

Myth! Allegory! Ekphrasis!
Professional Wrestling & the Poetics of Kayfabe

Marion Wrenn
NYU Abu Dhabi
mw299@nyu.edu

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 of 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 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 in 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.

Works Cited

- Arrand, Colette. *Hold Me Gorilla Monsoon*. OPO Books and Objects, 2017.
- Auden, W. H. "Musée des Beaux Arts." <http://english.emory.edu/classes/paintings&poems/auden.html>.
- Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers, 1957. Hill and Wang. 1972
- Bradbury, Janine. "Grappling and Ga(y)zing: Gender, Sexuality, and Performance in the WWE Debuts of Gold Dust and Marlina." *Performance and Professional Wrestling*, edited by Broderick Chow, Eero Laine, and Claire Warden, Routledge, 2017, pp. 107-117.
- Bret Hart: Wrestling With Shadows*. Directed by Paul Jay, Vidmark/Trimark, 1998.
- Carson, Anne. "Essay on What I Think About Most." *Men in the Off Hours*. Knopf, 2000, pp. 31-36.
- Chow, Broderick, Eero Laine, and Claire Warden. "Introduction: Hamlet Doesn't Blade: Professional Wrestling, Theatre, and Performance." *Performance and Professional Wrestling*, edited by Broderick Chow, Eero Laine, and Claire Warden. Routledge, 2017, pp. 1-6.

- Chow, Broderick. "Work and Shoot." *TDR: The Drama Review*, vol. 58, no. 2, 2014, pp. 72-86.
- "Ekphrasis." *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/ekphrasis>
- Fontaine, Jessica. "Headlocks in Lockdown: Working the At-Home Crowd." *Popular Communication*, pre-print, October 2021, pp. 1-13.
- Hill, Annette. "Spectacle of Excess: The Passion Work of Professional Wrestlers, Fans and Anti-Fans." *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2015, pp. 174-89.
- . "Wrestlers, Fans, and Power Dynamics at Live Events." *Convergent Wrestling: Participatory Culture, Transmedia Storytelling, and Intertextuality in the Squared Circle*, edited by CarrieLynn D. Reinhard and Christopher J. Olson, Routledge, 2019, pp. 15-30.
- Holmes, Michael. *Parts Unknown. Wrestling Gimmicks and Other Works*. Routledge, Insomniac, 2004.
- Jaffe, Russell. "I Wish More Poets Loved Pro Wrestling, or the Apocalyptic Postmodern Fanscape (With Examples)." *Entropy*, 8 Nov. 2016. <https://entropymag.org/i-wish-more-poets-loved-pro-wrestling-or-the-apocalyptic-postmodern-fanscape-with-examples/>.
- Jansen, Brian. "'It's Still Real to Me': Contemporary Professional Wrestling, Neo-Liberalism, and the Problems of Performed/Real Violence." *Canadian Review of American Studies*, vol. 50, no. 2, 2020, pp. 302-30.
- Kaneko, W. Todd. "A Review of *Hold Me Gorilla Monsoon*." *Waxwing*, http://waxwingmag.org/items/issue12/63_Kaneko-A-Review-of-Hold-Me-Gorilla-Monsoon.php.
- Litherland, Benjamin. "Breaking Kayfabe is Easy, Cheap and Never Entertaining: Twitter Rivalries in Professional Wrestling." *Celebrity Studies*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2014, pp. 531-33.
- MacFarlane, Kit. "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," *Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature*, vol. 6, no. 2, 20212, pp. 136-55.
- Mazer, Sharon, Heather Levi, Eero Laine, and Nell Haynes, editors. *Professional Wrestling: Politics and Populism*. Seagull Books, 2020.
- Pardlo, Gregory. "Allegory." *The New Yorker* 22 Feb, 2021. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/03/01/allegory>.
- . Personal interview. 4 Nov. 2021.

- “Poetics.” *A Handbook of Literature*, edited by C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon. 5th ed., Macmillan, 1986, p. 384.
- Reinhard, CarrieLynn D. “Kayfabe as Convergence: Content Interactivity and Prosumption in the Squared Circle.” *Convergent Wrestling: Participatory Culture, Transmedia Storytelling, and Intertextuality in the Squared Circle*, edited by CarrieLynn D. Reinhard and Christopher J. Olson, Routledge, 2019, pp. 31-44.
- Smith, R. Tyson. “Passion Work: The Joint Production of Emotional Labor in Professional Wrestling.” *Social Psychology Quarterly*, no. 71, is. 2, 2008, pp. 157-76.
- The Wrestler*. Directed by Darren Aronofsky, Fox Searchlight, 2008.
- Thomas, Dylan. “On Poetry.” *Quite Early One Morning*. New Directions, 1954.
- Wrenn, Marion. “Managing Doubt: Professional Wrestling Jargon and the Making of Smart fans.” *Practicing Culture*, edited by Craig Calhoun and Richard Sennett, Routledge, 2007, pp. 149-70.
- . “Catastrophist—Brueghel, Auden, and the WWE.” *American Poetry Review*, vol. 40, no. 6, 2011, pp. 47-53.
- . “Editors Talk Poetry Acceptances.” *Frontier Poetry*, 30 July 2018, <https://www.frontierpoetry.com/2018/07/30/editors-talk-poetry-acceptances-marion-wrenn/>.