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SPECIAL ISSUE—KAYFABE: WORKING THEORIES

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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-–smaaarrrt 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 appearences (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.

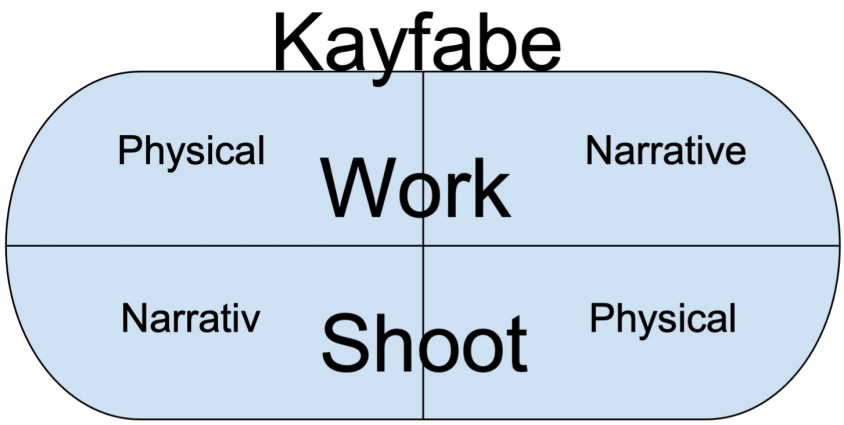

Figure 2

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.

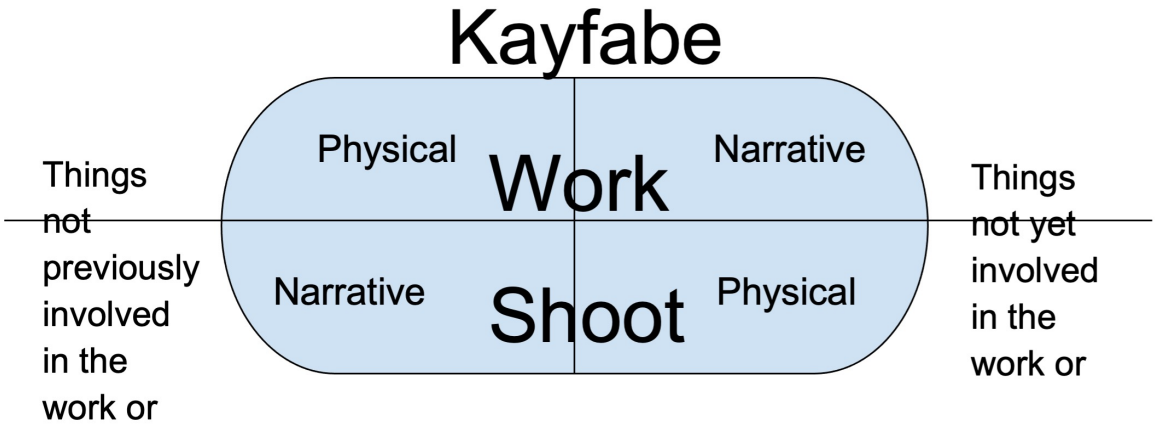

Figure 3

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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Work, Kayfabe and the Development of Proletarian Culture: Professional Wrestling as Potential Proletkult

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Analogies between politics and pro-wrestling have a long pedigree and are almost always meant negatively. What if, however, pro-wrestling is standing on its head in such analogies and must be turned right side up again? Building off arguments presented by Warden, Chow and Laine, this article argues that when approached as a specific form of embodied labor, embedded within the industry-specific performance convention known as kayfabe, a truer political analogy might compare pro-wrestling with the Proletkult, the cultural organization born amidst the 1917 Russian Revolutions to develop a new "proletarian culture" and usher in a socialist society. This is not to claim pro-wrestling offers a modern-day mirror of the historical Proletkult. Rather, drawing upon the work of Alexander Bogdanov, the leading intellectual force behind the Proletkult, this identifies pro-wrestling's latent potential to act as an anti-hierarchical, egalitarian organizational form able to platform human creativity with the goal of developing proletarian culture.

Keywords: Proletkult, pro-wrestling, Alexander Bogdanov, kayfabe, body work

Pro-wrestling as Political Analogy

Analogies between politics and pro-wrestling are perennial, the practice reaching critical levels with World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) Hall of Famer Donald Trump's election as President of the United States. With Trump, we were told, "the entire American public sphere turned itself into one big wrestling arena" (Schjørring 23) with "the language and postures of wrestling increasingly apparent among the nation's highest ranks" (Bateman). Comparing politics to pro-wrestling is clearly meant negatively; as Larry De Garis summarizes, "[p]rofessional wrestling and modern-day politics share a defining characteristic: they're both bullshit and pretty much everyone knows it" ("The Money and the Miles" 208).

Alternative perspectives on the alleged "pro-wrestling-ification" of politics (Mazer 195) have been proffered, the most interesting by Claire Warden, Broderick Chow, and Eero Laine, who claim "if we watched politics more like wrestling fans then we wouldn't have a Trump presidency," and "if we approached work as

wrestlers do … then we would have a stronger opposition in a political sense" (202). Many will find such claims outlandish; however, I believe pro-wrestling suffers a certain mystification in most analogies with politics, wherein it is standing on its head and must be turned right side up again. Embracing this task, and building from Warden et al., I argue that when approached as a specific form of embodied labor embedded within the industry-specific performance convention known as kayfabe, a truer political analogy might compare pro-wrestling not with Trumpism but with the Proletkult, the cultural organization born amidst the 1917 Russian Revolutions to develop a new "proletarian culture" and usher in a socialist society. This is not to position pro-wrestling as a modern-day mirror of the historical Proletkult (a portmanteau of the Russian *"proletarskaya kultura*," aka Proletarian Culture) in its Soviet-specific organizational form. Rather, as Nika Dubrovsky and David Graeber have shown, the Proletkult's value is its legacy as an anti-hierarchical, egalitarian organizational form for the platforming of human creativity, with the goal of developing said proletarian culture. It is within this goal and ethos I see pro-wrestling's potential as Proletkult.

Embracing this argument, I also embrace the writings of Alexander Bogdanov, the first person to consciously use the term "proletarian culture" (Murray 11), the central intellectual influence behind the Proletkult, and theoretical inspiration for this article's argument. This article's advocation of Bogdanov's concept of proletarian culture is not strictly Bogdanovist, however, as it does not conceive of a monist proletarian culture emerging from a context of machine labor and increased automation. Pro-wrestling, I argue, *is* proletarian labor, but of a different form than Bogdanov foresaw. Instead, in the tradition of McKenzie Wark, and Paul Mason (195–97), I adopt several key concepts underpinning Bogdanov's understanding of proletarian culture: (1) the labor point of view; (2) the belief that cultural revolution must proceed political revolution; (3) the need to reenvisage past culture rather than abandon or absorb it; and (4) comradely cooperation as socialism's central element. These are supplemented with Marx's early writings on the organic/inorganic body, unpublished at the time of Bogdanov's writing. The thesis presented here is not that the contemporary commercial form of pro-wrestling offers a model for proletarian culture; far from it. Rather, inspired by Bogdanov, I argue the specific nature of its embodied labor form, with kayfabe as its central performative logic, means a form of pro-wrestling organized around the principles of the Proletkult could potentially function similarly by platforming human creativity and developing and promulgating a proletarian culture that advances socialist politics.

This argument is made in several parts. The first introduces Alexander Bogdanov and the Proletkult, outlining key tenants of proletarian culture. The second explains pro-wrestling's status as both proletarian labor and culture. With this established, I turn to the theoretical heart of the argument, introducing and explaining the labor point of view underpinning Bogdanov's perspective. This leads into a reflection on pro-wrestling as labor, specifically as "body work" founded upon an ethos of care, cooperation and trust (here re-engaging with Warden et al.) Supplementing Bogdanov's labor point of view with Marx's early writings on the body, I then illustrate the revolutionary cultural potential inherent in pro-wrestling's specific form of embodied labor. Building from this I extend the argument beyond the workers in the ring to the labor of the surrounding audience, here bringing in the concept of kayfabe as a tool vested with an imminent power for ideological critique. Specifically, drawing upon Laine's work, I argue that kayfabe offers a means via which audiences can appreciate the *labor* of the performance—in the first (capitalist) instance in its exploitative form, but subsequently through a (socialist) appreciation of the artistic *techne*, grounded in comradely cooperation and creativity. The paper concludes with some tentative reflections on the institutional form of a revolutionized, Proletkultist pro-wrestling.

Bogdanov and the Proletkult

The Proletkult emerged in concrete form with the Russian revolutions of 1917. Laying claim to represent proletarian interests in the cultural sphere, autonomous from Communist Party diktat, it sought to develop a new "proletarian culture" via the creation of a vast network of studios in the arts and sciences. Espousing "a grass-roots amateur culture that encouraged the workers to participate in a de-hierarchised creative process" (Bishop 61), the Proletkult became a genuine mass movement during the Civil War, with an estimated peak of half a million participants engaged across 1,381 Proletkult organizations by the close of 1920 (Sochor 129). The Proletkult was ultimately suffocated by a series of decrees from the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party, which led to the Proletkult's integration into the People's Commissariat of Education (Narkompros) and its subsequent termination as an institution. Directly behind this decision lay Lenin's personal fear of Proletkult's autonomy as a potential platform for his old rival Alexander Bogdanov.

Born in 1873 in the Grodno province (now Poland), Bogdanov became a Social Democrat whilst a medical student at Moscow University. Expelled for activist activities, he served time in exile and prison before emigrating to Switzerland in 1904. There he joined Lenin, becoming first his closest ally and subsequently greatest rival for the leadership of the Bolsheviks, until his organized expulsion from

the central committee in 1909. Working alongside Maxim Gorky and Anton Lunacharsky, Bogdanov subsequently headed the new Vprerëd faction of the Russian Social Democratic Party, whose reinterpretation of Marxist theory gave culture a more creative, central role in comparison to Lenin's rigid materialism (Mally 4). It was here Bogdanov developed his conceptualization of proletarian culture, viewing its development as necessary to build the foundations of a socialist society within the confines of the existing capitalist one. When the group dissolved, Bogdanov dedicated himself to philosophical work until, in 1917, alongside Lunacharsky, he founded the initial groups of what would become the Proletkult—an organization that, as Sochor describes, came "as close as possible to being a 'live laboratory' for Bogdanov's ideas" (126).

Bogdanov believed that "[a]rt organizes social experience by means of live images not only in the sphere of knowledge but also in the sphere of feelings and aspirations" (qtd. in Sochor 126). Artistic training thus formed the core of local Proletkult activities, offering a vast array of programs through its networks of studies that included "lecture series, seminars, studios, exhibitions, theatres, orchestras, and even workshops in circus technique" (Mally 124). Its leaders called upon workers to view these studios as "live laboratories" in which to "work out in life" the elements of proletarian culture.

Workers were encouraged to engage with all forms of art—writing music, plays, poetry and novels, producing paintings, sculptures, and prints—within studio environments explicitly designed to be non-patronizing, non-hierarchical, and hopefully supportive in evoking participants' creativity and encouraging improvisation. Bogdanov saw the bourgeois system as one where individualism and competition are the guiding principles, with workers required to obey and implement orders with no space for their own inventive faculties. Within the Proletkult studios, collectivism was encouraged by replacing hierarchies of authority with such comradely cooperation even "collective authorship" of works. Notably for subsequent discussions, within Proletkult theatres this collective ethos extended to audiences, who were seen as participants, interacting, and responding to the acting with interjections (Bishop 53-54). Also encouraged was the abandonment of specialization, avoidance of formal distinctions and hierarchies among studio members—with equality decreed between all participants—and the synthetization of arts.

Central to Proletkult's aim was the inculcation, through the studios' work, of creativity, collectivism, and comradely cooperation (Sochor 132-36), each deemed vital constituting foundations of the proletarian culture necessary to supersede the hegemonic values indoctrinated by the bourgeois system. Were pro-wrestling to act

as a twenty-first century Proletkult it would look little like this twentieth century Proletkult; however, the aims and ethos would remain the same—providing a creative platform for workers to develop a proletarian culture founded on these same principles.

Pro-wrestling as Proletarian Labor

But is pro-wrestling proletarian? My short answer is yes, even if not as Bogdanov pictured. This is not simply arguing that "professional wrestling is a working-class sport" as Nonini and Teraoka do (162). Pro-wrestling's long noted popularity amongst working-class audiences (e.g. Freedman 71) affords it no particular value as a source of proletarian culture as leading Proletkultists envisaged; as Sheila Fitzpatrick notes, "[a]ll Marxist intellectuals agreed, without even thinking about it, that proletarian culture had little or nothing to do with observable popular lower-class habits and cultural tastes" (54). This held true for a heterodox Marxist like Bogdanov also. Pro-wrestling achieves a double flex here, however, by embodying both an example of "lower-class" cultural output dismissed by Marxist intellectuals *and* a form of proletarian work of the kind esteemed by those same intellectuals.

But what *is* pro-wrestling? De Garis describes it as "a hybrid form of sport, street fight, ballet, spectacle, and soap opera" that "defies easy categorization" ("The 'Logic' of Professional Wrestling" 195). MacFarlane dubs it a "global art." It is both. At its simplest, however, it is a live physical performance enacting inter-personal combat, at the core of which is a connection between the performers and their in-person audience (Chow, Laine and Warden 2). This performance is held together by this connection, which involves a willing suspension of disbelief, wherein both performers and audience all "keep kayfabe" (Chow, "Paterre" 75). Kayfabe is the most important concept within pro-wrestling and its academic study. Once upon a time, it referred to the noble lie that excluded outsiders from the predetermined reality of the "sport." Today, keeping kayfabe involves an audience choice to invest and participate in key performance conventions, thereby co-producing the performance (Hill 176). This is an active, collaborative relationship, wherein fans both create and sustain kayfabe, whilst simultaneously dissecting it with a discerning eye on how well performers "follow the rules of the performance practice and play their role" (Chow, "Paterre" 74).

The nature of pro-wrestling is further developed below; however, with this basic description an important if obvious point can be established: pro-wrestling is a cultural production, but it is *also* labor. As Oglesby notes, pro-wrestling "produces stories told primarily through *laboring*, porous bodies in close contact" (93; emphasis added); it is, as he put it, "a form of *body work* that focuses on the handling, assessing, monitoring, and/or manipulating of bodies" (89). Critics might,

nevertheless, argue that while pro-wrestling may be work, it is not *productive* work fit to label proletarian. Laine has dealt with this point head on. It is true, he notes, that "professional wrestling performs labor, but nothing tangible is produced"; however, following Marx, the labor of pro-wrestling does produce something—surplus value for the capitalist who employs the wrestlers: "Professional wrestlers, like other performers, need not produce any material goods in order to be productive for the promoters—certainly something understood by theatre producers and wrestling promoters throughout history" (*Professional Wrestling* 21–22). That this is understood by wrestlers also is seen in their industry specific argot, in which "wrestlers are called 'workers', a 'work' (noun) is a con, to 'work' (verb) is to perform, and convincing the audience is called 'selling'" (Chow and Laine 46).

That pro-wrestling is labor and pro-wrestlers are workers is thus established, but is this *proletarian* labor? Ultimately, pro-wrestling is a form of physical labor in which individuals sell the labor power of their bodies for money. This is, as Nonini and Teraoka rightly state, "in principle no different from work in factories, mines, and steel mills; it is even, in some ways, a purer form, since a wrestler has no tools or machinery, but only his [or her] body to work with" (162). However, the proletarian identity of pro-wrestling is not simply down to its physicality but the famously poor working conditions, in many ways at the cutting edge of contemporary capitalist exploitation.

Pro-wrestling has a "history of union-busting dating back decades" (Oglesby 91). It generally escapes scrutiny in health and safety terms despite workers in the industry, from the indies to the WWE, experiencing "a range of work-related harms" and grueling schedules (Corteen 142–44). In a feat of definitional stretching, the WWE misclassifies its performers as "independent contractors" meaning they "do not receive health insurance, retirement pensions, paid leave or other benefits a full-time worker is potentially entitled to" (Schiavone 486). The result is an industry with an "astronomical" (492) early death-rate in which exhausted workers are forced to work when in pain (Corteen 142), a situation so bad Corteen labels the WWE specifically "a harmful business" that "entails activities that are not typically considered as criminal – but perhaps they ought to be" (148). As I note in conclusion, more positive examples of pro-wrestling promotions do exist. Nevertheless, this is the antithesis of socialist relations of production—and why pro-wrestling in its currently dominant forms is not analogous to the Proletkult. Regardless, all but the highest paid pro-wrestlers are proletarianized laborers "who must sell themselves piecemeal, [who] are a commodity, like every other article of commerce" (Marx and Engels 59); with nothing to sell but their labor power, they approach the ring "like

one who is bringing his own hide to market and has nothing to expect but—a hiding" (Marx, *Capital* 114).

So, belaboring the point, are pro-wrestlers proletarians, capable of producing a proletarian culture? If we simply cite Bogdanov, for whom the proletariat was specifically linked to machine production, despite all of the above the answer is probably not (202). The lesson of the original Proletkult, however, is to not be too prescriptive. As Mally notes:

> The Proletkult was "proletarian" only in the broadest sense of the word; it drew its major support from the laboring population at large, from industrial workers and their children, from white-collar employees and artisans, and even from the peasantry.... Proletkultists passionately asserted the proletariat's central position in the new social order, but they did not agree on just what the proletariat was. (100-01)

Pro-wrestlers may not be the industrial proletariat Bogdanov envisaged, but they are the living, breathing proletarians we have. Understanding their potential in developing a proletarian culture now requires understanding Bogdanov's theory of "the labor point of view" (Wark 17)

The Labor Point of View

Bogdanov identified humans as a "laboring being" (White 390), centering the *experience* of said labor as the labor point of view. But what is labor? Some basics were just thrashed out; however, Bogdanov provides an answer whose wording is important to grasp:

> All aspects of labor boil down to this: that human beings *change the correlation of certain elements of nature,* moving them, establishing new interactions among them, etc. If we investigate each concrete act of work, we find this and nothing else. Objects and methods may be different, but the essence of the matter remains the same.
>
> One can go further. Human beings change the correlation of the elements of nature so that they conform to their needs and desires, so that they serve their interests. In other words, they *organize* these correlations to conform to their will to live and to progress. Thus, *all in all, labor organizes the world for humanity.* (42)

Conceptualized thus, nature is "the arena of labor" (Wark 15), or as Bogdanov puts it, "[n]ature is what people call the endless unfolding field of their labor-experience" (42). In other words, it is that which is encountered by/through labor, or more specifically that which is experienced as *resistance* to labor. Resultantly, as Wark

explains, for Bogdanov "the physical world *as we know it* cannot be thought as preceding our labors upon it" (26). Rather, its limits/boundaries are discovered *in practice,* which is to say through active labor upon it. Resultantly, in Bogdanov's words:

> the practical organization of labor effort precedes the intellectual organization of elements of experience and produces it [and as such] the methods of the organization of experience derive … from the methods of organizing activity that are already to hand…. Accordingly, methods of social practice provide the foundation for cognitive methods…. *In the final analysis, thought takes its form from social practice.* Or, to put it another way: *The interconnectedness of the elements of experience in cognition has as its basis the correlation of the elements of social activity in the labor process*. (219–20)

Culture thus develops from the experience of labor, which is to say from labor within a specific mode of production with attendant technologies (i.e., the tools and organizing schematics) through which we work to (re)organize the elements of nature.

Stemming from this, Bogdanov argues cultures have a class correspondence, as "[d]ifferent practice produces a different logic" (201). For Bogdanov, such divergent labor practices as a team of miners collectively hauling out coal and an intellectual typing up thoughts for publication will interconnect their relevant elements of experience in differing manners. The ramification is that ascendent classes needed to develop their own culture—their own "particular understanding of the world" (Bogdanov 201)—as without this, they will remain ruled by norms and values not truly their own. This cultural revolution, Bogdanov argued, was necessary *before* any political revolution. While socialism will only be possible with the abolition of private property and elimination of classes, before this elements of socialism must develop within the existing capitalist society, in particular "socialism's most essential element—comradely cooperation" (White 274). Proletkult's goal was to create a supportive environment that empowered workers' creatively to facilitate the production of cultural outputs born of their experiences within the field of labor. In practice, as described above, this involved amongst other things abandoning hierarchies and specialization, and adopting collective productions of work. The distinguishing feature of the resultant cultural outputs, Bogdanov believed, would be comradely cooperation, thereby building socialist elements within a non-socialist society.

What then of our contemporary proletarians, pro-wrestlers? From the labor point of view, what organization of experience would develop from the practical organization of *their* labor efforts? Answering this illuminates pro-wrestling's

potential in producing the key elements of proletarian culture. As a segue into the solution, Nonini and Teraoka offer a valuable point:

> Wrestling as a spectacle of physical labor, offers an exuberant display of labor power. Once the rock music stops, sequined robes are shed, and valets and managers leave the ring, we are left with the bodies of the wrestlers – and it is here that wrestling really begins. Standing in the ring, fully illuminated in a semi-darkened arena, the wrestler presents the image of labor power itself; his body, in full view of the audience, displays its scars and its muscle, the visible, tangible result of work in the gym and in the wrestling ring. Not only does the wrestler work with his body, but his body is his work, and it is displayed always with pride. (163)

As labor, pro-wrestling is physical embodied work in which the body is work, and work takes the form of body-to-body interaction. It is here that we return to Oglesby's description of "body work." Understanding the nature of this body work is key to identifying "the elements of social activity in the labor process" that form the basis of the "elements of experience in cognition" (Bogdanov 219–20) and thus the class correspondence of pro-wrestling as both labor form *and* cultural production. This task is aided by comradely engagement with Warden et al.'s previously cited argument regarding pro-wrestling's progressive potential.

Collaboration, Care, and Trust

A stronger political opposition to reactionary politics such as Trump's would exist, Warden et al. claim, "if we approached work as wrestlers do" (202). I hope to support and build upon this claim by establishing a link between said work and the potential development of proletarian culture. To do so, however, it is necessary to understand what is meant by *work*. As noted, the concept of "work" has a specific meaning within pro-wrestling argot, "to work" expressing coterminous meanings as both a con and performance, or as combined by Warden et al., "work" acts as "a shorthand term for the performative labor of representing a fiction" (206), the embodied labor being thus bound with(in) kayfabe. Ultimately the one cannot be separated and/or understood without the other; nevertheless, the first stage of this argument tentatively isolates the physical *technē* of the performance for discussion.

Warden et al. identify two central elements to pro-wrestling work that provide its progressive potential. The first is its collaborative nature, it being "quite obvious that because wrestling is not a real fight, wrestlers are actually cooperating." The second is its specifically embodied nature; as they explain, "it is impossible to fully understand wrestling unless you understand it as an embodied practice," pro-wrestling is "an embodied skill or technique." Both points are correct, as is the

related argument that "this collaborative labor might model a powerful and valuable embodied form of politics" (206–07). They can, however, be extended further.

Chow's experiences learning pro-wrestling, written-up in an earlier article ("Work and Shoot"), are key to Warden et al., who write:

> What is striking is the degree of care, trust, and friendship expressed in the physical practice of wrestling: the "lock-up" or "tie-up," an almost embodiment of physical conflict, serves instead as a way of establishing a communication between bodies. Suplexes and body-slams are taught with the same care as adagio acrobalance, and while strikes "hurt," temporarily, they necessarily require the trust of the partner. (207)

Previous descriptions of pro-wrestling's collaborative nature have been laid out by Levi's depiction of *lucha libre* training, where "every throw, every lock is a technique of mutuality" (36), or Nevitt's detailed explication of the execution of a piledriver ("Popular Entertainments" 84). As Chow explains, such collaboration compels empathy:

> [l]earning to chain [wrestle] is about more than executing the move "correctly," it is about developing kinaesthetic empathy. The majority of moves employed in chain wrestling are "legitimate" moves from Greco-Roman or Freestyle wrestling, adapted to ensure they can be performed safely and repeatedly. ("Work and Shoot" 77)

Pro-wrestler Heather Bandenburg describes this empathy as practically embodied in:

> the years of back-breaking pain that wrestlers endure (sometimes literally) in order to learn how not to hurt their opponent. We hurt ourselves, but not each other. We are stunt doubles that double for no one…. We look after each other. And learning how to beat someone in a match while leaving them without even a bruise, let alone as a bloody pulp, takes years to perfect. (15)

Pro-wrestling is, thus, a fundamentally cooperative practice that goes beyond simply paternalistic collaboration based upon protecting each other, to embrace an ethics founded upon openness and trust. A "process of *mutually* becoming vulnerable" is a necessary element of the craft as pro-wrestlers "put their bodies at great risk and trust that their partners will have the embodied knowledge to protect them" (Chow, "Work and Shoot" 79). It therefore requires the development of a tacit embodied knowledge—"more a matter of touch than cognition" (de Garis, "Experiments in Pro Wrestling" 72). As Oglesby reports based on his own training, pro-wrestling is "a sensuous, viscerally collaborative endeavor that privileges muscle memory cultivated only between the ropes … defined by an ethos of care" (91–92).

Within this training (and subsequent practice) is an emphasis upon "kinaesthetic and proprioceptive awareness – the perception of the body's positioning in relation to itself and other bodies" (Chow, "Work and Shoot" 76) with the purpose of protecting the Other and opening oneself up to their care. As Bandenburg describes, pro-wrestling "involves psychological conditioning—shaping your mind to overcome bodily reactions, such as panicking, lashing out, or freezing. Muscles have memories that learn how to defend the body instinctively from being destroyed, and wrestling involves overriding these" (16). This need to *unlearn* the instinctual reactions of the body to physical danger is central to a pro-wrestler's safety since, as Chow explains, "attempting to protect oneself makes the move more dangerous. To lay oneself open to danger makes the move more safe—but this also requires a great deal of trust, as one is placing one's safety in the hands of another" ("Work and Shoot" 80). Tyson Smith describes both the importance and difficulty in developing this state:

> For a new student learning pro wrestling, a main challenge is developing a deep bodily trust of his fellow wrestlers. Acting out violence requires each performer to intimately coordinate his body with the body of his "opponent." A successful performance only happens once the wrestlers learn to rely on each other, creating a synergistic flow of movements. Such trust is difficult to learn in a culture that rewards young men for their toughness, stoicism, and independence. ("Wrestling with 'Kayfabe'" 54)

For the above reason, pro-wrestling requires the active development of a "corporeal level of intimacy, safety, and care for the other's body" (Chow, "Work and Shoot" 83), in which "[t]he powerful, hypertrophic body of the wrester is put to the service of pliability and softness; wrestlers embody friendship while communicating antagonism and aggression" (80).

Pointing to this as evidence of pro-wrestling's progressive potential, Warden et al. describe "the physical practice of wrestling work" as "model[ling] a politics of friendship" (207). Some potential political implications have subsequently been developed by Laine; as he writes, "even as workers are exploited in the classic Marxist sense that promoters are extracting their labor and the wrestling form clearly stages such alienation, the mechanics and indeed the logic of wrestling may actually rely on in moments of care and camaraderie" (*Professional Wrestling* 25). With this in mind, Laine quotes Smith's *(Fighting for Recognition)* argument that "because of its inherent empathy built upon mutual trust and protection, [pro-wrestling] has the capacity to be connective, intimate, and a means of solidarity" (87). Yet, while the message that pro-wrestling has an ethos we might ape is important, the point goes deeper—it is the very nature of this embodied work that

generates this ethos, and it is here Bogdanov helps theoretically. Grappling with the regressive reality of much pro-wrestling content, Laine concludes that "the wrestling form, the actual physical practice of wrestling, is less the problem than its theatrical overlay" (*Professional Wrestling* 47). Far from a problem, this physical practice—the *technē* of the craft —is what affords pro-wrestling its potentially radical capacity. This becomes clearer when viewed through the prism of proletarian culture and its development, as advanced by Bogdanov.

Embodiment and Culture

To reiterate, Bogdanov holds that the intellectual organization of elements of experience is preceded by labor efforts, these methods of organization deriving from the nature of said social practice. One's embodied labor experience is thus central to "how thought takes its form" (Bogdanov 219–20). To further elucidate the radical potential implicit within pro-wrestling work, Karl Marx's early theoretical writings around the organic/inorganic body are a valuable supplement to Bogdanov here.

For Marx, to be human is to have one's "nature outside [one]self" ("Critique of Hegel's Philosophy in General"), being, as Fox summarizes, "profoundly open to and dependent upon objects that are ordinarily considered to be separate and external" (132). So expansive is this openness, in a general sense, that the "external" objects of nature are the "inorganic body" of man, physically separated from the "organic" body but functionally in unity (Marx, "Estranged Labor"). As an aggregation of organic and inorganic bodies in constant tension, the unity of subjective being is a state of perpetual striving. Marx views this striving as so significant that constancy and solidity are only possible by adopting social structures that provide the shared and consistent means for the coordinated and cooperative appropriation of our needed objects—that is to say, a mode of production. This mode of production acts as "the levee bank against the uncertainty and threat of our corporeality"; it is the "mode of unification" of our organic and inorganic bodies, producing a rhythm by which we stabilize and "draw ourselves together" (Fox 162–63).

Like Bogdanov, Marx's schema sees the mental organization of the elements of our experience preceded and produced by the practical organization of the mode of production. Here we segue back into Bogdanov's (227) argument that humans "'tend to take techniques of thinking that have already been worked out and apply them everywhere" (227)—techniques that are given to us "first and foremost by their social interconnectedness, which become the basis for understanding the interconnectedness of all phenomena" (37). Pro-wrestling's distinct labor form arguably has both organizing *and* potentially disruptive capacities. Warden et al. describe how it "*opens* the individual to the other" (208) by promoting a "radically

open hospitality" founded on instinctual trust, which "exists primarily in and through the body" (Chow, "Work and Shoot" 8). The essential character of pro-wrestling as labor is interdependence. As a worker, the pro-wrestler is, more clearly than most, the aggregate of a series of relationships with other beings, intimately involved in and dependent upon these "external" elements such that the borders between "internal" and "external" are inescapably, constitutively blurred. It is within this blurring of boundaries that pro-wrestling praxis has potential to alter the existing patterns of social relations, enabling the emergence of a new (albeit contingent) mode of ensemblement, and thus new forms of experience and expression of life. In doing so, however, it must work itself through (and ultimately beyond) the capitalist mode of production. A fundamentally collective and inter-subjective form of labor, the rotten employment practices previously described leave professional wrestlers individualized and atomized via their status as "independent contractors" (Oglesby 91), part of an industry that is "very individualistic" and "[w]ithout any type of solidarity" amongst workers (Schiavone 493). Thankfully, power to disrupt these is again found in pro-wrestling's embodied labor form.

Marx holds that the mode of production "predominates" over other social relations, acting as "a general illumination which bathes all the other colors and modifies their particularity" ("Grundrisse"). Under this influence, however, "the coexistence of other modes of being, other forms of engagement between our organic and inorganic bodies" is still a reality (Fox 226). Amongst these, central to this argument, are those demands made upon us by the corporeal body. Such demands are encountered on a daily, ongoing basis in such forms as urination, defecation, hunger, sleep, etc. and are regularly experienced as resistance to our will (Fox 213). These "embodied, material realities often stubbornly resist symbolic transformation" (Olson 269), forcing themselves upon us, breaking our sense of the autonomous independence of our self, reminding us of our dependence on our organic body. The human body thereby "influences and constrains the symbolic structures we erect" (Olson 268). In this manner, the body become a potential source of disruption of the hegemonic culture. Our bodies are "re/active and not inert," containing "stored bodily experience" (LeMesurier 364) that is/can be reactivated/resurrected on both an instinctual and strategical manner. Contained within us as the product of our accrued history, these habit-based, embodied memories—born predominantly, following Bogdanov and Marx, within the arena of labor—can lock us into path dependencies, disposing the body towards particular lines of thought and action. Acting as "embodied meaning cores," they "influence not only how we meet and respond to exigencies but also what new knowledge is produced as a result of that interaction" (LeMesurier 368). In the words of Hawhee,

"bodies and language … are often, if not always, moving together" (*Moving Bodies* 166). Returning to Bogdanov, we thus find that the influence our labor experience plays in shaping cultures is even deeper than previously detailed, extending into our flexing of muscles, the tightening of tendons, and the curve of the spine. What does this mean for pro-wrestling and proletarian cultural development?

The weight of such embodied knowledge can trap us in negative patterns of thought, attuning us to "previously learned situations" in manners that constrain our capacity to receive and compute new information. Yet, it is also possible to train and condition our bodies to embed different information and attitudes, and it is here that pro-wrestling, as a performative practice, has particular potential to influence a deeper cultural shift. LeMesurier cites "dance (or martial arts, method acting, burlesque, and so forth)" as extreme types of "[s]ystems of bodily training" that hold the explicit goal of crafting new "specialized habits of movement" and "new ways for bodily existence" (365). Pro-wrestling acts in just this manner, with a kairotic theory of regime development and training practices wherein the repetition of "micro-motions, over and over" is the means via which "a bodily rhythm [is forged] that enables a forgetting of directives" (Hawhee, *Bodily Arts* 142) to act through "immanent awareness" (69).

As indicated, "a form of tacit physical knowledge" (Chow, "Work and Shoot" 76) is an important aspect of pro-wrestling as practice, offering a deep, rich, taxonomy of moves and counter-moves, which can be drawn upon through endless invention and combination through on-the-spot improvisation in response to shifting conditions. In this manner, pro-wrestling initiates a particular series of demands upon the corporeal body, which in so doing embeds interdependence and openness to the Other. Alongside this is an emphasis "on the body in relation to other bodies and actors in space," attuning the subject:

> to potential places of action and response that arise not just from the isolated body but the body in context.… There is a larger awareness of the reciprocal influence of bodies and environments that surpasses dance interests and intersects with issues of how rhetorical actors function within overlapping ecologies and systems. (LeMesurier 377)

Within such kairotic training, the acquisition of pro-wrestling skill is not simply a process to be learnt but with a certain level of mastery can be transformational, offering "the pleasure of immersion and losing the sense of separation of mind from body and body from floor (or partner)" (Fox 224).

Training the body to instinctively cooperate with and trust the Other to protect it and to protect the Other in turn embeds such intersubjectivity into the embodied rhetoric of the pro-wrestler, creating, in the moment of performance, a

specific unification of organic and inorganic bodies in which their interrelation is brought to the surface and encoded into instinctual movements. In its subsequent organization of experience such labor offers a basis, in principle, for proletarian cultural development, pro-wrestling performances becoming cultural outputs akin to those produced in the Proletkult, aimed at building socialism within capitalism, as Bogdanov portrayed.

Kayfabe as Labor's Appreciation

So far, the focus has been upon pro-wrestlers and their embodied labor within the ring; however, with kayfabe the intersubjectivity of pro-wrestling work extends to encompass the audience also. Much like Proletkult theatre, pro-wrestling audiences participate in the performance. Is this audience proletarian? Not entirely, but they *are* working, performing labor and (co-)producing culture. As Hill explains, "the passion work in professional wrestling involves different types of labor, the physical and emotional work of wrestlers and event organizers, and the work of audiences, fans and anti-fans interacting with professional performers" (175). This labor is "keeping kayfabe," as already introduced. As Brunette and Young elucidate, by suspending their disbelief and playing along with performance conventions—cheering, booing, reacting to in-ring events—live audiences perform labor; their work plays into the paid performers' labor, supporting it by producing "a virtual all-encompassing backdrop character for wrestlers to play off" and "producing value by contributing to the spectacle of the show" (223), thus indicating it is worth watching.

However, kayfabe today has a second side also; simultaneous to their co-production of kayfabe, audiences "read through the fiction" (Jeffries 10), parsing performances' constitutive elements with an eye to developing immediate and long-term hypotheses about the intensions underpinning performance choices. This is "a game of prediction and interpretation to which they apply their understanding of wrestling techniques, character histories, performers and WWE as a company" (Nevitt, "The Spirit of America Lives Here" 323), part of which involves judging the verisimilitude of the actions, meaning performers' success in "follow[ing] the rules of the performance practice and play[ing] their role" (Chow, "Paterre" 74). At the heart of kayfabe today is thus an ongoing practice focused on interpreting the performance *as a work,* which is to say, consciously recognizing it as *labor aimed at the production of kayfabe*—or as Chow and Laine label it, "the labor of illusion" (45). Kayfabe recognizes kayfabe.

Grasping this, Laine has already identified the "ability [of audiences] to see and gauge labor in the match itself" ("Kayfabe" 201–02). My thesis is that in the right context this second side of kayfabe can be shifted from recognizing pro-wrestlers' work *is* labor to consciously appreciating it *as* labor. Moreover, this appreciation of

the performance's *labor* can take two forms. The first recognizes its exploitative (capitalist) form. Chow and Laine have noted how such recognition can be forced upon audiences when shocking moments, e.g., an injury to a wrestler:

> subverts the narrative frame and reveals the labor of the wrestling body. In these moments, the substance and meaning of affirmation quickly changes, from appreciation of narrative labor (that is, the ability to tell or represent a story) and the ability to simulate violence theatrically, to a celebration of labor as such. (45)

This celebration of labor need not romanticize it. As Jansen emphasizes, "[a]ny account of professional wrestling … is incomplete without considering the real violent labor involved in performing staged violence" (305). As talk of injury and wrestlers forced to work in pain indicates, pro-wrestling labor—even when performed well and correctly—puts tremendous strain on the human body. Moreover, Jansen warns how the specific nature of such labor, in which performers fake pains "while disguising other—real—pains", can veil "the conditions of [the latter's] production" (320).

Yet as Laine describes, even at its simplest level, in keeping kayfabe, thus acknowledging the work behind the work, audiences "see that workers are working, we work in the stands to cheer them on or boo them, and we know that the bosses are skimming excess value off all of us" ("Kayfabe" 201). Audience applause is thus, literally, "the acknowledgement of a *job* well done" (Chow and Laine 45; emphasis added). In recognizing pro-wrestling work as a job, moreover, said conditions of production swim into focus, available as a subject for critique. These conditions—pressure towards needless risk taking, lack of "down time" to rest and recuperate the body, etc.—are driven by capitalist maximalization of profit, creating unsafe working conditions, turning strains on the body into shortened careers.

The second form of appreciation for the performance's labor appreciates the specific nature of its embodied form. The curious nature of "keeping kayfabe" means all involved recognize and are fully cognizant of the interdependence and collaboration underpinning the performed violence—indeed its markers are visible to the trained-eye. As Bordelon describes, "the body communicates in a different language through such means as motion, gesture, and stance" (26), and in the pro-wrestling ring singular movements of this bodily rhetoric communicate two seemingly incompatible but vital messages, as concurrent with the "aggressive" snap of a suplex is the collaboration of the move "taker" in propelling the lift and "selling" the blow, and the protection supplied by the move "giver" as they bring them to the canvas. Appreciating such body work, audiences thus appreciate its grounding in

comradely cooperation and creativity, intuiting in their own co-productive labor the same features. Thus, might proletarian culture be developed and promulgated.

For Worker Control

Ultimately, such development will require revolutionary changes. As Laine notes, presently, "while the labored performance of professional wrestling may allow some moments or sense of solidarity between workers, it is at the same time leveraged for the needs of the promoter" (*Professional Wrestling* 26). The "general illumination" shed by the capitalist mode of production is a powerful force constraining the creativity of labor and increasing its endangerment—it is within these conditions that pro-wrestlers, as proletarians, must grapple towards a world beyond waged labor where workers are freed from conditions deleterious to their health and creative wellbeing, and in-ring actions are undertaken for the pleasure of performing, not shaped by calculations regarding pay packets.

As a Marxist, Bogdanov believed socialism will only be possible with the abolition of private property and elimination of classes. He also believed, however, that cultural revolution must proceed political revolution, the development of proletarian culture being necessary to arm the ascendant working class with cognitive tools for socialist rule. Elements of socialism could and must, therefore, develop within the existing capitalist system. My thesis presented here is that, in a manner analogous to the Proletkult, pro-wrestling could potentially facilitate that development. This is not to say pro-wrestling is innately progressive; its legacy of sexism, hypermasculinity, and racism is well known. These, however, are issues with "its theatrical overlay," not "the wrestling form, the actual physical practice of wrestling" (Laine, *Professional Wrestling* 47).

Either way, Bogdanov did not support a cultural *tabula rasa* in which proletarians broke with such bourgeoise art entirely; rather, "[he] urged the workers to study their cultural heritage in order to discover what was important to them and what was not" (Murray 197). The Proletkult's anti-hierarchical, egalitarian organizational form provided a platform facilitating such critical study and proletarian creativity. For pro-wrestling to live up to its potential as such a platform new relations of production will also be required. Existing studies already illustrate alternative models of organization, from the "Burning Hearts" training sessions Bandenburg (189-99) describes, to the potential of feminist promotions like EVE (Litherland, Phillips, and Warden) or queer indie promotions like A Matter of Pride (Westerling), such examples crying out for future close-readings to help connect theory with on-the-ground practice. If then, study can influence praxis, a vision of *workers'* control and proletarian cultural promotion should be pro-wrestling's future.

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The Meta-Fan Era: Examining Kayfabe on UpUpDownDown's *Battle of the Brands*

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In June 2015, WWE's Xavier Woods launched the UpUpDownDown video game channel on YouTube. Battle of the Brands *(*BOTB*), one of the series featured on the channel, develops its own storyworld kayfabe while rejecting some of the traditional rules associated with kayfabe of the WWE televised product. For example, superstars featured on the channel openly use wrestling terminology and discuss real-world relationships. This interplay between two different conceptualizations of kayfabe produces a series rife with intertextual and metatextual meaning for the audience. This paper explores how* BOTB *modifies our understanding of kayfabe by highlighting the viability of a storyworld specific approach to kayfabe.*

Introduction

In 1989, Vince McMahon acknowledged in front of the New Jersey Senate that World Wrestling Entertainment (then known as World Wrestling Federation) should be considered "an activity in which participants struggle hand-in-hand primarily for the purpose of providing entertainment to spectators rather than conducting a bona fide athletic context" (qtd. in Hoy-Browne). This acknowledgment changed the future of professional wrestling in the United States as WWE would transition from a wrestling company to a sports entertainment company. In making this transition, WWE would produce materials, both inside and outside of the televised diegetic world, that allowed consumers to peek behind the proverbial curtain of kayfabe.

However, the *Battle of the Brands* (*BOTB*) series launched in April 2018 for the YouTube channel UpUpDownDown represents a significant departure from previous WWE-affiliated programming that played with the concept of kayfabe. *BOTB* does not rely exclusively on the kayfabe narrative of the WWE televised product. WWE's televised programming, including *Raw*, *SmackDown*, and *NXT*, establishes how the audience should view the characters featured on television. Performers can be said to break kayfabe if their actions run counter to those expected by their characters or if their actions reveal the scripted nature of the professional wrestling business. However, UpUpDownDown complicates this dichotomous view of kayfabe.

Xavier Woods, in character as Austin Creed on *BOTB*, once described UpUpDownDown as a "kingdom [UpUpDownDown] within a kingdom [WWE]" ("Battle of the Brands Season 2: GMs Press Conference" 12:05-12:08). However, it may be more accurate to describe UpUpDownDown as kayfabe within kayfabe. UpUpDownDown has its own channel-specific kayfabe and storylines that have no impact on the narratives featured each week on the WWE televised product. *BOTB*, and UpUpDownDown as a whole, exist as a mostly independent storyworld that interacts with the kayfabe narrative of the televised product in thought-provoking ways. This article will explore *BOTB*'s unique positi on as a performer-led initiative that illustrates how a storyworld specific approach may help us understand the notion of kayfabe in the meta-fan (Shoemaker, "WWE SummerSlam") era. *BOTB* rejects traditional ideas of kayfabe by openly discussing real-world relationships and freely using wrestling terminology but manages to maintain its program and channel-specific kayfabe.

This analysis examines the first two seasons of *BOTB* available on the UpUpDownDown YouTube channel. Both seasons feature former WWE superstar Tyler Breeze and current WWE superstar Xavier Woods competing in General Manager (GM) mode in the video game *WWE SmackDown! vs. Raw 2006* for PlayStation 2. GM mode is text-based as it requires the GMs, Tyler Breeze and Xavier Woods, to book the best possible show given the talent featured on their digital rosters. In-game fan allegiances to a particular brand, Raw or SmackDown, can change because of the GM's booking acumen. The goal of GM mode is to end the season with more fans than your opponent. Although the seasons are different lengths, 66 episodes for season one and 37 episodes for season two, each episode features commentary from the GMs alongside guest appearances from other contracted talent. This case study relies on conversations between the GMs during the videos as well as the storylines and video promos developed to complement a text-based competition and fan remarks from the comment section below the videos. Quotations from the YouTube comment section will be attributed to commenters instead of including a username to preserve privacy.

"You know it's fake, right?" Exploring WWE's history with kayfabe

Like other fields of expertise, professional wrestling has its own specialized language that industry insiders use. Scholars argue that the primary purpose of this technical terminology is to obfuscate meaning to outsiders (See: Ford, "I was Stabbed"; Kerrick; Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*; Wrenn). George Kerrick once described wrestling jargon in the following way: "there are many other expressions associated with professional wrestling, but all seem to illustrate one point: the sport is handled from the inside so as to create a distance between the athletes and those who buy

their product" (145). David Shoemaker echoes Kerrick's comments when he writes, "Every subculture has its lingo, but the subbier the culture, the more unintelligible the dialect can be. Couple that with an industry conceived on falsehood and dedicated to keeping the lie alive, and you've got a rabbit hole that even the most stalwart of linguists would think twice before exploring" ("Grantland Dictionary"). The primary goal of wrestling terminology is to separate those in the locker room from those in the audience. The unrestricted use of wrestling jargon on *BOTB* can be considered a rejection of this traditional separation between the audience and the performers. Even more noteworthy is that the use of these terms can be regarded as a rejection of kayfabe.

Of all the terms used in professional wrestling, kayfabe is arguably the most important to the wrestling tradition. So, what is kayfabe? Scholars interested in kayfabe have posited many definitions, including the "illusion of realness" (Smith 54), it "describes the diegetic world of professional wrestling as real" (Laine, "Professional Wrestling Scholarship" 90), and it "refers to the practice of sustaining the in-diegesis performance into everyday life" (Litherland 531). What these and many other definitions have in common is a reference to the diegetic world of professional wrestling being distinct from the "real world" that surrounds it.

Walus and Wilcox propose that the acceptance of in-ring kayfabe, which they define as a "fictional storyline," is limited mainly to younger audiences. In contrast, older audiences are more interested in understanding what is commonly called the "'shoot' (unscripted, nonfiction reality)" (28). This dialectical tension between kayfabe and shoot, or fiction and reality, has enticed fans for a long time. Sharon Mazer describes this tension in the following way: "the pleasure for wrestlers and spectators alike may be found in the expressive tension between the spontaneous and the rehearsed, in the anticipation of, and acute desire for, the moment where the real breaks through the pretended" (68). Although fans want to peek behind the curtain, or perhaps see through the curtain of kayfabe, they also want to be afforded opportunities to "mark out." "Marking out" is defined by Sam Ford as "expressing the genuine emotion associated with fully immersing themselves in the role of the 'believing-sports fan'" ("The Marks Have" 123). Marking out has been examined as one of the pleasures associated with watching wrestling as it allows all fans to have an emotional response to the storylines regardless of their industry knowledge (Koh; Wrenn). Thus, kayfabe represents a reality parallel to the "real world" where gimmicks run rampant, feats of unbelievable athleticism and strength are commonplace, and evil authority figures are always waiting in the wings. Fans understand that in this reality, "matches can be predetermined and fictional yet feel completely real" (Reinhard 31).

Kayfabe long served as one of the guiding principles for the WWE product. Materials produced by WWE in the early 1990s, including the popular *WWF Magazine*, primarily adhered to the kayfabe of the televised product. These kayfabe-dependent materials can be classified as paratexts. Research on paratexts is indebted to literary scholar Gérard Genette's theory of transtextuality. Genette describes transtextuality as "everything that brings it [a text] into relationship with other texts" (81). Genette accounts for several relationships: intertextuality, paratextuality, architextuality, metatextuality, and hypertextuality. A translation of Genette's work on paratexts by Marie Maclean posits that a "text rarely appears in its naked state, without the reinforcement and accompaniment of a certain number of productions … like an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations" (261). While Genette's work focuses on books, an expansion of Genette's work by Jonathan Gray proposes that "paratexts are all those things that surround a work, dependently attached to it, yet aren't part of the work itself" (33). Early products like W*WF Magazine* provided additional perspectives on wrestlers, but features in this magazine depended on the kayfabe narrative established during the WWE televised programming.

Although Vince McMahon acknowledged that the matches were scripted entertainment, the company remained reluctant to altogether dispense with the notion of kayfabe in the early 1990s. However, just a few years later in 1996, WWE introduced *RAW Magazine,* which provided profiles on the real lives of WWE performers. In a 1997 address to usher in the Attitude Era, Vince McMahon stated, "We in the WWF think that you, the audience, are quite frankly tired of having your intelligence insulted" ("Mr. McMahon Ushers" 0:48-0:54). According to Dru Jeffries, this address served the following functions: to broaden the appeal of WWE programming by comparing it to their popular contemporaries and highlight the scripted component of WWE programming (4-5).

Jeffries argues that the expansion of WWE's media portfolio since 1999 "exploded the concept of kayfabe, creating multiple overlapping storyworlds, each of which bears its own unique relationship to the main storyworld" (2). If the televised product serves as the main storyworld, then WWE's transformation into a media conglomerate has resulted in a complex web of meaning where different mediated products may perform paratextual, intertextual, metatextual, architextual, and hypertextual functions. Consider WWE's foray into reality television, which has been a particularly fruitful enterprise, as shows like *Tough Enough* and *Legends Roundtables* were staples on TV and the WWE Network. *Tough Enough* allowed fans to learn more about the intensive training process for aspiring WWE superstars while simultaneously serving as intertextual and paratextual information for the appearances by contestants and winners on WWE programming. Consider Maven's

2002 Royal Rumble appearance, where both his chyron and the commentators referenced him as the male winner of season one of *Tough Enough*. If an individual watched *Tough Enough* before watching the weekly scripted product, then *Tough Enough* would serve as a paratext as it provides the audience with orienting information about the wrestling industry and WWE. However, the references to Maven's history on *Tough Enough* would constitute intertextual information as intertextuality is defined as "the literal presence (more or less literal, whether integral or not) of one text within another" (Genette, *The Architext* 82). WWE's creative approach to storytelling can be seen in the brief Reality Era that featured storylines like Daniel Bryan vs. The Authority (Norman; see also: Canella; Jansen; Koh, "It's What's Best for Business"; Laine, "Stadium-sized Theatre"; Laine, *Professional Wrestling and the Commercial Stage*), which obscured the difference between the behind-the-scenes machinations responsible for the WWE televised product and the actual on-air product.

Importantly, kayfabe is frequently discussed as a singular construct. In WWE's case, their kayfabe is dependent on the narratives featured on weekly *Raw*, *SmackDown*, and *NXT* episodes. These weekly shows and premium live events (formerly known as pay-per-views) let the audience know which performers are the "faces" (good characters) and "heels" (evil characters). This notion of kayfabe being linked to the televised product has become untenable in an era of expansive storyworlds and social media. The brilliance in *BOTB* is in illustrating what the audience considers real is no longer just promotion contingent but is also storyworld contingent. Each additional storyworld crafted can connect with the televised storyworld in various ways. Jan-Noël Thon proposes three relationships between storyworlds of the same transmedia franchise: redundancy, expansion, and modification (379). Briefly, redundancy refers to addressing the same storyline elements present in other words, expansion refers to the addition of novel aspects to the storyworld, and finally, modification refers to additions that are incompatible with our previous knowledge of the transmedia franchise (Thon 379). *BOTB*'s storyworld would fall under the umbrella of modifications as the storyline elements, and character names are largely incompatible with the world of the televised product.

Reinventing the Konami Code: The birth of UpUpDownDown

UpUpDownDown is a YouTube channel with over two million subscribers. Despite this success, a video game channel was not the original plan for WWE superstar Xavier Woods. Xavier Woods, one-third of the wrestling stable The New Day, approached WWE with the idea of producing a travel show for WWE Network that would highlight the different cities visited by superstars as they were on the road

(Fudge). When WWE rejected this proposal, Woods returned to the drawing board resulting in the idea for a channel where WWE superstars play video games (Fudge). Former WWE superstar Zack Ryder, the creator of kayfabe-breaking series *Z! True Long Island Story*, talked with Xavier Woods and Matt Hardy about their use of social media branding on the show *Table for 3*. *Table for 3* is a WWE network exclusive that features current and previously contracted talent discussing their experiences in the wrestling industry. In the episode entitled "Gone Viral," Zack Ryder admitted to Xavier Woods, "When you first told me this idea, I was like this is crazy. But now look, it's huge" ("Gone Viral" 17:05-17:11). Xavier Woods credits Zack Ryder "for bearing the cross" ("Gone Viral" 17:14-17:16) when it comes to YouTube endeavors, which may have made the establishment of the UpUpDownDown channel just a bit easier. The presence of a precedent in *Z! True Long Island Story* did not eliminate the difficulty of the negotiation process, as Woods stated that wrestling is "one of those industries that people have a lot of questions about, and we never really want to ruin the magic, we want people to still have their child-like awe when they see the show" (Fudge). Ultimately, WWE acquiesced, and Woods launched UpUpDownDown in June 2015.

From the outset, it was clear that UpUpDownDown would represent a departure from previous content associated with the WWE. UpUpDownDown is a gaming channel that features prominent WWE personalities cooperating and competing in an eclectic list of video game titles. During these gameplay sessions, superstars often reflect on their experiences inside and outside the ring. Gaming channels like UpUpDownDown have surged in popularity, with YouTube reporting that 100 billion hours of gaming content were watched in 2020 (Park). In the introduction video to the channel, Woods states, "Hello to the gamers, geeks, cosplayers, chiptune enthusiasts, nerds, one and all. I am Austin Creed, aka Xavier Woods, and I would like to welcome you to UpUpDownDown ("Welcome to UpUpDownDown" 0:00-0:14). This introduction is noteworthy because Xavier Woods introduces the alias Austin Creed. Most wrestlers that appear on the channel adopt nicknames to demarcate these appearances from the kayfabe of the televised product. The selected nicknames are occasionally intertextual references to their wrestling characters, with the "Phenomenal" AJ Styles nickname being the "Prince of Phenomenal" and The Miz using "Moneymaker" as a callback to a previous catchphrase. However, other nicknames emerge from interactions on the channel, such as Kofi Kingston adopting the moniker "Mr. 24/7" after defeating Woods in a game of *Madden* by a score of 24 to 7. For most nicknames, consider Becky Lynch's nickname of "Soulless Senpai," it is difficult to ascertain the relationship between the alias and their WWE character or the real-world performer. In addressing the

audience of his new channel, Woods averred, "Now, some of you may know me as the guy who incessantly claps his hands and forces positivity on people. I'm sorry. I really am sorry about that, but this is going to be an entirely different experience" ("Welcome to UpUpDownDown" 0:53-1:05). From its inception, the channel was designed to appeal to a broad swath of individuals regardless of their familiarity with the current televised WWE product.

Competing for General Manager supremacy: An overview of *Battle of the Brands*

In April 2018, nearly three years after the debut of UpUpDownDown, *BOTB* was launched. *BOTB* represented a partnership between WWE superstar Xavier Woods and former WWE superstar Tyler Breeze. It is important to note that gameplay discussions on *BOTB* will use the names Austin Creed for Xavier Woods and Prince Pretty for Tyler Breeze.

In *BOTB*, Prince Pretty serves as the general manager (GM) for Raw, and Austin Creed serves as the general manager of SmackDown in *WWE SmackDown! vs. Raw 2006*. As GM, the superstars have several responsibilities, including drafting their talent, managing superstar contracts, and booking all matches and promo segments for their respective brands. While *WWE SmackDown! vs. Raw 2006* marked the first WWE video game to feature a GM mode, fan-driven fantasy wrestling leagues initially were conducted through the mail in the 1980s before becoming more widely accessible online in the 1990s (Potter). To begin every fantasy season of GM mode, the game divides ten million fans evenly between the two GMs. While both GMs start with an allotment of five million fans, fan allegiances may change weekly due to effective or ineffective booking decisions. The GM with the most fans after WrestleMania receives the GM of the Year award.

Only the first two seasons of *BOTB* will be featured in this analysis. There are two notable differences between seasons one and two of *BOTB*. Season one of *BOTB* primarily emphasized the real-life friendship of Austin Creed and Prince Pretty as they competed for bragging rights and to avoid a punishment meted out to the loser. Season two of *BOTB* featured real-world performers cutting promos for their digital counterparts. In addition to these character promos, season two introduced an overarching narrative connected to the UpUpDownDown title. *BOTB*'s second season can be considered a drillable text (Ford, "WWE's Storyworld"; Mittell). A drillable text encourages the audience to "dig deeper, probing beath the surface to understand the complexity of a story and its telling" (Mittell). Audiences can explore multiple layers of meaning in the two separate but concurrent storylines featured in season two of *BOTB*: the in-game diegetic storylines as told by real-world performers and Austin Creed's attempt to demonstrate GM supremacy against the usurper of

the UpUpDownDown title in Prince Pretty. A WWE superstar wins the UpUpDownDown title if they can defeat the current champion in a game chosen by the GM of the channel, Austin Creed. Prince Pretty defeated Miss Bliss (WWE superstar Alexa Bliss) mere minutes after she won the title, setting the stage for the longest championship reign in UpUpDownDown history. While these championship challenges are part of a different series featured on UpUpDownDown, Prince Pretty's heel turn (transitioning from a good to bad character) was an essential part of the channel's kayfabe and represented a key theme during season two of *BOTB*.

Marks No More: How *BOTB* Speaks Directly to its Audience

Discussions of booking were once reserved for kayfabe-breaking moments, such as Triple H's infamous "Who booked this crap?" sign (qtd. in Bills), but *BOTB* dispenses with this sense of formality as the performers openly use wrestling terminology and discuss booking decisions. Ford ("I was Stabbed") argued that wrestling terminology can be classified as an "argot to shield the wrestling business from outsiders." This language was created to conceal the reality that professional wrestling was, in fact, the professional wrestling business. Throughout *BOTB*, performers do not shy away from using this secret language even if the use runs contrary to the televised kayfabe of WWE.

There are many conversations on *BOTB* connected to the subject of booking. Shoemaker ("Grantland Dictionary") defines booking as "planning the storylines and match outcomes." In fact, the title of this article is inspired by one of those discussions regarding booking. Prince Pretty, in a discussion about interactions between wrestlers of different generations, stated:

> You know how you have like eras? The Attitude Era? And then it was whatever came after that? Ruthless Aggression? And all that stuff? We're in like The Fan Era. Where literally like every week, it's like, "Alright, you guys are going to dress like DX because they were cool. And then do your stuff." And then like, "Alright, you guys are going to dress up like this other person that wrestled thirty years ago. ("Battle of the Brands #55" 7:30-7:51)

Prince Pretty opines it would have been unimaginable for Stone Cold Steve Austin to dress up as Macho Man, whereas the current generation of superstars is like, "Hell Yeah! Hit Austin's music. I'm going to put this bald cap on" ("Battle of the Brands #55" 8:04-8:09). While the concept of the fan era is intriguing, it would be more accurate to argue that wrestling is in the meta-fan era. According to Shoemaker, meta-fans are "the contingent of mostly older wrestling viewers for whom history and reality matter as much as the onscreen narrative" ("WWE SummerSlam"). Meta-fans are always interested in discussing the reality of the

wrestling industry. The GMs on the channel, Prince Pretty and Austin Creed, show as much interest in discussing the industry as non-industry-connected meta-fans.

For current WWE superstars, their booking becomes a veritable struggle between developing the future and honoring the past. As Prince Pretty mentioned, the booking may require a superstar to don an outfit that references a legend from decades ago. While the performer may be excited at the chance to cosplay as their favorite superstar essentially, this limits their opportunity to develop their unique brand apart from reenactments. Furthermore, booking may lead to segments, likely at a *WrestleMania* or anniversary event, where famous stars from bygone eras destroy modern-day heels. For example, consider the destruction of The Revival, now known as FTR in AEW, by D-Generation X and The New World Order on the 25th anniversary of *Monday Night Raw*. AEW's Dax Harwood (known in WWE as Scott Dawson) spoke with Jim Cornette about his frustration with the booking:

> We [referencing AEW's Cash Wheeler] came to the back and I walked right through gorilla and I punched the wall. It was a brick wall and punched it as hard as I could and I started flipping out…. I was in tears not because I was sad but that I was so upset and because a guy [Triple H] that we had, and we still do, a guy that we had so much respect for, we couldn't believe that he would allow that to happen to us. (qtd. in Ravens)

This deference to previous eras leads Tyler Breeze to imagine a scenario where he finally gets an opportunity that is secondary to an eighty-year-old Batista. Prince Pretty is far from the only performer to discuss or allude to booking during *BOTB*. Austin Creed, in explaining his motivations for developing season two of *BOTB,* states:

> Let's do season two. And we will put all our friends in there. People who we think should be on TV a little bit more. Let's give them an outlet. Let's make sure people have a safe haven if there's things they want to talk about that they don't get to talk about on TV or characters they want to try out, things they want to explore that they don't get the opportunity to explore. Let's give them this platform. ("Battle of the Brands Season 2: GMs Press Conference" 1:03-1:19)

Creed's language is certainly not incendiary, but it can be viewed as a gentle criticism of WWE booking. Creed's remark about the impetus for character promos and significant portions of season two of *BOTB* can be classified as examples of metatextuality. Genette's idea of metatextuality has been defined as "the transtextual text that links a commentary to the text it comments on" (*The Architext* 82). It is exceedingly rare for a WWE-approved series to imply criticism of the current product.

Another comment proffered by Creed in season two is rich with potential interpretations:

> You only put your money into your top guys, and that's what is wrong with your show. More fans would want to connect with your show if you quit investing all of your three hours into only three different people. When we got a full locker room full of people that can go. They can talk, but if you want to sit here, as the person in charge, just wasting all of their time. Wasting their prime, their physical activity, then you can be like that. ("Battle of the Brands S2E12" 21:05-21:33)

In context, the comments made by Austin Creed can be classified as gloating after Creed won 30,000 fans for his brand, SmackDown. However, fans quickly saw the potential latent meaning in Creed's comments. One commenter wrote: "'You put all of your money and resources into your top 3 guys while you have a locker room FULL of talent that you aren't using' I can't imagine a wrestling (Ahem, sports entertainment) company doing such a thing." Another commenter remarked, "That line about using three hours on three guys feels like that could be read into, but as a denizen of the internets, Mr Woods would know this. Either way; well played sir." There are certainly moments, especially in *BOTB*'s second season, where the line between kayfabe comments for *BOTB* and implied criticism of booking on the WWE televised product is blurry.

Discussions of booking were not restricted to the superstars, as fans of the series would frequently discuss booking of both the televised product and the in-game shows in the comment section. Many fans enjoyed Prince Pretty's booking during season one of *BOTB*. One comment read, "Breezy needs to book Raw and Smackdown for real" ("SmackDown vs. Raw 2006 – Battle of the Brands #3"). Another commenter declared, "If Raw was anything in rl [real life] like Breezy books it I'd watch it like nobody's business. #ImaTylerBreezeguy" ("Battle of the Brands #9"). A common refrain found across *BOTB* videos is dissatisfaction with the current product featured on television. One comment even managed to simultaneously criticize the booking of a defunct company while arraigning the in-game booking of Austin Creed: "Last week Creed ran out of cash but this week he still does a bunch of gimmick matches…. This GM mode is more like Breeze is WWE and Creed is WCW" ("Battle of the Brands #34"). The comment section allows fans to react to the show while simultaneously demonstrating their knowledge of the wrestling industry. This knowledge is not limited to the WWE televised product, as evidenced above, but represents the meta-fans consistent seeking and acquiring more information about the wrestling industry.

Beyond booking discussions, other moments feature terminology typically associated with the wrestling locker room. Some *BOTB* episodes were recorded backstage at premium live events when Xavier Woods and Tyler Breeze competed on different brands. For example, episode twenty-nine of season one was recorded backstage at the *Money in the Bank* pay-per-view in 2018. During the Carmella vs. Asuka match for the SmackDown Women's Championship, James Ellsworth returned to help Carmella as he had previously served as her manager. In discussing this return, the general managers had the following conversation:

> Austin Creed: What? Bro, Ellsworth came back?
>
> Prince Pretty: Smellsworth is back.
>
> Austin Creed: That's awesome. I had no idea. What was the finish?
>
> Prince Pretty: She [Asuka] was beating up Carmella. Smellsworth dressed up like Asuka. And then Asuka is like staring at her. He pulls off the thing and does the big "Hey, it's me." Superkick, 1-2-3.
>
> Austin Creed: I love it. ("Battle of the Brands #29" 8:06-8:28)

One commenter's surprise at this exchange was evident. "I like that they actually don't know their fellow wrestler's storylines. They must be kept on the down-low when it comes to surprises more than I thought." This fan fashioned themselves as knowledgeable about the industry, but this interaction befuddled them. In response to this apparent discovery, another commenter remarked, "Or, maybe they know parts of it but would rather keep it to themselves possibly?" These fans are unsure if they are witnessing the genuine reactions from the GMs or if they are heeding WWE's kayfabe or the kayfabe of *BOTB*. Laine argues "that even as you try to break through the web of kayfabe, you are still probably being duped one way or another" ("Professional Wrestling Scholarship" 90). This applies to an environment where kayfabe is no longer just a company-directed mandate. If performers have the flexibility and capability to create their own kayfabe and narratives, completely breaking through the web of kayfabe becomes an arduous task. However, these distinct conceptualizations of kayfabe provide meta-fans with new avenues to derive meaning from analyzing the wrestling industry.

One final example from season two demonstrates awareness regarding the use of wrestling terminology throughout the program:

> Austin Creed: How are you feeling going into your blowoff show? Let's just use all the vocab. All the lingo.
>
> Prince Pretty: Kayfabe. Kayfabe.
>
> Austin Creed and Prince Pretty [Laugh] ("Battle of the Brands S2E33" 0:38-0:46).

While both GMs laugh about their use of specialized terminology in this conversation, the use of jargon is normalized across the episodes. This openness in discussing booking decisions and wrestling terminology would have been unimaginable thirty years ago. However, the internet has increased audience awareness about the intricacies of the wrestling industry, so it makes sense to treat the audience as an equal. *BOTB* certainly does not insult the intelligence of its audience and instead welcomes the viewer into the locker room with open arms.

No Longer an Illusion: Real-World Relationships on UpUpDownDown

During the initial creation process of the show, Xavier Woods staunchly advocated for the wrestlers to appear out of character. In an interview with *The Esports Observer* (Fudge), Woods declared, "And from my end I really wanted to make sure that everyone was able to be their genuine selves in this space, so we don't have to worry about good and bad guys, and what happened last week on RAW, SmackDown, and NXT. Someplace where we can all enjoy video games and talk about our experiences with them and just have fun." *BOTB*, and UpUpDownDown as a whole, provide a glimpse into the real-world relationships between performers in the locker room.

Consideration of real-world relationships should begin with the GMs of *BOTB* in Prince Pretty and Austin Creed. In describing the creation of UpUpDownDown in the channel's kayfabe, Creed asserts:

> I've actually built this kingdom [UpUpDownDown] within a kingdom [WWE], and then someone who I thought was my good friend, one of my best friends that I've ever had in my life comes in, and I say, "Hey, you want to play this game with me? You want to be on the channel a little bit?" What does he do? He completely comes in and takes my kindness and uses it against me. ("Battle of the Brands Season 2: GMs Press Conference" 12:05-12:22)

While the channel's kayfabe will be explored later in the article, the rapport between the real-life friends is one of the driving forces behind the success of *BOTB* and UpUpDownDown as a whole.

As they book their shows, Austin Creed and Prince Pretty may provide information about the real person behind a character, especially if the GMs are booking them in an objectionable storyline. For example, season one of *BOTB* featured Austin Creed booking an angle where Scotty 2 Hotty was feuding with female superstars. In explaining the storyline, Creed declared, "The angle is that he's just a misogynistic evil guy and so the ladies are coming after him now" ("Battle of the Brands #14" 13:56-14:03). Immediately following a description of this angle, Creed spoke directly to the audience, "In real-life Scotty 2 Hotty: fantastic human, fantastic

human. This is just fiction. This is for play play" ("Battle of the Brands #14" 14:10-14:16). While this disclaimer may not be needed, it illustrates the friendships between performers and trainers backstage. Weekly television narratives attempt to sell the audience on character alignment being the determining factor for diegetic alliances. Still, discussions of real-world characteristics reveal information about the performers behind our favorite characters.

In another episode, Prince Pretty entices The Hurricane to jump brands from SmackDown to Raw. *SmackDown! Vs. Raw 2006* allows GMs to steal superstars from the opposing brand, which has a deleterious effect on the booked show. If the GM that books their show second steals a superstar from the first GM's completely booked show, then the entire match that the wrestler was involved in disappears. In season one, episode twenty-eight of *BOTB*, Austin Creed books a match featuring The Hurricane, managed by Khosrow Daivari, vs. Danny Basham, managed by Doug Basham. Instead of simply moving Daivari from a managerial role to a wrestler role, the game lists the match as vacant. In responding to The Hurricane's defection, Creed averred:

> The only person upset [the game allows GMs to see the morale of their wrestlers] in that match was Hurricane. So, Hurricane's gone. That's fine. So that hot Basham-Daivari rivalry isn't going strong anymore. Oh no. Now I don't have a match two. I'll lose a couple of fans. Bye Hurricane. I like you in real life. In this, you were giving me NOTHING. ("Battle of the Brands #28" 12:14-12:32)

Finally, let's return to the stated impetus for season two of *BOTB*: to give screen time to their friends. *BOTB*'s second season features promos from various performers, including Xavier Woods's New Day brethren in Kofi Kingston and Big E, Tyler Breeze's LeftRightLeftRight associates in Adam Cole, Cesaro, Drew Gulak, Drake Maverick, Jimmy Uso, Chad Gable, and Zelina Vega. The previous list doesn't account for the performers who watched the booking of shows or appeared on other UpUpDownDown series. These appearances represent a stark contrast to legendary manager Jim Cornette's description of kayfabe in the early days of professional wrestling: "A wrestler lived his 'gimmick'—his character—twenty-four hours a day" (Cornette and Easton 6). On *BOTB*, performers no longer live their televised gimmicks as they frequently discuss their real-world friendships. Moreover, these guest appearances may require performers to play different characters from those featured on weekly television. *BOTB* rejects the televised kayfabe of WWE by featuring performers ignoring their on-screen personas while simultaneously developing a new kayfabe based on the characters and promos created for season two of *BOTB*.

Time travel in *BOTB?*: Examining the use of "portals" in *BOTB*'s second season

Thus far, we have explored how *BOTB* takes viewers behind the scenes of their favorite shows. The performers openly use the language associated with their profession and discuss their real-world relationships. It would seem as if the notion of kayfabe does not apply to the *BOTB* universe. However, *BOTB* represents a delicate balancing act between some elements of WWE kayfabe and its own channel-specific kayfabe.

The tenuous nature of this balancing was unmistakable in *BOTB*'s second season. As stated earlier, season two featured created characters based on the real-world contracted talent of the WWE. According to Austin Creed, the logic behind creating these characters was, "If we can't see them a bunch on TV in real life, well this is still real life, in wrestle life over here. Why don't we see them in wrestle life over here?" ("Battle of the Brands S2E3" 2:42-2:51) In this statement, Creed distinguishes between WWE's weekly televised programming and their digital WWE within *WWE SmackDown! vs. Raw 2006*. Perhaps their digital WWE, which featured talent recording promos for their digital counterparts, would allow these performers to showcase different aspects of their personalities and promo abilities. These created characters represented a significant departure from the first season of *BOTB*, which only used wrestlers from the 2005 WWE roster. One of the dangers with using current performers, as opposed to wrestlers from fifteen years ago, is that their employment status can change at any moment. This section explores how *BOTB* navigated a spate of releases in April 2020.

On April 15, 2020, WWE released more than twenty active wrestlers (Casey). Some of the released wrestlers, including EC3, Aiden English, No Way Jose, and Drake Maverick were characters from the in-game storyworld on season two of *BOTB*. Drake Maverick was an integral component of the SmackDown roster as he served as World Heavyweight Champion and developed a rivalry with Drew Gulak's digital counterpart that resulted in a loser gets circumcised match. While the matches between the two performers only happened in the video game, the real-life promos between Drake and Drew were fan favorites. These releases resulted in both GMs needing to reshuffle their booking plans in the digital world as they dealt with the releases of their friends in the real world.

During a recording of season two, episode seventeen of *BOTB*, Austin Creed provides the following explanation of the recording process:

> Ladies and Gentlemen, so you understand, we tried to start doing this at 11 a.m. It's now 4 p.m. The thing that happened is when we are playing a game that is set in a universe such as this. When we have gone back in time and

> certain people have gone through this portal, and certain people stayed on the other side of the portal. There are certain situations where people on the 2006 side of the universe end up going back through the portal to present day. And people from present day end up waking up in the 2006 era. So, from time to time, that occurs in this universe because clearly, those are the rules. So, with that said, you are going to see some new people. And some people are going to be gone because they are back in the present day with us right now. ("Battle of the Brands S2E17" 03:09-03:51)

To explain the missing superstars, the general managers introduce the concept of a time portal. As they are playing a game set in 2006, modern-day performers must have traveled through a portal to participate in this digital version of WWE programming. This explanation provides insight into how performers on the 2021 roster are facing off with the legends from the 2006 roster. While time travel is not typically featured in WWE programming, the term portal refers to released superstars without using the term released. The portal concept was even worked into the feud between Aiden English and Cesaro. Creed provided the following explanation for Aiden English's disappearance in a portal:

> Aiden English is the only one who went through the portal on purpose. He said, "You know what? I've been whipping Cesaro's ass. For weeks we have gone back and forth, but you know who else wants a little piece? You know who else wants a little piece that's been sitting at the commentator's table? That knows how to get it done in the ring?" He went and tagged in his partner Corey Graves. ("Battle of the Brands S2E17" 18:33-18:55)

This explanation simultaneously explains Aiden English's departure while building the foundation for a rivalry between the newly acquired Corey Graves and Cesaro.

During this episode, one wrestler who was "portaled" back to 2006 was Michael McGillicutty. For those unfamiliar, Michael McGillicutty was the name used in *NXT* for WWE superstar Curtis Axel. Unfortunately, Michael McGillicutty was released on April 30, 2020, two weeks after the releases on April 15. This delayed release resulted in the discussion of "another dimensional time change" ("Battle of the Brands S2E18" 14:34-14:35) during the very next *BOTB* episode when Apollo Crews replaces Michael McGillicutty in this fictional universe. One astute commenter addressed the issue of releases while using the language associated with *BOTB* kayfabe, "I know it's years off, but I'm gonna guess that if there is a season three, it'll be using Golden Age and New Generation wrestlers. Less of a risk that they'll vanish down the time portal." According to a poll available on WWE.com ("What is your Favorite WWE Era?"), the Golden Age corresponds to the period from the 1980s to the early 1990s, whereas the New Generation refers to the period

from the early to mid-1990s. As the wrestlers from the previously listed periods are likely to be retired, there is little concern that changes in their employment status will require the GMs to change their in-game rosters.

The previously referenced episodes are not the only times that portal is used in season two of *BOTB*. During a livestream of the in-game SummerSlam, season two episode twenty-eight, Austin Creed's computer malfunctions and the files associated with the GM mode are corrupted. While the explanation refers to real-world events, the GMs developed a kayfabe *BOTB* explanation where the file associated with GM mode went missing, and the GMs had to work together, despite their differences, to recover the files by winning a game of *Minesweeper*. Although SummerSlam is presented as one four-hour event over two recordings, the events were streamed five months apart. In the five months between SummerSlam uploads, some performers left the WWE, resulting in some opponents being listed as portal. For example, Big E had a significant feud with Renee Young heading into the first SummerSlam upload in July 2020, but she left the company in August 2020. Therefore, she was listed as portal for the December 2020 upload of SummerSlam.

As the SummerSlam uploads were livestreams, the GMs received some questions regarding their use of the term portal. The GMs had the following conversation with their live audience:

> Austin Creed: For those of you who don't know what portal means, portal means sometimes we have to shuffle people that are on the show. Take a second…
>
> Prince Pretty: Not sometimes. Like every second day! Man!
>
> Austin Creed: All the time.
>
> Prince Pretty: We've got a full turnover of this damn roster.
>
> Austin Creed: We don't have to explain it. Take a second. Think to yourself on reasons why we might have to do that. ("Battle of the Brands S2E28 Part 2" 11:43-12:00)

As discussed earlier, the GMs work under the assumption that the audience is savvy enough to figure out why the changes in a person's employment status may lead to a portal. The GMs were correct, as some discerning individuals would track changes to the *BOTB* universe in the video's comments. Consider this post from a commenter who noted a total of six changes to the rosters featured in the in-game WWE:

> "Here are the changes that I figured out:
>
> No way Jose -> Dolph Ziggler
>
> Scott Dawson->Michael McGillicutty
>
> EC3->Riddick Moss

Drake Maverick->Isaiah Swerve Scott
Aiden English->Corey Graves
Dash Wilder->Keith Lee."

Another commenter responded to the list with the following chain of superstars: "Harper->No Way Jose->Dolph Ziggler." Dolph Ziggler represented the third unique wrestler occupying the same create-a-wrestler spot in the *BOTB* universe. Thus, while the GMs could not say that a wrestler was "future endeavored" in WWE parlance, fans could connect real-world releases to portals in the *BOTB* universe. The term portal simultaneously allows *BOTB* to maintain its channel-specific kayfabe while potentially following rules developed by WWE. The GM's creation of the term portal fits in with the wrestling tradition of developing specialized terminology. However, unlike previous terms exclusively reserved for wrestling insiders, the term portal is featured in content meant for a large audience.

Storyworld within a Storyworld: How *BOTB* rejects and references WWE's televised kayfabe

While it is never explicitly stated on *BOTB*, there may be rules provided by WWE regarding references to former talent, especially if those individuals are working for rival promotions like Impact Wrestling or AEW. Austin Creed, during a discussion of a high school interaction with Cody Rhodes, stated, "I went to rival high schools with someone who shall not be named. I don't think I'm allowed to talk about him now" ("Battle of the Brands S2E24" 51:50-51:57). In response to Creed, Prince Pretty jokes, "We will call him the Nightmare man" ("52:00-52:01). The "Nightmare man" references former AEW executive vice-president Cody Rhodes, as his nickname is "The American Nightmare."

Beyond creating portals to maintain kayfabe for their digital WWE, Austin Creed and Prince Pretty showcase an ability to develop storylines that integrate real-life events, reference famous wrestling events, and build UpUpDownDown kayfabe. *BOTB* managed to do all three things in two short videos used to lay the groundwork for *BOTB*'s second season. Season two begins with Austin Creed challenging Tyler Breeze to a wrestling match for the number one pick in the upcoming superstar draft. Creed makes the argument that "Tyler Breeze has never, in his life, defeated Austin Creed in a wrestling match. Never Ever" ("Battle of the Brands - Season 2 We're Back!" 2:21-2:29). Breeze rebuts the claim of having multiple wrestling victories, and Creed responds with, "How is that the case when Austin Creed has never had a wrestling match in WWE? Thank you" ("Battle of the Brands - Season 2: We're Back!" 2:34-2:40). One thing accomplished in this brief interaction is establishing UpUpDownDown personality Austin Creed as a separate character

from WWE superstar Xavier Woods even if the same real-world performer plays both characters. This idea of a performer playing multiple characters fits nicely within the wrestling tradition as many performers cycle through many names and gimmicks before becoming successful.

BTOB's next episode begins with Tyler Breeze "walking out" to cut a promo in front of a digital crowd. This walk out features Breeze's WWE theme song as he holds the UpUpDownDown Championship. Austin Creed picks Cesaro to wrestle on his behalf as he is suffering from a real-world Achilles injury. Creed gloats as he tells Tyler Breeze, "You're screwed, Breeze. You're screwed. You can't beat Cesaro. Why did he get called up? Because he beat the hell out of you so well" ("Battle of the Brands S2E2" 4:18-4:26). Unfortunately for Creed, Cesaro turns heel and aligns with Breeze, thus forming LeftRightLeftRight. As Cesaro reveals his LeftRightLeftRight shirt, he confesses, "It was me, Austin. It was me all along." ("Battle of the Brands S2E2" 5:23-5:27). This comment serves as an intertextual reference to when Vince McMahon revealed himself as the Greater Power to Steve Austin on the June 7th, 1999, episode of *Monday Night Raw*.

In ten minutes over two episodes, the performers created a narrative arc that not only applies to *BOTB* but to the prestigious UpUpDownDown championship. Furthermore, these segments establish the channel's kayfabe with the villain Tyler Breeze developing a gaming equivalent of the New World Order, the stable of wrestlers that led a storyline invasion of WCW in the late 1990s. Tyler Breeze would take all the actions expected by a heel inspired by the NWO, including expanding his power by finding new stable members, creating his own title, airing promos reminiscent of the New World Order and, of course, developing merchandise. The performers may not play the characters we see on weekly television, but this digital WWE universe allows them to create their own kayfabe that simultaneously stands alone and references events from both the WWE televised universe and real life.

Conclusion

To close, let's revisit Austin Creed's assertion that UpUpDownDown exists as a "kingdom within a kingdom" ("Battle of the Brands Season 2: GMs Press Conference" 12:05-12:08). As an ostensibly sovereign entity, *BOTB* shows us the evolution of kayfabe in the meta-fan era. Kayfabe is no longer a singular construct that exclusively refers to the kayfabe of the televised product. In its establishment of a series kayfabe within a company kayfabe, UpUpDownDown's *BOTB* paves the way for other performers to create their own storyworlds underneath the WWE banner.

These storyworlds give performers an additional outlet for their creativity and give fans more material to enjoy and examine. Despite the difficulty of balancing

different conceptualizations of kayfabe, *BOTB* became a series rich with meaning for the audience. Given the depth of the material featured in the series, fans could watch or rewatch episodes and leave with different perspectives. These repeat viewings allow fans to explore further the intertextual and metatextual references from the performers on the channel and the fans in the comment section. Austin Creed once responded to fan criticism of his in-game booking with the following rant, "Some people were like Woods is a bad GM. Then why are you guys watching everything so intently with the UpUpDownDown championship? Who do you think is the GM of that?" ("Battle of the Brands #56" 18:56-19:05) While fans can certainly criticize his in-game booking tendencies, there should be no doubt about how his creation of UpUpDownDown and *BOTB* has changed the landscape for discussions of kayfabe.

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Kayfabe and Authenticity: The Challenges of Extending Professional Wrestling Storyworlds to Comics

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The storyworlds of professional wrestling are defined by the contentious and ever-evolving relationship between fantasy and reality, framed here in terms of "kayfabe" (i.e., the performative conceit that professional wrestling is a legitimate sporting contest). This paper analyzes the challenges of adapting professional wrestling's kayfabe storyworlds to the comic book page through three case studies: Marvel Comics' WCW (1992–1993), *Super Genius'* WWE Superstars (2013–2015), *and BOOM! Studios'* WWE (2017–2019). *Each of these adaptations advances a distinct approach to storytelling and relationship to the core product of live professional wrestling. In seeking a sports-like presentation, Marvel's* WCW *reveals the limits of kayfabe and the logic of professional wrestling beyond the confines of the live event. Super Genius'* WWE Superstars *departs from the narrative conventions of professional wrestling as a genre, and instead seeks authenticity to WWE's corporate identity in the Network era. Finally, BOOM! Studios'* WWE *represents a return to kayfabe and the narrative logic of professional wrestling, updating* WCW*'s approach for the so-called "reality era" and its "smart" fans. In adapting professional wrestling storyworlds from different eras in markedly different ways, these comics are authentic to different aspects of a genre defined by inauthenticity.*

Keywords: adaptation; authenticity; comic books; kayfabe; professional wrestling; transmedia storytelling

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Despite its commitment to long-form serialized storytelling featuring violent confrontations between colorful, vaguely superhuman characters, the genre of professional wrestling has only been represented in comic book form sporadically. No doubt this owes partly to the fact that, as Eero Laine correctly observes, "Professional wrestling is theatre" and developed specifically in relation to the possibilities and limitations of the live event (1). Whether considered as a unique form of specifically theatrical performance or as a medium-agnostic genre defined by a suite of distinctive narrative conventions, it's undeniable that professional

wrestling has lived primarily in the theatrical space and mediated derivations thereof, both live (simultaneous television or streaming broadcasts) and recorded (retrospectives, repeats, clips, archives, etc.). But as the COVID era of empty-arena shows so forcefully demonstrated, it is not just the liveness of the event that matters; for one, the presence and participation of the audience in that shared space is equally crucial (see Fontaine; Ford). Adapting the characters, narrative conventions, and physical action of the squared circle to other media, then, can be considered similarly to other forms of adaptation, where ontological incompatibilities between media necessarily result in changes to the form, content, and affect of the material being adapted. The specific appeals of live professional wrestling—the physical bodies and athleticism of the performers; the improvisatory quality of the matches; the participatory audience and the possibility that they might influence the direction of the serial narrative; the possibility of slippage between the fictional ("kayfabe") storyworld occupied by the characters and the real world occupied by the athletes performing them—all resist adaptation to the comic book page. Given such incompatibilities, adapting professional wrestling to the comic book page risks stripping the genre of just about everything that makes it unique and compelling to its fans, effectively reducing it to de-powered superheroes engaging in repetitive sporting contests. This article will focus specifically on how professional wrestling's narrative content is modified through the process of adaptation from live event to comic book, with particular attention paid to how kayfabe has been mobilized in different eras.

Given professional wrestling's structural relationship to the live event, the relative absence of comics adapting these characters, stories, and storyworlds makes more sense. Nevertheless, there have been at least a few attempts to do so, and I will grapple with three of them here. First, *WCW: World Championship Wrestling* (Marvel Comics, 1992–1993), which ran for just twelve issues, offers what might be described as an early failure in transmedia storytelling, providing fans with the same kind of content that could be seen on television each week on shows like *WCW Saturday Night*, albeit in a different format. While the ideal of transmedia storytelling as articulated by Henry Jenkins would see episodes within a singular and coherent storyworld spread across different kinds of mediated experiences, "with each medium [doing] what it does best," Marvel's *WCW* maintains the genre conventions of the original televised product despite the shift to comics and essentially operates within a separate storyworld whose continuity with the televised product is ambiguous at best (*Convergence Culture* 96). By contrast, the more recent series *WWE Superstars* (Super Genius, 2013–2015) adapts the WWE Universe in a very different and less literal way. Despite being co-written by former

WWE performer Mick "Cactus Jack/Dude Love/Mankind" Foley, *WWE Superstars* largely abandons depictions of in-ring competition altogether and instead presents the company's iconic characters, props, and scenarios in generically unfamiliar contexts. Across its three story arcs, the series reimagines the WWE Universe first as a hardboiled noir, then as a *Rashomon*-inspired comic mystery, and finally as a futuristic sci-fi story set on Mars. WWE's most recent attempt at comics, the eponymous *WWE* (BOOM! Studios, 2017–2019), ran for twenty-five regular issues and is undoubtedly the most successful and satisfying comic from a pure storytelling perspective. Written by self-professed wrestling fan Dennis Hopeless (perhaps best known as the writer of Marvel's *Spider-Woman* and *All-New X-Men*), this series adapts and expands upon completed storylines from the company's recent past, filling in the gaps between televised matches and promos with fictionalized "behind-the-scenes" material and fleshing out characters' motivations and backstories via flashbacks and first-person narration (Yehl).

Significantly, Hopeless' *WWE* was described by publisher BOOM! Studios as "the most authentic line of ongoing WWE comics" ("WWE"). As the *only* ongoing line of WWE comics at the time, this was perhaps not a very meaningful declaration; however, the concept of authenticity is an interesting one to consider against all three of the aforementioned series, especially in relation to professional wrestling's qualified relationship to authenticity more generally. The term comes up again and again in scholarly analyses of professional wrestling, but with little consistency. For instance, Jenkins finds authenticity in the "pain and rage" stoked by wrestling's narratives, particularly when they draw upon "populist myths of economic exploitation and class solidarity, [feed] a hunger for homosocial bonding, or [speak] to utopian fantasies of empowerment" ("Never Trust a Snake" 52); in other words, professional wrestling itself is largely inauthentic, but the affective audience reactions it provokes are genuine. Laine associates authenticity with the "hardcore" style, which lays bare the physical pain endured by performers in a visceral and undeniable way even as it also necessarily exposes the inauthenticity of the sporting contest itself (62); similarly, Lucy Nevitt points to "Pain [as] the authentic core of wrestling," that which "sets wrestling apart from stage and film fighting and is its central defence against accusations from outsiders that wrestling is 'fake'" (84). Andrew Zolides locates authenticity in wrestlers' public performances outside of the squared circle, namely on social media (56), while Cory Barker's analysis of WWE's own forays into social media production reveals that "the authentic and the real are purposefully inaccessible in the realm of professional wrestling" (170). Despite their varied interpretations, what all of these disparate claims share is a recognition that the core product offered by professional wrestling—the characters, the matches, the

angles and feuds—are fundamentally inauthentic; if authenticity can be found, it will only appear around the margins of the staged performance.

So what would it mean, then, for a comic book to be "authentic" to a genre largely premised on inauthenticity? At root, the question comes back around to the irresistible and inescapable concept of kayfabe: that is, "the presentation of professional wrestling as sport that is not predetermined" (Laine 19). Imagine if the Marvel Cinematic Universe purported to be a documentary—the myriad efforts required to sustain that illusion (even if nobody believed it for a second!) would be akin to kayfabe. The obviously scripted, clearly pre-determined, and resolutely non-physical representations offered by comic books would seem to foreclose on the possibility of maintaining kayfabe, and yet these comics largely do just that. However, there are nuances between the three comics' approaches, and in their relationships to kayfabe and authenticity, that are worth parsing with greater specificity. If *WCW* is authentic to anything, it is to the look of the televised product and to the strictures of kayfabe as adhered to in the early 1990s; the comic thereby reveals the limits of kayfabe and the logic of professional wrestling beyond the confines of the live event. By contrast, *WWE Superstars* departs from the narrative conventions of professional wrestling itself and instead seeks authenticity to WWE's corporate identity in the Network era. This series, like much of the original content WWE produced for the WWE Network, recontextualized the company's branded iconography in non-sportive contexts in a push for content diversification beyond their core wrestling-based product. Finally, *WWE* represents a return to kayfabe and the narrative logic of professional wrestling, updating *WCW*'s approach for the so-called "reality era" and its "smart" fans; if *WWE* is truly the "most authentic" line of wrestling comics, it is because it mobilizes fans' "insider" knowledge of performers' lives outside of WWE's fictional storyworld in order to heighten their emotional investment in specific characters/performers, as well as in the WWE brand more generally. Ultimately, in adapting professional wrestling storyworlds in markedly different ways, all three of these comics are authentic to different aspects of this inherently inauthentic genre. While this analysis should be of primary interest to scholars working in the fields of professional wrestling studies and comics studies, my findings may also be of interest to those working in adaptation studies, and media studies more generally, insofar as they engage with an understudied form of adaptation (professional wrestling/"sports entertainment" to comics) and reflect some of the challenges inherent to both adaptation and transmedia storytelling.

Case Study #1: Marvel Comics' *World Championship Wrestling*

For most of its history, professional wrestling's approach to storytelling has been closely linked to the imperative that the fictional illusion be maintained at all times

in order to "protect the business." Writing in the late 1990s, Jenkins described the narrative conventions of televised professional wrestling thusly:

> the programs' formats mimic the structures and visual styles of non-fiction television, of sports coverage, news broadcasts, and talk shows. The fiction is, of course, that all of this fighting is authentic, spontaneous, unscripted. The WWF narrative preserves the illusion at all costs. There is no stepping outside the fiction, no acknowledgement of the production process or the act of authorship. When the performers are featured in *WWF Magazine*, they are profiled in character. Story segments are told in the form of late-breaking news reports or framed as interviews. The commentators are taken by surprise, interrupted by seemingly unplanned occurrences. ("Never Trust a Snake" 51)

From April 1992 to March 1993, Marvel's *WCW* comic extended this logic from the television product to the comic book medium, essentially remediating the televised format using standard comics conventions: with just one exception, a significant portion of each issue is devoted to standard in-ring competition, narrated by a team of ringside commentators via a glut of caption boxes.[1] While the comic book medium is fundamentally incapable of maintaining the illusion that the narrative is unscripted or "real" in any meaningful sense, it compensates for this lack by presenting a more comprehensive account of a world in which wrestling *is* real than is possible on television. Whenever the narrative ventures beyond the ring—whether to the arena's backstage area (in issue #9), to a children's hospital (#8), or to a wrestling-themed "bruise cruise" (#3)—we see the law of kayfabe in full effect: as on the televised product, there is "no stepping outside the fiction" in these comics. Indeed, the comic goes out of its way to characterize professional wrestling in no uncertain terms as a legitimate sport; as Sting announces in the first issue, "Wrestling's a sport--! The only *true* sport! No wimpy time-outs, no padding, or protection! We work for our reputations every stinking night!" (Lackey, *WCW: World Championship Wrestling Vol. 1, No. 1* 27). In short, the comic provides a snapshot of kayfabe as practiced throughout most of the genre's history and into the early 1990s—as represented by an insistence on portraying professional wrestling as sport—even as the very premise of the comic undermines the claim: if wrestling was

[1] As I've written elsewhere, the difference between remediation and adaptation is important: "an adaptation is a text in which "the content has been borrowed, but the medium has not been appropriated or quoted." A remediation is essentially the inverse, wherein the medium is the focus of the appropriation and the content is irrelevant. Of course, it's also possible for a text to adapt and remediate simultaneously" (Jeffries, *Comic Book Film Style* 16). For more on remediation and its distinctiveness from adaptation, see pp. 13–16.

a sport, rather than a narrative genre along the lines of the superhero or musical theatre (on the latter, see Laine 5), could a comic book focusing on play-by-play action alone reasonably sustain itself and engage its readers, even for a single issue?[2] The appeal of professional wrestling clearly lies in its combination of sport—the physical bodies and the incredible feats of athleticism they're able to perform—and narrative storytelling, both within an individual match and as a long-form serialized storyworld.

One challenge that *WCW* faced early in its publication run related to its subordinate position relative to the company's televised live events. As a storytelling genre, professional wrestling is unusually subject to real-world contingencies that can force the bookers (i.e., storytellers) to change the direction of the planned narrative on the fly; these range from an unanticipated audience reaction (whether positive or negative), an injury that sidelines a performer in the middle of a feud, or even a performer leaving the company. The latter occurred in 1992 when Lex Luger left WCW to join Vince McMahon's World Bodybuilding Federation, and the World Wrestling Federation thereafter. Luger wrestled his last match in WCW on February 29, 1992, which would be roughly contemporaneous with the first issue of *WCW* hitting newsstands.[3] Given that comic books must pass through multiple stages of creative work and production before seeing print, the content of any individual issue must be locked in several months ahead of publication, resulting in a significant time-lag between the narratives being told on live television compared to those on the printed page. In the series' debut issue, Luger is clearly established as the series' central character and a formidable heel champion, which makes it surprising when he is hastily written out of the story in the final pages of the second issue. After successfully defending his championship in a 3-on-1 handicap match, Luger "[takes his] leave" for "greener pastures," championship reign intact (Lackey, *WCW: World Championship Wrestling Vol. 1, No. 2* 26). Presumably written prior to Luger's loss to Sting at *SuperBrawl II* but published after the fact, the way the comic writes Luger out of the story boldly conflicts with the narrative as told to television viewers. Such are the challenges inherent in serialized transmedia storytelling, which demands

[2] While this article focuses specifically on comics adaptations of professional wrestling, there is a broader world of sports-themed comics that are relevant to this discussion. While Marvel and DC have made some attempts to integrate sports and superheroes (Marvel's short-lived *NFL SuperPro* [1991–1992], whose publication history partially overlaps with Marvel's *WCW*, comes to mind), the genre of sports comics is most popular in the Japanese context. As in some of the wrestling comics discussed here, the emphasis is squarely on character and narrative rather than play-by-play action. See Schodt 60–62 and Collins 1736–39.

[3] Comic books are typically "cover dated" two months after their street date, so *WCW* #1's April 1992 cover date would put it on newsstands in February.

coordination and consistency across platforms (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 95–96): the different production schedules of comics and live television, as well as professional wrestling's relationship to contingency, only magnify these challenges. BOOM! Studios' *WWE*'s similarly close relationship to televised narratives solves this problem in a novel way, but before getting to that series we'll first turn our attention to a comic book that adapts WWE's storyworld far more loosely.

Case Study #2: Super Genius' *WWE Superstars*

WWE Superstars effectively takes the opposite tack compared to *WCW*, discarding wrestling's connection to sport almost entirely and focusing instead of telling novel stories with familiar characters and iconography from across the history of WWE. The series' co-writer, former wrestler Mick Foley, described his approach in direct opposition to that taken in earlier comics like Marvel's *WCW*: "When I got together with my co writer [sic] Shane Riches we did not want to just give a comic book version of the WWE show. We just didn't want to give fans the same thing they can see every Monday and Friday night on television" (MacDonald). If Marvel's *WCW* presents a parallel version of WCW's primary televised storyworld, *WWE Superstars* would be better conceptualized as a series of "Elseworlds" takes on the WWE Universe.[4] Additionally, if *WCW* requires its readers to accept the illusion of kayfabe, *WWE Superstars* follows the lead of contemporary professional wrestling by redefining the genre not as sport but rather as "sports entertainment"—a deliberately vague category coined by Linda McMahon in 1989 to dodge a New Jersey tax on tickets to sporting events that has since come to be a cornerstone of WWE's brand identity (Jeffries and Kannegiesser 65).[5]

All of the comics considered in this article should be understood not as professional wrestling texts themselves but rather as adaptations of televised professional wrestling. Linda Hutcheon usefully theorizes adaptation as a three-staged process: first, a text is changed in some way, whether in genre, medium, format, or point-of-view; second, a new text is created that (re-)interprets and (re)creates the older text (i.e., repetition with difference); and third, the adaptation is received in dialogue with its originary text as an adaptation thereof (7–8). We can

[4] In DC Comics, "Elseworlds" refer to stories set in alternate realities compared to the main storyworld established in the company's ongoing titles.

[5] AEW's success as an upstart promotion has been largely contingent on its explicit embrace of professional wrestling, as a direct contrast to WWE's alignment with sports entertainment. On the March 16, 2022 episode of AEW's *Dynamite*, for instance, former WCW and WWE performer Chris Jericho executed a self-reflexive heel turn premised entirely on defining himself as a "sports entertainer" rather than a "professional wrestler." The heat Jericho generated during this promo speaks volumes about many wrestling fans' vocal antipathy for WWE's coinage. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0upHBa1z1LE for the full promo.

see how each of these three stages is deployed in *WWE Superstars*' first arc, titled "Money in the Bank." First, the characters and narrative logic of the contemporary WWE is transposed into a new medium (comics) and a distinct generic context (hardboiled noir). The comic then recasts the WWE roster in roles that loosely correspond to their in-ring personas: for instance, the polarizing babyface John Cena becomes a disgraced police officer beloved by half the town and hated by the other, the McMahons ("the Authority") become a crime family that pulls the strings from behind the scenes, and CM Punk becomes a straight-edge anarchist that wants to tear the whole corrupt system down. The narrative draws upon and assumes the reader's familiarity with the in-ring histories of these characters to provide an implied backstory for the animosities and ambitions that fuel the comic's noir plot. Despite the lack of in-ring competition, the comic gives its characters ample opportunity to shout their catchphrases (the first issue opens with the words "You can't see me") and perform their signature maneuvers, and even culminates in something resembling WWE's annual "Money in the Bank" ladder match, wherein the first competitor to climb a ladder and retrieve a briefcase suspended above the ring wins a contract for a future title match. (In the comic, there's a briefcase full of stolen cash hidden in the ceiling above a wrestling ring.) By transposing WWE's iconography and personalities into a new genre, the comic provides the "repetition with difference" that allows readers to read the comic in dialogue with the core televised product, and allows fans to apply their knowledge of WWE in a new narrative context.

Like Marvel's *WCW*, *WWE Superstars* provides a snapshot of how a professional wrestling promotion wants to be understood by its fans at a particular moment in time: whereas *WCW* encapsulates a more straight-forward era defined by kayfabe and a heightened sports-like presentation, *WWE Superstars* emphasizes how the company's branded iconography (including its larger-than-life characters) moves across genres and platforms. Significantly, the narrative takes place in the fictional metropolis of Titan City, a reference to WWE's old corporate name, Titan Sports. This places "Money in the Bank" in the company of several other of WWE's contemporaneous attempts at content diversification, many of which are similarly premised on reimagining the company as a geographical space. Such texts include *Slam City*, a series of animated shorts in which WWE characters find new jobs in the titular Slam City; *Scooby Doo! WrestleMania Mystery*, a direct-to-DVD animated film in which Scooby and the gang travel to WWE City to attend WrestleMania; and *Camp WWE*, an animated series that reimagines the WWE Universe as a summer camp, with WWE Superstars and executives reimagined as campers and counsellors. The consistency with which WWE imagines itself as a physical space is notable (see

Jeffries and Kannegiesser) and evokes Jonathan Gray's claim that, through our media consumption, "we are all part-time residents of the highly populated cities of Time Warner, DirecTV, AMC, Sky, Comcast, ABC, Odeon, and so forth" (1). Of course, it's no coincidence that each of the aforementioned WWE adaptations is roughly contemporaneous with the launch of the WWE Network in January 2014, which was the company's attempt to be considered in the same breath as the massive corporations cited by Gray—in the company's own words, as "an integrated media organization and recognized leader in global entertainment" rather than a professional wrestling promotion (Jeffries, "Introduction" 2).

If "Money in the Bank" is an intergeneric adaptation of the contemporaneous WWE, *Superstars*' third and final arc, "Legends," narrativizes the logic underlying the WWE Network as a whole. Billed as a comprehensive archive of WWE history, including every television episode, every pay-per-view event, self-mythologizing documentaries, and even tape libraries acquired from defunct promotions like WCW, the WWE Network allows viewers to keep up-to-date on the current product while also diving into the history of professional wrestling (as curated by and around WWE). "Legends" explicitly borrows its premise from Marvel Comics' first major crossover event, *Secret Wars* (1984–1985), putting performers from various eras together on the same page. Whereas *Secret Wars* takes place on Battleworld, "Legends" takes place on "Battleground World," a clumsy portmanteau of *Secret Wars*' Battleworld and WWE's *Battleground*, one of the company's annual pay-per-view events. One area of Battleground World is "WWE Island," whose visualization is a clear tip of the hat to professional wrestling's roots in the traveling carnival. At the climax of the narrative, Battleground World is revealed to be Mars, purchased by WWE in 2217 and terraformed into "the ultimate venue in sports entertainment" (Foley and Riches, *WWE Superstars Vol. 1, No. 12* 1). With this reveal in issue #12, the narrative is fairly explicit in portraying Battleground World as an allegorical stand-in for the WWE Network. In the comic, Triple H explains how "temporal displacement rays" can be used:

> to pluck *WWE Superstars* from any time period and zap 'em here to battle in an era-spanning tournament to prove who is the greatest *WWE Superstar* of all time. Over *one hundred thousand* satellites capture every matchup and smackdown to broadcast across the *WWE* universe. Any setting. Any time period. Any WWE Superstar. All for just $9.99. (1; emphases in original)

The $9.99 cost cited in the story is not arbitrary; it is the exact price of a monthly WWE Network subscription, which was a constant refrain on WWE programming

in the wake of its 2014 launch.[6] It's possible to read this moment both as an on-the-nose bit of cross-promotion and, more charitably, as a parody of WWE's incessant shilling for the WWE Network following its initial launch.

As Shane Toepfer observes in his ethnographic study of wrestling fans, a wide swath of WWE's viewers have felt alienated by the company's transition from a professional wrestling federation designed to resemble and heighten the appeal of competitive sports to a "sports entertainment" brand in which in-ring competition is increasingly marginalized for the sake of other forms of storytelling and spectacle (104). This transition is well-captured by the differences between Marvel's *WCW* and Super Genius' *WWE Superstars*, the former of which maintains the core logic of the televised product while the latter abandons altogether any and all pretence that professional wrestling is a sport. Despite being a niche product aimed squarely at existing WWE fans, *WWE Superstars* is notable precisely for what it lacks: actual *wrestling*. Recall Sting's impassioned devotion to in-ring competition from *WCW* #1, which specifically exalts those aspects of the genre that resemble sport: physicality, competition, and fair play. Compare this to how an off-panel "Rowdy" Roddy Piper describes an impossible match-up—a hypothetical "dream match"—between John Cena and the late Ultimate Warrior in *WWE Superstars* #9: "It's entertainment" (Foley and Riches, *WWE Superstars Vol. 1, No. 9* 7). More than an unusual attempt at intergeneric adaptation (though it certainly is that), *WWE Superstars* is emblematic of WWE's ongoing shift from a professional wrestling promotion to a media empire, from an entity bound by the narrative logic of kayfabe to a corporation that imagines itself as "an integrated media organization and recognized leader in global entertainment," unrestricted by genre or medium (qtd. in Jeffries, "Introduction" 2).

Case Study #3: BOOM! Studios' *WWE*

This brings us to WWE's most recent attempt, as of this writing at least, to adapt its characters to the comic book page. The narrative approach taken by writer Dennis Hopeless in BOOM! Studios' *WWE* bears some surface similarities to Marvel's *WCW* but is also distinct in some crucial ways. Both comics seek to tell stories set in the storyworld established in their respective promotion's regular televised content (*WCW Saturday Night* in *WCW*; *Raw, SmackDown* and various pay-per-view events in *WWE*), but whereas *WCW* focuses primarily on the moment-to-moment action of specific matches, *WWE* takes a broader view in which individual matches and championships are contextualized within characters' overall careers. If the purpose

[6] In the United States, the WWE Network has ceased to exist as a standalone streaming platform since the publication of the comic and is now housed as part of NBC's Peacock service.

of *WCW* was to replicate the existing televised product in comic book form, *WWE*'s goal seems to be to canonize specific storylines while also enhancing readers' emotional investment in particular characters or performers. In contrast to BOOM! Studios' claim to authenticity, though, *WWE*'s adherence to kayfabe is especially inauthentic to the contemporary WWE, which is lauded by fans for its self-reflexivity and increased willingness to acknowledge its status as performative fiction (Jeffries, "Introduction" 6). In this respect, *WWE* is more closely aligned with previous wrestling comics like *WCW* in its positing of a world where professional wrestling is real and performers "live the gimmick" 24/7. In the pursuit of narrative consistency with the televised product, however, *WWE* is ultimately inauthentic both to the contingency inherent to the genre—that feeling that anything can happen, including performers going "off-script"—and to the self-reflexivity that defines the current phase of the company. As in actual professional wrestling, though, authenticity does seep in around the margins of the text, and it is clearly written for an audience of "smart" fans capable of decoding such references.

As suggested above, what's distinctive about *WWE* compared to *WCW* is precisely its relationship to specific, clearly defined story arcs that have been previously seen on television, and with which readers are assumed to be familiar. Rather than attempt to engage with contemporaneous, ongoing television storylines in either an additive or reflective capacity, *WWE* instead retells and expands upon significant storylines from the company's recent past. The narrative interest, then, is not of the *what will happen next?* variety but rather stems from how the comic will modify or augment readers' understanding of these familiar stories and characters. In addition to the change in medium, the "difference" part of the Hutcheon's "repetition with difference" criterion is satisfied by changes in storytelling structure—the comics' narratives are radically streamlined compared to how they originally played out over months of televised live events—and point-of-view, which reframes the narratives through the first-person lens of characters like Seth Rollins, Bayley, and AJ Styles. As such, these comics don't simply transfer the storytelling logic and surface aesthetics of the professional wrestling genre to a new medium, as was the case with *WCW*; they also adapt and streamline particular stories and character arcs, offering fans novel information and insights into the characters as a result of the shift to first-person narration. With respect to kayfabe, then, *WWE* seeks to have its cake and eat it too, extending kayfabe beyond the live event in precisely the way that Jenkins ascribes to '90s WWF while also mobilizing the much higher level of knowledge possessed by the average wrestling fan today compared to the early 1990s.

The decision to mine completed, rather than ongoing, storylines for narrative content makes a great deal of practical sense and allows *WWE* to sidestep the difficulties that Marvel's *WCW* encountered with Lex Luger's departure from WCW, which left that comic without its central antagonist after just two issues. Following the precedent set by *WWE Superstars*, it also gives WWE another outlet for the kind of self-mythologizing that its Network documentaries have specialized in, which allow performers to break kayfabe, appearing as themselves and reflecting upon their careers, albeit in a context that is always authorized and controlled by WWE. These documentaries (e.g., the WWE Network's *WWE 24* series) encourage WWE fans to develop meaningful parasocial bonds with the performers themselves, rather than (or in addition to) the fictional characters they portray on television. Where *WWE* is more similar to Marvel's *WCW* than WWE Network documentaries, however, is in the comic's steadfast refusal to break kayfabe; even as it consistently assumes a "smart" reader with a great deal of knowledge about the performers' real lives, the characters themselves think and behave as though professional wrestling was a legitimate sporting competition.

CarrieLynn D. Reinhard's discussion of kayfabe's co-constructedness and fans' emotional investment in professional wrestling is useful in understanding the potential appeal of *WWE* compared to actual professional wrestling. As Reinhard writes, "Kayfabe can feel real to fans because of how they emotionally engage with professional wrestling and make sense of what they see. If fans have a connection to the wrestlers and their stories, then they can become entangled in the kayfabe, suspend their disbelief, and believe in the fiction" (33). Certainly, fans can become immersed and invested in a match in which the outcome is predetermined but unknown to them—that's a testament to professional wrestlers' in-ring storytelling abilities—but what about when the outcomes are *known* and the story obviously written, as is the case in *WWE*? In these comics, readers shift into a comparative mode, wherein interest is generated by how the comics restructure and refine familiar narratives compared to their original televised versions. In particular, readers would be interested to see how Hopeless draws upon performers' real lives and personalities (as discernible from interviews, documentaries, social media, etc.) to flesh out their kayfabe counterparts.

The first year of the series centers on The Shield (Seth Rollins, Dean Ambrose, and Roman Reigns). The series' first arc (issues #1–4) details the rise of Rollins as a solo star, beginning with his betrayal of The Shield and culminating in his triumphant return from injury at the 2015 *Extreme Rules* pay-per-view event. While Rollins' injury was referenced on WWE programming, the comic takes readers into the hospital and rehab facilities, and even Rollins' home, fleshing out

his return to the ring as an act of defiance against Triple H and the Authority. As such, this first arc functions as a kayfabe counterpart to the *WWE 24* documentary focusing on Rollins in this same period. The second arc (#5–8) starts at *Extreme Rules* but shifts its focus to Ambrose, ending just at the outset of his main event push with his victory at the 2016 *Money in the Bank* pay-per-view. Much of this arc centers around an unlikely friendship between Ambrose and Sasha Banks as they travel from city to city together. The third arc (#9–12) again picks up precisely where the second one left off—at the 2016 *Money in the Bank* event, immediately following Ambrose's victory—but shifts, finally, to Reigns' perspective. Much of the narrative attention here is devoted to understanding how Reigns struggles with his negative crowd reaction among "smart" fans, which is typically understood as a response to bad booking rather than any specific antipathy toward Reigns himself, either as a character or performer.

The series' second year featured a series of three disconnected storylines, detailing Bayley's role in the "Women's Evolution" (#14–17), the tortured friendship between Canadian indie-circuit darlings Kevin Owens and Sami Zayn (#18–20), and AJ Styles' journey from the indies to WWE (#21–25). Each of these story arcs is defined by a common narrational approach, defined by non-linear storytelling (i.e., flashbacks) motivated by the protagonist's first-person perspective. Focalizing the narration in this way provides an automatic difference from the highly restricted, omniscient narration provided in WWE's televised programming and grants the comic reader access to these characters' thoughts and motivations, as well as flashbacks to significant (fictional) moments in their lives prior to signing with WWE (e.g., Ambrose's discovery of backyard "garbage" wrestling; Reigns' struggle with divisive crowd reactions on the high school football field; Owens and Zayn discussing their WWE dreams between indie gigs). Such flashbacks imaginatively extend WWE's kayfabe storyworld backwards in time, retconning these performers' pre-WWE lives to cohere with their current WWE characters. Short for "retroactive continuity," retconning refers to "when an author alters established facts in earlier works in order to make them consistent with later ones" (Wolf 380). In the case of *WWE*, this process effectively takes biographical information about WWE performers' real lives and transforms it into "'facts' about an imaginary world" (Proctor 224). In addition to enhanced narrative continuity, the effect here is also to erase aspects of these performers' biographies beyond WWE's ownership; for instance, Owens and Zayn are seen working the indie circuit under their WWE ring names rather than their real names (Rami Sebei and Kevin Steen, respectively) and Zayn's popular luchador character "El Generico," which he used consistently on the indie circuit, is elided.

While both *WCW* and *WWE* maintain and extend kayfabe beyond the live event, the two adaptations—published more than two decades apart—illustrate an evolution in how professional wrestling addresses its audience. Christian Norman observes that:

> As wrestling fans have become more knowledgeable and participatory, WWE has gradually shifted from addressing the audience as "marks" (who believe wrestling is unscripted or real) to "smarts" (who "know the inside of the business and the secrets behind the ruses—what is real and what is staged both in terms of story lines and moves"). (84)

If *WCW* addresses its narrative to an audience of presumed marks, *WWE* addresses its narrative to a readership of "smarts." For "smart" fans, arguably the most compelling moments in *WWE* are precisely those where the fiction draws upon or even conflicts with their insider knowledge of performers' lives outside of WWE. In issue #19, for instance, Owens refers to Zayn's desire to hear WWE crowds chant "Olé!" (Hopeless, *WWE Vol. 1, No. 19*): for "smart" fans, this reads as an unambiguous, but necessarily implicit, allusion to Zayn's retired El Generico persona. In contrast to Marvel's *WCW*, Hopeless knows that readers know too much about the industry and these performers' real lives to accept the kayfabe storyworld at face value; coded references like this thus function as winks to the "smart" fan, acknowledging and rewarding their knowledge without technically breaking kayfabe.

In some instances, however, *WWE*'s imperative to keep kayfabe goes beyond even that of the televised product, resulting in conflicting versions of the same story. For instance, in June 2016 Reigns was suspended for thirty days following a violation of WWE's "wellness policy," presumably after testing positive for an illicit drug (though not necessarily of the performance-enhancing variety). The transgression was publicly acknowledged by the company ("Roman Reigns Suspended") by Reigns himself (@WWERomanReigns) and even within kayfabe on the June 27, 2016 episode of *Raw* ("Seth Rollins and Dean Ambrose Address"). Like a real-life injury or a contract dispute, Reigns' suspension is another example of how the kayfabe storyworld is subject to real-world contingencies, but whereas Rollins' real-life injury was integrated into the character's narrative trajectory in *WWE*'s first arc, Reigns' drug violation is simply erased and replaced by an absurd narrative contrivance. At the conclusion of *WWE* #10, Reigns gets into a scuffle with Ambrose at Stonehenge while on a European tour, toppling one of the monument's massive stone tablets; Triple H suspends Reigns for his role in the brawl, rewriting history by providing an alternative rationale for his suspension (Hopeless, *WWE Vol. 1, No. 10*).

Conclusion

In closing, we must return to the question of authenticity more directly. *WWE* was sold to fans as the "most authentic" professional wrestling comic book, but what exactly does this mean? Authentic to what, exactly? To professional wrestling as a narrative genre, or to professional wrestling as a business? To the interactions between fictional characters, or to the real lives and motivations of the performers that embody those characters? None of the comics analyzed in this article acknowledge the fundamental inauthenticity at the heart of professional wrestling—that is, its baseline status as a fictional performance featuring performers playing characters that are distinct from their true selves. Paradoxically, however, refusing to acknowledge that inauthenticity may make these comics more authentic to professional wrestling as a narrative genre, which has historically followed the imperative to maintain kayfabe wherever possible.

One way that Marvel's *WCW*, Super Genius' *WWE Superstars,* and BOOM! Studios' *WWE* could all be considered equally "authentic" is by virtue of their relationship to, via licensing agreements, the corporate entities that they bring to the comic book page. As J. Mark Percival writes in his examination of authenticity in cinematic adaptations of *Judge Dredd* comics, "a cultural product or phenomenon can be positioned as authentic when it is authenticated by an individual or institution that has the authority (cultural, social, political) to attribute authenticity to that product or phenomenon" (218). The institutions in this case would be WCW and WWE themselves, who license the use of their brands, characters, and iconography to publishers like Marvel, Super Genius, and BOOM! Studios as a means of diversifying the exploitation of their intellectual property; these corporations also determine what content is acceptable for print (e.g., the representation of wrestling as a legitimate sport in *WCW* and *WWE,* shilling for the WWE Network in *WWE Superstars*) and what is off-limits (e.g., Reigns' violation of WWE's wellness policy).

While these corporate entities have the exclusive legal right to "authorize" licensed products such as these, it is ultimately the fans who determine what succeeds or fails in the world of professional wrestling. Given fans' increased knowledge of the industry and interest in what goes on behind-the-scenes, the generally brief publication spans of these comics suggest that there may be a fundamental disconnect between what fans want or expect from a comic book adaptation of professional wrestling and what these companies are willing to give them. It's also possible, as the partial list of appeals in the opening paragraph of this article suggests, that comics are simply incompatible with what fans love about professional wrestling, and that even the most "authentic" adaptation couldn't hope

to measure up to the real deal. Moreover, the comic book format is disempowering compared to the live event, which has accustomed fans to a level of participation and spontaneity that comic books are unable to replicate. Despite the repeated failure of these series, they remain compelling curiosities at the periphery of the business and should be considered alongside other professional wrestling spin-offs (e.g., cartoons like *Hulk Hogan's Rock 'n' Wrestling*, feature films like *No Holds Barred*, and reality television series like *Total Divas* as a window into how corporations like WWE want professional wrestling to be understood, and what they think their fans want as a narrative supplement to live events.

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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.

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[1] 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,

[1] "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[2] 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

[2] 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 unbegrudgingly 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. Afterall, "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 19th 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 27th one fan tweeted "also pretty incredible that Vince has put Kofi in [the] world title storyline. this was unthinkable 3 months ago" (@hhhbks). 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 19th 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 26th 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 26th *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 26th 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 19th 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 wresters 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" (@jimmyyadig). 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 👏🏾👏🏾👏🏾 #WresteMania" (@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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Myth! Allegory! Ekphrasis!
Professional Wrestling & the Poetics of Kayfabe

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This essay aims to answer Kit MacFarlane's call for a poetics of professional wrestling by describing and analyzing a "poetics of kayfabe" drawn from the world of contemporary creative writing. Poems by Michael Holmes, Colette Arrand, and Gregory Pardlo are analyzed in-depth through the lens of "kayfabe," insider jargon for the maintenance of the boundary between the performer's choreography and craft, and the audience's belief (or doubt) in the reality of the performance. The work of these three contemporary poets provides evidence for a poetics of kayfabe, which mixes rhetoric and poetics, analysis and art, and highlights their interpenetration. Not only do the poets themselves meditate on professional wrestling and kayfabe, their work offers a way to re-see Barthes' ideas about professional wrestling as a "spectacle of excess": a poetics of kayfabe offers insight into the "spectacle of suffering" and the potential experience of desire, analytical thinking, and empathy. A poetics of kayfabe drawn from the world of creative writing, then, offers us a powerful toolkit for the analysis of professional wrestling, and this essay suggests that scholars of professional wrestling might be inspired to focus on myth, analogy, allegory, and ekphrasis (the tools poets use to make sense, make worlds, and make sense of the world).

Keywords: kayfabe, poetry, poetics, professional wrestling

Introduction

In "A Sport, A Tradition, A Religion, A Joke: The Need for a Poetics of In-Ring Storytelling and a Reclamation of Professional Wrestling as a Global Art," Kit MacFarlane makes a strong case that the cultural analysis of professional wrestling may be "insufficient" to understand the nuances of the artistic construction of wrestling matches or grasp the ways in which wrestlers as artists and performers are enmeshed in the characters they play (152). MacFarlane notes that much work on professional wrestling tends to emphasize the ideological implications of the spectacle and the industry and to disregard the poetics of the craft and "artistic construction" of wrestling as a "dramatic art form" (138). To correct this imbalance,

MacFarlane proposes a new approach. Drawing on David Bordwell's poetics of cinema, MacFarlane argues "it makes sense to turn to the similar realm of film" in order to "begin the mammoth task of establishing a foundation of poetical analysis in wrestling" (143). Bordwell's *Poetics of Cinema* puts "the film as an artwork at the center of study" (qtd. in MacFarlane 143), and MacFarlane follows suit, adapting Bordwell's insights to the study of in-ring narratives, a move that affords a shift away from cultural analyses that privilege ideological claims to focus instead on the "text" of professional wrestling. MacFarlane makes the case for textual analysis, an emphasis on professional wrestling's visual poetics (especially the "choreography" and "psychology" of its performances) and an understanding of a match's historical and artistic contexts (145).

One of the most persuasive aspects of MacFarlane's 2012 essay is the way he draws on the voices of wrestlers as performers to testify to their craft as performers. By threading the voices of wrestlers reflecting on their work, choices, and performances throughout his analysis, MacFarlane models how scholars might "pursue not only the construction of an individual dramatic match, but also the ongoing process through which the performer establishes their character or 'gimmick' as an inseparable part of their own persona, a distinction that is often blurred in an art-form that tends to blur the 'fine line between fact and fiction' (Foley, *The Hardcore Diaries* 9)" (qtd. in MacFarlane 152). That blurred line, I argue, points directly to kayfabe, a chief facet of the persuasive performative power of a wrestler's work. Kayfabe is the name used by industry insiders and fans to signify the work of making it look real, the work of belief, or the belief effect. Fans hope it is real, trust it is not. Or not exactly. "Kayfabe" captures that bargain between performer and audience (Wrenn, "Managing Doubt"; Chow, Laine, and Warden; Hill; Reinhard). What, then, might a poetics of kayfabe entail?

This paper amplifies MacFarlane's call for a poetics of professional wrestling by gathering voices from outside the world of professional wrestling. By jumping fields from the world of wrestling to the world of poetry and creative writing, this essay sets out to show that a poetics of wrestling has been taken up and taken seriously outside of conventional settings for the analysis of professional wrestling as a "text." In fact, contemporary poets have been paying attention to professional wrestling, and if we attend to their work, we can see they are not just concerned with a poetics of wrestling. They are articulating a poetics of kayfabe. To trace this emerging poetics of kayfabe, this essay analyzes the work of three contemporary and well-established poets from North America: Michael Holmes, Colette Arrand, and Pulitzer-Prize winner Gregory Pardlo. Via a close reading of their poems, this essay moves through a consideration of three rhetorical modes that help make up a

poetics of kayfabe: the act of reproducing and demystifying myths, the art of deploying analogy and allegory as a form of knowledge production, and the use of ekphrastic poetry as a form of analysis and amplification of kayfabe—the belief/doubt/delight in being in-the-know and deeply uncertain, simultaneously.

A Poetics of Kayfabe

This essay focuses on the ways kayfabe migrates across aesthetic boundaries, particularly into the realm of contemporary poetry and literature. In *Can Poetry Matter?,* published in the early 1990s, poet Dana Gioia offered a provocative critique of the insular world of contemporary North American poetry. According to Gioia, who went on to serve as Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, only poets read poetry; only authors published in literary magazines read literary magazines. At the end of the 20th century, no one outside the insider world of American poetry cared much about the cultural role of poetry. Gioia hoped to change this by drawing attention to the risks of such insularity.

It is Gioia's critique of poetry's insularity that highlights the way an arguably "highbrow" art form holds a key to understanding the cultural status of professional wrestling. Whereas professional wrestling is often condemned as lowbrow and "fake," North American poetry has long been condemned as elitist and inconsequential. Insiders love what they love; outsiders sneer. Taste matters: both poetry and professional wrestling suffer critiques from eye-rolling outsiders; both nonetheless hold the passion of devoted insiders. And both, crucially, blur the boundaries of producers and consumers—be it performers and/as audiences or writers and/as readers. This was particularly the case during the COVID-19 era of professional wrestling, where live audiences became impossible to gather due to pandemic-related safety guidelines, and outfits like AEW used wrestlers as the audiences for their shows (Fontaine).

So it is of particular interest when wrestling fans write poems and/or poets write about wrestling. In "I Wish More Poets Loved Pro Wrestling, Or The Apocalyptic Postmodern Fanscape (with Examples)," poet, essayist, and self-proclaimed "wrestling die-hard" Russel Jaffe explores the analogy between the world of wrestling and the world of poetry. The essay laments that more poets don't take wrestling seriously. But there are indeed those who do. In the pages below I show how poets Michael Holmes, Colette Arrand, and Gregory Pardlo understand—and use—kayfabe as both object of analysis and means of expression. We can see how MacFarlane's call for a focus on the poetics if in-ring craft has emerged in a surprising context—in poetry and the world of creative writing.

Michael Holmes' *Parts Unknown: Wrestling, Gimmick, and Other Works* is a strange combination: it is a poetry collection with the whiff of a "dirt sheet" (a wrestling magazine that breaks kayfabe, covers backstage business, often fan-produced, and equally often read by wrestlers themselves). Holmes' collection draws upon and expresses a "smart fan's" knowledge and love of professional wrestling through sophisticated poetic forms. The result, for some readers, is a double sense of alienation: if you don't possess the cultural knowledge to grok professional wrestling or relish poetry, you can't crack either code. In other words, its esoteric poetic gestures alienate non-poetry readers; its arcane fan knowledge and pro-wrestling references make other readers want to put the book down.

And yet the book is a powerful example of a poet's preoccupation with kayfabe. Holmes' speaker breaks kayfabe even as the collection simultaneously reproduces it—sharing its secrets and minding them at once. Holmes' tightly crafted collection draws on his deep familiarity with professional wrestling. The book kicks off with the title poem, which situates the poems at the nexus of nostalgia, masculinity, and a fan's love of professional wrestling. The collection is divided into five sections: "Battle Royal," which consists of thirty poems; two long poems follow in the next two sections, "10 Bell Salute" and "Finishing Moves," respectively. The book ends with "Parts Unknown: A selected Professional Wrestling Glossary." The final section reads like found poetry. "Built upon the foundation offered by Andrew Solomon's wonderful "Glossary of Insider Terminology," Holmes has created a classic list poem, cataloging insider jargon from "angle" to "gimmick," from "smark" to "tweeners." Alternately, in the "Battle Royal" section, Holmes works exclusively with the quintain form. From "The Godlike Genius of Scotty Too Hotty" to "Shave Your Back" or "The Three Faces of Mick Foley," the poems are each composed of four 5-line stanzas. The formal constraints Holmes sets for the poems in the "Battle Royal" section function as a container for the depiction and contemplation of an array of performance dynamics, from the execution of in-ring match elements, to the speaker's imagined sense of the wrestlers' experiences in and outside of the ring, to the speaker's assessment of a smart fans' pleasures when he addresses poem after poem to those who are in the know.

Throughout, Holmes trains his eye on the razor's edge of kayfabe. For example, in the fifth section of "10 Bell Salute," Holmes dwells on the real and the fake. Whether the speaker is a fan or a wrestler is beautifully unclear, which also conveys a chief feature of the dynamics of kayfabe: performers can be marks—or smart marks—too:

Because it's fake it's not real—
tell me again because I'm too dumb
to understand, too unreal to rail
against what numbed
one town into this town
derailed my train of—
it's not easy to own
up to this thoughtlessness, my love
the one apology I still need to make
(it's real because it's not fake) (section 5, lines 1-10)

The poem unfolds as a chiasmus: "Because it's fake it's not real" in the first line is flipped and re-presented in the final line's aside. As if with cupped hands, the speaker confesses a brutal truth as parenthetical: "(it's real because it's not fake)". Bonus points that the poet chooses not to include a final mark of punctuation. That lack creates a feeling of perpetuity and drift, the endless recursive cycling between the real and the staged.

Holmes' poems adopt an anthropological stance—the speaker is participant observer, fan and/as cultural critic, focused tightly on the intricacies of the world of wrestling. For example, in "You Screwed Bret," Holmes dwells on Earl Hebner, the professional wrestling referee famous for his role in the "Montreal Screwjob." Holmes' ideal reader would relish the poem's invocation of the "screwjob," subject of Paul Jay's *Bret Hart: Wrestling With Shadows* and eventual narrative fodder for the WWE. In the lead-up to this infamous match, Vince McMahon, Jr. had assured Hart of an in-ring narrative outcome that would preserve Hart's image and popularity, even as he left the WWE for a rival promotion, World Championship Wrestling. Unknown to Hart, however, McMahon backed out on any assurances he'd made; instead, McMahon supposedly manipulated the match and betrayed Hart, who lost his title to Shawn Michaels in a "shoot screwjob" overseen by referee Earl Hebner, who ended the match abruptly, ensuring Michaels' victory and Hart's stunning defeat. Footage of the match shows a baffled Hart who, slowly recognizing the betrayal, spits on McMahon. But Holmes' poem focuses on Hebner:

…he's had to live
with it stalking him, making him doubt
every friendship he thinks he can believe
in. He had no choice– and that will haunt
him, always, too. Sure, it was Bret he screwed. (lines 16-20)

By considering the long shadow of that match from Hebner's point of view, the poem explores the work and cost of keeping kayfabe not only for the wrestlers but

for the referees. But if the reader is not an insider, the poem is a closed box, cryptic and off-putting even as it names the very way in which the spectacle is constructed. The poem plays with confession and obfuscation by inviting the reader to empathize and analyze the "screwjob's" impact on Hebner.

Poet Colette Arrand takes a different approach in her 2017 collection, *Hold Me Gorilla Monsoon*. A reader need not be a "die-hard" fan in order to delight in the speaker's obvious knowledge of the world of wrestling. As one reviewer put it, "Arrand accomplishes the difficult feat of writing poems that deliver the camp of professional wrestling, but does so in a way that diminishes neither wrestling nor the integrity of the poems themselves" (Kaneko). The book mixes first-person lyric mediations with a burst of illustrated comics mid-way through the collection, all of which highlight formal match elements and the dynamics of performance. Fannish joy and insider knowledge simmer throughout the collection, balanced by a thematic throughline: the speaker's deep and consistent existential longing. Arrand's speaker uses her knowledge of professional wrestling to confess that longing and to serve as a self-soothing embrace: *Hold Me Gorilla Monsoon*. In other words, Arrand breaks kayfabe, and in doing so she uses kayfabe to read and represent the speaker's experiences as a trans person. Thus used as a literary device, kayfabe allows the speaker to think in analogies and metaphor: x is as y. Kayfabe becomes a tool with which the speaker decodes the nuances of gender performativity, heteronormativity, and desire.

The first poem in the collection illustrates this point. "The Use of Roland Barthes to Justify One's Love of Wrestling" marks this significant rhetorical shift between Holmes' immersed world-making gestures (aimed to please the author and the in-the-know reader) and Arrand's project. Like Holmes, Arrand rewards a fan's knowledge of professional wrestling with poems that address the complex in-ring poetics of wrestling matches: for example, "Executing a Pumphandle Slam"; "Full Body Slam"; or the collection's second section, "II. Wrestling School, Illustrated by Scott Stripling," which includes a series of illustrations made up of three panels each, each animating scenes inspired by the wrestling moves indicated in the titles: "Atomic Drop," "Reverse Atomic Drop," "German Suplex," "Surfboard Stretch," and more. However, Arrand's collection expands the project of meditating on an in-ring poetics of professional wrestling by invoking the literature on the cultural significance of wrestling as a spectacle in the very first poem. By doing so, Arrand signals one of the book's central concerns: the complex pleasures of decoding professional wrestling as an analogy for the speaker's dynamic sense of self and desire.

In other words, Arrand's collection adopts an arch rhetorical posture, drawing upon professional wrestling, its discourses, and its analysis to serve as an analogy for or lens through which she reckons with questions of gender performativity and her trans identity. By invoking Barthes's seminal essay "The World of Wrestling" in her collection's first poem, Arrand does more than wink at a knowing reader. Just as Barthes opens *Mythologies* with "The World of Wrestling," Arrand strategically opens her collection of poems with a nod to Barthes. With this move, Arrand reckons with Barthes' widely cited premise that professional wrestling is not a sport but spectacle, and more importantly "a spectacle of excess" (15). But Arrand refines Barthes' argument by extending it in order to meditate on enduring cultural norms about gender and identity, and in turn crafts an analogy that implies gender, too, might be understood and misunderstood as a "spectacle of excess." Writing from the perspective of a trans woman, she leads with the body and meditates on the body's reception. Arrand establishes this pattern in "The Use of Roland Barthes to Justify One's Love of Wrestling":

> My mother says that she hasn't adjusted
> because she has no evidence of my womanhood.
> My voice is still her son's voice, my body,
> however changed, is one she still pictures
> as masculine. (lines 1-5)

The poem poses the collection's central concerns with the self, subjectivity, gender, and identity by dwelling on the power of disbelief. The speaker's mother can't believe in her son's transformation into a woman.

To make sense of the mother's disbelief, the speaker invokes the blinding of Junkyard Dog by the Freebirds. In the match, the Freebirds cultivate heel heat by blinding their opponent; thus, Junkyard Dog, playing a new father now unable to see his newborn daughter, becomes a fan favorite. The narrative is used as an analogy: the speaker's mother doubts what she sees, but Junkyard Dog need not see his daughter to believe in her existence. Thus the opening poem exemplifies the chief pattern in the collection: the poems' "complex juxtapositions" of references to professional wrestling narratives and fandom with the speaker's relationship to and understanding of her social world, result in "surprising reveals of the speaker's character"(Kaneko). They also result in a poetics of kayfabe.

We can see a poetics of kayfabe emerge in this extended excerpt from the middle of "The Use of Roland Barthes to Justify One's Love of Wrestling":

> Hardly wanting to seem foolish, wrestling fans
> hold up the time Roland Barthes went
> to the matches as proof that there's a kind
> of art at work grander than the illusion
> of contact. Where Barthes saw a narrative
> simplification of the challenges faced
> by the audience, the shook fan purchases
> a kind of respect via betrayal—wrestling,
> praised by a theorist, has no room
> for its audience. To what standard
> I'm meant to hold my entertainment
> or myself to is never clear. Am I real
> because I present myself as real,
> or because another person recognizes
> me as such?… (lines 16-30)

Without naming it explicitly, Arrand uses kayfabe as a metaphor for self, subjectivity, and identity, and by doing so she deepens and refines Barthes' ideas about professional wrestling as a mythic text. The experience of the "shook fan," caught up in the match, is legitimized and betrayed by the scholar's gaze. The poem suggests Barthes's canonical insight about wrestling as the spectacle of excess fails to offer a nuanced understanding of the fan's pleasures: the theory "has no room / for its audience." Or, put another way, Barthes' analysis does not fully account for the pleasures and power of kayfabe to legitimize the fan's role in creating the world of the spectacle via belief. The speaker notes that erasure and, through Barthes' presence in the poem, the speaker crafts the book's central analogy and poses the collection's central existential, ontological question, one which applies equally to the discourse of professional wrestlers and gender performativity:

> …Am I real
> because I present myself as real,
> or because another person recognizes
> me as such?… (lines 27-30)

Through analogy, Arrand meshes the speaker's lived experience with a wrestling fan's love of the show. She aligns the speaker's preoccupations with professional wrestling as a way to meditate on the way belief, disbelief, and the performance of the self all take work: kayfabe. Kayfabe thus clearly emerges as both a subject and a rhetorical device in *Hold Me Gorilla Monsoon*.

Taken together, *Parts Unknown* and *Hold Me Gorilla Monsoon* offer a poetics of kayfabe. These poets engage in kayfabery (Wrenn, "Catastrophist"). By adding the

suffix -ery to kayfabe, it is easier to recall that kayfabe is both a noun and a verb—like archery or cutlery, witchery or trickery (Wrenn, "Managing Doubt"). Holmes uses kayfabery to establish the boundary between insiders and outsiders (if you know you know). Arrand's collection positions kayfabery as a structural analogy, a move which undergirds the whole collection's efforts to demystify and re-mystify the myths that shape our sense of the worlds we inhabit. Following Barthes, myths are world-making belief systems made legible in images, objects, and practices that both reinforce implicit norms and values and yield to analysis and interpretation. In this sense, Arrand's poems resonate with scholarship on professional wrestling, gender, performance, and performativity (Bradbury, for example). Holmes' work anticipates scholarship on kayfabe, smart fans, and smart marks (see, for example, Litherland or Jansen). In these poems, kayfabe is a sign that communicates myth, but it is also a device that simultaneously decodes those myths, particularly myths associated with believe and doubt. The poems balance kayfabe's rhetorical power to construct meaning with its invitation to analyze and decode the meaning being created. The poems in these collections thus arguably confirm Barthes' chief insight that wrestling is "a spectacle of excess" (15). But they also complicate his ideas. Barthes makes the case that "what matters most" to audiences "is not what it thinks but what it sees" (15). "The great spectacle of Suffering, Defeat, and Justice" (19) is performed by wrestlers who strive to balance an "excess of sincerity" with an "excess of formalism" (20). But the study of kayfabe suggests that Barthes' claim that "the public is completely uninterested in knowing whether the contest is rigged or not" might overstate the case (15). Fans delight in the "co-creation" of the sense of reality they consume (Reinhard). Which is to say both Holmes and Arrand extend and complicate Barthes' ideas via a poetics of kayfabe. Whereas Barthes did not fully imagine the various fan positions kayfabe affords—mark, smart fan, or smark—Holmes and Arrand certainly do. So, too, does poet Gregory Pardlo in his masterful poem "Allegory," an ekphrastic poem on the death of Owen Hart.

The death of Owen Hart triggers Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Gregory Pardlo's consideration of kayfabe in his poem "Allegory." Published in *The New Yorker* in 2021, the poem offers a striking meditation on the wrestler's infamous in-ring death. Pardlo's title invites the reader to think about the rhetorical nature of professional wrestling narratives. Allegories are stories in which one thing stands for another. By putting "allegory" into conversation with "kayfabe" in a poem composed of couplets and arch line breaks, Pardlo satisfies MacFarlane's call for a poetics of wrestling and sheds light on Barthes' ideas about professional wrestling not only as a spectacle of excess but a spectacle of suffering.

By dint of the poem's careful description and consideration of the tragedy—from the wrestler's position, from the audience's perspective, and as a text unto itself—"Allegory" is technically an ekphrastic poem. "Ekphrasis" refers to the act of description; ekphrastic poems rely on the "vivid description of a scene or, more commonly, a work of art" ("Ekphrasis"). Famous examples include Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and Auden's "Musée Des Beaux Arts." The technique allows poets to "amplify and expand" the meaning of the art they contemplate "through the imaginative act of narrating and reflecting on the "action" of a painting or sculpture" ("Ekphrasis"). But ekphrasis need not confine itself to high art. Pardlo's "Allegory" keeps a steady gaze on Hart's failed entrance, his catastrophic fall. And what gets amplified? The experience of kayfabe.

The poem conjures the moment of Hart's death as carnivalesque performance art gone horribly wrong. Describing the faulty harness that led to Hart's fall, the poem contemplates the spectacle of Hart's demise from multiple points of view: the speaker imagines the perspective of the audience in the arena and imagines, too, what the plummeting wrestler might have been thinking in his final moments. The speaker reads the event, and reads the reactions to the baffling spectacle, through the lens of kayfabe: "… as fans prayed the stunt / might yet parade the emperor's threads wrestlers call kayfabe" (lines 15–16). The speaker's voice serves as a calm counterpoint to what he envisions as the frayed confusion and desperate sense-making of the audience, fans caught in the awful moment of the fall. The contemplative, elegiac tone infuses curiosity with empathy: "I'd like to think / …that he didn't spend his last attempting to method / Zeno's proofs" (lines 11, 13–14). Curiosity doubles as a prayer; the poem holds out hope that Hart wasn't caught up in the knowledge of the deadly absurdity that the reality of spectacle could only be proved with his body, or that the ground wasn't rising to meet him, or that he'd risked too much to make it look real. And that wish for Hart leads the speaker to "kayfabe":

> Kayfabe, a dialect of pig Latin, lingo for the promise to drop
> at the laying on of hands. To take myth as history. Semblance
>
> as creed. A grift so convincing one might easily believe
> it could work without someone else pulling the strings. (lines 17-20)

Positioned at the end of the poem, the term "kayfabe" is introduced like a glossary term, or le mot juste, a key to decode both the reactions to Hart's impossible fall and the conditions of spectacle that led him there.

New Yorker readers might be surprised to see a Pulitzer-Prize winning poet turn to professional wrestling as the object of a poem's meditation. But as "Allegory"

shows, the *object* reveals a rich and complex *subject*—the matrices of belief, trust, doubt, and danger that fans and performers find themselves in. In other words, "Allegory" draws a link between the rhetorical power of allegory and "kayfabe."

Poet Gregory Pardlo shared his thoughts on "Allegory" and the poetics of kayfabe with me in a series of extended conversations over the years—culminating in an interview for this essay. When asked how he how would characterize the relationship between allegory and kayfabe, Pardlo wrote:

> Thinking about it from the perspective of literary theory, allegory and kayfabe differ in degree. There is a hermeneutic quality to both. Allegory intends to instruct its audience and to instill or maintain a particular value system without exceeding the symbolic nature of its form. In other words, allegory says, "do as I say, and not as I do." Kayfabe wants to manifest or realize its symbolism. Kayfabe is a game of "Simon Says," but with every command in the game being compulsory. By drawing the link between the two, I'm also hoping to demonstrate the ways ideologies are structural. This kind of critical engagement not only makes the structure of kayfabe legible, it makes legible, as you're suggesting, the rhetorical nature of kayfabe which is to produce a reality in which certain things are possible. Kayfabe is relatively innocent (if not harmless), while other structures—structural racism, for example—are not.

In Pardlo's configuration, kayfabe is thus the mechanism by which and through which ideologies circulate. But he understands kayfabe, much like the rhetorical form of allegory itself, as "innocent." In this sense, kayfabe is a tool, a device, a form—and, as such, is "innocent" until it is put to use. But as films like Darren Aronofsky's *The Wrestler* and Paul Jay's *Bret Hart: Wrestling With Shadows*, not to mention scholarship by Jansen, Hill, Smith, and others suggest, kayfabe has very real consequences for its performers (Chow).

To understand the relationship between kayfabe and suffering implied by Pardlo's "Allegory," it is important to note that "Allegory" is in a secret conversation with Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts," a regularly anthologized ekphrastic poem about another boy falling out of the sky. At the risk of alienating wrestling fans, dwelling on this insider conversation sheds light on the way poets imagine audiences who witness suffering. Written in 1939, the poem describes Brueghel's "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" as an occasion to meditate on the way artists depict human suffering: "About suffering they were never wrong, / the Old Masters." Using Brueghel's Icarus as evidence and inspiration for his idea, Auden suggests that we are always inadvertently turning our backs on catastrophe, preoccupied elsewhere, or worse, indifferent. In the painting, Icarus' fall occupies a few inches in

the lower corner of the canvas. The careful spectator will catch the boy's feet splashing as he drowns, the sea skimmed with feathers, an angler on his knees, facing the fall, who seems, nonetheless, to have missed it. The rest of the painting is a vast landscape– a ploughman at his work in the foreground, a ship receding into the sunset—a masterpiece of compositional perspective that depicts how much we fail to see.

"Allegory" thus alludes to and inverts "Musée Des Beaux Arts." In "Allegory" Pardlo takes Owen Hart's catastrophic fall as the poem's subject. Unlike Brueghel's Icarus, the wrestler's death is center stage. In Auden's poem, we turn away from the drowning boy; we fail to see Icarus's wake. Pardlo's ekphrastic insists otherwise: it is a supplication, for the performer, falling.

As such, "Allegory" complicates Auden's ideas about the banality of suffering. Pardlo's poem, though clearly an ekphrastic, is not a study of indifference. "Allegory" is an elegy for Hart: just as the fans pray the wrestler will survive the fall, will be resurrected, the speaker attends to the suffering performer and the risks inherent in playing his role to the end. By invoking "kayfabe," "Allegory" reckons with the audience's curiosity and confusion; by breaking kayfabe and defining the term, the poem reframes that confusion as the potential for empathy and compassion.

The turn at the end of "Allegory" also returns kayfabe to the realm of myth. When Pardlo writes "to mistake myth as history," he too invokes Barthes' project in *Mythologies*, which was to show how myth removes history from language, making some signs seem absolute, or, as Barthes put it: myths make "contingency seem eternal" (155). Pardlo's deft compression in the phrase "to mistake myth as history" suggest the poem's motive, too: like Barthes, Pardlo reads wrestling for its myth-making power. Whereas Barthes did not delve into the audience's pleasures in decoding the means by which myth is constructed and performed in matches, Pardlo points to the audience's confusion and hope when kayfabe—and breaking kayfabe—is itself the spectacle. And, crucially, the speaker is part of that audience albeit from afar. The ekphrastic gesture of describing and "amplifying" the wrestler's fall allows the poem to show the reader how allegory works as a rhetorical device and how kayfabe is a mechanism for ensuring that as narratives unfold, audiences are engaged by the deep fascination of belief and doubt. Myths persist, and the real always threatens to rupture what's meant to be staged, to disrupt and reinforce what is meant to be taken as normal, natural, or "eternal."

The poem makes a powerful move at the end, suggesting that kayfabe is the internal logic of the audience's engagement, bafflement, and desire. It also seems to point outside of the ring, so to speak, or outside of the moment the poem contemplates. This suggests Pardlo was thinking about the broader implications for

kayfabery, despite deeming it "innocent" in his comments on the poem. When I asked him how he envisioned kayfabe's risks and pleasures, he shed light on the resonant intellectual context in which he sees kayfabe fit:

> Another one of my fascinations, and perhaps the flip side of kayfabery, is Bertolt Brecht's notion of the alienation effect. Brecht thought plays should have disruptive moments in the performance intentionally to jolt the audience out of the fantasy that what they were watching was real. The poem, "Allegory," zeroes in on one such moment… and what the rupture between the real (in this case death) and fantasy can teach us, that is, applying the hermeneutical lens of allegory. The poem as, in some ways, both allegory and alienation effect, is hinting at the possibility that we are participating in shared fantasies right now.

Crucially, Pardlo sees the work of his poem as both "allegory and alienation effect." In other words, the poem invites the reader to *experience* allegory, which is a kind of metaphor, or a comparison between two dissimilar things crafted in such a way that a reader registers a new truth. The pleasure of metaphor, then, is a pleasure of the mind at work. And as Anne Carson puts it in her poem "Essay on What I Think About Most" (from *Men in the Off Hours*), it's the experience of *error*. In her poem, Carson asserts that Aristotle "says that metaphor causes the mind to experience itself // in the act of making a mistake" (lines 18–19):

> Metaphors teach the mind
>
> to enjoy error
> and to learn
> from the juxtaposition of *what* is and *what is not* the case. (lines 36-39)

This wonderful configuration is a great description of the pleasures of metaphor as the reader's experience of both error and understanding (Wrenn, "Editors Talk Poetry Acceptances"). It is also, arguably, an apt description of an audience's pleasures in consuming of kayfabe. Recall Holmes' arch chiasmus:

> Because it's fake it's not real–
> …
> (it's real because it's not fake) (lines 1, 10)

The push-pull of kayfabe is not only a rhetorical gesture; it is a way of knowing. It may push outsiders further out, demarcating the line between those in-the-know and not, but it also pulls audiences in, drawing them to the edge, the boundary between the real and the staged.

It is also a form of poetics. Recalling how MacFarlane borrows from cinema studies to create a useful definition of poetics, this essay jumps fields and borrows a

definition of poetics from literature, and more specifically from creative writers, to track a poetics of kayfabe. In the field of literature and creative writing, broadly speaking, "poetics" refers to "a system or body of theory concerning the nature of poetry; the principles and rules of poetic composition" ("Poetics" 383). The term also occupies two positions, seemingly split across the field's division between "scholarship" and "practice." Whereas literary scholars interested in poetics are invested the systematic study of literary works, creative writers develop a systematic personal poetics, typically in the context of a larger tradition of poetry or fiction with which they identify. Aspiring creative writers tend to sign up for MFA programs precisely to craft both a full-length manuscript and also to develop a coherent sense of their poetics (craft, craftsmanship, and tradition).

At the end of the definition of "poetics" in *A Handbook of Literature*, the editors make a glib remark: "In a large sense … a poetics is the science of any activity that produces a product, whether a set of sonnets or a set of dentures" (384). Their snarky claim that a "poetics" refers to any tool used to create a product allows me to forge a link between literary poetics and MacFarlane's call for a poetics of professional wrestling, not to mention a poetics of kayfabe. I admire the entry's flippant tone because it is asked to deliver an impossible task—a sound bite for a centuries' long philosophical debate, via Plato and Aristotle, between poetics and rhetoric, one that continues to be reflected in the structural split between literary production (aka creative writing) and literary scholarship. At the risk of being overly reductive, the difference between rhetoric and poetics signifies an old quarrel—between persuasion (rhetoric) and expression (poetics), between philosophy and poetry. But, as the analysis of the poems above suggests, kayfabe mixes rhetoric and poetics, analysis and art, highlighting their interpenetration. A poetics of kayfabe drawn from the world of creative writing, then, offers us a powerful toolkit for the analysis of professional wrestling, reminding us to focus on myth, analogy, allegory, and ekphrasis—the tools poets use to make sense, make worlds, and make sense of the world.

But does a poetics of kayfabe inspired by poems also risk reinforcing the gap between "high culture" and popular culture? How might a poetics of kayfabe productively complicate the relationship between popular culture and poetry? Or poetry and cultural criticism? As Pardlo notes, "In many places, poetry *is* popular culture." Thus, a poetics of kayfabe has the potential to yield a productive way of rendering and reflecting on in-ring narratives (as MacFarlane hopes) and also offers us a way to reckon with the shifting politics of popular culture (Mazer et al.). As Pardlo puts it:

> Politics in the US lately demonstrates that what constitutes reality is contentious. People are committed to the idea that their experience of reality is the universal experience. Poems are, as I say, both self-consciously allegorical versions of reality and disruptions of the stupefying routines of daily life. It's safe to say "Allegory" isn't so much interested in kayfabe or in professional wrestling, but that kayfabe is itself a kind of poetic terrain that can further teach us to recognize various interpretations of beauty, and to discern between them and what are *actually* unyielding facts of life.

We can see Pardlo's own poetics emerge in these comments. For him, poetry is the medium and genre through which a poet may re-create, demystify, and simultaneously re-mystify the world as s/he sees it, a world full of nuance, emotion, and experience for which we may not yet have language—and the poet's role is to conjure that language for us. In other words, as Pardlo argues, "any aesthetic expression is an argument for beauty, which is to say an argument for our perception of reality." Pardlo's comments align with Dylan Thomas' famous claim that "a good poem is a contribution to reality" (169). By Thomas' definition, a good poem "helps to change the shape and significance of the universe, helps to extend everyone's knowledge of himself and the world around him" (169). If we trust that good poem has that kind power, then a poetics of kayfabe gives us a rich vocabulary for the realities we create and consume.

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Notes on Kayfabe

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It entirely befits the concept that kayfabe risks engulfing the subfield of professional wrestling studies before professional wrestling studies has had time to do much of anything else. Kayfabe is professional wrestling's most unique and interesting feature, with arguably the most to offer the rest of the academy, while simultaneously being not especially interesting or unique at all. If *kayfabe* is everywhere—in politics, in academia, in apparently all our day-to-day interactions—is the object of study really *kayfabe* after all? Where does professional wrestling, a culturally important but nevertheless niche sporting entertainment, fit in in all of this? How do we pin down such an elusive concept, even as it "eludes … academic authority" (Mazer 68)?

First things first, a history with which I am sure we are all now familiar (and if you are not, see Beekman; Litherland, *Wrestling in Britain*). At the turn of the twentieth century, professional wrestling developed as a carnival sideshow and vaudeville entertainment where legitimate sportspeople demonstrated exhibitions as entertainments in addition to wrestling "legitimate" sporting contests. By the 1920s and '30s, the legitimate sporting competition had been disregarded almost entirely, and the exhibitions were all that remained. These exhibitions, however, continued to be presented by promoters and wrestlers as a legitimate sport. Various forms of entertainment—characters, masks, comedy, dramatic narratives between "good" and "evil"—were integrated into the show, to a greater or lesser degree depending on the local and national context. Claims of legitimacy were maintained, albeit with differing degrees of commitment, until the 1970s and '80s, producing a longstanding confusion from the press about professional wrestling's cultural status.

The fact that professional wrestling sits somewhere between sport and theatrical entertainment remains, frustratingly, important. I spent the early years of my postgraduate degrees tussling with, and trying to avoid, the question of defining pro wrestling in these terms. The answer seemed obvious—Both! Neither! *Does it even matter*? But as my work continued, the reason why this question emerged and re-emerged, in pubs and conference rooms, was that this was more than a mere definitional question. The stake of that question is really a desire to understand how

to culturally locate professional wrestling, and what critical lens you need to bring to it to make sense of it.

There's also a seeming broader desire to understand the borders and boundaries of the fictional text and how they are maintained. Plays are, usually, on the stage, and we understand an actor pretends to be someone else when they're on it. Sport pitches have their own rules separate to everyday life, but we recognize that there is a continuity from one to other. Professional wrestling operated the first while maintaining the second. For much of the twentieth century, the claim was that the wider performance expanded beyond the ring: characters in the ring were the same, or close enough the same, outside of it; performed injuries carried over into everyday life; good guys and bad guys, famously, never travelled together to the next show. Even more confusingly, sometimes this was blurred further: sometimes wrestlers kept their legal names, sometimes they didn't. Sometimes brothers were legitimate brothers, sometimes they weren't. Sometimes celebrities from beyond the world of wrestling punctuated the fictional world.

In the 120 years or so of professional wrestling's history, it has fallen between the different codes and conventions required of sport and entertainment, never being entirely comfortable as either, opportunistically drawing on both at different moments. It is also worth pointing out that neither sport nor entertainment are static entities and have their own overlapping histories and uneasiness with one another. (In my book, *Wrestling in Britain*, I used Bourdieu's work on fields to claim that the history of professional wrestling only makes sense when placed in the sporting field, but the central point I wanted to make was that fields are always contingent and reproduced socially.)

Though politicians, commentators and regulators might have been confused, understandably so at times, fans have never really been "fooled" by pro wrestling, despite what some wrestlers have convinced themselves about "marks" and the like. In my times in the archives, I've personally never seen any compelling evidence that audiences fully believed that what they were watching were sporting events. Audiences have, however, been consistently interested in making sense of the performance, even if they have been hampered by inconsistent access to its inner workings. There's a bit of suspension of disbelief, a desire to seek the authentic in the inauthentic, the joy in getting lost in the moment, and sometimes a desire to do the things that a good audience member would do.

Kayfabe, then, sits at the intersection of these histories: the contradictions, and ambiguities inherent in this type of performance; the sorts of relationship generated between performer and audience; and the different types of work required to uphold these systems. From these overlapping points, however, I want

to make two central observations about kayfabe, drawn from my own work studying the past and present of pro wrestling.

First. If all of the above sounds like a highly delicate balancing act, made up on the fly, with little to no internal or external consistency, precariously operated on the immediate needs and desires of individual promoters and performers, then that's exactly what it was. Modern fandom, and sometimes modern academia, sometimes speak of kayfabe in a type of hushed reverence about its broader social meaning, and the secrets passed down from one generation to the next, when for the most part it was developed by people looking to avoid taxes in one state, promote their next show via whatever outlets would have them, and worry about the consequences of their storytelling whenever it came to the boil.

As such, we should avoid speaking of kayfabe as an unchanging, universal quality that belongs to all professional wrestling in precisely the same way at the same time. The meaning of kayfabe, for performers and audiences alike, shifts over time. It is interlinked with changing attitudes about the meanings of sport, the types of relationships that audiences have to professional wrestling as a form, and to the shifting styles, promotional strategies and genres that have emerged at different times and places. In so doing, I think you can begin to speak of kayfabe as having different eras, and indeed as operating differently in different local and national contexts, but for now I am going to focus on history. Someone with more space might want to try and identify the specificities of those eras, but for now I'll give an example.

The presentation of professional wrestling in the halls in England in the 1930s was, for the most part, a contained event. The fictional world was confined to the match, and while there was a sense that the character existed outside of the ring, there was very little need to think about them in these terms, and very little supporting media to develop those personas. When wrestlers started appearing on television in the 1950s, logics of promotion required they do other media appearances to support these shows. This posed secondary questions about how you present that persona to the public outside of the hall itself. Continued synergy, and the expansion of promotional strategies by Vince McMahon in the 1980s, caused similar problems to arise in even more complicated ways, creating its own trial and error as performers like Hulk Hogan tried to convert their wrestling stardom to film stardom (Chard and Litherland). And reality television and social media has forced adaptation again (Litherland, "Breaking Kayfabe").

It remains vital when discussing kayfabe, then, that we locate the thing that we are referring to—audience reception and practices, the text, the persona—in its historical context. Not "pro wrestling" and "kayfabe," but specific promotions,

wrestlers, promotional strategies, types of performance, and so on. This is as true now, when comparing, say, European indies to the World Wrestling Entertainment as it is when comparing '90s *lucha libre* to Parisian all-in.

Second. To understand these different eras of kayfabe similarly requires us to understand historical developments in cultures of celebrity. I have been unable to untangle these two concepts in my own work. Celebrity is the management and organization of promotional, public, and mediated personas, with different fields and cultural forms developing their own rich codes and conventions. As we have seen, professional wrestlers have drawn on different codes and conventions at different times to suit their given needs, and have responded to broader social, political, and economic changes, as well shifts within the various cultural industries, just as celebrities have.

In this regard, some of the things that professional wrestling does are not quite as unique as professional wrestling scholarship can sometimes assume. Numerous performances insist on their own authenticity and resist revealing their secrets: freak shows, magic shows, etc. Lots of performances maintain the individual on the stage is a "real" person off it: comedy, television presenting. You can find plenty of examples of, say, fictionalized film stars, with biographies invented entirely by studio executives, who maintain their "realness" beyond the nicely contained fictional world on the screen. Professional wrestling shares a history of strained authenticity, incoherent biographies, and a longstanding trial and error from publicists, managers, studios, and celebrities themselves as they try and manage and develop these forms of presentation.

The pleasures and practices of audiences reading these celebrity texts, then, are in some regards the very same pleasures of kayfabe, even if professional wrestling has at times heightened them or created some interesting knots to untie. Here, I have always been particularly struck by Joshua Gamson's work, and how comfortably professional wrestling maps onto not just his history of North American celebrity but the shifting cultural practices associated with them. Starting with PT Barnum and his sideshows, taking in the Hollywood studio system, and then television, he traces a history of playful audiences that grow increasingly sophisticated in reading the texts offered to them, and the shifts in the media and promotional industries as they respond in turn to those sophistication. Other scholars have influentially developed this reading in relation to social media (Marwick and boyd), something that, again, pro wrestling has similarly responded to.

By the postmodern 1980s, the levels of sophistication, rooted in complex intertextuality, have produced quite an intense level of scrutiny from audiences who

are able to respond quickly to notions of authenticity. Vince McMahon is often accredited with changing kayfabe forever, admitting to the New Jersey Senate about its performed nature ("Now It Can Be Told: Those Pro Wrestlers Are Just Having Fun," The New York Times reported), but this is a simplification. Professional wrestling's performed nature had been an open secret since the 1930s. Rather, this was part of a broader pattern of cultural change that the whole media ecosystem had undergone, incorporating postmodernity, emergent media technologies, and promotional strategies that developed from political economic changes.

Put another way, and as I argue in longer form pieces referenced above, the history of kayfabe is really a history of celebrity culture. When professional wrestling critics, fans, scholars and wrestlers themselves speak of kayfabe they are using a shorthand term for a set of pleasures and forms of presentation and reception that underpins the celebrity culture more generally. For reasons of historical accident, professional wrestling has a term for those pleasures. It is for this reason, then, that I think scholars, whether fans of professional wrestling who work in other fields or pro wrestling scholars who write about other aspects of culture, can often see kayfabe operating throughout society and culture. Celebrity has become increasingly important across any field that has been reshaped by the media, and there are very few fields where that is not the case. Today, anyone who has a social media account is doing a form of promotional and presentational persona management. Kayfabe is everywhere ultimately because celebrity is everywhere.

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Response to Benjamin Litherland's "Notes on Kayfabe"

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Benjamin Litherland's essay raises many thought-provoking questions about kayfabe's role in professional wrestling. My response will address some of those questions, not with the goal of answering them—as Ben rightly points out, defining "kayfabe" may depend on "what critical lens you need to bring to it to make sense of it" (124)—but more with the goal of exploring dimensions opened by his questions.

Ben positions kayfabe, and his analysis of its history, primarily in the context of wrestling promoters presenting something that they claim is "a legitimate sport." He makes a compelling case that kayfabe has evolved across time, as have other aspects of professional wrestling, and that discussions of kayfabe and its implications should be situated within a specific era or set of events. However, as Ben acknowledges, promoters' claims of legitimacy have also varied across time. These variations are particularly interesting when they involve kayfabe consciously being broken. WWE only formally admitted that professional wrestling was not a sport when it was trying to avoid paying a state tax on tickets sold for sporting events (Assael and Mooneyham). Kayfabe has also occasionally been broken by promoters in attempts to circumvent some US states' regulations for amateur wrestling, boxing, and/or martial arts events, such as requiring participants to pay a fee and be licensed (Oliver). Thus, another dimension that can be incorporated into analyses of kayfabe is the larger external environments that it operates within—including those within which the concept of kayfabe, or maintaining kayfabe, may be irrelevant or even detrimental.

Kayfabe's effect on external perceptions of professional wrestling's legitimacy can also be related to the eternal question of whether professional wrestling is sport or theatrical entertainment. One answer to this, as presented by Ben, is "does it even matter" (123)? But that could also be reframed as "to *whom* does it matter?" Ben presents kayfabe as causing "a longstanding confusion from the press" (123) about professional wrestling's legitimacy, but it could be argued that the mainstream media's perception of professional wrestling's legitimacy has never been essential to the success of the professional wrestling industry. Discomfort caused by the practices of kayfabe may be more of an issue to external stakeholders than to the

professional wrestling industry itself. That in turn suggests that the effects of kayfabe may depend not only on historical locations or critical lenses, but also on the part of professional wrestling's external environment that is assessing or interpreting the industry.

When situating kayfabe in relation to audience perceptions, Ben states that he has never "seen any compelling evidence" that professional wrestling fans have fully believed they were watching actual sporting events. If we define "sporting event" as a genuine competition between athletes that results in a winner, then I agree with this statement. But although theatricality and artifice are integral parts of professional wrestling, it still has an authentic element of athleticism. There are recognized moves and techniques, and audiences generally expect these to be performed with some degree of competency (woe betide the wrestler who blows a spot and gets a chant of "You f***ed up"). From a fan perspective, kayfabe may encompass a tacit understanding that wrestlers are playing characters and that the outcome of a match is planned in advance—but audiences also expect wrestlers to display real-life athletic skills, albeit within a semi-choreographed context.

Another dimension of kayfabe that Ben alludes to, and which is a potentially rich source of further exploration, is how it functions in the age of social media. Professional wrestling companies and wrestlers use social media to build wrestlers' in-ring characters and advance storylines by, for example, wrestlers tweeting provocations to other wrestlers they are feuding with, or companies sustaining fans' attention by leaking details about upcoming matches. But a great deal of this communication still maintains kayfabe by staying "in character," and some wrestlers have allegedly been ordered to delete social media messages that their company considers detrimental to the company itself or to the wrestler's character (Shoemaker). Social media also allows information from outside sources about the industry and its performers to be distributed very quickly and very broadly. That poses a challenging conundrum for professional wrestling companies: trying to preserve the intrigue of their characters and plotlines while building audience interest and fan bases through social media.

As Ben suggests, kayfabe may not be as distinctive as professional wrestling scholars sometimes portray it to be. Other cultural industries also strive to control audience perceptions and to present desired images. But even if there is no consistently accurate definition of "kayfabe," the practice of keeping secrets from outsiders is essential to the continued prosperity of an industry dependent on a unique blend of theatricality and physicality.

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A Response to Fiona McQuarrie's Response to Benjamin Litherland's "Notes on Kayfabe"

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Thanks for your response, Fiona!

Your points about the "external environments" that kayfabe operates is critical here, I think. Any study of professional wrestling really needs to take into consideration the broader political, media and cultural environments it operates in. As you point out, laws, regulations and political economy, and the promotional and commercial logics that emerge from these conditions, could well be the biggest influence on how *kayfabe* operates (though I leave open the possibilities that performers, promoters, and audiences have their own creative inputs).

For me, really, the development of *kayfabe* as a historical feature of pro wrestling was merely the by-product of the tensions between competing fields (sport and the stage) and the promotional and commercial logics that operated between them.

If I can get away with *another* cheap promo for my own book, I found fields and Bourdieu's wider work helpful here insofar as it allowed me to think about and map the social relationships and rivalries between different individuals, institutions and fields. The strength of Bourdieu's work on fields is always that it offers a starting point for thinking about relationships and how people themselves exist in those spaces, the written and unwritten rules that govern the space, and how that constitutes possible actions. All (sub)fields have their own internal dynamics, forms of capital, rules of the game, but also influence and are influenced by other fields. As you point out, though, fields are never entirely closed off from one another: in my work I used Simmel's intersecting social circles to think about how this plays out for individual's habitus, but the broader point that fields shape one another has always been critical. Again, you're right to suggest that the logics of one field might be completely illogical to another.

I do want to stress that how professional wrestling presents its own celebrity culture isn't any stranger or more convoluted than any other media industry, much of the discussion generated here is merely because it's tricky to pin down which lens to assess it with, and that pro wrestling has historically sat uncomfortably across the fields of theatre, sport, television, Hollywood (to which, I suppose, we might now also add politics!). I sometimes think professional wrestling scholarship has a bit of a bad habit of using kayfabe as a catchall to access much more prevalent promotional or commercial strategies that have

been developed in a variety of spaces. I think it remains critical to place it into those contexts to really evaluate how things like celebrity and promotion are operating, and how they differ exactly.

My critical point regarding Vince McMahon is that his impact on kayfabe is really more to do with the fact that he fully brought his company entirely into the logics of televised popular culture, and the commercial and branding logics that go with that. In this regard, kayfabe is arguably the least important factor of a much broader set of conversations about political-economy, the changing environment of 1980s and 1990s US television industry, pay-per-view, merchandizing and a whole range of other factors. As a narrative and promotional logic, kayfabe has adapted to these contexts rather than being a driving force. And as you indicate, Twitter is but one example of both wrestlers, promoters and audiences experimenting with the promotional logics and adapting as necessary.

How Do You Learn to Fall Off a 20-Foot Ladder?

Exploring Hardcore Professional Wrestling as One of the Last Keepers of Kayfabe

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Existing in the fringes of a world that exists arguably already on the fringes of popular culture, hardcore professional wrestling occupies a controversial space. While some propound it as an extension of the art form of professional wrestling, its critics argue it is a form of mindless violence and not what professional wrestling is meant to be. Regardless of opinion on its practice, hardcore professional wrestling presents a product where the line between performance and reality is razor (if you will excuse the pun) thin. Such a presentation calls into question the difference between reality and performance. It is a contemporary rarity in the world of professional wrestling where kayfabe has diminished elsewhere. In this essay, we interact with prior works of scholars that explore kayfabe, those who have given thought to the world of hardcore professional wrestling, and we also present multiple examples of hardcore professional wrestling to articulate it as one of the last spaces where elements of bygone kayfabe remain in the ethos of modern professional wrestling.

Exploring Kayfabe and Hardcore Professional Wrestling

Kayfabe in professional wrestling has been the subject of several inquiries. The notion of kayfabe as being an illusion, more specifically presented as the "illusion of realness" (Smith 54) or "the illusion of authenticity" (Pratt 140), brings about particular interest when conceptualizing the role that hardcore professional wrestling has in maintaining kayfabe. When imagining these two definitions one may reflect upon moments in professional wrestling that evoke audience reactions that allow for the suspension of disbelief and genuine investment in what is happening before them. We as consumers of professional wrestling can reflect upon storylines, characters, matches, promos, and moments where we bought into the illusion of professional wrestling. Arguably, those experiences have

dwindled over time, as the professional wrestling consumer has become "smarter" to the product and developed a greater understanding of the behind-the-scenes workings of the sport (Wrenn). The reasoning for the reduction in these moments of "buy-in" has been a shift in the professional wrestling industry's presentation. In a foregone era, the heel who garnered the jeers of an audience disappeared into the night to resume his life as a family man (Barthes). The heel of the contemporary, however, whose everyday "normal" life is seen through social media, is known by consumers to not be a genuine villain (Olson). While impact of more knowledgeable consumers on the production of professional wrestling has opened doors to interactions that were not previously possible, it has also presented a dilemma in which the maintenance of kayfabe has become debatably moot due to the consumer knowing that professional wrestling is a work.

Hardcore professional wrestling offers grey area to this dilemma in that the element of constant danger and violence may leave consumers wondering if what is unfolding before them will end as according to plan. Hardcore professional wrestling presents consumers with a constant presentation of over-the-top violent themes filled with blood and brutality (Chow and Laine). Hardcore wrestling's appeal may come from the same source of the uneasiness that it produces in consumers due to unfamiliarity with anything like it. Professional wrestling fans know that body slams and punches are a part of professional wrestling, but who said anything about tables, ladders, and light tubes? Hardcore wrestling leaves consumers questioning how and why something may go wrong in a match and gets "real." The popularization of hardcore wrestling itself has been presented as the byproduct of consumers of professional wrestling watching hardcore matches that happened elsewhere in the world beyond the familiarity of fans (Laine). The consumption of hardcore wrestling and its history over the last forty years will be explored in the next section of this essay as a means for presenting hardcore wrestling as being one of the few remaining preservers of the "realness" (Smith 54) and "authenticity" (Pratt 140) of kayfabe in contemporary professional wrestling.

Hardcore Wrestling and the Captivated Consumer

Commonly the origins of hardcore wrestling can be traced to the Memphis territory in 1979. It was during this time when in Tupelo, Mississippi that Jerry 'The King" Lawler, Bill Dundee, Larry Latham, and Wayne Farris had a tag team match that saw the wrestlers leave the ring and brawl at the concession stand within the Tupelo Sports Arena (Lee). Even during an era when kayfabe was still the cornerstone for professional wrestling, the now famed Tupelo Concession Stand Brawl was like nothing that professional wrestling audiences had ever seen before. The match generated headlines in the mainstream and drew the interest of many. Fans had never seen professional wrestlers engaged in what appeared to be such chaos before, and it presented an element of uncertainty as to what

exactly was going on. The success of this match would see other iterations of the match take place over the next few years within the territory.

One participant of a later iteration of the Tupelo Concession Stand Brawl would, fittingly, introduce many consumers to hardcore wrestling a decade and a half later. Atsushi Onita participated in a Tupelo Concession Stand Brawl match in 1981 along with Masa Fuchi, Eddie Gilbert, and Ricky Morton while on excursion to the United States from All Japan Pro Wrestling. In the 1990s when creating his promotion Frontier Martial-Arts Wrestling (FMW), Onita recalled how the hardcore brawling style of professional wrestling in Memphis had captivated consumers. Having this knowledge, Onita would take hardcore professional wrestling to the next level in FMW and would revolutionize its standing within the sport by piquing both the curiosity and the captivation of consumers globally. FMW pushed the conventional boundaries of professional wrestling through having matches with stipulations such as the "exploding ring deathmatch" in which rings were armed with pyrotechnics designed to detonate during and at the conclusion of matches. The unbelievable scene that these matches created, coupled with Onita's ability to captivate the emotions of his audiences by his own display of emotion, produced a professional wrestling product that would become a global curiosity. FMW's popularity would spread from Japan to North America and Europe through VHS tapes that captivated consumers of "traditional" professional wrestling. One of the most captivating FMW matches took place between Onita and his longtime mentor and friend Terry Funk in 1993. Funk and Onita wrestled in a match where the ring was surrounded by barbed wire and explosives that were set to detonate when a countdown timer expired. As Funk laid motionless with the clock approaching zero, Onita covered up Funk in a desperate effort to shield his friend from the explosion. This moment remains reflected upon within professional wrestling as a compelling display of emotion and reality intertwined within the performance. Audiences of the match were emotionally moved by the display of selfless desperation by Onita to save a friend, and amidst the bloody brutality of the match, there was a sense of humanity that resonated with consumers.

The intrigue FMW generated among U.S. consumers has been identified anecdotally as the impetus for the emergence of Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW) in the 1990s, which further pushed the commonly accepted connotations of what professional wrestling "was" to consumers. ECW's presentation of hardcore matches in the mid-1990s, along with a gritty motif, was representative of a counterculture to the comic book style presentation of the former World Wrestling Federation (WWF) and World Championship Wrestling (WCW) of the era. ECW offered viewers an alternative professional wrestling experience that differed thematically than its counterparts. Hardcore wrestling in ECW pushed the envelope on what was part of the presentation and what was reality, leaving consumers with a questioned sense of what exactly they

were witnessing. In an era when professional wrestling consumers were becoming increasingly more aware of the sport's production, ECW pulled back the curtain a bit by presenting a production that the consumer, in some cases, could not decipher as fact or fiction. ECW wrestlers were not the clichéd gimmicks of their WWF and WCW counterparts; instead they were creations more vested in the "illusion of realness" (Smith 54) and "the illusion of authenticity" (Pratt 140) than anything many consumers had been familiar with.

Its mainstream contemporaries noted the reactions that ECW generated with consumers when WWF and WCW both began presenting hardcore matches and more "reality" based products in the latter half of the 1990s. Both saw the use of ladders, chairs, tables, and a variety of other unconventional objects find their way into and outside of their squared circles. These items' use presented again that element of unfamiliarity and danger to a consumer group who thought that they were now in on the secret of the show. Most wrestling fans knew by the late 1990s that wrestlers' finishing moves that looked devastating were done so in a cooperative way to not cause any actual harm, but as Jim Ross famously said: "How do you learn to fall off of a 20-foot ladder?" Not knowing what was going to happen next in many of these high-risk matches captivated audiences and created resounding memories within the Attitude Era that are still talked about today. Hardcore wrestling brought back a sense of kayfabe curiosity that was nearing absence from the sport in the late 1990s.

Modern hardcore wrestling has evolved and continued to push the envelope in its presentation just as traditional professional wrestling and the movesets of today have. World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) has centered entire pay-per-view events on hardcore match stipulations such as Hell in a Cell, Tables, Ladders & Chairs, Extreme Rules, and Elimination Chamber. One of All Elite Wrestling (AEW)'s most anticipated pay-per-views came in the form of a show that was main evented with an "exploding barbed wire deathmatch" between Kenny Omega and Jon Moxley, as well as a highly rated cable television deathmatch between Chris Jericho and Nick Gage. On the modern independent professional wrestling scene, companies such as Game Changer Wrestling (GCW) have seen a tremendous rise in popularity with at their core several storylines that have culminated in deathmatches and generated intense emotional reaction from consumers both in attendance and on the Internet. These examples are all demonstrative of producers of professional wrestling displaying an understanding that hardcore and deathmatch professional wrestling, while controversial to some, is a generator of consumer intrigue and investment. Such investment and intrigue are arguably centered on the curiosity of these match stipulations, and an uncertainty of what their outcomes are.

Conclusion

Hardcore professional wrestling over the last forty-plus years has gone from the aforementioned fringe of an already fringe product, to a consistent element of professional wrestling's mainstream. This rise in popularity has come with both captivation and controversy over its place within professional wrestling. Whether in support or opposition of its practice, hardcore wrestling has continuously cemented its ability to spark the emotions of its audiences one way or the other. Even as professional wrestlers who work hardcore and deathmatch style matches are trained to prevent actual harm to the best of their abilities, audiences of these matches see only the ultraviolent happenings in front of them. This in turn creates an uncertainty in viewers as to whether or not there will be a safe outcome for performers. This thread of uncertainty positions hardcore professional wrestling as one of the last maintainers of a "kayfabe reality" in the sport.

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Shifting Kayfabe in Hardcore Wrestling and Beyond

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"How Do You Learn to Fall Off a 20-Foot Ladder? Exploring Hardcore Professional Wrestling as One of the Last Keepers of Kayfabe" offers an important opening to further analysis of an underappreciated genre of professional wrestling. As a young fan, I implicitly took up this argument while defending professional wrestling to skeptical friends, citing moments like Mankind's fall at *WWF King of the Ring 1998* or the practice of blading as elements that cannot be "faked," situating the genre as exceptional within professional wrestling. And certainly, hardcore wrestling troubles the rigidity of kayfabe as it pushes the boundaries of fakery and legitimacy but also challenges binarized ideas of safety and danger, as the slicing of flesh and spectacular impacts to the body invite audiences to consider the production of bodily harm—and perhaps their own complicity as viewers—in this unique form of choreographed collaborative violence.

Hardcore wrestling mirrors other boundary-pushing forms of performance art like surgical performances, which "create uncontestable images of the opened body that force the attention of spectators" (Faber 89). A viewer notes the absence of a bruise after repeated worked punches to the face, but hardcore wrestling upsets that aesthetic distance by drawing attention back to the body as it produces visceral evidence of injury. Hardcore wrestling capitalizes on the tension of watching a performer face what seems to be a more genuine bodily risk, transforming kayfabe through a "deep interplay between knowing, and not knowing, for sure" (Conquergood 273).

What strikes me about this argument, though, is that these spectacular sights in hardcore wrestling—crimson masks, thumbtacks, barbed wire—are, with some exceptions, not typically the bodily impacts that leave lasting impacts on performers. Whereas a bladed forehead can heal in days, the more mundane impacts: the long drives from town to town, hundreds of repeated flatback bumps, and pressures to accrue and maintain sufficient bodily capital (Chow 82) all contribute to the long-term wearing down that makes early death so common in the industry (Morris). Yet, the splitting of skin in a hardcore match troubles the viewer's aesthetic distance much more immediately and effectively, drawing forth an empathy from audiences that might otherwise be suppressed through conventional notions of fakery.

Does this redemption of kayfabe through hardcore wrestling, then, preclude the possibility of shifting contexts of kayfabe within conventional genres of professional

wrestling? If spectacular falls, cuts, and explosions lend a feeling of legitimacy to kayfabe, non-hardcore wrestling would face greater pressure to keep up so as to not lose buy-in from audiences. As non-hardcore wrestling remains popular among fans despite a perceived lesser sense of legitimacy, I posit that kayfabe is not quite bygone but rather shifting and reforming across genres, certainly including but not limited to hardcore wrestling. As a fan, watching stiff strikes in conventional wrestling matches draws a comparable empathetic response from me, for example, as do some legitimate-looking submission maneuvers applied by wrestlers with mixed martial arts backgrounds. With the advent of high-definition broadcasts, wrestlers working televised matches have had to work more snugly, again shifting styles to meet changing performative contexts. And while heels and babyface traveling together as co-workers is no longer a scandalous affront to kayfabe as it once was, contemporary wrestlers frequently blend onscreen personas with personal lives on social media, extending an updated form of kayfabe well beyond the confines of the wrestling arena (Litherland 532). In this way, hardcore wrestling is a testament to the malleability of kayfabe over time, a form that provides particularly promising avenues to bring attention back to the wrestler's body as it faces down precarity and peril both imagined and painfully felt.

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Response to "Shifting Kayfabe in Hardcore Wrestling and Beyond"

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"Shifting Kayfabe in Hardcore Wrestling and Beyond" furthers the conversation on hardcore professional wrestling's role in the maintenance and redefining of kayfabe. Oglesby brings in the works of Faber and Conquergood to illuminate the parallels of hardcore professional wrestling as a form of extreme performance art. The discourse of Oglesby on the ultraviolent presentation of hardcore professional wrestling also is an important observation in that these actions are not necessarily the culprit of both short- and long-term health consequences that many professional wrestlers encounter because of their participation in the industry. Yet, as the author also excellently formulates, these actions can be most effective in gaining legitimate reactions from a potentially skeptical crowd. This is a fascinating observation and one that warrants further conversation. Hardcore professional wrestling matches present audiences with moments of discomfort, but also are intended, when done "correctly," with the safety of the performers in mind. Anecdotally there are stories of hardcore wrestlers noting that they often feel comfortable in their matches because they know that who they are working with knows what they are doing. Then as any other form of professional wrestling, this presents the importance of wrestler competency of their craft. Just as the wrestler doing a piledriver must know how to safely deliver the move, so too must a hardcore or deathmatch wrestler know how to use foreign objects to draw investment and reaction while also not causing legitimate life-threatening harm to their opponent.

Oglesby continues by offering a proposed "shifting of kayfabe" in professional wrestling as opposed to its deterioration. For instance, Oglesby raises the examples of stiffly worked matches incorporating heavy strikes and elements of mixed-martial-arts. These matches are indeed ones that draw captivating reactions from audiences, and there is nothing "fake" about an open palm strike tearing open a wrestler's chest. This presents what we believe to be an opportunity for further inquiry into the reshaping of what constitutes kayfabe and its parameters over the course of professional wrestling's

popularity. What really is kayfabe in the contemporary world of professional wrestling, and is there one way to achieve its maintenance? Hardcore professional wrestling is one way to elicit humanistic concern and curiosity within professional wrestling, as is a snuggly and stiffly worked match. As these genres continue to generate more exposure and popularity, we ought to also be asking ourselves how their practice actively reconfigures one of professional wrestling's core elements, that being the existence of kayfabe.

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Defining Kayfabe: A Dialogue Among Pro-Wrestling Professionals and Academics

The Academics

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The Professionals

Terrance Griep wrestles as Tommy "The SpiderBaby" Saturday and has been recognized by *OUT Magazine* as America's first openly gay professional wrestler. Having wrestled for nearly twenty years, he has claimed over a dozen championships and writes creatively under the unlikely penname Terrance Griep.

Cory Strode is a pro-wrestling journalist for *Pro Wrestling Insider*. He is also a podcaster, webcomics writer, and all-around comic book nerd.

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Introduction

Presented in this article is a discussion between the academics and the professionals toward understand the definition of kayfabe and how kayfabe has changed over the last century of professional wrestling. This discussion was organized especially for this special issue on kayfabe and considers how to understand kayfabe in professional wrestling and beyond. Across this discussion about the past, present, and potential future of kayfabe, the participants considered how kayfabe operates as a co-construction or collaboration between the audience and the performers. Academic and professional perspectives on kayfabe both reflected this common theme and, potentially, common definition.

From both insider and outsider perspectives, kayfabe emerged from the interaction of audience and performers engaging in their respective roles. In a sense, then, the reason for kayfabe's change over time could be seen as resulting from changes in the expectations

and norms of those roles. Seeing kayfabe as existing in the actions of audience and performer alike helps explain why kayfabe has not died, but has rather expanded, morphed, mutated, and adapted to the changes in professional wrestling and the broader historical, material, social, and cultural contexts in which it exists.

This conversation occurred on October 14, 2021, via Zoom and has been revised for publication to augment the conversation with citations. The discussion focused on addressing the basic questions, presented by moderator CarrieLynn D. Reinhard. Each discussant was asked to respond to the questions, and they were given the space to expand upon their answers as well as to respond to each other's comments. The conversation was recorded and the audio track transcribed using Zoom's in-program features. To retain the conversational feel of the discussion, explanations and citations are provided in footnotes to allow those interested to locate such additional sources of information and learn more about the concepts under discussion. The conversation has been edited for space and clarity, removing pauses and tangents and allowing the discussants to review and explain something said that perhaps was not properly captured and transcribed by Zoom.

This article presents the discussion, turn for turn, as it occurred, with subheads added to highlight the question being addressed in that specific section.

The Definitions of Kayfabe

CarrieLynn Reinhard (CR): On kayfabe as a concept, we wanted to get different perspectives beyond just academic ones, because academics have ideas, but they are not the only ideas and definitely sometimes not the most important ideas. Three people at different stages of their academic career, as well as three people with more of a professional relationship with professional wrestling, come to this conversation. The idea is to talk about kayfabe and understand different approaches to understanding kayfabe: what kayfabe is and what we can do with it. I thought we could just begin by going around the room and describing how you define kayfabe. When you hear that word, what comes to mind?

Terrance Griep (TG): Obviously kayfabe has changed a lot, which I guess is foreshadowing some of the other questions here. My own thought on contemporary kayfabe—and we can talk historically too, if you like—is just that it is a simple synonym for the willing suspension of disbelief, the old theatrical concept. Ultimately, what kayfabe is from a wrestler's perspective is selling your finish; it is making the end of your match seem believable, and everything you do that contributes to that effort. So, as a wrestler, you present your gimmick when there are people around. You do not show up at the same venue in the same car with your archenemy, that kind of thing. Anything that is going to interfere with the fans' enjoyment of what we are presenting is the opposite of kayfabe. Obviously, the word itself is carnie for "fake," with the implication being there that it is not a legitimate

competition.[1] But I am not sure anyone ever believed that it was. Audiences want to give themselves over to this illusion. It is somewhere between frustrating and insulting when we as performers do things that remove this illusion. Something that drives me nuts as a wrestler on the indie scene is seeing somebody who wrestles in the second match of the card, and then I see him milling up and down the aisle with the fans, going to the bathroom and yucking it up. But no one wants to think that we are just here at a show; they want to believe we wrestlers are larger than life figures, and to diminish ourselves in front of the audience dilutes that experience, I think. That is where the value of kayfabe is today, keeping that experience as close to "real" as possible, because these days, I think the most intriguing part of wrestling is where reality ends and illusion begins, and vice versa.

Cory Strode (CS): For those who do not know, I cover wrestling for *PW Insider*, and I see it the same way I see actors on a soap opera.[2] You do not watch a soap opera to see the persona drop, and the actor look at you in the camera and say "now, this part is based on this." No, you give yourself over to the story. Terrence plays a part; his character is based on him in some ways; in some ways it is not. It depends. Are they really fighting? No, but you could get hurt in the same way that a stunt man gets hurt. Is the story based on reality? Well, in the same way that every writer brings forth parts of their life to add to what they are creating. It is the same as an actor on stage or in a movie or anything like that. It is this line that you understand where reality ends and this fictional world where everything is settled in a ring by two people fighting or four people fighting—or with AEW up to twenty-four people. I see wrestling as any other sort of fictional storytelling. You accept the tropes of the storytelling, and you accept what they are doing as a reality that may or may not be tangentially related to ours. Much in the same way when I read a James Bond book, James Bond is not a real person, but Ian Fleming took parts of his life and put them into the story. The best example is the whole poker game in *Casino Royale* being based on him and his friend at a casino going, "You know, let's make this more interesting; let's pretend that the other people at the table are Russian spies and we have to take their money to stop whatever nefarious thing they are doing."

Chris Medjesky (CM): I am with CarrieLynn, and I am going to steal some of her thunder. For me kayfabe is about that co-constructed place of reality between the wrestler and the

[1] For more on this connection, see: Eero Laine's *Professional Wrestling and the Commercial Stage*, Routledge, 2020; and Shannon Bow O'Brien's *Donald Trump and the Kayfabe Presidency: Professional Wrestling Rhetoric in the White House*, Palgrave, 2020.

[2] For more on this connection, see Heather Levi's "Sport and Melodrama: The Case of Mexican Professional Wrestling" in *Social Text*, no. 50, 1997, pp. 57-68; and, J. D. Pratten's "Professional Wrestling: Multi-Million Pound Soap Opera of Sports Entertainment" in *Management Research News*, no. 26, is. 5, 2003, pp. 32-43.

audience.[3] What's really important is everybody playing a role there. The wrestlers can disrupt that sense of disbelief, and the audience can choose to do it, too. Frankly, as a fan, I get more annoyed when the audience does that than when the wrestlers do it because I feel like that is my portion of it. I feel like they are not playing their role properly whenever they break kayfabe. I think that is an important part of what I do not like about wrestling today. As fans we are all kind of playing in a way that is meaningful to everyone, and so I think it is important to add, at least in this conversation, the role that the audience plays in preserving or disrupting that kayfabe.[4] And yet fans can be some of the worst perpetrators in destroying kayfabe. I always wonder why. There are different levels of smart fans that we run into. And there are some that just sit there, not playing their part, and I want to say: why are you a fan? Why? Why is this something you want to do? Why do you want to disrupt? Why do you spend all this time, this money, and just your life invested in the product that you not only seem to hate but want to disrupt and destroy? It has always bothered me, but I think it highlights the significance of the audience in kayfabe.

Joe Ciupik (JC): I think there are actually two definitions of kayfabe: there is old school kayfabe and the new version of today. Old school was the boys did not ride together in the same car from town to town. They did not share hotel rooms. They did not appear in public with each other. What happened in the ring extended to their personal lives. Kayfabe today is a speck of dust compared to what it was. Kayfabe is, for all intents and purposes, dead. The boys will still do their carnie talk or their kayfabe inside the ring, but I am sure that this has waned from back in the day. I mean kayfabe started to die in the early 1990s when Vince McMahon let the cat out of the bag. I guess, let me rephrase what I initially said: there is only one version of kayfabe, and that was what it used to be before Vince destroyed it.[5] It is dead now. You can go on the Internet, and you can find out who is going to be wrestling who in a month from now or the angle that they are going for. As a fan back in the day, you had to watch the matches. The promoters gave you a nice nudge as to what was going to happen, but you still needed to figure it out for yourself. Back then, if you happened to go to a bar or a restaurant after those matches, you did not see a Bruiser Brody and Jerry Blackwell with the Sheik's Army after the Army turned on Blackwell. You did not

[3] For more on the co-construction of kayfabe, see CarrieLynn D. Reinhard's "Kayfabe as Convergence: Content Interactivity and Prosumption in the Squared Circle" in CarrieLynn D. Reinhard and Christopher J. Olson's edited collection *Convergent Wrestling: Participatory Culture, Transmedia Storytelling, and Intertextuality in the Squared Circle*, Routledge, 2019.

[4] For interesting work on applying play concepts to professional wrestling, see Shane M. Toepfer's Ph.D. dissertation *The Playful Audience: Professional Wrestling, Media Fandom, and the Omnipresence of Media Smarks*" from Georgia State University, 2011: https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/communication_diss/33.

[5] For more on this story, see David Bixenspan's article "Thirty years ago, WWE Admitted it Wasn't a Sport to Try and Dodge Regulation" from *Deadspin*, February 15, 2019, https://deadspin.com/thirty-years-ago-wwe-admitted-it-wasnt-a-sport-to-try-1832640826.

see them sitting in the corner booth at a Perkins having a bunch of pancakes. If they did such a thing, I guarantee you Verne Gagne was going to boot one of them out, if not both of them. That is just the way business was done in all of the territory for kayfabe. But that is no longer the case. And I get it. I understand it. The cat is out of the bag, the genie is out of the bottle, and you cannot put it back in.

Aris Emmanouloudis (AE): I see kayfabe as a contract, an unwritten contract, that involves a process between the performers and the audience. The performers and the audience have to play their respective roles; in the case of the audience, most of the time knowingly but also unknowingly. Yes, they have to, both of them, play the roles assigned to them.[6] It is a formality, one that you do not really care about it, but you will be annoyed if it is not there, if one day it disappears. Yet, depending on the company they are working for, wrestlers do not always seem to care about convincing fans. What I am trying to say is that fans might not bother too much about it, if kayfabe is not there, as long as it happens outside the magic circle of the performance. Nowadays you see wrestlers going on social media and participating with their everyday normal names. However, if kayfabe is broken during a performance, this will be very, very wrong. I am talking about examples like the Madison Square Garden incident where the heels and the faces hugged each other during the performance.[7] Fans became upset at that event. Also, breaking kayfabe is accepted only when it is broken for a good purpose. What I mean is that when they have those cancer awareness campaigns in WWE, and you see heels and faces all standing next to each other, and you have the person that you hate mortally standing next to you.[8] In that particular moment of time, fans do not really seem to be annoyed by the break in kayfabe because wrestlers are fighting for a greater purpose. Same with the post-911 *SmackDown* episode where everybody came out on stage for the moment of silence, or when celebrating someone whose career is about to end, like Ric Flair. It is acceptable to break kayfabe under those conditions during performance, and breaking kayfabe is accepted outside of performances so that wrestlers are free to do whatever they want with their own personas and personalities.

CR: Chris already talked about some of my approach to kayfabe, and how I see it as this negotiation that needs both the audience and the wrestlers playing their parts to make it

[6] For more on what this work entails, see Tyler Brunette and Birney Young's "Working Stiff(s): A Theory of Live Audience Labor Disputes" in *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, no. 36, 2019, pp. 221-34; and, R. Tyson Smith's "Passion Work: The Joint Production of Emotional Labor in Professional Wrestling" in *Social Psychology Quarterly*, no. 71, is. 2, 2008, pp. 157-76.
[7] For more on this incident, see this review from *Bleacher Report*: https://bleacherreport.com/articles/986789-wwe-a-look-back-at-the-infamous-curtain-call-the-msg-incident.
[8] For more on the contemporary WWE and their fans, see Dru Jeffries' edited collection *#WWE: Professional Wrestling in the Digital Age*, Indiana University Press, 2019.

happen. But I will say that the reason why I actually became a professional wrestling fan in 2014 is because my partner, Christopher Olson, mentioned the way of looking at professional wrestling and kayfabe as a hyperreality. Hyperreality is this academic idea that says we have this construction of a reality and we are trying to portray that reality as real, but we know it is fictional.[9] We know that it is constructed, that it may be based in objective reality, but it is someone's subjective interpretation of that objective reality. That idea is what fascinated me, and I began thinking about professional wrestling as existing in this hyperreal space. But to me, the difference between like wrestling and a play or a movie is the fact that oftentimes it is meant to be occurring in real time, so this hyperreality has to be functionally created in real time by individuals who are really good at improv. They must be able to sell their performance in the moment. What I also find interesting with that approach to kayfabe, and how you are creating this fictional reality in real time, is how much it also relates to all of us these days, and how we may be performing a way that we want people to see us. We do so to get over: to get the job, the love, the money. We do the hustle, whatever it is, in real time. Especially when you look at social media and how we put on all these different masks and performances to essentially survive in the world today.[10]

Comparing Kayfabes

CR: I definitely do not see kayfabe now as what it was in the past, and so now I am going to segue into thinking about these comparisons. I think the kayfabe that I see when I watch AEW—and I have gone back and rewatched all of *Being the Elite* for an essay I wrote[11]—and I have noticed how they have aspects of kayfabe coming in. They definitely have times where they are putting on performances, and there will be times where they break that performance with laughter, or they wink at the camera, and they are giving those knowing fourth wall breaks, so that you, the fan, know they are breaking kayfabe. But the one thing that they never really seem to break kayfabe on is in declaring that the matches are real. They may wink and nod and let people in on the fact that we all know that everything is pre-determined or fictional or whatever—creating almost a post-postmodern kayfabe. However, they really want to keep the illusion that the matches are not predetermined; that seems to be a big thing for AEW. So, how do you see kayfabe having changed over

[9] For more on professional wrestling as a hyperreality, see Reinhard and Olson's *Convergent Wrestling*, and Broderick Chow, Eero Laine, and Claire Warden's edited collection *Performance and Professional Wrestling*, Routledge, 2017.

[10] For more on the relationship between professional wrestling and the theories of Erving Goffman, see Kelsie Weavill's master's thesis *Breaking Kayfabe: Professional Wrestling in the Key of Erving Goffman* from the University of Huddersfield in 2020; and, Michael R. Ball's Ph.D. dissertation *Ritual Drama in American Popular Culture: The Case of Professional Wrestling* from the University of Nebraska in 1989.

[11] For this essay, see Reinhard's "Being the Elite (Khan, 2019-Present)" in Simon Bacon's edited collection *Transmedia Cultures: A Companion* from Peter Lang, 2021.

time? And do you think it is different? Do you think that it is adapting now, if it still exists, or is it just an aspect of the past?

TG: I suppose, if you want to think of it in tarot card ways, you know death does not mean death, necessarily. It means change; it means one thing dying, and something else taking its place. Maybe that is one way to think of kayfabe. The old territory system could use the old kayfabe method. They were created for each other, and you could work the same match town after town after town after town. Now—and this probably goes back to cable TV when Vince really just took the territory paradigm and made it national—but, now, kayfabe had to go away. Because you could not keep that con, if you want to think of it in those terms, going because the new exposure brought by cable TV and then the Internet.[12] I just imagine people trying to maintain kayfabe like a masked wrestler today. Could you get away with that? I read in Bobby Heenan's autobiography that I think it was Dr. X who would leave a venue with his mask on and then wait till he was in a middle of a cornfield in Nebraska before he would take it off. And if you try doing that today, three kids would jump out from behind the corn stalks and yell "gotcha!" The fans think there are a lot smarter than they are. I know that is part of the fun. I am endlessly fascinated by the notion when I hear wrestling podcasts or whatever talk about "well, this guy should have gone over. The other guy should have gone over. What have you done with him? He cannot afford to lose another match!" And those sorts of things. I just think that that would never have happened in the old system. It could not have. It would have been "can you believe that big guy finally got pinned by the little guy?! I did not see that coming!" That that kind of thing, even if people understood that this wasn't 100% legitimate. Look at Wilbur Snyder versus Warren Baku: they will just do a drop toe hold and then hold it for five minutes. I remember seeing that exact match years ago and thinking "gosh I wish I could get away with that. I wish I could do that." But I would get booed out of the building with go-away heat, not heel heat. As wrestling changes, kayfabe must change right along with it. I see what wrestling is becoming with all the backflips and all the just showing off for the sake of the audience, and I think how long can we keep up shifting, athletically? Maybe reverting to something a little more traditional, with the bad guys acting like bad guys again, might be helpful.

CR: Maxwell Jacob Friedman seems to always be a heel, no matter where he is.

CS: Even if it is flipping off a seven-year-old who asked for his autograph. And the kid's parents are "oh, I cannot believe he would do that!" But those of us who have been wrestling fans forever are like, well, yeah he is a heel.

[12] For more on the history of professional wrestling, see Scott Beekman's *Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling*, Praeger, 2006.

CM: I think back to like when Sasha Banks was most popular but she was signing autographs with a rubber stamp. Pure heel heat.

JC: I think kayfabe is in a generational transitional period. Anyone that was born before the turn of the century still knows and recognizes what kayfabe is. Anybody born after them does not know what kayfabe is. When I talk about the general generational transition, I think after I am long gone man—I am 56, hopefully I have got another, you know, thirty to forty years left in me—by the time my six-month-old granddaughter—if, for whatever reason, she becomes a wrestling fan—she and her generation will watch it as they would a TV show or a movie or a play. They do not look at the mystique of the bad guy and the good guy are going at it. They look at what happens in the ring and if the wrestler can cut a promo; they look to see if the wrestlers can get over with the audience. I use Tom Cruise movies as an analogy. When anybody walks into a movie theater, and they see Tom Cruise—who is in great shape, but he's an almost-sixty-year-old guy right now; when you watch him repel down the tallest building in the world in Dubai, do they say that is fake, that could never happen. No. They get immersed in the action; it is an escape. Right now, even this discussion, it is a transitional discussion between what was and what it is going to be. That is just where it is at, and that is why I say kayfabe is dead. Well, maybe it is on life support, but they just do not want to pull the plug type of thing. As I tell anybody when they find out I have been involved in wrestling for thirty-six years, just enjoy it. Just watch it. If you are not entertained by it, that is fine. There are some movies out there that people have glowing reviews about, yet I think they are horrible. It is all a matter of opinions, whether you like it, or maybe you like baseball, or maybe you like football. It is a personal preference thing.

CS: You talked a little about the *Being the Elite* and them treating the endings of matches as if they are serious. I think they brought that over from New Japan Pro Wrestling, where the idea in Japan is: yes, it is pre-determined; yes, it is a show; but, when it gets to the ending of the match, the fighting spirit takes over. And the person who wins has the better fighting spirit. The audience has kind of accepted that as their version of kayfabe. The Young Bucks spent a lot of time in Japan; Kenny Omega lived in Japan. So, with All Elite especially, they want to kind of bring that idea to it, where, "yeah, wink wink nudge nudge, we know it is a show but …" One other thing I wanted to mention after what Joe was talking about with Tom Cruise: I used to help out my friend at his comic shop. This was during the WWE Attitude Era, so we would have on the TV screen *Monday Night Raw*. We would be watching it and every so often, someone would come up with a stack of comics, look up at the TV, and they would go, "You guys know that is fake, right?" As they are reading about

Spider-Man and Star Wars and Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Yet they felt compelled to tell us "You know that is fake, right?" to the point where it became a joke.

AE: To speak about the idea of kayfabe changing, and also going back to the perception of kayfabe as a contract: I think it is a contract that is very strict and specific, but its application depends on it being flexible, and it depends on the promotion. I want to bring an example here. There is a promotion that has been thriving and gaining popularity: Gatoh Move ChocoPro.[13] They produce these weekly shows that they put on YouTube for free every week. The promotion is run by Emi Sakura, who now wrestles for AEW. The idea of the promotion is that it is utterly twisted kayfabe. Even the rules about where wrestling takes place are twisted because they have this very small room, and they have just put a mat in the room. They have all sorts of crazy gimmicks and props around the room, and they do all sorts of wild stuff. What I have noticed from their chat history next to the streaming page is that the audience is very happy to play along. Even though the wrestlers willingly break kayfabe all the time—such as after the show is over they bring the entire roster on to have the rock-paper-scissors contests or they have cooking streams or they do all sorts of crazy, entertaining stuff—the audience is so hooked on it. The audience does not care, and it goes back to what Joe said earlier about being entertained by pretending kayfabe is real.

CM: I mean, I see that, and I think they are pretending kayfabe is alive. But it is so ridiculous. An outsider could not possibly believe that no one is going walk up to that and be like, "You know that is fake, right?" because it is so obviously fake, whereas traditional professional wrestling where kayfabe was maintained, it was a reasonable question that a person might get asked. But in the world of wrestling a mop that we see sometimes, that sort of thing is so obviously fake that they are pretending to maintain kayfabe. I think that ultimately gets to what my biggest problem with the fans is. There is an audience role and there is a wrestler role in wrestling, and the audience feels that they are more storytellers now. They want to be more Vince Russo than what they would really let Russo be. They want to be the ones to book the matches; they want to be the ones that they are just so close to being in that ring without being in that ring. And now they are overstepping their bounds, and so they do things like pretend like all this is really good. They want heightened flip flops and all those things, and we get a world in which Joey Ryan's dick flips happened. Fans are supposed to pretend that that is real, and I just think that is a different thing almost at this point then wrestling. And I have a hard time understanding how the same

[13] Their YouTube channel can be found at https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC2HtPsU4U7TNSv2mSbPkjow.

fans reconcile that because they will cheer for the dick flips, and they will go crazy when somebody DDTs a mop and pins in the middle of the floor, or there is an entire wrestling match of the blow-up doll. They will maintain the performance of fan who believes in kayfabe—but at the same time, when wrestlers are actually trying, the fans will boo them. And they will not maintain kayfabe whenever things are more realistic and then, at the same time, those same people will then sit there and be like "William Regal really should have been world champion." He did holds! He would do a headlock for 35 minutes! He went to a time limit draw for fifteen years on purpose because it worked. Those same wrestling fans doing all three things are really sort of three different sets of wrestling fans or people occupying different spaces. How are they negotiating various versions of kayfabe as they look at the slightly different variations of the same wrestling product? I personally cannot do it. As a fan, I cannot look at the cinematic matches when they happened at *WrestleMania 36*. I sat there with my son, and I said, buddy, I think this is it, I think this is the end of professional wrestling. Anyway, point being is I do not understand how people do it. I am of the opinion that you are right: we can only go so far in terms of how many flips we can do in a match, how high those flips can go, how many times can they rotate in the air. There is a limitation to the human body, how far they can twist, how far they can fall. We are so long past the time when a DDT was a finisher. Now anything short of pulling out a knife and stabbing them seems like it is not a finisher anymore. We either must go down the hill backwards to where we were, or it is just going to keep escalating to a hyperbolic level. If it keeps escalating, I am out; it is just not for me anymore.

JC: Do not abandon it. Here is what I will tell you. What you watch on TV, I agree with what you said 100%. Go support the indies. Go support the wrestlers that are going to be on TV in six months, a year, or in a couple of years from now. From my experience of producing indie wrestling, watching it from the inside, watching it as a fan, it is sort of a cross between WWE and old school because they are not on a time limit. When you are watching TV, when Roman Reigns goes into the ring, he knows he only has to go for twelve minutes and then the referee is going to tell him "okay, let's go home." Vince or the company wants them to do so much in that short period of time; that is why the bar has been raised so high. I have become disillusioned with watching (especially the WWE), but if you go to an indie show, there is no time limit. They are going to have five to eight matches, whatever it might be, and they will try to get done in two hours to try to keep it in a standard movie time limit. But if they go over, that is okay; they are not under that stress of getting it done within a time limit. Going in and supporting indie wrestling gives the true wrestling fan a taste of maybe what they once had as an eight-year-old and believing it at that age. Indie wrestling still provides a little bit of that for me, but even AEW is doing a better job, in my opinion, than WWE. However, there are certain

limitations: AEW has got such a large roster. Chris, you made the comment earlier about how the bar has been raised, about how extreme can wrestling get? And I will use the genie in a bottle analogy again: it is tough to go back to the toe holds and the head locks for two minutes. I mean those days are dead, even in in the indie scene, because we have become a microwave-takes-too-long-to-cook-my-food world. It is just a reality.

AE: They still do them in Japan, though, I think.

JC: And I am glad that that is the case, but here in the United States? Forget it. Again, even in the indies, the guys are working to get to AEW or the WWE, and so they are doing the flips. It becomes a gymnastics show as much as it is a wrestling show.

CM: I feel very strongly about the time factor. With WCW, they had *WCW Saturday Night*, they had a pay-per-view every other month. I think they had one more show in actually, but it was enough. You got to see talent spread out across the various areas, and it was quite exciting.

TG: The time thing is intriguing to me because that, basically, is what created kayfabe in the days when wrestling was 100% legitimate. You would have matches that would last five hours, and the audience would submit. They would be like, "I am sorry, but I got work tomorrow." So, the Gold Dust Trio, they came up with "slam bang wrestling" where they went from something legitimate in terms of competition to something that was designed to entertain simply because audiences could not sit through all that wrestling. Now, here we are, a century later, going right back to it.[14]

JC: The world has certainly changed from a century ago, when wrestling was done under the big top. In most towns you did not have 237 entertainment options or 1,000 TV channels to watch, so it was an event when it came to your town, much like the circus or any carnival that may have come around. People had nothing else to do and might have been there, literally, for only entertainment. The talkies were just starting but not every neighborhood had a movie theatre. That is what made professional wrestling a big attraction: the circus came into town, people saw there is a wrestling show and that these guys are real. To go back to Terry, what he said earlier about having a leg hold for forty-five seconds or something, and this all ties back into kayfabe. It seemed real when a guy is doing that, when they are not doing all of this acrobatic stuff. Some of the things they are doing today would

[14] For more on the Gold Dust Trio, check out this episode from *Cultaholic Wrestling* https://podcasts.apple.com/kw/podcast/the-gold-dust-trio-wrestling-in-the-twenties-part-1/id1344913966?i=1000462280613.

paralyze ninety-five percent of the population if it was really done. It is so over the top, kayfabe could not keep up. Even if Vince did not kill it in the early 1990s, kayfabe would still be dead today because of the evolution of professional wrestling in the ring, as well as the Internet and the information age.

CM: I wonder if it is a chicken and egg thing: did kayfabe die and wrestling change, or did wrestling change and kayfabe died? I do not know, but I think back to some of the most pivotal things to happen in professional wrestling in the past forty to sixty years was Bret Hart holding Steve Austin in that sharpshooter for an extra amount of time. I mean that was forever he held Stone Cold in there, and it was because of that, and that double turn, that really caused a monumental shift in wrestling. We saw that really birth the Attitude Era. I do not know how audiences would respond to that today. I just do not know because the type of wrestler that would do that the sort of thing exist out there—well, Bryan Danielson does a little bit, but I am not talking about the Hogan-esque type. I am talking about the sort of small technical guy.

CR: So, I am probably going to mark out a little bit on that one. I do think that the variety of what constitutes as a wrestling move these days allows for those types of holds and those types of technical wrestling. Along with the acrobatic style as well, the more lucha libre style. You are almost able to then heighten certain things to look more realistic like the holds. Again, AEW mark here, but you have like Thunder Rosa, Bryan Danielson, Daniel Garcia—these individuals can do other types of moves, but it is when they get so brutal with the holds that the audience at times will gasp. I think there is still that type of audience-wrestler interaction when we have those moves, and, again, it may just be AEW and indies as well. Because I have not watched WWE in several years at this point. It is just that the diversity of what is out there, I think, allows for the diversity of fans that are out there. So that, depending on who you are, you can emotionally engage with something and in doing so, even if it is just for that fleeting second or a couple of minutes, it becomes the most real, engrossing thing that you could see, just like in a movie when you are emotionally attached to the character. I think it is a very similar dynamic.

CS: I was going to say, one of the things that Ring of Honor did when they came back from the pandemic, they reinstituted what ROH refers to as pure wrestling, which is hold for hold, not a lot of the flippy-dippy stuff; not a lot of high flying. It is very mat-based wrestling. It is very much the sort of stuff that we are talking about here as fans. Except now the hard thing about that is Ring of Honor has not been able to resume touring (and may be on hiatus for months). Because of the pandemic, and they were kind of in a down cycle before the pandemic because they lost so many of their wrestlers, they have instituted

this pure wrestling that is a very mat-based product. I think that is almost a reaction to other promotions. They started and eventually became an indie that does not have death matches. Then it was we do not have monster guys, we have wrestlers and now they are more pure wrestling against the Pro Wrestling Guerrilla lucha style that is popular with AEW, and it would be popular in WWE if Vince understood it, but he does not. No match on WWE TV can go more than like three minutes.

JC: If you include the walkouts, then it is ten minutes.

CS: Well, yeah, but I quit watching WWE when I realized that none of the matches are over four minutes unless you are watching a pay-per-view. If I want to watch people enter, I can go on YouTube. I want to watch a confrontation between two people about money, a title, or revenge. I get that with Ring of Honor. I get that with New Japan. And I get that with AEW. They all have very different styles. You have the strong style with New Japan. You have the mat-based style with Ring of Honor, and you have kind of a buffet with AEW, where they are doing a little of everything. For every Young Bucks, you have a Bryan Danielson or a CM Punk. They are going to bring that MMA, strong-style type to the ring. So, I think the different styles, they rise and fall over time.

AE: Funnily enough, all those Young Bucks, CM Punk, and Bryan Danielson, they all began from Ring of Honor. I think that even WWE wrestlers, in the house shows when they know it will not be televised and they know that they have more time to perform, sometimes they will also go a bit off script. I remember in 2016, there was this house show here in Amsterdam, and Cesaro was wrestling. At some point, his opponent was headfirst in the ropes, and everybody from the crowd started chanting "6-1-9! 6-1-9!" Now 619 is a banned move for anyone that is not Rey Mysterio. However, Cesaro performed the 619, something that he has never done on TV. From what I have read in other comments, because I was reading the results from the entire European tour, he performed this move in other cities as well. So, when it comes to non-televised, it is not really canon in WWE. When they know that they can go off script and get away with it, they will do it. That was just something that came to my mind now because we bash WWE—and sometimes rightfully so—but I think that the performers also try to find these small opportunities, small windows to express themselves differently. Like their social media presence. I also remember how shocked I was in the beginning, when wrestlers on Twitter was becoming a thing. Chris Jericho would go on Twitter and bash his opponent or call them a stupid idiot or whatever, but if someone

said "hey, Chris, I saw your match tonight, and it was really good," he would reply politely to them.[15]

CM: I think your point is really to the larger conversation about what happened to kayfabe. I think it would be hard to disassociate what Vince did, and I am going to blame Vince specifically here, but I mean certainly Eric Bischoff would later play a role in it. TV used to exist to sell house show tickets. People would watch TV and then want to go to the show. It seemed that eventually Vince wanted people to buy tickets to watch TV and now he wants people to watch TV to buy into the intellectual property. I do not really think he cares if people watch the TV show or not, just as long as something drives them towards that intellectual property. But that all happened right around the same time period, in the late 1980s and early 1990s. I do not think you are wrong in thinking about how important those house shows were to maintaining kayfabe. There is the separation from being the mediated audience or the live audience, and that was a really important thing in what was kayfabe, this participating as an actual live audience members opposed to a mediated audience member. Those live shows are really an important part of what we are talking about here. The sort of death of those live shows contributed to the death of kayfabe, I would think.[16]

JC: Well, that is why I brought up earlier about hitting the indies because those are like shows not affiliated with the big boys, with the shows that are on TV.

CR: But the indies are increasingly recording to put things up on YouTube and are indeed now also producing live streaming of their pay-per-views. AAW here has done that. My partner and I both went to one that was being live streamed and then we watched one that was live streamed. So, they do have the time limit coming in that way, too, but another thing about the indies—and I think this goes back to what Chris was saying about the gimmicks—you have people like Orange Cassidy who started off in the indies doing a very particular gimmick that requires you to really buy into it to go along with what he does. You also have instances where Bryce Remsburg oversaw a match that had no one actually wrestling in it, so an invisible man match.[17] That was again on the indie scene, so you do see these types of experimentation, innovation, degradation, whatever word you want to

[15] For more on the impact of Twitter on professional wrestling, see Benjamin Litherland's "Breaking Kayfabe is Easy, Cheap, and Never Entertaining: Twitter Rivalries in Professional Wrestling" in *Celebrity Studies*, no. 5, is. 4, 2014, pp. 531-33.

[16] For more on the changing roles of audiences in professional wrestling, see Jon Ezell, "The Dissipation of 'Heat': Changing Role(s) of Audience in Professional Wrestling in the United States," in *Performance and Professional Wrestling*, edited by Broderick Chow, Claire Warden, and Eero Laine, Routledge, 2016, pp. 9-16.

[17] This comment refers to the 2019 Game Changer Wrestling match: Invisible Man vs. Invisible Stan that can be watched at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Csluz7zFmPjM.

use, of kayfabe and trying to push the boundaries of how much the audience will accept and go along with what is real and what is not.

JC: No doubt about it. You are exactly right that a lot of the indies are trying to stream. They are trying to get an additional revenue stream in the door. Well, none of them have quit their day job, let us put it that way; they have shoot jobs. However, again, just in my experience and watching it, even if it is being recorded and put together on YouTube, not having that time restriction helps calm the acrobatic gymnastic approach to professional wrestling. They can go ahead and do that, but then they can also go down and do a leg lock—maybe not for a couple of minutes, maybe thirty seconds, just so that they are blowing up by that point. They need to catch up, but they cannot let you do that on WWE or any of the TV shows

CS: I am not going to get all my moves in, brother.

JC: To me part of kayfabe started to die already in the 1980s when Hogan's finishing move was a leg drop. Are you kidding me? Oh, even a little bit later than that, The Rock's finishing move in the '90s—come on…. And I get it: people, for whatever reason, they love that: hook, line and sinker. They get brought into the boat and skinned alive. But when you do stuff like that, after having the death matches where you have Mick Foley being chokeslammed off the top of the cage … through the cage to the mat. And he still kicks out; yet, Hogan's or The Rock's finishing move, the guy does not kick out. I mean, come on. Wrestling has killed kayfabe itself. Yes, Vince did it, but the style of wrestling changed, and it killed itself. Hulk Hogan and the Road Warriors changed professional wrestling. I think that was the beginning of the end because it just started to change. You needed to be big, muscle-bound guys. And I love Animal and Hawk. I have worked with them a few times, but there was no science in the match. That was the beginning of kayfabe dying as that changed the perception of the audience when those three individuals appeared.

The Audience and Kayfabe

CR: I do have one last question that we could think through here that is related to things I was just hearing. I am going to preface it by saying one of the things that I think we are hearing is that certain fans like certain things, and the promoters might be feeding into that. So AEW might be feeding into one type of fan, while WWE is feeding into another type of fan, and so on and so forth. Just how important do you think it is for the fan to buy into professional wrestling? Does kayfabe still exist if the fans believe that it exists, even if the wrestlers are not really doing much to keep kayfabe alive? Are the fans doing enough to keep it alive?

TG: It's real to me, damn it![18] This ties into the point I want to make; it ties everything together, I think, the various components. First, I want to mention Chris's excellent point about Japanese toe holds. I think I could get away with doing a toehold for two minutes. I will do a figure four leg lock or various other related things simply because no one else does that stuff. If I am in there with some flippy kid, it is like, okay, I just took away your arsenal, now what are you going to do? We are going to wrestle, that is what we are going to do. When you set it up and you work with the audience, and they realize what I am doing, they will cheer and they will go "oh wow" even though I am generally the heel. And then you lock it in, and they are so excited to see this move that they recognize and no one else is using, at least locally. Then I make a point of getting the referee to do a check and see if my opponent wants to quit. I have got the figure four and what do I do? I reach behind the ref's back and grab that second rope. And I tell my opponent to sell. He throws his head back, and if he is doing a good job, he looks like Robert Shaw from the climax for *Jaws*. The audience will then start booing. They are in on the whole thing: like they cheer the move, but they know I am the bad guy and now the bad guy is cheating. And so the audience is keeping up with what I am doing in the ring—or, maybe I am keeping up with them, that might be another way of looking at it. But they will cheer the hold, and then they will go back to booing me when I started the cheating. It feels to me like maybe the audience is just that much more sophisticated, and that kayfabe just made a natural progression of sophistication.

CM: I think you are hitting on what I think ends up being an issue with kayfabe. The promoters, particularly Vince and some of the others, and as a result, the fans and some of the wrestlers, do not really know where they are at any moment. Like they do not know where they are in the storytelling process. So they do not know if they are supposed to buy into it or not; they do not know if they are supposed to be smart or not. Like when Kurt Angle went to Pittsburgh for the first time as a heel,[19] and he did not believe that he would be booed. Let me assure you, I was there booing him, and I was happy to do it. Even though he was a childhood hero of mine, we knew where we were at that time, where the product was. The wrestlers knew where the product was; the promoters knew where the product was, and so the audience knew where the product was. And they sort of knew where they were going. I think that there is a lot of uncertainty right now. This gets a lot to what Joe was talking about: there is an uncertainty about where things are headed and what things

[18] See Brian Jansen's "'It's Still Real to Me': Contemporary Professional Wrestling, Neo-Liberalism, and the Problems of Performed/Real Violence" in *Canadian Review of American Studies*, no. 50, is. 2, 2020, pp. 302-30; and Laine's "Kayfabe: Optimism, Cynicism, Critique." *Professional Wrestling: Politics and Populism*, edited by Sharon Mazer, Heather Levi, Eero Laine, and Nell Haynes, Seagull Books/University of Chicago, pp. 192–206.
[19] For more on this incident, see this report from the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette's Cristina Rouvalis in 1999: https://old.post-gazette.com/magazine/19991114angle2.asp.

are. It causes so much confusion that there is a lot of frustration. What ends up happening with that is sort of my concern about kayfabe. I think if people committed to their roles, then what worked in, say, 1977 would work just as well today.

JC: I agree with everything that you said, but one of the things that you said expanded on my viewpoint. One of the other things that turns me off on wrestling is the turn or multiple turns from babyface to heel back to babyface back to heel. A turn is good but do not do it every six months—heck, do not even do it every year. If you are going to do a turn, look for a reason, not just for the sake of doing it because you need another heel or another babyface. Whatever the reason, make it worthwhile and memorable and, the last thing, make it count

CR: Even in that sense, what you are describing is similar to a story that has logic to it, and there are definitely a lot of TV shows and movies where, at some point, the logic is broken and the character suddenly does something that is out of character and makes no sense to the plot. There are some fans who will watch that, and they will hate it because of their emotional attachment to the characters and suddenly they are acting out of character. But then you will have fans who might watch something just because of the spectacle, and again I think that comes back to this idea that we have multiple types of fans watching for very different reasons. And for different fans, it could also then be different definitions of what they consider to be real. For me, the biggest heel turn was Tommaso Ciampa against Johnny Gargano because I was very invested in that story and that seemed real to me. But for others what might be real is watching to Nick Gage and Jon Moxley make each other bleed as much as possible. Whereas I can watch that, and I see that the hits are not necessarily landing the right way or that light tubes do not have powder in them to be real lights. So, I think there are different types of fans with different definitions of what real is.

JC: But having said that, a good heel turn or a good babyface turn, an impactful one is going to transcend the entire audience and maybe not 100% but I am going to put it into the low to mid or even high 90s. I was at the match when the Sheik's Army turned on Jerry Blackwell, and I guarantee you every single person in there became a fan. They started cheering for Jerry Blackwell; 99% of the people in that audience were cheering for Jerry Blackwell. That is why, going back to what I said earlier, do not do it just for the sake of doing it.

TG: Get a story. Make it character development.

AE: Having various definitions of real, I think, is a very positive element of the contemporary wrestling landscape. That there is something for everyone. There is so much

wrestling right now, and so many ways to consume it, which means that everybody can get what they are looking for. I think this is what I mean we say wrestling is dead, wrestling might not be mainstream, or mainstream wrestling has killed wrestling or whatever, but I think that there is so much wrestling right now that everyone can get what they are looking for. And to answer about the placement of kayfabe: I do not think that kayfabe is either alive or dead. It will appear when it has to be there, and it will die when we fans kill it, but we can never really get you know rid of it.

CS: How I want to end my thought of kayfabe is it in some ways is almost a match per match thing. I can watch one match and when I do my analysis for *PW Insider*, it is like okay these guys did this, this was the story of the match, I like this, I did not like this. But I can also watch and the match that always comes to mind was Kenny Omega and Okada. Three minutes into that match, I am not thinking about the performance. I am not thinking about where they are going next. I am not thinking about anything other than oh, my gosh, who is going to win? They have used their ability in the ring to create kind of—I think the best way to put it would be a kayfabe bubble, where I forget about anything else other than these two people want to win and they will do everything they can to do so in this hyperreality world between these ropes in this arena.

TG: And only one of them can win.

CS: Right, and somebody has to win. Because they have set it up that way. Another match was Kenny Omega and Bryan Danielson. On the one *AEW Dynamite*, I was covering it and I had to stop. Because I bought into the story. I completely gave myself over to it, and when you got that time limit draw, perfectly done. It was not Bryan has got to get Kenny in the hold and make it last for the next thirty-five seconds. It was more that they are there, they see that the time is running out, and they are both getting more frantic about having to win. And you buy into it. At that moment, it was pure kayfabe because I believed it. I did not go well, you know, Kenny Omega is not going to lose this match and Bryan Danielson cannot lose on his first show on public TV and on and on. It was, oh, my gosh, what is going to happen? And great performers create that, in the same way, like we talked earlier. The first time you saw *Die Hard*, did you think about the stunt work; did you think about who wrote the script; did you think about this actor's previous roles; did you think about how Bruce Willis cannot play action hero because he is this goofball on TV who just put out an album of crappy music? No, they won you with the story. When performers are good, no matter where they are, no matter what company they work for—whether it is at the VFW with fifty people or in a concert hall—you buy in if they do their job right, and I think that is the most important thing. They make that reality to where you buy in.

JC: Cory, I have talked to several locker rooms before doing a TV taping, mostly for the indie shows, and the single biggest thing that I tell any wrestler in any locker room is that they have one job to do for me: make me believe. Because if they can make me believe, then I know that the people that are in that audience or watching on the screen are going to believe. The version of kayfabe out there today will happen if the wrestlers in the ring can get you to believe that what is happening is real, which allows you to suspend all disbelief and be entertained and get into it and to boost somebody like Spider Baby. Then kayfabe is still alive. So it is not only the wrestlers themselves in the match, but it is the audience. It is a tag team that can keep kayfabe alive—the new version of kayfabe.

CM: I think what we are seeing now, though, is just more of an exaggerated version of what we saw. I think we do have some people buying into wrestling a blow-up doll. I think we do have people buying into that. Obviously, I have a preference, and I am obviously going to put it out there that that is stupid and I hate it and I wish it would have never existed.

CR: As we have said, the match is real. Those are two real people engaging in real athleticism that sometimes results in very real injury. The question then is to what extent is the audience going to buy into all the other parts of it.[20] If the performers, the wrestlers, are doing their job well enough when it comes to selling, it makes it a lot easier for the audience to buy into it. I think of it in terms of what I call entanglement and detachment. Like when you are watching a movie, you can become entangled in the movie and buy into it: it just hooks you and you go with the flow. Then maybe something happens, and you might detach from it, because you notice like all that special effect is not that special. So, you get detached from the movie but then, if you keep watching, something else might entangle you again. I have had that experience with professional wrestling, both mediated and live, where I see something does not totally work, but as long as the performers do not dwell on it and they do not make a big deal out of a whiff or a botch, then I can get entangled again. But it does require this kind of going back and forth between the audience and the wrestler for that perception of reality to be constructed and maintained.

CM: And so, just the academic in me throwing it out there for us to tease out in another day, but I think it is interesting that when we think about kayfabe, we are always thinking about protecting the real in the illusion of the real. We always have these conversations, if you look at the academic scholarship, for those of you that are academics, that is always focused on the real. We never ever focus on the intentionally fictional. That portion of the

[20] For more on the labor of professional wrestling, see Broderick Chow and Eero Laine's "Audience Affirmation and the Labour of Professional Wrestling" in *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, no. 19, 2014, pp. 44-53.

conversation never comes up. It might be simply because to do so would require us to have more access to the means of production for the actual matches than we probably do. But still, I think it is interesting, and if this conversation continues academically that might be a path to take.

CR: Well, just to piggyback on that, I do think part of that is similar to like fan studies. There has been decades worth now of fan studies research trying to legitimize being a fan. And I think because of the stereotypes associated with the wrestling fan as being a dupe and being a mark, there is this idea to try to focus on what is the real versus what is not real rather than understanding it more from like a media studies perspective as something fictional and something constructed. Instead of trying to compare professional wrestling to sports—which is like a factual entertainment?—we should just compare it to any other form of fictional entertainment.

CM: Probably right.

CR: I think we are trying, as academics and as fans of professional wrestling, to reclaim this idea that, hey, we are not idiots; we know what is real and what is not real. We are trying to tease that out to make professional wrestling fans look better to the general public.

CS: As a comic book nerd, I remember when I started, there was this whole thing—and it had been in science fiction as well. This need to legitimize our stuff, that science fiction needed to legitimize itself. And then, when it got on the bestseller list, fans say, "See, we are literature." The same thing with comic books when we got *Maus* and *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight*: "See, we are literature." But the older I have gotten, the less I give a damn about that. Because eventually it seeps into the culture in its own way. Nothing needs to be legitimized because, in the end, nothing is really legitimate. You look at the bestseller list now. No one is going to be teaching that at a university in fifty years. You look at the non-fiction list, same thing. It is gimmicky. I think this focus *on we need to make ourselves legitimate* is an insecurity that eventually, over time, people just give up. I do not give a damn if people know I watch wrestling or read science fiction or read comic books or put up with Terrance at conventions. Because I no longer care what other people think. I think in a lot of ways, the whole *we need to legitimize this* goes away after time, and, in some ways, you can look at the Attitude Era when wrestling was hot. Nobody had to explain that they were a fan then. It is when it is not all that popular, like now, that people feel they need to explain why they are a fan. When something is popular, you do not need to explain anymore. So, maybe, just in our own minds, do not care if it is popular or not.

Everything is legitimate in the same way that watching a Bugs Bunny cartoon is just as good a way to learn about opera as watching an adaptation of it on PBS. It is all about the enjoyment of it. If it is an enjoyment and it does not hurt anybody, who cares if it is legitimate or not.

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