleMania XXX*). Similarly, the 2015 Royal Rumble ended in fan rejection as even an endorsement from arguably the most popular wrestler of all time, The Rock, could not stop the live and online audience from jeering the decision to crown Roman Reigns as Rumble winner (*Royal Rumble 2015*). Reigns would go on to lose at that year's *WrestleMania* (*WrestleMania 31*). Such fan rejection is not exclusive to WWE. The early days of AEW saw fans reject The Nightmare Collective, a faction led by the company's then Chief Brand Officer Brandi Rhodes. Despite consistent television time, the group was widely rejected by in-person and online audiences and subsequently disappeared (Ounpraseuth).

In the case of #Kofimania the fans engaged in a social movement as natural to wrestling as wrestlers themselves: they got behind a babyface. In kayfabe, the babyface or hero's job is to connect with the audience. As Jones explains, "When a babyface wrestler suffers adversity and defeat, the audience can relate to this on some level" (282). In 2019, following an unfortunate injury to Mustafa Ali, Kofi Kingston was called upon as a replacement for the upcoming *Elimination Chamber* pay-per-view. As Matthew Wilkinson writes for *The Sportster*, Kingston was called upon because over his eleven-year tenure with WWE he had proven to be a "reliable hand and quality performer." Perhaps best known at that point for his tag team success with The New Day and his yearly awe-inspiring athletic feats in the Royal Rumble match, Kingston had been a fan favorite for more than a decade. On February 12, 2019, he competed in a gauntlet match against other *Elimination Chamber* competitors. The story dictated that Kingston would start the gauntlet, fight valiantly as a babyface, beat almost all of his opponents, and fall late in the match. Fans, who were supposed to be behind him, would not attribute his loss to a

lack of skill, but exhaustion. Kingston's babyface effort was supposed to give fans something to root for and a reason to tune into the pay-per-view. It did far more than that.

Inspired once again by a performer who had given them so many reasons to cheer over the years, fans took to social media and #Kofimania was born. Within two months, Kingston was WWE Champion. However, while fans supporting a wrestler in this way is certainly a prerequisite to a social movement within wrestling, it does not constitute a social movement in and of itself. It was not simply that fans loved Kingston and wanted him to become champion. #Kofimania became a rallying cry for fans to communicate about a very real racial issue in WWE. That communication impacted the way that WWE executed Kingston's story within the illusion. After all, "Kofi Kingston was never originally going to be part of the 2019 Elimination Chamber match for the WWE Championship" (Wilkinson), and he was never supposed to become champion at that year's *WrestleMania*. However, with #Kofimania, fans saw an opportunity to engage an important racial discourse, and the WWE responded accordingly.

### **Methodology**

To gather data about the #Kofimania movement I used Twitter's advanced search tool. I searched three things. First, I searched for tweets containing "#Kofimania." Due to Twitter's relevancy function this rendered many tweets from 2020 and 2021. I then searched "#Kofimania 2019," which produced many of the tweets from the time of and not long after Kingston's championship run. Finally, I mistakenly searched #Kofimani, which also produced many tweets that have used the hashtag over the past three years. Presumably, several Twitter users made the same error that I did and posted the tweets before realizing the error had been made. Therefore, I retained several of those tweets for analysis as well.

The content of each tweet was then copied onto the Google spreadsheet, which documented the tweeter's handle, the tweet itself, the date and time of the tweet, and one of six codes that I created. The codes were Black wrestling discourse, Black public memory, Black responses to the win, general fan interaction, use in new storylines, and public memory. Using these codes, I inductively crafted my analysis allowing the argument to flow from the data that the tweets captured.

From there, I divided my analysis into two broad categories: 1) #Kofimania as fan support for Kingston, and 2) #Kofimania as a social movement concerned about Blackness in wrestling. In the next section I use these two categories to argue that #Kofimania is a fanbase social movement and kayfabe is a discursive space in which audiences can play the role of encoder and promotions play the role of decoder.

## #Kofimania

When #Kofimania appeared on Twitter and other social media outlets in mid-February 2019, WWE fans made it clear what they wanted. A simple breakdown of the hashtag explains precisely what they were communicating: they wanted Kofi to main event *WrestleMania* for the WWE Championship. As Hinck reminds us, “fans gather in communal spaces like discussion boards and hashtags on social media” (192). #Kofimania became a thread linking a conversation that evolved into a movement. Fans used this hashtag to show support for Kingston, express support or frustration with the story’s development, and critique the company. In the next section I highlight how fans employed the #Kofimania hashtag to engage the storyline. I also provide some insight into some of the ways the WWE spoke back.

### *Fan Support*

Early on in the hashtag’s existence fans expressed excitement about the possibility of Kingston being cemented as a main event performer. On February 19<sup>th</sup> one user tweeted, “It’s 2019 and we are coming together to give Kofi Kingston a title shot. I fucking love wrestling! #kofimania #KofiVsBryan” (@jaydeec137). Very early in the story, fans began to recognize not only the potential that Kingston could ascend to a new level but the power they had to assist in that effort. Driving home the role that fans played in Kingston’s ascension, on March 27<sup>th</sup> one fan tweeted “also pretty incredible that Vince has put Kofi in [the] world title storyline. this was unthinkable 3 months ago” (@hbbks). After all, Kingston was a perennial midcard act. Sure, he was a multi-time tag team champion, but it had been almost a decade since he had been seriously considered a main event contender. Early in February 2019 Kingston was merely Ali’s replacement. There were no long plans to change his status as the reliable midcard act. However, once #Kofimania was underway, the fans were less inclined to accept Kingston’s relegation to the midcard. Evidence of that fact lay in the way the story progressed following Kingston *Elimination Chamber* loss.

Following February’s *Elimination Chamber* pay-per-view, the WWE began the build toward *Fastlane*, the precursor to *WrestleMania*. Coming out of the *Elimination Chamber*, WWE made a point to highlight Kingston’s performance. The February 19<sup>th</sup> show featured a video package of Kingston’s amazing performance, which, within the illusion, almost won him the WWE Championship. Kingston also did a backstage interview with his tag partners Xavier Woods and Big E. Here, interviewer Kayla Braxton, Woods and Big E all celebrated Kingston and acknowledged the fans’ support for him through #Kofimania (“WWE *Elimination Chamber* Fallout”). The promotion had made note of fans’ communication and were now including the emerging movement within the illusion.

However, the acknowledgement did not immediately produce what fans were hoping to see. In the closing segment of the February 26<sup>th</sup> episode of *SmackDown Live* both Kingston (within the illusion) and the fans were made to believe that he would receive his first ever one-on-one WWE Championship match. The show promoted a contract signing between Kingston and WWE Champion Daniel Bryan for *Fastlane*. The live audience roared and Kingston and his tag partners celebrated. Just as Kingston began to put his pen to the paper, Vince McMahon's music hit. McMahon announced that he had made an executive decision and instead of Kingston, a returning Kevin Owens would challenge Bryan at *Fastlane* ("The Road to WWE Fastlane 2019 Begins"). Fans took to Twitter in outrage, using #Kofimania to mark their protests. One user tweeted, "This disgusts me tbh, Kofi served 11 years in WWE, he gets his first opportunity in 2019 for the WWE Championship in a Singles match, and @VinceMcMahon replaces him with @FightOwensFight, who didn't even do anything to deserve an opportunity. #Kofimania #WWE" (@\_liv\_forever\_21). Another fan said, "Just a shame Kofi been hair [here] 11 years when comes to Hard working people like @BeckyLynchWWE and @TrueKofi they get there opportunities strip[p]ed away[.] that bullshit they for the past five years work there butts off for moment like wrestlemania they deserve better #FreeLynch #KofiMani" (@leyva27levya). Calling upon communal values such as hard work, people voiced their displeasure with the direction the promotion was taking the storyline.

It is still unclear if the promotion made this move as a means of misdirection or if it was a genuine reflection of the booking teams' intentions. Whatever the case, after years of watching performers they support pushed aside in lieu of the company's own agenda, the fans were far too shell-shocked to trust the process. For them, McMahon's executive decision could mean the end of Kingston's chance to be WWE Champion.

In frustration, one fan tweeted "#kofimani day 3. Vince can go fuck himself" (@yeetadoink). McMahon's insertion into the storyline helped to progress the conversation in many ways. After all, it was McMahon's booking decision that had created the whiplash to which fans were responding. It was Vince who they did not trust to do the right thing. Melding fan displeasure into the storyline Xavier Woods used #Kofimania to pose this question to McMahon: "So what else does @TrueKofi have to do? He's a multi-time champion. He's given 11 amazing years to this company. He's pinned the @wwe champion. Kofi is more than good enough. Kofi is more than worthy. What else do you want from him? WHAT ELSE?" (@austincreedwins). Interestingly, Woods blended elements of the kayfabe illusion with real-life elements to make his argument. On one level, the tweet is a performer

(Woods) using a non-illusion platform (Twitter) to speak to the illusion. But on another level, Kingston being a multi-time champion and pinning the WWE champion is within the illusion, while giving the company 11 years of service is not something that Kofi Kingston did. Rather, that was done by Kofi Nahaje Sarkodie-Mensah, the man outside the illusion who performs as Kofi Kingston.

Sarkodie-Mensah, a Black man, served WWE faithfully for more than a decade and did many of the things that performers must do to be elevated. He amassed and maintained a massive following of fans, as #Kofimania attested to. He consistently put on highly rated and regarded performances. He remained relatively healthy. These are some of the reasons that he was the first person the company turned to in a moment of crisis. Yet he had never received his just reward for being such a valiant and reliable worker. For many fans, the reason why was obvious.

### *Fan-Based Social Movement*

Toward the beginning of the February 26<sup>th</sup> *Smackdown* episode, a fan tweeted: “Is 2019 actually going to grant us a storyline revolving around their infamously historical mishandling and poor booking of their Black talent and superstars, (hopefully) ending with a Black WWE Champion?!?! #SDLive #KofiMania” (@nathankiss). Very early into the #Kofimania movement fans realized that a potential championship run for Kingston would have larger implications than just a fan favorite receiving a well-deserved opportunity. Kingston was in line to do something historic. The story that WWE told would be just as much a reflection of the promotion’s feeling about Black wrestlers as its feelings about Kingston. Understandably, then, race took a front seat in both the illusion and the movement.

Following the February 26<sup>th</sup> swerve a fan tweeted a gif of Steve Harvey using his hands to change a bewildered face into a smile with the caption, “My mood upon realizing what this switch to #KevinOwens at #WWEFastlane could ultimately lead to...Also, the angle tonight is a perfect fictional representation of how #BlackHistoryMonth 2019 has felt! #SDLive #KofiMania 🤔🍷🍷” (n8mozaik). Less bewildered than some by the switch, this fan puts into words the work-shoot nature that the Kingston storyline took. As Kerrick explains, in pro wrestling, “Any rehearsed or pre-established plan or movement” is considered a “work” (142). On the other hand, shoot refer to story elements “whose outcome is unknown beforehand” (144). Put more simply, worked elements of the storyline are fabricated purely for the illusion and only exist within the illusion to serve the illusion. Shoot elements, however, exist outside of the illusion. A work-shoot incorporates both halves of this dichotomy. Most of the time this means incorporating things outside of the illusion to advance its story. In Kingston’s case, shoot elements like his eleven

years of faithful service to WWE and his race took a front seat in the worked storyline.

*Fastlane 2019* saw Kingston endure yet another worked misdirection. The show opened with McMahon seemingly making a 180 on his previous decision and promising Kingston he would indeed get a championship match at the pay-per-view. Later that night Kingston went to the ring only to be met by SmackDown Tag Team champions Sheamus and Cesaro for a handicap tag team championship match in which he was brutally beaten (*WWE Fastlane 2019*). Within the kayfabe illusion McMahon was making a point that he did not view Kingston as a legitimate contender for the WWE Championship, taunting the fans for supporting Kingston.

As the promotion used the month of March to build toward *WrestleMania*, McMahon's taunting of Kingston became a recurring theme. On March 11 a fan tweeted, "The last time a black wrestler had a WWE Championship match 1 on 1 was John Cena Vs R-TRUTH in 2011, IT'S 2019 LET THAT SINK IN! They are playing the Racial bias role With Kofi Kingston which I like cuz Kofi is a fan favorite for year's! #KofiMania #wwe #KofiKingston" (@itrickrude). With many fans now understanding the statement the promotion was hoping to make, the company began to lean more heavily into Kingston's race to tell the story.

On the March 19<sup>th</sup> episode of *SmackDown Live* Kingston participated in another gauntlet match. This time if he were to win McMahon would finally book him to face Daniel Bryan one on one at *WrestleMania*. Kofi spent an hour defeating Randy Orton, Samoa Joe, Sheamus, Cesaro, and Erick Rowan in yet another gauntlet match. McMahon then appeared from the back saying, "Kofi ... you're going to *WrestleMania* as long as you can defeat this one last opponent." After ordering the rest of the New Day to leave the ring, he brought out Daniel Bryan. Bryan eventually defeated an exhausted Kofi, presumably ending Kofi's chance to challenge for the WWE Championship ("The Road to WWE *WrestleMania* 35 Continues"). Kingston's opportunity was gone.

The next day, Big E posted a work-shoot video to Twitter. In this video, he echoed frustrations expressed by many fans that a person like Kofi, who has "work[ed] hard," consistently "show[n] up" and "stay[ed] late," has done "all the right things" and "jump[ed] through all the right hoops" never really had a "good chance of making it to the top." Rather, as Big E put it, "people like us, historically, and moving forward clearly can only get so far...clearly we are never meant to be more than this. And for people like us, that's not enough. And it will never be enough" (@wwebige). Reflecting fan opinions about racialized booking in WWE, Big E, a worked character within the illusion, used Twitter, a shoot platform, to advance the racial element of the storyline. Because fans voiced their discontentment about not

only Kofi's booking but the booking of Black performers as a whole, the promotion was seemingly forced to acknowledge its racist booking patterns publicly.

The next week's March 26 *SmackDown Live* featured a faceoff between The New Day and McMahon. During this faceoff McMahon said:

Kofi you are still, and always will be, in my view, a B+ player. The only question in my mind is if [Big E and Xavier] are a B+ tag team. I know all this passion you have for Kofi; all this respect you have for Kofi. I get it. So the question is "can you two put Kofi Kingston in the WWE Championship match at *WrestleMania*.... Kofi, you're done having opportunities, but if you two can win a tag team gauntlet match tonight, Kofi's in at *WrestleMania*. ("WWE Smackdown Women's Championship Match")

The New Day would eventually win the match, winning Kingston's *WrestleMania* opportunity. Despite the outcome, many fans still considered this move to be a burial of Kingston because he was never able to cleanly get the opportunity based on his own merit. In fact, one fan responded to Kingston's booking, tweeting, "@WWE Vince McMahon is a racist son of a bitch any of the white wrestlers get the chance they deserve. But not Kofi? Sounds like there are some personal bullshit going on. @VinceMcMahon #kofimania should be rolling in for 2019. Not Kevin Owens" (@barretgimpsy). Despite the outcome being what they desired, fans still understood that the manner in which Kingston was booked could very well mean that the promotion might stick to its racist booking patterns.

Big E's use of "people like us" was a callback to another racist *WrestleMania* match for a top championship in WWE. In the 2003 *WrestleMania* World Heavyweight Championship storyline between Black wrestler Booker T and white wrestler Triple H, the latter told the former, "Someone like you doesn't become world champion" ("Welcome Back Stone Cold"). This hyper-racialized story included instances of Triple H telling Booker T to carry his bags and bringing up the Black performer's shoot arrest as a child. As opposed to heel Triple H getting his comeuppance for his racist antics, babyface Booker T lost in embarrassing fashion when Triple H took an absurdly long thirty seconds to pin him following the match's finish. Given this history many fans approached Kingston's upcoming match skeptically. Just four days before the pay-per-view, one fan tweeted "Umm.. What's the date on the contract? Looks like its March 10th 2019...does this make the contract not legally binding. Is this how Vince screws kofi with expired Contract #WrestleMania #WWE #KofiMania #SDLive" (@itskarathik\_). Nevertheless, Kingston would go on to challenge for and win the WWE Championship at *WrestleMania*. Because of its direct tie to the Booker T vs. Triple H booking

decisions, WWE presented Kingston's coronation at *WrestleMania* as a turning point for Black wrestlers within the company.

Fans also seemed to understand what Kingston's victory could mean. Shortly following the *WrestleMania* main event match, one fan tweeted:

I shouldn't be shocked, but I am a little, that The Rock & #Kofi are the only 2 African Americans who've won the WWE championship.

- The Rock in 1999
  - #KofiKingston tonight (2019)
  - The title has existed since 1963.
- #Wrestlemania35 #KofiMania. (@jason\_patterson)

Similarly, another fan said "WWE has their first Black WWE champ since The Rock. 2019 is looking up. #WrestleMania #Kofimania" (@alexismclaren) Many fans celebrated Kingston's accomplishment as a moment of progress. However, even in the midst of the celebration, other fans provided a reminder that part of the reason racialized booking has such a storied history in wrestling is because promotions are attempting to respond to fan expectations.

Many Black fans found their celebrations of Kingston's symbolic Black victory met with criticism. In response to such criticism one fan tweeted, "Racist wrestling fans are mad and bitter because black wrestling fan[s] are expressing their joy of finally seeing a champion who looks like them. We are celebrating #KofiMania for the rest of 2019" (@jimmyadig). Giving another glimpse into the work-shoot nature of Blackness in wrestling, this tweet exemplifies how the shoot element of race always interacts with any worked element within kayfabe. As another fan explained in a tweet, "2019 [has] been tough for black people. #Kofimania is a helpful dub for us 🤝🤝🤝 #WrestleMania" (@iamericvicent). For Black performers and fans, the reality of race always matters. It impacts booking and representation within the illusion and conversations about race outside of it. #Kofimania propelled kayfabe into a conversation about Blackness within wrestling. Here, kayfabe was more than an illusion. It was a discursive space in which fans discussed the very real and ever-present matter of race and expected WWE to listen and respond accordingly. And #Kofimania was more than tag used to discuss a wrestling story. It was a marker that a fan-base movement used to make it clear to WWE what they wanted to see: not just a wrestler becoming champion but an acknowledgement of how WWE books Black wrestlers and a change in that treatment.

## Conclusion

Another tweet on the night of Kingston's win seemingly prophetically sets April 7, 2019 aside as a day of historical significance, saying "Mark Sunday, April 7, 2019 in



your HIStory books as the day a #BLACKMAN was announced as the NEWW @WWEchampionship. #ITSANEWDAY - #YESITIS #HEDIDIT” (@talibandre). In the two-plus years since Kingston’s victory, many fans have remembered the historic *WrestleMania* moment for its significance in Black Wrestling. In December 2019 a fan posted a tweet thinking back on the historic year. It read “From the #StreetProfits winning gold, to @TrueKofi and #Kofimania and to @itsLioRush winning Gold and finally to @RealKeithLee showing the WORLD what he can do. Black Magic is the word of 2019. 🍷🍷🍷🍷 Let's see what 2020 brings!” (@theshowmrjones). Just a month later, another fan tweeted: “If we didn't have #KofiMania last year, would people in the wrestling community be considering Keith Lee as a real contender for Brock's title?” (@trisarhtop\_). For them, Kingston’s championship run, propelled by the #Kofimania movement, marked the potential beginning of new possibilities for Black wrestlers.

In this article I have argued that #Kofimania was a fan-based social movement. Through this, I also argued that beyond merely being an illusion, kayfabe is a discursive space in which promotions communicate with fans and fans communicate back. In the case of #Kofimania fans saw an opportunity to communicate two things: 1) support for Kofi Kingston to be WWE Champion and 2) the racialized booking of Black performers needs to change. This message manifested in the way that WWE told Kingston’s championship story because of the relatively unique way that kayfabe as a discursive space casts fans as encoder and promotions a decoders.

Since Kingston’s victory several other Black wrestlers have added important and historic accomplishments to their resumes. Sasha Banks and Bianca Belair became the first Black women to main event *WrestleMania*. Bobby Lashley and Big E became the third and fourth Black WWE champions, respectively. As was the case with Kingston, WWE acknowledged the historical precedence of these moments. However, that historical precedence did not stop Triple H from taking thirty seconds to pin Booker T, Lesner from taking Kingston’s WWE Championship in six seconds, or Becky Lynch taking Bianca Belair’s Women’s Championship in twenty-seven seconds. Have WWE’s racialized booking practices changed or does the promotion now understand the benefit of “making history”?

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