

ENTERTAIN ME: THE HISTORY OF COMMODIFIED RACISM AND THE
EXPLOITATION OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING

A Thesis Submitted to the Committee on Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts in the Faculty of Arts and Science

TRENT UNIVERSITY

Peterborough, Ontario, Canada

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History M.A. Graduate Program

January 2023

ABSTRACT

Entertain Me: The History of Commodified Racism and the Exploitation of African Americans in Professional Wrestling

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The scope of my scholarship has undergone a primarily interdisciplinary approach with an emphasis on historiographic scholarship and method, with the support of communication and sociological theory to underpin my core arguments in each chapter. I use the theories of Third Space, commodified racism, and common sense racism in combination to provide an in-depth analysis of prior scholarship on professional wrestling, contemporary and historic fan activities, and biographic information about professional wrestlers. My first chapter examines prior scholarly methodologies and approaches for broaching the topic of professional wrestling while providing a unique and effective alternative for negotiating with the complex and often-tenuous relationship between professional wrestling, race, and collective memory. I evaluate the seminal works that make up the body of previous professional wrestling scholarship, specifically focusing on dramaturgy as a scholarly approach that limits focus to in-ring performance. In Chapter 2, I provide an in-depth analysis of first-hand accounts by and about Black professional wrestlers, charting the ways in which commodified and common sense racism affect both their careers and personal perspectives on race. Drawing on the tradition of minstrelsy, the chapter defines the ways that Black professional wrestlers have been categorized as mere sources of entertainment rather than being portrayed as skilled, athletic, or serious contenders for wrestling titles. My third chapter assesses twenty-first century fan engagement with professional wrestling content within the context of online Third Spaces. The chapter highlights the points of

ideological division amongst fans, who both support and resist the wrestling industry's common sense and commodifying racism.

Keywords: Pro wrestling; commodified racism, common sense racism, Third Space, critical race theory, American history, fan studies

Acknowledgements

The following are a series of acknowledgements to those who without their love and support this project would not have been possible. I appreciate the following individuals beyond all comparison and it is my only hope that I can do these acknowledgements with the same kindness and care that these individuals demonstrated and continue to demonstrate to me throughout my academic journey and beyond.

To David Sheinin, I thank you for the endless hours of support and encouragement that you provided to me even before the process of supervising this thesis began. You are one of only a handful of academics who did not laugh or balk at my ideas. You have encouraged me every step of the way and have never been afraid to provide critiques when needed. Your knowledge is boundless, your research skills are impeccable, and more than that, everything is surpassed by your kindness and care as a human being. I thank you so much for the value of our professional relationship and I hope to maintain a long lasting personal relationship that goes beyond the end of my academic tenure at Trent. Thank you so much, my friend, for being the one to show me that studying something you love is not only a possibility but also a rich endeavour filled with promise and a bright future ahead. It is my only hope that I can be a scholar of the depth and caliber that you are and I hope to get together for drinks and have a spirited academic discussion soon. Thank you for giving a small town kid a chance to live out his dreams. I share this victory with you.

An immense thank you to the Trent History Department and Graduate Studies for their support and financing for the past two years. I appreciate and value the time spent at Trent for forming me into the competent and well-rounded scholar that I am today.

To Amir, Max, and Allie, I not only thank you for your professional support as my scribes, but far beyond that assistance you provide me, the friendship, warmth, and laughter are what I treasure. I deeply care about and value the level of strength and support that your friendships have brought to my life. I hope to maintain these connections long after our professional endeavours end as laughter is the key to a good foundation in both work and life. I share this victory with all three of you.

To my brother and best friend, Dan Tamblyn-Watts, I love you more than 99% of the people on this earth. You have been my constant emotional support and best friend throughout my academic journey, you've seen me through my successes and failures in their entirety, and you are one of the people who categorically gives my life the greatest meaning. Without your encouragement, I would have never turned a single idea on a ride home from Carleton into something so deep and meaningful to the course of my academic trajectory. Without you, I wouldn't be where I am today. I love you lots and I share this victory with you.

To my mom and dad, I love you more than words can say. Your support throughout my life has been endless and limitless. I will always appreciate those late nights frustratedly spent with me doing math homework, encouraging me to do my best despite overwhelming frustration. You have always been there for every key moment and milestone. I love you both so much and I share this victory with you.

To Amund and Stephanie Desmarais, my best friends and sources of reality when I've needed it, I love you guys beyond all rational measure for the endless hours of support on stream during such a chaotic time in our world and in my academic and personal life. You were always sources of humour and support when I needed it. You are not only my friends but a part of my family and two constants in my life that have supported me even when I was at my lowest with

my research. I love you both so much and I look forward to spending many years together playing board games and video games. I share this victory with you.

To Andrew Johnson, as my first academic mentor in my post-secondary existence, you provided me with not only a solid academic foundation, but a friendship and camaraderie that is unparalleled even nine years into our friendship. I hope that I am doing your contributions justice by saying that your endless support and encouragement of my academic growth has shaped not only the direction of my career but how I hope to approach students and faculty when I become a full-time professor. You are a constant source of inspiration, a gifted scholar, and an incredible person. I share this victory with you.

To Robert, thank you for providing not only invaluable insights during our committee meetings but during our many in-depth discussions in class. You are an extremely valuable asset to your field and a wonderful human being and I look forward to both a personal and professional relationship with you long after this academic endeavor is done. Thank you so much. I share this victory with you.

Thank you to the countless professional wrestlers and scholars who agreed to share their knowledge and thoughts which helped me to form the structural and theoretical basis when approaching this thesis. A special thank you to ECW Press and McFarland Publishing for providing me with a number of helpful academic resources including materials and suggestions that were vital to formulating the background for this thesis. I hope to work together in the future and I share this victory with you.

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Glossary of Terms

Athletic Exceptionalism: An American athletic ideology which reflects a notion of athletic superiority and physical prowess among American athletes and performers. This discourse is derived from White heteronormative masculine displays as expressed by western (primarily American) athletes. In the context of wrestling, athletic exceptionalism may be used to assert a racial or cultural superiority over non-American performers and athletes either in storyline discourses or expressed through the structural racist tones of the locker room.

Attitude Era of Wrestling: Period of time between the mid-1990s to the early 2000s which was characterized within professional wrestling by hypersexuality and embraced the shock culture of the 90s.

The AWA: American Wrestling Association revived by Verne Gagne in the late 1950s, it ran until 1994 and is considered the original birthplace of Hulk Hogan and Hulkamania.

Baby Face: Good guy.

Blading: The act of cutting oneself during a wrestling match in order to evoke a reaction from the audience.

Booker: The person who books and schedules matches, and is influential on the storylines and gimmicks within matches. They help to direct the structure and formation of the wrestling company and are instrumental in the hiring and firing of talent.

Bull Rope Match: A match in which two competitors are tied together by the ankle, with each pulling the other, dragging them along the ring in order to touch all four corners. Whichever competitor manages to touch all four corners will win the match.

Capitol Wrestling: Existed from 1953 to 1979 when it became the World Wide Wrestling Federation. Later it became the World Wrestling Federation in 1982, and finally it became World Wrestling Entertainment in 2002.

Catch-as-catch-can: A style of wrestling that is considered highly influential on the development of professional wrestling during the late 19th century. Evan “Strangler” Lewis is an example of a grappler who used catch-as-catch-can wrestling maneuvers in his move set.

Chicano: A group of Mexican or Latino Americans who identify with a specific set of cultural norms and attitudes that define their mixed cultural identity. This is often expressed through attire, attitude, and linguistic expression. In the context of professional wrestling, it is maintaining the style, presentations, and traditions of a luchadore in an American context while embracing elements of their American cultural heritage in conjunction. An example of this is Eddie Guerrero who’s in-ring style was that of a luchadore while also utilizing submission style and Greco-Roman style holds in his matches without the use of a mask

Collar and Elbow: Another early style of professional grappling that informed the basis for late 19th century professional wrestling. An Irish style of combat that also contributed to the

formation of modern American pro wrestling and is specifically linked to the physical and masculine traditions of the Irish diaspora of the United States and around the world.

Combative Patriotism: Patriotic expression that is executed through primarily hyper-violent displays of devotion to one's country. In the context of professional wrestling, a common descriptive used for the vitriol expressed by Hulk Hogan's fans towards foreign Heels in the 1980s.

Community Creations: A space for the gamer to engage with independent play and create their favorite wrestler.

Consumable Masculinity/Femininity: The physical representation of a wrestler's masculine or feminine presentation through that of an action figure or merchandise which depicts normative behaviors through poses or gestures that can be manipulated by consumers who craft their own narrative. This also extends to pro wrestling video game avatars, and these are considered symbols of masculinity and femininity. This can be considered the profit driven consumption of masculinity and femininity.

Collective Memory: The shared memory and experience between a group or groups of individuals which define and entrench historical narratives and moments. In the context of professional wrestling, it constitutes a fluid history which is often indistinguishable due to its constant revision by promoters and wrestlers throughout their careers. It is a core tenet of defining historical identity and group experience.

Colour Commentator: Also known as a play-by-play commentator, they provide excitement to a live or taped sporting event through dramatic calls and, specifically in professional wrestling, gestures. Jim Ross's use of the term "slobberknocker" is an example of language and phrases used to keep audiences engaged and dramatize the night's event.

Dark Match: An untelevised match which does not affect the course of scheduled programming. It is used as a means of initial audience interaction with upcoming stars to indicate their potential level of success and popularity with audiences.

Death Match: A match which contains various foreign objects such as explosives and barbed wire.

Dirt Sheets: A colloquial term for a wrestling magazine or publication.

Entrance: A video and music display designed to indicate to audiences that a wrestler was entering the stadium at the start of a match or beginning of a segment of a live or taped broadcast.

Fast Count: When a corrupt referee increases the speed of counting a pinfall in order to ensure victory for a heel generally over a babyface in storylines.

Fixed Time: Within the context of professional wrestling, fixed time means the allotted amount of time for a match or segment that is allowed by producers and the corresponding television

networks that host wrestling programs. Some producers are tasked with the express purpose of managing these timed segments to ensure they do not go over their allotted or projected time.

Fluid Time: Time that can be allotted to essential storyline segments that is otherwise left over from the events of a wrestling broadcast.

Gaijin: Foreign person in Japan, primarily White or western in background.

Going Home: The act of ending a match with a final series of maneuvers or a single maneuver which results in a pinfall submission, disqualification, or count-out victory for one participant. An agreed upon predetermined finish which allows both participants to conclude the match.

Going Over: When one wrestler obtains a predetermined victory over another wrestler, resulting in increased popularity or admiration among fans for a previously unrecognized talent.

Generally, when someone ‘goes over’ it is usually a lesser wrestler rising through the ranks who is given the victory by their more popular counterpart. Going over can also be the result of an up-and-coming prospect facing many jobber or enhancement-talent level wrestlers who are there for the express purpose of making the incoming talent appear formidable.

Gold Peacock: A term used to describe flamboyant masculine wrestlers such as Adrian Street or Velveten Dream who display feminine qualities along with traditionally masculine traits. Often displaying a prideful demeanor which positions them as arrogant. They display attire which reflects a flamboyance and masculine opulence that gives a visual representation to their attitudes and in-ring styles.

The Golden Age of Wrestling: Period between the late 1940s and the mid-late 1950s in which wrestling was broadcast on television (and prior to that, on radio) throughout the United States and Canada and was considered at its most profitable. Depending on the perspective, this could also refer to the mid-1900s to the mid-1980s. The term is generationally dependent in professional wrestling and usually means a period in time at which high ratings and maximum profits were achieved with minimal expense in production cost and distribution.

Gorilla Position: The area just off-stage prior to entering the ring, named for commentator and former wrestler Gorilla Monsoon. It is used as a means for all wrestlers to observe matches.

Graeco-Roman: A style of wrestling that originated in France at least as early as 1848 that is upheld as true, competitive wrestling. It is falsely attributed to the Pankration Games of Ancient Greece.

Heat: This is the negative or hateful reaction that a Heel elicits from wrestling audiences and opposing wrestlers.

Heel (Rudo in Lucha Libre): Bad guy.

Historiography: A scholarly means of measuring historical perspectives, attitudes, and cultural items for their relevance and impact for the narratives of history. An intricate way to detail in a

scholarly fashion the importance and relevance of historical narratives to the broader cultural narrative of society.

Hulkamania: A worldwide phenomenon first brought to life in the AWA by Hulk Hogan and Verne Gagne, eventually appropriated by Vince McMahon and Hulk Hogan to attract mass audiences to the WWF.

Internalized Orientalism: The definition for one who experiences othering within their own community despite conforming to its cultural norms and habits. They may still have an attribute or physical characteristic that invites the scrutiny of racial or cultural difference within one's cultural group.

Jobber: Also known as enhancement talent, this is a performer who is present for the express purpose of getting well-known or up-and-coming talent exposure among audiences. They generally do this by conceding the match as part of the predetermined elements of the event.

Kayfabe: A 19th ce carnival term used in 20th ce professional wrestling to refer to the maintenance of suspension of disbelief among audiences and the boundaries between the real life performers and the gimmicks they portray.

Ladder Match: A match in which both competitors must climb up a ladder to retrieve an item such as a briefcase or title belt and unhook it in order to win.

Legend: A retired, professional wrestler who has achieved top accolades within the professional wrestling business and is therefore recognized with the designation of legend.

Lucha Libre: A form of masked professional wrestling with an emphasis on high flying. Lucha Libre was first established in Mexico between the mid-1920s and early 1930s. Many wrestlers and scholars believe Lucha Libre was derived from Mayan and Aztec tribal traditions. A pop cultural activity with sociopolitical and sociocultural implications that are considered a cornerstone of Mexican and Hispanic cultural identity.

Lumberjack Match: A match in which two occupants are in the ring and ten or more wrestlers are on either side of the ring to interfere in the match on behalf of one of the competitors, generally divided by baby faces and heels.

Masculine Exceptionalism: The display of male pride which is generally seen in western athletics to indicate a notion of toughness or aggression over one's opponent.

Masculine Consumerism: Items such as posters, action figures, or videos which reinforce or assert a professional wrestler's masculine representation to consumers or a purchasable commodity or item that displays masculine traits and representations.

Mid-South: A wrestling promotion from the mid-1960s to the late 1980s, primarily run by promoter Bill Watts.

The NWA: The National Wrestling Alliance is an allied system promotion founded in 1947. The NWA exercised considerable influence over professional wrestling in North America through its system of allied territorial promotions and control over the most widely-recognized version of the world heavyweight title.

Outlaw/Mud Show: An unsanctioned show, generally conducted by an amateur promoter. It infringes upon the gimmicks or associated properties of wrestling companies without consent.

Pay-per-View: A wrestling or sporting event which is televised with the express purpose of payment being made by audience members in exchange for viewing the product. A means by which storylines can be further advanced or concluded. Generally incorporating a global audience.

Promoter: A person who owns/promotes professional wrestling in a given geographic area and has the power to organize rosters, hire and fire talent, and overall manage the day-to-day activities of a wrestling promotion. They have primary creative control over wrestling storylines and the creation of gimmicks for less prominent performers. They were most influential during the mid-20th century.

Road Agent: A person who helps to book and structure matches in the WWE. They are also responsible for finding and accommodating talent.

Shoot: This may describe a wide variety of real-life encounters between wrestling personalities or interviews that do not have the wrestlers appearing in-character at any time. Wrestlers in these interviews/encounters speak and interact more freely and without adopting their wrestling personas.

Slobberknocker: A backstage brawl which features multiple competitors vying for a prize or title which can only be won by TKO or pinfall.

Spot Show: A show which does not have any relevance or connection to current storylines and does not affect the outcomes, statistics, or directions of televised pro wrestling events.

Squared Circle: Another term for the wrestling ring literally referring to the shape of the ring.

Squash Match: Squash matches are defined as matches that end quickly, usually featuring up in coming talent who are slated for upward mobility in their in-ring career. Generally positioned as heels with the enhancement talent serving as the company's attempt to demonstrate the skill or monstrosity of a heel and the ease with which they can destroy an opponent.

Stampede Wrestling: A Western Canadian promotion run by Stu Hart and the Hart family off and on from the late 1940s to 2007.

Stretcher Match: A match in which one opponent must incapacitate the other in order to tie them down to a stretcher and take them out of the ring and place them in an ambulance.

The Territories: A system of wrestling promotions and traveling talent that would exchange talent by a means of handshake agreements and verbal negotiations from the mid-1950s to the late 1980s. The territories were the most profitable sector of professional wrestling until being superseded by the WWF and the WCW.

Title Bond: A \$25,000 bond given by the NWA's appointed Champion to ensure that they will not unlawfully keep the title belt past their given title reign.

Top Rope: Literally the top corner of a 4 or 6 corner wrestling ring. Competitors may use the top rope to jump and perform aerial maneuvers on an opponent.

Undercard: This is a part of the match card typically made up of less prominent or less popular wrestlers. An undercard wrestling match usually precedes the main event taking place. Sometimes they only appear for a single event and are often considered space fillers.

Veteran: A professional wrestler with five or more years' experience.

WCW: The now defunct World Championship Wrestling was originally known as Jim Crocket Promotions and was purchased by Ted Turner in 1988. It was a direct competitor to the WWE in the late 1980s and early 1990s, sparking the Monday Night War. Upon its dissolution in 2001 as a result of the sale to the WWE from Time Warner Media, WCW's library and assets have become exclusive global property of the WWE.

Work: This may be described as the opposite of "shoot" where a wrestler dons their gimmick or persona for the purposes of an interview or piece of promotional material. They may behave as though they are acting authentically when in reality they are still in-character.

Wrestlemania: A blockbuster event launched in 1985 by Vince McMahon to highlight the connection between the World Wrestling Federation and MTV at the time. It is the most popularly recognized event in all of wrestling.

Wrestling YouTube: YouTube channels with content that centres around or frequently discusses professional wrestling.

WWF/WWE: A promotion based out of the North Eastern U.S. that has become a global entity and is affiliated with Titan Sports owned by Vincent K. McMahon and his wife Linda McMahon. A very controversial and often politically incorrect wrestling promotion that is frequently questioned for its mistreatment and inequity towards its talent. Nevertheless, the WWE is the industry leader for the global recognition, branding, and overall reach of professional wrestling.

Young Lion: A term for a professional wrestler at the start of his career in Japan.

Introduction

Professional wrestling, race, and identity are seemingly disparate topics with very tenuous links to each other when considered from a surface level. By studying “gimmicks,” the scholarship and cultural meaning of professional wrestling, and wrestling’s relationship to the history of racialized hierarchies in America, a well-defined point of entry emerges for the study and incorporation of these topics into the commentary on race representation and communication of identity. In my work, I define a gimmick as a dramatic guise or persona that provides a hyper-exaggerated, and in many cases a hyper-racialized, portrayal of a group or individual based on creative negotiations between wrestling promoters and professional wrestlers. The scholarship on wrestling so far has failed to analyze how the gimmick often employs the use of racial hierarchy because white norms or ideals about the racialized group influence the construction of these dramatic performances. Wrestling scholarship has also only addressed wrestling on contemporary terms, never broaching the historical contexts in which these normative traditions were formed and entrenched within the community and culture of professional wrestling.

In my thesis, I unpack the history of professional wrestling and, more specifically, wrestling gimmicks and their connection to discourses of race and racism among audiences and African American performers. I argue that the history of professional wrestling reveals audiences’ and wrestlers’ complicity in and resistance to entrenchment of racist and highly commodified depictions of Black performers and athletes when examined through the lenses of common sense racism, racialized commodification, and Third Space fan culture.

Both fans and wrestlers are situated in specific cultural milieus that inform their complex relationships to the often-problematic stereotypes and storylines associated with highly racialized gimmicks. Underpinning all of these relationships are capitalist mechanisms and a culture of

commodified racism and active voyeurism and consumption by fans. Fans are deeply entrenched in the history of exploitation and commodification of Black wrestlers during the twentieth century. Unlike fans in the twenty-first century who sometimes attempt to challenge or unsettle racism in professional wrestling, there are few observable or documented moments of twentieth century wrestling fans resisting or refusing to participate in racist representations. These social and cultural points of division among fans of professional wrestling enrich the historical study of professional wrestling as it helps to determine how much agency a performer possesses in their interaction and engagement with their fans. Wrestling performers must manage the fame that comes with problematic gimmicks, some wrestlers using them to their individual advantage while sacrificing the way in which they represent themselves to audiences in their own racially defined communities. At times, the racism surrounding wrestlers' fame is disregarded or actively dismissed by the wrestler. In the case of a wrestler like Booker T., these performers become pariahs in the eyes of some fans in the twenty-first century.

The first two significant works to broach professional wrestling in a historical context were *Thrashing Season* and *Ringside*. These two books critique and make compelling cases for professional wrestling's inclusion in broader studies of popular culture, examining the history of professional wrestling's contributions to late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century American and Canadian cultures. These books largely cover wrestling history and its relationship to regional identities and the early territorial systems of professional wrestling at the time. They enabled wrestling to be considered within studies on the broader history of cultural activities in North America. The other works that cover histories of professional wrestling are fan-produced and largely based on inconsistent first-hand accounts that have never been accurately verified. While these can be valuable repositories of knowledge and collective memory, they lack critical,

historical analysis. Because of the dearth of historical scholarship on wrestling during the early-to-mid-twentieth century, much of the studies done since have been focused on the two aforementioned academic publications. Most of the scholarship before *Thrashing Season* and *Ringside* had emerged from the disciplines of sociology and the dramatic/performing arts. While these other disciplinary approaches mobilize historical facts, their focus is fixed on the contemporary contexts and implications of studying professional wrestling.

The scope of my scholarship has undergone a primarily interdisciplinary approach with an emphasis on historiographic scholarship and method, with the support of communication and sociological theory to underpin my core arguments in each chapter. I use the theories of Third Space, commodified racism, and common sense racism in combination to provide an in-depth analysis of prior scholarship on professional wrestling, contemporary and historic fan activities, and biographic information about professional wrestlers. My first chapter examines prior scholarly methodologies and approaches for broaching the topic of professional wrestling while providing a unique and effective alternative for negotiating with the complex and often-tenuous relationship between professional wrestling, race, and collective memory. I evaluate the seminal works that make up the body of previous professional wrestling scholarship, specifically focusing on dramaturgy as a scholarly approach that limits focus to in-ring performance. In Chapter 2, I provide an in-depth analysis of first-hand accounts by and about Black professional wrestlers, charting the ways in which commodified and common sense racism affect both their careers and personal perspectives on race. Drawing on the tradition of minstrelsy, the chapter defines the ways that Black professional wrestlers have been categorized as mere sources of entertainment rather than being portrayed as skilled, athletic, or serious contenders for wrestling titles. My third chapter assesses twenty-first century fan engagement with professional wrestling

content within the context of online Third Spaces. The chapter highlights the points of ideological division amongst fans, who both support and resist the wrestling industry's common sense and commodifying racism.

Chapter 1

Dramaturgy

This chapter identifies the most influential scholarly approaches to the study of the field of professional wrestling and provides the basis for this thesis' historical and scholarly perspective. It undertakes a critical analysis of both contemporary and seminal works associated with the ideological approach of dramaturgy and the study of professional wrestling. In surveying past scholarship, this chapter identifies limitations to the use of dramaturgical theory and gestures toward the need for a more comprehensive and socially engaged approach to wrestling that encompasses more than studies of in-ring performances.

Dramaturgy is a method of academic study commonly used in professional wrestling to discuss the in-ring performance as a sociocultural catalyst for discourses of morality or “good guy versus bad guy” as portrayed in the in-ring performance. Dramaturgy is utilized as an academic tool for analyzing how the body is used to convey commentaries or responses to societal norms and changes that may affect the audience and the performers themselves. In the context of academic discussions, dramaturgy assists in framing how gimmicks carry out their cultural and societal function within an in-ring and interactive context with fans. Throughout the twentieth century, dramaturgy was predominant as a prevailing scholarly theory in legitimizing the study of professional wrestling.

The first person to undertake this methodological practice was Mary Joe Deegan in 1982.¹ Dr. Deegan applied the theory first in conjunction with discussing the ritual practices of football. Her doctoral student Michael Ball in 1989 would advance the application of dramaturgy to the physical and social rituals of professional wrestling and more specifically to contextualize the sociocultural and physical significance of professional wrestling gimmicks as a modern morality play.² Ball's work both reinforced and disrupted traditional masculine/gendered stereotypes while simultaneously providing an image of their hyper imagined display depending on the contextual application and purpose of a gimmick in a given match or storyline.

Dramaturgical theory enables us to contextualize how the gimmick is being used to advance how to read the structure of the in-ring match or promo taking place and to identify the significance of each role involved in the production of the act itself. Meaning, how does the audience respond and engage with the narrative (both live and on television)? Furthermore, how do the performers engage with the narrative, and what does each party contribute to reimagining or reshaping a gimmick's trajectory over time? Ball defines dramaturgy as providing "a reliable structure with which to examine large-scale and personal ritual activities."³ It is this personal ritual engagement with professional wrestling, and specifically the body, that provides a contextual scholarly framework for how fans interact with the in-ring performance and displays of masculinity.

Dramaturgical theory provides an argument for how the wrestlers engage with their gimmick in the ring in addition to waging a brief discussion of the separation from the in-ring

¹ Mary Jo Deegan and Michael Stein, "American Drama and Ritual: Nebraska Football," in *The Sociology of the Offbeat: Essays in the Science of Human Behavior*, ed. Robert M. Khoury (University Press of America, 1982).

² Michael Ball, *Professional Wrestling as Ritual Drama in American Popular Culture* (The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990).

³ Ball, 1.

persona and the individual. However, applications of dramaturgical theory to professional wrestling do not account for how the identity of the professional wrestler outside of the ring has a distinct reciprocal relationship in terms of body and identity to the gimmick portrayed in the ring and the voyeuristic relationship that fan engagement plays in defining who are active and passive in the social and cultural production of professional wrestling's identity.

Twentieth century wrestling audiences begin to dictate more predominantly what they want to see in their wrestling product and who they want to represent the product as a cause for their continued (sometimes passive) consumption at live events. Dramaturgical theory attempts to define audience participation in professional wrestling during the twentieth century as a rigid echo chamber of consumerism that does not articulate true social or moral value within the engagement. Michael Ball's work contributes to this tradition of disparaging professional wrestling's value by suggesting that wrestling's status as a capitalism-driven, consumer-based activity greatly limits its potential for meaningful social and cultural influence.

Ball's opinion was inspired by case studies like Hulk Hogan's performances and marketing with the WWF in the early-to-mid 1980s. As Ball argues, when audiences were first exposed to cartoonish gimmicks, Hulk Hogan was part of a narrative of hyper-masculine consumerism that defined the Reagan era social and cultural consumerism of the 1980s.⁴ Hogan was famous for a four-move routine, a formulaic combination of attack and counterattack that was used at every event in order to engage audiences in an over-the-top or extreme fashion. Hogan has been criticized for his overreliance on eliciting fan reactions by holding a hand cupped to his ear to hype audiences. His detractors saw this as an attempt to compensate for a lack of physical skill in the ring and, similarly, Ball sees Hogan as emblematic of wrestling's lack of athleticism. Early

⁴ Ball, 89.

wrestling scholars would point out that Hogan was unlikely to win in any serious physical contest and would use that as a primary reason for considering wrestling as part of a lowbrow culture that, according to Ball, was a part of simplified ritual drama and pandered to what he considered to be the lowest common denominators in American society.⁵

In addition to Hulk Hogan's overly simplistic choreography, his unnaturally enhanced and prominent physique was also seen as covering over a lack of skill. Steroids became a topic of concern and discussion in American culture by the late 1980s due to many deaths in bodybuilding related to the chronic overuse and misuse of steroids.⁶ According to *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* publisher Dave Meltzer, "The fact is that steroid use in wrestling dated back to the early 60s and many major names and minor names of that era had experimented with them."⁷ The wrestler Billy Graham has been identified as popularizing the use of steroids among professional wrestlers, his "big box office draws of the 70s" leading other wrestlers like Hulk Hogan and, later, "Big Poppa Pump" Scott Steiner to emulate his act.⁸ In his 2006 biography, Graham admits to using steroids to further his bodybuilding and wrestling careers.⁹ He even boasts that he is responsible for the career of Arnold Schwarzenegger.¹⁰ He credited his success in wrestling to steroid use to the point that he spoke about it as part of his self-promotion. "My steroid habit had me in such a grandiose mindset that I actually boasted about it in my promos. During one interview, I vowed to increase my intake of Dianabol and Delatestyl to prepare for a

⁵ Ball, 50.

⁶ Dave Meltzer, *The Wrestling Observer Yearbook 1993: The Year of Major Beginnings and Major Endings* (Glasgow: Titan Insider Press, 1993).

⁷ Meltzer, 100.

⁸ Meltzer, 101.

⁹ Keith Elliot Greenberg, *WWE Legends: Superstar Billy Graham: Tangled Ropes* (New York: Pocket Books, 2006), 11.

¹⁰ Greenberg, *WWE Legends*, 132.

match.”¹¹ His candidness about performance enhancing drug use speaks to its prevalence in American sports and performance culture at the time.

In 1992, the wrestling and bodybuilding landscape would change dramatically when a federal investigation was launched into the WWE’s primary physician, Dr. Zahorian, who was accused of providing steroids to known wrestling stars such as Rick Flair, Hulk Hogan, and Rowdy Roddy Piper.¹² By the fall of 1993, the scandal threatened to tear the fabric of the professional wrestling industry with the federal indictment of Vincent K. McMahon, then owner and CEO of the WWE, on charges of providing illicit substances to his performers.¹³ The accusation of steroid use would become prevalent throughout the sporting industries in the 1990s.¹⁴ A legacy of scrutiny and suspicion has endured into the present day, sparking controversy and defining the careers of athletes and entertainers alike.

Though wrestlers with smaller physiques like Brett Hart and Shawn Michaels would become more prominent in 1996-97, the WWE’s response to the steroid scandal was seen as providing thin policies which only appeared to eliminate the use of steroids on the surface. Part of the reforms included removing McMahon from his visible position of control, and granting the title of CEO to his wife, Linda McMahon.¹⁵ This was done in an effort to further distance the company from allegations of illegal activity. However, it was known in the industry that even “after the Zahorian trial, Titan [the parent company of WWE] instituted an anti-steroid policy and drug testing for both steroids and other illicit drugs. However, after this policy was

¹¹ Greenberg, 140.

¹² Meltzer, 99.

¹³ Meltzer, 114.

¹⁴ Meltzer, 412

¹⁵ Meltzer, 367.

instituted, steroid use continued.”¹⁶ Even McMahon was known to have “continued to use anabolic steroids and other controlled substances in violation of his own drug policy.”¹⁷ Not all wrestlers wielded such impunity, however. It is notable that racialized performers like Tony Atlas were barred from signing contracts with companies like WCW due to their perceived association with excessive use and abuse of anabolic steroids.¹⁸ Atlas was left homeless for a year-and-a-half because promoters in the wrestling industry would not agree to hire him.¹⁹

Despite the pressure caused by the steroid scandal and subsequent trial, major professional wrestling promotions continued to push hypermasculine physiques. Hulk Hogan withdrew from professional wrestling promotional material from 1993 to mid-1994, embarking on an acting career in an effort to distance himself from the steroid scandal and cultivate an image that was wholesome, family-friendly, and distinctly American.²⁰ He was trying to recapture the vision projected by the McMahon family during his first run in the WWF. As Hogan describes in his memoir, he was explicitly positioned as the wrestling hope for Irish Americans:

During my first meeting with Vince McMahon Sr., he mentioned that he had an idea. He was going to change my wrestling name from Terry “The Hulk” Boulder to Hulk Hogan. Why? Because they had Bruno Sammartino for the Italian-Americans, Chief Jay Strongbow for the Native Americans, Ivan Putski for the Polish-Americans, and Pedro Morales for the Puerto Rican-Americans, but they didn’t have anyone to represent the Irish-Americans.

So I was going to be the great Irish hope. The funny thing is I didn’t have a single drop of Irish blood in me, my dad being Italian and my mother being part French, part Italian, and part Panamanian.

Anyway, Vince Sr. gave me two bottles of red dye and told me to dye my hair red. And when I was done, I was supposed to look Irish.²¹

¹⁶ Meltzer, 21.

¹⁷ Meltzer, 21.

¹⁸ The Hannibal TV, “Tony Atlas Full Shoot Interview with Hannibal 2020,” YouTube.com, November 7, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJEDK_NEB1c

¹⁹ The Hannibal TV

²⁰ Mark Dagostino, *My Life Outside the Ring: Hulk Hogan* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2010), 138.

²¹ Michael Jan Friedman, *Hollywood Hulk Hogan* (New York: Pocket Books, 2002), 88–89.

Hogan's initial introduction to the American public was an image built on that of an Irish-American patriot, which entrenched Hogan as a part of 80s Americana and made him an overnight success. In pursuing a film career, Hogan hoped to recapture his status as a cultural icon by starring in films that targeted children and families, most notably *Mr. Nanny* in 1993.²² By doing these light and comedic films, Hogan hoped to free himself from the steroid-infused image of *Hulkamania* while retaining the fame associated with his brand of cartoonish patriotism.

The premise of the Hulk Hogan character was to realize masculine manifest destiny. Although it promotes an American identity to fans, it perpetuates marginalization because of how intensely it focuses on a white, hypermasculine rhetoric, not seeking to appeal to non-white audiences in professional wrestling. In fact, the foes that Hulk Hogan faced were stereotypical and villainous representations of minority groups that served to reinforce white American ideas. The Iron Sheik and Kamala are two primary examples of highly racialized gimmicks designed to show the superiority of Hulk Hogan and American hypermasculine exceptionalism.

Wrestling embodies how people envision their ideal sense of physical identity as a result of changes in cultural trends and social norms. The late-twentieth century of professional wrestling reflected gimmicks that appealed to a greater sense of realism and greater adversity narratives in matches. These heightened storylines around struggle demonstrated that exceptionalism and manifest destiny were alive and well, not only in the public consciousness but in the consumer market and visible in pop-cultural trends as well. There is no successful narrative process for mapping how the audience responds to gimmicks or storyline development overtime through dramaturgy's narrative framework. As a result, the reading of singular events places wrestling's

²² Friedman, 282.

scholarly potential in a silo where it appears to exist as a simplistic measurement of audience behaviour in the moment rather than a complex piece to a narrative commentary on culture or identity.

Throughout the twentieth century since Ball's first application of dramaturgy to professional wrestling, many sociologists and dramatic arts theorists have attempted to apply dramaturgy further into the study of professional wrestling, masculinity, and the body as a function for sociocultural or sociopolitical discourses and as a symbolic representation of modern society's dichotomous relationship to the masculine form in sport and performance. Those authors will be discussed in this chapter.

This chapter discusses how dramaturgical theory, though effective, is an inadequate framework for establishing how various gimmicks and storylines may shape wrestling's legitimacy as a scholarly avenue for studies of cultural and social collective memory. Additionally, the first chapter provides a discussion of how dramaturgical theory captures the physical and narrative structure of an in-ring performance without discussing the broader implications for race, identity, and queerness as commodified entities during the twentieth century. Historiography, on the other hand, negotiates the idea of commodified bodies within professional wrestling more effectively when discussing the role that gimmicks play in distilling commentaries and attitudes on the body within and outside of the context of a match. The effectiveness of historiography will be discussed later in this chapter.

Where dramaturgy is useful is its ability to define the in-ring performance as seen in the context of a live event. When successfully applied, dramaturgical theory offers a general indication of how live audiences respond to a particular event happening before them in that moment. However, dramaturgy does not effectively link a wrestling event to a particular

storyline that has preceded it. The dramaturgical lens narrows wrestling matches to a single, siloed moment without reference to a core history or focus beyond the immediate physicality of the event. Larger symbolic readings of culture or social hierarchy are omitted in this perspective.

Televised performances are designed to market wrestlers and storylines in an effort to commodify wrestling beyond the live event itself. The commodification of professional wrestlers has a great effect on how audiences perceive and categorize the bodies and bodily expressions of a wrestling match. Studying the commodification of professional wrestlers and their relationship to fans is important because it helps scholars to bridge the complex gaps between different modes of exploitation that wrestlers experience at the hands of fans and promoters alike. Dramaturgy is not able to address the ways that factors external to the live event, like television marketing and merchandise, come to greatly influence the performances themselves. It is not able to explain something like the relationship that the WWF had with MTV that created a Saturday morning cartoon based on Hulk Hogan for children²³ and which came to influence the further cultural proliferation of Hulk Hogan's persona.

This next section will focus on the perspectives of seminal and modern scholars in the field of professional wrestling studies and their various perspectives on commodified and othered bodies. Additionally, we discuss the scholarly methodologies of Roland Barthes, Stephen Greer, Michael Ball, and Michael Workman for their different interpretations of symbolic and narrative significance relating to professional wrestling. Other notable scholars whose ideas are negotiated are Sharon Mazer, Eero Laine, Heather Levi, Scott Beekman, and Nathan Hatton.

²³ *Hulk Hogan's Rock 'n' Wrestling*, season 1, episode 1, "The Junkyard 500" written by Jeffrey Scott, aired September 14, 1985, DIC Enterprises and World Wrestling Federation.

Roland Barthes and Stephen Greer

Roland Barthes is an example of an early scholarly approach in professional wrestling that views the wrestling performance as a satirical stage play in which personal views may be imposed in lieu of legitimate scholarly opinions and thoughtful analysis.²⁴ When comparing the approaches of Roland Barthes and Stephen Greer, we can view Barthes' approach as one which emphasizes his own personal disdain for othered bodies.

Roland Barthes' early exploration of masculinity in professional wrestling argues that heels and baby faces display different masculine qualities in their performance and that the baby face sets the standard for traditionally sought-after masculine body types and that the heel or "le salaud" is a more feminized and cowardly body type which is alien and subject to satirical positioning.²⁵ Barthes' portrayal of "le salaud" forces a debate within professional wrestling historiography about how feminized bodies in the western culture of the twentieth century are traditionally associated with othered villainy.

This feminized and queer heel is considered the subversive (or most threatening) element to the masculine heteronormative traditions of Parisian, and more broadly Western, society. Barthes uses the queer body as a morality play, describing the queer body as a threat to Parisian and Western ideals of a "pure" normative society.²⁶ If we imagine professional wrestling as a micro community, we are forced to imagine how Parisian audiences define the "le salaud" character as less than masculine due to their own internalized fears of individual queerness and an inherent lack of traditional masculinity.

²⁴ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (The Noonday Press, 1972), 13–14.

²⁵ Barthes, 15.

²⁶ Barthes, 23.

During the 1950s, ideas of non-heteronormative alternatives or behavioral displays were considered to be the product of deviance. The writing of Barthes in 1957 reflects the cultural panic associated with homosexuality and male femininity and is encapsulated by the quote: “Thauvin, a fifty-year-old with an obese and sagging body, whose type of asexual hideousness always inspires feminine nicknames, displays in his flesh the characters of baseness, for his part is to represent what, in the classical concept of the *salaud*, the “bastard” (the key-concept of any wrestling-match), appears as organically repugnant.”²⁷ It can be considered that Barthes’ reading of the heel’s perceived non-masculinity is highly problematic. However, Barthes’ analysis is the first in-depth contextual reading of wrestling as a melodrama and his opinions and beliefs are a product of the time and culture.

Due to the pervasive nature of Victorian standards for masculine and feminine expression, ideas of queerness or the other within twentieth century Western society were seldom broached by scholars as a commentary found in popular culture and specifically sports and entertainment. Despite this, Barthes provides a sociocultural historiography that allows us to envision the in-ring spectacle as a space where commentaries on such things as a cultural or social queerness can be defined and problematized as a self-reflexive concept for how audience members accept a broad range of body types that deviate from those of the hyper masculine or hyper feminine.

For audience members these alternative masculine portrayals may also provide a self-referential mirror for an internalized self-acceptance that challenges the self-flagellating narratives often associated with those in Western society that remain largely normative within sporting and consumer culture today. When looking at the role of dramaturgy in defining queerness in sporting and entertainment spaces, the idea of homosocial displays of eroticism are

²⁷ Barthes., 15.

a key to understanding the boundary between a genuine commentary on queerness and the duality presented with elements of satire which wrestling appears to use as a tool to mock the queer other while simultaneously discussing their validity in sport and entertainment.

Steven Greer's engagement with what he calls the pragmatic performance of queerness, was manufactured by wrestlers like Adrian Street to challenge traditional narratives of masculinity and femininity and explore the impact of societal shifts from a less labour conscious society to a more entertainment focused society whose values were shaped by the consumption of popular entertainment spectacles like professional wrestling.²⁸ Unlike Barthes' failure to negotiate a question of queerness, Greer using the case study of Adrian Street, challenges traditional narrative discourses in the scholarship by suggesting that the duality of a masculine binary can exist alongside allusions or overt references to queerness within a single character. Scott Karasick calls this kind of character a "gold peacock," a character that displays an androgenous or homosocial in-ring attitude with the "traditional" trappings of westernized predominately White conceptions of masculinities.²⁹

The gold peacock is in essence the merging of social dualities and tensions societally in professional wrestling between acceptance and rejection of queerness historically in the twentieth century. Adrian Street's emergence as a "subversive" masculine archetype is an example of wrestling's ability to historically push back against the idea that masculinity is distinct and biologically encoded and perpetuates the idea to audiences that conceptions of masculinities are inherently conditioned and encoded societal ideals of appropriate psycho-social

²⁸ Stephen Greer, "'King of the ring, and queen of it too': The Exotic Masculinity of Adrian Street," in *Performance and Professional Wrestling*, eds. Broderick Chow, Eero Laine, and Claire Warden (New York: Routledge, 2017).

²⁹ Scott Karasick, "Gorgeous Gold Peacocks: Exploring Masculinity in Professional Wrestling" (Florida Atlantic University, Dissertation, 2019).

developments which are by-products of a muscular Christian culture that rigidly defines gender and gender expression.

For performers like Adrian Street who came from a predominantly working-class background in Wales, his status in professional wrestling is the most naturally subversive. As Exotic Adrian Street he disavows the notion of a gender singularity in professional wrestling and instead provides this notion of an identity fluid character whose persona articulates both the masculine and feminine as argued by Greer.

Barthes' initial broaching of performative divergence from the "normal" provides the historiography of exploring queerness in professional wrestling with its first starting point into the process of wrestling's ability to uphold while simultaneously questioning body and gender normativity. The question of audience engagement and self-referential behaviours around ideas of queerness and masculine and gender fluidity are developing topics of engagement within the historiography of professional wrestling in the twentieth century as a subtopic. This is due in large part to the fixation of scholars on defining the notion of a standard historiographic binary for the history of expressing gender and masculinity in professional wrestling.

Barthes' contribution to twentieth century professional wrestling scholarship is emphasized by his acknowledgement of the dramatic displays in the ring and his interpretation of wrestling as a dramatic stage play. His influential ideas have circulated relatively unchallenged and continue to inform the majority of modern scholarship on professional wrestling. This has contributed to the reification of a severely limited understanding of wrestling as an exercise and expression of normative masculine traditions that does little to engage the audience in a thoughtful fashion. When reframed by other twentieth century scholars who acknowledge the impact of Barthes' work and the degree to which it extended the dramatic discourse, they

struggle to acknowledge its minimal impact on discourses outside of the ring and its potential when applied to the way performers and audiences interact with early discourses of self-referential physicality and individual identities within professional wrestling.

Eero Laine

Eero Laine is an example of a scholar who negotiates the ideas of the performance of identity in professional wrestling being non-specific to female or male participants and that each may adopt the traits of the other while still retaining some normative displays and features in the ring. Laine defines professional wrestling in terms of its dramatic spectacle while presenting how the dramatic spectacle has the space to acknowledge othered performers and the response of fans and commentators as part of that performance.

Laine's more holistic and complex perspective on wrestling is undermined by his use of sources like Thomas Hackett and Neil Genzlinger, who dismiss the importance of studying professional wrestling. Hackett, in his book *Slaphappy: Pride, Prejudice, and Professional Wrestling*, disparages wrestling fans as slovenly, uneducated, and prone to passively replicating what they see to their own detriment.³⁰ Genzlinger, an American cultural critic and frequent writer for *the New York Times*, holds a similarly dismal view of wrestling fans as unintelligent, passive consumers. The influence of these essentialist interpretations by Hackett and Genzlinger emerge in Laine's work and become visible in sentences like: "professional wrestling presents a model of lowbrow theoretical critique."³¹ Laine's use of lowbrow can be considered problematic because it implies that there is an inability of the product to resonate with more than an

³⁰ Thomas Hackett, *Slaphappy: Pride, Prejudice, and Professional Wrestling* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2006)

³¹ Eero Laine, "Professional Wrestling Scholarship: legitimacy and Kayfabe," *Popular Culture Studies Journal Special Edition: Professional Wrestling* 6, no.1 (2018): 86.

uneducated audience and that it does not provide any meaningful assessment of a culture or a people.

From a post-structuralist perspective, Laine's idea implies that there is no ability for the viewer that consumes wrestling to reasonably understand "higher forms" of culture, confining them to a classist construction of sociocultural being that is directly contradicting Laine's pursuit of legitimizing pro wrestling as a scholarly endeavour, and instead reinforces the toxic view that consumption of popular culture is confined to and separates individuals by distinctions of class. Laine points out in this quote that both are reductionist in tone when speaking of fans and professional wrestling as a community. This does not give weight to the idea that there would be much public or academic support for the study and methodological developments of professional wrestling scholarship. This seems to greatly detract from the narrative that wrestling can be held to the same standards as other forms of popular culture by scholars.

Though Laine's arguments are well reasoned, examples have a great deal of impact on how arguments are to be received and interpreted. It can be noted that because both are oppositional texts to the idea of wrestling as a legitimate entity, you have no counter argument that best supports or challenges traditional social narratives pertaining to wrestling. Laine places fans in a non-self-reflexive position by saying "professional wrestling takes pains to disrupt such order and is decidedly and proudly 'lowbrow.'"³² It can also be seen that Laine acknowledges the disruption to traditional norms of the narrative of higher and lower culture, but his ideas are greatly sacrificed when he chooses to use the term "proud" when describing the label of lowbrow and fans' reaction to the designation.

³² Laine, 86.

To make the statement that all fans are “proud” to be placed and contextualized as “lowbrow” is to be willfully blind to the fans of wrestling that use it for the purposes of their own scholarly work. It is also problematic to use the term as it has a highly racialized connotation and does not promote the idea that wrestling fans have the autonomy to aspire higher than an archaic and traditional social construction. Through Laine’s use of “lowbrow” he confuses what his intentions are for when discussing the audience of wrestling. A more appropriate assertion would be that wrestling’s audience, like any other popular culture audience, proudly supports the piece of popular culture and does not conform to any label. A change in word choice such as this provides a clearly defined opposition to those cultural traditions and meanings while providing a genuine interrogation of their use.

Eero Laine’s use of WWE as a scholarly source provides us with an understanding of the conservatism pervasive in professional wrestling that threatens autonomy of queer and othered bodies through their use in storylines demean and marginalize their presence within the space engraining the social acceptance of reducing the queer to a parody as a part of wrestling and fan culture that sees heteronormativity as the only option for a superfan. We must as scholars critically examine how WWE is part of a historic narrative for the voice of pro wrestling and that other platforms of professional wrestling are creating more accessible forms of content that allow previously othered groups to enjoy and consume. This work expands our breadth of focus and looks at the moments of professional wrestling that truly demonstrate marked social and cultural progression and expanded thought beyond the heteronormative.

Mark Elliot Workman

When comparing both the approaches of Ball and Workman, each scholar takes a sociocultural approach to discussions of professional wrestling. However, Workman's approach highlights the ethnographic and symbolic significance of fans in an arena setting, characterizing their role as passive while discussing the implications of kayfabe and fan awareness on the in-ring content, gimmick, and storyline creations. Workman, however, differs from Ball in the way in which he categorized fan engagement and its function on the pro wrestling product from a television and live match perspective, interviewing fans in one on one accounts which helped to establish their positions about the product and its validity as a form of sport or drama.

In Mark Elliot Workman's dissertation on professional wrestling, Workman analyzes specific semiotic and in-ring performances of good guy versus bad guy. This is a classic way in which to broach the topic of professional wrestling as semiotic theories help to clearly define the in-ring structure and presence of gimmicks as seen in the ring. Workman's work opens a scholarly dialogue pertaining to how we may interpret the in-ring space as one which reflects culture, identity, race, and politics in addition to recapitulating how we view the physical performance of gimmicks and their validity as predetermined contests. This work is seminal because it allows for a discussion of concepts such as kayfabe and the suspension of disbelief as well as a basic understanding of in-ring psychology rather than a mere interpretation and discussion of the aesthetic framings of wrestling as traditionally waged by Barthes.

Workman alludes to an ethnographic study of fans and truly diverse representations among audiences and arenas but stops short of discussions of micro communities or race, something that is illuminated in the following chapters. When analyzing Workman's thesis, it is important to once again understand that it is a product of its time and suffers from the limitations and

constraints of technology, correspondence, and social awareness that underpin most discourses on wrestling of the mid-twentieth century.

Where Workman specifically struggles is his ability to provide a credible understanding of the difference between reality and fiction, as several times Workman references elements of kayfabe and gimmickry in wrestling that are evident for their lack of authenticity, but clearly positioned as authentic by Workman. An example of this is when Workman falsely claims racial authenticity for Chief Jay Strongbow and Billy White Wolf, neither of whom are indigenous, and maintain the pretense of kayfabe even in correspondence with Workman, something which is not clearly articulated in the text which leaves the tone of Workman's argument, at best, ambiguous.³³

Throughout Workman's dissertation, there is a tendency to both acknowledge the potential validity of clear kayfabe while maintaining vehemently that it is all predetermined and that the research done experiences gaps because wrestling's code of silence prevents a definitive answer on the reality of wrestling to be established in the thesis. Workman clearly understood the value of discussing race and its legacy in professional wrestling as well as the treatment of societal others as a topic of significant potential going forward in the scholarship. Workman's assertions about authenticity throughout the thesis create a false potential for authenticity in in-ring work when the most authentic elements of wrestling are arguably articulated in the third space correspondences of the locker room and other backstage locations where the gimmick of the individual may be separated from their personal communication with colleagues, superiors, and fans.

³³ Mark Elliot Workman, "The Differential Perception of a Dramatic Event: Interpretations of the Meaning of Professional Wrestling Matches," Dissertation for the University of Pennsylvania, Department of Folklore, 1977, 162.

Workman was writing at a time when kayfabe was king, meaning that his ability to gain an authentic sense of wrestling's social scope beyond the ring would have been mired by the attempts of his case studies to keep their industry safe from interlopers and bad press. Though Workman acknowledges the potential for red herrings posed by subjects during interviews, the validity of all statements are assumed without a great deal of academic thoughtfulness employed when thinking about the conspicuous nature of some of the points being contested such as why wrestlers will not admit that matches are predetermined. The reasoning behind Gorilla Monsoon and others' lack of admission of a contrived or staged event is obvious as they seek to protect their jobs and livelihoods.

It is the lack of integration into the culture of professional wrestling that Workman cites as a major failure on the part of his thesis as the clarity between reality and fiction in the ring is not something that can be determined simply through an interview done entirely under the guise of kayfabe and instead, as wrestling scholars, we must focus on how to read statements in wrestling for their lack of authenticity and their links to a collective memory and internal culture.

It is a negotiation with this internal culture and sense of dichotomous negotiation with identity that modern scholars such as Eero Laine, Broderick Chow, and Claire Warden attempt to negotiate in their work through conducting backstage interviews with independent promotions and acclimating into the community beyond the ring in order to have a deeper understanding of these social and cultural mechanics that come with defining effective scholarly approaches to wrestling.

Michael Ball

Michael Ball's seminal work, *Professional Wrestling as Ritual Drama*, is the first body of work to focus on the dramaturgy of wrestling and its sociocultural links to in-ring discussions of race, sexuality, and gender – using the in-ring performance as the primary form of analysis. The significance of Ball's in-ring analysis to formative scholarly discussions of professional wrestling is the discussion of gimmicks or othered bodies as capital commodities. This discussion of capital commodification in wrestling is a subject that allows us to define how professional wrestlers can be not only produced as athletes but produced as products for the consumption of audiences in arenas and on television. When discussing this in terms of a racialized commodification it is notable that the collective memory of the organization or promotion is dependent on the enduring legacy of the commodified body. This produced a highly crafted legacy that allows contrasting views on a gimmick to exist among audiences as people pay to see an exaggerated mirror image of how they physically envision themselves or their ideal sense of self triumph over adversity or hardship.

Through Ball we can negotiate how fan voyeurism and capitalism in combination allow us to craft an idealized narrative around traditionally hyper masculine body types that, in the twentieth century, were perceived to be the ideal standard for engaging with the American dream as manifested through narratives of physical culture. It is this very manifestation of our own voyeuristic desires through these herculean performers that produce wrestling's first tangible exchange between gimmicked bodies and targeted capitalism. It is this targeted capitalism that Ball discusses as separate from dramaturgical theories on gimmicks and the body which evades a key element of why audiences so critically engage with the performance. This missing element is the link between the marketability of a performance and its tailoring to regional audiences as a

hook that defines a twentieth century relationship between wrestling gimmicks and discussions of audience engagement with masculinity and various othered and non-othered bodies.

In the first two chapters, Ball states that his analysis of wrestling focuses on a combination of dramaturgy and a cultural historical analysis of the United States and its links to sport and audience engagement. Ball believes that dramaturgy functions in professional wrestling as a way of engaging the audience in a morality play of good versus evil which Ball feels are an illustration of fundamental American values. It is this emphasis on fundamental American values that provides twentieth century American professional wrestling scholarship with its first tangible articulation for wrestling's historic and cultural impact on American society and it can be argued that Ball's discussion is the first to accurately socially position or frame the professional wrestling gimmick as a representation of American social commentaries on physical culture and the body. An extension of discussions of wrestling's relationship to social and cultural commentaries on the body in the twentieth century would be further developed by Mazer and other scholars of the late 1990s and early 2000s who use Ball's generalized discussion as a platform for how wrestling defines the positioning of othered or traditionally oppressed bodies in hypermasculine capitally driven exceptionalist tradition.

Michael Ball defines dramaturgy as an extension of dramatic ritual or tradition in the context of a stage play or performance. Ball goes on to define how wrestling creates symbols of American masculinity through the creation of hyper masculine gimmicks or superstars that represent ideals, normative processes, or physicality and patriotism. Ball specifically references Hulk Hogan as a symbol of a masculine patriotism that performs traditional modes of masculinity while also acting as a satire that subverts the traditional exceptionalist discourse held

by twentieth century American society. The question that may be posed is how might modern rituals based on consumer culture question long held attitudes or perceptions of the body?

By reinterpreting wrestling as a form of cultural and moral commentary, Ball has advanced the study of professional wrestling. Arguing against the idea that wrestling's only appeal is as a one-dimensional, largely lower class activity without any moral instruction (as posited by Barthes and various other scholars), Ball contributed a study of how gimmicks present a hyper realized embodiment of human character and reflect national, regional, and generalized social anxieties about the physical other. This perspective enriches an understanding of wrestling's campy storyline and dialogues of the 1980s. Ball's 1989 work enables us to advance into discussions of the way in which wrestling's storylines and hyper masculine or stereotypical characters function as a subversive message to the audience.

What Ball fails to grasp however, is how the audience functions in shaping the structure of storyline commentaries as told in the ring and once again how his work does not go beyond the implication that wrestling is predetermined. It can be argued that the social agency of audiences takes on a voyeuristic masculine caricature, something that Ball in his work cites as a product of social conditioning with minor self-reflexivity on the part of audiences who acknowledge, to varying degrees in Ball's opinion, the success of wrestling in creating satire through their gimmicks.

In a quote from Ball's work, Ball discusses how audience engagement is a matter of debate as wrestling panders to a structure that inherently marginalizes specific segments of the audience such as the mentally ill and the handicapped by displaying gimmicks which provided a less than culturally appropriate commentary and spectacle in Ball's view. "Sexism, while directed largely

at gender inequality, is also apparent in the repression of the handicapped and mentally ill...”³⁴

The idea that audiences would not engage in the cultural construction of these gimmicks as an active form of demonstrating society’s capacity to other these various groups is something that Ball does not actively discuss, instead suggesting that the product produced by wrestling implies the potential for cultural apathy towards these groups by professional wrestling audiences.

Diverse receptions to gimmicks embody the same characteristics as sport or theater because every audience has a unique way of framing their perspective on the other or stereotypes which forces wrestling, like any other consumer product or piece of popular culture, to adapt based on how its audience responds. If there is no response from an audience, then there is no way in which a storyline may move forward, meaning that the wrestlers of the twentieth century depended on audience’s feedback for practical completion of the melodrama in Ball’s view.³⁵

When looking at the different spheres of professional wrestling Ball’s theories apply to a very specific segment of wrestling’s population - those who primarily watch midwestern or southern regional professional wrestling where racially contentious storylines and problematic representations of the other were prevalent as forms of satire in the ring. Ball’s case study does not necessarily capture how the audience at a live performance or through television responded to the gimmicks listed in the chapter nor does Ball provide concrete evidence of how audiences engaged with the gimmicks, whether they were received with critical acclaim or labeled as offensive by broader mid-twentieth century American audiences.

When discussing race, disability, and sexuality, Ball acknowledges the evolution of problematic gimmicks that portray a racialized or othered body as a reflection of cultural shifts

³⁴ Ball, 17.

³⁵ Ball, 127.

throughout America's twentieth century that wrestling acknowledged and changed. One notable reference that Ball makes is the rise of Nazi or white supremacist based gimmicks which Ball states rose sharply in popularity during WWII and had largely disappeared in the 1980s.³⁶ In Ball's example, he cites the Nazi's disappearance in wrestling as correlating to the disappearance of a sociopolitical antagonist to the United States in the form of Germany and that wrestling best reflects a cooling of these antagonisms through the disappearance or reframing of gimmicks over time into a new antagonist or foreign other that allows the audience to engage in the ideological and moral struggle.

Beyond acknowledging the foreign other or menace, Ball notes what role the foreign menace plays in developing an all American hero. Ball captures the subversion of the American hero when describing Sergeant Slaughter,³⁷ suggesting that Slaughter is indicative of wrestling's ability to further entrench discourses of American exceptionalism, something which Mazer in *Sport and Spectacle* contests as a satirical commentary on patriotism and traditions of masculinities in the US.³⁸ Ball's research into wrestling's potential function as a hybrid continues in the twenty-first century with modern researchers refining Ball's original concept to include extended discussions of the queer or racialized other when determining the space that wrestling occupies. The hybrid Ball defines when discussing wrestling is the hybrid of sports and entertainment which blends competitive athleticism with traditional forms of dramatic entertainment such as theater.

For both Workman and Ball, race and queerness are discourses in professional wrestling studies that are not fully realized, and if studied, are only understood through the dynamics,

³⁶ Ball, 86.

³⁷ Ball, 106.

³⁸ Sharon Mazer, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* (University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 158.

staging, and relation to the in-ring performance and personas. The backstage, even by the late 1980s during Ball's writing, remained categorically untouched as a resource due to a preoccupation with how wrestling is performed, something that Workman, Barthes, and others continued to fixate on throughout the rest of the twentieth century. It can be argued that this obsession with clearly staged in-ring work and its function produced an echo chamber effect which caused an unstable framing of wrestling as having an inherent lack of credibility from a scholarly perspective due to perceived stagnant positioning.

The work of Ball and Workman primarily focused on how to read wrestling's live performance as a limited social commentary with the fixation on representing the hyper masculine portrayal and displays of the body with cartoonish or exaggerated expressions of race and queerness. Ball and Workman provide some early demographic representations of who engages with these hyper masculine performances from demographic case studies of race and culture. The framing of these demographic explorations are done in a way that reflects the class of the case studies rather than their racial or ethnographic significance. The work of Sharon Mazer continues a focus on the ethnographic and social significance of professional wrestling's in-ring performance as well as exploring how gender and other forms of masculinity can be reconciled through the creation and marketing of gimmicks.

Sharon Mazer

In Sharon Mazer's book *Sport and Spectacle*, Mazer discusses the heavily gendered dynamics of professional wrestling through a dramaturgical lens that assesses the different modes of masculine and feminine commentaries in the performance of wrestling. Mazer positions wrestling as a lower class version of the Middle English play, with a deep homosocial

and even homoerotic set of values engrained within the physical interaction between the two wrestlers. Mazer argues that wrestling is a struggle between homosocial expression and traditional masculinity as a means of underpinning and defining the in-ring performance of wrestling. Mazer's exploration into the homosocial dynamic of the in-ring performance is invaluable as it allows for further discussions of masculinity's fluid definition within sport and performance as well as within pop cultural expression.

Mazer defines wrestling as "a hybrid performance practice: a professional sport in which players can earn their livings at the same time that it offers its audiences a spectacle that goes beyond contest into theatrical spectacle. In this light it is important to ask what makes wrestling so popular in contemporary culture, to see what it is the fans actually see in the arenas, big and small, as well as on television."³⁹ Much like Workman and other fellow scholars of the twentieth century, Mazer once again establishes an argumentative framework for a hybridized definition of wrestling, which this work argues, is effective in the legitimation and framing of wrestling as its own independent form of study.

In a discussion with Mazer about wrestling's exact definition, Mazer continually referred to her book as evidence for total confirmation of wrestling's place in the scholarship. The challenge I would pose to that response is wrestling much like other scholarly forms of study adapts to its social, cultural, or political environment and functions accordingly, so as scholars we must constantly try to renegotiate its functionality within an evolving culture. This is something that Mazer critically challenges as she believes her work covers discussions of the body, queerness, and masculinity's fluidity with great effect.

³⁹ Mazer, 6.

I would suggest that masculinity's function in wrestling in particular is a topic that is constantly renegotiated with wrestling's constant need to adapt to an ever changing audience who possess varied ideas about the body, sexuality, gender, and normative expression in physical culture than that of their twentieth century counterparts, rendering the continued validity of arguments made in the late twentieth century outdated. Meaning that they are a product of their time and sociocultural position, which Mazer roots predominately in second wave feminist ideology which traditionally does not recognize the fluidity of normative masculine or feminine presentations and places and the traditional two-pronged approach is used when conceiving of gender in scholarship, meaning that the idea of a multiplicity of genders or varied gender identity is something outside of the scope of second wave feminist theory, making the ideas waged here a product of a more traditional discussion of gender normativity.

The issue with community historians contesting the validity of Mazer's argument centres around how prolific *Sport and Spectacle* became in the late 90s for its use of field study and primary source interview work as the benchmark for professional wrestling scholarship which defined how masculine and feminine archetypes existed within the space of the late 80s and early 90s ring of professional wrestling, opening the door for broader discussions about how bodies exist in the in-ring space as part of an extended commentary on modern gender roles and the changes present in the "rebellious grunge" culture of the 90s.

Mazer's work is effective at defining the ways in which masculine and feminine bodies may inhabit the communal space of the ring. However, Mazer's assertion that the gender traits occupied by men and women have an exclusivity to them are based in a 90s gender binary which is emphasized in the quote: "Male wrestlers may be seen to reveal, in the display of their bodies and in their actions, their real manliness. Conversely, what women reveal in their bodily displays

and performances is that no matter how closely their actions converge on those of men, they are not and can never be men.”⁴⁰ Through this quote’s assertion of a fixed gender binary for bodies within professional wrestling the ideas expressed imply that traditional discourses of masculine exceptionalism exist within the professional wrestling space and may not be overturned or reimagined as they are inalienable roles from which the participants are hopelessly incapable of separating themselves from.

It can be argued that this surface level reading of gender performativity in wrestling, though opening the door to a more in depth discussion of the space than that of Barthes or those undertaken by Workman in the mid-1970s, Sharon Mazer’s arguments are a product of research which was conducted in the early 90s when gender normativity and performance of that normativity in professional wrestling was predominant but certainly open to boundary pushing precedence that challenged the internalized narratives of gender and gender performativity, creating a richer depth from which the male and female wrestler can be reframed. By Mazer asserting that women may never perform as men within professional wrestling regardless of their attempts to do so is an idea that excludes (perhaps inadvertently) the identity of trans folks who, within professional wrestling identify as women, or female bodybuilders turned wrestlers such as Chyna and Nicole Bass who in the late 90s redefined how female wrestlers could be portrayed as extremely physical performers with traits that were not mutually exclusive to masculine or feminine archetypes of twentieth century professional wrestling. It is within this misreading of Mazer’s case studies that lessen the impactfulness of her argument over time under the modern standards of scholarship as she goes on to ignore how each wrestler within the micro community defines their sense of identity within the space, thus limiting the ability of the performer’s voices

⁴⁰ Mazer, 5.

to aid in Mazer's definition of an authentic placement for professional wrestling and discussions of gender performativity.

When Mazer discusses issues of femininity, she uses second wave feminist ideology which suggests sexuality that is overt in nature, reduces the independence and true feminist expression of the performer as well as the validity of their personal identification as a feminist. A quote from her work underpins these ideas: "...she is claiming a kind of propriety, both in establishing the limits of her accommodation to the client's desire and in claiming ownership of her body and identity in performance. At the same time, regardless of the way in which she represents her actions, when I consider her acts of display and commodification I remain ambivalent."⁴¹

Mazer's study of female professional wrestlers provides an interpersonal examination of the setting in which she conducts her research, resulting in statements of ambivalence towards subjects like Sky Magic. Sky Magic's performances assert her physical and sexual autonomy within professional wrestling but Mazer opposes Sky Magic's conception of herself as a feminist, blatantly condemning Sky Magic's wrestling style and the sexualized nature of some of her wrestling performances, which Mazer openly regards as a contradiction to staunch, traditional expressions of feminism.

Mazer's work is extremely beneficial for providing a window into the early analysis of the contradictory ideals and attitudes that exist within the community of professional wrestling and is an excellent piece of source material for understanding its position as a hybridized physical activity beyond the realm of pure sport or dramatic presentation. Mazer's assertion of wrestling as a hybridized and contradictory space helped in the evolution of wrestling's place in scholarship far more than her predecessors as *Sport and Spectacle* provides distinct dimensions

⁴¹ Mazer, 121.

to the commentary of ‘good guy versus bad guy’ by inserting discourses of masculinity and femininity into the scholarly context. However, the rigid inability of Mazer to separate her personal conceptions of gender identity and performativity from her own work cause an otherwise seamless discussion to falter under the weight of a clear counter argument in which othered non-binary or queer bodies exist and redefine ways in which the historiography and conceptions of space in professional wrestling of the 20th century would be capitulated going forward. Mazer’s work would continue to define the study and occupation of scholars within 21st century discussions of professional wrestling, resulting in clear vacuums and argumentative loops which still pervade the scholarship today.

Historiography

In this initial chapter, the core argument that is posited is that the inclusion of dramaturgical theory in the study of professional wrestling greatly mars the clarity of studying specific aspects of professional wrestling gimmicks that pertain to the identity of othered bodies as it only captures the reading of the in-ring performance and the symbolic reproduction of sociocultural values within American, and more broadly, Western society. The argument proposed is that a reading of in-ring performance does not contribute meaningfully to scholarly discussions of cultural identity and the commodification of athletic and performative bodies. The ideological resolution that this chapter establishes posits that modern Third Space theory and critical race theory when applied to the 20th century history of professional wrestling are more effective theories for recapitulating the social and cultural significance of gimmicks to American audiences and provides an effective means for the illumination of challenges faced in prior

scholarly discourses of how to define wrestling's place in popular culture and narratives of collective memory.

I also discuss how the commodification of the body and queerness in professional wrestling is used to underpin how modern scholarship questions the authenticity of reframing or reinforcing traditional stereotypes or responses among audiences and the role that commodification plays in marketing progress within character development and storyline progression. Only a surface level scholarly exploration is conducted during the twentieth century when discussing wrestling's relationship to commodified bodies and queerness. By portraying queer gimmicks as inauthentic, scholars label a performer and performance as containing purely satirical elements which are designed to draw audiences to the arenas (or to their television sets) with the understanding that the performer is somebody who can authenticate a "traditional" masculine perspective within the same performance.

Janine Bradbury allows for a discussion that reinforces the narrative of queerness as being more complex than just simple commodified camp. In her discussion of Goldust, Dr. Bradbury is quoted as saying "A wrestling fan familiar with classic film would recognise that Goldust's persona therefore explores the psychology of performance and acting while drawing upon *Sunset Boulevard*'s status as a 'camp classic' as a way of heightening the androgyny and sexual ambiguity of Goldust himself."⁴²

This quote underlines how gimmicks such as Goldust may be shaped in order to reflect the queer gimmick and its ties to discourses of consumerism. This is a more modern debate within professional wrestling scholarship that is an extension of investigating how to successfully

⁴² Janine Bradbury, "Grappling and ga(y)zing: Gender, sexuality, and performance in the WWE debuts of Goldust and Marlena," in *Performance and Professional Wrestling*, eds. Broderick Chow, Eero Laine, and Claire Warden, (Routledge, 2017), 108.

delineate between authenticity and acting. Stephen Greer points out quite successfully that the queer gimmick in professional wrestling does not necessarily reflect an authentic access for audience members to a genuinely queer body on display.⁴³ Greer goes on to discuss how twentieth century wrestling's preoccupation with in-ring discourses of the body draw focus from how the authenticity of wrestling gimmicks and what they represent are the most ambiguous aspects of the study, as even within the commodified exoticism of a queer gimmick, there can be genuine discussions and sociocultural dialogues about how these gimmicks play a role in advancing positive discourses about marginalized bodies in sports and entertainment.⁴⁴ It is this acknowledgement of a dichotomous negotiation with wrestling gimmicks of the mid to late twentieth century that allows for third spaces cultivated by fans to become essential in the positioning of each gimmick and their genuine contributions to more progressive dialogues about otherness within professional wrestling and entertainment overall that is a constant source of scholarly negotiation inquiry.

The role of the twentieth century wrestling scholar becomes one of tireless negotiator as our job is to demonstrate how satirical caricatures of othered or marginalized bodies in professional wrestling are exploited, while in a dichotomous way, provide an authentic window for fans to discuss social and cultural progress in professional wrestling and the role that each of these gimmicks played in advancing the discourse historically. Community scholarship in combination with conventional scholarship helps to clearly establish the way in which different communities and regions negotiate a satirized version of the other when consuming professional wrestling as part of a commodified social and cultural third space.

⁴³ Greer, "King of the ring, and queen of it too," 122.

⁴⁴ Greer, 125.

Though the precedent was set by Scott M. Beekman and Nathan Hatton, this study hopes that the following discussion, when framed in a sociocultural historiographic context, will provide a deeper understanding of where twentieth century scholarship struggled to define wrestling's ability to socially commentate on the various scholarly arguments waged about how the othered bodies have been framed throughout the twentieth century history of wrestling and how the argument can be made for its continual growth and development as a viable informal and formal mechanism for social and cultural discussion.

Professional wrestling scholars deal with the extremely tenuous process of collective memory and narratives that are constantly reshaped by those who produce wrestling as well as the wrestlers themselves in an in-ring context. It is the challenge of negotiating with collective memory that is discussed throughout this thesis.

Current scholarly discourses on professional wrestling are attempting to renegotiate traditional dramaturgical perspectives on wrestling and their relationships and significance to studies of popular culture. Theo Plothe's work on Samoan identity in professional wrestling is an example of how wrestling gimmicks have a complex relationship with race and popular culture that is constantly reevaluated by promoters according to the diversity of audiences. Plothe's work demonstrates how the WWE used Roman Reigns' character to increase the fanbase of Samoan Americans by providing positive and marketable representation.⁴⁵ This chapter has observed how personal bias reflected in scholarly thinking of twentieth century professional wrestling studies causes wrestling to be continually isolated from the normative study of popular culture as a legitimate subject. The argument supporting professional wrestling's legitimacy in the scholarly

⁴⁵ Theo Plothe, "Samoan Submission Machines: Grappling with Representations of Samoan Identity in Professional Wrestling," *Professional Wrestling Studies Journal* 2, no. 1, (2021).

discourse states that wrestling occupies a space which is not quite a legitimate sport or strictly theatrical but a middle space which defines its role as a hybrid of sports and entertainment. Entertainment as a scholarly form of study has been constantly questioned for its lack of authenticity.

Scott Beekman and Nathan Hatton Section

Scott M. Beekman's *Ringside* provides a critical examination of race and social stratification in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century professional wrestling. Beekman's work provides the first real interpretation of the racialization and brutality associated with early carnival circuit wrestling. Beekman's historiography focuses on the question of how racialized athletes in professional wrestling during the nineteenth century adapted to an existence which accentuated racist stereotypes while also defining some racialized athletes as athletically gifted. Beekman describes professional wrestling and its relationship to nineteenth century discourses of race as a key factor in the early maintenance of kayfabe and gimmick based culture which came to define the treatment and categorization of legitimate athletes into gimmicks with limited social agency or capacity for growth.⁴⁶

In Beekman's work, the racialized athlete is a victim of collective memory as their records, accomplishments, and crowd reception are subject to constant change and distortion. This form of collective memory distortion, as acknowledged by Beekman, was often undertaken by promoters who refused to provide top Black athletes in the early twentieth century with a clear

⁴⁶ Beekman, *Ringside*, 74.

record or source of prior history upon which the racialized athlete could build a reception with fans or use their reputation as a credible articulation of their own athleticism.⁴⁷

Unlike his contemporaries in professional wrestling scholarship, Beekman's use of examples of racialization and racism within professional wrestling are effective at clearly marking the racist past of kayfabe, physical categorization of racialized others, and the clear appearance of commodified racism as an early methodology for studying professional wrestling in an American context and its relationship to a highly racially contentious history.

This thesis undertakes the task of highlighting the issues and successes of these various seminal works and more specifically how each author's body of work and ideas help to shape the discourses expressed throughout the thesis. A quote from Nathan Hatton defines a key issue with traditional forms of professional wrestling scholarship and what we can do to correct or unpack the gaps that exist within the previous scholarly works commonly used: "The early studies were of varying strength with regard to factual accuracy, few offered social contexts to accompany their narratives, and their focus strayed only marginally from professional wrestling as conducted in the United States. Nevertheless, they remain among the few published surveys of the major individuals and events associated with the sport in North America prior to the Great Depression."⁴⁸

This quote from Nathan Hatton underlines key issues with histories of professional wrestling which are not mutually exclusive to more non-scholarly based histories but underline a broader set of systemic issues in prior attempts to ascertain a legitimate scholarly placement. Most seminal scholars of the twentieth century tend to focus on the surface level applications of

⁴⁷ Beekman, 28.

⁴⁸ Nathan Hatton, *Thrashing Sessions: Sporting Culture in Manitoba and The Genesis of Prairie Wrestling* (University of Manitoba, 2016), 8.

dramaturgy and their links to foundational literary or dramatic texts which are used as a common rationalization for interpreting in-ring performance.

Conclusion

Theoretical discussions of professional wrestling in a scholarly context are important for establishing how to legitimize professional wrestling as a sociocultural commentary on perceptions of the body and reactions by twentieth century American audiences. These early, twentieth century discussions of professional wrestling scholarship are a primary means of reading professional wrestling gimmicks and storylines. This thesis helps to develop key counter arguments against the prevailing attitude that wrestling's only scholarly value rests in studies of its in-ring performances. I argue that in twenty-first century wrestling scholarship, a sociocultural framework for discussions of race and its impact on the relationship between professional wrestlers, fans and promoters reveals the cultural values that are both challenged and reinscribed within the racially contentious discourses of professional wrestling.

In the second chapter, the perspectives of the racialized professional wrestler—or more specifically, examples of Black athletes in professional wrestling—are negotiated for their ability to provide insight into another key dynamic in professional wrestling—the wrestler's ability to engage with conceptions of self-identity that are intertwined with kayfabe. Through the use of Critical Race theory and Third Space theory, I argue that racialized professional wrestlers' relationships to their gimmicks are extremely complex, varied, and rely on negotiations with internalized and commodified racism. The second chapter will establish how Black athletes balanced their own personal and professional sense of autonomy within the space of twentieth century professional wrestling despite being faced with an often highly racialized or socially and

culturally problematic gimmick. Many of these performers negotiated to varying degrees of success a liminal space for agency both personally and financially. The primary question that is posed in chapter two asks how Black athletes of the twentieth century grappled with their success despite contending with an inauthentic, highly racialized gimmick which caused, in some cases, great personal strife and confrontations with internalized racism.

When studying highly racialized gimmicks, it is important to approach the historical issues faced by Black wrestlers with an understanding that the production of the racialized wrestler's presence in the profession during the twentieth century was based on racial monetization and exploitation. When discussing exploitation in the second chapter, agency and success for Black wrestlers depend on the performer's ability to navigate a complex relationship between wrestlers, promoters, and fans to articulate a sense of autonomy beyond the theatrical performance in the ring. The second chapter will demonstrate how performers with racialized gimmicks of the twentieth century struggled to reconcile a sense of personal autonomy beyond the space of the ring as a result of being under the pressures of kayfabe and other highly racializing practices of professional wrestling.

Chapter 2

Introduction

The African American experience in twentieth century North America was defined by racial tension and the pursuit of social and racial equality. Participation of Black athletes in sports and performance is a rich historic and cultural tapestry which connects to professional wrestling studies when defining the question of how equal were performative and sports spaces? Wrestling, as a subject, provides the opportunity for engagement with serious social and cultural

issues relating to race and identity. Wrestling utilizes satirically based gimmicks to insert itself in more serious commentaries and discussions of the struggles for autonomy undertaken by individuals who identify as African American.

Professional wrestling has historically struggled to avoid the tandem pitfalls of common sense racism and commodified racism when crafting wrestling gimmicks for African American performers. White promoters of the mid-to-late twentieth century would often use a racially motivated commonsense narrative to justify or pacify the problematic presentation of a gimmick to audiences and the performers themselves as a function of commodification and popular entertainment. As noted by Yousman:

Just as in Said's descriptions of Westerners who collect Middle Eastern or Asian art and artifacts as a way of bringing the "exotic" or the "mysterious" into their domestic spheres, hooks argued that the commodification of Black culture allows Whites to soothe their guilt over Black repression, cope with the crises of White identity in latter day capitalist society, and achieve vicarious thrills, excitements, and sexual pleasures through their "transgression" into a strange and uncharted world.⁴⁹

From the mid-twentieth century onward, white fans have justified their consumption of these gimmicks by positioning them as harmless entertainment that provides a Black entertainer with exposure and capital, despite the adverse internalized struggle and constant racialization they may face. Wrestling promoters attempt to suggest a reasonable trade-off, promising fame and acclaim for performers working in an industry they love and delivering a source of audience entertainment, while at the same time pacifying and marginalizing racist moments that commodify the performers' body and actions in and outside the ring. With each passing decade and every racialized gimmick, promoters attempt to present a socially progressive leap that appears positive on the surface but continues to mask the ongoing marginalization and

⁴⁹ Bill Yousman, "Blackophilia and Blackophobia: White Youth, the Consumption of Rap Music, and White Supremacy," *Communication Theory* 13, no. 4, (2003): 378.

exploitation of the performers with no real evidence of granting racialized performers increased agency or meaningfully engaging the topic of racism.

Another question that underlines the discussion of race and professional wrestling is that of double consciousness and the struggle for authentic forms of representation for African Americans.⁵⁰ A key argument to unpacking Black athletes' positions in twentieth century professional wrestling can be found when discussing the question of Black athletes' social agency. With the limited academic historiographical writing on professional wrestling, biographical materials and a wealth of other primary source materials including online videos, archived interviews given for TV and websites, and online newspaper articles will be utilized in this chapter to support wrestling's inclusion into the existing space of civil rights history, sports history, and broader narratives of U.S social history.

Using the critical race theory of Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, we can negotiate the challenges associated with double consciousness, commodified racism, and commonsense racism found in the case studies of African American performers in this chapter. Bonilla-Silva's principle of "commonsense racism"⁵¹ details how whites negotiate their relationship and acknowledgement of their own racist interpretations and responses to Black identity. Commonsense racism is defined as a set of racist beliefs or principles that normalize the stereotypes or conditions in which racism exists. It is a mode of justifying racist norms and entrenching them through the false belief that they are a neutral element of social and cultural discourse, as opposed to their reality as harmful mechanisms of maintaining racial power imbalances in society. In this context,

⁵⁰ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*, ed., A. G. McClurg, 1903 (New York: Johnson Reprint Corp, 1968)

⁵¹ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006).

the chapter will detail how white promoters and creators of the twentieth century professional wrestling landscape adopt commonsense racism principles when crafting storylines and gimmicks for Black performers and how Black performers were forced to negotiate with the double consciousness created by the racializing dichotomy of seeking fame and socioeconomic privilege in a highly racist space.

The relationship of professional wrestling to racialized others is a complex and often dualistic historiographic thread as racism in the ring was considered a normal part of twentieth century American professional wrestling. The contradictory nature of the professional wrestling space regarding race and identity is nothing new when it comes to America's culture of conflict and denial in regard to race. Critical Race Theory and the work of Eduardo Bonilla-Silva is used in this chapter to discuss how commodified racism in professional wrestling creates a complex and problematic internal negotiation with identity and double consciousness for Black wrestlers. The success that Black wrestlers can gain is limited by their positioning as a wrestling gimmick or journeyman wrestler whose time and financial futures are dictated by promoters' desires to continue using their hyper-racialized likenesses to sell to audiences. While there is a clear power imbalance between company and performer, there is nonetheless a limited space for negotiation around racial representation and a chance for performers to realize financial success if they are willing to embrace their own racialization in the name of fame and fortune. However, for most performers, this success is varied and limited, based on their status within a wrestling company's structure and their ability to draw large audiences to their performances.

Throughout the course of this research, a theme of fractured community amongst wrestlers emerges. This locker room community asserts itself as a space that attempts to be "post racial" in its framing by promoters such as Bill Watts, who claims that the 20th century locker room of the

mid-south was an “equal opportunity space” for Black wrestlers.⁵² Notable contradictions to this claim include Black performers like The Junkyard Dog, New Jack, Kamala James Harris, and Booker T., who suffered constant racist depictions but received no financial gain as they lost most of their wealth in the end. For African Americans/Black Americans, the level of autonomy experienced varied radically depending on their ability to exercise healthy positionality and bargain with the ideologies of commonsense and commodified racism being perpetuated in the industry at the time. It is this very act of bargaining and negotiation that creates a very complex conversation regarding the limitations of a racialized performer’s autonomy and their ability to convey with authenticity their true sense of self and contribution beyond their gimmick.

For many successful Black performers in the space of professional wrestling, there is a defined struggle with moments of internalized racism where racist performances or actions are gradually reconciled as ‘part of the job’ and a means of attaining control over how one’s identity as a wrestler is depicted. It is this cautious acceptance of performing racist stereotypes that can often distort for the performer the true nature of power and control throughout the course of their wrestling career. The wrestling industry is rife with white wrestling promoters and bookers who ultimately use the performer’s desire for success and desire for authentic self-expression as a means of continued exploitation as promises of greater financial gain and eternal acclaim are freely dispensed, often without substantiation or follow-through on the part of the promoter—even if contractually stated. As discussed later in the chapter, during the twentieth century and early twenty-first century the professional wrestling industry was fraught with incidents of Black performers being denied substantial financial gain, fame and acclaim due to promises that

⁵² “Cowboy” Bill Watts and Scott Williams, *The Cowboy and the Cross, The Bill Watts Story: Rebellion, Wrestling and Redemption* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2006).

remained unfulfilled or only partially fulfilled, as in the case of Kamala James Harris receiving four times lower the rate he was promised and which was fully paid to white performers like The Undertaker.⁵³

A key methodological approach to understanding race and its complex relationship with wrestling in this chapter is foregrounding the prominent form of racism that exploited and controlled the careers of African American performers during the 20th century—commodified racism. Commodified racism in the 20th century of professional wrestling rested on the primary tenet of a racialized stereotype not being viewed as racist by white promoters or audiences.⁵⁴ Consequently, an internal dichotomy for Black performers is created as the wrestlers are confronted with acts of racism perpetrated by colleagues in the locker room and by fans in the arena, while still justifying their existence in a problematic and racist space by clinging to the belief that they will receive sufficient financial gain to validate their continual exploitation.

The relationship between promoters and wrestling superstars during the twentieth century reinforces the historical significance and impact of commodified racism on the negotiation for Black athletes and performers in the struggle to assert their own autonomy and authenticity. When discussing the significance of professional wrestler's careers and their experiences with commodified racism there is an acknowledgement that many of these athletes resign themselves to partaking in problematic, highly racialized caricatures of the Black identity in order to make a reasonable to highly profitable living. The challenge for many of these performers as a result of this resignation or renouncement of personal power and autonomy is the willful blindness to

⁵³ KenTerminatedbyDQ, "Kamala Shoot Interview (Gun on Andre, Undertaker, HATES Eric Bischoff, WWE Diva Search & more)," Youtube.com, March 3, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LYct01lgemA>

⁵⁴ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

internalized racism that occurs within the process of reinforcing the cultural and social validity of a racist gimmick. For example, when addressing fans, Kamala James Harris has said that he wished he came up with the ‘Kamala gimmick’ himself, a gimmick whereby he was depicted as an “African bushman” who was mute, painted in tribal designs, and wore an ‘African mask’ designed by white promoter/wrestler Jerry Lawler.⁵⁵ Harris admits in his book, *Kamala Speaks*, that in his earlier years, he was a person who defended his family and others from the social and cultural consequences of racism by engaging in physical altercations with racist white people in his hometown. This is a stark contrast to how Harris defined himself in the space of professional wrestling, as his willingness to embrace and even cherish the Kamala gimmick is an example of his internalized racism and acceptance of the ‘realities of the industry’. Despite Black fans’ continued objections and condemnation of the gimmick over the years as an offensive racial stereotype, Harris would consistently frame this dichotomy as something fans could not understand or engage with as outsiders to the industry.⁵⁶

In the syndicated system of the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA), founded in 1948, what was best for business was defined by the clout of the promoter within the NWA. For Black athletes, what was best for business was for them to be portrayed as ‘authentic’. However, that ‘authenticity’ was scripted by predominantly white, Southern promoters whose image of a Black character often harkened back to pre-reconstruction slavery and other minstrel-esque representations.⁵⁷ The pervasive racism of the Jim Crow South in the 1950s and 60s was alive and well among Southern wrestling fans and promoters who had grown up in a segregated world.

⁵⁵ KenTerminatedbyDQ, “Kamala Shoot Interview”; Doug Asheville, *It’s Good to be King...Sometimes: Jerry “The King” Lawler* (New York: World Wrestling Entertainment Books, 2002).

⁵⁶ KenTerminatedbyDQ, “Kamala Shoot Interview”

⁵⁷ Karen Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race: Black Performers in Turn of the Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

Vince McMahon Jr., a native of North Carolina, grew up in conditions that would continue the legacy of minstrel portrayals being acceptable in professional wrestling⁵⁸.

How does this notion of the minstrel being ‘authentic’ affect the social agency of Black athletes in professional wrestling? To answer this, this chapter will utilize case studies of Black wrestlers to define the historic evolution between professional wrestling and its relationship to race, authenticity and double consciousness. Using commodified racism and racial common sense as theoretical lenses to analyze these case studies, this chapter evaluates the effect on the internal social culture of wrestling, as well as its consequences for the personal lives of Black wrestlers facing these two very distinct but related forms of racism. The careers of Bobo Brazil, “Special Delivery” Jones, the Junkyard Dog, New Jack, Kamala James Harris, and Booker T. are relevant case studies for understanding the complex negotiations faced by Black wrestlers with their own internal sense of identity, and the powerful influence of commodified racism on their personal lives and careers.

Pro Wrestling Journeymen

Bobo Brazil and “Special Delivery” Jones were early to mid-twentieth century journeymen wrestlers who traveled around various territories as enhancement talent who would put white athletes over. ‘Putting someone over’ refers to a wrestling match in which the winner’s ‘skills’ are demonstrated in order to garner greater fan and audience support, boosting a wrestler’s fame and acclaim by pitting them against a well-established opponent who has already agreed to lose the match. At times, these can look like real back-and-forth matches, not all of them appearing as

⁵⁸ Shaun Asseal and Mike Mooneyham, *Sex, Lies and Headlocks: The Real Story of Vince McMahon and World Wrestling Entertainment* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004).

quickly-won squash matches, in order to make it look like the winner has had to face a great trial and has successfully overcome it. In the book *The Squared Circle*, “Special Delivery” Jones was defined as a solid enhancement talent whose skill and ability were never considered for the main event but were used to enhance the quality and maintain the believability of even the quickest of squash matches.⁵⁹

“Special Delivery” Jones was given several character gimmicks in the WWF which played to a racialized caricature of an overtly hypersexualized Black man whose purpose was to comedically entice fans into watching the product while throwing the match to white stars like King Kong Bundy at *Wrestlemania 1*.⁶⁰ The WWE used Jones’ status as enhancement talent to memorialize him by emphasizing the fact that his match with Bundy was the shortest recorded match in *Wrestlemania* history at only 9 seconds in length. By doing this, the WWE stripped Jones of his athletic capacity as a performer and placed commodifiable value in his comedic image. In a photo compilation at WWE.com created in order to memorialize Jones after his death, Jones is depicted wearing supposedly traditional African garb while carrying a set of bongo drums and maracas.⁶¹ This photo in particular can be read as an attempt to provide Jones with a gimmick in order to place him in the upper tier for enhancement talent during the 1980s while also serving to racialize and marginalize his athletic contributions by playing to a simplified and inaccurate version of African culture. Under the principles of commonsense racism, Jones is categorized as entertaining enhancement talent who contributed to the pageantry of the show instead of being positioned as a serious contender for winning a title.

⁵⁹ David Shoemaker, *Squared Circle: Life, Death, and Professional Wrestling* (New York: Gotham Books, 2013), 110.

⁶⁰ Shoemaker, *Squared Circle*, 104.

⁶¹ ““Special Delivery” Jones Photos,” WWE.com, accessed June 2022, <https://www.wwe.com/inside/news/articlephotos/sdjonesphotos#fid-8481836>.

A quote from *The Squared Circle* demonstrates why racialized enhancement talent was never used to any great significance in promotions during the days of the territories: “When you consider the recent history of African American wrestlers in pro wrestling, to simplify a performer’s character to his race isn’t as offensive as what’s come when promoters try to give Black wrestlers personas with more, shall we say, idiosyncrasy.”⁶² For these African American ‘jobbers’ or ‘journeymen’ they were more often than not placed in a gimmick that would conform to an exaggerated caricature of Blackness that did not demonstrate their athletic ability or ability as a performer in its purest form. Instead, the use of the Black athlete in the early formation of the territories was designed to position the athlete as a one-dimensional character with athletic abilities whose role placed him on the under-to-mid-card with the most notable exception being Bobo Brazil whose world championship reign was never formally acknowledged by the NWA.⁶³

Brazil’s success as a journeyman turned mid-carder was a reflection of the growing American desire to see racial diversity in programming through the late 1960s, coinciding with the growth and prominence of the Civil Rights movement. Brazil, however, was still relegated to short term reigns as a mid-card level champion with few world title reigns, neither of which were a matter of record in their time. In a feud between Brazil and white wrestler Bobby Colt in Ohio in November of 1982, Bobby Colt further emphasizes the racialized nature of Brazil’s gimmick in professional wrestling by not only referring to Brazil as “boy” but also mocking the champion with the statement: “You think your head’s hard? It’s hard because you don’t have anything in it,

⁶² Shoemaker, *Squared Circle*, 117.

⁶³ Shoemaker, 114.

Brazil.”⁶⁴ This emphasis on Brazil’s “hard head” speaks to 19th ce phrenology which racialized African Americans as having thicker bone density and different skull shape to white Europeans. Colt’s racist remarks lean further into these 19th ce tropes by suggesting that Brazil is unable to outwit his opponent due to his mental deficiencies and brutish physique.

In a Hall of Fame package by the WWF, Brazil’s NWA title reigns are not acknowledged in any way. Instead, the compilation overemphasizes the supposedly devastating nature of Brazil’s finishing maneuver, the “Coco Butt.” During this compilation, Brazil is often depicted dancing back and forth before delivering his finishing maneuver on opponents. The commentary over the compilation is sensationalist and reductive, almost lending itself to a satirical tone that reduces Brazil’s accomplishments to those of an “entertainer” whose only contributions were to lean into stereotyped associations with African Americans as thick-skulled and prone to minstrel-like dancing. However, many promoters see his elevation to legendary status in the industry as a sign of progression on discourses of race in North America.⁶⁵ Looking back at Brazil’s portrayal in promotional materials and in his gimmicks, his overt racialization is extremely palpable.

Brazil’s role inside the ring was not the only role in the wrestling industry in which he fell into a position of quiet subservience. In 1962, Brazil won the WWF World Heavyweight Championship but the storyline that promoters crafted for him dictated that Brazil not acknowledge his win due to an ‘accidental’ groin-shot. Wrestling promoters omitted his championship win in later promotions and Brazil never felt inclined to address his marginalized position as champion or the racist implications that came with that omission. However, the

⁶⁴ BobUrbanVideo, “Bobo Brazil - BobUrbanVideo,” YouTube.com, April 9, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_EyXlzS487U

⁶⁵ Tim Hornbaker, *Capitol Revolution: The Rise of the McMahon Wrestling Empire* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2014).

internal politics of the locker room undoubtedly forced Brazil into a position where he simply had to accept that he would not be acknowledged as the face of the NWA and that the locker room politics and systemic racism faced by Brazil and others, would make the significance of his dedication less in the minds of promoters than that of his white compatriots.

Wrestling scholars Scott Beekman⁶⁶ and Tim Hornbaker⁶⁷ acknowledge the racism that surrounded Bobo Brazil and his title reigns. These are the only sources that note Brazil's contributions and accomplishments in professional wrestling and acknowledge the satirical and racist delivery of his gimmick, which Beekman described as a twentieth century minstrel act.⁶⁸ Hornbaker notes that this approach to Brazil was a part of the 1960s depiction of race and professional wrestling at the time. Brazil's world title reign was nullified by his satirical characterization and as a result of his legendary satirical status. His athletic and career accomplishments were eclipsed by the racial undertones and the problematic history of his gimmick in the minds of modern fans.

Living Cartoon or Black Superhero?

In the earliest histories of traditional professional wrestling, Black athletes were separated from white athletes on wrestling circuits in order to reduce the potential for audience volatility – particularly in the Southern United States where racism was the most culturally and socially pervasive⁶⁹. Even if a Black performer possessed drawing power in the early twentieth century,

⁶⁶ Beekman, *Ringside*.

⁶⁷ Tim Hornbaker, *Death of the Territories: Expansion, Betrayal and the War that Changed Pro Wrestling Forever* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2018).

⁶⁸ Beekman, *Ringside*.

⁶⁹ Nicolas Porter, "Professional Wrestling in the United States, 1877-1920," (PhD Dissertation, Saint Louis University, 2018); Beekman, *Ringside*.

they would never attain championship gold due to promoters viewing them as a cartoonish side piece whose impact on the business was negligible at best. At the NWA's inception in 1949, affiliated promoters such as Vince McMahon Sr. would use very few Black stars to sell the business to fans but instead would focus on white athletes like Buddy Rogers and ethnically European athletes like Bruno Sanmartino to define their business' image.

Unlike his father, Vince McMahon Jr. utilized Black athletes such as the Junkyard Dog, however their inclusion was based on their entertainment value. McMahon Jr.'s approach to incorporating Black performers hearkens back to the minstrel tradition in American entertainment. The negotiation with commodified and common sense racism amongst African American performers does not begin with professional wrestling. Rather, it is connected to a larger history of systemic racism that is tied to the dramatic arts and sports since as early as the 19th century with performances of Black minstrelsy.⁷⁰ The relationship between minstrelsy and wrestling begins in the 19th century with each act used to showcase white conceptions of Blackness. For Black minstrels, the negotiation with internalized racism and the imperative to conduct profit-seeking activities produced similar anxieties and internal conflicts to that of their wrestling counterparts. In the graphic novel *A Revolution in Three Acts*, the career of early 20th century entertainer Bert Williams and his internal struggle to negotiate between an authentic Black identity and the racially oppressive caricatures he performed in pursuit of fame parallels the experiences of the Junkyard Dog, New Jack and other Black professional wrestlers.⁷¹

Bill Watts, the promoter who discovered Sylvester Ritter and turned him into the Junkyard Dog character, developed many of the overtly racist features displayed by the Junkyard Dog in

⁷⁰ Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race*.

⁷¹ David Hajdu and John Carey, *A Revolution in Three Acts: The Radical Vaudeville of Bert Williams, Eva Tanguay, and Julian Eltinge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

later WWF matches and promos. While journalist and wrestling fan Greg Klein sees the Junkyard Dog's inclusion in wrestling as largely racially progressive,⁷² it is notable that Ritter, like his Black contemporaries, was never given the opportunity to demonstrate athletic or wrestling skill when performing in matches. Instead, he played into the trope of the entertaining minstrel who dances around the ring, growling like a dog and performing rolling headbutts on his opponents as finishing moves. Professional wrestler, Greg "The Hammer" Valentine, one of Ritter's white coworkers, describes their encounter at *Wrestlemania 1*: "So they put Junkyard Dog in there and he was a great performer and everything, but he wasn't a "wrestler wrestler" like I was, or Tito, you know holds and all this. It was kind of a lot of the gimmick stuff but he was over and, you know, he'd get down on his legs and, like a dog, he'd get down on his knees and charge you with a headbutt."⁷³

Valentine distinguishes wrestlers from entertainers, noting that the audience drawing power and fan engagement was not indicative of an athletic performance and should be regarded as less valuable to what made the *Wrestlemania* pay-per-view successful. Valentine's statements dehumanize and invalidate Ritter's participation as an athlete, locating his value as simply a source of entertainment that exists alongside real (white) athletes. The third chapter of this thesis analyzes how this *Wrestlemania 1* match has been immortalized for audiences through the video game *Legends of Wrestlemania* as a moment of triumph to "relive" in the Junkyard Dog's career, stripping the event of its links to a problematic, highly racialized context.

⁷² Greg Klein, *The King of New Orleans: How The Junkyard Dog Became Professional Wrestling's First Black Superhero* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2012).

⁷³ Title Match Wrestling, "Greg Valentine - How Junkyard Dog Was in Real Life," YouTube.com, April 20, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cOM4rWpIDn0>

While Valentine's statement reveals how Ritter's wrestling persona placed him in a position of inferiority to many of his white contemporaries, wrestling fan and journalist Greg Klein tries to soften and idealize Junkyard Dog's presence in mid-twentieth century wrestling. He romanticizes Junkyard Dog's inclusion in Southern promotions as a period of racial integration and acceptance, alledging an increased number of Black fans in the audience for Junkyard Dog's performances.⁷⁴ Klein's position reinforces the myth that promoter Bill Watts actively perpetuated and attempted to entrench: the idea of Mid-South wrestling as a post-racial utopia for Black wrestlers like the Junkyard Dog to find success and prosperity.

Watts was notorious for creating highly racially charged storylines and matches, for example Junkyard Dog played a masked character known as "Stagger Lee" which was based on a folktale about an African American who would kill white stagecoach owners in New Orleans. Watts used this as a revenge angle for the Junkyard Dog against Ted DiBiase in 1980, having Ritter don the black mask of Stagger Lee for several weeks.⁷⁵ As the Lloyd Price version of the "Stagger Lee"⁷⁶ folk song depicts, the main character is a Black man whose sole purpose in the song is revenge against a man named "Billy" to whom he owes a considerable gambling debt. Stagger Lee goes home, gets his gun, goes to the local bar, and—despite Billy begging him not to—he shoots Billy. This storyline was meant to parallel the dissolution of Junkyard Dog's friendship with Ted DiBiase, the two of them having featured in previous storylines that highlighted their closeness. The end of this friendship is meant to further the depths of Ritter's desire for revenge, justifying his rage and painting him as an angry Black stereotype. Bill Watts

⁷⁴ Klein, *The King of New Orleans*, 10.

⁷⁵ Klein, 93.

⁷⁶ "Lloyd Price - Stagger Lee Lyrics," Lyrics.com, accessed July 13, 2022, <https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/8303607/Lloyd+Price/Stagger+Lee>

attempted to carefully frame this storyline for audiences as a prominent white hero, Ted DiBiase, turning against a mythic Black hero and, consequently, against Black audiences as well.

In Bill Watts' book, *Cowboy and the Cross*, Bill Watts talks about seeking an African American star in order to foster the illusion of a racially progressive space in professional wrestling that would distinguish Midsouth Wrestling as an inclusive and forward-thinking brand. The Junkyard Dog was positioned as an American hero, not just a hero for African American fans but one who could stand for American values more broadly. Watts believed this would eliminate the need for an emphasis on race and racial division, smoothing over and homogenizing identity-based difference instead of highlighting, addressing and, ultimately, confronting racial conflict as something endemic to wrestling and Southern culture. As he stated: "Junkyard Dog wasn't just black. He was Mr. American. He was everybody and everybody's hero. He could talk the black vernacular, but he never made things racial."⁷⁷ Bill Watts' emphasis on using Junkyard Dog for his universal appeal and Americanness is a veiled attempt to broach the discussion of race without discussing it. Watts' created an atmosphere in which discussions of race could be broached in a pacified manner that suggested racial tensions could be eased simply by enjoying the Junkyard Dog's latest exploits and feuds. Racial tension and violence is romanticized and mythologized by using the Stagger Lee character to locate such conflicts within the early 20th century, thereby clearing space to depict the contemporary moment as free of such cultural hostilities.

Watts, however, emphasizes current day hostilities by describing the scenarios that the Junkyard Dog was faced with in wrestling storylines as "impossible," admiring the way that he

⁷⁷ "Cowboy" Bill Watts and Scott Williams, *The Cowboy and the Cross*, 113.

“was not letting a white man save a black . . . he always saved himself.”⁷⁸ Junkyard Dog is promoted here as an idealized form of a neoliberal, self-reliant Black man who requires no intervention or aid on the part of white people, and whom Black fans can look to and emulate. This idea entrenches itself in a common sense logic of neoliberal racism that presumes an automatic adoption and adoration of these traits, thereby increasing the marketability of this wrestling character to white and Black fans.

While the tone that promoters like Bill Watts adopted around topics of race in the 1980s was committed to “never making things racial,” while still employing racism to garner financial success and audience attention, this would shift in the 1990s. Wrestlers like New Jack embodied a more overt—and more overtly problematic—approach to race in in-ring performances and engagements with audiences. Rather than situating racial conflict as a thing of the past, New Jack would discuss contemporary moments of racial tension and confront white, Southern audiences with displays of performative violence and racially charged rhetoric intended to enrage the audience and inflame racial tensions. Jerome Young, who played the wrestling persona New Jack, has explained that his act was intended to capitalize upon the racism in white fans present in the audience. New Jack’s persona was that of a south-central Los Angeles gangster and many of his matches involved extremely risky falls, the use of weapons such as tasers and bricks, and cutting his opponents’ faces, as described in *The Dark Side of the Ring* episode.⁷⁹

In his autobiography, Young describes a conversation with white promoter of Smoky Mountain Wrestling, Jim Cornette, who approached New Jack and his tag team partner Mustafa

⁷⁸ Shaun Asseal and Mike Mooneyham, *Sex, Lies and Headlocks*, 71.

⁷⁹ VICE TV, “The Most Feared Wrestler of All Time | DARK SIDE OF THE RING,” YouTube.com, March 23, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sHmU_6Hj5SM&t=21s

to propose an extension to their gimmick – “The Gangstas.”⁸⁰ During this exchange, Cornette stated, “I want you to be racist ... Anything you can say that’s racist, put it in a promo and say it.”⁸¹ Cornette intended for the team to come in as stereotypical Black heels, meant to occupy the storytelling role of villains, but putting a contemporary spin on it by evoking and channeling the social anxieties and tensions around racial divisions in the American South. As Young notes in his memoir, “This was early 1994, so everyone was way too familiar with the Rodney King riots that had knocked race relations back a bit and hurt a ton of people and businesses.”⁸² In order to exploit and profit off of this palpable pain, New Jack would follow Cornette’s advice to “cut a promo to make white people mad” and develop promos that would antagonize and bring to the surface the public vitriol of Southern audiences. By his own admission, however, Young was not just seeking to rile white audience members, claiming, “I don’t just want to make white people mad; I want to make *everybody* mad.”⁸³ In a Smoky Mountain Wrestling promo, he would menace the audience and fellow wrestlers with the threat of pouring gasoline on them and setting them on fire, insulting the crowd as a collection of “rednecks, coal miners, chicken farmers and Klansmen,” and culminating in a “special shout out to my homeboy O. J. Simpson” whom he praised for murdering two white people.⁸⁴ Although wrestling storylines frequently evoke audience hatred toward heel characters, New Jack’s early 90s performances were the first time that overt discussions of race in wrestling played such a pivotal role in casting a Black wrestler as a villain.

⁸⁰ New Jack and Jason Norman, *New Jack: Memoir of a Pro Wrestling Extremist* (North Carolina: McFarland, 2020), 39.

⁸¹ New Jack and Jason Norman, *New Jack*, 38.

⁸² Jack and Norman, 39.

⁸³ Jack and Norman, 40.

⁸⁴ Jack and Norman, 41.

Despite the potential for New Jack's initial promos in Smoky Mountain Wrestling to evoke sentiments of Black solidarity against pervasive white supremacy and racism, Young's promo choices demonstrate his desire to highlight social struggles while negating any push for social change. As Young explains, he was concerned that Black communities might have "gotten behind us, gotten all radicalized"⁸⁵ and therefore he also took to disparaging Civil Rights icons like Martin Luther King Jr. and Medger Evers, and insulting Black wrestling fans as welfare recipients. This is clearly emblematic of commodified racism, as New Jack is using the controversy surrounding his promos to strengthen the visibility and exposure of his gimmick to U.S. and global audiences despite the moral implications of exploiting racial tensions for profit.

Young's statements also point to a deep-seated internalized racism that defines the direction of his gimmick and his willingness to commodify and exploit tensions among audiences and members of his own community. There is some evidence to suggest that Young is cogent of his own internal conflicts surrounding his gimmick, as he describes audiences' hateful reactions towards him outside of the arena, stating, "I got some sad reminders that my rants against racism still had some justification."⁸⁶ He has stated that he feels the position of the New Jack character is iconic, but the notion of icon-status is driven by an attempt to maintain cultural relevance. Unlike other wrestlers, he willingly admits that his gimmick is the source of his success and not his prowess as a wrestler.⁸⁷ The New Jack character stands as an example of how self-directed commodification could have been used to solicit or signal Black solidarity within a wrestling gimmick but, sadly, was used to uphold and validate a persistent racial common sense within wrestling.

⁸⁵ Jack and Norman, 42.

⁸⁶ Jack and Norman, 46.

⁸⁷ Jack and Norman, 43.

By the end of the 1990s, audiences and promoters were beginning to question New Jack's extreme displays of racism and violence which contributed to the decline of his drawing power and the number of bookings he made each year.⁸⁸ He had become known as an unmanageable talent who would violently attack fans and fellow wrestlers.⁸⁹ As a result of the infamy that had once propelled his career, New Jack became a cautionary tale as opposed to a trendsetter in using inflammatory rhetoric and weapons to incite and inflame audiences. Further, the wear and tear of years of extreme wrestling, injurious stunts, and intense bingeing on drugs and alcohol left New Jack with a severely weakened physique and permanent neurological problems.⁹⁰ As a result, New Jack never received another critical push in his career and was relegated to falling into early retirement. Even after his death in 2021 as he was eulogised by former ECW owner and current WWE personality Paul Heyman, New Jack's footage could not be shown as part of a memorial package due to its graphic and highly polarising nature. In Heyman's words, "To be blunt, we can't show you a lot of footage of New Jack because he was the most non-PG performer in sports entertainment history because New Jack was a gangsta."⁹¹

Jerome Young's story is one of resignation and struggle for autonomy that reflects the historic struggles of Black performers like Bert Williams and other early Black actors and entertainers who were placed into situations that limited their capacity to articulate an authentic cultural or self-defined identity unburdened by the overwhelming influence of commodified racism. Their success was dictated by white promoters and fans who defined their public

⁸⁸ Thom Loverro, *The Rise and Fall of ECW: Extreme Championship Wrestling* (New York: Pocket Books, 2006).

⁸⁹ VICE TV, "The Most Feared Wrestler of All Time | DARK SIDE OF THE RING."

⁹⁰ VICE TV, "The Most Feared Wrestler of All Time | DARK SIDE OF THE RING."

⁹¹ WWE, "Paul Heyman pays tribute to ECW's New Jack," YouTube.com, May 15, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GVZqv7JOFvc>

personas through racist gimmicks which, by the 21st century, mainstream wrestling networks found too violent and racially charged to show.

Booker T. – A Modern Representation of A Racialized Cartoon Gimmick or a Mark of Progress?

Booker T. is an example of another professional wrestler whose career success was defined by his ability to embrace his highly racialized blacksploitation gimmick of the 1990s with success in organizations like WCW, WWE, and TNA. Booker T. has reached incredible heights in an industry dominated by white male performers during the late 20th century.⁹² Booker T.'s earliest exposure in mainstream wrestling fandom, however, saw him and his brother positioned as an African slave tag team who would come into the ring attached to each other by chains.⁹³ Booker T. and his brother quickly rebuked this idea and Booker even acknowledged the frustration he felt with WCW promoter Bill Watts and booker Dusty Rhodes for having suggested such a highly racialized gimmick.⁹⁴ Again, commodified and common sense racism are at work in undermining the autonomy of an African American wrestler and circumscribing the ways in which fans are meant to receive a Black athlete. Booker would go on to suggest a reimagining of the tag team gimmick:

Ever since we were kids, we loved the campy Blaxploitation films of the seventies like *Shaft* and *Super Fly*. ‘Dusty, what do you think of Harlem Heat? Instead of a couple of chained-down slaves, we come out as a couple of badasses from Harlem?’ It barely escaped my mouth before he pointed at us and said, ‘That’s it! Harlem Heat. I love it. The badasses from 110th Street!’ Lash and I laughed, and I said my favorite line from *Shaft*:

⁹² Booker T. Huffman and Andrew William Wright, *Booker T: My Rise to Wrestling Royalty* (Aurora: Medallion Press, Inc., 2015).

⁹³ Booker T. Huffman and Andrew William Wright, *Booker T. From Prison to Promise: Life Before the Squared Circle* (Aurora: Medallion Press Inc., 2012).

⁹⁴ Huffman and Wright, *My Rise*, 19.

‘Can you dig it, sucka?’ Little did I know those five words would stick with me for the rest of my life.⁹⁵

Unlike the previous case studies of New Jack and the Junkyard Dog, Booker T. carefully mediated and curated how his racialized gimmick was presented in order to maintain an illusion of post-racial neutrality toward ideas of Blackness. Bonilla-Silva would characterize Booker T’s rationalization of his gimmick’s presentation as emblematic of 90s post-racial thinking which masked racist content and ideas by presuming their universality and harmlessness.⁹⁶ While appearing before audiences as slaves would draw too openly on a painful, racist history, styling a gimmick based on Blacksploitation films could be presented as playful, neutral, and simply entertaining. Booker T. has claimed on his podcast “Reality of Wrestling”⁹⁷ that 20th century fans view him as a pioneer for strong Black representation but as we will see in Chapter 3 when we look at fan forums, this presumption may be false.

Booker T. would succumb to his struggle with commodified and common sense racism that was faced by his contemporaries and Black performers of the past in the industry. Using his Blacksploitation gimmick throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s, Booker received acclaim and was elevated to the status of main event talent, advancing to receive five world title reigns through WCW and becoming one of the most recognized faces of wrestling at the turn of the century. However, in early 2003, Booker would find himself in a controversial storyline with Triple H in which Booker was positioned as the number one contender for Triple H’s world title after a series of successive wins leading up to late March before *Wrestlemania XIX*. On the WWE’s weekly wrestling show, RAW, on March 3rd, 2003 before *Wrestlemania XIX*, Booker

⁹⁵ Huffman and Wright, *My Rise*, 19.

⁹⁶ Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*, 31.

⁹⁷ “Reality of Wrestling,” accessed July 12, 2021, <https://www.realityofwrestling.com/category/podcast/>

discussed his excitement for the upcoming match and pledged to the audience that he would win the title. After making that statement, he was interrupted by a counter promo from Triple H who said:

Booker, I think you are a little bit confused about your role in life here. I think you are a little bit confused. See Booker, you're going to get to go to *Wrestlemania* but see the fact is Booker, somebody like you, doesn't get to be a World Champion. See, people like you don't deserve it. That is reserved for people like me. See Book, that is where the confusion is. You are not here to be a competitor. You are here to be an entertainer, that's what you do, you entertain people. Hell you entertain me all the time. Go ahead, Book, why don't you entertain? Go ahead, do a little dance for me, Book.⁹⁸

Booker T.'s positioning as a non-competitive entity during Triple H's promo is an example of how WWE continued, even in the early 2000s, to categorize Black competitors as entertaining, cartoonish, and minstrel-esque rather than real athletes. The commodification of Booker T. as a racialized source of entertainment for audiences is something that Booker T. himself vehemently denies when discussing the cultural legacy of the *Wrestlemania XIX* storyline. Instead, Booker T. focuses on the capital accumulated and the significance of being at *Wrestlemania* and competing for the world title. In response to questions about his racialization in that storyline, Booker T. has stated, "I got paid more money for that match than I got paid for any match in my life."⁹⁹ This statement signals a stubborn acceptance of the trade-off between commodified racism and financial autonomy. Booker T. reinforces the idea that Black performers of the 20th century feel resigned to discuss the economic autonomy and acclaim created by particular events or storylines rather than discussing the racism and trauma at the core of their experience in the wrestling industry.

⁹⁸ DoubleZWWWE, "Triple H Cuts THAT Promo on Booker T | March 3, 2003 Monday Night Raw" YouTube.com, Feb 12, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=50yDO_iXBG0

⁹⁹ "Booker T clears the air about "racial issue" with Triple H and WWE," sportskeeda.com, accessed July 3, 2021, <https://www.sportskeeda.com/wwe/news-booker-t-clears-air-racial-issue-triple-h-wwe>.

The WWE goes to great pains to acknowledge the majority of Booker T.'s career accomplishments in the WWE, but often omits or downplays the significance of the *Wrestlemania XIX* storyline in video compilations and packages. This can be read as a means of removing their inherent complicity as a company in reinforcing traditionally racist stereotypes in a twenty first century storyline, and by proxy, erasing the moment as a stain that contradicts the modern image of inclusivity and diversity which the WWE is now attempting to cultivate in the minds of modern wrestling fans.

Conclusion: The Modern Landscape of Race and Professional Wrestling – Has Wrestling Become More Progressive?

This chapter has addressed a central tension between profit-seeking, white promoters and racialized professional wrestlers who struggle to attain an autonomous sense of identity while maintaining economic and professional viability by leaning into racist gimmicks and storylines in order to gain acclaim and continued financial autonomy in the process. The principles of commodified and common sense racism govern the logic of white promoters who view Black athletes as a commodifiable human asset to be freely exploited as they are perceived as willing participants with a desire to support the business and their colleagues. Promoters seize upon this dynamic to maximize profit at the expense of human dignity and autonomy for these men and women. Due to its links to minstrelsy, commodification of Black bodies in American entertainment has been a common sense logic since the birth of minstrelsy in the mid-19th century. Professional wrestling of the 20th century continued this exploitative tradition, vacillating between expressions of overt and covert racism as illustrated by the examples of The Junkyard Dog and New Jack. As seen in promoter Bill Watts' insistence on a post-racial

wrestling community and in the veiled language of colleagues like Greg Valentine, The Junkyard Dog was positioned as an inferior wrestler without overt reference to race. He was established as an entertainer with universal appeal who could unify audiences. New Jack, on the other hand, was designed to capitalize on the racist vitriol of the 1990s and the concept of his gimmick emerged directly from the L.A. race riots. The New Jack gimmick perpetuated overt, highly racialized stereotypes in order to profit off of audiences' violent and enraged reactions to racial provocations. Both of these gimmicks typify profit-seeking measures by white promoters who are able to justify racist representations by appealing to a logic of good business and harmless, pacified entertainment for all.

Though Booker T. shows that Black wrestlers have a certain degree of agency in resisting overtly racist depictions like slavery, he nonetheless embraces a highly racializing mode of performance by leaning into the linguistic and performative aspects of Blacksploitation. Drawing on this legacy of Black exploitation in film, promoters are able to pass this content off as entertainment devoid of social commentary or significance to broader discourses of race in America. From the perspective of many Black wrestlers, however, there is a confrontation with moments of racism that challenges their approach to racial tensions outside of professional wrestling. As in the example of Kamala James Harris who used to fight racists in his hometown but came to embrace the racist Kamala gimmick, Black wrestlers must contend with the dichotomy of reinforcing racial stereotypes and exerting personal and economic autonomy.

The next chapter deals with how fan communities position themselves in online wrestling fandom, examining how fans negotiate and discuss issues of race within wrestling, and analyzing their perceptions of wrestling's historic moments and gimmicks as instances of racial

exploitation. This analysis seeks to determine to what extent these communities disrupt or reinforce racist traditions within wrestling.

In conclusion, does the history of professional wrestling articulate a facet for change when considering the history of civil rights and Black identity in sports more broadly? The answer, regardless of how future historiographies develop around professional wrestling, is that the autonomy of Black athletes will always be up for debate in an industry that refuses to let go of the recycling of problematic ideas which are framed as modern to new audiences and ultimately it is tough to measure a history that perpetually erases its prior existence in order to maximize profit and conform to acceptable ideas of each decade making the Black athlete's strength and articulation of autonomy each time more difficult but no less profound. That is why when considering the study of sports business, social, or civil rights history, we must consider divisive properties like professional wrestling as they demonstrate humanity's capacity for wilful blindness and propensions for erasing the past. The third chapter will reconcile these problematic representations and their legacies in black-led fan spaces and other wrestling media of the twenty-first century.

Chapter 3

Introduction

This chapter provides an analysis of fan relationships to commodified racism in online fan spaces and how wrestling fans negotiate with historic and contemporary moments of racism in professional wrestling. Fan complicity in the celebration and popularity of these racist moments in the analyzed context of online dialogue provides a formative connection between fans and their complex relationships with wrestling personalities and their participation in racist moments.

In addition, this chapter assesses how wrestling fans use online Third Spaces to discuss the nature of racism in professional wrestling and as a part of American popular culture more broadly.

When defining how Third Space is used as a framework in this chapter, we will discuss its modern application in online fan spaces and how it accurately assesses the complexity of the relationship between fans and highly racialized performers in and outside of these communities.¹⁰⁰ Modern fan relationships with professional wrestlers are complex because fans feel that they have been given the right to have personal access to professional wrestlers due to continued consumption and exposure to these performers on television, at live events, and through interactive merchandising such as video games. With the advent of social media, fans/consumers are able to impose themselves and their desire for a greater connection upon performers. It is in this delicate dichotomy between admiration and aggression where issues of common sense and commodified racism come to shape not only the social patterns of fan communities but also the personal lives and careers of Black professional wrestlers.

Fan engagement with racist moments in professional wrestling in these online Third Spaces forces a contest between opposing factions who both seek to support separate, idealized versions of what wrestling should be. This contestation can have an incremental effect on recapitulating contemporary expressions and articulations of race in the presentation and execution of professional wrestling gimmicks and storylines. While some fans online identify and criticize racist exploitation in wrestling, many wrestling fans dismiss these concerns as

¹⁰⁰ Ray Oldenburg, *The great good place: Cafes, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons, and other hangouts at the heart of a community* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1989).

problems brought about because “snowflakes” are too sensitive and falsely problematize content that is simply entertaining. Comments of this nature tend to value nostalgia over social change.

This chapter analyzes the recreation of racist storylines and key moments in the careers of Black professional wrestlers in video games and the ways that fans relive and participate in this racist exploitation as they play through. The complicity of fans in reproducing racism in wrestling will be discussed, but this chapter will also analyze moments of resistance amongst fans who problematize common sense racism, linking it to broader issues in contemporary American culture. The fan discourse that this chapter analyzes stems from commentary on 1980s to early 2000s footage of professional wrestling on YouTube, as well as fan commentary on more recent shoot interviews and podcasts with professional wrestling legends.

Defining Third Space Theory

Homi K. Bhabha defines Third Space as “the intervention of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code.”¹⁰¹ Homi K. Bhabha’s application of Third Space traditionally applies to informal political communities and spaces, looking at how the members of these spaces and communities negotiate with polarizing ideologies and points of political and cultural division within westernized societies. Bhabha problematizes how actors within these spaces attempt to produce points of reconciliation or negotiation politically through individual and group engagement in social settings.

¹⁰¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 54.

This chapter treats wrestling fandom online as a Third Space in order to understand the way that these informal political and cultural communities negotiate ideas of race and display very polarized positions on the topics of race and representation in America. Third Space theory provides a framework through which to analyze fan interactions and to treat them as significant sites of political expression. Traditionally, wrestling fans have been labeled as passive consumers by wrestling scholars.¹⁰² By using Third Space, this paper problematizes the activity and engagement of fans, and assesses fans' capacities to shape the direction of a cultural commodity over time through the community's influence. Because Third Space highlights contestation within informal political communities, it points to divisions within fan communities along lines of difference and identity, allowing a consideration of fan positionality and how that shapes interactions with cultural objects.

Wrestling Video Games - Why do they Matter When Talking about Representation, Capitalism, and Race?

For 21st century fans of professional wrestling, video games are a way of re-living treasured moments in wrestling's history and reshaping the narratives and futures of their favorite performers through an often carefully historically curated "career mode," which allows a player to chronologically play through the events and critical moments in a wrestling star's career. When discussing professional wrestling, video games provide an added layer when talking about race and commodification. As the player, you are able to physically embody your favorite wrestler and carry out actions on their behalf in a digital world, entirely subject to the

¹⁰² John Fiske, *Television culture: popular pleasure and politics* (New York: Routledge, 1987).

limitations set out by the developer and the conditional freedom they provide to you as the player.

Like with most video games, video games based on professional wrestling are crafted with a concerted effort to remove offensive or highly problematic moments from the real life careers of performers and athletes in order to create a safe and welcoming environment in which all players can participate. For the Black wrestlers being depicted in these historic moments, the common sense and commodified racism that shaped those events do not merely disappear with the stroke of a keyboard but are reinforced and recreated in a digitized and playable form. As a result of highly ahistorical and problematic omissions from the digitized video game world of professional wrestling, players can unconsciously replicate moments of violence and racialization against Black performers without being fully aware of the history and pain behind the selected matches and storylines that they have a hand in bringing life to once again.

An example of this ahistoricism is the wrestler Mark Henry who was billed in his early wrestling career as “Sexual Chocolate” but when recreating his late-90s persona for the game *WWE 13*, publisher THQ chose not to feature this early gimmick.¹⁰³ They depicted him in-game in standard weightlifter garb without making reference to his previous persona. The highly racialized depiction of a Black performer as a sexual deviant was not a success among wrestling fans during the storyline’s duration. When the storyline originally aired, WWE faced backlash from fans and the NAACP for this highly sexualized and racialized portrayal.¹⁰⁴ When modern

¹⁰³ Aaron Weiss, “The Ballad of Sexual Chocolate: The Tale Of Mark Henry,” Bleacher Report, March 25, 2009, <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/144809-the-ballad-of-sexual-chocolate-the-tale-of-mark-henry>

¹⁰⁴ Top Wrestling Shoots, “Mark Henry shoots on racism and pranks in WWE,” YouTube.com, July 13, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_v4kbOc_3k

wrestling fans play through Henry's early career in-game, they are, in essence, creating a less controversial and overtly racialized version of Henry's career.

Notably, however, Henry's depiction as a Black nationalist in the Nation of Domination faction is reproduced in *WWE 13* as part of a playable history that is depicted through a common sense racist lens that justifies the existence of racist content based on its popularity. The "Sexual Chocolate" gimmick which was critically panned and unpopular with fans was not a source of successfully commodified history and was therefore omitted. The Nation of Domination, however, was a group that garnered fan support and critical acclaim in the 1990s by featuring an all Black heel faction that could play on 1990s anxieties around race wars and fears of aggressive Black men without alienating the audience.¹⁰⁵ As players complete storylines in *WWE 13*, they play through a sanitized and decontextualized version of the conflict between white, babyface Steve Austin and the Nation of Domination faction led by Ron Simmons and The Rock. It allows the WWE to appear to have conscientiously rethought their racist past when in fact, they have only removed those racist moments that were not economically justifiable.

Another example of wrestling video games carefully revising the racist history of wrestling is depicted in a promotional compilation for *Smackdown: Here Comes the Pain* which features the *Wrestlemania XIX* match between Booker T and Triple H from 2003.¹⁰⁶ The promotion surrounding the *Wrestlemania* match is not depicted in the commercial for the video game despite its significance to the game's storyline and the match's inclusion in the promotional material for the game. Booker T and Triple H had an ongoing rivalry throughout March of 2003

¹⁰⁵ Grilling JR, "Grilling JR #95: Ron Simmons," YouTube.com, Feb 4, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ULL20e-NTzQ>

¹⁰⁶ Gamefools, "Smackdown! Here Comes The Pain Ultimate Trailer," YouTube.com, Dec 7, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCqLMXPBNbY&t=97s>

that, as explained in chapter 2, was highly racially fraught and capitalized on longstanding traditions in wrestling that position Black performers as mere entertainers, not serious wrestlers. By using that rivalry as a means of advertising the game without depicting the racist rhetoric surrounding it, they position the match as a source of playable entertainment that appears to have no contentious context when viewed by the player. In purchasing and playing games like *Smackdown: Here Comes the Pain* and *WWE 13*, the player participates in recommodifying a racist moment in a decontextualized form.

Fan Commentary on Wrestling Podcasts, Shoot Interviews and Promotional Footage

As this paper analyzed in Chapter 2, wrestlers of the twentieth century reconciled their participation in racist moments by justifying their actions due to the economic reward of an attention-grabbing performance. Wrestling fans of the twenty-first century who view archived footage of those racist moments in wrestling's history on YouTube or listen to the podcasts of wrestling legends like Jim Cornette, employ a similar logic when justifying their continued viewing and support of these storylines and individual gimmicks. Jim Cornette is a prominent wrestling manager and commentator on twentieth century wrestling. He was a promoter who was instrumental in shaping the careers of wrestlers such as New Jack, the tag team The Midnight Express, and many other performers. Cornette has been involved in many controversial storylines over the years; as discussed in Chapter 2, his involvement in the creation of the New Jack gimmick for Jerome Young was a highly profitable moment for Cornette that relied on fueling racial tensions and commodifying the modern stereotype of the angry, Black gangster.

In 2019, Cornette was embroiled in yet another controversy involving race when commentating for the wrestling studio show *NWA Power*. Describing the white wrestler Trevor

Murdoch, Cornette stated, “Murdoch is so tough he could strap a bucket of fried chicken on his back and ride a motor scooter across Ethiopia.”¹⁰⁷ He justified his statement as a non-racist commentary on starvation in an attempt to downplay the uproar online that arose in response to his so-called joke. Fans of Cornette’s podcast would attempt to support Cornette’s justification, claiming that Cornette created a post-racial environment in wrestling through the use of highly racialized storylines and gimmicks, citing the example of the infamous 1994 New Jack promo that was discussed in Chapter 2, saying: “New Jack and Jim Cornette ended racism with racism in the 90's. Joke's [sic] are jokes, because it's funny.”¹⁰⁸ This comment typifies many of the fan reactions found on Cornette’s YouTube video about the scandal surrounding his racist statement. One comment points out that New Jack has described Cornette as racist, but replies to this comment attempt to discredit New Jack as unstable by using the example of New Jack violently stabbing a fellow wrestler in the ring.¹⁰⁹ By discrediting New Jack, Cornette’s fans attempt to nullify the social and cultural severity of the racism present in Cornette’s statement and his history in professional wrestling. Cornette would go on to mock the incident a year later in a subsequent podcast, garnering over four thousand positive reactions to his video on YouTube.¹¹⁰ This is an example of fans participating in the maintenance of a common sense logic in professional wrestling when discussing racist moments.

At times, fan justifications of racism in wrestling mirror statements made by Black wrestlers themselves regarding racism in their performances. Another comment on the Cornette

¹⁰⁷ Official Jim Cornette, “Jim Cornette on His Departure From The NWA,” YouTube.com, Nov 22, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rOvRmf_HYAU

¹⁰⁸ The Mighty Gooch, July 2020, comment on Official Jim Cornette, “Jim Cornette on His Departure From The NWA.”

¹⁰⁹ Anonamatron, July 2020, comment on Official Jim Cornette, “Jim Cornette on His Departure From The NWA.”

¹¹⁰ Official Jim Cornette, “Jim Cornette on His Departure.”

video asserts that Cornette is “a huge part of what has made this NWA reboot successful.”¹¹¹

This assertion attempts to reinforce the prevailing idea that racist controversies are permissible so long as they result in financial and popular success among wrestling fans. It echoes statements made by Black wrestlers such as Booker T who made similar comments about the racist *Wrestlemania XIX* feud with Triple H, claiming it was the most money he had ever made from a match.¹¹²

On Booker T’s *Reality of Wrestling* YouTube channel, Booker reflects on A&E’s *Biography* series that features an episode on Booker T’s wrestling career but omits the racially charged *Wrestlemania XIX* feud.¹¹³ Booker claims that it was not a significant enough moment in his career to justify its inclusion in the episode, but fan commentary under the video indicates that fans are willing to go beyond the wrestler’s analysis of the moment to discuss the racism present within the feud and its broader impacts on fans who viewed the content. One fan in particular, TheBlackSuper Saiyan, states, “you let a white man, writers at the WWE, Hunter talk to you like garbage...I’ll never forget the “people like you” lines..I was 12 years old and really felt infuriated and you did nothing about it..the guy bashed us as a race and as a whole and you did nothing..all for the sake of a job.”¹¹⁴ TheBlackSuper Saiyan’s comment emphasizes the political and personal impact of a storyline that denigrates and marginalizes a Black wrestler. It illustrates how fans can feel personally betrayed by those in entertainment who are meant to positively represent their race. TheBlackSuper Saiyan’s comments demonstrate an act of resistance to

¹¹¹ Jonathan Cilla, July 2020, comment on Official Jim Cornette, “Jim Cornette on His Departure From The NWA.”

¹¹² “Booker T clears the air about “racial issue” with Triple H and WWE.” sportskeeda.com.

¹¹³ Reality of Wrestling, “Booker T Addresses Triple H / WrestleMania Scenes Being “Cut Out” of A&E Documentary,” YouTube.com, May 11, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3huDmbj7SCo>

¹¹⁴ TheBlackSuper Saiyan, July 2021, comment on Reality of Wrestling, “Booker T Addresses Triple H / WrestleMania Scenes Being “Cut Out” of A&E Documentary.”

common sense racism, pushing against the idea that a job is worth portraying Black people in a negative light. While other comments under Booker T's video show that many fans embrace Booker T as a Black icon within modern professional wrestling, there is nonetheless evidence that fans are able to form perspectives on race in wrestling that counter the hegemonic discourse that maintains common sense racism stemming from promoters and Black wrestlers themselves.

The examples in this chapter provide an articulation of the complex relationship between fans, Black wrestlers, and the pervasive racism within the wrestling industry. Studying fans and their responses to wrestling content and personalities uncovers a link between the intricate world of professional wrestling and the boundaries of America's politics and cultures that is reflected in the ideological divisions between fans sharing a Third Space. As fan studies advances as a field and comes to embrace professional wrestling as a site of inquiry, it is hoped that the exchange between fans online and the wrestling industry can be more fully understood over time, bolstering the validity of fan studies, the study of professional wrestling, and their respective impacts on culture, society, politics, and race in the United States.

Conclusion

The study of professional wrestling and race-based commodification has provided a unique perspective on twentieth century US history and politics. This thesis has demonstrated the complex negotiations and challenges between Black wrestlers, promoters, and fans. Professional wrestling has been understudied as a valid site for observing the relationship between race, politics, and popular culture on a broader basis. The role of commodified racism and common sense thinking around race in twentieth century professional wrestling reflects the interconnection between external racial tensions and highly racialized performances. This work

also demonstrates the value of studying twenty-first century fans and their capacity to reinforce or challenge the pervasive culture of racism that shapes the cultural objects they enjoy and the fan communities they participate in. By studying prior scholarship in Chapter 1, I was able to analyze and contextualize the impact and disciplinary directions of the study of professional wrestling, and further advocate for the inclusion of history in broad discussions of popular culture. By analyzing autobiographical texts and other primary sources from professional wrestlers, I was able to clearly articulate the different modes of racist and common sense exploitation by a white-dominated industry that has forced twentieth century Black professional wrestlers to accept the commodification of racialized traits and caricatures in the pursuit of limited social and financial agency and independence. The analysis of twenty-first century fan interpretations of older wrestling footage and wrestling legends' perspectives reveals ongoing contestation and reinforcement of common sense racist values among modern online fan communities. The historic divisions and cultural contestations between race, identity and politics are mirrored in the history of highly racialized professional wrestling gimmicks of the twentieth century and the palpable and ongoing struggles of the racialized human beings behind those gimmicks who strive to gain financial autonomy and independence despite continuous gatekeeping by white promoters, fellow wrestlers, and wrestling fans.

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