

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: SEXUALITY, GENDER, AND THE  
PERFORMANCE OF WRESTLING FAN  
CULTURE

Jessica Lloyd Krennek, Doctor of Philosophy,  
2017

Dissertation directed by: Dr. Faedra Chatard Carpenter, School of  
Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies

This dissertation focuses on fan culture in the world of professional wrestling, specifically the perspectives and experiences of female and AFAB (assigned female at birth) non-binary fans<sup>1</sup>. The project explores broader themes about empowerment, female sexuality, and representation through the lens of fans of American professional wrestling, particularly World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE). The dissertation looks at the performance of self and the performance of fandom on social media sites (such as Tumblr, Twitter, and Instagram), during “live” wrestling events, as well as through fan fiction and other artistic expressions. In so doing, I explore

---

<sup>1</sup> LGBTQ+ Definitions, <http://www.transstudent.org/definitions> Accessed 25 May 2017.

various ideas about the ways that fans behave, interact, and connect with one another in a frequently male-dominated forum in order to grapple with larger questions about gender and performance in American society and history. I argue that non-male fans attempt to refigure the image of wrestling fan culture to include their own voices and their own presence through the use of social media and other virtual methods of connection and community-building.

SEXUALITY, GENDER, AND THE PERFORMANCE OF WRESTLING FAN  
CULTURE

by

Jessica Lloyd Krenek

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
2017

Advisory Committee:

Professor Faedra Chatard Carpenter, Chair  
Professor Laurie Frederik  
Professor Esther Kim Lee  
Professor Alexis Lothian  
Professor Emeritus Nancy Struna

© Copyright by  
Jessica Lloyd Krenek  
2017

## Dedication

For Tommy, who is now & always in my corner.



## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I wish to thank Dr. Faedra Chatard Carpenter, my dissertation chair, my advisor, and my constant cheerleader, who encouraged me to follow my passion and let me teach her children all about the Undertaker and his mythic urn. I am endlessly grateful for your guidance, your enthusiasm, and your kindness.

The members of my dissertation committee: Dr. Laurie Frederik, Dr. Esther Kim Lee, Dr. Alexis Lothian, and Dr. Nancy Struna. Your research and assistance has shaped this project from its inception, and I thank you for your support.

Though the University of Maryland's School of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies has many strengths, by far its greatest is the graduate students that it brings together. I am thankful for all of the truest friends that I have made over the course of this journey, but I would be remiss if I did not mention Christina Banalopoulou, Lis Fallica, Brittany Ginder, David Gregory, Allan Davis, Kate Spanos, Natalie Tenner, Sara Thompson, Emily Townsend, and my partner in crime since 2009, Emily Jane Warheit, for the countless tears of laughter, autobiography titles, and love.

A special thanks to Adam Sheaffer, who told me across the table at Adele's on an accepted students' day that his second great passion, after Shakespeare, was professional wrestling. I have you in large part to thank for all that this project has given me, and I owe you endlessly for the promos, the hugs, and all those times you let me hide from apron spots.

My love & thanks also to my infinitely patient, supportive, and loving friends and coworkers, who have continually reminded me to breathe, who knew exactly when a funny video was necessary, and who were always there to talk me through, even from states away. Scott and Jaime, who never failed to remind me that I could make it through every step of this, my West Coast dear Joey, all of my Northeastern Coat Piling Game Guild, and of course, to the fabulous Scholars team, from Central Staff

to Arts, who let me keep all of those wrestling ticket stubs mixed in with my theatre ones, and even stopped by to talk to me about WrestleMania.

This project brought me together with wrestling fans from around the world, who have squeezed my hands through more matches than I can count, sent me Starbucks and pajamas and perfect necklaces, wrestling-themed calendars, Australian sweets, and more pictures of my favorite wrestlers than I could ever have found myself. Much love to Kate, Christine, Lacey, Keith, Niki, and a “want 2?” to my horsewomen, Courtney, Emily, and Amanda. This project would be nothing without you, and you are the greatest stable I could ask for.

For my brothers, Mikey, Christian, and Tyler, whose group texts kept me sane, whose support kept me grounded, and whose Grinch Punch almost got me horribly sick. You have been my best friends since the days you were born, and I will forever share my memories of pro wrestling with all of you, from Brick Elks to the Verizon Center. NWS for life.

For my dad, who rented every single wrestling video tape that A-Z Video had on offer, who kept multiple copies of a hand-drawn wrestling “art book,” and who never questioned why his Jessa Lloyd wanted to watch wrestling. I would not know what wrestling was if it was not for you, and I would not be who I am today without your endless love and support. For my “sainted mother,” because while I may never get to dedicate a Tony Award to you, I hope that this dissertation will suffice. Thank you for believing in me even when I wasn’t sure I did, for every candle you have ever lit, and for every adventure we have shared together, even if that trip to Savannah ended up without a Civil War project and with a very large lab. I love you both, always.

And for Tommy, who never takes down my wrestling 8x10s, who keeps wrestling themes on his iPhone, who has heard me lose my voice over more wrestlers than I can count, and who agreed to watch *Monday Night Raw* in January of 2012, never knowing where this would lead. I am infinitely grateful for your endless patience,



your endless love, and your endless supply of jokes, even when they were at the expense of whatever wrestler I was sighing over. You are my best friend, the best tag team partner ever, and I love you now and forever. This one's for you.

## Table of Contents

Dedication .....	ii
Acknowledgements .....	iii
Table of Contents .....	ii
Chapter 1: From wrasslin' to WWE: Wrestling & fandom history .....	1
Chapter 2: Live events and fan engagement .....	53
Chapter 3: Breaking the Shield: Internet fandom response .....	104
Chapter 4: The art of fandom.....	162
Chapter 5: Fans and their fictions .....	213
Conclusion: Reflecting back .....	264
Appendices.....	270
Bibliography .....	273

This Table of Contents is automatically generated by MS Word, linked to the Heading formats used within the Chapter text.

## Chapter 1: From wrasslin' to WWE: Wrestling & fandom

### history

There is nothing quite like professional wrestling in American popular culture. It has baffled its critics for decades and consistently resisted classification. Part sporting event, part rock concert, part soap opera, part political debate, part morality play, as well as part soft-core pornography, wrestling today is a genre-defying myth factory that combines practically every form of popular culture under the sun into the glorious “spectacle of excess” Vince McMahon has christened “sports entertainment.”<sup>2</sup>

--Mark Leverette, *Professional Wrestling: The Mat, The Myth, and American Popular Culture*

Professional wrestling is a substantial American popular art form, the latest in a long line that includes burlesque, vaudeville, jazz, rock'n'roll, and punk.<sup>3</sup>

--Nicholas Sammond, Introduction, *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*

Sociologist Gregory Stone, near the conclusion of his essay “Wrestling—The Great American Passion Play,” observes:

When the sociologist first attempts to probe the present-day social organization of wrestling, his reaction is one of wonder at the fantastic extent of a marvelously controlled “conspiracy of silence.” As he continues his study, the wonder gives way to consternation at the impenetrability of the conspiracy. Finally, his attitude becomes one of dull resignation and reluctant acceptance of the fact that many of his conclusions will be more often inferences than demonstrations.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Mark Leverette, *Professional Wrestling: The Myth, the Mat, and American Popular Culture* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), 101-102.

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Sammond, ed., *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Gregory Stone, “Wrestling—The Great American Passion Play,” in *The Sociology of Sport* (London: Whitefriars Press, 1971), 309-310.

Though Stone was writing over thirty years ago, his “dull resignation” permeates the study of professional wrestling<sup>5</sup> history to this day. American Studies scholar Mark Leverette concurs decades later, writing,

Wrestling historian Ed Garea notes how wrestling works only by denying its history: The history of wrestling is in fact a thinly disguised mythology, bent and twisted to fit the needs of whoever is telling the story at the time. Wrestling is a sport living in the eternal now; its future only stretching ahead to the next big card and its past only reaching as far back as the last big card. There is no history of the game, just a sense of matches and anecdotes. Baseball needs a history. Wrestling needs the next big card (*Wrestling Perspective*, No. 75 (no date), quoted in Feigenbaum 40).<sup>6</sup>

Though “inferences rather than demonstrations” accurately describes the ways in which would-be experts in the “IWC” (Internet wrestling community) write about professional wrestling online, I argue that wrestling needs more than the “next big card.” For both the purposes of this project and more broadly, an examination of the ways in which professional wrestling and the study of professional wrestling has grown and continued to thrive in the United States is essential. In this chapter, therefore, I will provide a brief history of the television era of WWE, as well as a discussion of fandom studies more broadly, with particular attention to its applications to the study of professional wrestling.

## **Wrestling in the United States**

There are relatively few books written about the history of professional wrestling in America even now. The narrative of the history is difficult to pin down,

---

<sup>5</sup> Although there is a larger history to the world of Olympic wrestling and the United States, that is not the focus of this dissertation.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Leverette, *Professional Wrestling: The Myth, the Mat, and American Popular Culture* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), 130.

and is frequently contested, as the roots of professional wrestling particularly as we know it today can be traced in multiple directions. Further, even when attempting to narrow down the field to examine solely the history of the WWF/WWE, the books that arise offer titles like *Is Wrestling Fixed? I Didn't Know It Was Broken*<sup>7</sup>; *Headlocks and Dropkicks: A Butt-Kicking Ride Through the World of Professional Wrestling*<sup>8</sup>; or *Sex, Lies, and Headlocks: The Real Story of Vince McMahon and the World Wrestling Federation*.<sup>9</sup> These texts, while offering potentially useful information, are more focused on sensationalized history, or more particularly, on offering the reader “insider” information, a popular (often lacking proper citations) history attempting to provide salacious details or offer evidence (more frequently, conjecture) about the “real” story behind moments in modern-day professional wrestling.

The world of professional wrestling is, in some ways, simultaneously more accessible and more closed off than ever before. While fans offer more and more conjecture (and more and more fans and former employees offer “insider” information, often obtained through questionable methods), companies are all the more aware that they are under constant surveillance and analysis, and thus feel compelled to keep much of their information as close to the vest as they can. The research in this chapter (and throughout this dissertation) is amassed from a combination of articles, texts, and observations, all of which have been analyzed and

---

<sup>7</sup> Bill Apter, *Is Wrestling Fixed? I Didn't Know It Was Broken! From Photo Shoots and Sensational Stories to the WWE Network, Bill Apter's Incredible Pro Wrestling Journey*. (ECW Press, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Ted A. Kluck, *Headlocks and Dropkicks: A Butt-Kicking Ride Through the World of Professional Wrestling* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Shaun Assael and Mike Mooneyham, *Sex, Lies, and Headlocks: The Real Story of Vince McMahon and the World Wrestling Federation* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2002).

synthesized to offer an effectively comprehensive, yet necessarily concise understanding of professional wrestling's history as well as elucidate the ways in which wrestling (and its fans) have been studied. Thus, this dissertation attempts to provide demonstrated, illustrated facts (rather than present fannish inferences) wherever possible. Accordingly, for the purposes of this study I will provide the reader with essential information about the history of wrestling in the United States, while also revealing what is most notably absent in the archives: an effort to document the presence of women in wrestling history--either as key players or as audience members. Though women were always fans (and, by the twentieth century, wrestlers), they are rarely, if ever, mentioned in the official histories. This helps to perpetuate the image that women have had little place in the wrestling universe--an untruth that, in the chapters that follow, I work to correct.

This chapter particularly leans heavily on Scott Beekman's work, as he is one of very few historians offering a relatively comprehensive history of professional wrestling without purporting to be an insider. Wherever possible I also incorporate other authors to corroborate Beekman's foundational work. Subsequently, as noted in the introduction, it would be impossible for me to attempt to treat the history of wrestling in the United States in its entirety within the confines of this project, let alone this particular chapter.<sup>10</sup> However, I do wish to establish some important contextual information about the evolution of wrestling to its present-day form of "*sports entertainment*."

---

<sup>10</sup> Additionally, there are a wide variety of narratives around wrestling's history, its roots, and its intentions—I have included a number of resources here, but other titles (such as those referenced in the introduction), among others to be found in my bibliography, offer additional information.

Gregory Stone writes that from the onset of sports in the United States, “in general, the more elaborate the technological paraphernalia of a sport, the higher its social status.”<sup>11</sup> Wrestling, in its early phases, did not require a ring, special gear, or any apparatus, just two men with a score to settle. Wrestling became a sport discussed at taverns, a sport to settle disputes, a sport that could be watched, discussed, and enacted by those who lacked access to the sorts of formal training (and equipment) that more “genteel” sports activities might have demanded. This same lack of establishment and access also brought a dismissive sort of snobbishness that, arguably, persists to this day. In *The Squared Circle: Life, Death, and Professional Wrestling*, David Shoemaker writes,

Wrestling was a bastard art form from the start. You can trace its history back to “catch wrestling,” a mutt form of organized grappling that incorporated aspects of Greco-Roman wrestling, Irish collar-and-elbow, Indian styles, and the famously violent brand of English fighting called Lancashire wrestling, also widely known as “catch as catch can.”<sup>12</sup>

Its mutt-like roots did little to contribute to improving wrestling’s image. The dismissiveness was particularly pronounced by the nineteenth century, when wrestling was seen as “primitive” and lacking the honor and sophisticated code of, for instance, dueling, as a means to settle disputes. It is almost comforting to know that the looks of disdain and disbelief that come in 2016 by identifying as a fan of professional wrestling are not new reactions. In its early phases, wrestling grew side-by-side with boxing and/or bare-knuckle fighting (although this was often unsanctioned, albeit popular). While boxing and wrestling grew side by side, boxing

---

<sup>11</sup> Gregory Stone, “Wrestling—The Great American Passion Play,” in *The Sociology of Sport* (London: Whitefriars Press, 1971), 302-303.

<sup>12</sup> David Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle: Life, Death, and Professional Wrestling* (New York: Gotham Books, 2013), 9.

soon began to divorce itself from both wrestling and its supporters in the 1860s with the establishment of the Queensbury rules. Although they had their roots in the United Kingdom, the rules spread to the United States and were firmly in place by the 1890s. Beekman explains:

To improve the widespread perception that prizefighting was a brutal and barbaric struggle, the Marquis of Queensbury developed a new set of boxing rules in the late 1860s. The Queensbury rules required that gloves be worn and that bouts be scheduled for a set number of rounds. Further, the rounds lasted exactly three minutes, with a one-minute rest period between them. Queensbury intended to make prizefighting more respectable and gentlemanly, and, as part of this endeavor, his rules disallowed the wrestling holds that had been an integral part of the sport but which he felt brought an unnecessary crudity<sup>13</sup> to the “manly art.”<sup>14</sup>

Elliott J. Gorn and Warren Goldstein further note that

Duffield Osborn wrote in the *North American Review* in 1888 that civilization degenerated into “mere womanishness” as it grew overrefined. But the unflinching courage of boxers upheld “high manly qualities” that counteracted the “mawkish sentimentality.”...The Queensbury rules that mandated gloves, three-minute rounds, and the ten-second knockout would paste a veneer of respectability over the outlaw sport, yet still let it retain the old elemental vitality. Boxing would be reformed in the name of bourgeois manliness.<sup>15</sup>

By establishing rules and limits, boxing was able to become, at least temporarily, a higher and more genteel sport, furthering the notion that equipment can help play a role in defining the respectability of any given sport.

Wrestling, too, attempted to take on rules, but they were not necessarily widely adopted, nor was wrestling itself made as uniform as boxing. For instance, the

---

<sup>13</sup> The establishment of these rules also served, directly or indirectly, to divorce wrestling and boxing from the racially charged sport of “cutting”—almost human cockfights between enslaved men. Though this project does not attempt to treat this history, it is crucial to note that wrestling and “genteel” boxing would have stood in contrast.

<sup>14</sup> Scott M. Beekman. *Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling in America*. (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2006), 31-32.

<sup>15</sup> Elliott J. Gorn and Warren Goldstein, *A Brief History of American Sports* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 120-121.



*Police Gazette* established rules (and a medal, predating title belts) by the 1880s, decreeing the types of bouts that would need to be fought in order to earn the medal, including the most popular, catch-style. Catch-style wrestling was in some ways symbolic of its practitioners: it did not represent any one culture or style, nor was it particularly governed by rules or gentility. Instead, it represented an amalgamation of a variety of styles, taken from all over the world, and arguably represents the style of wrestling that is most entertaining to watch: quick, sometimes brutal, and constantly adapting to reflect your opponent's weaknesses and your own strengths. It was not necessarily high-class: instead, it was designed to be entertaining, engaging, and capture the audience's attention. Catch also possessed the opportunity for nearly anyone to compete, regardless of size or training; it became, as Beekman, Gorn and Goldstein, Shoemaker, and others observe, the most "democratic" form of wrestling, and thus fitting that it took hold in the United States above other forms of wrestling styles.

Wrestling's exaggerated focus on the body--both intense masculinity and intense femininity--is the topic of discussion, sexual and otherwise, among modern-day female fans. Yet this attention is frequently treated as a recent development. Women, in particular, are often accused of watching wrestling only because they think the performers are attractive, an accusation that implies their fandom is somehow less authentic and informed than the fandom of their male counterparts. Yet this sexualized focus on the body was emphasized far earlier than the modern era,

during the touring work of wrestlers like William Muldoon, the “father” of professional wrestling.<sup>16</sup>

Muldoon was an extremely popular and storied champion during the late nineteenth century. He toured much of the United States with a company of wrestlers and boxers (in a similar manner as traveling theatre troupes, circus groups, and vaudeville circuits), performing showcases across the country, particularly in rural areas where the residents might not have the opportunity to see such performances in theatre spaces. Along with the wrestling and boxing matches on offer, portions of these shows often included opportunities for the performers to pose scantily clad as “living statuary” or *tableaux vivants*. While this hardly seems in keeping with the sense of propriety and middle-class ideals of the late nineteenth century, these sessions were permitted by definition as “artistic” reflections and athletic exhibitions of idealized physical fitness (not unlike the *tableaux vivants* that would feature prominently in the Ziegfeld Follies and throughout burlesque performances well into the twentieth century).

Wrestling has, in some ways, always danced on the line of respectability: there are always bodies on display, often in positions that (out of context) are highly sexualized or sexually charged, homoerotic, and scantily clad. Yet wrestling only flirts with acknowledging its erotic and homoerotic allusions. While it is evident that Muldoon and company were well aware of wrestling’s literal and figurative selling

---

<sup>16</sup> The “father” of modern bodybuilding, Eugen Sandow, offered these opportunities as well. After his routine, which generally consisted of him posing and performing individual feats of strength, Sandow is reported to have collected extra pay for allowing audience members to come up and view his muscles up close, even touch them—an experience that, it is said, caused more than one woman to faint dead away at the touch.

power, particularly to women, it was never directly presented as erotic. Rather, this presentation was wrapped in the boundaries of respectability, an athletic competition or physical display first, at least officially, with any additional interpretation being entirely in the mind of its audience.

By the early twentieth century, the trappings of modern-day professional wrestling were beginning to fall into place. As James Twitchell describes it, “By 1908 the ring side had been fixed at the “squared circle” of eighteen feet, the parody of Greco-Roman holds had become standardized, and the establishment of regional organizations with high-sounding names like the National Wrestling Alliance organized the high-jinks and supplied the itinerant stuntmen.”<sup>17</sup> The rings themselves were surrounded by ropes, the surfaces made of soft stretched material to help cushion the falls of the wrestlers, the ring itself often surrounded by mats (and audiences sometimes separated by metal barricades). There were still a number of figures who wished to compete in legitimate contests, and these bouts often drew tremendous crowds: one of the best-known rivalries pitted the “Russian Lion” Georg Hackenschmidt against the Iowa farmboy Frank Gotch, with their first bout taking place in Chicago in April of 1908. The match reportedly drew over six thousand spectators to the pavilion where it was held. It lasted nearly two hours, at which point Hackenschmidt, the world champion, conceded the match to Gotch. Though at the time the narrative did not reflect it, in this match we see many of the trappings of professional wrestling today: the hometown boy against a foreign menace, the

---

<sup>17</sup> James B. Twitchell, *Preposterous Violence: Fables of Aggression in Modern Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 251.

resourceful “catch” wrestler (Gotch) against the more polished, refined grappler (Hackenschmidt), the match over a title but really about more than a belt, etc. Further, in a style that wrestling fans today would observe as typical “heel tactics,” Hackenschmidt later attempted to save face by noting that Gotch had come out too heavily oiled, and thus had had an unfair advantage.<sup>18</sup> The event propelled Gotch to heights of superstardom, allowing him to bask in his image as one of the first “star” wrestlers, leading to an eventual “rematch” in 1911. However, as successful as the 1908 match had been for helping to both raise national attention for Gotch and to legitimize the cause of professional wrestling, the 1910 match succeeded in doing the precise opposite. While this later match drew a crowd five times larger--Chad Dell writes that “nearly 40,000 people flocked to the rebuilt Comiskey Park in Chicago”<sup>19</sup>--Hackenschmidt was no longer in the same shape he had once been, and he attempted to withdraw from the match before it began. Beekman writes,

Gotch scored two falls in less than twenty minutes. Fans in ringside seats heard Hackenschmidt tell referee Ed Smith of his intention to willingly fall backward and yield the second fall to Gotch...The Gotch-Hackenschmidt rematch fiasco did irreparable harm to professional wrestling. Already reeling from more than a decade of concerns over the legitimacy of matches, the Chicago debacle, occurring in a highly touted world championship bout, destroyed much of the remaining public faith in wrestling.<sup>20</sup>

While Gotch does not appear to have participated in attempting to “fix” the match, the damage was done: he retired two years later, vacating the championship title, and

---

<sup>18</sup> David Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle: Life, Death, and Professional Wrestling* (New York: Gotham Books, 2013), 11-13.

<sup>19</sup> Chad Dell, *The Revenge of Hatpin Mary: Women, Professional Wrestling and Fan Culture in the 1950s* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2016), 5.

<sup>20</sup> Scott M. Beekman, *Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling in America*, (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2006), 49-50.

in many ways, ushered in the dawn of the almost exclusively “worked” (or fixed) era in professional wrestling.

The first half of the twentieth century of professional wrestling was dominated largely by the establishment of regional promotions, often each with their own champions and major figures.<sup>21</sup> These “territories” (as they were called by the 1920s) were often defined along geographic lines, with one of the most desirable territories being the New York Metropolitan area, and Madison Square Garden--a site that maintains significance in the wrestling world to this day. The promoters drew heavily on local talent, particularly former college football players due to their regional name recognition (combined with usually clean-cut good looks and a built-in move set drawn from their sports years), as well as occasionally attempting to appeal to local immigrant communities by bringing in talents that resonated with different ethnic groups. There was, as one might expect, stiff competition and underhanded attempts at sabotage between the promotions and territories, frequently attempting to snag talent from others or to steal titles by convincing a performer to “defect” to a rival territory. Accordingly, promoters began to look for highly marketable champions, ones that would draw in the largest audiences and create the greatest mass appeal.

In this way, one begins to see the slow progression toward the wrestling stars of today: some possess tremendous wrestling skills; others possess tremendous charisma; still others possess movie-star good looks; and, in the best of cases--though

---

<sup>21</sup> Further information about the rise of these territories and alliances can be found in Larry Matsyik’s *Drawing Heat the Hard Way: How Wrestling Really Works*; Beekman’s *Ringside* (as quoted throughout this chapter), and Tim Hornbaker’s *National Wrestling Alliance: The Untold Story of the Monopoly that Strangled Pro Wrestling* and *Capitol Revolution: The Rise of the McMahon Wrestling Empire* (quoted in this chapter) among others noted in my bibliography.

highly rare--some possess a combination of the three. Frank Gotch, for instance, had been a tremendous technical wrestler, and many argued that he was attractive in a brawny sort of way. But it was the rise of Jim Londos, the “Golden Greek,” that signaled a shift toward the preference for good looks and average skills when it came to box office. Wrestling promoter Jack Curley hired Londos, a handsome, chiseled wrestler from Greece, who reportedly was deliberately booked to fight the least attractive opponents possible thereby looking all the better by comparison. The “Adonis of ancient Argos”<sup>22</sup> was undeniably a sex symbol--women supposedly turned up to his matches in record numbers--and a champion, albeit one whose in-ring skills were, by many reports, merely passable. Londos was big box office, however, drawing tens of thousands of fans to his bouts (and helping to sell massive amounts of newspapers when they featured his shirtless image).

Londos represents the development of the more clearly codified “heel” and “face” dynamic that was beginning to emerge by the late 1920s: “heel” being an industry term for the wrestler who fights as the villain, versus “face” (short for “babyface”) for the hero. Traditionally, “faces” were clean-cut and attractive, even sexy, often “all-American” with fair skin and features (though, as with Londos, that was not necessary), while the older, less attractive, and foreign-born “menaces” served as the heels. As Beekman notes,

The growth of heels and faces represented a logical evolution of professional wrestling. To a certain degree, the notion of good wrestler versus bad wrestler can be discerned throughout the history of the sport. In the Gilded Age, out-of-town shooters, at show inside men, and wrestlers known for dirty tactics played the role of embryonic heels. Imported wrestlers, particularly the welter

---

<sup>22</sup> Maxwell Stiles, “Nine Bouts at Ball Park Arena” *Los Angeles Examiner*, Oct. 10, 1934 (accessed via <http://www.wrestlingclassics.com/wawli/Nos.624-634.html> 12 February 2016).

of Terrible Turks, also presented foils for homegrown wrestlers in front of parochial crowds.”<sup>23</sup>

Shoemaker furthers this notion of the vague “Foreign Menace,” writing

The promoters were putting on morality plays filtered through the lens of nationalism, with heroes constructed specifically to appeal to the ethnic origins of the fans. For years Londos ruled in New York. “A Foreign Menace, in most cases a real wrestler, would be imported. He would meet all the challengers for the title whom Londos had defeated in any city larger than New Haven, and beat them. After that, he and Londos would wrestle for the world’s championship in Madison Square Garden. The Foreign Menace would oppress Londos mercilessly for about forty minutes, and then Londos would pick him up for the airplane spin....Londos would whirl the current Menace around his head and dash him to the mat three times, no more and no less, and the match would end in time for suburbanites to catch the trains they caught on theatre nights.”<sup>24</sup>

Ethnic titles and distinctions also began to be falsely applied, whether to make one appear more heroic or more villainous depending on the region (i.e. a performer wrestling in, for example, northern New Jersey might find himself given an “Italian name” for the evening).

This desire for immediately recognizable symbols, those that are easy to “read,” echoes the movements that occurred within theatrical productions since the years of melodrama and, arguably, from the medieval pageantry of Europe. Beekman in particular attempts to argue that wrestling demonstrates the first visible usage of “image recognition” in a popular form, but theatrical history supports the fact that performers and playwrights had been using the technique for decades, particularly in

---

<sup>23</sup> Scott M. Beekman. *Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling in America*, (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2006), 65.

<sup>24</sup> David Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle: Life, Death, and Professional Wrestling* (New York: Gotham Books, 2013), 23-24.

popular melodramatic performance as well as vaudeville and variety.<sup>25</sup> When one cannot guarantee a literate audience, or that even a literate audience would have a shared language, the importance of immediate visual signifiers becomes all-encompassing. “Bad guys” must be dressed in black and heroes in white, and they must have ominous or hopeful music that accompanies their entrance. Moreover, familiar performers must take on the same role in multiple presentations. There should be heavy reliance on spectacle and the sensational, as well as the editing of texts or performances to fit the local audience (referencing local groups, local addresses, etc.). In many ways, the world of professional wrestling draws directly from the elements of melodrama that had helped it prove so successful. As wrestling moved further and further toward “fixed” and predetermined bouts, and drew closer to what would become the “television” era--designed to tell stories rather than focus on physical skill--its relationship to the theatrical grew clearer still.

While World War II sufficiently halted the growth and rise of wrestling, the rise of access to television in the home would more than make up for it. As Beekman notes:

... the immediate postwar years witnessed the birth of America’s fascination with the “magic window.” By 1946, four national networks began offering prime-time network programming. Easy to film, with one or two stationary cameras and occurring in well-lit arenas, boxing and wrestling became staples of early television. The two sports, especially wrestling, also appealed to television networks because they were cheap to produce and readily available. Further, they both dovetailed with wartime developments regarding strength, physical fitness, and an increasing connection between masculinity and America’s global power.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Vaudeville and variety shows, in fact, frequently incorporated “strongman” acts as well as wrestling and boxing matches, as well as cameos by popular figures including wrestling champions.

<sup>26</sup> Scott M. Beekman, *Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling in America*, (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2006), 81.



The rise of television, however, even more clearly dictated the need for the style of professional wrestling to change. By the 1940s and 1950s, the performances needed to be even more over-the-top in order to be clearly conveyed to those not there live; characters needed to be still more clearly defined (or, perhaps more accurately, caricatured). Finally, there became an increased need for mediation, found in the form of ringside commentators and announcers, to help interpret the action for the viewing public. As the territory alliances (included the American Wrestling Association and the National Wrestling Alliance) grew more and more powerful, the “star power” of their talent became all the more important: who would be the most immediately identifiable? Whose character could translate through the black and white screen just as easily as with a live, screaming crowd?

The shift from mat skills to charisma as the strongest point in a wrestler’s favor was all the more apparent in the television era: wrestlers now had to be able to talk convincingly as well as perform physically, to convey everything about their characters in a swift thirty seconds with the ringside announcer or “backstage” interviewer. In the United States and abroad, this meant an increase in not only physically attractive (or unattractive) performers, but those who were able to convey specific characters. One of the strongest examples of the 1940s and 1950s was the “Human Orchid” a.k.a. Gorgeous George<sup>27</sup> (who legally changed his name from George Wagner), a character so iconic that some of his defining characteristics have become heel coding. George preened, he strutted, he dyed his hair platinum blonde

---

<sup>27</sup> While this project focuses on pro wrestling in the United States, the career and character of Adrian Street, a British wrestler interviewed in Simon Farber’s *The Wrestling*, mirror much of George’s experiences and demonstrate a tremendous impact on wrestlers of the later twentieth century, including Goldust.

(and fussed over it prior to starting the match, berating anyone who dared touch it). He entered his matches wearing increasingly elaborate robes, berated the audience, and, of course, used any underhanded method he could get away with to capture victory (or at least humiliate his opponents). George was committed to preserving the character in all of his interviews, even those that took place with the press outside of the arenas--interviews that were rife with reminders that anyone who he deigned to speak to should count themselves extremely fortunate. Few articles, books, or biographies of the “Human Orchid,” including Simon Farber’s *The Wrestling*, discuss, for instance, his wrestling style, or his skill in the ring. Instead, his character and charisma transcended the boundaries of what seemed possible for a mere professional wrestler at the time, skyrocketing him to a place of celebrity that few would be able to touch in the coming centuries. Even non-wrestling fans would recognize George if asked; he attained name and face recognition almost beyond belief.

Gorgeous George is, arguably, the first “pro wrestler” of our age, and certainly the first of the television era; Beekman argues that:

George can be viewed as the first modern professional wrestler in that he abandoned antiquated notions of striving to become world champion to achieve celebrity...With the championship titles now merely a prop to be exploited by promoters, and all vestiges of catch-style legitimacy forever gone, wrestlers such as George truly became entertainers, as opposed to athletes. In the NWA era and beyond, wrestlers continued to fight and struggle to obtain the world championship but did so because it reflected their success in drawing a large gate and putting on a good show, not because it signified their status as the world’s best wrestler.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Scott M. Beekman. *Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling in America*. (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2006), 88.

Chad Dell furthers this notion of George as the first “pro wrestler,” and certainly one of the first popular pro wrestlers, but speaks to a broader sense of what was now to be required in wrestling, saying

As wrestling moved to television in the late 1940s, newer, more nuanced types of villains emerged. The complexity and depth of these new characters might not have traveled easily to spectators in the top rows of a live arena but were effortlessly communicated through television. Among the most crowd-pleasing was Gorgeous George, whose stage persona balanced prissiness, arrogance, and ostentatious display. George wore his hair long, dyed blond or other colors to match his costume, and set in a marcelled permanent at a local beauty shop prior to each match.<sup>29</sup>

By the television era, “titles” had lost the significance and weight that they had borne in the eras of Muldoon and Gotch. As wrestling became more “fixed,” it became clearer that to win a title was less reflective of innate (or learned) wrestling skill, but rather a reflection of one’s ability “to draw”—that is, to make promoters money by bringing in an audience. One’s ability to charm (or disgust) the audience, one’s ability to create an impact that shone through the tiny television screens in so many American households, was all important. Though subtlety has never been wrestling’s dominant feature, it fell even further out of vogue as the decades went on; characters were quickly reduced to a single defining characteristic, usually a highly visual one--although an accent or speech pattern could come into play in interviews or crowd hassling. This is also reflective of the movement away from local territories as the main sites of performance. Previously, performers and promoters could focus their attention on the crowds that were physically sharing the arenas with them; the primary relationship was between the performer and the live crowd, and the character

---

<sup>29</sup> Chad Dell, *The Revenge of Hatpin Mary: Women, Professional Wrestling and Fan Culture in the 1950s* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2016), 17-18.

would be understood by the audience accordingly. With television dispersal (and syndication), it was no longer enough for a character to be legible to the local audience; they needed to signify and convey a meaning that was larger than life, one that would play coast to coast to audiences young and old, wealthy and poor, white collar and blue. Mirroring the world of film, heels were likelier to draw on national fears or prejudices, playing caricatured versions of American's "monster of the week"; if they did not go that route, heels became even more dastardly in their flagrant violations of the rules, always making sure to cheat toward the camera (in more ways than one).

As Tim Hornbaker notes, "The first half of the 1950s was a record-setting period for wrestling promoters, and it was all thanks to the emergence of television...It was a perfect mixture of combat, comedy, and athleticism...and the stigmas that were attached to grappling in previous years were quickly forgotten."<sup>30</sup> Wrestlers were part of popular culture, figuring into the popular consciousness; live events drew large crowds, and televised matches boasted growing audiences. The emergence of the television audience for professional wrestling, as Chad Dell observes, also meant that a new audience was forming: women. In his book, *The Revenge of Hatpin Mary: Women, Professional Wrestling and Fan Culture in the 1950s*, Dell addresses how women appeared in the front rows during television programs, but also gathered around their television sets to watch the shows. He writes,

---

<sup>30</sup> Tim Hornbaker, *Capitol Empire: The Rise of the McMahon Wrestling Empire* (ECW Press, 2015), 139.

These were not women who attended with husbands or male suitors in tow; they were women in their twenties intent on indulging their own pleasure, including the pleasure of each other's company. Furthermore, these women had gathered in public—outside the isolated domestic world considered the most appropriate place for the feminine body, and outside their relationships to men—to take up a collective, active position at the center of the auditorium. At the same time, they were actively taking in male performers as *objects* of spectacle, momentarily denying the men their customary role as *definers* of “appropriate” gendered roles.<sup>31</sup>

For the women that Dell would interview (and observe through watching older tapes of professional wrestling from the mid-twentieth century), the wrestling arena was a space in which the familiar bodies of male wrestlers that they knew from television were available for public consumption. Women were able to become the consumers and the gazers in this narrative, flipping the traditional image of men acting and women merely appearing. By presenting beautiful male bodies on display, professional wrestling drew an even larger crowd than it once had.

But as the decades wore in, the familiar feuds began to feel stale. Once-popular stars fizzled and some promoters were hesitant to present new stars, preferring instead to rely on the old standbys. Perhaps most damningly, the staleness and repetition were beginning to once again lead to attacks on the legitimacy of wrestling. Other sports were beginning to find their television groove as well, and thus wrestling's omnipresence faded by the end of that decade, pushed aside in favor of televised football, baseball, and boxing.

Though wrestling grew dormant in some ways, it was never entirely absent. The sport (not yet fully sports entertainment) still carved out a niche for itself,

---

<sup>31</sup> Chad Dell, *The Revenge of Hatpin Mary: Women, Professional Wrestling and Fan Culture in the 1950s* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2016), 24-25.

particularly the wrestling presented by Vincent James McMahon and his Capitol Wrestling Corporation in the late 1950s. Featured largely in the Northeast, with region highlights found in New York, New Jersey, and Maryland, McMahon's corporation was willing to have their programming air on smaller stations on less popular nights (Saturdays in particular) and while they were part of larger alliances, McMahon always had his eye out for his own breakout success. Thus, it was both shocking and unsurprising when, in April of 1963, McMahon decided to launch the World Wide Wrestling Federation (WWWF),<sup>32</sup> putting McMahon in possession of one of the biggest past stars (Buddy the "Nature Boy" Rogers) and one of the brightest young newcomers, a physical powerhouse named Bruno Sammartino. Dell described Sammartino as "the hero of nearly every...young wrestling fan in the northeast, [with] a broad, rippling chest, thin waist, and rugged good looks."<sup>33</sup> Wrestling, it would seem, was staging a comeback, and it would be in the name of the McMahon family--a name that endures in fame (and infamy) to this day. Wrestling found its foothold once again in a working-class, blue-collar audience. The same audience that had buoyed it before the television era made it accessible to the masses of the small screen. While the audience would continue to grow and shift, a wrestler like Sammartino was particularly appealing to working-class audiences based out of cities.

While the rise of the McMahon family is the most written-about and reflected upon topic in modern wrestling history, it is also a history plagued by scandal and

---

<sup>32</sup> Tim Hornbaker, *Capitol Empire: The Rise of the McMahon Wrestling Empire* (ECW Press, 2015), 191.

<sup>33</sup> Chad Dell, *The Revenge of Hatpin Mary: Women, Professional Wrestling and Fan Culture in the 1950s* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2016), 1.

sensationalist journalism, some of it coming from the McMahon family themselves. It can be particularly difficult to separate fact from fiction; indeed, much of the information and literature seems to exist somewhere in between, helping to establish the mythos of the McMahon family and the WWF. McMahon's company was doing tremendous business by the end of the 1960s, increased its fortune into the 1970s, and eventually renamed itself as the WWF (the World Wrestling Federation) by 1979. The McMahon family prided themselves on taking risks and having the willingness to invest in the new and unfamiliar in hopes of a larger return.

Vincent J. McMahon's son, Vincent Kennedy McMahon, became a larger and larger presence in the federation as he grew older, eventually coming down to ringside as a wrestling announcer and commentator. As noted in a 1991 *Sports*

*Illustrated* article:

In 1979 [Vincent K. McMahon] bought the Cape Cod Coliseum in Yarmouth, Mass., which included a 5,000-seat hockey rink, where Atlantic Hockey League teams played in winter and rock bands played in summer. Ambitious and smitten with a then radical vision of marrying rock 'n' roll to rasslin', Vince bought out his father's stock in the WWF in 1982. Vincent J. died in 1984, but by that point his only son had declared war on the entire structure of American professional wrestling as it had been nurtured and loved by promoters since the turn of the century. "Had my father known what I was going to do, he never would have sold his stock to me," says Vincent K. "In the old days, there were wrestling fiefdoms all over the country, each with its own little lord in charge. Each little lord respected the rights of his neighboring little lord. No takeovers or raids were allowed. There were maybe 30 of these tiny kingdoms in the U.S. and if I hadn't bought out my dad, there would still be 30 of them, fragmented and struggling. I, of course, had no allegiance to those little lords." In 1982, McMahon launched his first massive attack—not with a slogging ground war to capture live audiences from enemy arenas but with the cold, airborne eye of television.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> William Oscar Johnson, "Wrestling with Success," *Sports Illustrated*, March 25, 1991, via the Sports Illustrated Online Vault, <http://www.si.com/vault/1991/03/25/123865/wrestling-with-success-vince-mcmahon-has-transformed-pro-wrestling-from-a-sleazy-pseudosport-to-booming-family-fun> (accessed 25 February 2017).

Vincent K. McMahon proved an even larger risk-taker than his father had, paying handsome sums to have his programming syndicated and shown on the national market, but the risks continued to pay off as the WWF claimed a larger and larger portion of the television audience. As Twitchell describes it,

In the 1970s Vincent McMahon, who had inherited the World Wrestling Federation from his father, transformed a loose confederation of southern New England carnivals held in high-school gyms into an international multimillion-dollar enterprise. He did this by first contracting with the USA Cable Network and then with Ted Turner's WTBS until he had essentially created his own national network...The stations made their profit (and it soon became a huge one) by selling the remaining commercial time. This relationship proved so successful that the WWF network soon "penetrated" almost ninety percent of American TV households.<sup>35</sup>

As the corporation grew, the younger McMahon began his still continuing trend of buying out the highest-drawing talent from rival companies,<sup>36</sup> offering them greater exposure as well as more money than they would receive elsewhere. While McMahon's tactics are still not always popular or considered ethically sound, it is difficult to argue with their success.

As the company moved into the 1980s, however, the WWF was starting to lose money. In response, McMahon made one of his largest gambles to date, unveiling a bold new idea: WrestleMania, an event aimed at attracting a tremendous live audience while simultaneously bringing in an equally tremendous television audience. Twitchell describes the event as follows:

On April Fools' Eve of 1985 Hulk Hogan, the "Hulkster" (6'8" with 24" biceps, lovingly referred to as his "pythons"), joined [Mr.] T in a grudge match against "Rowdy" Roddy Piper and Paul "Mr. Wonderful" Orndorff in

---

<sup>35</sup> James B. Twitchell, *Preposterous Violence: Fables of Aggression in Modern Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 250-251.

<sup>36</sup> Though there are no companies that can possibly rival WWE in size or scope, there are a number of recognizable independent as well as international promotions that exist to this day, that McMahon and company continue to draw from when they seek out fresh talent.



Madison Square Garden. This was the modern media event par excellence—a cornucopia of preposterous violence. “Hulkamania,” a registered trademark of Marvel Comics Group, had run wild. Everything was a sham. On hand were Muhammed Ali [sic] (a real participator in real violence) as referee, Liberace (a send-up of male aggression) as timekeeper, and Billy Martin (an instigator of real sports violence of which professional wrestling is anti-image) as ring announcer. Andy Warhol had a ringside seat. Also on hand to view WrestleMania, as the spectacle was called, was a crowd so large that it sold out the Garden, and the overflow had to be packed into the adjoining Felt Forum to watch on a video monitor. More than one million fans watched the closed-circuit telecast around the world at more than two hundred locations.<sup>37</sup>

The event was a hit well beyond even McMahon’s wildest dreams, financially as well as culturally--wrestling was in the public sphere on an even larger scale than it had been in the dawning television era, with crossover into film, popular music, television, and more. Though wrestling’s acceptance and stigmas are still often fraught, it has not left the public eye since. Peter Lukko, quoted in the *Sports Illustrated* profile of McMahon, reflected on the impact of McMahon’s executed vision:

Wrestling always produced strong crowds, but it was often a very rough night—mostly males who were beer-drinkers and had a tendency to get into a lot of fights. That was as recently as seven or eight years ago. Vince not only called it entertainment, he made it over into real entertainment—rock music, hype, stars, lights—and that brought fans out of the closet from every age and economic group—teens, children under 10, film stars, attorneys, bankers and the blue-collar people who came before.”<sup>38</sup>

McMahon thus deftly avoided the battleground around wrestling’s legitimacy, shifting its classification from “sports” to its current incarnation, “sports entertainment,” by the mid-1980s. McMahon states, “The difference between Dad’s

---

<sup>37</sup> James B. Twitchell, *Preposterous Violence: Fables of Aggression in Modern Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 246.

<sup>38</sup> William Oscar Johnson, “Wrestling with Success,” *Sports Illustrated*, March 25, 1991, via the Sports Illustrated Online Vault, <http://www.si.com/vault/1991/03/25/123865/wrestling-with-success-vince-mcmahon-has-transformed-pro-wrestling-from-a-sleazy-pseudosport-to-booming-family-fun> (accessed 25 February 2017).

and Granddad's day and my day is pure presentation...There was too much emphasis on the sports element and not enough on entertainment in the old days. Now we call it sports entertainment. We don't want to de-emphasize the athleticism of wrestling; these are great athletes with great charisma. But in the WWF, entertainment is the key."<sup>39</sup> Perhaps ironically, this drawing back of the curtain led to even greater success for the company.<sup>40</sup>

Though the McMahon family and the WWF faced financial setbacks (mainly due to continued speculation and risk-taking) and significant, public scandal (steroid usage as well as multiple deaths and severe injuries to performers),<sup>41</sup> professional wrestling's popularity continued to grow from the 1980s-early 2000s. Mark Leverette, writing about wrestling in the late 90s and 2000s writes,

On the box it appears on numerous channels several nights a week; books about and by wrestlers appear on the *New York Times* bestseller list for months at time [sic]; on the big screen wrestlers star in hit movies. They have infiltrated the popular culture institutions held as a rite of passage in American celebrity-dom: they host *Saturday Night Live* and make guest appearances on *Martha Stewart Living*. Wrestling floats were featured in the 2001 and 2002 Macy's Thanksgiving Day parades. And a wrestler even planted his flag on the lawn of the Minnesota governor's mansion!<sup>42</sup> Wrestling is a major content of the Internet, and promoters such as Vince McMahon have used licensing to ensure that its presence be incontestable. Characters of the squared circle are made tangible in the thousands of products which can be found at a fine retailer near you. Wrestlers impinge on our communication

---

<sup>39</sup> William Oscar Johnson, "Wrestling with Success," *Sports Illustrated*, March 25, 1991, via the Sports Illustrated Online Vault, <http://www.si.com/vault/1991/03/25/123865/wrestling-with-success-vince-mcmahon-has-transformed-pro-wrestling-from-a-sleazy-pseudosport-to-booming-family-fun> (accessed 25 February 2017).

<sup>40</sup> In spite of this openness, many wrestling scholars (myself included) observe that the immediate reaction to being "outed" as a wrestling fan or discussing wrestling with someone leads to the near-instant question "You know it's fake, don't you?"

<sup>41</sup> As noted earlier, a number of books, largely "tell-alls" and popular culture texts alongside wrestler (auto)biographies, focus on this more modern era of WWE; the titles mentioned in the introduction are among them, and others are indicated in my bibliography. For the purposes of this project, this particular history is less important to establishing my narrative.

<sup>42</sup> Leverette refers to professional wrestler Jesse "The Body" (now "The Mind") Ventura.

media, our stores, and our very homes.<sup>43</sup>

Indeed, in May of 2002--due to a court case with the World Wildlife Fund--the WWF completed its name transformation to World Wrestling Entertainment: WWE. While the name change may have originated as a legal, logistical issue, the impact and marketing to date have reflected the WWE's commitment to emphasizing the "entertainment" in "sports entertainment," branching out their stars into television shows (reality TV and otherwise) and film ventures, while also incorporating actors, singers, and pop culture figures into their own televised storytelling.

In 2017, professional wrestling may not enjoy the same popularity surge it enjoyed at the turn of the century, but no longer is it on the fringes, rather it is smack in the middle of the mainstream. Though the WWE has not advertised on the Super Bowl in recent years, wrestlers appear with some regularity on NBC's *Today* show as well as late night talk shows, sometimes to promote movies but more often to discuss their lives in WWE. Fan favorites start things "trending worldwide" on social media (and capitalize on it with appearances on *SportsCenter* the next night) when they win championships, or declare themselves entrants in the Royal Rumble. Wrestlers continue to cross over into film and television, whether through movies made by WWE Studios or more mainstream films and television shows. The WWE even created its own reality programming with *Total Divas*, a show that highlights the romantic and wrestling lives of its female superstars, followed by its spinoff, *Total Bellas*, which focused on the lives and loves of the beautiful Bella Twins. The WWE

---

<sup>43</sup> Mark Leverette, *Professional Wrestling: The Myth, the Mat, and American Popular Culture* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), 4-5.

continues to hire the best talent from America and beyond, and news of its most recent hirings spread fast through WWE's official social media channels and the WWE Network (available now for just \$9.99 a month). It is on this worldwide stage that wrestling now stands, with a long history behind it and with the potential for many years of entertainment to come—all propelled by innumerable fans clamoring for more.

### **“Aca-fans” & fandom in the academy:**

These innumerable fans, joining together at live events, on Internet forums, or on social media sites like Tumblr and Twitter, are the primary focus of this dissertation--particularly female fans, attempting to carve out their space in a form of entertainment that frequently seems designed to keep them out. Yet while it is the case that there exists no singular history of professional wrestling within the United States, the topic has proven fascinating for decades, inspiring authors from a range of fields such sport history, sociology, American and cultural histories, and performance studies. Wrestling has been examined as an art; as a subversion; as a ritual; as an athletic contest; and a combination of the above. While, for the purposes of this project, I wish to treat the studies and examination of *women's* wrestling fan culture in particular, the varied ways in which wrestling has been discussed, dissected, and, in some cases, dismissed, bears critical reflection and consideration. To that end, the remainder of this chapter furthers the historical context for this project by offering insight into the history of fan studies, thereby setting the stage for a more focused exploration of female fan culture within the world of professional wrestling.

In service of this dissertation's focused field of study, I have consulted numerous fandom studies texts, all of which have guided and shaped my inquiries over the course of my research. One of the seminal texts in the field of fan studies, Henry Jenkins' *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*,<sup>44</sup> was initially published in 1992, although a twentieth anniversary edition incorporated a conversation on the numerous changes that had occurred in the interim. Jenkins, in a conversation with Suzanne Scott (a written exchange that now serves as the introduction for the newest edition), observes that, among other changes, the world of fan studies has been feminist from its outset, but now the field is more broadly populated by what he calls "aca-fans"—academic fans, or studiers of fans.<sup>45</sup> He also notes that the very definition of "fan," particularly within the academy, has shifted, when he states that

I also think we also should write with a recognition that fandom has its own traditions, values, and norms which have emerged through collective decisions and actions. When my mentor, John Fiske (1992), said he was a "fan", he meant simply that he liked a particular program, but when I said I was a fan, I was claiming membership in a particular subculture. Meaning-making in Fiske was often individualized, whereas in my work, meaning-making is often deeply social. There continues to be a core distinction (and sometimes a heated debate) between those of us who write within and about fandom (as a larger network of affiliations and practices) and those who write about individual fans and their personal meaning-making.<sup>46</sup>

Fandom, then, goes beyond a mere shared interest in, or even passion for, a subject—it is about claiming connections, marking oneself as a member of a group. Dennis

---

<sup>44</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture: Updated Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (Routledge: New York, 2012).

<sup>45</sup> The term "aca-fan" did not appear in the original version of the text, but has since been applied, to some disagreement—it is a term that Jenkins does claim for himself, however, including in the title of his personal blog.

<sup>46</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture: Updated Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (Routledge: New York, 2012), xiii-xiv.

Kennedy, for instance, writes that “The relationship of one fan to another is quite extraordinary in sport...Openly emotional behaviour is sanctioned as the level of excitement gathers force. ‘It is not uncommon, in any sport, to see spectators behaving in a way that would be uncharacteristic of them in any other context: embracing, shouting, swearing, kissing, dancing in jubilation’ (Buford 1991: 166).”<sup>47</sup>

Fandom is defined in many ways as an excess of emotional response, and female wrestling fandom is no different; it is not a coincidence, as I will discuss in chapter five, that when trying to define what it is that is most compelling about a wrestler, it is the feelings that that wrestler evokes that stand out the most.

One of the difficulties with the 1992 edition of Jenkins’ book, addressed to some extent in the twentieth anniversary edition, is a crucial element of fandom studies that my work engages with: the online aspect. Specifically, the 1992 edition lacks the same amount of research on fandoms that exist largely online—understandably so, as in 1992, this was not the predominant form of fannish engagement due to lack of access. However, with increased Internet access has come an increase in the role it has come to play in both forming fandoms, cementing connections, and in its ability to change or even revive television programming. Wrestling is no exception to this--the “IWC,” or Internet Wrestling Community, frequently strives to influence wrestling programming, to varying degrees of success. Being a member of a fan group is more than simply joining together to enjoy

---

<sup>47</sup> Dennis Kennedy, *The Spectator and the Spectacle: Audiences in Modernity and Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 156.

something, I argue, and the critique that fandom inherently lacks self-reflexivity is inaccurate.

In a 2014 article on his personal website, Jenkins noted that while the publication of his book in 1992 was crucial within the field of fan studies, he

would make the case that 2006-2007 was an equally important period for the development of the field, marked by the publication of two key anthologies — Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse’s *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays* and Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss and C. Lee Herrington’s *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*. For there to be a field of Fan/Fandom Studies, there must in fact be not simply a few singular contributions but a large group of people doing original work in that space.<sup>48</sup>

Hellekson and Busse were indispensable in my research, particularly because Jenkins and other fandom studies authors from the late twentieth century were naturally unable to take into account the ways in which the fans I knew engaged. As Busse said, “I’m glad the book helped reframe fan studies. I knew the book filled a hole in scholarship, if only for its acknowledgment of new modes of fannish consumption.”<sup>49</sup>

These new modes are particularly striking for wrestling fandom, which exists everywhere--and nowhere. Lacking a single, physical site or event that one can go to gather with fans, online communication and exchange is crucial for engagement and participation within the fannish culture. Busse and Hellekson also offer a standard glossary of fandom terminology that I employ throughout my project, particularly

---

<sup>48</sup> “Where Fandom Studies Came From,” from *Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Personal Weblog of Henry Jenkins*, <http://henryjenkins.org/2014/11/where-fandom-studies-came-from-an-interview-with-kristina-busse-and-karen-hellekson-part-one.html> (accessed 10 March 2017).

<sup>49</sup> “Where Fandom Studies Came From,” from *Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Personal Weblog of Henry Jenkins*, <http://henryjenkins.org/2014/11/where-fandom-studies-came-from-an-interview-with-kristina-busse-and-karen-hellekson-part-one.html> (accessed 10 March 2017).

terms that pertain to the creative output of fans, whether that output is expressed as art, fiction, or as private conversations between individuals.

The work of editors like Busse and Hellekson also serve to push back against the narrative of “fan as fanatic.” Even Cornell Sandvoss’ *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption* opens its introduction by recounting songs, films, and real-life instances in which fans, blurring the line between fiction and reality, commit acts of violence.<sup>50</sup> Though Sandvoss goes on to call this interpretation into question, the point remains: fandom as fanaticism is the narrative of many volumes assessing the behavior of fans, particularly young (i.e. teenage) and emotional *female* fans as described in texts like *Starstruck: when a fan gets too close to fame* by Michael Joseph Gross.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, in the past twenty years and beyond, original work on fandom studies has substantially increased, yet it has continued to grapple with these issues, as well as with an issue that Hellekson, in an interview with Jenkins, describes:

Fan studies was like the field of science fiction literature studies (my original field) all over again: writers were expected to spend time explaining why they were bothering with a low-culture trash genre, and they also had to position themselves in relation to the field—in particular, if they were fans, this needed to be disclosed and scholars had to distance themselves.<sup>52</sup>

This raises the question: is fandom studies a “legitimate genre,” and how can those of us operating within it continue to affirm this? Can one truly be an “aca-fan?”--to identify as both a fan of a form, and also to examine that form critically? This was the guiding principle of my own journey through the world of wrestling fan studies: to

---

<sup>50</sup> Cornell Sandvoss, *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005).

<sup>51</sup> Michael Joseph Gross, *Starstruck: when a fan gets too close to fame* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005).

<sup>52</sup> “Where Fandom Studies Came From,” from *Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Personal Weblog of Henry Jenkins*, <http://henryjenkins.org/2014/11/where-fandom-studies-came-from-an-interview-with-kristina-busse-and-karen-hellekson-part-one.html> (accessed 10 March 2017).



both acknowledge and establish my own positionality, but also to push back against and question the “low-culture trash” labeling that both fan studies and, arguably, wrestling itself sometimes encounter.

Some of the earliest texts that examine the world of wrestling fans and fandom as we know them today come from the early years of the television era. Features in *TV Guide* and even advice columns began to question the existence of the wrestling fan—particularly the appeal of wrestling to female fans (a topic that will be discussed further in the following section). These texts suggested that the critical examination of wrestling was, at its onset, primarily seen as existing in the popular imagination and consciousness, rather than framed as a scholarly endeavor. Though many of these stories are no longer accessible, several *TV Guide* and advice column stories were excerpted in Chad Dell’s *Revenge of Hatpin Mary: Women, Professional Wrestling and Fan Culture in the 1950s*<sup>53</sup> and Michael R. Ball’s *Professional Wrestling as Ritual Drama in American Popular Culture*.<sup>54</sup> The discussion of these stories affirms that initially, examinations of professional wrestling fandom were perceived as human-interest stories (and as a way to sell television advertising) rather than perceived as bona fide research. This difficulty persists within fan studies today, with discussions of fandom often treated as human-interest stories first and subjects of research second, in the public consciousness. But one of the seminal texts of wrestling studies comes from a French literary theorist and critic, a structuralist and semiotician, Roland Barthes, who penned “The World of Wrestling,” published in his

---

<sup>53</sup> Chad Dell, *Revenge of Hatpin Mary: Women, Professional Wrestling, and Fan Culture in the 1950s* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006).

<sup>54</sup> Michael Ball, *Professional Wrestling as Ritual Drama in American Popular Culture* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990).

collected *Mythologies* in 1957. The “sports entertainment” nature of professional wrestling that made it (and makes it) so attractive to the larger audience also renders professional wrestling ripe for analysis as a performance, and Barthes was one of the first to do so.<sup>55</sup>

The debate over the “fixed” nature of pro wrestling and the ways in which it should be classified concerns Barthes not at all; he opens his essay by noting that

Wrestling is not a sport, it is a spectacle, and it is no more ignoble to attend a wrestled performance of Suffering than a performance of the sorrows of Arnolphe or Andromaque. Of course, there exists a false wrestling, in which the participants unnecessarily go to great lengths to make a show of a fair fight; this is of no interest. True wrestling, wrongly called amateur wrestling, is performed in second-rate halls, where the public spontaneously attunes itself to the spectacular nature of the contest, like the audience at a suburban cinema. Then these same people wax indignant because wrestling is a stage-managed sport (which ought, by the way, to mitigate its ignominy). The public is completely uninterested in knowing whether the contest is rigged or not, and rightly so; it abandons itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle, which is to abolish all motives and all consequences: what matters is not what it thinks but what it sees.<sup>56</sup>

Wrestling, for Barthes, is a conscious performance; the ways in which the performance can fail is when it attempts, too fervently, to bear the trappings of a “fair” fight, rather than reveling in its spectacular nature. The description of wrestling as a “stage-managed sport” is particularly apt; as many wrestlers and fans are liable to note, wrestling is choreographed; wrestling outcomes are pre-determined; wrestling is rehearsed, but wrestling still requires athleticism, requires training, and requires a sense of showmanship to pull off successfully. That sense of showmanship, the ideal

---

<sup>55</sup> It should be noted that Barthes is speaking about his observations of the world of professional wrestling in his native France; however, his reflections on its character and the performance that occurs within offer international repercussions.

<sup>56</sup> Roland Barthes, “The World of Wrestling,” in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 23.

of rendering visible and legible what cannot be communicated in words during the heat of a match or when watching from a distance (it can be difficult to hear anything from the ring, even shouted), link the history and performance of wrestling to the history of performance itself. Though Barthes makes no reference to theatre theory, he recognizes the performative nature of what he witnesses, as well as the transformative nature of that performance. The ring allows the wrestler to transcend the physicality and stand in for something more than himself (and, as Barthes notes, to reverse that transformation later, if one sees the wrestler departing the arena, once again humanized).

Yet in Barthes' writing (and that of other theorists and students of wrestling culture), one also sees the reflection of the notion of what he refers to as the "spectacle of suffering," which I argue is markedly similar to the "pornography of pain"<sup>57</sup> theorized by Karen Halttunen. Barthes writes,

What is thus displayed for the public is the great spectacle of Suffering, Defeat, and Justice. Wrestling presents man's suffering with all the amplification of tragic masks. The wrestler who suffers in a hold which is reputedly cruel (an arm-lock, a twisted leg) offers an excessive portrayal of Suffering; like a primitive Pieta, he exhibits for all to see his face, exaggeratedly contorted by an intolerable affliction. It is obvious, of course, that in wrestling reserve would be out of place, since it is opposed to the voluntary ostentation of the spectacle, to this Exhibition of Suffering which is the very aim of the fight. This is why all the actions which produce suffering are particularly spectacular, like the gesture of a conjurer who holds out his cards clearly to the public. Suffering which appeared without intelligible cause would not be understood; a concealed action that was actually cruel would transgress the unwritten rules of wrestling and would have no more sociological efficacy than a mad or parasitic gesture. On the contrary suffering appears as inflicted with emphasis and conviction, for everyone must see not only that the man suffers, but also and above all understand why he suffers. What wrestlers call a hold, that is, any figure which allows one to immobilize

---

<sup>57</sup> This concept will be explored again in greater length in the examination of fan culture in later chapters, both in the wrestlers' performances and those of fan fiction writers in particular.

the adversary indefinitely and to have him at one's mercy, has precisely the function of preparing in a conventional, therefore intelligible, fashion the spectacle of suffering, of methodically establishing the conditions of suffering.<sup>58</sup>

Haltunen argues that the “pornography of pain...represent[ed] pain as obscenely titillating precisely because the humanitarian sensibility deemed it unacceptable, taboo.”<sup>59</sup> This suffering that is writ large in the world of professional wrestling--this suffering that Barthes feels the viewer enjoys, precisely due to its spectacular nature--flirts with this pornography as well, rendering the pain titillating. The performers, then, respond to this titillation, ensuring that their suffering is as visible and audible as possible, yet simultaneously committed to a certain degree of reality. The screwed-up face, the wails of anguish, and the struggling to escape are only reasonable when the audience can plainly see what is being inflicted. These wails of pain that serve to horrify and frighten, however, can easily cross over into a more pleasurable form of pain, something that fans observe in their collections of photographs and videos.<sup>60</sup>

In her essay “Is RAW War?: Professional Wrestling as Popular S/M Narrative,” Lucia Rahilly takes this titillation to its logical conclusion, writing, “Pointing toward a broader trend in wrestling performance, the episode conflates pleasure with violence and the apperception of pain, attempting to veil a queer-inflicted, sadomasochistic extravaganza behind little more than a flimsy,

---

<sup>58</sup> Roland Barthes, “The World of Wrestling,” in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 26-27.

<sup>59</sup> Karen Haltunen. “Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-american Culture”. *The American Historical Review* 100.2 (1995): 304.

<sup>60</sup> Discussed in chapters three and five.

melodramatic scrim.”<sup>61</sup> Though wrestlers and commentators rarely imply that the pain being inflicted is enjoyable, there might be an implication that the wrestler who is *inflicting* the pain takes pleasure in it, usually described as a “sick pleasure.”

If something in a match, however, goes awry, which can happen during a match--a wrestler misses a step, or fails to deliver the move from the proper angle--the audience is at once incensed, condemning a different degree of artifice than before. There is an argument to be made, one that theorists have posited, that there is a certain pleasure in catching those glimpses “behind the curtain”--the indication that we, as fans, have just been permitted to see something that was not intended for us.<sup>62</sup> Both Laurence de Garis, in his essay “The ‘Logic’ of Wrestling,” and Sharon Mazer, in her seminal text *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle*, observe this phenomenon. Much as there is a titillation in pain, there is a particular sort of titillation in what de Garis, quoting Mazer, describes by saying that “one of the strongest sources of pleasure for fans of spectator sports is the voyeuristic pleasure of seeing something that one is not supposed to see. Professional wrestling fans take pleasure in detecting mistakes or miscues that were not intended for their eyes.”<sup>63</sup>

Yet this can enter into questions of “double layering” in the modern era. Wrestling organizations are well aware of the fans’ desire to catch these glimpses, and share them with the Internet at large, thereby prompting the question: are they

---

<sup>61</sup> Lucia Rahilly, “Is RAW War?: Professional Wrestling as Popular S/M Narrative,” *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 214.

<sup>62</sup> There is, of course, question of how much we are supposed to see versus what we are *told* we are not supposed to see—in a social media dominated society, which WWE takes full advantage of, “leaks” and accidents may in fact be highly deliberate.

<sup>63</sup> Laurence de Garis “The ‘Logic’ of Professional Wrestling,” in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 201.

deliberately “accidentally” sharing these reveals, thus exercising their control over the performance? The inherent theatricality of wrestling is not in question. As observers, even those who are aware that it is “worked,” we enter into a pact of belief in what is presented to us, as long as it is properly executed. We are willing, that is, to be “worked” ourselves--to be brought to a point of believing the well-crafted illusion. When a wrestler either over-exaggerates or under-plays, this is different than a momentary slip, a peek behind the scenes. When the performance rings false, we are confused; we are angry, and this is the experience that Barthes captures in his essay just as wrestling is falling out of favor in the television world.

This theatricality, however, can also be perceived as ritualistic, as in the work of both Michael R. Ball and Mark Leverette. Leverette focuses on the years since the “WWE” was established (since 2002), while Ball’s work focuses more on the “territory” years of wrestling. Like Barthes, Ball questions the impulse towards seeking “truth” in wrestling, arguing instead that the function of the performance is to *seem* real to those who are viewing it, those who come together as a community bound together by a transformative ritual. Ball says, for instance,

The focal point of sociological inquiry is not whether a particular phenomenon is ‘real’ or not. As ritual, all activity is a product of the culture in which it occurs. Instead, the focal concern must be the perception of the ritual by the participants, or as William I. Thomas and Dorothy S. Thomas observed, “what men believe to be real is real in its consequences.”

A major goal of theater is to make characters believable. Daily interaction rituals strive for sincerity, while extraordinary rituals attempt to believably portray conflicting values. In either case, if audiences do not believe the performances, the rituals fail<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> Michael Ball, *Professional Wrestling as Ritual Drama in American Popular Culture* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 116-117.

Once again, one is reminded of the metric by which “good” wrestling--or, perhaps more accurately, successful wrestling--can be judged: the effect the performance has on the audience. The perceived impact of the audience’s experience speaks to the establishment of the character of wrestling since its inception. In 2017, but arguably even before that, technical skill and accomplishment can only take a performer so far, in the public eye. The interview subjects I have spoken with over the course of this project speak highly of some performers, while roundly dismissing others. There are some constants, but each interview subject shared their own favorites, citing this match or that, this encounter or that one, as the one that cemented their devotion. Yet the criteria by which a wrestler is most frequently judged by fans is the way that they are able to make the fan *feel*: do we believe in what we are seeing? Do we believe that the pain you are feeling is real--are we moved to want to stop the suffering (or, perhaps, to bask in it?) Do we believe that the odds are stacked against you, or is the storytelling trying too hard to convince us not to believe our eyes?<sup>65</sup> The technical performance of a given wrestler is a crucial element in establishing this narrative, but the ritual we observe “fails,” not only when we hear a too-loudly telegraphed move, or see a wrestler miss with a kick that still somehow sends the opponent reeling, but when we find ourselves unable to believe in the story we are presented, the story being told through the signifying bodies of the performers in question. When interviewing fellow wrestling fans about their favorite performers, it was this ability to create *belief* that drew them in—a wrestler who could make you

---

<sup>65</sup>A storyline, for instance, built since the summer of 2015 and extending through 2017, asked fans to support the cause of an “underdog” against the evil Authority. This “underdog” is strong, handsome, and highly successful, hardly unconventional in any way, and fans responded to the inorganic nature of the storytelling that leads them to dismiss the performer in question.

feel for them, truly believe in their suffering, and evoke an emotional response, positive or negative, was far and away the best kind of wrestler.

Creating that emotional response is part of what helps to develop the participatory nature of wrestling. Without audience response to draw on, the narrative of professional wrestling would fall flat. Leverette references Ball's work on this topic in his own examination of the world of wrestling, writing,

For wrestling to be successful, both financially and as myth, it must become a participatory event for the viewers. If myths such as wrestling are today objectified on television, as myths once were in literature and in art, they are actualized in ritual. If myth is the story or narrative, ritual is the acting out of the story. Central to ritual is that it requires the participation of everyone, so in wrestling's case it goes beyond the mat and involves the viewer...Professional wrestling's ritual is always framed in a dramatic context called a "ritual drama" (see Deegan). Ritual dramas utilize repeating plots with familiar stereotypes (i.e. the Hero uses the crowd's strength to win over foreign menace) (Ball 122).<sup>66</sup>

This participatory element of wrestling, the relationship between performer and audience, is a frequent fixture in literature examining professional wrestling, one that surfaced again and again through the course of my interviews. The wrestling does not begin and end in the ring, even less so today in a highly mediatized, digitized age, where one feels that they have access to the wrestlers at all times through, for instance, social media channels (along with the ability to view and re-view the matches themselves through digitized versions). To engage with professional wrestling is to enter into this ritual of transformation, where we accept that real and not-real will blur together, creating something that was not previously present in either the wrestlers or their audiences.

---

<sup>66</sup> Mark Leverette, *Professional Wrestling: The Myth, the Mat, and American Popular Culture* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), 114-115.



Professional wrestling, as performance and ritual, is liminal, seeking to both blur and cross boundaries: it is sport and performance, it is sports entertainment.

Laurence de Garis writes, for example,

I find it curious that those who write about pro wrestling seem to take the stance that there needs to be some kind of explanation for why fans enjoy pro-wrestling matches but seem to feel that competitive sports need no similar explanation, as if “competition” in and of itself is sufficient for pleasure and enjoyment...At this point in time, one would be hard pressed to find anyone who would seriously defend professional wrestling as a traditional sport. But neither is professional wrestling traditional drama, exhibiting aesthetic choices long considered too “low” for the conventional definition of theater. Professional wrestling’s transcendence of boundaries is precisely what makes it so interesting as a cultural phenomenon.<sup>67</sup>

de Garis acknowledges that the companies themselves (particularly WWE) contribute to this confusion and desire for clarification, yet I argue that this confusion is a deliberate act. Rather than attempt to depict themselves as any one element--either sport or entertainment--professional wrestling has created their own category, one that nothing else can quite be a part of in the same way. There are precious few sports that are willing to depict themselves as possessing pre-determined outcomes; the implication that boxing or MMA, for instance, might be as “fixed” as WWE provokes an outcry. In acknowledging its own transformative properties, professional wrestling sits calmly in a category of its own; while the WWE itself may have national and international competitors, it possesses brand recognition and ease of access to render it almost untouchable.

The unique qualities and characteristics of professional wrestling have invariably led to a desire to look beyond the performers and/or business of wrestling,

---

<sup>67</sup> Laurence de Garis “The ‘Logic’ of Professional Wrestling,” in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 193.

and turn an ethnographic eye to the fans themselves in an attempt to draw conclusions about the whys and wherefores of wrestling fandom. What is the average age, gender, class, of a wrestling fan? How do they most frequently experience viewing professional wrestling: by attending live shows, by watching on television? What is the portrait of a professional wrestling fan, in other words, and who is pushing back against it? The collection *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*, cited throughout this text, offers a range of fannish examinations, from those online to those live, male and female, young and old; in addition, articles like “Fifty Million Viewers Can’t Be Wrong” examine wrestling’s mass appeal (and the ways its popularity can create stasis). Throughout this dissertation, I will reference these and other authors working to unpack the wrestling audience and the popular audience more broadly, in hopes of putting my experiences—and the experiences of my informants—into a broader social and cultural context.

### **A Brief History of Female Sports (and Sports Entertainment) Fan Culture:**

Why, then, is it particularly fruitful to examine the relationship between wrestling and *female* fan culture specifically? On the surface, the answer seems almost too simple: wrestling, like many sports, is perceived as a male domain, and thus female presence within it must be noteworthy. Yet as Chad Dell’s *The Revenge of Hatpin Mary* indicates, women have made up a sizeable percentage of wrestling audiences from its television days (and, arguably, well before, as there are anecdotes about women fainting away at the sight of Muldoon’s muscular traveling wrestlers).

Their presence has always been and continues to be visible; while it may not represent a majority, it is at the very least a noticeable minority. So why is it that every woman I have spoken to has shared at least one experience of being treated as exceptional (and suspicious) for their wrestling fan culture? Why do women share stories of feeling as though they must “prove” their fandom to be permitted to enter what is seen by many as an open-access activity?

This experience is, of course, not unique to wrestling fans; it is the case whenever women attempt to participate or engage in fandom of traditionally male-dominated activities or performances. Their performance of fandom is heavily scrutinized; while doing fandom “wrong” is not necessarily limited by gender, it is at the very least a far slipperier slope for women. For instance, as Victoria Gosling writes in “Girls Allowed? The Marginalization of Female Sports Fans,”

Therefore female fans of male mass spectator sports often find that their authenticity as “real fans” is questioned by other (most often male) supporters and that they are labeled as “uncommitted” to their team (Woodhouse & Williams 1999)...Women’s marginal position within sport fan cultures means that their legitimacy as sport fans is often questioned, even though there is some evidence to suggest that women may be more dedicated and loyal to the sports they follow. This questioning of authenticity and loyalty could simply be seen as an expression of men’s fears over women invading their traditionally masculine space; however, it plays an important role in marginalizing female fans.<sup>68</sup>

Female dedication or loyalty, if it passes questioning at all, is then frequently reduced to a purely sexual attraction, whether to the players themselves or borne from a desire to impress and attract male fans. Stacy Pope, in her article on women as “consumers” and fans, writes,

---

<sup>68</sup> Victoria Gosling, “Girls Allowed? The Marginalization of Female Sports Fans,” in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World* (New York: NYU Press, 2007), 256-260.

Female fans on the other hand will seemingly fall into one of three ‘new consumer’ fan categories constructed for them: those who have attended matches for a long time and approve of changes in the game; those who were encouraged to attend after the creation of a new family stand at Old Trafford; and teenage girls who now attend matches because of the new sexual attractiveness of star players (King, 2002). By labelling females as more typically ‘new consumer’ fans, this seemingly implies that they will have a ‘naturally’ weaker identification with their club.”<sup>69</sup>

The notion of female dedication to sports fandom of any kind is perceived as inherently weaker than that of male fans; women who wish to buck this image must work doubly hard in order to prove themselves “worthy” of the label “real fan,” often necessitating rejection of other female fans to demonstrate worthiness.<sup>70</sup>

In her solo article, Gosling goes on to observe,

In interviews with British ice hockey supporters, Crawford and Gosling reveal that the attitudes of many male supporters indicate that women continue to be seen as “inauthentic” in their patterns of support, most notably cast into age-specific roles as “mothers” who are there to look after the children, “girlfriends” who are there with partners, or “silly young girls” who are there to “lust after the players.” For instance, “John” (male, aged thirty) criticizes young female fans, stating,

*They sit there talking all through the game, and when they score a goal they don’t even get up. We’ve sat there and the girls are in and out, in and out, and for me they are just there to look at the players, they’re not interested in the game are they? They just have a giggle, you know what I mean? You can’t concentrate with someone chatting away. It’s obvious what they’ve gone for.* (cited in Crawford & Gosling 2004: 486)

Such comments, Crawford and Gosling (2004) argue, emphasize the belief (and unease) of male fans that women attend male mass spectator sports merely to “swoon” over the players. Women fans are therefore viewed as inauthentic and not dedicated enough in their support. Although it may be the case that some female supporters may have been attracted to sport, and in particular soccer, by the ways in which players such as David Beckham are packaged and sold today (Woodhouse & Williams 1999: 61), Hinerman

---

<sup>69</sup> Stacy Pope, “ ‘Like tearing down Durham Cathedral and building a brothel:’ Women as ‘new consumer’ fans?” *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 2011 46, 474.

<sup>70</sup> This sense that gatekeeping is as much female/female as it is male/female was a topic that came up in conversation with a number of my informants, and will be discussed in greater detail in later chapters.

(1992) suggests that most fan activities involve some level of fantasy, and this is not necessarily a sign of less dedication. As Van Zoonen (1994: 98) highlights, it is “the patriarchal will to maintain power” that dictates that it is wrong to look lustfully at the male body, and it is the male gaze that dominates sport presentation (see Rose & Friedman 1994). Therefore male mass spectator sports in both the mass media and the live event are primarily targeted towards a male audience (Cooper-Chen 1994). The presence of women fans therefore threatens the “male gaze,” as women become the observers and men the objects of the gaze, and men may find this incredibly unnerving (Whelehan 2000).<sup>71</sup>

In the article quoted within this essay, Gosling and her co-author Garry Crawford reflect on this threatening and unnerving presence more fully, particularly as it pertains to sexuality:

A quote from Gareth (male, aged 29, interviewed July 1999) provides one example of this unease at the presence of women at ice hockey, expressed by many male interviewees in this research: Well they [female fans] only go to perv don't they? ... you know ... to look at the hunky big Canadian players [laughs]. It's not right, it ain't what sport is about, you're there to get involved, men together ... that's what it's always been about ... women ... well some might be ... but you know what I mean? I mean some women go to look at the players ... sport's a man-thing, they make it girly. Sport has traditionally been seen as a male domain and men 'create barricades to "protect" their territory' from invasion by women (Whelehan, 2000: 127). Coddington (1997) argues that the anxiety behind why men so ardently wish to protect this 'territory' is the fear that women, by making players the subject of their sexual gaze and desires, will bring sex into sport<sup>72</sup>.

The mere physical presence of women in the stands--the physical body noticeably present--renders the male gaze unstable. The pleasure of looking, the joy in watching, is now filtered through the female gaze rather than strictly the male; thus, men who feel compelled to protect their territory (and, as Crawford and Gosling argue, who may not wish to acknowledge their own complicated feelings toward their enjoyment

---

<sup>71</sup> Victoria Gosling, “Girls Allowed? The Marginalization of Female Sports Fans,” in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World* (New York: NYU Press, 2007), 258-259.

<sup>72</sup> Garry Crawford and Victoria Gosling, “The Myth of the Puck Bunny: Female Fans and Men’s Ice Hockey,” *Sociology*, July 2004, Volume 38, No. 3, 487-488.

in looking) attempt to create boundaries, tests, and accusations of inauthenticity.

Though these authors (among others) are speaking more broadly about female sports fandom outside of the world of professional wrestling, this troubling of the gaze is all the more significant when the performers on display are well-muscled, often handsome men, who are attempting to touch, grab, and pin one another in a series of movements that, outside of the wrestling ring, would raise an eyebrow at the very least. As Lucia Rahilly describes it,

Without the rigorously policed disavowal of the link between pain and sexual pleasure, therefore—facilitated and, paradoxically, necessitated by the hypereroticization of both male and female wrestling competitors—the spectacle of overtly sexualized, barely clad, intimately grappling same-sex bodies would threaten the stability of the boundaries of heterosexual identity. In its very amplification of erotics within an ostensibly heterosexual matrix, therefore, wrestling serves to illuminate the normalizing role of sport more generally as it preserves the integrity of the categories of gender and sexual orientation, serving as a forum for “men to watch and dissect other men’s bodies...a legitimate space for gazing at the male form without homosexuality alleged or feared” (Miller 1998: 103).<sup>73</sup>

If wrestling creates a pornography of pain, then, it also creates titillation well before any physical pain is put on display. While wrestling is, in many ways, hyper-masculine, the fulfillment of violent fantasies, the physicality of it seemingly has significantly more to offer heterosexual women and homosexual men than the straight male. Mark Leverette notes the satisfaction and freedom that the experience of viewing professional wrestling can bring:

Wrestling is a liminal activity, as Victor Turner defines it (*Ritual Process* 167), since for the viewers it provides “cognitive satisfaction, a break from regularity, and license for normally illicit behaviors;” however, it goes beyond being merely an exercise in catharsis. It functions in this way because it is a realm of interactivity in which the “participants are liberated from their formal

---

<sup>73</sup> Lucia Rahilly, “Is RAW War?: Professional Wrestling as Popular S/M Narrative,” *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 228.

structural identity” (Turner 95). Liminality is “a time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action” during which the values of the social construct are examined (Turner, *Ritual Practice* 167). A liminoid genre such as professional wrestling theoretically offers participatory fans a chance to view alternative social experiences, own experiences.”<sup>74</sup>

From its inception, wrestling (and, arguably, other sporting events) has afforded its viewers the opportunity to break free from the acceptable bounds of society, and to witness violence with or without participating in it. For women, this opportunity was especially potent, offering the opportunity for male bodies on display as well as far more boisterous behavior than might be typically considered permissible. Chad Dell’s *The Revenge of Hatpin Mary* examines the rise of female wrestling fandom in the 1950s--the rise of the television era--and the ways in which the experiences of sex and violence were linked, as women explored and redefined their own sexuality. Yet wrestling’s appeal to women is seen by some theorists and critics as part of its difficulty in finding mainstream acceptance, as Dell observes:

It is appropriate to pause a moment and reflect on the historical status of women’s culture—or that which is ascribed to women at a particular historical moment. Women have long been associated with spectacle, from melodramatic theatricals to romance novels, as well as with mass culture more generally, and they have been roundly criticized in the association. Huyssen argues that nineteenth-century women were often castigated for their consumption of “inferior” literature and “inauthentic” mass culture, while men were similarly praised for their devotion to real or authentic culture, that is, “high art”...Professional wrestling’s status was considerably lower than its more male-oriented sporting equivalent—boxing—and sunk even lower in the 1950s. It is no surprise, then, that professional wrestling would be further denigrated for being popular with women.<sup>75</sup>

Wrestling was (and is) spectacular; it is accessible and appealing to the masses; and thus its association with the feminine is hardly surprising, in spite of appearances. Yet

---

<sup>74</sup> Mark Leverette, *Professional Wrestling: The Myth, the Mat, and American Popular Culture* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), 116.

<sup>75</sup> Chad Dell, *The Revenge of Hatpin Mary* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006), 18.

as Dell goes on to observe, and as many present-day authors (and wrestling fans) have said, this opportunity and access ultimately afforded women, and continues to afford women, a reversal of roles. Women are doing the looking, rather than being looked at; while, to borrow the words of John Berger, men are still *acting*, women in wrestling audiences are doing far more than simply *appearing*. They are active consumers, with men as the object of their gaze; as Dell describes it, women were “making visible what sports culture tends to deny: the sexual appreciation of the athlete. This has a further destabilizing effect on the relationship between audience and performer, when defined in strictly masculine terms, which typically denies any sexual dynamic. By acknowledging the sexual aspect of an athlete’s performance, women were asserting their power--through their control of the gaze--to be public consumers of male sexuality.”<sup>76</sup> Wrestling audiences, as Dell discusses at length, were a safe place for women to act out, to behave in ways that would not be seen as socially acceptable, to scream and call out for the performers’ bodies or their deaths, depending on their personal feelings--wrestling was an outlet. But Rahilly further observes that

As Jenkins argues, emotional restraint—particularly for men—proves critical to social integration (Jenkins 1997: 52, and in this volume); emotional display baldly violates cultural norms, coding vulnerability and a dangerous incapacity for self-control. Cathartic and libidinal for both participants and fans, therefore, wrestling catalyzes a necessary emotional release that allows them to comport themselves, otherwise, in a definitively docile fashion...But professional wrestling certainly does more than supply a safe forum for acting out; in its appropriation and fundamental parody of athletic culture, wrestling actively illuminates the role of sport in preserving the power status quo.<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>76</sup> Chad Dell, *The Revenge of Hatpin Mary* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006), 25.

<sup>77</sup> Lucia Rahilly, “Is RAW War?: Professional Wrestling as Popular S/M Narrative,” *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 216-217.



Watching and enjoying professional wrestling, for male and female fans, but also for male and female performers, serves as both outlet and opportunity to reaffirm that this outlet is necessary, with sexually charged performers and audience members alike reacting to the spectacular displays they are being offered.

That wrestling, like other sports, is highly sexually charged is unsurprising (we are, after all, talking about a sport in which men typically oil up before a match, enter the ring in trunks that leave stunningly little to the imagination, and proceed to grab one another while grunting and moaning in pain). Yet this sexual energy is tacitly ignored, almost disavowed, by the official narrative which suggests that sports and athletes exist to be consumed by heterosexual males. Other types of writing, as one might expect, centers around the bodies on display in professional wrestling fandom, and, to an extent, the ways in which fans might relate to those bodies and the stories that they are telling, whether successful or not. In “Never Trust a Snake:’

WWF Wrestling as Masculine Melodrama,” Henry Jenkins III, writes:

Here and elsewhere, WWF wrestling operates along the gap that separates our cultural ideal of male autonomy and the reality of alienation, themes that emerge most vividly within tag team competition. The fighter, that omnipotent muscle machine, steps alone, with complete confidence, into the ring, ready to do battle with his opponent. As the fight progresses, he is beaten down, unable to manage without assistance. Struggling to the ropes, he must admit that he needs another man. His partner reaches out to him while he crawls along the floor, inching to that embrace. The image of the two hands, barely touching, and the two men, working together to overcome their problems, seems rich with what Eve Sedgwick calls “male homosocial desire” (Sedgwick 1985). That such a fantasy is played out involving men whose physical appearance exaggerates all of the secondary masculine characteristics frees male spectators from social taboos which prohibit the open exploration of male

intimacy. In their own brutish language, the men express what it is like to need (and desire?) another man.<sup>78</sup>

Yet Jenkins also notes that, “Wrestling operates within a carefully policed zone, a squared ring, that allows for the representation of intense homosocial desire but also erects strong barriers against too much risk and intimacy. The wrestlers ‘share things,’ but they are not allowed to get ‘too close.’”<sup>79</sup> Wrestling is still presumed to be aimed at a heterosexual male audience, and thus the stories that are being told and the (muscular, well-sculpted) bodies that enact those stories must not cross boundaries. Sharon Mazer notes that numerous early studies and examinations “are reliant on assumptions of the wrestling fans’ lower-class naïveté and working-class anger”<sup>80</sup>--I would further add that there is a default assumption of the “typical” fan as male.<sup>81</sup> As Susan Clerc and Catherine Salmon assert, “The gender based differences in the picture galleries [of professional wrestling] further underscore the impact of wrestling as a conservative narrative with very clear, essentialist, gender lines,” underscoring an argument made by numerous authors before them. Salmon and Clerc<sup>82</sup> continually (and rightly) assert that women have long been fans of

---

<sup>78</sup> Henry Jenkins III, “‘Never Trust a Snake:’ WWF Wrestling as Masculine Melodrama,” in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 54.

<sup>79</sup> Henry Jenkins III, “‘Never Trust a Snake:’ WWF Wrestling as Masculine Melodrama,” in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 55.

<sup>80</sup> Sharon Mazer, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 7

<sup>81</sup> This sort of default assumption is, indeed, supported by numerical evidence, like the above-cited survey; more anecdotally, in my own personal experience as well as that of several of my female interview subjects, being a woman who self-identifies as a wrestling fan is typically met with surprise and even discomfort.

<sup>82</sup> Susan Clerc and Catherine Salmon, “‘Ladies Love Wrestling, Too’: Female Wrestling Fans Online,” in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 167-191.

professional wrestling, in spite of its traditional representation, or what might accurately be called the pre-conceived notions of “typical” fandom that surfaces in a great deal of writing about professional wrestling and its fans. They write, “‘Pretty boys’ and sexual predators enact male psychodramas and are elevated or cast down, turned heel or face, based on the reactions of the male audience. Any joy female fans derive is the result of their unintended interpretations and pleasure at watching big men in small trunks.”<sup>83</sup> The Internet (and sites like Tumblr in particular) created a “safe space” for women to share those unintended interpretations and pleasure, voicing their vast and varied types of interest in the world of professional wrestling to often like-minded fellow female fans. I would argue, however, that organizations like the WWE are increasingly aware of the presence of this space, and often find ways to play to it very selectively without stating outright that they are doing so--a topic I discuss in chapter three when considering the ways in which WWE markets imagery through their official social media channels.

As noted earlier, Clerc and Salmon’s assertions draw from Chad Dell’s *Revenge of Hatpin Mary: Women, Professional Wrestling and Fan Culture in the 1950s*. *The Revenge of Hatpin Mary*, a study that examines the ways in which wrestling in the 1950s offered women a “gathering place” where they could act out freely. In this wrestling sphere, women could express their similarly highly-sexed fixations on the males performing in the ring, while cheering and booing the “faces” and “heels” as they fought their bouts. Dell, like Clerc and Salmon, is particularly

---

<sup>83</sup> Susan Clerc and Catherine Salmon, “ ‘Ladies Love Wrestling, Too’: Female Wrestling Fans Online,” in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 168.

interested in the way that mass media, including television and the press, created and excluded audiences for professional wrestling, both helping and hindering the women who identified as fans. The current climate toward “thirsty”<sup>84</sup> or “hysterical” female fans is unfortunately not a new one either--that is, the strong impulse that exists (both at live events and perhaps even more on the Internet where anonymity continues to reign supreme), to silence female expressions of sexual desire for the wrestlers they support. A woman who expresses her sexual interest in a male wrestler is likely to be called “thirsty”; a man who does the same towards a female wrestler is typically just called a wrestling fan. In *Theorizing Fandom* Dell writes:

Attempts to gain power over individuals by gaining control of their bodies has long been a familiar tactic in human history, as the world of Michel Foucault has so aptly illustrated. Foucault (1980) detailed elaborate Victorian-era efforts with regard to the human body—and particularly the female body—in order to bring it under (male) control, through the deployment of medical and educational institutions, prisons, and so forth. As Foucault points out, the “discovery” of the specifically female disease “hysteria” is but one particularly relevant example of attempts to assert power over the female body. Much the same sort of effort was made in the 1940s and 1950s to control the “loose” bodies of the female fans of Sinatra and Elvis. The public expression of female sexual desire ran counter to the image of the domestic(ated) woman so prevalent at the time...Whether one is analyzing the phenomenon of Luke Perry who, as I write this, must be airlifted in and out of shopping malls amidst the crush of female fans, or Fran Sinatra, whose every movement, reporters in the 1940s noted, would make “young girls faint and old women scream” (reported in Kelley, 1986, p. 74) or wrestlers like Mr. America, whose “beauty and brawn makes bobby-soxers swoon” (Boal, p.24), the phenomenon of the defiant female body “out of control” was and is arguably a significant and powerful transgression of prevalent gendered norms.<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>84</sup> Thirst/thirsty are slang terms that frequently circulate on Tumblr and Twitter, among other places, referring particularly to strong sexual attraction/lusting after any given individual. There are some wrestlers whose fans are frequently dismissed as particularly “thirsty” (Dean Ambrose’s fans are often chief among these).

<sup>85</sup> Chad Dell, “Lookit that hunk of man!” in *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture, and Identity* (New Jersey: Hampton Press, 1998), 101.

This desire to restrict and control manifests itself in a variety of ways, from eye-rolling and outright mocking at live events, to anonymous posts (and non-anonymous ones) on numerous message boards decrying the “wrong kind” of female fan. The “wrong kind” of female fan is the kind that takes a sexual interest in the wrestlers--the kind that is not behaving according to the unspoken prescribed role in which she has been cast.<sup>86</sup> Notably, in interviews wrestlers have not asked male fans to “stop it,” playfully or otherwise; arguably, male fans have the potential to post the identical sets of images as female fans, but the immediate response will not be to assume that they are posting those images out of sexual desire for the wrestler pictured. As female fans, the battle is at least doubled: first the battle that all fans face (to convince “non-believers” that there is pleasure to be found in professional wrestling), and then the secondary battle of convincing even fellow fans that their pleasure is as legitimate as any other. Unsurprisingly, then, female fans online find spaces in which they can resist and break free from the restriction and attempted control (whether by male or female fans or outsiders) by connecting to other fans that are “like them”--and that number is growing daily. Like Dell’s work, Clerc and Salmon’s essay reaffirms the continued and continual female fan presence as an essential component of the construction of the world of fandom, but their mere presence can often serve as a source of discomfort to that majority.

Articles and interviews in the 1950s frequently imply that this female consumption is somehow disruptive and incorrect; tweets, Internet articles, and fan

---

<sup>86</sup> It is worth noting that this outcry and backlash is not only coming from male fans uncomfortable with female fans infringing on “their” territory; there are also numerous examples of other female-identifying fans making a conscious effort to set themselves apart from “those girls,” who “ruin it for the rest of us,” indicating by their statements that their performance of fandom is “purer.”

chants in 2017 strive to do the same. It is the work of this dissertation to examine these varied ways of “doing girl” (to borrow a term from Jane Ussher, used by Stacy Pope), to discuss and dissect the experiences of female fans in male-dominated spaces that still suggest that, in spite of the growth of fandom and the increased accessibility, there is no guaranteed, easy room for women. It is the work of female fans—whether artistic or the simple act of taking up space, in public and on social media—to help carve out those spaces, to make them accessible to other fans, and to push back against the dominant narrative of who, exactly, professional wrestling is meant to draw in.

## Chapter 2: Live events and fan engagement

“Play cannot be denied. You can deny, if you like, nearly all abstractions: justice, beauty, truth, goodness, mind, God. You can deny seriousness, but not play. But in acknowledging play you acknowledge mind, for whatever else play is, it is not matter.”

--Johan Huizinga, “Nature and Significance of Play as a Cultural Phenomenon”<sup>87</sup>

Learn how to read people's emotions. This tip is invaluable. People don't just boo or cheer. You have to learn how to make them.

--William Regal, Advice for Aspiring Pro Wrestlers<sup>88</sup>

The setting: the Verizon Center, in downtown Washington, DC. The crowd has, temporarily, been hushed, at the behest of the seven foot tall “giant” currently in one of the four corners of the wrestling ring, pinning the smaller, thrashing heel<sup>89</sup> against the ringposts with one huge hand. In the midst of the hush, the giant draws back his other arm and delivers a loud, resounding slap to the bare chest of the other wrestler, who writhes in exaggerated pain and attempts to collapse to the ground, much to the delight of the crowd. But—there are three more corners of the ring to go—and the giant looks to the crowd to see what they think. As Michael R. Ball writes, “in the participant event, both the wrestlers and the fans contribute to the action. The ritual is truly participatory, with wrestlers eliciting responses from the crowd and reacting to the yelled comments of fans seated nearby. Fans are encouraged to “support” their heroes by cheering loudly when he or she is in a

---

<sup>87</sup> Johan Huizinga, “Nature and Significance of Play as a Cultural Phenomenon,” in *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1971), 97.

<sup>88</sup> Via William Regal’s Twitter site, this was a series of tweets that was compiled into Tweet Longer: <http://www.twitlonger.com/show/njvnje>, June 8, 2015 (accessed 1 April 2017).

<sup>89</sup> “Heel” is the term used to describe the wrestler who acts as the villain in matches, contrasted with the babyface or “face” who plays the hero.

temporarily compromised position.”<sup>90</sup> In this case, fans were instead cheering loudly because their hero was in a position of potential triumph. The cry heard that night, among a crowd of wrestling fans, was a familiar one. “One more time! One more time! One more time!”

This cry is, to be fair, not unheard of well beyond the world of “sports entertainment.” Fans of sports and entertainment of all kinds boisterously and joyously call out for more, hoping to see another home run, hear an encore, or, in this case, another chest chop. The concert encore, at this point, is almost expected--set lists circulate and note at least one or two planned encores, becoming, in a sense, an extension of the set itself, a continuation that was never in question. Though there may be teases--for example, a Bruce Springsteen concert where the Boss feigns hesitation in picking his guitar back up, cupping his hand to his ear to see just how loudly the crowd can scream its approval--one can rest fairly well assured that the “show will go on” as planned. Yet there is a particular potency in watching two wrestling performers renegotiate the boundaries of their performance amongst a roaring crowd, giving the audience what they’re crying for or, in the case of the heels, coldly denying it. As Ball notes,

because wrestling “gives the people what they want,” rather than adhering doggedly to any trite ideals of sportsmanship and fair play, wrestling is more reflective of public ideals and values than other sports. Basketball and baseball, for example, have changed their rules over a period of years to accommodate public demand for more action...By contrast, wrestling has few known rules—and these are rarely followed. Since rules are seldom enforced, this allows wrestlers to “read” their audience, fabricating ritual drama at audience demand (“Guaranteed Entertainment,” 1948; 51-52)...<sup>91</sup>

---

<sup>90</sup> Michael R. Ball, *Professional Wrestling as Ritual Drama in American Popular Culture*, Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990, 75.

<sup>91</sup> Michael R. Ball, *Professional Wrestling as Ritual Drama in American Popular Culture*, (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 51.



As the wrestlers “read” their audience and react to it--or choose not to--the same questions are raised at each event, verbally and non-verbally, through cheers and boos and signs. Will the crowd change the flow of the story? Can good triumph over evil in spite of every appearance to the contrary? Will the fans choose to engage with the product that is being presented, or will they attempt--to the best of their ability--to engage in “hijacking” the show, attempting to make it more about the audience and their responses than what is on offer in the ring?

In the world of professional wrestling, audience/fan interaction is likelier to shape the performance at smaller, independent shows--or in “house shows” for WWE (defined below)--whereas even audience attempts to reshape larger or televised shows (such as a *Monday Night Raw* taping or a pay-per-view) can be commodified and then re-shaped by the corporation in order to tell a particular story. One of the challenges in attendance at a live event is the lack of commentary, a staple of televised wrestling events since its earliest days. Typically, when watching a pay-per-view or televised event, a commentary team (sometimes featuring a wrestler who is engaged in a feud with one of the performers who has a match going on) is there to interpret, elaborate, and call attention to what is happening; to remind the audience of ongoing feuds, or to explain what is happening outside of the ring that influences what happens within it. When at a live event, however, although the commentary team is frequently there and recording, the audience<sup>92</sup> cannot hear them. Live events appear, in some ways, a blanker slate for the audience’s interpretation, what you see, what you hear, what you

---

<sup>92</sup> The exception, of course, being if one is seated ringside directly behind the commentary team—I have not experienced this and cannot speak to its effect!

experience, is what goes, without anyone in a position of authority suggesting what it is you should look at or focus on or even remember. Yet even in these instances, the combination of music, lighting, and atmosphere, along with the marketing of particular superstars (whose signed photographs and t-shirts are available for purchase) strongly guides audience members towards a specific narrative.

In spite of this guiding, however, there becomes a greater sense of focus and purpose for the audience, a stronger sense of belief of one's own power to influence what is about to occur. Even when the storytelling itself is not altered by audience engagement, however, audience interaction allows for fuller storytelling without necessarily influencing the ultimate outcome of the match. Further, there are events in which wrestlers are given opportunities to interact with fans directly outside of the ring; while in these events, wrestlers may act out of "character," fan engagement and interaction still has a prescribed set of rules and/or limitations, and can at times be utilized to script larger storylines for the performers after the fact.

The audience plays a crucial role in the creation of the stories of the professional wrestling world, and in this essay, I offer four examples of personally witnessed case studies in an attempt to describe the wide range of ways in which audience and fan interaction: 1) shapes the performance that is being staged; 2) shapes the ways in which fans engage with the talent and the performance, and 3) shapes the ways fans engage with other fans who are present in these live events.<sup>93</sup>

Throughout much of this dissertation, I engage with my informants about their

---

<sup>93</sup> The ways in which fans engage virtually with these events—whether watching on television or computer, liveblogging, or some combination thereof—will be discussed in greater length in chapter three.

experiences on social media and at live events that they have attended, or their reflections on watching weekly television programming or pay-per-views. Here, I wish to present the narrative of bodies in space, particularly *my* body and *my* experiences at live events. I cannot speak for all of the fans at these events, but I will speak to my own experiences attending a range of different types of wrestling shows and fans events. Some questions that I will explore are: as I experienced it, how does the audience envision their role at a live event--do they see themselves as shaping or affecting the events themselves? How do the audiences differ between these events, and how do the performers allow for a shift in audience engagement? How do audiences interact with the performers in non-match settings--meet and greets, for example, or fan gathering events--and what are the codes of conduct that govern these engagements? In considering these questions, I will reflect on the ways in which wrestling has features in common with aspects of play as well as aspects of theatrical performance as well as spectacle.

As Sharon Mazer notes in *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle*, “professional wrestling is not accepted as a legitimate sport—nor, obviously, can it be considered legitimate theatre—it does in fact intersect, exploit, and finally parody both forms of entertainment.”<sup>94</sup> Further, while the WWE has its headquarters in Stamford, Connecticut, wrestling remains at heart a mobile art; the performers travel constantly, with shows happening across the world (sometimes simultaneously), with no single place that fans can go to, to say that they have “really” experienced

---

<sup>94</sup> Sharon Mazer, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 21.

wrestling. There is an argument to be made that one is not “truly” a fan until they have experienced a live wrestling show, but later chapters of this dissertation, as well as my personal experience, push back against that argument. For instance, though I began watching wrestling as a child and continued watching until I was approximately fifteen years old, and then picked up again in 2012, I did not attend my first live wrestling event until 2013. The advent of social media and readily available cable television access to five hours of professional wrestling a week, with two to three additional hours available if one is a subscriber to the WWE Network, means that while there is prestige and power in attending live events, they are not the only milestone by which to measure fandom.

The world of professional wrestling, then, is a fraught one in some senses, existing everywhere and nowhere--a fandom caught in a world “between” sport and entertainment, in spite of the long and rich history of wrestling in the United States, as established in the previous chapter. The majority of fans would be quick to argue the semiotics of the terminology surrounding wrestling and its dubious status. Wrestling is not “fake,” it is “scripted” or “rehearsed” or “predetermined.” All professional wrestling is scripted & rehearsed, to a greater or lesser degree. By reports and interviews from current and former talent, in all matches, there is a certain degree of discussion beforehand: “we need the match to go about this long, we want to make sure we do these spots, and this is how the finish is going to happen,” but beyond that, as in other forms of performance, a certain amount of improvisation. This improvisation may be physical and affect the moves that will happen in and out of the ring; it might alternately be connected more directly to audience response,

allowing the wrestlers to adjust their moves and taunts to reflect the ways in which the audience is reacting to what they are doing. It is additionally very much dependent on the level of the performers how much things will be scripted and how that scripted action will come across. Will it be almost robotic: just a series of spots (individual moves or moments in-ring) that seem clunky, lacking transition? Will it be seamless, as though these people have done this together a thousand times (which sometimes they may have)? Most importantly for the purposes of this chapter, will the performers anticipate the whims of the audience and make adjustments throughout in response to them, or will the unpredictable liveness of the crowd throw them off? Will a performer be so struck by the actions of a fan during an interaction that they break out of character to attempt to handle it? Will audience members demand something different than what is offered--and will the performers offer that in reply?

The audience's role in sports and sports entertainment is, in many ways, strikingly similar. As Dennis Kennedy writes,

The...free-play characteristic for sports spectators is the freedom to condemn the performance's outcome and reject the manner of play. Fans can know better than the coach, demand more of the team, see more than the referee. If the result displeases them, they may well express their dissatisfaction publicly. It is true that any theatre spectator can do this, but since the investment of theatregoers is substantially less ardent their disappointment is also less and they rarely express it openly, except by staying away in the future. Further, sport fans can indicate dissatisfaction on a continuing basis, communally and with statistically supported knowledge. In dramaturgical terms a sporting season or tournament is like a serial TV show, with the same players meeting challenges each day or each week that are both new and not new. The character identification that some TV viewers assume with actors in soap operas, sitcoms, or series dramas is parallel to the heroicizing of sports stars,

and little like it is possible in the theatre<sup>95</sup>.

Unlike in other sporting events, however, due to the nature of professional wrestling and its predetermined status, the response of the fans may in fact play a role in dictating the particulars of the match, or help set up a match or event in the future. There are several confirmed instances of WWE performers who are given “pushes” in large part due to the overwhelming response of the crowd (and countless other rumored instances--unsubstantiated claims, but arising frequently enough to bear notice)<sup>96</sup>. While the crowd may not, typically, dictate how the match will end, they do in fact help to dictate how that ending happens, at least according to the narratives of wrestlers after they have left the company, or in storylines through wrestling promos (speeches) that claim that “the people” are the reason that a performer has won or lost a match.

The strongest performers are frequently those that are most attuned to the crowd: what are they responding to? What are they not responding to? What actions can you repeat, and what ones swiftly grow stale? While technical wrestling skill is important--the “sport” in sports entertainment--the entertainment is crucial as well, and is often tied to spectacle. John MacAloon, in his essay on the Olympics and spectacle in modern society, discusses four main genres that the Olympics engage in: spectacle, game, festival, and ritual. Professional wrestling particularly follows the

---

<sup>95</sup> Dennis Kennedy, *The Spectator and the Spectacle: Audiences in Modernity and Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 157.

<sup>96</sup> It is crucial to note that no fan can be truly privy to the inner workings of a major corporation like WWE, and thus such conclusions may be conjecture. However, these conclusions are based on informed analysis of patterns within the company and represent numerous articles and interviews with the performers themselves that have been published and/or released both during the performers’ time with the WWE and afterward, when they are even likelier to confirm these rumors.

guiding principles of his notion of spectacle, as spectacle must be seen (it is in its etymology); spectacle must be of a certain scope; spectacle requires both actors and audience; and spectacle must be dynamic. Without any of these components, what is occurring is simply not a spectacle. In wrestling, as in the case he makes when discussing the Olympics, new rules are being put in place, new champions are being crowned and defeated (sometimes in one day), and even the location is constantly changing<sup>97</sup>. The spectacular in wrestling can be anything from a particularly flashy or high-risk move to a series of fireworks set off to herald the entrance of a particular team, but even these elements can shift depending on audience size and response.

The improvisation and spectacle are further determined and complicated by questions of what character you are working or playing--will you be a heel or a face in this match? In theory a “good” heel, the strongest kind of heel, would not want the crowd to “pop” (have a loud positive response to) anything that they do--that kind of response is reserved for the face in a moment of what Roland Barthes describes as “justice,” writing,

The idea of “paying” is essential to wrestling, and the crowd’s “Give it to him” means above all else “Make him pay.” This is therefore, needless to say, an immanent justice. The baser the action of the “bastard,” the more delighted the public is by the blow which he justly receives in return. If the villain—who is of course a coward—takes refuge behind the ropes, claiming unfairly to have a right to do so by a brazen mimicry, he is inexorably pursued there and caught, and the crowd is jubilant at seeing the rules broken for the sake of a deserved punishment...<sup>98</sup>

---

<sup>97</sup> John J. MacAloon, “Olympic Games and the Theory of Spectacle in Modern Societies” in *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle: Rehearsals Toward a Theory of Cultural Performance* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1984), 241-280.

<sup>98</sup> Roland Barthes, “The World of Wrestling,” in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 28.

This kind of crowd response may lead to a longer match or a shorter one; it may call for multiple near-falls or a single clean one; it may mean that the wrestlers speak longer before their matches or run out all the faster afterward. As Laurence de Garis observes,

The reason that credibility is important is so that fans can experience a pro-wrestling match as they would a sports event. The best matches in wrestling are those that mimic the oohs and ahs of a sports contest. The best matches have reproduced the formula that makes those “miracle moments” in sports so miraculous: the home run in the bottom of the ninth to win the game, the last second field goal, the final-round knockout while you are behind on the judges’ scorecard....”<sup>99</sup>

How can a performer respond to the crowd at hand--or the individual fan--to help reproduce those moments, to create some element of perceived connection between fan and fan object, allowing the mentality that “I influenced that, I made an impact!” to persist?

To speak further to the frequently-confronted question of the “reality” of wrestling, it is also crucial to note the notion of professional wrestling as a type of performance, or perhaps even more specifically a ritual performance, a ritual that helps to create insiders and outsiders, those in the know and those who are not.

Non-participants are quick to condemn professional wrestling as “fake,” but would never consider theatrical performances “fake.” Fans, and wrestlers alike support the entertainment value of wrestling. For them, wrestling’s ritual dramas are rekeyings of real-life dramas, no more a deception than John Wayne movies...One reason for the belief in the deceptive nature of wrestling springs from the fact that promoters do not advertise the matches as theater. This leads non-participants to believe that participants are gullible “dupes, marks, pigeons, suckers, butts, victims,” or “gulls.” Non-participants have “discovered” the deception which is apparently unknown to participants. The “sport” has been “discredited.” The fact that participants view the proceedings as a rekeying rather than a deception adds yet another dimension to the ritual.

---

<sup>99</sup>Laurence de Garis, “The ‘Logic’ of Professional Wrestling,” in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 201.



The we-know-but-they-don't-know-that-we-know attitude of fans strengthens the boundary between the ritual group and "others."<sup>100</sup>

To participate in the world of professional wrestling, there must therefore be a certain willingness to "buy in" to what your role is as an audience member, particularly when participating in the performance as an adult. The "smart" fan is assumed to know that what is about to unfold in the ring is predetermined; it is generally considered extraordinarily poor etiquette to demand that the children around you at a live event engage with that knowledge. Further, many fans describe the moment of "marking out"--of being drawn back into what is happening with the belief that it is all true, having a strong emotional response that defies logic--as one that results from both the performances of particular wrestlers and also the response of the audience around you. What Gerald W. Morton and George M. O'Brien have written holds as true in the ring as it does out of it: "Wrestling...is social by its very nature, and to exist requires the other, friend or foe."<sup>101</sup> The community of fans at professional wrestling events enter in a sort of pact regarding appropriate conduct and behavior, considering a wide variety of ways in which they can interact with both their fellow audience members and the talent themselves, sharing these moments of "rekeyings" and internal understanding.

### **Overview of Case Studies:**

---

<sup>100</sup> Michael R. Ball, *Professional Wrestling as Ritual Drama in American Popular Culture* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 144.

<sup>101</sup> Gerald W. Morton and George M. O'Brien, *Wrestling to Rasslin': Ancient Sport to American Spectacle* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1985), 1.

In the world of professional wrestling, there exist a variety of performance options for the interested consumer and I will discuss a representative sample of each below.<sup>102</sup> First, the WWE offers twelve major “pay-per-view” events annually (averaging one a month, though this is not always the case), held at large-capacity venues. Tickets for these events can cost anywhere from \$25 for seats in the upper tier of a large stadium to \$3,000 for ringside seats.<sup>103</sup> These events draw anywhere from 10,000 fans in attendance (for “smaller” events) to over 80,000 (for the largest event of the year, WrestleMania, now on its 33<sup>rd</sup> year). Pay-per-view events, particularly the largest three--the Royal Rumble, held in late January; WrestleMania, typically held in late March or early April; and SummerSlam, held in late August--are often celebrity-studded affairs, feature musical performances or celebrity hosts, and generally last from three to five hours (not counting an hour to two hour long “preshow”). The major pay-per-view events often represent the beginning or conclusions of ongoing storylines; except in the event of an emergency or accident, the outcomes and interactions within these matches cannot be altered. For the purposes of this chapter, I will discuss the Royal Rumble from January of 2014.<sup>104</sup>

WWE also offers weekly television programming (airing on Monday and Tuesday nights), which is taped in front of a live audience twice a week.<sup>105</sup> This does

---

<sup>102</sup> Numbers and statistics about attendance and pricing are drawn from my personal experience as well as the data that is released by WWE and other wrestling sites in the aftermath of a program.

<sup>103</sup> This represents the face value of the tickets and not their resale value—ticket “scalping” is as much an issue with the WWE as it is with music, theatre, and other sports, and it is not uncommon to see tickets for larger events selling for at least double their face value, if not more, through online resellers.

<sup>104</sup> Brief discussions of my experiences with other pay-per-view events can be found in additional chapters!

<sup>105</sup> *Monday Night Raw*, their flagship program, airs live the majority of the time; this is occasionally not the case if they have traveled to England or anywhere where the time difference would make that challenging. *Thursday Night Smackdown* and *Main Event*, while taped in front of live audiences, air later—audience noise is frequently edited, and “spoilers” of the outcomes of the matches (as well as

not include WWE's increasingly popular "developmental" program, *NXT*, which is available exclusively through the WWE Network (or WWE's partnership with Hulu), and represents a different talent pool.<sup>106</sup> Ticket prices for these tapings tend to be slightly cheaper than those for a pay-per-view event, averaging between \$15 for an upper level seat to \$600 for a "platinum" ringside seat, including meet-and-greets beforehand.<sup>107</sup> These events do not draw nearly the high numbers that the pay-per-views do (and are frequently not held in venues of the same size), though they frequently sell out and draw on average ten thousand fans. These televised events also operate as part of the larger, overarching storylines that WWE is attempting to create; the degree to which the events of these programs can be altered varies, although it is fair to say that typically, regardless of audience response, the plans will go forward.<sup>108</sup> There are always fail safes, and there are unfortunate mistakes--someone accidentally gets eliminated in a battle royal<sup>109</sup> that was not supposed to lose, or someone takes a fall or a bad hit and isn't able to finish the match--but there are plots

---

photos of the matches themselves) are available before the programs air, usually courtesy of taping attendees who share these results online.

<sup>106</sup> *NXT* features talents that have only recently signed with WWE--while they may have considerable experience in the world of independent wrestling, they have not worked with WWE before and thus begin their training in what might be compared to Triple A baseball. These superstars are all working toward the goal of making their main roster debuts. *NXT* shows are taped in batches of three or four at a time from Full Sail University in Florida; their "special events," styled after WWE pay-per-views, are held quarterly, and last approximately two hours. Previously, these were also held exclusively at Full Sail University--now, WWE has begun having *NXT* shows in other cities and countries, and the program is becoming popular enough that it is now selling out much larger arenas.

<sup>107</sup> This once again represents the face value of the tickets and not their resale value--while prices might not be quite as high, there is still a resale market for televised shows, especially if they are in a popular city or a talent is rumored to be making their return.

<sup>108</sup> This is not to suggest, however, that fan response at these televised events, both to particular performers and moments that occur, is not noted by the company and used to shape storytelling going forward, a point upon which I will elaborate later.

<sup>109</sup> A match consisting of a large number of people--often ten to thirty, depending--whose goal is to throw other competitors over the top rope, so that both of their feet hit the floor, and then be the last wrestler in the ring. These matches are fast and exciting, but also can lend themselves to errors due to the speed and nature of elimination.

that are supposed to move forward, and need to move forward, and the performances in-ring must ensure that this occurs.<sup>110</sup> The exception to this exists with “dark matches”--matches that will not air on television and that occur only for the live audience (although video and images frequently surface online)--and post-show interactions. These matches and interactions may exist to “test out” a new pairing or character, or, in the case of post-show interactions, as a way to send the crowd home happy if something negative or nefarious has ended the taped programming.<sup>111</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, I will discuss a taping of *Monday Night Raw* from June of 2014.

Between their pay-per-views and televised events, WWE offers what are referred to as “house shows” internationally on non-taping days, in cities across the United States (along with occasional international tours, including England, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Australia, to name just a few of the recent visits). These are non-televised events and thus rarely involve storyline or title changes, are often held in smaller venues, and draw smaller crowds (though no less vocal). Tickets for these events typically range from \$15-\$95, and tend to draw a few thousand fans to each (smaller numbers than televised events in most cases). House shows vary in what talents they feature; rarely do house shows include all of the “top” stars on the roster (this is reserved for television tapings and pay-per-views), but there is typically

---

<sup>110</sup> Since WWE pre-tapes some of this weekly programming, these injuries and accidents can at times be written into the script; with *Monday Night Raw*, this is more challenging, but “real” accidents are frequently written into the stories after the fact as though they were deliberate or part of the storyline.

<sup>111</sup> For instance, if the televised programming ends with the heels standing tall over the faces, it is not unheard of for face performers to run out from the back after the cameras have stopped recording to attack the heels, to raucous cheering; there also may be birthday celebrations or acknowledgement of local talents, even if they are typically booked as heels.

one marquee name involved in any given house show (this is especially notable in cases where there are two shows occurring on the same night in separate cities). In these cases, non-attending fans can find out the results of matches online, but have no other way to see what is being presented--unless they engage with other fans online, who share pictures and sometimes even video from what they have seen.<sup>112</sup> The non-televised nature of these events, however, means that there are more frequent opportunities for both engagement with the audience, and also for that audience engagement to help shape the stories that are being told in and out of the ring. In this chapter, I will discuss moments from two house shows that I attended: one in May of 2013, and one in September of 2013, at two different sized venues.

Finally, as another example of ways in which fans can engage with both other fans and with the performers themselves in a more up-close and personal way than at the wrestling shows, WWE offers a variety of ways in which fans can meet the performers. These range from officially sanctioned WWE meet and greets (available by buying “VIP” tickets to events); to advertising talent as appearing at comic conventions, car shows, toy stores, and the like; to prizes that can be won in contests and charity auctions; and, as part of the lead-up to major pay-per-views, fan access (stylized “Axxess”) events. The largest of these latter events occurs in the days before WrestleMania, and it grows larger with each year. In most of these cases (Axxess notwithstanding, as the rules for that operate slightly differently), fans are able to purchase a ticket, and, in exchange, receive a photo and/or autograph with the

---

<sup>112</sup> Discussion of the ways in which fans create bonds and connections through sharing what is “unseen” is found at greater length in chapter three.

performer who is appearing; there may be an opportunity for a brief exchange, and the amount of physical contact may vary, but they are usually very monitored and ordered in order to maximize the amount of fans who are able to see these performers. At WrestleMania Axxess, fans can purchase two different kinds of tickets: a four-hour “general admission” ticket that allows them entry to a large convention center hall, where they can try to meet as many performers as possible; or a “VIP” ticket, which focuses on the opportunity to meet one particular performer who is not available to those with general admission tickets. This is still highly monitored and ordered, but there are opportunities to meet a wider variety of talent (and, if you purchase tickets to multiple sessions, you can continue to do so for several hours!). While I have attended multiple types of events, for this chapter, I will discuss my experiences with WrestleMania Axxess from April of 2014.

In these studies, I discuss interactions between fans and other fans, as well as fans and performers—that I have witnessed. These examples are representative of some of the ways in which audience members most frequently interact with the performers while they are either performing in-ring or on their way to do so (or on their way from doing so).<sup>113</sup> In the case of my discussion of WrestleMania access, these examples represent the ways in which fans interact with the performers in an environment officially sanctioned (and controlled) by WWE. In so doing, I will address the questions raised in the introduction to this chapter, regarding the ways in which audience interaction does or does not shape what can occur in the ring in the

---

<sup>113</sup> This does not include audience or fan interactions with individual performers that occur before or after shows--this dissertation focuses on officially sanctioned interactions, rather than discussing that particular kind of engagement (waiting for wrestlers at the venue, or, perhaps more problematically, at the airport or at their hotels).

long and short term, as well as questions about what happens when that interaction goes “wrong.” Though these examples are by no means exhaustive, they represent a range of engagement levels with both “heels” and “faces,” and similar engagement levels back from the performers themselves.

### **“Boo-tista” & the 2014 Royal Rumble**

The Royal Rumble is an annual pay-per-view held in late January that represents, in many ways, the “kick-off” to the lead up to the biggest event of the year for WWE, the aforementioned WrestleMania. This event has been my personal favorite since childhood,<sup>114</sup> predominantly due to its usual main event: the titular Royal Rumble--a battle royal with thirty participants, all competing to see who will get to wrestle in the main event later that year at WrestleMania. This event can often be seen as highly unpredictable, although it is as scripted and predetermined as any other main event; however, the nature of the match means that it is not always immediately clear, even to a “smart” crowd, who is going to win this match, since it has been used as both a vehicle to push up and coming talent and as a way to showcase veterans. A variety of highly charged moments often occur during the Royal Rumble; other matches occur during the evening, but the focus is on that event--who will enter? Who will make a comeback? What unexpected (or, at this point, expected) antics will save someone from elimination?

---

<sup>114</sup> Several of my informants also named the Royal Rumble as their personal favorite event of the year, even over WrestleMania.

The Royal Rumble in Pittsburgh in 2014 is, more than three years later, widely considered as one of the worst-received main events in the pay-per-view's history. The event culminated in a vocally dissatisfied audience booing and walking out while the winner--Batista, wrestling theoretically as a face--yelled back at the crowd in a seemingly unscripted fury, even raising his middle finger in frustration. As in many other sports, certain cities are notorious for being particularly loud and boisterous. Although this event was held in Pittsburgh, the relative proximity to Philadelphia--notoriously an especially vocal city of fans--meant that many were predicting a chaotic crowd, all the more because by all reports, some moments that were intended as surprises for the event "leaked" to the public ahead of time. In particular, one wrestler who had left the business several years prior was due to make his triumphant return at this event. This was, by all reports and interviews at the time, meant to be a surprise return, one not heralded by any television or house show appearances beforehand to "spoil" it. However, in the age of social media, rumors spread quickly and gain traction. To further complicate this, advertisements for later shows indicated this performer's presence before he had formally returned to television. In light of this, the company instead elected to alter their plans, and advertised (for approximately a month) and then presented Batista<sup>115</sup>--a wrestler who had enjoyed a run of tremendous popularity during his earlier time with the company-

---

<sup>115</sup> Dave Bautista, who wrestles as simply "Batista," wrestled with the WWE from 2005-2010, although he began in their developmental promotions as early as 2000; during his time with WWE, he engaged in a range of storylines, including being part of "Evolution," a powerful stable that consisted of a combination of past legends and wrestlers who were perceived as the next phase of wrestler (hence the name). Batista had left the WWE under controversial circumstances in 2010 after a kayfabe injury (later revealed to be legitimate) to pursue work in film, although he stated in interviews after the fact that he did not "like the direction" that WWE was headed. Batista's style tends toward brawling, as he is billed at six foot six and over two hundred and fifty pounds; his finishing move, the "Batista Bomb" is explosive and powerful.



-only six days before the event, as a returning face on *Monday Night Raw*. On *Monday Night Raw* on January 20, 2014, Batista made his return as a “face,” defeating wrestlers who had disparaged his intent to return, then proudly declared his intention to enter the Royal Rumble for his big chance to appear in the main event at WrestleMania--an announcement greeted, online and in person, with tremendous boos and disdain, the company seemingly ignoring the fact that the crowd was most assuredly not behind him in the way that one typically expects when presenting a face. The overall impression was that Batista had been brought back purely to win the Royal Rumble and headline WrestleMania, rather than allowing a new talent (or even a talent who had simply been more present over the past years) to take that honor--a case of the audience anticipating, based on previous patterns, the ways in which the company intended to behave. While no audience member can ever be said to truly be “in” on the backstage interior world of wrestling, there is something to be said for a history of patterns and fan engagement with a product that they have come to know well.

The crowd on Sunday, January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2014, was, as anticipated, loud and boisterous in even before entering the arena--fans yelled to other fans crossing the street, singing the theme songs for their favorite wrestlers or blaring them out their windows while they parked. It was tremendously cold in Pittsburgh that evening, and the arena doors opened late, forcing fans (myself included) to stand outside in the cold for over an hour in order to enter. Even the most diehard fans complained about the cold and the wait, grumbling to those around them about the disorganization, chatting about previous events that they had attended. Most fans were dressed in thick

layers to protect against the cold, although these would be quickly shed once inside, where it would be suffocatingly hot. At least one woman, in spite of the cold, stood behind me in a tall pair of spike-heeled boots and a short dress. Her boyfriend proudly declared to any who would listen that this was “my girlfriend’s first wrestling event,” even as she audibly questioned why she was even standing out here, if their seats were assigned. While the fans joked and chatted with one another, concerns about the main event--this year, a thirty-man Royal Rumble<sup>116</sup>--were frequently voiced, and fans walked by me clutching signs declaring their hopes for their favorites. I saw children clutching brightly colored signs with wobbly letters announcing support of Daniel Bryan, and twenty-something men holding signs for CM Punk, Seth Rollins, Roman Reigns, and Dean Ambrose, to name a few. Notably, none of those signs seemed to indicate any support for Batista, although once inside the arena, it was clear that there were at least a fair amount of fans who were backing him, based on their t-shirts and signage. These consisted mainly of fans who looked approximately old enough to have watched his run several years earlier, sporting Evolution t-shirts, and, in some cases, children of these fans. As I walked up to my seat high in the top of the indoor arena, I had a perfect birds-eye view of the ring itself, as well as the large screens that would allow me to see the action in more detail. These seats had been purchased through a resale site, but had originally retailed at approximately fifty

---

<sup>116</sup> The Royal Rumble began in 1988 as a free, televised event on USA, with a twenty-man battle royal (called the Royal Rumble) as a featured match, although not the main event. The event is annual, and typically features a thirty-man battle royal, often as the main event, although in certain years, championship matches have served as the main event and thus final event of the program. For the twenty-fourth Royal Rumble, the main event was a forty-man match. The stipulation as it currently exists states that the winner of the Royal Rumble will go on to headline WrestleMania in a championship match for the title of their choosing.

dollars, on the cheaper end of the price range. It was difficult to lean back in these seats without your head running into the knees of the person behind you, but the fans offered one another high fives and cheers throughout the night.

Further complicating this notion of fan support and engagement, this event was in the midst of an story arc involving fan favorite Daniel Bryan. Bryan was a wrestler who illustrated the notion that popular response can in fact shape a character's storyline<sup>117</sup>. Daniel Bryan's catchphrase, simply consisting of chanting "yes!" over and over, was a fan favorite, and, indeed, so was he. Bryan's popularity had been a slow-blooming development, transforming him from a crude heel (who treated his kayfabe girlfriend terribly, humiliating her and blaming her for his losses), to a smiling, beloved face, although his vicious, submission and speed based moveset had not changed. It was clear throughout the night that Daniel Bryan was tremendously supported by the crowd—the number of Daniel Bryan t-shirts were rivaled only by the number of John Cena t-shirts, the crowd response during his match was by far the loudest, and the "yes!" chants were nearly deafening. Children and adults, men and women, first-time fans and veterans, all seemed to be uniting behind Daniel Bryan, representative, in some ways, of the type of wrestler that Batista was not. Bryan, to many, represented the "Internet" or "indie"<sup>118</sup> darling, a wrestler whose popularity is based, hipster-like, on not subscribing to the mold of a "typical"

---

<sup>117</sup> Daniel Bryan is a five-foot-seven, bearded, vegan, highly technical wrestler who came to the WWE after years of success on the independent circuit, who does not resemble the "typical" success story of WWE—picture Hulk Hogan or John Cena in the modern era. However, the crowd was hugely behind him, and had been for months—and thus he was entered into the forefront of the title picture and the main event storylines, although he and others have stated in interviews that this was never intended to be the case—the crowd response was simply too big to ignore.

<sup>118</sup> Slang for "independent wrestling," reflective of Bryan's background wrestling for numerous organizations before joining WWE.

wrestler, as noted earlier. In spite of the fact that we had been told in kayfabe that Daniel Bryan would not be entering into the event (and, as the crowd had witnessed, he had also had a major match earlier in the night that had left him battered and badly beaten), the crowd was anticipating a “swerve.” In other words, the crowd was expecting to be fooled--that WWE had presented them with something obvious (Batista returning only six days before the Royal Rumble) as a means of distracting them from the actual plan. Throughout the night, and particularly once the Royal Rumble itself began, the crowd was waiting for his triumphant surprise entrance, for him to overcome the odds as he had many times before, and cement his place firmly in the main event of WrestleMania.

The crowd response to the Royal Rumble main event--including some genuine surprise entrants (an NXT performer, Alexander Rusev, as well as a returning favorite who entered to loud cheering, Sheamus)--grew increasingly over the course of the evening, the group of male fans seated behind us fueled by multiple beer runs. For instance, a loud “who the fuck is that?” greeted Rusev’s entrance, a moment of triumph for me as someone who watched NXT and recognized him.<sup>119</sup> Still, the crowd remained hopeful, chanting rhythmically “DAN-IEL BRY-AN (clap, clap, clap-clap-clap)” louder with each buzzer that indicated a new entrant about to head to the ring. Perhaps anticipating this level of fan rage, or perhaps reflective of Batista’s time away from the ring and concern about his ability to outlast other opponents, Batista entered very late into the match, at number 28. His music and presence were

---

<sup>119</sup> This event is also particularly noteworthy, in retrospect, because CM Punk—another tremendously popular wrestler—would, in fact, quit the company the night after the Royal Rumble. He had entered into the match as the first entrant, but spent much of it collapsed in a corner, ultimately culminating in him reaching the final four entrants and being eliminated by outside interference.

greeted by loud, boisterous boos, profanity (to the chagrin of some of the parents nearby), and only a few weak cheers, difficult to hear over the tremendous displeasure of the crowd.

This presented an interesting dilemma. While I myself was not seated near any Batista fans, the majority who were present joined in the popular response and engaged negatively. They dismissed Batista and denied their support of him; while certainly not all of them gave in, this speaks to a larger issue about the unreliability of fan response at live events, and the difficulty that can be found in attempting to unpack it. Small pockets of fan support can be very difficult to discern; visible cues, such as signs and t-shirts, can indicate support, but they cannot and do not represent all of the wrestlers that one might be supporting that night. As Dennis Kennedy, among others, has observed, it can be difficult to quantify or even qualify ever type of fan that is engaging with a product, or how, and this event--as only the second pay-per-view I had attended, and certainly the first event I had witnessed drawing such an intensely negative response--was no exception.

As the remaining two numbers ticked by and it became increasingly clear that Daniel Bryan was not going to enter, the fan response to Batista--who was, again, working face, typically enough to draw cheers--grew angrier and angrier. Though there were cheers for some of the action in the ring, there were much louder boos at everything Batista attempted to do, along with loud cursing declaring that this was all “bullshit” from the men around me.

When the final buzzer hit to announce the entrance of the thirtieth participation, a usual fan favorite, Rey Mysterio,<sup>120</sup> came running out—to a sea of deafening boos. As I sat, I received a text from one of my siblings--watching on pay-per-view--noting only that he “felt bad” for Rey Mysterio, even as Mysterio was quickly eliminated. To voice their displeasure further, fans elected to loudly cheer for Roman Reigns,<sup>121</sup> wrestling as a heel, in the final four, rather than any of the faces that remained. Reigns’s elimination cemented the inevitable, and, as predicted from when the news of his return had leaked, Batista won the Royal Rumble. In that moment, the response was unlike anything I have ever heard in years of watching both televised and live wrestling. To say that there were boos and furious, often highly profane chants would be to put it mildly--fans yelled “FUCK YOU, BATISTA” and “GET THE FUCK OUT” from the moment he entered until the moment that he won the match. The fury continued long afterward, echoing through the arena and the hallways into the streets. The event ended, not with the triumphant cheers and celebration of a face who has emerged victorious, but with fans walking out earlier than expected, and ultimately, with Batista cursing back at and flipping off

---

<sup>120</sup> Óscar Gutiérrez, who wrestles as Rey Mysterio--although no longer with the WWE at the time of this writing--is a Mexican-American wrestler who has a long and storied career in professional wrestling. His small stature--only billed at five foot six--fast-paced *lucha libre* style, with lots of high-flying and high-risk maneuvers, coupled with his colorful masks (and his entrance, in which he frequently touches heads with any child he encounters in the audience also wearing a mask), along with his longevity in WWE as well as WCW, has made Rey Mysterio tremendously popular, especially among younger fans. His entry at this number would appear to be a guarantee that fans would react well--to no avail.

<sup>121</sup> Leati Joseph Anoa‘i, who wrestles as Roman Reigns, was a member of one of the most popular heel factions in recent WWE history, the Shield, discussed at length in chapter two and three. Reigns was widely considered the least experienced member of the group, spoke rarely, and relied on strong, striking finishing maneuvers--such as the spear and a powerful “Superman” punch—to complement his strong, silent personality. His height and build, along with his legacy as part of the Anoa‘i family, a tremendous presence in the wrestling world, made him highly visible and popular, although the crowd would, eventually, turn on him as well.

the crowd because he was so genuinely infuriated, a gesture that does not fly in the modern era as it might have in the 1990s (a gesture that was not, in fact, televised, or at least not maintained on later broadcasts of the event).

While it was, of course, part of storyline, and, as stated earlier, WWE is typically unable to change particular storylines and outcomes on the fly since it would create considerable long-term issues, the crowd would not be assuaged. Knowledge or anticipation had not created complacency or acceptance. While the audience “knew” that Batista would win, the overwhelming sense, from both the loud boos and the impassioned discussions echoing around as we made our way out into the cold night, suggested that even these “smart” audience members had banked on that swerve, on the WWE knowing what they would be anticipating and offering something different at the last moment. Those who supported Batista and were pleased at his victory remained in the minority; I have little doubt that any fans (particularly adult fans) who departed the arena in Batista merchandise or carrying signs for him were subject to berating at the very least, as I witnessed at least one incident that involved simply yelling “FUCK BATISTA” at a passing fan. The anger did not abate with time--the taunts of “Boo-Tista” and signs illustrating the nickname would be omnipresent in the following weeks, with Batista ultimately becoming a heel character as a result, claiming that he had not returned to the WWE--in the reality show staple sentence--to be popular or liked, but instead to win a championship. Batista would, indeed, go on to headline WrestleMania, although Daniel Bryan would become involved, ultimately tapping Batista out. Batista left the company again in June of 2014 and has not returned. It is worth noting that, in

interviews, Batista has claimed that he questioned the idea of returning as a face, and that he was in many ways unhappy with the direction that WWE took him during his time back.<sup>122</sup> This stands as an example of the ways in which a fan response can, in some ways, shape and guide the ways in which the “long game” storytelling occurs, even if, in pay-per-view events, even the angriest fan response cannot alter the immediate.

### **A pool full of pudding and *Monday Night Raw***

Television tapings represent an interesting challenge for WWE and for audiences. In this case, I have chosen to focus on a taping of a live show, rather than a show to be aired later in the week--it can be difficult to accurately reflect on what occurs at one of these tapings, because there is often a blurring between what will air and what will not. Further, in observing and discussing a taping that aired live, I am more accurately able to speak to the environment as it was occurring and also, typically, a larger crowd (*Smackdown* tapings are popular, but *Raw* frequently features most if not all of the top talent). When a show airs live, WWE has only so much control over the ways in which the audience consumes and responds to what is presented--the television audience can usually, if not always, hear the crowd response, regardless of how the commentary team attempts to spin it, and there is little to no time for editing or delay. As a member of a live crowd, it can be difficult to tell the way that an event is being presented on air--often questions are raised about

---

<sup>122</sup> It is of course difficult to know if this was actually the case, or if this was fabricated after the fact (or, understandably, a reflection of the hurt at being utterly rejected by the fanbase)--still, it is now a part of the narrative around the events, and poses further questions about the blurred line between character and performer.



why, exactly, someone is coming out to the ring, or why a match is happening, because the backstage segment is not being projected. In this instance, this was an episode of *Monday Night Raw* from June 23, 2014, the “go-home” show for the Money in the Bank pay-per-view that was to be held on Sunday, June 29<sup>th</sup>, in Boston.<sup>123</sup> I was once again seated in the “cheap seats,” in the upper levels of the indoor Verizon Center, a venue that is a hockey and basketball arena as well as a concert space when it is not in use for sports. The fans around me ranged in age, with numerous families including young children along with clusters of late teen to early twenty year old men, a few couples, and a smattering of women in groups.

In many ways, the television audience represents the moments of least power in fan interactions. Comparatively, there is a greater chance of ending up on television--seats closer to the ring are more affordable versus at pay-per-views, and the cameras sweep larger portions of the crowd to attempt to capture their signage. However, even though this is a live crowd, moments of “hijacking” are becoming largely commodified and reframed by the WWE as opportunities to “cash in” on merchandise, rather than moments where the writers and producers genuinely need to consider the ways in which stories are being told<sup>124</sup>. This particular show was not

---

<sup>123</sup> Typically the “go-home” shows before a pay-per-view serve to remind audiences of upcoming storylines, cement participants in matches and feuds, and also represent weeks in which virtually all of the full-time talent and much of the part-time talent is featured on television, as a way of increasing interest in the forthcoming pay-per-view and pushing more viewers to tune in. In this case, the show was to confirm some participants in the upcoming ladder matches at Money in the Bank, and also help establish further cause for some of the non-main-event matches.

<sup>124</sup> The *Raw* AFTER a pay-per-view—particularly the *Raw* after WrestleMania—has become notorious for this kind of audience hijacking behavior, with crowds frequently starting chants for the commentary team, singing along with the music of unpopular performers, cheering for the heels, and generally presenting disinterest in whatever is happening in the ring. While this was once regarded as a spontaneous event, it is now something that WWE is able to prepare for and even cash in on, designing T-shirts based on crowd response and raising ticket prices for an event that they know will be tremendously popular.

exceptional in that regard--the overwhelming crowd sentiment aligning with the ways in which we were being asked to consume the product, cheering for the faces and booing the heels with equal vigor.

This can occasionally be overridden, as was the case in a match that night between Wade Barrett<sup>125</sup> and Dolph Ziggler<sup>126</sup> for the intercontinental championship: while Wade Barrett was working as the heel that night (and as the champion), the match itself was drawing a tremendous amount of crowd response based on its technical skill and speed, to the point where, during a rest moment in the match (in which both wrestlers lie on the mat, presumably exhausted from the exertion of the match), viewers at home were able to capture a moment of the two performers congratulating one another on putting on such a tremendous match that the crowd was responding to so loudly. The crowd, then, is sometimes responding as much to the quality of the match itself as it is the performers in it--while theoretically, only Ziggler should have received cheers, the notion of a crowd reacting to the match itself is not necessarily subversive, if they are engaged in and excited by what they are being presented.

The show also offered a moment of feigned “spontaneity” that is typical of televised matches in particular: at the conclusion of one match, in which two

---

<sup>125</sup> Stu Bennett, a Preston-born wrestler who goes by “Wade Barrett” in the WWE, came up to the WWE as the “winner” of the former incarnation of NXT, in which would-be performers competed to earn a spot in the WWE, in 2010. Barrett emphasizes his background (a mixture of truth and fiction) as an underground bare-knuckle brawler overseas as part of his character—claiming his nose has been broken over a dozen times, for instance—and is known for his brawling in-ring style and striking finishing maneuvers, and has wrestled as a heel throughout his time in WWE.

<sup>126</sup> Nic Nemeth, who wrestles as “Dolph Ziggler” in the WWE, is another hugely popular fan favorite with a huge social media presence—his in-ring gimmick is being the “show off” who’s “too damn good,” and he has had multiple romantic storylines that have paired him with various WWE divas of a variety of types and ages, and frequently his social media posts include not-so-thinly veiled sex jokes. Ziggler has been both a “heel” and a “face,” but has remained popular throughout.

wrestlers (typically each on a tag team) competed in a singles match, their tag partners demanded an opportunity to face one another as well! This was presented, on the show, as a moment of demanded action, based on the audience's displeasure that the heel had won through distraction and cheating. The crowd was led to believe, to some extent, that it was the wrestler's passion--and their own loud response--that led to the creation of this match, something that happens near-weekly when a performer demands the opportunity for a match "tonight!" usually accompanied by heavy breathing and talk of revenge. Wrestling always skates this line, and it is all the more evident with the lack of commentary to contextualize: as a live audience member, it can be challenging to determine precisely why a given match is about to occur, or what the rationale is, or what the particular stipulation is going to be (or, in some cases, why someone is coming down to the ring, when they have no intention to wrestle--typically this means they're about to be on commentary). As a fan at this show, I was able to ride the roller coaster of sudden surprise twists and announcements--an eighth entrant into the Money in the Bank ladder match! The loud, thunderous sound of firing pyro, so much louder in person! The sudden raised stakes for a match!--while still recognizing the ways in which these events, and in some ways, my response to them, were pre-scripted and anticipated, already taken into consideration in the shaping and writing of this performance.

But when I think back on this show and the ways in which the audience response shaped what occurred, I in fact think more upon two non-wrestlers, and the ways in which the audience reacted to larger issues with the ways in which the WWE treats and writes its female characters. The show kicked off with a particularly

unpleasant fan interaction, as Stephanie McMahon<sup>127</sup> called out Vickie Guerrero<sup>128</sup> to start the show. In past weeks, Vickie had been playing the role of the face victim to both “the Authority” (represented by Stephanie McMahon and her on and off-screen husband, Triple H) and to those who wanted to thwart it by taking advantage of Vickie’s position. The prior week, a gross-out gag had resulted from Vickie’s coffee delivery to Stephanie McMahon being sabotaged by a face Roman Reigns,<sup>129</sup> leading to Stephanie vomiting all over Vickie onscreen. Accordingly, Vickie--a fairly hated character who drew loud, raucous boos from the moment she spoke--was now being told that in order to save her job, she would need to wrestle Stephanie McMahon (herself a former wrestler, although not generally active at this phase). Yet in this moment, the evil of Stephanie McMahon and the legacy of Eddie Guerrero blended together as Vickie accepted the challenge to loud cheers and applause, with the voice of the audience firmly behind this formerly berated character. This was, of course, WWE’s intent with the storytelling--in most of its matches and storylines, there is a heel and a face character, and the audience is intended to support the face. A

---

<sup>127</sup> A complicated example of a performer who is both a character and a real member of the business side of WWE, Stephanie McMahon--who is married to Paul Levesque, better known to WWE fans as Triple H, and is also the daughter of Vince McMahon--plays an exaggerated version of her real-life job on television. Since taking on a leadership role, McMahon usually plays the heel, concerned only with the bottom line of the company and often requiring performers to grovel for their jobs, mimicking her father’s “YOU’RE FIRED” to cement her heat.

<sup>128</sup> Vickie Guerrero is the widow of former beloved WWE superstar Eddie Guerrero, whose tragic death cemented both his legacy and that of his widow in WWE. Her character by this point was the “Cougar in Charge,” a screeching woman clad in too-tight dresses who was typically regarded with disgust, in spite of the fact that she was frequently paired with young, attractive male superstars as her love interests. Her shrill cry of “excuse me!” was akin to nails on a chalkboard for many.

<sup>129</sup> There are frequent questions raised about the nature of “face” versus “heel” behavior, particularly when faces act or speak in ways that are degrading or insulting--often, the only way to tell who is a heel and who is a face is by looking at their opponents and attempting to discern.

character, even a hated one, can rapidly become a fan favorite simply by virtue of facing someone that an audience hates even more.

However, where women are concerned in the WWE, this can be particularly challenging, as was the case here. Mere moments after Stephanie made her entrance, her music declaring that we were welcome to “the queendom, where the kings bow down,” the boos greeted her--again, in keeping with the storyline, where she represents the evil power of authority. The piercing yell from behind me took that one step further, declaring “YOU’RE AN UGLY SLUT!” This was greeted by laughter and cheers from the fans seated around me, who seemed largely unconcerned that this yell was coming from a child who could not have been more than nine or ten years old. From where I was seated (with my husband), high in the cheapest seats in the now-full Verizon Center in Washington, DC, there was little to no chance that the actual phrase would carry down to the ring. When I watched the recorded version of *Monday Night Raw* later, that particular shriek was not audible on the recording.

Yet the sentiment of it echoed throughout the arena, as it frequently does when a woman--or women--are being presented as the center of the action, creating a space in which fan interactions become more challenging. Expletives and slurs are the rule for women behaving in ways that an audience does not like, but this is not merely governed by the role of “playing heel”--even faces can be subject to it, and can even be called upon, in their promos, to insinuate that women that they are about to face are less-than because they are “sluts.” Women are frequently written, as characters, as ‘unstable,’ vacillating between the clearly defined roles of “face” or “heel” from week to week, even from segment to segment, and the audience response to them

often reflects this. It remains unclear who is to be cheered for and who is to be booed; it remains unclear if the WWE wants its male fans to treat its female performers with the same regard that they give the male talent.

In the Verizon Center, no matter how loud the cheers were when Vickie Guerrero came out--to her late husband's music--she was still entering in order to compete in a match in which the winner would be the one who pushed the loser into a kiddie pool of unnamed brown sludge (really pudding, as evidenced on the behind the scenes video afterward, not visible to the live crowd). Stephanie was booed as the heel when she cheated to get Vickie to tumble into the sludge--and Vickie was cheered when she caught Stephanie off-guard and knocked her right back into it, even after losing, shimmying in a direct imitation of her late husband and blowing a kiss to the sky. Though the crowd there was supporting the face and booing the heel, and thus reacting correctly and appropriately, the atmosphere created by that correct behavior left me feeling as though I should leave the arena. The crowd's response, in this instance, confirmed for WWE that they were doing the right thing--but for female fans in the crowd, or at least for me, it further served to confirm that this was not, perhaps, the place where we belonged.

### **“If I can’t wrestle, then what am I doing?:” Breaking the rules at house shows**

While the matches and moments that occur at house shows do still follow the major storylines of a given time, there is considerably more flexibility for just how that occurs as long as the actions taken remain within kayfabe. “Kayfabe,” as noted earlier, is a term used by the wrestling (and, increasingly, wrestling fan) community

to describe the presentation of the televised storylines and events as “true,” regardless of what is known about the individual performers and their lives outside of the ring (i.e. a female wrestler might be in a kayfabe relationship with one performer while engaged to another in reality; a wrestler may suffer a televised “kayfabe” injury that takes them out of commission when they are being allowed time off for scheduled surgery or to act in a film, etc.). They mean that things, particularly on televised performances, whether pay-per-views or weekly programming, need to play out in a particular way. House shows still operate in that world of kayfabe--faces are still faces, heels are still heels--but wrestlers are able to play a bit more, test things out slightly more, and change the way that they interact with the crowd (and allow them to be more responsive to it). The outcomes remain predetermined, in other words, but the journey to get to those outcomes may well be more influenced by the audience’s response.

I turn now to two of the first house shows that I attended, in the earliest phases of this project--indeed, before it had even fully come to fruition. I present two smaller examples from two different shows here because I feel that contrasting the two ways in which “house shows” can occur is important to establish the environment. One of the first representative incidents occurred at a house show in Upper Marlboro, Maryland, on May 5, 2013, at the Showplace Arena. This space was rather small, with a crowd of perhaps two thousand--but no less enthusiastic for their small size. As is generally the case with house shows at smaller spaces, the technology and set-up of the show was fairly minimal--absent are the large screens and pyrotechnics

utilized in television tapings or at pay-per-views, there is no “commentary team,”<sup>130</sup> and it is much more affordable to get extremely close to the ring. In my case, for considerably less than I have paid for highest-tier seats at pay-per-views, I was seated in one of the front rows of the non-ringside seats. This meant that I was able to both hear and see the action in the ring more clearly, as well as be closer when the wrestlers entered and exited.

As is frequently the case at WWE shows--house shows in particular, due in part to their tendency to be scheduled earlier in the evening and also a more affordable price range--there were a large number of families there, with numerous children under the age of thirteen. By and large, these audience members “buy in” to the kayfabe as it is presented to them, very rarely cheering for the heels or booing the faces. This is not to suggest that there are not audience members who frequently do the opposite--the loud dueling chants of “Let’s Go Cena”/ “Cena Sucks!” upon John Cena’s arrival to the ring on each week’s episodes of *Monday Night Raw* demonstrate this, as well as discussions with numerous informants who count “heels” as their favorite wrestlers. However, by and large, younger audiences and the “typical” fan chooses to follow the alignments of cheering for good and booing the bad, in superhero fashion. This also speaks to ideas about the code of acceptable behavior--if one is sitting by a young child, it is generally considered poor sportsmanship to taunt or belittle if their favorite is losing; if one is sitting by another adult, that code shifts

---

<sup>130</sup> As noted earlier, when one attends a live event, one of the challenges is that there is no commentary to be had--you are left to interpret what is occurring based purely on what you see, and thus sometimes lack the setup or explanation that at-home audiences receive. At house shows, however, no one is receiving that commentary or setup--all participants and observers, all audience members, are on equal footing in that sense, although familiarity with the talent may vary since house shows often showcase less frequently seen performers or NXT talents.



very quickly. Due to the intimacy of the space, as well as the freedom of non-televvised events, throughout the show there was a great deal of interacting with the crowd from heels and faces alike--heels trying to silence cheers for their opponents, or tearing up signs, and faces allowing the crowd's energy to visible pump them up. This engagement was particularly notable with a group of young boys, all under the age of twelve, sitting ringside--the faces pointed at them and smiled, and the heels often attempted to silence their mocking chants.

The specific example in this instance came during a "divas," or women's wrestling match.<sup>131</sup> two experienced performers, who have wrestled numerous times before. In this case, Alicia Fox<sup>132</sup> was wrestling Natalya,<sup>133</sup> with Alicia working the heel role--prancing out to the ring, whirling her fur coat over her head, and strutting around the ring after each successful hit. As the match continued, it was clear that the audience was firmly behind Natalya, much to Alicia's chagrin--in particular, a problematic chant<sup>134</sup> of "you can't wrestle" was flung at Alicia throughout. Finally, in a classic heel move of just-nearly-cheating but not quite, Alicia threw Natalya into the corner and started whaling on her, ignoring the referee's attempts to break the hold

---

<sup>131</sup> The WWE women's division was referred to as the "Divas Division" from approximately 1999 until WrestleMania 32 in 2016, when it was rebranded as the Women's Division.

<sup>132</sup> Victoria Crawford, wrestling as Alicia Fox, was the first African-American divas champion in WWE, who began working with the WWE in 2006. She has alternated in her time in WWE between playing a face and heel character; recent storylines saw her behaving erratically and "crazily," but in May of 2013, she was wrestling as a heel—her signature moves include several beautifully-executed technical moves, which she maintains regardless of her face or heel status.

<sup>133</sup> Natalie Neidhart, who wrestles as simply "Natalya," is a second-generation wrestler, the daughter and niece of some of the most popular wrestlers in WWE in the 1990s; one of her chief claims to fame is that she is the only female graduate of a particularly notorious training school known as the "Hart Dungeon" that prided itself on aggressive, cruel training styles. Natalya, sometimes "Natty," is a former Divas champion who has alternated between face and heel roles during her time in WWE.

<sup>134</sup> This chant does not discriminate by gender, and is often a shorthand for crowd response to a character that they do not like. It is worth pointing out, however, that this is particularly leveled against female wrestlers, who are perceived in many ways as models who want to learn to wrestle, not actual trained wrestlers—the fact that the two women in this match were multi-year veterans went ignored.

until a near five-count, which would have had her disqualified. In the midst of this, Alicia finally turned to the kids in the crowd--once again trying to get a loud “you can’t wrestle!” chant going--between hits and yelled, loud and clear, “If I can’t WRESTLE then what am I DOING?” and slammed Natalya again. The crowd went wild for that brief moment of engagement--that brief breaking of character, a wrestler choosing to interact and engage with a specific negative chant rather than simply ignoring it or attempting to “rise above,” as a face might have done.<sup>135</sup>

This is, in my observation, reflective partly of a wrestler’s comfort level and experience level--many performers, male and female, find the crowd response to be flustering, and to actively engage with it would be to throw off the rhythm of the match or the rivalry, especially on television. Many crowds take advantage of this fact by trying to “hijack” the show and start chants that have nothing to do with what is happening in the ring, or to disparage the talent in crude sexual ways--in this instance, however, the performers in question were able to take the crowd response and utilize it to confirm the story that they were trying to tell, cementing their characters firmly into place.

As Barthes notes, “Each sign in wrestling is therefore endowed with an absolute clarity, since one must always understand everything on the spot. As soon as the adversaries are in the ring, the public is overwhelmed with the obviousness of the roles. As in the theater, each physical type expresses to excess the part which has

---

<sup>135</sup> In many ways, heels have more “freedom” to interact with and react to the crowd, in keeping with their characters; wrestlers who are playing the role of faces, by and large, are only permitted to engage with the positivity, or perhaps allow the negativity to fuel their fire and make a statement about how that only makes them stronger.

been assigned to the contestant.”<sup>136</sup> Ultimately the outcome of the match was as one might expect: Natalya was able to overcome Alicia’s attempts to cheat and emerged victorious--taking special care to go to those boys who had been chanting during the match for some grins and high-fives, thanking them for their support of her and their subsequent and simultaneous discrediting of Alicia. The result of the match was not altered by the chants or the moment of engagement; however, the characters of the performers were revealed all the more fully by these moments, and the storytelling of the match and its aftermath were shaped by an engagement that might not have occurred in a different audience, with a different arena, or with a televised storyline that would limit the ways in which a character could actively respond to what the crowd was saying for fear of it altering the story.

My other example comes from the house show mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, which took place on September 1<sup>st</sup> of 2013, at the Verizon Center in Washington, DC. This is a considerably larger arena than the Showplace Arena, and the space has also hosted *Monday Night Raw* and *Tuesday* (formerly Thursday) *Night Smackdown* tapings, including the one discussed earlier. It does not represent the often “small” or “intimate” settings that can unfold at a house show, but the sense of slightly more playful engagement held true at this event as well. The crowd here was larger than at the Showplace Arena as well-- it was the Sunday of Labor Day weekend, and there were even more children at this show than at the previous one. The crowd makeup in general was considerably more diverse--a wide range of ages,

---

<sup>136</sup> Roland Barthes, “The World of Wrestling,” in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 24.

races, and genders, although the seats for this show had been slightly more expensive in keeping with its metropolitan locale (and thus, for more money, we were not seated as close to the ring as we had been at the Showplace). The crowd was not nearly as large as it would be for the taping of *Monday Night Raw*, with a large portion of the seats on offer completely empty, allowing fans to move closer to the ring if they so desired. The show featured some of the biggest fan favorites of the time--Daniel Bryan, Randy Orton, and the members of the Shield, a heel faction whose popularity belied their heelish behavior.

The sense of playful engagement was most notable in one particular match, in which two long-term veterans were teamed together against the brash up and coming heel superstars who currently held the tag team titles: the face team of the Big Show<sup>137</sup> (the seven-foot giant of the introduction) and Rob Van Dam, also known as RVD,<sup>138</sup> facing two of the three members of the faction the Shield, Seth Rollins<sup>139</sup> and Roman Reigns (the to-be-cheered-for heel in the yet to come Royal Rumble in January 2014). At this point, RVD was, in a way, a special attraction: he was very

---

<sup>137</sup> Paul Wight, who debuted as “The Giant” but became known as “The Big Show” upon changing from WCW to WWE, is billed as a seven foot tall, four hundred fifty pound giant--often the next coming of Andre the Giant--and fluctuates rapidly from heel to face in the WWE, to the point where it is a long-standing joke among fans. His large stature makes him an impressive and imposing sight, and when he is playing a face, he is often especially popular with young audiences.

<sup>138</sup> Robert Szatkowski, who wrestles as Rob Van Dam (usually shortened to RVD) was a fixture of Extreme Championship Wrestling--or ECW--from its inception, known for his high-risk maneuvers and high-flying action, particularly his finishing “Five Star Frog Splash.” RVD represents a wrestler that no longer works with the WWE regularly, but who had come back in June of that year for the first time since 2007. His charisma has made him a natural face in WWE who is frequently regarded as one of the most popular performers to come out of ECW.

<sup>139</sup> Colby Lopez--who wrestles as Seth Rollins--was often the most vocal member of the Shield, who taunted and yelled at opponents while his teammates fought, or even while he was fighting, making him a natural fit for the role of cowardly, loud-mouthed heel (who could back it up with his fast-paced fighting). Rollins is an indie circuit veteran who signed with WWE in 2010--his debut as part of the Shield, clad all in black with two-tone blonde and black hair, made him a male and female fan favorite, and his subsequent betrayal of the Shield in June 2014 (and nude photo scandal in 2015) are discussed at length in chapter three.

much a temporary or part-time talent,<sup>140</sup> while the Big Show represented one of the old guard who remained omnipresent, often to the point of boredom among older fans. The Big Show was notorious for shifting from face to heel with seemingly little to no rhyme or reason, depending on what was needed at the time. There were numerous fans vocally in support of the Shield<sup>141</sup>, once again serving as a reminder of the ways in which “expected” behavior can be subverted, but the fans were receiving their proper dosage of cheers and excitement, particularly from younger members of the audience.

Throughout the early moments of the match, RVD was in the ring, but the crowd was, shockingly, cheering for Big Show--and the end result was that Big Show kept getting tagged in, to the crowd’s very vocal delight. The perception that was evident, to me as well as numerous other fans surrounding us, was that that was not what was planned, that RVD was meant to do more. After all, RVD was the “special attraction”--he had only been back in the WWE for a few months, was something fresh and new for younger fans, and represented a sense of nostalgia for older fans, something for them to think back on fondly if they had been watching in the days of ECW. Yet every time RVD entered the ring, the crowd would take up the chant “We want Big Show!” until RVD tagged Big Show back into the ring, which was met with raucous cheers and applause. The crowd here--in this untelevised event--was loudly

---

<sup>140</sup> WWE has their regular rotation of full-time wrestlers who makes up the majority of their roster, but they also frequently sign former popular talent to shorter-term contracts for a few months.

<sup>141</sup> I often observed that, when the Shield entered—much as when Randy Orton entered—the octave of the in-house screaming raised considerably. The Shield, with its three attractive members each with their own appeal, was a female fan favorite for a reason: clad in black SWAT gear, they made an impact on the world of female wrestling fandom that is still discussed nearly three years after their debut, as discussed in chapters three, four, and five.

and strongly behind Big Show, and thus, as both RVD and Big Show are long-term veterans, they were able to react much more on the fly and react to the crowd's response. Whether or not it was planned, RVD was able to tag him in, let him do those loud, resounding chest slaps more, let him do more work in the match. After all, that was what the crowd was responding to, what the crowd was calling for, and two experienced veterans were able to allow the crowd response to give them energy, to not fluster them, and to keep the match moving forward without being strongly tied to the original plan. Ultimately the faces still won (albeit via disqualification), so whether or not it was meant for RVD or Big Show to get the pin, to get the big spots, is arguably less important. This serves instead as an example of a moment of the sort of improvisation that can come into play between performers who are both, at this point, veterans, have worked together multiple times before, and are able to respond to the crowd responding and give them things that they're interested in. In this sense, the fans who responded "correctly"--cheering for the faces--were once again rewarded, while the fans who responded by cheering for the heels were simultaneously rewarded by seeing their favorites lose only via a technicality, rather than being pinned or forced to submit (due to outside interference). House shows allow for what would be considered, on television, a near-impossibility on air: a way to send the majority of fans home happy without sacrificing elements of storytelling or kayfabe. In contrast to the ways in which the fan response to the Royal Rumble played out, in this instance, fans could not alter the "long game" (and did not do so in any measurable way), but were able to make small, enjoyable impacts on the

immediate, guiding the wrestlers to give the crowd what they wanted and making the storytelling more pleasurable for the live crowd.

### **“Are you here by yourself?” WrestleMania Axxess, 2014**

When I sleepily landed at the New Orleans airport on April 3, 2014, I was not entirely sure what to expect from the weekend ahead. It most assuredly was not to walk to baggage claim and stand beside one of the legends of professional wrestling,<sup>142</sup> nor to listen to him talk with a former WWE “diva”<sup>143</sup> and her fiancé (the conversation centered largely around Flair’s daughter, who was competing on WWE’s developmental program at the time) as I hoisted my too-full suitcase off of the belt. But that was only to be the beginning of a wrestling-soaked three days in the city. The entire city of New Orleans, it appeared, was in a wrestling frenzy--large signs hung in the airport welcoming fans to WrestleMania XXX, signs in shops encouraging fans to shop there for (unlicensed) merchandise, fans stopping wrestlers on Bourbon Street and at Café du Monde for photos--and all of this before I had so much as set foot inside an official WWE-sponsored event.

---

<sup>142</sup> Ric Flair--born Richard Fliehr--is seen as the descendant of the “Nature Boy” discussed in chapter one; his gimmick both as a wrestler and, later, a manager is a “kiss-stealing, wheeling and dealing” playboy, dressing richly and surrounding himself with beautiful women and all of the luxuries a privileged lifestyle affords. His battles with alcoholism are well-documented, but he remains a highly visible presence in the WWE to this day, as his daughter wrestles in the women’s division (with him as her manager, currently) and he stands as a two-time inductee into the WWE Hall of Fame.

<sup>143</sup> I had, in fact, shared my second plane ride with Maria Kanellis--another wrestler who performs under her real name--a leggy redhead who performed in the WWE for several years, even winning “Diva of the Year,” during a time when the women’s division was still defined by “bra and panty matches” (one of her storylines included earning the “right” to pose for the cover of *Playboy*, which she did). Kanellis left WWE in 2011 and has established herself as a highly visible force on the independent and international wrestling scene, one who firmly positions herself as an advocate for the importance of women’s wrestling and the role it can play.

WrestleMania itself is, as noted earlier, WWE's largest pay-per-view event of the year, but it has grown exponentially in the past decade, from a single-day event to a long weekend to what now amounts to nearly a week's worth of appearances and ticketed events (with several months' worth of lead-up, including a ticketed event...for tickets to go on sale). Some of the biggest featured events now associated with the days prior to WrestleMania include the opening of the WWE "Superstore" in the vicinity (a large store that sells a variety of exclusive merchandise branded for the event, alongside the usual WWE offerings) which also offers opportunities to attend meet and greets with superstars and divas; the WWE Hall of Fame<sup>144</sup> induction ceremony the Saturday night before WrestleMania; and, perhaps most popular, WrestleMania Axxess. As noted earlier, for Axxess, fans have the option to purchase either a four-hour "general admission" ticket (\$45 before taxes and fees); a "VIP" ticket for the same amount of time, but one that included line-cutting privileges along with an autograph session with a superstar that would not be available to general admission attendees (\$95 before taxes and fees); or, a new option that year, a "Premium VIP" ticket, allowing all of the benefits of the VIP ticket, an autograph session with an even more exclusive superstar, and a copy of a recently published photobook (\$175 before taxes and fees).<sup>145</sup> Along with these events, wrestlers participate in various charity work, attend galas and parties, and, from time to time,

---

<sup>144</sup> There is, in fact, no physical Hall of Fame for the WWE, as there is in other sports—this is merely a symbolic induction, one that carries with it no site to visit. Inductees do, however, receive Hall of Fame rings, frequently flaunted in a variety of settings—in recent years, a former WWE diva made headlines for wearing her Hall of Fame ring while filming pornography.

<sup>145</sup> It is worth noting that these prices have increased in the last two years; tickets are now \$55, \$110, and \$190--without even a photo book!



even mingle in the city. The performance of WrestleMania has become even more spectacular, and even the city, it seems, is a participant.

I had attended WrestleMania XXIX in New Jersey the previous year, but had participated in none of the lead-up events that went along with it--I arrived, attended WrestleMania itself and then departed. In 2014, my plan was, perhaps oddly, the opposite--since tickets to WrestleMania had gone on sale well before I considered going (and thus became prohibitively expensive), I instead purchased tickets to a number of Axxess sessions, and planned to soak in as much of the experience--and take as many pictures--as possible through those means instead. In many ways, the setup of an event such as Axxess allows for far more access to not only the talent, but also to other fans. The time spent waiting in line for a particular favorite creates an instantaneous bond with the fans who stand behind and in front of you; spontaneous conversations (and, on occasion, moments of competition) occur as much as a means to pass the time as anything, as the mere proximity to one's mutual hero (or, in many cases, crush object) spurs a desire to connect with those who share that proximity. Much of the declaration of fan culture is, by its nature, visual; as observed at other live events, it can often be difficult to discern individuals in the crowd, or to discern their individual choices, when listening to chants and responses. Yet the visual signifying is clearer up close: the selection of shirt, the choice (or creation) of sign, the visual reactions toward particular talent. In this setting, stakes shift slightly: by choosing who it is you are waiting for, you associate yourself with not only the

performer, but with their fans, and do so in a way that, for some fans, necessitates a desire to be set apart.<sup>146</sup>

Over the weekend, I attended three sessions in total (Thursday & Friday evening, from 6:00 PM-10:00 PM, and Saturday morning, from 8:00 AM-12:00 PM); each session brought with it new talent to meet, and accordingly, each session brought with it fresh sets of fans.<sup>147</sup> The experience of being a female fan--particularly a female fan on her own--was particularly striking for me on my first evening, although the scenario repeated itself at each session. Arriving at Axxess, I was immediately overwhelmed by the sheer size of the line, the vast numbers of fans around me--and the relatively minor number of fans in that same line that were female. Of that small percentage (perhaps 30% in total by visual estimation), approximately half were accompanied either by children, or by a male fan (the relationship of course varied--some romantic, some familial, some friendly). While there were of course instances of the women as the visible fan (and the man accompanying with varying degrees of begrudging enthusiasm), the majority of these pairings were as one might expect: an enthusiastic male fan, attempting to either "convert" the woman who he had brought, or mothers of children trying to take their little ones to see their favorites. This left, by my count, a mere 15% of fans "like me:" unaccompanied women, here to meet and greet the wrestlers, here to see what sorts of people we might meet. In this moment--slightly jet lagged, sweaty from a longer walk

---

<sup>146</sup> This concept of "good" versus "bad" fans, and the larger "us versus them" mentality, will be discussed at more length throughout this dissertation.

<sup>147</sup> It should be noted here that tickets for the general admission sessions go on sale well before the superstars are announced; thus, purchasing tickets can either be a last-minute venture--sometimes necessitating paying above the ticketed price--or an early gamble, hoping that those you'd like to meet will be at your sessions.

than expected, nervously wondering if I had chosen the right wrestling shirt for the evening--it was difficult to feel as though I was in a space that was meant for me. As I took in more and more of the event--standing ringside to watch some developmental matches, purchasing a shirt, and, finally, getting in line--this doubt did not disappear entirely.

In general, I passed through the crowd largely unnoticed or remarked upon--at least to my knowledge, assuaging at least that particular fear. While many of the people on their own were male, individual fans were scattered all over, occasionally chatting with fellow line mates, but more often keeping to themselves. When I sat down at one of the small tables, a young boy immediately began telling me all about the superstars that were there, while the man accompanying him looked on bemused, letting me know that they were New Orleans born and bred, and that this was their first time at WrestleMania weekend too--wishing me luck in the city they loved so much. However, a number of fathers, usually on their own with young boys, would give me looks of concern (or, perhaps, confusion), asking, "Are you here by yourself?" When I answered in the affirmative, the questions would begin: why was I here? Where had I come from? (Maryland! But that's so far!) What had made me decide to attend? Was I meeting anyone here?<sup>148</sup> These encounters differed from those online, where female presence was often perceived as threatening or dangerous to the male fans, moments of "proving." Rather, these men questioned my presence out of concern for *my* safety, rather than theirs; my presence did not threaten them,

---

<sup>148</sup> There was often palpable relief when I said yes, that I had other friends that were in town, and yes, they were wrestling fans too.

but instead gave them pause. My presence was perplexing--though I wore the “uniform” of a wrestling fan in the New Orleans heat (a t-shirt bearing the motto of one of my favorite wrestlers, a bag indicated purchased WWE merchandise), my participation was suspect as a woman on my own, either a threat to myself or, more often, a threat to others.

Typically, as I waited in line, small conversations would pop up around me; depending on the nature of the conversations (and my level of willingness to engage, often based on the size of the group), I might participate, sharing my thoughts on the talent we were waiting to meet, etc. With a small number of younger men--within five years of my age, I would guess<sup>149</sup>--there were moments of perceived posturing, wondering how long, for instance, I had been watching? Why was I in line for this particular performer?<sup>150</sup> However, when dealing with groups of men, my presence would more often go largely ignored. Instead, these groups preferred instead to loudly chant for the talent they were waiting for, or with little thought to who was around them (and certainly no apology) offer their commentary on the relative physical attractiveness of the female talent in particular. For instance, upon arrival at Axxess Thursday night, I immediately headed to the “NXT Experience” section, waiting in line to meet one of my personal favorite wrestlers,<sup>151</sup> Adrian Neville. While I had

---

<sup>149</sup> At the time, I was thirty years old.

<sup>150</sup> Crucial here is the question of what this sort of questioning indicates: as authors—and my interview subjects—have observed, a part of the male bonding experience in sports fan culture is that interrogation of fandom, a test that all fans must pass. Yet when it is male fans pressing these questions upon female fans, there is a certain amount of gate-keeping behind it: a desire to define fandom in a particular way, one that will not admit the “wrong” sort of fan. This topic is further discussed in chapters three, four, and five.

<sup>151</sup> Benjamin Satterly, a Newcastle-born wrestler who made a name for himself wrestling as PAC internationally for years before signing with the WWE as Adrian Neville (now just Neville), is a high-flying wrestler whose in-ring work relies heavily on his high-flying abilities (flipping all over the ring) and high-risk maneuvers, since he is arguably and self-proclaimed not the prototypical WWE superstar

only been watching NXT for a few months, he had emerged as far and away my favorite: his wrestling style tended toward the high-flying and acrobatic blended with strong technical wrestling, relying primarily on speed, qualities that I feel are the most appealing in-ring for creating an engaging match. Additionally, he had built compelling rivalries with former tag partners as well as individual competitors. Finally—a noticeable factor for many of my interview subjects in selecting their favorites—I was attracted to his Newcastle accent and “elven” (to borrow both compliments and critiques) features. This combination rendered him incredibly appealing for me (and a number of other female fans in line, quietly sighing over him to one another), yet our shared fandom remained mainly quiet: our proximity to one another, and soon to be him, identified us together, but we were less willing to establish ourselves loudly or vocally.

By contrast, as I stood tweeting busily with photos of the empty table, it became abundantly clear that the majority of the men were in line to meet the young WWE Diva that would be signing autographs alongside him, Paige.<sup>152</sup> In spite of Neville’s current standing as the NXT champion--and in spite of his sizeable independent/international background, a fact that normally earns wrestlers a degree of intrigue--two men in line behind me loudly declared, as the crowd cheered, “oh, see,

---

(he is relatively short compared to the top superstars, and he is seen as not conventionally good-looking). At the time of this Axxess session, he was the NXT champion, and though Neville has described himself in interviews as looking like “some kind of elf creature” with an accent that “no one can understand,” he is tremendously popular in part due to his time on the independent circuit and in Japan.

<sup>152</sup> Saraya Jade Bevis, who wrestles in the WWE as Paige (and on the independent circuit as Brittani Knight) is one of the first second-generation female wrestlers who traces her wrestling heritage through her mother, a British wrestler who performs as “Sweet Saraya.” At the time of this Axxess session, Paige was the NXT women’s champion (and was, in fact, the inaugural women’s champion,

these people actually watch NXT”<sup>153</sup>--in spite of this area of Axxess being designated specifically for the talent on NXT (and despite that also being, in WWE at least, the only space where one could see Paige perform, at this time). Instead, the most frequent topic that they chose to discuss among themselves remained their personal knowledge of wrestling or, in a few uncomfortable moments, exactly how hot they found Paige. My presence--and the presence of other women--in this particular line went largely unnoticed during either version of this discussion, and in this setting.<sup>154</sup> Paige, and other performers, existed as objects for consumption and discussion, and an essential component of the fan bonding experience was to loudly participate in that consumption.<sup>155</sup> Without explicitly declaring us unwelcome, without deliberately denying us a place in line, the code was clear.

In at least one case, however, that questioning and that moment of alienation was flipped on its head entirely: the person in front of me was an enthusiastic twenty-something year-old girl, with long dyed hair and glasses, whose immediate response to noticing me in line was to declare that she had to “apologize for being such a stereotypical fangirl right now” but that she just *had* to show someone the picture she had gotten earlier with Seth Rollins, so proud was she that she’d convinced him to put her into a playful headlock.<sup>156</sup> In that moment, she felt her enthusiasm had to be briefly tempered, the waters warily tested: was I (another woman, also on my own,

---

<sup>153</sup> Krenek, notes on Axxess, April 3, 2014

<sup>154</sup> As in others—many of my informants spoke of scenarios in which men were able to react loudly and openly to the physical appearance of the female wrestlers, but female fans were scorned for even subtly expressing said attraction.

<sup>155</sup> In a larger version of this project, I would be interested in interviewing male fans about this experience and its effect on their participation in fan culture. While this scenario repeated itself in all settings where female wrestlers were available to see/meet, I am not trying to argue that ALL male fans in line participated.

<sup>156</sup> Krenek, Notes on Axxess Day 1, April 3, 2014

also in line to meet a performer) about to dismiss her? The instinct towards disavowal of behavior was not unique; many of my informants admit to feeling similar impulses, the desire to make the joke about themselves before others can be allowed to make it about them, to, in some ways, cast themselves in a particular light, to demonstrate self-awareness, to prove that they are not “Those” fans, the wrong sort. She went on to tell me about how she’d designed her t-shirt herself (an official licensed piece of WWE merchandise that she had cut, twisted, and tied off to be more fashionable); warned me that if I got her talking about wrestling she “would NOT stop,” and, in response to questions I never asked, loudly volunteered her knowledge of wrestling, her rationale for being there, how much she’d paid for her seats to WrestleMania and how long she had watched. When she admitted that it was “probably weird” for guys, to see a girl so interested in wrestling, a heavysset young man with a British accent behind me laughed. When we turned to look, he offered, gamely, “We’re watching a bunch of men touch each other, in their underwear. Don’t you think it’s probably weirder for me to explain to people why I like that?” The knowing laugh we shared, for a moment, united us all as fans: we recognized all that was strange, surreal, and frankly homoerotic about this sports entertainment, and we allowed it to bring all of us to New Orleans, him across an ocean, her a mere two-hour drive, and me over a time zone and a handful of states.

It was these moments of strange and sudden connection that would repeat the most frequently with the fans I encountered over the course of that sleepless weekend: a girl, fixing her lipstick in the bathroom, yelled in delight when she saw

my shirt and pleaded with me not to leave,<sup>157</sup> that her friend absolutely had to see it. When this friend emerged from the bathroom (and, thankfully, washed her hands), the shirt (and I) was presented to her evident delight, as she demanded to know how to follow me on social media, declaring, “Girl, now we’re family.” I stood behind her in line mere minutes later to meet Wade Barrett,<sup>158</sup> the superstar whose shirt I bore--later, she would ask permission to share any photos she had taken to the fan site she ran for him, giving me a sense of welcome, a sense of belonging, one female fan to another female fan. The space felt, in that moment, safe and welcoming: while we were not the majority, we were at the very least a visible minority. Later that night, I stood on a slightly rickety balcony overlooking Bourbon Street, calling my responses to the chants starting in the street below: a sea of wrestling fans loose in the city, aligning ourselves with the talent we loved and disdaining the talent we did not, predicting outcomes and chanting for those absent with equal vigor. Yet even in that moment of seeming welcome--a space where all fans could come together as one voice, to chant “YES! YES! YES!” for Daniel Bryan, the woman on the balcony next to us was, abruptly, the target of sexualized chants, demanding that she show those in the street her “puppies” (to borrow an unfortunate term for breasts from the “Attitude Era” referenced in chapter one), and, when she refused, to loudly chant that she had

---

<sup>157</sup> In another setting, it might be frightening to be abruptly asked not to leave a bathroom—at WrestleMania weekend, it felt strangely like par for the course.

<sup>158</sup> Stu Bennett, a Preston-born wrestler who goes by “Wade Barrett” in the WWE, came up to the WWE as the “winner” of the former incarnation of NXT, in which would-be performers competed to earn a spot in the WWE, in 2010. Barrett emphasizes his background (a mixture of truth and fiction) as an underground bare-knuckle brawler overseas as part of his character—claiming his nose has been broken over a dozen times, for instance—and is known for his brawling in-ring style and striking finishing maneuvers. At the time of Axxess, Barrett’s gimmick was that of “Bad News Barrett,” delivering “bad news” to his opponents verbally and physically; the shirt I wore that day bore his catchphrase, much to his delight and the delight of fans who noticed.



any number of sexually transmitted diseases. While these chants may not be aimed directly at female fans at live events, the mentality behind them remains, even when wordless. Female fans are suspect by their very presence; we are called upon to testify, to provide evidence of the “purity” and “rightness” of our fandom, and though we may on occasion feel as though we have been made part of a family--however abruptly--we are reminded, nearly constantly, that we may be disowned at any moment.

### **Conclusion:**

These examples that I have discussed represent five out of the twenty-one WWE events<sup>159</sup> I attended over the course of my research from 2013-2016, each demonstrating different ways in which fans interacted with the performance that they were being offered, choosing to accept it or reject it. In turn, by accepting or rejecting the performances that were on display, they chose to accept or reject the fans around them, deciding whether or not those fans were going to be allowed to feel welcome, or if they were going to feel alienated. Though the degree to which the audience can truly be a “blank slate,” and the degree to which an audience can ultimately influence the narrative of a particular show is difficult to prove, these case studies illustrate the experience of being in the physical presence of other fans, to contrast with the forthcoming chapters focusing on fandom in the virtual sphere.

---

<sup>159</sup> In total I attended more than thirty events over that time, but the rest of the events were independent or non-WWE-related.

### Chapter 3: Breaking the Shield: Internet fandom response

For a large number of online media fans, online sexual activity (OSA) is an everyday part of their fandom experience.<sup>160</sup>

-- Heather Meggers, "Discovering the Authentic Sexual Self: The Role of Fandom in the Transformation of Fans' Sexual Attitudes"

Too much emphasis on male bodies and too many women in the audience also make it more difficult to suppress the fact that wrestling is sports entertainment, not pure sport, and that the entertainment is all about half-naked, sweaty men pretending to fight while they have their faces and hands in each others' groins.<sup>161</sup>

Susan Clerc and Catherine Salmon, " 'Ladies Love Wrestling, Too': Female Wrestling Fans Online"

Statistically, wrestling is not for women. This is not, of course, reflective of the actual lived reality of being a female wrestling fan, and never has been, but if one chooses to rely on numbers, it is a statistical fact. A 2012 survey showed that the majority of wrestling fans (67 percent) identify as male; while 33 percent is not an insignificant number by any means, it is a decided minority. When one attends a live event, that number seems inaccurate--the split frequently seems much more even, close to 50/50, but the numbers for television viewing suggest a different narrative. Online, however, it is far easier to find female fans--and to find ways to engage with these fans. In this chapter, I will discuss two case studies of events that my informants and I experienced through television and social media, as well as examine the ways in which official WWE social media accounts (such as Twitter and Instagram) circulate imagery intended for fan consumption. These case studies reflect the predominant

---

<sup>160</sup> Heather Meggers, "Discovering the Authentic Sexual Self: The Role of Fandom in the Transformation of Fans' Sexual Attitudes," in *Fan Culture: Theory/practice* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 80.

<sup>161</sup> Susan Clerc and Catherine Salmon, " 'Ladies Love Wrestling, Too': Female Wrestling Fans Online," in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 170.

means by which fans experience professional wrestling events, as the constant travel and expense of attending live shows would make it largely out of reach for most, if not all, fans to perform consistently. Furthermore, watching events on television, online, or pay-per-view allows for fans to react in real time to a broader fan community who is sharing that experience, no matter how many miles apart.

As discussed in chapter one, numerous texts and studies have examined and considered the ways in which wrestling and masculinity are intimately and innately tied together, complicating images of gender and sexuality while still maintaining extraordinarily traditional, conservative roles. It is natural to conclude that by and large, wrestling is constructed for the male gaze. To borrow from Laura Mulvey: women might be looking (WWE programming seems to suggest as much), but their gaze is apparently not quite strong enough. While the “gaze” might traditionally be male, the female gaze has a potency that is becoming more and more visible--and women are finding more and more places to share with one another what exactly it is that we might be looking at on Monday nights every week. While women may represent a statistical minority in the official records of WWE, their presence--at live shows and, online--is increasingly and intensely visible. As this chapter explores, it only takes the click of a mouse for women to assert their right to speak out in the wrestling fandom, and sometimes that means recreating and visualizing the product in ways that, previously, were perceived as largely male domain or considered too

“deviant” (to borrow Lisa A. Lewis’ use of the term) to share publicly, however anonymously.<sup>162</sup>

While the WWE offers over two hundred live events, from house shows up through pay-per-views, annually, it is neither feasible (nor, for many, even desirable) to see more than a small percentage of those in person. There are, of course, “superfans” that make it a point to travel to as many wrestling events as possible,<sup>163</sup> but these are the exception, rather than the rule.<sup>164</sup> One of the primary challenges is distance and location; the company tours both nationally and internationally, and at times there are multiple shows in multiple cities at the same time.<sup>165</sup> Cost also represents a significant obstacle for many fans. Though it is possible to get tickets to a house show for approximately \$20, even that cost can be prohibitive, particularly if a family is attending; multiply this by five to six shows in a week (on average), add in travel costs, and it becomes clear why being a wrestling fan is more often mediated through television or the Internet.

---

<sup>162</sup> As noted in chapter one, I am not implying here that this experience is solely a female wrestling fan experience—as my bibliography notes, the phenomenon of the “fake geek girl” and the ways in which many niche fandoms have long been male-dominated has informed my work throughout. Rather, I wish to assert that this is a representative example of some of the specific ways that female wrestling fans respond to this gatekeeping.

<sup>163</sup> A number of these fans also make it a point to sit on camera whenever possible, and, to a certain extent, attempt to become “celebrities” themselves, particularly online—the “Brock Lesnar Guy,” “Frank the Clown,” “Shocked Undertaker Guy,” “Sign Guy,” and others. The phenomenon of fans who are more interested in being showcased themselves, rather than taking in the action, is one that this project cannot fully explore, but I touch upon it in the epilogue—further reading can be found in my bibliography.

<sup>164</sup> There is a slight exception for, as it currently stands, a show like NXT. While the company does now tour NXT, nationally and internationally, with the exception of a few pay-per-views a year the show is taped at Full Sail University or another location in central Florida. Thus, it is not uncommon to see the same fans on screen at every aired NXT show; though they may be traveling, it is only a few hours.

<sup>165</sup> This is presumably to help increase exposure and revenue; it can be challenging, however, since purchasing tickets to a live show does not ensure that your particular favorite will be at that show versus the rival one that night!

Similarly, while it is possible to meet and talk with fellow wrestling fans at live shows,<sup>166</sup> the opportunity for lengthy conversation or engaged debate is drastically reduced from a combination of acoustics and adrenaline. One might encounter another fan in a similar shirt or holding a sign for a mutual favorite performer, but these exchanges are usually very brief—"I like your shirt" or a loud "Whoo, Neville!" or a quick exchange of a signature gesture,<sup>167</sup> usually suffices. From time to time deeper or longer conversations can and do occur, but these are far likelier to happen at smaller, non-WWE shows,<sup>168</sup> or by the pure chance of opportunity. The communal experience of live wrestling is grounded more in shared and easily interpreted emotional experience--cheering, crying, booing--rather than individual connections.

How, then, can wrestling fans connect with more depth and at more length with fellow fans--and how can fans access hours of wrestling in a week, if they are not able to attend? Thanks to social media, the WWE Network,<sup>169</sup> and cable television and television apps,<sup>170</sup> there are tens to hundreds of thousands of at-home viewers for any given pay-per-view or weekly programming, such as *Monday Night*

---

<sup>166</sup> I met one of my informants, Kate, by chance at a small independent show in Brooklyn—she was seated next to me, and we exchanged Twitter information at the end of the night, when we discovered that neither of us was local and that in fact we lived only two hours apart. These kinds of connections are wonderful but, among my informants as well as my personal experience, rare.

<sup>167</sup> For instance, when I got on a plane in a "Balor Club" sweatshirt, two men that I passed as I walked to my row called out "Balor Club, Too Sweet!"—in exchange, I mimicked the gesture that they were referencing (lifting the index & little finger up, pressing your middle and ring fingers to the thumb to form a wolf shape) and bumped each of their outstretched hands. As a nervous flyer at 6 AM, this felt like a particularly nice bit of camaraderie.

<sup>168</sup> Primarily due to the smaller audience and closer seating arrangements.

<sup>169</sup> A WWE-owned streaming service, available for \$9.99 a month, which grants a subscriber access to all pay-per-views, current and past, as well as *Monday Night Raw*, *Smackdown*, and *NXT* episodes, although *Raw* and *Smackdown* do not air live.

<sup>170</sup> Applications that allow you to stream/view certain channels, such as Apple TV, Sling, Roku, etc.

*Raw* or *Smackdown*. House shows, as discussed in chapter two, still exist by and large only for the live audience, but from time to time WWE will present one on the WWE Network, or share videos and/or pictures on their official website and app, and fans still circulate images and video captured at these smaller shows to share with other fans. While there are always a limited number of tickets and seats for any given live event, the mediated access is vast. Even if one is unable to watch live or does not have cable, the WWE App and sites like Twitter, Tumblr, Reddit, and other forums are updated live by fans almost instantly. Many of the most striking and memorable moments in my informants' stories are not ones that they experienced in person (as I described in chapter two); rather, they were watching at home, or following along online.

With this access, however, comes risks. The relative, or potential, anonymity of the Internet and that sense of disconnect can lead to extremely negative experiences. A number of my informants shared stories of policing or harassment at live events<sup>171</sup> and, unfortunately, the number of incidents that happens online is greater. Alongside the all-too typical experiences of racial, ethnic, or sexual slurs that seem to circulate in all forms of commenting and social media, fandom itself can be called into question: are you a “real” fan or a “fake” fan? How long have you been watching, and why? How many of these performers have you watched since day one-on the indies, in Japan, in a backyard in suburban New Jersey with a staple gun?<sup>172</sup>

---

<sup>171</sup> Elements of these stories can be found in chapters two and four, as well as this chapter; though no one I spoke to was ever physically attacked or assaulted at a show, many of them reported stories of being harassed or questioned by male fans, or of being given a sense that they were unwelcome, and further felt that it was not possible to talk back to the person in question.

<sup>172</sup> CZW, or Combat Zone Wrestling, is based out of Philadelphia, but they run the majority of their shows in New Jersey; in the past, they specialized almost exclusively in hardcore, “ultraviolent”

Are you, then, a fan, “just a fangirl,”<sup>173</sup> or even a “ringrat?”<sup>174</sup> When I began my research this project, based on what I had observed and the numerous articles and texts about fandom experience, my presumption was that the majority of this kind of fandom policing and attempting to dictate what qualified as correct fandom would be intergender: men attempting to play gatekeeper and keep women out of “their” interests. However, over the course of my research and interview process, I have discovered that while this does indeed happen with considerable frequency, there is also a large amount of female-to-female fan policing, particularly in regards to sexuality.

As stated in the introduction, in this chapter I will first explore two case studies. In both cases, I experienced them by watching them air live on television and online, responding in real time with tweets and Tumblr posts. These events all center around the experience of arguing over the “correct” fan response, and represent multiple types of fan connections as well as fan policing. The first section, “The fall of the Shield,” unpacks the end of a fan favorite faction in June of 2014, and the ways in which the intense emotional response to that breakup was preemptively dismissed, particularly by male fans. This section offers analysis of the deep emotional responses that professional wrestling can evoke, and affords opportunities to discuss both fan connectivity over shared grief, and fan exclusion. The second study, “Sounds like you had a bad Valentine’s Day,” deals with a nude photo leak that occurred in February of

---

wrestling, full of blood and unusual weapons. Some WWE wrestlers (like Dean Ambrose, then known as Jon Moxley) got their starts, or at least some experience, in this and other similar promotions.

<sup>173</sup> A further discussion of the difference, or perceived difference, between fangirls and fans will be discussed in sections two and three of this chapter, as well as in chapter four and five.

<sup>174</sup> Derogatory slang for a fan, typically female, who attends events in hopes of having sex with wrestlers-akin to a groupie.

2015, and how that photo leak and fan responses reveal deeply rooted sexism and fan policing that can occur between groups of women. From there, this chapter addresses the discrepancies between the officially sanctioned distribution of images by the WWE, and the unofficial (and unintentional) circulation of imagery by wrestlers, fans, and those in between, by examining four photographs circulated by either WWE's social media accounts, or by the superstars themselves.

These case studies, when in conversation with one another, show the arc of approximately a year and a half of storytelling, and reveal elements of both the positive and negative sides of fan culture--and the ways in which engagement in that culture can be questioned, challenged, and dismissed.

### **The Fall of the Shield**

In wrestling, as in other sports (and in entertainment), the storytelling is best when it can culminate in a single, iconic moment--a lasting image that can stand as summary, as symbol, of days, weeks, months, or even years of a storyline. The image can capture the thrill of victory or the agony of defeat; the joy of a reunion or the heartache of a breakup; the underdog overcoming or falling. Laurence de Garis observes that:

The reason that credibility is important is so that fans can experience a pro-wrestling match as they would a sports event. The best matches in wrestling are those that mimic the oohs and ahs of a sports contest. The best matches have reproduced the formula that makes those 'miracle moments' in sports so miraculous: the home run in the bottom of the ninth to win the game, the last second field goal, the final-round knockout while you are behind on the



judges' scorecard.<sup>175</sup>

While the results of wrestling may be predetermined, the performers still need to work to create the air of natural occurrence and attempt, whenever possible, to draw a genuine emotional response from the finish, as well as the moments that build up to it. In the world of professional wrestling, some of the most-cited memorable moments, the moments that are replayed again and again, stem from betrayal. Fans--myself and my informants included--recount stories of remembering the first tag team they saw fall apart; the first time they saw a beloved fan favorite turn heel, or align themselves with a new faction or manager. It is, as with many things, somewhat generational--there is a reason, for instance, that a popular Internet wrestling t-shirt store is named Barbershop Window, a title referring to one of the most memorable tag team breakups of all in 1992.<sup>176</sup> Just as it can be said that there are iconic players for every generation of sports fans, there are iconic betrayals for every generation of wrestling fans.

The act of betrayal can be a slow build, or instantaneous; it can be predictable or unpredictable; it can turn characters into faces or heels. Certainly not every breakup or betrayal enters into the public consciousness in the same way. As in theatre or film, the ones that tend to draw the largest response come when characters

---

<sup>175</sup> Laurence de Garis, "The "Logic" of Professional Wrestling," in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 201.

<sup>176</sup> The ultra-popular long-lived tag team The Rockers, consisting of Marty Jannetty and Shawn Michaels, reportedly had a number of "backstage" issues that became a part of their storyline; in January of 1992, this came to an in-character head when Michaels executed his finishing move, a "superkick" known as Sweet Chin Music, on Jannetty, kicking him through the glass window of the Barbershop belonging to fellow wrestler Brutus "the Barber" Beefcake, who had been interviewing the two to help them reconcile. This breakup cemented Michaels' heel character and, arguably, propelled him to fame--Jannetty became a footnote at best, and the breakup is still referenced as one of the most shocking.

have become beloved, when their relationship itself becomes one that the viewer is devoted to, and when even the most experienced viewer, in spite of claims to the contrary, does not fully believe it is possible. The team has already overcome near-breakups, perhaps, or the wrestler is too devoted to his or her young fans to ever turn on them...right? But when the moment finally happens and the foreign object is swung, nothing, it seems, can ever be the same again; in a series of images, captured in an official WWE.com gallery, one can nearly hear fans' hearts breaking.<sup>177</sup> Such was the case on June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2014--but to get to June of 2014, it is necessary to go back to 2012.

At Survivor Series in November 2012, during a triple threat<sup>178</sup> title match between champion CM Punk<sup>179</sup> and challengers Ryback<sup>180</sup> and John Cena,<sup>181</sup> a trio of men,<sup>182</sup> dressed all in black, abruptly emerged from the crowd and attacked Ryback, who had already performed a finishing move on Cena, leaving him collapsed in the

---

<sup>177</sup> WWE.com, "Roman Reigns versus Randy Orton Photos." Accessed 25 February 2017.

<http://www.wwe.com/shows/raw/2014-06-02/roman-reigns-vs-randy-orton-photos#fid-26508909>

<sup>178</sup> In triple threat matches, the champion is forced to defend his or her title against two competitors, and as the commentary team frequently notes, the champion does not even have to be pinned to lose the title—there are no countouts or disqualifications, and if one of the challengers pins the other challenger OR the champion, they will win the title.

<sup>179</sup> As mentioned in chapter two, a Chicago-based wrestler who left the company after Royal Rumble 2014, citing a variety of reasons for his dissatisfaction; in November of 2012, he was wrestling as an anti-authority heel, but one who was beloved by the fans.

<sup>180</sup> A large, extremely muscular wrestler whose crowd chant of "Feed Me More!" spoke to his desire to fight as many men as possible, as often as possible—he is no longer with the WWE, but saw highs and lows of intense popularity during this time.

<sup>181</sup> In many ways the face of the company in the modern era, John Cena (like Randy Orton, a man who wrestles under his real name) is a fresh-faced good guy, who draws an intensely split reaction from most crowds—alternately chanting "Let's Go Cena!" and "Cena Sucks!" He has granted the most Make a Wish wishes in history and is far and away the best seller of merchandise within the company, particularly among children, but "smart" fans often disparage him—still, he remains self-aware and pokes fun at himself.

<sup>182</sup> Reigns and Rollins had been wrestling individually on NXT; when the promotion was called FCW, all three of them had appeared. They were not wrestling as a trio at that point; their first NXT appearance as "the Shield" was on January 2, 2013. It is also crucial to note that NXT was not widely accessible at this point in time, so the majority of fans did not recognize them immediately.

ring. The three worked together to pick the huge superstar up and slammed him through a table, in a move that they would later identify as “the triple powerbomb.” The seemingly surprised Punk then climbed into the ring and pinned Cena, allowing him to retain his title. In the following weeks on *Raw*, Ryback would demand revenge from the group who identified themselves only as a “Shield of Justice”--strong, silent Roman Reigns;<sup>183</sup> unpredictable, “unstable” Dean Ambrose;<sup>184</sup> and high-risk “architect” Seth Rollins.<sup>185</sup> They would continue to bring destruction to those who they perceived as enemies of justice, and made their official in-ring debut a few weeks later at WWE’s “TLC: Tables, Ladders, and Chairs” pay-per-view in a six-man tag team match against Ryback, accompanied by “Team Hell No” consisting of Daniel Bryan<sup>186</sup> and Kane.<sup>187</sup> The match was full of high-risk spots--Rollins, for instance, went flying off two ladders in a moment I will never forget--and the Shield emerged triumphant, their legacy only just beginning.

The trio wrestled as heels, initially; though they claimed that they only attacked those that deserved it, it missed no one’s attention that they typically attacked those who either opposed CM Punk or those that were popular “faces.” Their gear transformed to tactical vests and pants, still skintight black; their music began

---

<sup>183</sup> As discussed in chapter two.

<sup>184</sup> Jonathan Good, who currently wrestles as Dean Ambrose (but has, in the past, wrestled as Jon Moxley) with the WWE with the problematic nickname of the “lunatic fringe,” has a tremendous fan following, male and female, and his female fans in particular are accused of being especially “thirsty” and overzealous, by male fans as well as other female fans. His in-ring persona is extremely intense and unpredictable, occasionally-to-often violent, and he is particularly noted for his strong promo work. Ambrose began wrestling as a “heel” but was tremendously popular from the onset—he is currently a face.

<sup>185</sup> As discussed in chapter two and to be discussed at more length in section three of this chapter.

<sup>186</sup> As discussed at length in chapter two.

<sup>187</sup> A wrestler who has been with the company since the 1990s under a variety of personas and, often, masks, Kane (real name: Glenn Jacobs) was, at this time, wrestling as “The Demon Kane,” his best-known persona, a kayfabe sibling of the Undertaker and, in spite of his monstrous appearance, a face.

with a crackling declaration spelling out “Shield”<sup>188</sup> in the phonetic alphabet followed by music that became iconic; they entered through the crowd, who, even if they were booing, were still reaching out to touch them. Though they may have been booked as heels, the team was immediately iconic and overwhelmingly popular. They continually had new merchandise introduced, a strong sign of their tremendous popularity,<sup>189</sup> and they had a several-month undefeated streak in televised six-man tag matches, including a match at WrestleMania 29, only a few months after their debut. They began competing as individuals and in two-man tag teams as well; Ambrose won the United States on May 19, 2013, and that same night, Rollins and Reigns won the tag team titles. They shifted from independent mercenaries (although it was revealed that, at least initially, they had been on the “payroll” of manager Paul Heyman<sup>190</sup>) to employees of the “authority,”<sup>191</sup> particularly Triple H.<sup>192</sup>

As with most tag teams and stables, an eventual breakup seemed, in many ways, inevitable; no team stays together forever, or at least fans have convinced themselves. Thus the topic of “when will the Shield break up?” was a common conversation topic among fans online and in person, albeit a topic that frequently

---

<sup>188</sup> Each member of the team said two letters, so that the overall effect was a series of voices declaring “Sierra, Hotel, India, Echo, Lima, Delta” (recording found here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vnan\\_qK8eq8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vnan_qK8eq8)) with all three voices intoning “SHIELD” afterward, followed by the music. A sample of the theme song can be found at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AiHECnWxq7s>

<sup>189</sup> It is unfortunately not possible to access specific sales numbers from WWE; however, on lists of top company sellers, the Shield—and, later, its individual members—were consistently in the top ten.

<sup>190</sup> Paul Heyman, a manager, promoter, and founder of the 1990s fan favorite Extreme Championship Wrestling, a promotion with no (or very few) rules that specialized in hardcore matches featuring weapons, barbed wire, and of course, tables, ladders, and chairs.

<sup>191</sup> It was at this point, in late summer of 2013, that I saw them compete in the house show, as detailed in chapter two.

<sup>192</sup> Triple H—short for Hunter Hearst-Helmsley, in kayfabe (Paul Levesque, in reality), whose role in WWE could warrant its own chapter. In storyline, he serves as both a wrestler and the COO of WWE, alternating roles as needed; in reality, by marrying Stephanie McMahon, daughter of Vince McMahon, he truly is the COO, and also manages NXT as his pet project.

ended with some variant on “...but I hope they never do.” WWE, well aware of this trope and these conversations, began hinting at “cracks” in the Shield as early as the fall of 2013, but the team always seemed to manage to overcome and reunite at the most crucial moments. Still, taunts and tension continued, leading to an iconic moment at the Royal Rumble in January of 2014,<sup>193</sup> when Ambrose attempted to eliminate Reigns and Reigns responded by simultaneously eliminating Ambrose and Rollins.<sup>194</sup> The tension seemed to reach a peak when Rollins walked out on the team on *Monday Night Raw* on March 3, 2014, claiming he could no longer be the glue that held the team together.<sup>195</sup> However, on the episode of *Smackdown* that aired three days later,<sup>196</sup> the threesome “resolved” their tension in-ring, with Ambrose and Rollins settling issues in the time-honored tradition of wrestlers everywhere: by punching one another. The trio then resolved to stand together stronger, and on March 17, 2014, the team officially cemented their role as faces by attacking another one of Triple H’s employees, Kane. The crowd had long been cheering for the Shield and now the official storyline reflected the fan response, allowing even the youngest audience members an opportunity to cheer for the newly minted heroes.

After WrestleMania 30, the Shield entered into a rivalry with the freshly reformed Evolution, a trio of entitled heels consisting of Batista,<sup>197</sup> Randy Orton,<sup>198</sup>

---

<sup>193</sup> As discussed in chapter two.

<sup>194</sup> By this point, however, the Shield had begun to transition over to playing a “face” role, moving into rivalries with the villainous Wyatt Family; this would not officially be confirmed until March 17<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>195</sup> WWE.com and YouTube. “A Crack in the Shield?: *Raw* Fallout.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=csxYTS9Wzrk> (Accessed 15 March 2017)

<sup>196</sup> *Smackdown* did not air live at that point, so the show was actually taped the Tuesday after *Raw*, and then aired in America on Thursday night.

<sup>197</sup> As discussed in chapter two.

<sup>198</sup> One of the rare wrestlers whose “real” and ring names are the same—Randall Keith “Randy” Orton, a current WWE superstar and female fan favorite—his ringside entrance pose is frequently photographed & can be seen in Appendix. Randy Orton is, intriguingly, one of the few other superstars

and Triple H, after it was revealed that Triple H, while still employing the Shield, had orchestrated an attack against them. Triple H announced a match for the May 4<sup>th</sup> Extreme Rules<sup>199</sup> pay-per-view between the two factions. As expected, the match featured plenty of underhanded tactics, double-and-triple teams, and brawls through the crowd, including Rollins, ever the daredevil, taking a dive off of a balcony onto his rivals. Just as at WrestleMania, the match ultimately ended with Batista taking the loss, but this time it was to Roman Reigns thanks to a double combination of Reigns' two finishing moves (though earlier in the match he had also taken a triple powerbomb). Although the Shield stood victorious, Triple H and his teammates would attempt to humiliate the team and regularly distract or interfere in matches, eventually forcing Ambrose to defend his title (which he ultimately lost).

On June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014, WWE had held another one of their monthly pay-per-views, called Payback. The theme, as the name suggests, is to set up matches between rivals, or offer those who have been unfairly treated or cheated a chance to gain some well-deserved revenge. The pay-per-view itself was, by and large, not terribly memorable. When asked, informants did not remember very much of what had occurred (nor, to be fair, had I), save for the main event, a “No Holds Barred Elimination Match.”<sup>200</sup> At the pay-per-view, the Shield, now solidly playing faces,

---

who has publicly acknowledged that he is aware of fan fiction written about him and other male superstars, and has laughed it off (or, as noted later, wondered why he doesn't see more variety); he is highly aware of his own sexual appeal and often ensures that it makes it into his promo work, as well as the highly “on display” pose he offers every time he enters the ring.

<sup>199</sup> Theoretically, the Extreme Rules pay-per-view centers around the theme of “extreme” matches—street fights, no holds barred, steel cage matches, etc. The Shield/Evolution match, however, was just a six-man tag.

<sup>200</sup> An elimination match means that each member of a team must be eliminated individually, rather than a single pinfall, submission, disqualification, or countout, as is standard. “No Holds Barred” means that, technically, no maneuvers are illegal and thus eliminates disqualification or countout as an option; wins must be scored by pinfall or submission.

got the desired “payback” and defeated Evolution for a second time. Though the match was elimination-style (that is, it was possible to win the match even with members of your team being pinned and/or submitted, as long as one member lasted), the victory came with not a single member of the Shield being eliminated--in their post-show interview, the three spoke of their bond, their connection, and their ability to come out standing tall, seemingly putting to rest any of the moments of weakness or “cracks” that had been glimpsed in previous months.

As noted earlier, the television episode that airs the Monday after a pay-per-view is seen as “can’t-miss”; this is when wrestlers make their returns or debuts, for instance, or when a fresh storyline begins, having put to rest the night before. To that end, many fans tune in to watch live just to see what will happen, even if they might ordinarily just catch up later, I watched at my apartment, alongside my brother, his non-wrestling-fan girlfriend, and husband. On June 2<sup>nd</sup>, on *Monday Night Raw* (the longest-running episodic weekly television series in the United States, as viewers are reminded each week), Batista demanded a title match, which he was not granted, and as noted in the conclusion of section one, quit on the spot. After that incident, however, not much was happening, with the exception of further announcements about Daniel Bryan’s surgery and the impact it would have on both his future and the future of his fellow wrestler and wife, Brie. As Amanda, one informant, noted, “So I remember that night, the episode of *Raw* was pretty boring and I was tired and I was really considering going to bed and missing the end. But for whatever reason, I stayed up....”<sup>201</sup>

---

<sup>201</sup> Follow-up interview, email, Amanda T., March 2016

That reason, the hoped for and anticipated surprise, occurred near the end of the show in the grand tradition of barbershop windows from years past. As with the most successfully memorable moments, a fan favorite “face” made a heel turn by betraying his team, the men that had called one another brothers became sworn enemies. The Shield entered the ring together, ostensibly to support Roman Reigns, who was to face Randy Orton in the main event. Rollins grabbed up a chair to help defend them, a move that my brother commented on. For his part, Orton entered with Triple H, who was clutching his signature sledgehammer; Triple H reminded the Shield--and the viewing audience--that what he always did best was adapt. “Last night,” Triple H mused, “was Plan A. Tonight?”--with a look at his sledgehammer--“Plan B. There’s always a Plan B.” Orton grinned alongside him, and the members of the Shield—Seth clutching a steel chair--looked at one another, before Reigns and Ambrose moved forward.

In a pause that seemed to last forever, Rollins hung back for a second or two--a second long enough for both my brother and I to, in chorus, say, “Uh, wait a—” and then, viciously, Rollins swung the chair to Roman Reigns’ back, then turned it on a shocked Dean Ambrose, striking them both over and over till the chair warped. “These guys are on top of the world!” mourned commentator JBL,<sup>202</sup> “Why on earth would Seth Rollins do this?” Rollins paused only long enough to swap out the broken chair and bring in a new one, performing his “curbstomp” finisher on Dean Ambrose before he left the ring with the chair. As Rollins approached his apparent new

---

<sup>202</sup> One of the primary advantages to watching televised/pay-per-view wrestling is the presence of commentary; while the team can frequently be irritating for a variety of reasons, they are able to lend gravitas to the appropriate situations, as well as weave together storylines—when one sees an event live, there is no commentary, so on occasion events can be confusing or unclear without interpretation.



teammates, leaving his former ones collapsed, the boos were resounding; a man at ringside, visible on camera, loudly shouted “WHY? WHY?” as other fans chanted “You sold out!”

From the onset, the Shield had been mercenaries and renegades, answering to no one except one another, as they were always citing their brotherhood. The possibility of this breakup had been hinted at for months, to the point that fans regularly claimed to expect it and/or be braced for it--but the anticipation was repeatedly undone by a strong showing at a *Monday Night Raw* or pay-per-view event. With the team standing united in their signature pose, fists extended and meeting in the middle, fans would be appeased and once again think things were safe. This is not to suggest, however, that fans had stopped hypothesizing if and when the breakup might happen (and what the fallout might be when it did). Theories were expressed—who would betray whom? Who might team off where, and how might it play out? Interesting theories were lauded and reblogged by some and lamented by others who loathed the idea of such a breakup and were infuriated by those who they saw as “encouraging” it. Yet in spite of it all, when it finally happened, it seemed as though none of us had seen it coming.

That single moment of betrayal brought with it all of the soap opera clichés one could possibly ask: a sudden moment of violence that shocked the team into silence; long looks between heroes, former heroes, and new allies; dramatic replays; cries of betrayal and hurt. Numerous authors, such as Barbara O’Connor & Raymond Boyle’s “Dallas with Balls: televised [sic] sport, soap opera and male and female

pleasures,”<sup>203</sup> or Eileen Kennedy’s “Bad Boys and Gentlemen: Gendered Narrative in Televised Sport,”<sup>204</sup> among others,<sup>205</sup> have observed that televised sport has maintained the trappings of soap opera for decades, transforming the feminine coded world of “soaps” into a narrative that statistically attracts more men. Wrestling, in particular, as sports entertainment, has maintained these trappings from the onset. When Kennedy, quoting Fiske, discusses “feminine” television coding, the first three items of said descriptions can easily apply to the scripted world of professional wrestling:

- Serial form resisting narrative closure
- Multiple character and plots
- Use of time paralleling actual time, implying continuation of action, watched or not<sup>206</sup>

Narrative closure, it seems, is always one match away in professional wrestling--a rivalry, a breakup, or a reunion will always be stretched just slightly further than expected, lulling the audience into believing (or hoping) that it will never come, then striking seemingly out of nowhere. The Shield breakup epitomized the soap opera element of professional wrestling. It was, for many, one of the biggest shockers that has unfolded in WWE--one that has retained its staying power nearly two years later, becoming a defining moment among the fandom. It was, far and away, the moment in the years of my research that still draws the strongest memories--all of my informants brought it up at one time or another during fannish discussions online or in person.

---

<sup>203</sup> Barbara O’Connor and Raymond Boyle, “Dallas with balls: televised sport, soap opera and male and female pleasures,” *Leisure Studies* Vol. 12 , Iss. 2 (1993): 107-119.

<sup>204</sup> “Bad Boys and Gentlemen: Gendered Narrative in Televised Sport,” *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, Vol 35, Issue 1, (2000): 59-73

<sup>205</sup> See bibliography for further reading on the topic.

<sup>206</sup> Bad Boys and Gentlemen: Gendered Narrative in Televised Sport,” *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, Vol 35, Issue 1 (2000): 61.

However, I wanted specific conversation about the topic, and thus several spoke to me about it via email follow-up in recent months. Some samples from those follow-ups:

*The question I posed to all: Do you have any particular memories of it [the Shield breakup] as it happened? Were you surprised/excited/sad?*

I remember realising<sup>207</sup> what was going to happen as soon as Seth went and got ONE chair and set up slightly behind the other two. It was still a massive shock and yes I was very sad. But also excited for the possibilities!<sup>208</sup>

I was definitely awake after that! I was super surprised initially – I didn't think it would happen at this juncture, and I always assumed that if someone went heel on The Shield, Seth would be the last guy. It's funny, I had always said before this that Seth was a natural face, that he would be a bad heel comparatively. Man, was I wrong! Anyway, my initial feeling was surprise and shock. But I actually wasn't upset about it. As you can see by my posts (the selected ones I provided in roughly chronological order), my initial reaction other than NOOOOOOOO at the very first was to look on the bright side and consider the possibilities. I knew The Shield would break up and I was prepared for it, I just didn't think it would happen at that moment, and I was frankly GLAD to have been surprised by something in wrestling for once, and I was thrilled by the possibilities of interesting things happening...<sup>209</sup>

I was surprised because I didn't think it would happen for a while longer and I didn't think it would be Seth when it did. I was excited because I was looking forward to seeing where they'd go with the storyline...<sup>210</sup>

I remember sorta assuming something was going to happen, but not that it would be Seth turning. I was at the show the night before<sup>211</sup> and it was an amazing Shield team match, so it was sorta shocking.<sup>212</sup>

---

<sup>207</sup> Emily is from Australia, and I have preserved her spelling.

<sup>208</sup> Follow-up interview, email, Emily F, March 2016

<sup>209</sup> Follow-up interview, email, Amanda T., March 2016

<sup>210</sup> Follow-up interview, email, Christine, April 2016—she noted that she did not watch it happen live, but the day after, so her response was altered accordingly having followed along on Twitter.

<sup>211</sup> Courtney Rose is a Chicago native and frequently attends live events that happen there, both WWE and independent.

<sup>212</sup> Follow-up interview, email, Courtney Rose, March 2016

The Shield inspired passionate devotion among fans, with most fans having a favorite among the members in spite of preferring the cohesive unit. Their combination of wrestling skill, a variety of good looks, and powerful charisma (along with form-fitting black SWAT-style gear) made them popular from the moment they debuted; by the time they broke up, they were arguably one of the best things that the WWE had going for it. Niki, for instance, was unbridled in her enthusiasm, declaring “I fuckin’ LOVED the SHIELD. I thought they were an exciting team. Their matches always stole the show. I loved each of the guys for different reasons, but I always felt like Seth Rollins was the one who had the most overall talent...”<sup>213</sup> Emily, when asked, mused, “Man, I loved the Shield so much. I thought they were great. I liked all of them and thought they really were greater than the sum of their parts together. I loved Dean the most,”<sup>214</sup> while Amanda countered “I feel like as someone who’s a big fan of Seth Rollins, I was actually really pleased that he was picked to have the heel turn opportunity and likely push. A lot of other people in the Shield fandom were focused primarily on Ambrose or maybe Reigns<sup>215</sup> – Rollins was the one who got the least love as an individual, I think. So I was really excited for Seth Rollins to be doing interesting things.”<sup>216</sup> In keeping with disclosure, prior to the breakup as much as afterwards, Seth Rollins was my favorite out of all of them. This is, admittedly, partly for aesthetic reasons, as my reaction the night that this group

---

<sup>213</sup> Interview, in person, Niki P., October 2015

<sup>214</sup> Follow-up interview, email, Emily F., March 2016

<sup>215</sup> As noted here, none of my informants named Roman as their favorite member of the Shield, although he was never without his fervent admirers—he had the least professional wrestling experience of the three and also served to play the role of silent enforcer, which arguably made him more of a challenge to connect to. Still, this sense of disconnect persists to this day, where Roman has won the WWE championship while Ambrose has not—Rollins emerged victorious in 2015, but was sidelined with an injury.

<sup>216</sup> Follow-up interview, email, Amanda T., March 2016

debuted in November of 2012 was to immediately look him up online because I found him incredibly cute. It was also because I like his in-ring style best, as he tends to favor high-flying moves and high-risk maneuvers, my preferred style over strong power moves.

Christine offered a balanced view, saying “I loved The Shield. They were the hottest thing going on RAW. They had a lot of screen time and made excellent use of it. I was a big fan of Dean and Seth. I never cared for Roman.”<sup>217</sup> Courtney Rose seconded this, saying “LOVE THEM. They were favs. Love Seth, love Dean, Roman was not my favorite but he’s handsome and a great wrestler so I like him a lot...”<sup>218</sup> Kate remained more neutral, saying simply “I really really enjoyed them. I do remember being a little annoyed that Ambrose held that IC title<sup>219</sup> for so long and never defended it. To compare where they are now...it’s incredible because I don’t think anyone consistently can say “X member was always going to be the standout and X was going to be left behind.”<sup>220</sup>

Shield-related screennames and blog titles were omnipresent in 2013 and 2014; ringtones and text alerts rang out the static-filled opening of their catchy theme music. That much of the most vocal, and most visible fan base was female does not, however, miss my attention--nor did it miss the attention of other fans, male and female, some of whom greeted that fandom with disgust. This is not to imply that the Shield lacked a sizeable male fan base, but in many ways, female *wrestling* fandom

---

<sup>217</sup> Follow-up interview, email, Christine, April 2016

<sup>218</sup> Follow-up interview, email, Courtney Rose, March 2016

<sup>219</sup> Ambrose was the US Champion, not the Intercontinental champion, but the point remains the same—he held the title for a long time but rarely, if ever, defended it.

<sup>220</sup> Follow-up interview, email, Kate, March 2016

from 2012-mid-2014 was *Shield* fandom, with fresh photographs circulating daily, frequent confession posts appearing on Tumblr by the hour, and autograph signings and opportunities to meet Shield members selling out almost instantly. Throughout their tenure, the WWE was capitalizing on all of it, offering a vast variety of Shield merchandise and offering sizeable segments and matches weekly (as well as on house shows). They were the darlings of the company--and thus the response to their collapse was to be epic.

On the night of June 2, 2014, the world of wrestling fandom, particularly Twitter and Tumblr (and the Internet more broadly) was, more than I had seen it to date, rocked. People were devastated, crying, and heartbroken--if the Tumblr posts were to be believed--and certainly, as my informants noted above, shocked to see what had unfolded, particularly by who carried out the final blow. Dramatic YouTube videos were made in the immediate aftermath, featuring slow, dreamy montages of images with tear-inducing music; individuals who I might not have previously known had even a passing knowledge of Shakespeare were posting images with “et tu, Brute?” (and tagging those pictures with arguably less-intellectual captions like “TWO-TONED BITCH”). How could anything possibly carry on, when the world of wrestling had just been rocked so completely and brilliantly--by the last person anyone would have expected to betray their team?

The desire for many fans at such a moment is to respond in a manner that is genuine, but simultaneously in the manner of the performative “good subject”--to behave in the way that is expected, to align oneself with the majority, and thus to demonstrate that one is sufficiently “fan enough.” The Shield breakup revealed to me

the pinnacle of what wrestling can be and can do: it can be these amazing, intense moments that create and inspire intense reactions of joy and anger and heartbreak and anything in-between. Wrestling is deeply tied to emotion and nostalgia for many-- childhood memories of favorites betraying one another immediately rang in my mind when this happened, hearing the shattering of barbershop window glass or remembering Hulk Hogan and Macho Man battling over the love of Miss Elizabeth. These responses--intense and emotional as they may be--are, in their own right, permissible while operating within this world. As Dennis Kennedy observes,

In obvious distinction to the restrained behaviour at films and bourgeois theatres, sport fans from the start were encouraged to display emotions, approbation, and partisanship in an open and free-playing manner. In most sports it is beneficial for athletes to have vocal assistance and of course this behaviour is not disruptive as it is in dramatic ventures in the modernist tradition, whether live or recorded; the sport contest would seem deadened without the noise of communal support. While endorsing the team, sport spectators are also invited to connect their own fantasies to the ordeal on the pitch. Their vociferous responses indicate the degree of investment fans can assume with the match, and further suggest the liberating and recreative spirit available for live witnesses. Compared to a theatre spectator the sport spectator assumes a playful freedom.<sup>221</sup>

This “playful freedom” and liberating spirit were in full play in the aftermath of this event, albeit perhaps a more mournful sort of pleasure. The emotions were encouraged and were expressed as a sort of frenzied escalation from fan to fan. Mere disappointment was not enough, it would seem; one needed to be carried away, to experience the full measure of devotion, to demonstrate the depth and intensity of one’s fandom and, accordingly, prove that one was not merely an average fan. The

---

<sup>221</sup>Dennis Kennedy, *The Spectator and the Spectacle: Audiences in Modernity and Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 156-157.

Internet response, in many ways, affords this even more strongly; no one, after all, knows the difference between the emotions that are being textually performed, and the emotions that are being genuinely felt, and thus the engagement in emotional hyperbole is easy to parrot back. This, arguably, is one of the challenges of examining Internet engagement; the role of the audience in shaping the performance is twice removed, in some senses, and thus we know only what is presented textually and lack even visual or audio signals. When participating in fandom, then, there are still “appropriate” responses to have, though the level of those responses might vary depending on the company that you are keeping. The world of fandom can shift rapidly from welcoming to dismissive. What happens when fans get caught on the wrong side of the line abruptly? What happens if one becomes categorized as a “fangirl” rather than a “fan” based on said emotional responses? How does one find a new sense of belonging in a community that is based on an inconstant system, on characters that are arguably even more in danger than those on television?

Yet as these emotional responses were being presented as the only understandable reaction by one segment of fandom--itself a form of fandom policing--there was a simultaneous backlash from another portion. Or, perhaps more accurately, a backlash to an anticipated reaction: namely, a portion of fans whose immediate response was to sarcastically warn others of the flood of “fangirl tears” that were surely forthcoming, particularly those “crazy Shield girls” or, as Seth himself once put it, “Tumblr girls.”<sup>222</sup> Yet much of the supposed backlash remained

---

<sup>222</sup> Rollins was interviewed by Dan Campbell for an online series called “Talking With Soup” in January of 2014; over the course of his interview, he addresses the “erotic fan fiction” that exists online and features him and includes the semi-playful admonishment of these “Tumblr fangirls.”



just that--imagined, having little to no basis in reality. Yes, there were some particularly heightened responses, but these required active seeking out. That is, the average perusal of Twitter or Tumblr, in the moment, but also in the days that followed, would reveal that most of the responses that one could find within the “tags” of the wrestlers involved, as well as the Shield, though emotional, seemed at worst over-indulgent.

A number of my informants felt the same, when asked the two questions I posed: *Did you feel like your response was in keeping with other people, or did you feel like your reaction was in the minority?* I asked further, *What were your reactions to the reactions?* Courtney noted, “I think [mine] was in keeping with others...General reactions of surprise concerning who it was who turned were in tune with mine. I think the sometimes overzealous tumblr crowd can go a bit overboard with the traitor posts I remember seeing, treating the situation **as if it were real [emphasis mine]**...”<sup>223</sup> Christine furthered this response, adding, “Hmmm... I'd say [my calm response was] in the minority. Most people seemed to be absolutely wrecked that The Shield split. [And my reply was] A shrug of the shoulders. Sometimes a roll of my eyes for people who were over the top with it. But I didn't make fun of anybody because I love that people are so passionate about wrestling to be so affected by it.”<sup>224</sup> Amanda agreed, as they noted:

I feel like a lot more people were just sad and upset about it than I was. People wanted The Shield to remain together forever. But for me, as much as I loved The Shield, they had done as much as they could do. They were starting to get boring in their booking, if not as characters.... Also, I was in the community of Ambrollins shippers at the time, and a lot of Ambrollins

---

<sup>223</sup> Follow-up interview, email, Courtney Rose, March 2016

<sup>224</sup> Follow-up interview, email, Christine, April 2016

shippers were upset because since Seth and Dean were enemies, they felt the ship was over. Of course, it's fiction, so I didn't think that was true...Anyway, I thought this could be great for the slash shipping because I looked back to Rollins and Ambrose's work in FCW, where they were rivals, and it was so great and frankly, so sexy.<sup>225</sup> So I was glad...[And] I eventually got annoyed with people being super sad and negative about it. **It's wrestling, after all. These things happen.** [emphasis mine] I ended up trying to comfort people with positive thoughts of all the good things the break up could mean. Some people liked that, others didn't.<sup>226</sup>

When events of this magnitude occur in the world of professional wrestling, the line between “real” and “fake” blur more than usual, and fan response reflects accordingly. When I stood in line later that fall at a “meet and greet” event to meet Roman Reigns, I struck up a conversation with the two friends standing in front of me--a twenty-something woman named Jenny, and her friend, a fellow fan who went by “Freeze.” We passed the time in the cool, rainy weather chatting about our favorites, with Jenny playfully referring to Roman as her “future husband,” though she had just gotten into wrestling in January—a few months prior to the Shield split. When I mentioned Seth, Jenny's face clouded, and Freeze laughed and told me not to “get her started.” Jenny said, with perfect aplomb, “We don't talk about him anymore.” Seth had been one of her personal favorites prior to the breakup--though he had played second fiddle to Roman from the onset--and that was no longer the case. The Rollins shirts she had previously sported, she informed me, were no longer in her possession; she had gotten rid of them the morning after the breakup, and though Seth has changed his ways since that time, her Instagram site, as far as

---

<sup>225</sup> Amanda's forays into fanfiction and the role it has played in their life and fandom experience are explored in chapter five, although it is worth noting here that the Shield featured *heavily* in wrestling fan fiction before and after their breakup; fan fiction served as a way for fans to work through their feelings or, alternately, continue to exist in a world where the Shield was together.

<sup>226</sup> Follow-up interview, email, Amanda T., March 2016

wrestling was concerned, remained steadfastly dedicated to Roman from that point forward. The dedication to the chemistry and narrative that is presented on television, or the subversion (and perversion) of that chemistry and narrative, is potent. When the reality is challenged, the response is instantaneous. This can, and in the case of the Shield breakup often did, lead to the refusal to see the positive impact. Further, the concept of viewing it as a detached observer who is thinking of the “greater good” of the storyline was extremely uncommon. Pragmatism has no place, it would seem, in a world of steel chairs and heartache.

### **“Sounds Like You Had a Bad Valentine’s Day:” The Rollins Photo Incident**

What is the difference between a fan and a fangirl? This debate (as briefly touched upon in chapter one) has been the subject of considerable conversation and consternation, particularly when questioning whether it is a label claimed or applied. That is, there is often a tremendous difference between labeling oneself as a fangirl, and being called a fangirl. The former is often playfully self-deprecating, an acknowledgement of one’s own tendencies; the latter is dismissive, a means by which to reject the perspectives and desires of the “wrong” kind of fan. Fans themselves grapple with these definitions, as was the case with the girl I encountered at WrestleMania Axxess<sup>227</sup> who apologized for being “such a fangirl right now”-- equating excitement and over-emotion with “fangirl,” versus “fan.” Bethan Jones, quoting Cann, describes fangirling thus: “Typically used in a derogatory way, “[a]s a noun ‘fangirl’ names a form of cultural consumption that is excessive and associated

---

<sup>227</sup> Referenced in chapter two, in the section on Axxess.

with girls and [can also] be used as a verb, describing a hyper feminine performative act of consumption.”<sup>228</sup> This performance (and its detractors) came into play in an even larger way approximately eight months after the breakup of the Shield, when another storyline involving Seth Rollins would play out in WWE.

The WWE’s relationship with superstar and diva nudity has long been a complicated one, to say nothing of the long-standing relationship between the idea of wrestling and bodies on display. Vince McMahon, on a *Dateline* interview in 1999, proudly proclaimed that “people are very interested in sex, and we will exploit that any way we can.”<sup>229</sup> Sex has sold in the WWE since its inception, arguably--or at least most explicitly--peaking during the “Attitude Era” and the “Ruthless Aggression” eras, when bra and panty matches<sup>230</sup> or matches for the “right” to pose for Playboy were the primary goals for women, or when superstars like Val Venis<sup>231</sup> were central in storytelling. Yet a crucial element of this exploitation was control. WWE made the decisions regarding who could and would appear in which publications; what kinds of photoshoots they would release; what sorts of matches would happen on what shows; and so on. Sexuality, this suggests, is a prized commodity, one that can be simultaneously presented and disavowed. The WWE presents the bodies of their performers in ways that are titillating and tantalizing, but always stopping just short of indecency, particularly through the shift to “TV-PG”

---

<sup>228</sup> Bethan Jones, “‘I Will Throw You Off Your Ship and You Will Drown And Die:’ Death Threats, Intra-Fandom Hate, and the Performance of Fangirling,” in *Seeing Fans: Representations of Fandom in Media and Popular Culture*, ed. Lucy Bennett and Paul Booth (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 63.

<sup>229</sup> Quoted in Brendan Maguire (2000) “Defining Deviancy Down: A Research Note Regarding Professional Wrestling,” *Deviant Behavior* (21:6): 558.

<sup>230</sup> A match in which the goal is to strip an opponent down to her bra and panties, usually from her ring gear—already fairly sparse

<sup>231</sup> A wrestler whose gimmick was that of a porn star (and who had a “castration” storyline), whose music began with a sexy saxophone riff and Venis saying, “seductively,” “Hello, LADIES.”

programming. It would be reasonable, then, to assert that WWE expects its performers to carefully control the kinds of media associated with them—and the WWE would certainly not want a wrestler’s nude photos posted to their social media accounts mere minutes before *Monday Night Raw*. But on Monday, February 9, 2015, that was precisely what happened to “Mr. Money in the Bank,” the former Architect of the Shield, Seth Rollins, and the fan response (and fan policing) that unfolded as a result is the subject of this section.<sup>232</sup>

As noted in the first portion of this chapter, Seth Rollins had a devoted following well before the fall of the Shield. He acquired fans from his Tyler Black days in Ring of Honor, followers from his time in FCW and NXT (as the first champion, no less), and more recent converts from his time in WWE. His physique, his gravelly voice (sometimes praised, sometimes disparaged), his high-risk style (and dedication to Crossfit), his promos, or any combination of the above were cited as reasons for adulation, and the Authority played all of them up as they pushed their “Plan B” to greater and greater heights. By February of 2015, Rollins held the golden Money in the Bank briefcase that entitled him to a championship match whenever he chose (which he gained with a little help from the Authority). He had defeated some of the top talents in WWE, including Randy Orton and John Cena, and had even made a few surprise appearances on *The Daily Show*, threatening host Jon Stewart.<sup>233</sup> Rollins was looking every bit of the Authority and WWE “golden boy” that fans had

---

<sup>232</sup> The photos in question are no longer available on their original sources, but a variety of media outlets reposted the photographs.

<sup>233</sup> This would become more significant at SummerSlam 2015, when Jon Stewart would host and, in a title match between Rollins and Cena, interfere on Rollins’ behalf—to the screaming shock of everyone in the Brooklyn arena.

hoped he could become, even if Roman Reigns had won the Royal Rumble and would be appearing in the title match at *WrestleMania* (to the tremendous chagrin of fans).<sup>234</sup> Rollins was prominently featured on weekly programming as well as pay-per-views, and although he had lost a match to fellow fan favorite Daniel Bryan the previous week, it seemed certain he would be central to the storytelling on *Raw* on Monday, February 9, 2015.

On that evening, I walked into my apartment slightly late after a day of teaching, refreshing my Instagram feed as I did so. Of all the things I could say I anticipated seeing on WWE superstar Seth Rollin's Instagram page, a blue-lit photograph of a nude, tattooed woman was not especially high on the list. The photo had been posted extremely recently, but disappeared fairly quickly. When I texted a friend,<sup>235</sup> they replied "yeah, he got hacked." Some fans online noted that it was a photo of a current developmental talent in WWE, one who had not yet appeared on television. These sorts of scandals and leaks are not unique to WWE performers; entertainment news stories are frequently filled with tales of men and women who abruptly find their social media feeds covered in photos of them that were never intended to be released, or who must fight with tabloid magazines to block the release of such photos. Laws regarding the sharing and posting of "revenge porn" frequently surface, though many states have found them challenging to pass.<sup>236</sup> All of this

---

<sup>234</sup> A longer version of this project would examine the ways in which fans, particularly those in the "IWC," can very quickly shift their opinions on a wrestler that they feel is being "pushed" on them—as was the case with Roman Reigns, who fans cheered for in the 2014 Royal Rumble to defeat Batista and had completely rejected by January 2015.

<sup>235</sup> Amanda, an informant on this project

<sup>236</sup> This is not a topic I attempt to treat at length in this section or project, although as discussed in the epilogue, it continues to play a role in professional wrestling.

speaks to the questions surrounding the right to take or possess nude photos, to say nothing of the right to share them, which is also a constant source of debate.

The intrigue with the photo in question, however, was only just beginning. Over the course of the evening, this photo would surface again, this time on Seth Rollins's Twitter feed--a feed that, incidentally, also appeared on WWE's homepage, meaning that this nude photograph would sit, unchecked, accessible to anyone who went to WWE's page during a several-hour span,<sup>237</sup> even after the original tweet was deleted off Rollins's account. The second tweet was captioned, "zaharah schrieber," a name that meant nothing to me but that Internet fans quickly confirmed was the name of an un-debuted NXT talent named Zahra Schreiber. Furthermore, nude photos of Rollins himself emerged in the process, posted by, strangely, a woman that fans had identified as Seth Rollins's fiancée, who was not involved in professional wrestling. The two photos--one of Seth taken from the waist down, standing up, and one of him lying on a bed, face clearly visible--were captioned "zaharah?" As Kate tweeted that night, "Definitely set fire to my kitchen aaaaand I come back to Rollins penis. WHAT IS HAPPENING?! #RawColumbus #WWE"<sup>238</sup> Though the tweets did not stay on Twitter for long, the reveal was irreversible. Fans were retweeting and reblogging the photos and the tweets, or at the very least saving the images, and it seemed impossible to think that WWE would not be immediately aware of what had transpired. This was not Shawn Michaels posing for Playgirl in 1996;<sup>239</sup> this was a set

---

<sup>237</sup> See Appendix for a visual.

<sup>238</sup> makeitloud (Kate), Twitter post, 9:02 PM, 9 February 2015.

<https://twitter.com/makeitloud/status/564967543363108865> (Accessed 15 February 2017.)

<sup>239</sup> Michaels posed for a non-nude layout in 1996; this later became part of a storyline in the Attitude Era, where Michaels asserted to his friends that "you told me girls read that magazine!" in response to the tremendous gay following of Playgirl.

of unauthorized, uncontrolled photos of a superstar and a (future) diva, circulating for the world to see.

Although *Monday Night Raw* was live, it seemed impossible to consider that the WWE would directly address the events on television, a suspicion that was proven correct as the show wound down. The Internet fandom, however, was more than prepared to discuss and dissect, and the plot points of the night's programming were lost to a sea of debate over the content of the photos and the ways in which they had come to be shared. The official story about what occurred still does not exist but when the dust settled the general understanding was that there had been a deliberate leak of these photos by Seth's now-ex fiancée in revenge for infidelity with Zahra. This transformed the narrative from an unfortunate hack of private photos to a story of a woman scorned and an unfaithful pair of wrestlers. Approximately a year after the events had occurred, I asked my informants for their memories of it and received a variety of responses. All of the informants acknowledged having seen the photos, whether on Twitter and Tumblr, or through other mediums. As Niki put it, "Everyone saw the pictures of Seth. My COWORKERS saw his penis and they don't even watch wrestling. MY MOM SAW IT. I saw it on twitter. I have no idea where everyone else was seeing it. Everyone saw it. Everyone. Everyone has seen Seth Rollins' penis."<sup>240</sup> Courtney Rose seconded this, saying "Absolutely. It was all over Facebook, ONTD<sup>241</sup>, several sites."<sup>242</sup> I recall seeing Facebook sidebar articles linking to the "scandal," although Facebook did not post the pictures until after one had clicked

---

<sup>240</sup> Follow-up interview, email, Niki P, March 2016

<sup>241</sup> Oh No They Didn't, a celebrity gossip site

<sup>242</sup> Follow-up interview, email, Courtney Rose, March 2016



through a filter indicating the photos were “not safe for work.” As noted, the information about how and why the pictures came out was fuzzy at first, and several of my informants acknowledged that discovering these had been leaked as an act of revenge altered their perceptions of the experience. Emily, for instance, said “When I found out that Leighla (Seth’s ex) was the one who had found the photos and hacked Seth’s account to leak them, I felt a bit conflicted because once photos are on the Internet, they’re there for good. Someone has screenshotted them and they will live forever...”<sup>243</sup> Yet, as Amanda noted, “When I later saw the photos of Seth and the tweets by his ex-fiancee, I felt bad for enjoying them because they were private photos posted without consent. That said, I’ll admit I didn’t really feel too bad about it, as the cat was out of the bag so to speak. The damage had been done and it wasn’t as if little ole me trying to avoid the pics was really going to help Seth any.”<sup>244</sup> But it was that very issue—how fans should respond to the photos—that would spark controversy online, particularly on the “anonymous confessional” Tumblr site that dubbed itself “True Ringrat Dirt.”<sup>245</sup>

As the name might imply, the site initially began as a confessional site dedicated to fans sharing stories of sexual encounters, or advice on how to arrange sexual encounters, with professional wrestlers. There is, of course, no way to vet the information that is being shared. Visitors have the option of submitting anonymously to the site, and even those who choose to use their names need to provide no proof of the veracity of what they are claiming. Fans who submitted stories of sexual

---

<sup>243</sup> Follow-up interview, email, Emily, March 2016

<sup>244</sup> Follow-up interview, email, Amanda T., March 2016

<sup>245</sup> As of September 2016, this Tumblr site has been deleted—however, posts are still accessible via the Wayback Machine, an Internet site dedicated to archiving now-dead websites.

escapades did not provide images, for example. Rather, they would provide colorful, detailed descriptions of the wrestler, their genitals, and their sexual style, complaining about who was selfish and who was generous, who was “good” in bed and who was not, who had fetishes and preferences and who did not. Unsurprisingly, descriptions of sex with wrestlers that were popular, or hookups that seemed as though they might inspire envy, tended towards glowing and positive: the sex was fantastic, they were generous and concerned with her pleasure, and the man in question was incredibly well-endowed (although discrepancies over just how well-endowed someone was occasionally arose if multiple women claimed to have hooked up with the same performer). Other times, however, these stories were opportunities to shame wrestlers for being rude or selfish, or--perhaps the worst insult of all, based on the reactions--in possession of “small” genitals, with the specifics of that qualifier depending on the story. Wrestlers’ lives, by these standards, were open books--the fact that they had social media presences, the fact that they performed in the ring, made them available for consumption, available to be judged and, however temporarily, possessed.<sup>246</sup> The common complaint from fans who are denied access to their objects of fanaticism is frequently some variation on “But I pay their salary!” or “Well, I bought a ticket,” implying that once granted in one scenario, access should be granted for all conceivable scenarios. Kate spoke to this, saying “I think people have these weird assumptions about famous people’s private lives just because they follow them on social media--it’s this belief that you’re in this almost friendship and you have the same obligations that you would if you were interacting with your friends on social

---

<sup>246</sup> See bibliography for more texts on celebrity culture and consumption.

media, when in fact it's just a manufactured experience.”<sup>247</sup> Thus, fans feel as though they have “earned” the right to share any story, real or equally manufactured, particularly when the option for anonymity exists.

In the wake of the Rollins nude photo leak, the narrative became complicated: there were dozens of posts in the two weeks following the leak, with the majority occurring when the photos first appeared. The site's moderator (“Ellie”) and her supporters by and large determined that they would support three particular narratives when it came to the three individuals involved in this scandal. First, that Leighla, Seth's now ex-fiancee, was a “hero” for exposing her fiancé as a cheater.<sup>248</sup>

Anonymous asked: Team Leighla all the way. Real women<sup>249</sup> understand what she did and why. What would you have done in her situation Ellie? Same or some other extreme? I would have donated a bunch of his prized possessions while he was overseas.

Ellie: I'd be as vicious as I possibly could be. Probably much worse than Leighla.

Anonymous asked: Leighla is probably fine. I would be fine if i was finally free of a cheating scumbag who didn't deserve me in the first place.

Ellie: Absolutely. What she did was liberating I'm sure. Very proud of her and any other woman that puts some cheating scumbag in his place.

Anonymous asked: Ellie I think you are really sweet. I was surprised but very happy to see you supporting Leighla in this whole thing.

Ellie: Thank you anon. She was so done wrong and dirty. She's the only one that needs support in this situation. I know she doesn't care but I'm completely on her side. Rollins is a scumbag and his twat Zahra is just as bad. If not worse, seeing how we already knew the deal with her before this was officially exposed.

---

<sup>247</sup> Follow-up interview, email, Kate F., March 2016

<sup>248</sup> All of the posts quoted below are taken from the Wayback Machine's recreation of TrueRingratDirt from early February, 2015.

<sup>249</sup> The implication that anyone siding with Seth or Zahra is not a “real woman” just as much as they are not a “real fan” is problematic at best.

Second, these fans declared that Zahra, the “other woman,” was pathetic and disgusting for staying with him, and that she was unattractive, which was perhaps the worst thing about her:

Anonymous: A couple of people on this have called Zahra. This is a thing that women must do when they feel that they must insult another women. So as a woman can i say Zahra is a bonafide cunt, doesn't seem very intelligent and her morals are obviously nonexistent. However i thought she was beautiful before this and i still think she is. Her body is the perfect type that the media adore, her hair is gorgeous (who cares if its fake) and shes got lovely eyes. So while she may be awful, she is still pretty.

Ellie: If it looks like a cunt, acts like a cunt, talks like a cunt- it's a cunt. She is a horrible individual. Really going to be glad to see her get hers. I don't find her to be all that attractive. I think most of her pics are shopped and airbrushed to no end.

Anonymous asked: "With over 200,000 searches, Zahra Schreiber, who is the NXT Diva involved in the Seth Rollins Twitter controversy, was the most searched topic on Google Monday." -- and gained plenty of fans too because people are terrible ☺

Ellie: Trash attracts trash.

Anonymous asked: ""I miss your sleep voice" so, Zahra's voice sounds like a dude?" Well...Zebra does look tranny-ish so....

Anonymous asked: I don't care about her stupid naked picture. I'm 32 a naked body is a naked body at this point. She should be apologizing for the intent in which it was used. She sent it to a man who was engaged. She is a trashy whore who spit out all this shit about how horrible woman are and then turned around and did the same thing she was bitching about. Fuck her and her apology.

Finally, in spite of the fact that Seth had been a fan favorite on this site (as well as among numerous fans, my informants included), they declared that Seth was perhaps equally as disgusting, if not more; that his nudes were laughable, and, to borrow one of their favorite attacks to criticize male wrestlers, that his genitals were particularly small.

Anonymous asked: why is ppl calling seth small dick? are there receipts, cause i heard different.

Ellie: We've had some anons say it's small but some said the opposite. It looks tiny in those cyber fights vids and the pics too. What'd you hear about it?

undersethrollins asked: Don't pay attention to that silly blog Ellie. They blantly disregard Leighla's feelings in this whole situation. They are foolish and obviously looking to pick fights. Seth is my fave and even i can admit what he did was shit. If they don't like what's said here, they can bounce, period.

Ellie: What he did was totally fucked up. Only a piece of shit would think it wasn't.

Furthermore, the idea of a fan wanting to defend Seth, or still support him, was not an option--if one did not buy into their narrative, then there was no point on trying to post to the site. "Only a piece of shit," according to Ellie, would want to do so. Once again, a code of "acceptable" fandom response and behavior was being dictated.

thebloodydivaschampion asked: Ellie you know I love me some Rollins, I absolutely adore him. But he is such a cunt for this. I'll still continue to love and support Seth Rollins (the character and his in-ring work) but supporting Colby Lopez?<sup>250</sup> No. He fucked up. No woman deserves to be treated like Leighla was.

It is notable that, while Ellie would occasionally post submissions without replying to them, this was not the norm. In this case, Ellie chose to publish the individual's name who had submitted the confession, declaring support for "Seth Rollins" if not "Colby Lopez." She did not post agreement or support for this fan, but instead left their Tumblr name available to anyone who visited the site, in case they wanted to go after her and remind her why she was wrong. Further, this speaks to the "wall" and distancing effect that I will discuss in chapter five: namely, the complicated idea within wrestling fandom that it is possible to support "the wrestler and not the

---

<sup>250</sup> The distinction between "person" and "character" is discussed in greater detail in chapter five, when discussing fan fiction.

person,” that one’s in-ring character and behavior are in no way connected to the out-of-ring reality. It is this narrative that allows fans to share confessions about wanting to sleep with wrestlers who they know are married--after all, Colby Lopez cheated, not Seth Rollins. There was, the site implied through its confessions, judgements, and assessments, a “correct” way for female fans to act, and a “correct” set of wrestlers to enjoy. The anonymous confessors and confessions on this blog served as all the evidence needed to support these assertions, and failing to join in that assessment and opinion meant that you were no longer welcome in this particular branch of fandom. This, however, does not represent the overall mindset of female wrestling fans, as it would be impossible for this project, for any project, to assert that there is a singular mindset. There is no “fan experience,” only what “fans experience,” and the Rollins photo leak and fallout became an intense talking point for weeks, even months, and can still be referenced even to the day of this writing. The photos of Rollins, and the relatively little fallout that Rollins experienced in his professional career, still permeates fan perception of Seth Rollins, and the acknowledgement of oneself as a fan of his must necessarily come with a caveat for particular subsets of wrestling fandom.

### **“There are no words:” Circulating (official) imagery**

One of the major ways that fans, especially female fans, connect with one another is through the circulation of images, whether those posted by WWE (or the performers themselves), or photos obtained by attending shows, meet and greets, and the like. When one becomes known by fellow fans as particularly attached to a

wrestler (or a group of wrestlers), a mark of friendship and connection is to draw one another's attention to any new images--even if the act of sharing the photographs is called into question. Amanda, for instance, said that when the nude leak occurred, "Because of my known attraction to Seth Rollins and my affinity for writing smut about him,<sup>251</sup> multiple people who knew me alerted me. So I really didn't even have a choice to avoid the photos, as people basically forced them upon me."<sup>252</sup> While in that specific instance, there is an understandable element of disavowal, image circulation and "fangirling" over a particular wrestler is frequently the subject of mixed pride and embarrassment. As I observed Tumblr sites, the ways in which the posting and circulating of these images inspires the women I interviewed to resort to self-deprecation or acknowledgement that this sort of photo or this kind of behavior is inappropriate.

Though cameras frequently capture the male wrestling body in alluring, suggestive positions, the presumed heterosexual male audience makes it seem as though these sorts of positions and glimpses are accidental at best. Salmon and Clerc speak of the re-interpretation and re-analysis/narrating that women are able (or, perhaps, forced) to create when faced with a gaze that is strongly not constructed for them, writing:

Given the implicitly straight male look of the camera in most popular media, female fans have had to develop their own strategies for obtaining pleasure from visual media. In comparison to men's publicly sanctioned opportunities to look at women, ways for women to look at men have always been limited...Frame grabbers and the Internet have enhanced women's ability to appropriate images and display them for each other outside the confines of mass media, although the selection is still limited by the camera work used to

---

<sup>251</sup> Discussed in chapter five

<sup>252</sup> Follow-up interview, email, Amanda T., March 2016

construct the televised narrative. (This is often a source of consternation for female fans, who are disappointed when the camera quickly shifts from a moment of comfort between tag team partners to a long camera shot of the victors holding aloft their title belts.)<sup>253</sup>

I would further argue—and numerous real-time liveblogging posts as well as interviews support this assertion—that women are similarly disappointed when the camera shifts from an angle that would allow for greater appreciation of the male bodies that are on display (angling the camera to show the thighs or crotch during a “bridge,” for instance), especially given that the camera can sometimes linger on the female bodies on display with more frequency. Tumblr incorporates a “tagging” system on their posts that is familiar to many bloggers and others who make frequent use of the Internet. This tagging system allows people to track their own posts as well as connecting to others who might be using these same tags. Thus, a post about a popular wrestler like, for instance, Randy Orton,<sup>254</sup> might be tagged with “randy orton” and “wwe,” making it accessible to those who might want to find posts about him. But a number of the women I have spoken with, and whose Tumblr sites I follow, use this tag system for another purpose: what one interview subject called, affectionately, “screaming in the tags.”<sup>255</sup> While we may not add our captions to the pictures themselves (thus leaving them intact for others to reblog to their hearts’

---

<sup>253</sup> Susan Clerc and Catherine Salmon, “ ‘Ladies Love Wrestling, Too’: Female Wrestling Fans Online,” in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 170.

<sup>254</sup> Randy Orton’s ring entrance pose, standing on the top turnbuckle with his arms above his head, as though daring the audience to look at him, pose is in fact so well known that other superstars have been known to imitate it in mockery of him. Randy Orton is, intriguingly, one of the few other superstars who has publicly acknowledged that he is aware of fan fiction written about him and other male superstars, and has laughed it off; he is highly aware of his own sexual appeal and often ensures that it makes it into his promo work, as well as the highly “on display” pose he offers every time he enters the ring.

<sup>255</sup> Emily F., interview, in person, September 4, 2014



content without carrying our responses with them), the tag system becomes a place for us to both acknowledge and disavow our own sexuality and sexual attraction. Moreover, it allows us to document our reactions to pictures that go well beyond mere smiles, but also offers us a place to mock those reactions, to present them as inappropriate, and thus apologize for this transgression.

This apologetic tendency comes, I argue, in large part due to the aforementioned backlash against the “wrong kind” of female fans, a desire to demonstrate that our attraction to these performers does not preclude our engagement with professional wrestling on a wide variety of other fronts. Salmon and Clerc note that “Female wrestling fans appropriate a male-oriented product and reshape it or interpret it in a way that is pleasing to them, making inferences and speculations that go beyond the information conveyed to the male fan.”<sup>256</sup> This reshaping and interpretation carry with them a certain amount of sexual tension and homoeroticism that WWE and has not officially sanctioned in storylines between their male superstars.<sup>257</sup> Perhaps tellingly, WWE has had far less of an issue with playing with homoeroticism between female performers; storylines that imply that one of their “divas” has a crush on another diva, that their aggression in the ring is more than merely wrestling are not merely relics of the “Attitude Era” of the late 1990s and early 2000s. This also speaks to the marketing strategies targeting the predominantly

---

<sup>256</sup> Susan Clerc and Catherine Salmon, “ ‘Ladies Love Wrestling, Too’: Female Wrestling Fans Online,” in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 174.

<sup>257</sup> WWE has had a few storylines that teased this idea in the past—most notoriously in the early 2000s with their storyline about “Billy and Chuck,” a tag team who continuously toyed with the idea of being more than wrestling partners, even up to and including planning a wedding that they revealed was a publicity stunt. However, these storylines have been played largely for comedy and over-exaggerated, rather than desire to titillate.

heterosexual male audience that typifies WWE's target market. Women wrestling one another in skimpy clothing while implying a desire to be with one another sexually is used as a way to draw in more fans. If men are presenting this kind of desire (which is, in and of itself, incredibly rare), it is either in the language of competition, or treated as a joke. Women, then, must work harder to take pleasure not just in the characters and personalities of the men that they find attractive, but also in those bodies in motion, those bodies at play with one another, whether in the ring grappling, out of the ring staring one another down after a tense promo, or embracing after a victory. However, when online, female fans have the opportunity to embrace the pleasure in looking aspect of their fandom in a way that they cannot at live events. Moreover, they have the space to connect with one another over a mutual enjoyment of the pleasure of the sexualized gaze. Online exchanges allow them to share photographs and videos and to engage--through anonymous "confessional" sites as well as their personal pages--in frank sexual discussion about performers, even when that means embracing the "deviancy" that comes with it.

There is little to no such apology, I argue, from male fans--or, indeed, from the WWE, who continue to publish galleries of their female stars in such spreads as "Diva's Day Off," which reminds us that apparently all WWE divas spend their time outside of the ring lying around in sexy pajamas.<sup>258</sup> This is nothing new, however, as Salmon and Clerc note:

Male fans are aided by the industry's pandering—the WCW and WWF have published videos and photo spreads, as it were, of their female performers. The practice extends to female performers who are athletes and compete in the

---

<sup>258</sup> WWE.com, "Divas' Days Off," just a sampling--each diva featured here had her own multi-photo gallery. <http://www.wwe.com/inside/wwe-divas/best-of-diva-day-off-photos> (Accessed 25 March 2017.)

ring. Lita, probably the most popular female performer with female fans, had to have implants before the WWF would give her a push. The photos in the divas section of the official WWE Web site (WWEdivas.com 2004) emphasize her sexuality—Lita’s cleavage is prominently displayed—and are an illuminating comparison to the official Rock photos...<sup>259</sup>

In spite of frequent female fan demand for them, there have been no such male galleries created--there are no superstar days off, as far as the WWE photo gallery is concerned, no time to capture the superstars lounging around in what many female fans hope would be similarly skimpy pajamas. It is at this juncture that my personal research experience breaks away from the assertions of Salmon and Clerc. They write, “Inadvertent and incidental moments, close-ups of crotches and asses, and looks that lend themselves to subversive interpretations, are available for exploitation by female fans, yet they choose to capture and share images, augmented with words, that temper their voyeurism with affection, romance, and concern for characters and performers.”<sup>260</sup> It is crucial to note that the contradictory facts I have found through analysis and observation do not undermine or alter the analysis and examination of Clerc and Salmon. Rather, I argue that my conclusions reflect an updated perspective on the ways in which female fans operate in a more social-media savvy society. We must now take in account the way that Internet access is more widespread and how it further lines of communication (with other fans as well as the performers themselves), creating more open and available exchanges.

---

<sup>259</sup> Susan Clerc and Catherine Salmon, “ ‘Ladies Love Wrestling, Too’: Female Wrestling Fans Online,” in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 174.

<sup>260</sup> Susan Clerc and Catherine Salmon, “ ‘Ladies Love Wrestling, Too’: Female Wrestling Fans Online,” in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 170.

While Salmon and Clerc do observe repeatedly that fan fiction, particularly erotic fan fiction, is a staple of female fan culture,<sup>261</sup> they frequently state that the sorts of more highly sexualized pictures found on sites aimed at male wrestling fans are not present on female-run sites. They continue the above quote by saying,

In effect, they attempt to use visual images to reproduce what media fans more often do in conversation—present a summary of the character and analyze his nature. Rather than gathering pictures of the men’s bodies, the extensive galleries of frame grabs and photo scans found on almost every female fan’s site are filled with dozens of close-ups. Smiles and unguarded emotional moments are particularly popular, the pictorial equivalent of shoot moments in the ring when the performer’s guard is down and the real person spontaneously appears.<sup>262</sup>

This sort of photo--the unguarded emotion, the smiles, the embraces--does factor largely into many of the sites that I have observed over the course of my research, including the Tumblr sites of my interview subjects. But the implication that female fans do not circulate pictures of those “inadvertent and incidental moments” is perhaps less true today than it was when their essay was originally published, and the evidence of that shift grows by the day.

I will further note that the rising prevalence of official social media for WWE (numerous superstars have official Twitter and Instagram accounts, one or two even have publicly acknowledged Tumblr sites, and WWE has official accounts for much of its programming), does seem to reflect an increased desire to reach out to female fans, specifically, through the use of images. However, the images that seem to reach female fans (or gay male fans) are not framed as though they are aimed at anyone in

---

<sup>261</sup> Discussed in more detail in chapter five.

<sup>262</sup> Susan Clerc and Catherine Salmon, “ ‘Ladies Love Wrestling, Too’: Female Wrestling Fans Online,” in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 170

particular. They are not curated into a collection like “divas at the pool,” but instead are sprinkled among fairly innocuous shots of wrestlers meeting fans or preparing to enter the ring. In order to demonstrate the style and nature of material that is currently circulating among fans, I wish to turn to sample photographs from the WWENXT & WWE Instagram accounts. These images have also made the rounds on the Tumblr sites of numerous female fans, and serve as an example of the kinds of material that Salmon and Clerc suggest were typically absent from female-curated sites. Now, however, they are coming from the officially sanctioned photo sites of the WWE. What might that suggest, then, about the intended gaze and intended purpose for these photos?

The first photo of interest is captioned “Kicking off #NXTArRIVAL #CesaroZaynIV,” showing wrestler Sami Zayn<sup>263</sup> prior to entering the ring for his match against Antonio Cesaro.<sup>264</sup>

---

<sup>263</sup> Claudio Castagnoli, a Swiss-born wrestler, performed under his real name for over ten years internationally before signing with the WWE in 2011 and taking the ring name Antonio Cesaro (now just Cesaro). His “gimmick” includes speaking five languages along with his considerable strength, and he is the topic of much female fan attention.

<sup>264</sup> wwenxt Instagram account, posted 27 February 2014. <http://instagram.com/p/k8MXESMUui/> (Accessed 10 February 2017.)



*Figure 1: Sami Zayn prepares for a match.*

Zayn is, as noted, a fan favorite, and he has a sizeable presence on the WWENXT Instagram account, having appeared in numerous matches as well as fan greeting events. Currently, Zayn also features prominently on the main WWE account as well, since his promotion to the main roster. However, the image above is a far cry from the sort of “official” pictures that typically circulate of the male performers, pictures that highlight their tough, sneering faces and impressive biceps. Instead, this image appears to have been shot from below, and zeroes in on the “SZ” logo on Zayn’s tights: a logo that happens to appear on the crotch of said tights, above a series of international flags representing the numerous countries Zayn has wrestled in over the years down one thigh, and the name “Sami Zayn” on the other. One of Zayn’s fists is visible in the photograph, and a small amount of skin visible above the waistband, but that is all that is framed in the shot. This is hardly a moment of “unguarded emotion” nor the sort of photograph that “official” sites might use to highlight a match, but its popularity is unquestionable. On Instagram alone it has well over a thousand “likes,”

to say nothing of the postings and re-postings on Tumblr, Twitter, and other sites. Moreover, numerous fans (including large numbers of female fans) reposted and reblogged with plenty of commentary about the angle and offered some fairly detailed discussion of the placement of the flags and initials. The photograph is a potent and a popular one, but not for that majority audience that these sorts of images usually reward. This image boasts a photographic angle often reserved for photos of “divas”; it represents an aesthetic choice that highlights the subject(s) as sexual beings first and in-ring performers second. This does not, I argue, represent the traditional “masculine gaze” that the camera so often privileges. The photo in question is not about highlighting Zayn’s physique or even his face, but rather it offers a more subtly sexualized angle to draw attention to an up-and-coming performer and, I would further argue, it works to draw in an audience who might typically feel that they are excluded from the camera’s gazing eye.

The Zayn photograph could be seen as a mere aberration, albeit a highly popular one, but this is not the case. While suggestive male photos are perhaps not the “norm” of the WWENXT Instagram account, they do make up a notable percentage. For example, consider the following image of then (as of September 2014, when the photo was originally posted) NXT champion Adrian Neville, below.



*Figure 2: Adrian Neville shows off his belt.*

This photo from September of 2014 is captioned “After retaining the NXT Championship at #NXTTakeOver, a new road begins for Adrian Neville TONIGHT! Be sure to tune into #WWENetwork at 9/8c for an all new episode of #WWENXT!”<sup>265</sup> There are numerous photos and brief videos of Adrian Neville on the NXT Instagram account that show him holding up his t-shirts or greeting fans, or offering a brief promo for an upcoming match or meet and greet event. This photo, however—like the one of Zayn—chooses to highlight Neville’s body from a different angle. This photo is also shot from below, and Neville is holding his title in front of him at crotch level. Neville’s legs are spread to either side and his head tilts downward so his long hair is completely covering his face. Unlike the photograph of Sami Zayn, there is far more of Neville’s body on display—his arms, torso, and

---

<sup>265</sup> Wwenxt Instagram account, posted 18 September 2014, <http://instagram.com/p/tGy2amMUqz/> (Accessed 11 February 2017.)



thighs are prominently featured, though again, not his face. One can assume he is wearing his ring gear (Neville, like many other superstars, favors the trunk style rather than the tights that Zayn and some other performers wear), but from this angle it is difficult to say definitively--the positioning of the title gives the appearance that Neville could well be naked save for his boots, wrist tape, and knee pads. I am not entirely certain what “new road” this photograph is suggesting Neville will be taking beginning on that all-new episode, but this hardly seems to be a photograph intended for a heterosexual male audience. While Neville’s body is on display, this photograph is far less about athletic achievement or in-ring prowess. The 1300-plus “likes” on the photo (once again to say nothing of the multitude of reblogging on Tumblr and the like, with a plethora of comments speculating fairly extensively about the state of dress or undress that Neville might have been in while taking this picture, along with wondering who exactly it was that got to shoot it) suggests that the picture hit its mark and captured the attention of the audience. The nature of its intended audience sits more squarely in the minority of gay male fans as well as female fans. WWE is thus afforded the opportunity to play all sides, as it were--to offer its programming and even a large portion of its social media coverage to as wide an audience as possible, typically privileging the majority, but still offering carefully created and sanctioned opportunities for fans to engage with at least mildly “deviant” gazes and behaviors through the images WWE circulates.

Lest, however, it appear that these photos were mere aberrations from the early phases of my research, I wish to turn to a more recent photograph:



**Figure 3: Finn Balor, backstage at Raw.**

This photo of wrestler Finn Baylor was, notably, posted by the wrestler himself with the simple caption “#raw #real,” thereby referencing the fact that the photo was taken backstage at *Monday Night Raw* on July 25, 2016 (the photo was posted the next day on July 26<sup>th</sup>). Balor signed with the WWE in 2014 and debuted on WWE NXT that November. Following that entrance he debuted on *Monday Night Raw* in the summer of 2016, as the “number one draft pick” from NXT up to the main roster. Like both Neville and Zayn, Balor (whose real name is Fergal Devitt) brought a considerable amount of buzz when he signed, having spent a number of years achieving tremendous success in Japan as well as the United Kingdom. Although this picture does not demonstrate it, he is also particularly well known for his elaborate face (and,

at times, body) painting that he incorporates into his entrances.<sup>266</sup> As with both of the other photographs, this image is shot from below, showcasing Balor's thighs, abs, and arms, while his head is thrown back so much that his face is not visible. He is extremely sweaty, and a closer look reveals that he appears to have some "war wounds" along his legs and possibly neck; evidence of a recent match (although these marks are not as visible as some of the injury photos that WWE will share). The image is highly sexually charged, the angle implying once more that the viewer is crouched down in front of him, looking upward, having the chance to admire his body while he looks away. This Balor post garnered over thirty-three thousand likes and over five hundred comments, once again emphasizing that, while WWE may have its focus on the heterosexual male audience, the imagery and video that they circulate (and that their superstars circulate) offer a different narrative.

The aforementioned pictures are just select examples of the "official" photos that WWE presents. However, fan photos from events run the gamut of angles and focuses, and these images circulate even more widely on sites like Tumblr as well as Instagram and Twitter. In this way, fans are able to not only photograph their favorites and experience a moment of perceived connection, but also, by sharing those photographs and not keeping them private, are able to give that moment of perceived connection, in whatever form it may take, to other fans, especially fans who were not able to attend said event.

There is one further element addressed by Salmon and Clerc that I wish to briefly explore in this discussion of the circulation of imagery, by both the performers

---

<sup>266</sup> Some images, and brief discussion of body paint as intimidation, can be found in chapter four.

themselves and their female fans: the embracing of what Karen Halttunen terms a “pornography of pain.”<sup>267</sup> While “hurt/comfort” stories--fan fictions in which the physical and emotional suffering of one or more of the characters is necessary for others to provide comfort, whether through words, embraces, or, in many cases, sex--have long been de rigueur among fan fiction writers from a multitude of genres, Salmon and Clerc argue that actual images of this kind of pain are absent from fan sites. They write:

One aspect of vulnerability and emotion missing from the galleries, although quite evident in fan fiction, is the manifest suffering required by all wrestlers. Although the persona of wrestlers is fierce macho toughness and imperviousness to pain, the hardcore ethic demands both the physical record of pain (bleeding, stitches, broken bones, scars) and the performance of suffering (grimacing and writhing to sell their opponents’ moves). A gallery of photos of faces twisted in pain, however, would give quite a different impression from the usual ones of smiles and ironically raised eyebrows or a series of hurt/comfort stories.<sup>268</sup>

Accordingly, images of the wrestlers suffering--bleeding, faces twisted in obvious pain in submission holds, getting stitched up or the aftermath of medical treatment--should, therefore, be notably absent from these Tumblr pages. Yet, just as the statistical notion that wrestling is “not for women” is challenged in reality, so too is the purported absence of pain-riddled imagery. Salmon and Clerc’s assertion is challenged by the reality of numerous female-run pages, those dedicated exclusively to wrestling as well as those that include wrestling as one of a myriad of diverse interests. Suffering and violence are innately tied to the in-ring storytelling, and with

---

<sup>267</sup> Karen Halttunen, “Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 100, No. 2 (Apr., 1995): 303-334.

<sup>268</sup> Susan Clerc and Catherine Salmon, “ ‘Ladies Love Wrestling, Too’: Female Wrestling Fans Online,” in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 172.

the increasing access to video and images from matches of all sorts, to say nothing of the (problematic but still present) popularization of erotic literature like *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the eroticization of stylized, controlled violence is becoming more commonplace to publicly acknowledge. It is true that, in recent years, WWE as an organization has made numerous moves to reduce the amount of actual blood that is seen onscreen (though accidents can and do happen), but that does not mean that there are not plenty of images that focus on the physical suffering and violence that can and do circulate. Moreover, like the images themselves, the responses they evoke are often varied.

As underscored earlier, there are both “official” (WWE-sanctioned and circulated) images that play into this pornography of pain, and then images that circulate among fans, whether as video clips or stills. The officially sanctioned pictures might come from performers’ Twitter accounts, or perhaps from the now-defunct *WWE Magazine*, but the injuries that they are celebrating—and the degree to which these images circulate on individual Tumblr sites—stand in direct contrast to the absence that Salmon and Clerc observed. For instance, after a particularly brutal match in April of 2014, WWE superstar Wade Barrett<sup>269</sup> tweeted out “It never hurts

---

<sup>269</sup> Stu Bennett, a Preston-born wrestler who goes by “Wade Barrett” in the WWE, came up to the WWE as the “winner” of the former incarnation of NXT, in which would-be performers competed to earn a spot in the WWE, in 2010. Barrett emphasizes his background (a mixture of truth and fiction) as an underground bare-knuckle brawler overseas as part of his character—claiming his nose has been broken over a dozen times, for instance—and is known for his brawling in-ring style and striking finishing maneuvers. Barrett’s current gimmick (though he has been injured for the last few months) is that of “Bad News Barrett,” delivering “bad news” to his opponents verbally and physically; though he wrestles as a heel, Barrett is a popular performer.

when you win. This is your next Intercontinental Champion,” accompanied by a picture of his back showing numerous cuts, scratches, and bruises from the match.<sup>270</sup>



*Figure 4: Wade Barrett's back after a match.*

The responses on Twitter were numerous: 916 retweets and 1,250 favorites at last count, with a variety of comments ranging from a sampling of “Ouch!” and similar sympathetic cries of pain to admiration of what kind of “badass” it takes to endure pain like that,<sup>271</sup> to a few offers for “comfort” to greater or lesser degrees. As the image made the rounds on Tumblr (not long after it was posted on Barrett’s Twitter account), the eroticization of the suffering became more and more apparent in a way that was perhaps not possible in a mere 140-character limit constrained by Twitter. The “tags” on this picture ranged from similar offers to “take care of” Barrett, to

---

<sup>270</sup> Wade Barrett, Twitter post, April 21, 2014, 7:06 PM., <https://twitter.com/wadebarrett/status/458426653149245440> (Accessed 15 February 2017)

<sup>271</sup> Injuries like this are also moments in which fans retweet and respond to said images with variants of the “who says wrestling is fake?” statement.

proclamations of the reality of wrestling, to the simple and straightforward “eeeeyyyyy something about this is mildly sexual” (followed, of course, by apologizing for saying so). More than one anonymous confessional blog<sup>272</sup> that week included multiple confessions expressing suspicions about Barrett’s tastes in bed. These posts reveal that the violence in the ring and the direct effects of that violence on Barrett’s body were sexually exciting, provocative, and appealing, and the image is most assuredly not absent from the galleries and pages of numerous women.

If mere still images do not suffice and adequately quench fans’ “thirst for blood,” WWE will sometimes post videos of wrestlers being stitched up after matches and even post fairly graphic surgical procedures.<sup>273</sup> While less common, there are also posts that reveal emotional turmoil related to injury. In the case of Adrian Neville in March of 2016, there was a video of Neville<sup>274</sup> being informed that his ankle was broken and that he would, presumably, be missing WrestleMania as a result. In the video, though the sound is quiet, the viewer sees Neville in both physical and emotional pain. When he receives the news, he starts to cry, covering his face and leaning back as he hears more from the doctors about the trip he will be taking to the emergency room to get X-rayed. His body is on display, lying back and vulnerable on the table, still clad in his trunks, sweaty after the match, but it is the emotional trauma that is centered in this video.

---

<sup>272</sup> Such as “True Ringrat Dirt,” but also other anonymous confessional blogs.

<sup>273</sup> WWE.com. “Seth Rollins Undergoes Surgery.” Originally posted 11 November 2015-the video includes a “graphic content” warning. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jt9L32PCYK8> (Accessed 12 March 2017.)

<sup>274</sup> WWE.com. “Injured Neville preps for a trip to the Emergency Room: Raw Fallout, March 14, 2016” Originally posted 14 March 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wYU57sdJIDc&feature=youtu.be>, (Accessed 12 March 2017.)

And now, thanks to widely-available DVDs and image sets of wrestler's "hardcore" pasts (along with their current matches and performances), fans of all types can circulate as many images, gifs, and videos as they might desire, showcasing not only individual fans' deep knowledge of their favorites' pasts, but also the pain and suffering that those favorites have endured throughout their histories as in-ring performers. This pain and suffering may be presented with expressions of admiration for the kind of skill and endurance it takes to carry on through such anguish, but that is by no means the only expression that comes with these presentations. For example: gif sets of "Jon Moxley" wrestling with a chain attached to a collar on his neck that *connects him* to the collar on his opponent's neck, all while he gleefully fires a staple gun into the mouth of his opponent and declares "Oh my god, that was fucking awesome!"<sup>275</sup> are readily available by browsing the "dean ambrose" tag on Tumblr. To some extent, seeing these sorts of images and circulating them becomes a badge of honor (speaking to a larger and more challenging idea of defining "real" or "true" fandom, and what that entails). However, it also creates a larger narrative about the world of female wrestling fandom: the hurt and comfort need not exist only in our fan fiction, but can circulate in full, glorious Technicolor, larger than life, and can provoke reactions of all different kinds.

WWE has toyed with this provocation in their now-defunct magazine through image galleries, for instance, dedicated to the scars of the wrestlers. Accompanying the photographs that highlight the said scars are brief stories from the wrestlers about

---

<sup>275</sup> "that was awesome." Originally posted 13 April 2014, <http://lunaticfringe.tumblr.com/post/48719495423> (Accessed 23 October 2016.)



where and how they received the scars. These images and their supporting text were scanned repeatedly as well as made available through WWE's website in their "Scars of the Superstars" galleries.<sup>276</sup> Barrett (with a twelve-inch scar down his right underarm, described as coming from a knife wound after an illegal bare-knuckle fight) and Ambrose (focusing on the large scar running down his back, earned in a "Barbwire Death Match" prior to arriving in WWE) are featured, along with numerous other superstars that have vocal female fan followings. These stories and images circulate among fans on Twitter and Tumblr, but they also make their rounds through officially sanctioned sites and magazines, thus one does not have to put forth great effort to find these types of images, nor does one have to take them secretly in order to circulate them. All of this adds, of course, to the narrative of these performers as superhuman and human all at once, as susceptible to pain and injury as anyone but also able to overcome this pain and this injury, but it also offers fans the opportunity to gather and circulate precisely those images that Salmon and Clerc believed would remain absent from fan galleries for years to come.

I would argue that the responses of female fans to these kinds of images speak to larger ideas and questions about the ways in which gendered roles are constructed and played out--the simultaneous desire to nurse and comfort the injured, and then the intense sexual response to that injury; the strange sense of pleasure in seeing a previously untouchable and invulnerable body suddenly rendered vulnerable. The pain itself is eroticized by the moans and cries that accompany it, alongside the

---

<sup>276</sup> WWE.com. "The Scars of the Superstars," WWE Inside. Originally posted 30 May 2014, <http://www.wwe.com/inside/the-scars-of-the-superstars> (Accessed 25 October 2016.)

frequent sight of faces contorting or bodies writhing—the cameras linger on wrestlers as they lie on the ground after a particularly brutal beating, or zoom in on a wrestler’s face as they cry out in pain as they are put into a submission hold that happens to put their body on tantalizing display for both the live and televised audience. These images and clips are then turned into pictures and gif sets that circulate among fan sites of all sorts, re-distributing and sharing a perverse delight in the sights of the objects of attraction rendered so helpless. As numerous authors on fan fiction have observed (a topic that will be discussed in more detail in chapter five), the clichéd image of the pain-stricken wrestler being gently cared for--by a tag team partner or a fictional version of the author--is a successful cliché for a reason, and thus it is an image that continues to circulate.

Statistically, wrestling is not for women--this fact may be a repetition, but it cannot be denied. The storylines as they are told are focused predominantly on the majority heterosexual male audience. This segment of fandom may arguably see themselves in the performers and see wrestlers as fantasy figures that they can project themselves onto, or they may use witnessed scenarios to imagine themselves in the ring, pulling off impressive victories over enemies and getting the girl (or the gold). The gaze of the camera is still arguably as male as it was in the days of WWE’s inception, and the majority of the official photography, video, and storytelling reflects this bias. This dominant, heterosexual and male-centric narrative (and the attitudes that it breeds in male fans and female fans alike) creates and fosters a sense of unbelonging among female fans. Constant questions about the ways in which we conduct ourselves as fans breed concerns about how to be the “right” kind of female

fan in order to gain access and true acceptance into the world of wrestling fandom. Internet fandom, however, is increasingly diverse, increasingly vocal, and yes, increasingly female, and it is carving out new spaces and new opportunities for engagement with other fans as well as with the product itself. Those “Tumblr girls” that Seth Rollins is admonishing are not decreasing in number, and, perhaps, there may come a time where there is no longer a compulsion for apology for the ways in which those “Tumblr girls” engage in fannish practices.

## Chapter 4: The art of fandom

I just don't understand where this concept of 'fake geek girls' came from.  
Like, AT ALL.

Cus when I look for fandom related stuff like 90% of the fan art and the fanfiction and the meta, zines, comics, etc. Like 90% of the shit that I've seen is created by women & girls.

And all that stuff take's [sic] a lot of work and research and critical analysis and staring at reference photos for hours.

We are literally the most well versed and invested group in the fandom. So, like, What the fuck boys? You mad you can't keep up?<sup>277</sup>

--gingerjuju, on "fake geek girls"

Female fandom is creative. Females create fanart, cosplay, fanwritings.

Female fandom ALTERS canon, for the simple reason that canon does not serve female fandom. In order for it to fit the 'outsider' (female, queer, POC), the canon must be attacked and rebuilt, and that takes creation.<sup>278</sup>

--scifigr147, on attacking the canon

The posts cited above, in combination, have over 70,000 notes on Tumblr-- meaning that over 70,000 people have liked, commented on, or reposted this text, adding their own contributions as they see fit. The post, among other points, reinforces the popular narrative of the male "curator" and the female "creator" fandom styles--that is, men are seen as collectors and curators, the "keepers" of the fandom, while women's predominant role is that of creator, giving back to the fandom and making it new, pushing back against the keepers. This is particularly relevant for this chapter, in which I will share three case studies of female wrestling

---

<sup>277</sup> GingerJuju, "I just don't understand..." Posted 22 September 2014, <http://gingerjuju.tumblr.com/post/98160475744/i-just-dont-understand-where-this-concept-of> (Accessed 15 January 2017.)

<sup>278</sup> Scifigr147, "I saw an argument..." Posted 22 September 2014, <http://scifigr147.tumblr.com/post/98162324651/gingerjuju-i-just-dont-understand-where-this> (Accessed 15 January 2017.)

fans who are also wrestling fan artists. Their work (in makeup, digital drawing, and graphic design, respectively), offers examples of the varying ways in which female wrestling fans connect to one another. By exploring their narratives, and looking more closely at some samples of their work, I argue that the “creator” style of fandom allows for stronger, clearer connections between wrestling fans, and, moreover, that visual art affords one of the most accessible ways for fans to connect to one another.

Part of the “collector versus curator” model of fandom speaks to the notion of the “economics” of fan culture, and the ways in which artists fit into that culture. There are, of course, physical signifiers and objects of fandom: collectibles, clothing, et cetera, objects that allow one to show off the depth of their fandom by their willingness to spend money to obtain what is rare and exceptional, along with what is popular. However, the creation of art, especially digital art, pushes back against this idea; while there may be a financial component to it periodically, the artists I will talk about in this chapter do the majority of their work for passion and connection. Some artists, for example, take commissions, negotiating fees and then accepting payment to create art for their fellow wrestling fans. Even this relies on social media connectivity, as artists will indicate through their social media sites whether they are currently accepting commission requests, along with a link to a list of prices and options. In many cases, however, artists will make large portions of their work available for free, offering viewers the option to contribute if they would like. For the scope of this project, and this chapter particularly, I was interested in speaking with fan artists who had other primary forms of employment. This, I argue, is a more realistic view of the creative work of fandom—while for many it is not realistic to

rely on this kind of creative work for primary income, it is a passion and a source of connection, and an essential component of their fandom experience. Over the course of this chapter, I explore the ways in which three women artists navigate the world of fandom, finding their own places within it, and the ways in which their performances of highly visible female fandom offer opportunities for them—and other fans—to form connections.



**Figure 5: Courtney Rose's Shinsuke Nakamura look**

**Courtney Rose, Chicago makeup artist**

I sit with my eyes closed as Courtney dabs glue across my lash line.

“Don’t open your eyes,” she cautions, as I hear the click of a small jar opening, then feel some glitter fall from my eyelids to my cheeks.

“We’ll clean that up after. Stay closed.”

I am sitting in an incredibly narrow AirBNB in New York City, in August of 2015, getting ready to go to Coney Island for--what else--a wrestling show, this one to be

held at a minor league baseball field. The “main event” of the weekend, so to speak, will be WWE’s SummerSlam the following night, but this independent wrestling show has brought in some major stars from Japan, including Shinsuke Nakamura,<sup>279</sup> the man who inspired the black and red sparkling look Courtney is currently re-creating on my face. She had posted the look herself on her Twitter and Wrestling With Makeup site a few weeks earlier, writing “New look! Based on the obviously flawfree Shinsuke Nakamura! He is a god, I get to see him wrestle live in (eek!) 17 days, and I am now covered in glitter. Obviously it looks much more glittery<sup>280</sup> in person but it’s hard to tell in the light. Enjoy it friends.”<sup>281</sup> Since I was particularly taken by this look (and since Courtney has become the *de facto* makeup artist for her friends when attending shows together), I had requested to be her model when we all met in New York.

---

<sup>279</sup> Shinsuke Nakamura, in the summer of 2015, was a wrestler for New Japan Pro Wrestling, a Japanese promotion that typically performs its shows throughout Japan, but typically sent some of their superstars to cross-promote and wrestle with companies in the United States—in this case, Ring of Honor. Nakamura, the self-proclaimed “King of Strong Style,” is a wrestler of both extraordinary wrestling strength and skill and extraordinary charisma, who cites Freddie Mercury and Michael Jackson as just as inspirational to his performances as his wrestling trainers and heroes. His entrances and wrestling gear usually operate around a scheme of red and black, sometimes glittery but always flashy, taunting his opponents with his eccentric behavior before turning up his in-ring brutality. As of April of 2016, however, Nakamura has signed with WWE—red leather still firmly intact at the time of this writing.

<sup>280</sup> Having experienced the look firsthand, I can vouch that it was intensely glittery.

<sup>281</sup> Wrestling with Makeup: Shinsuke Nakamura  
<http://wrestlingwithmakeup.tumblr.com/post/125896754062/new-look-based-on-the-obviously-flawfree-shinsuke>

Later that night, I would lean across the plastic table as Nakamura signed an autograph for me, gesturing toward my face, and told him “You inspired my makeup.”<sup>282</sup> I was glad Courtney was there to see his pleased reaction—and to see that the makeup look had outlasted a long subway ride, a bout of excited tears, and several hours in the sun. There is, after all, a reason that she has been hired to do makeup for wrestling matches—both her artistry and skill for longevity serve her well.



**Figure 6: Courtney Rose's Shinsuke Nakamura look, recreated on me**

---

<sup>282</sup> See the included images of Shinsuke Nakamura, particularly his red sequined “ninja” outfit, via [https://www.reddit.com/r/SquaredCircle/comments/4f1gdd/nakamura\\_is\\_a\\_sparkly\\_ninja\\_your\\_argument\\_is/](https://www.reddit.com/r/SquaredCircle/comments/4f1gdd/nakamura_is_a_sparkly_ninja_your_argument_is/)





Figure 7: Shinsuke Nakamura's "glitter ninja" outfit that inspired the makeup.

Working with the traditionally feminine-coded practice of makeup artistry, Courtney Rose shares her passion for wrestling with other fans as well as the wrestlers themselves. Like most artists, Courtney Rose has a day job--she is a librarian based out of a Chicago suburb, spending her days helping customers and her nights running book clubs. But makeup, she says, has always been a passion of hers, right alongside wrestling.

I've always loved doing makeup, probably starting from when I was a junior or senior in high school. We weren't allowed to wear makeup to school but I was always trying to be a dumb rebellious teenager, so I would try little makeup things to see if anyone would notice. That's when I started wearing it more often. In terms of an art form, it wasn't until I was in college that I really tried to do more intricate looks that weren't just basic makeup for running to class or the store. I drew a lot of my inspiration from really avant garde performers like David Bowie. I just like working with a lot of colors...<sup>283</sup>

---

<sup>283</sup> Courtney Rose, follow-up interview, email, March 2016

Courtney Rose uses makeup to transform, to pay homage, and--once in a while--to pay the bills. She has turned her online makeup photos into opportunities to do makeup for friends' weddings or other events, but also for local independent promotions and wrestlers based out of Chicago.

Makeup has long had a place in the world of professional wrestling; for women, it is a necessity, but it is not uncommon for men to visibly sport it for one reason or another. This traditionally feminine coded art of makeup may more often be called "face paint" when it is applied to a male wrestler--the overall effect, as seen in the photos below, is less about attempting to be attractive, but rather to appear intimidating. The makeup can be partial, as is the case with fraternal twin brothers the Usos, whose entrance begins with a Samoan haka to pay tribute to their family heritage (and intimidate opponents).



**Figure 8: The Usos, with faces half painted as they typically are upon entering the ring.**

Though their specific cultural heritage is usually reduced to their relationship to the Rock, and the long legacy of Samoan wrestlers in the WWE, they borrow cultural elements to strengthen their intimidation factor in the ring. The paint may also be full-

body art, thus rendering the performer even more alienating and, typically in the narrative of wrestling, somehow something other than entirely human, as is the case with Finn Balor. In the photos below, he is sporting one of the many versions of his “demon” full body paint--though he only uses this for “special” matches (pay-per-views, etc.), in part due to the length of time the makeup process takes, it is described as him summoning his “inner demons” to give him strength for the match.



**Figure 9: Front view of the "demon" makeup Balor sometimes sports.**



**Figure 6: Back view of the makeup, highlighting the "demon" itself.**

Alternately, applying more traditionally feminine makeup (i.e. eyeliner, glitter, lipstick) can be used to transform and create a new character element for a performer, often used to simply make his opponents uncomfortable. Many of my informants, for example, recall seeing Goldust wrestle during the 1990s--a wrestler who regularly was coy about his sexuality, frequently “coming on” to his opponents, and appearing

with long blonde wigs, feather boas, and a combination of face paint and more traditionally “feminine” makeup. Goldust was, perhaps unsurprisingly, booked as a heel, with the implication being that a man who behaved in such a campy, feminine way must have evil intent. A male wrestler visibly wearing makeup, outside of the above examples of “acceptable” face paint,<sup>284</sup> remains subversive and usually implies either villainy or vanity (if not both), and a certain duplicitous “feminine” nature (one that, more than likely, will be mocked by WWE commentators).

Female wrestlers, by contrast, post pictures that regularly credit their hair and makeup artists. Their Instagram feeds are full of close-up photographs of the heavy, almost stage-like makeup that has become the expected standard for their television appearances: fake eyelashes, layers of sparkling eyeshadow, contour and self-tanner, and, in most cases, long hair extensions. Whether face or heel, female wrestlers are expected to present a highly glamorous appearance; even the “girl-next-door” characters, when shown close up, are wearing layers of makeup artfully applied to appear less conspicuous. The white mat of the wrestling ring is often streaked orange<sup>285</sup> and glittery at the conclusion of a women’s match, physical reminders of the feminizing adornments that female wrestlers are expected to exhibit alongside wrestling skill. Yet wrestling is, by its nature, spectacular. Wrestling gear, moves, and

---

<sup>284</sup> Wrestlers in face paint have been a standard for decades; the designs and colors can indicate their allegiances, their cultural backgrounds, or simply serve as a striking bit of decoration in the ring. It is particularly popular among tag teams, serving as a visual link between them (or, in some cases, a method by which they can be distinguished from one another, with designs on opposite sides of their face). The Ultimate Warrior, one of the most iconic wrestlers of the 1980s and 90s, was known for his face paint. Present-day examples include twin brothers the Usos and, when he embraces his “inner demons,” Finn Balor, as discussed above.

<sup>285</sup> Male and female wrestlers alike are expected to either tan or use tanning lotion, with the exception of wrestlers who are expected to be particularly pale and have that as part of their character (i.e. British wrestler Paige and Irish wrestler Sheamus).

the performers themselves must find some way to stand out, to make themselves memorable. For Courtney, this is inspirational and, I argue, many of her most successful or striking looks come from wrestlers whose choices of gear and “character performance” purposefully play with a blend of masculinity and femininity.

Courtney’s makeup art, as I define it, falls into two main categories, with the latter category broken down into two smaller ones. The first category encompasses her work as a professional makeup artist. With regard to this work, companies and wrestlers hire Courtney to create looks for matches. In this first category, on at least two occasions, Courtney has worked for Chicago-based promotional companies to do makeup looks that connoted the typically “masculine category” of looks designed to intimidate or disguise. The looks designed for these promotional events were not supposed to be physically attractive, nor were they subverting gender presentation or performance. Case in point: for one of the events, Courtney was hired for a Halloween show, charged to turn a stable of wrestlers into zombies.





**Figure 7: Courtney Rose & her zombie wrestling horde**

One of Courtney's strengths as an artist is her quick adaptability and willingness to learn new skills to better her portfolio. To be an artist, particularly one who wants to give back directly to the community where they practice their fandom, is to constantly adapt to widen the range of potential employment opportunities. In this case, she watched a number of tutorials and was able to create the desired effect.<sup>286</sup> Freelance Wrestling, the company that hired her for the event, is a relatively small promotion; while they have some well-known performers, they do not generally receive much recognition outside of the Chicago area. Thus, while this

---

<sup>286</sup> "Wrestling With Makeup: Freelance Zombies"  
<http://wrestlingwithmakeup.tumblr.com/post/132365279172/i-worked-my-first-wrestling-show-at-freelance> (Accessed 10 March 2017.)

work was her first step into the professional wrestling world, it would not resonate nearly as far as her next experience.

While Freelance hired Courtney to work on a small group of wrestlers, her next job would be for a single wrestler, appearing for a larger and independent Chicago-based company called AAW.<sup>287</sup> The match in question was a one-off involving Chris Hero<sup>288</sup> and the masked and face-painted luchador Pentagon Jr. Pentagon Jr. fits into the theme of wrestlers mentioned earlier, utilizing face paint (as well as masking) to create an intimidating effect on his opponents. He wears a black, white, and silver mask that covers the majority of his face, but underneath incorporates makeup to make his face look skull-like even as the mask shifts. Courtney was asked to create a similar look to Pentagon Jr. for Hero, but Hero did not want to wear a full mask along with it. He asked instead that a design that would look like Pentagon Jr.'s mask and makeup combination be painted on the right half of his face, leaving the left half bare. This created a stark contrast between face paint and skin, highlighting the separation between the two and drawing more attention to the makeup, for both the audience and his opponent. The look was meant to be intimidating and to incite Pentagon Jr. to fight harder--by imitating Pentagon Jr.'s appearance, in other words, Hero taunted him visually from the moment he entered

---

<sup>287</sup> The abbreviation is in fact the company's full name, although they were previously known as All American Wrestling and are sometimes billed as AAW Wrestling.

<sup>288</sup> Chris Spradlin, who wrestles as Chris Hero, has had a long career, beginning as an independent wrestler, rising to great popularity, and eventually being hired by the WWE and wrestling there as Kassius Ohno (Hero is known as "that young knock out kid" and wanted his initials there to be KO). Hero, however, was let go by WWE without ever making it to the main roster; rumors circulated that it was because of his refusal to get into "ring shape" to WWE's liking. Since then, he has had another hugely successful independent run and has wrestled around the world, in spite of being heckled frequently at shows for being "too fat," something I have witnessed happening; however, his response to this is usually to simply fight harder and stare directly at the hecklers, a tactic that seems to be efficient—he did, however, return to WWE in the late winter of 2017!

the ring. Even the name that Hero (and, in turn, Courtney) used for the look--Hero Miedo--was a reference to Pentagon Jr.'s signature chant of "Zero Miedo," or "Zero Fear." The chance to do Chris Hero's makeup was a favorite opportunity for Courtney (and, in retrospect, her first of three opportunities to create makeup looks for him):

I'm super proud of the makeup I did for Chris Hero as well, because that look took a lot of practice and work and it turned out really well. By the end I think I managed to do the whole look for him in about twenty minutes, which is way shorter than I thought was possible. Seeing him do his entrance, which I've seen...hundreds of times, only this time with my makeup, was really overwhelming in the best way and I hope I get to experience that more often. People now know me as "The girl who did the Pentagon Jr makeup for Hero," I've been present when I've been introduced like that before, and it's a really great and strange feeling being recognized for something like that<sup>289</sup>.

Recognition for creative work, particularly work that circulates online, can be challenging to obtain, yet when something catches on, it can spread very quickly. Internet fan culture is often instantaneous. That is, when something striking or interesting happens, there are social media posts always immediately; if these posts are text-based, the usual response is a sea of pleas for "pictures PLEASE" or "does anyone have video?" As noted in earlier chapters, part of the culture of fandom is about sharing with those who are unable to be there. Videos and images are an art in themselves, adding a further layer to the art on display, whether that means the in-ring performances themselves or the gear and makeup. Capturing those photos and videos becomes an art form--there are artists who specialize in wrestling photography and their images can offer the sense of liveness to those who were unable to experience the moments themselves. Such was the case with Courtney's makeup work for Hero

---

<sup>289</sup> Courtney Rose, follow-up interview, email, March 2016



that night. Images and gifs of Hero's makeup from this night circulated quickly on Tumblr<sup>290</sup> and Twitter, including the following:



**Figure 8: Wrestler Chris Hero, with Courtney Rose's "Hero Miedo" makeup**

Though many of the disseminators of these posts did not credit Courtney Rose, arguably because they would not have known who created it, her followers and friends would share the links with her. This allowed her to share the links on her own social media sites—Instagram, Tumblr, and Twitter—and also to clarify or add text (where desired) that she had been the one who created the Pentagon Jr. makeup look

---

<sup>290</sup> For example, here: <http://that-prowrestling-girl.tumblr.com/post/135524128820> and here <http://that-prowrestling-girl.tumblr.com/post/135523932485> (Accessed 20 March 2017.)

for Hero.<sup>291</sup> Her Twitter profile currently highlights the photos (before, during, and after the match), and she still receives recognition for this project. Some have taken the act of duplication a step further, using Courtney's makeup design on custom action figures of Chris Hero<sup>292</sup> and when creating versions of Hero in video games, something that still surprises and delights Courtney even now.

In some ways, using makeup artistry to create looks for male wrestlers (or perhaps even the female wrestlers)<sup>293</sup> would seem like a traditional “feminine” way to get into professional wrestling. However, these sorts of professional opportunities make up only a small percentage of the photos and experiences that Courtney shares. For Courtney, like many of the artists I interviewed, the initial inspiration for wrestling based makeup, and her engagement with the artwork, is really all about the fans. Though Courtney has worked on wrestlers before, her primary focus and experience has been designing looks for herself and, occasionally, for those who attend shows with her. In so doing, she brings a hyper-feminine element to a frequently male crowd; her makeup and, occasionally, flower crowns serve as her trademark. She notes that, “While I don't see myself ever doing this as anything more than just a hobby, it's nice to know that people associate you with something

---

<sup>291</sup> Questions about crediting artists—and stealing artwork, or at the very least attempting to pass it off as your own—is an issue that I will touch on briefly when discussing Niki. It is one of the chief difficulties of the instantaneous power of the Internet, in that most platforms make it extremely easy to share an image without any connection to the source, if desired.

<sup>292</sup> “Sometimes you get bored and make a mini version of Chris Hero cosplaying as Pentagon Jr. Still gotta finish the face paint & clean it up. ‘Sup @wrestlingwithmakeup?”  
<http://wrestlingwithmakeup.tumblr.com/post/139215318727/nickmaniwa-sometimes-you-get-bored-and-make-a>

<sup>293</sup> Most female independent wrestlers—not unlike many actresses—do their own makeup and hair, as hiring a makeup artist or hair artist for those outside WWE is an incredible expense. Thus it is unsurprising that Courtney Rose would not have been hired by female wrestlers to date.

positive.”<sup>294</sup> Though the average wrestling audience may skew male, women are present, and Courtney Rose’s highly visible makeup creations drive that point home.

Courtney’s second category of makeup creation consists of the designs that she creates for herself (or friends). Like her work on wrestlers themselves, some of these designs are literal recreations of wrestlers’ makeup or overall appearance, but a large portion are more “inspired by” the countenance of wrestlers. For her, this is an opportunity to, in her words, “combine [my] two passions in life: makeup artistry and wrestling,”<sup>295</sup> going beyond an attempt to be employable or benefit financially.

Though the art of makeup design, combined with the fact that the majority of the photographs of these creations are selfies<sup>296</sup>, might make it appear as though this is merely self-indulgent, for Courtney this is all about making connections that go beyond professional opportunities. She said, in a follow-up email interview,

I’ve been at shows before where people have approached me because they recognize me from Twitter or the makeup blog and want to say hi and chat. There’s been several instances where I’d go to say hello to a wrestler only to find that they already know who I am because of Twitter. ...Most recently I went to a series of independent shows in Las Vegas and several people stopped to say hi to me, both wrestlers and fellow fans, and that is always the best experience. ...I feel like I’m at the point where I could go nearly anywhere and find someone from Twitter to hang out with.”<sup>297</sup>

By making herself more visible, literally and figuratively, Courtney is able to stand out in a crowd and offer fellow fans—especially female fans—someone to connect

---

<sup>294</sup> Courtney Rose, follow-up interview, email, March 2016

<sup>295</sup> “Wrestling With Makeup Intro,”

<http://wrestlingwithmakeup.tumblr.com/post/96687800037/welcome-to-wrestling-with-makeup-here-i-shall> (Accessed 19 March 2017.)

<sup>296</sup> Slang for pictures of yourself, often associated particularly (and negatively) with young women.

<sup>297</sup> Courtney Rose, follow-up interview, email, March 2016

with immediately, to feel like they already know. The makeup becomes an introductory talking point to allow longer lasting connections to form.

Though Courtney has a full Tumblr and Instagram site dedicated to her makeup work, (and is currently in the process of developing her own personal site outside of social media), I wish to highlight a few representative examples here to showcase the kind of work she has done. In all cases, the posts have received anywhere from dozens to hundreds of “likes” and repostings (in part, I argue, due to the relative popularity of the wrestler or wrestlers she is imitating). She notes that one of her first looks was doing full Ultimate Warrior face paint for her wrestling fan (and wrestler-in-training), younger sister, Hayley<sup>298</sup> for Halloween. In these cases, it is likely not a look that Courtney will wear to a show, or try to reproduce on someone else; she is striving for accuracy and recreation. For instance, in one of her self-proclaimed favorite looks, Courtney Rose paid homage to Bull Nakano, a female wrestler who appeared in the WWF in the 1980s and 1990s, whose ring attire included thin blue lines painted across her face, her hair spiked high. The overall strangeness of the look served to intimidate her opponents (alongside her five foot seven, nearly two hundred pound frame), in a similar style to current *male* wrestlers like Finn Balor or the Usos, as mentioned earlier. Courtney (as pictured below) spiked her own short blonde hair high, and mimicked the design of Nakano’s look after considerable study of video and pictures. She posted the images to her Tumblr, captioning it simply “Every little girl wants to grow up and be Bull Nakano, right?”

---

<sup>298</sup> Courtney Rose, follow-up interview, email, March 2016

Inspired by my favorite female wrestler of all time. All drugstore makeup done freehand. A few people requested this one, so I hope you like it.”<sup>299</sup>



**Figure 9: Courtney's Bull Nakano tribute look.**



**Figure 10: Bull Nakano herself.**

When Courtney posted the photos to her Twitter account, she made sure to tag Nakano<sup>301</sup> and, much to her delight, Bull Nakano both “liked” and retweeted the images to share with her followers. When asked, Courtney noted this acknowledgment from Nakano as perhaps her proudest personal moment, particularly because it was a design she had worked hard to replicate: “I don’t often try to

---

<sup>299</sup> “Wrestling With Makeup: Bull Nakano,”

<http://wrestlingwithmakeup.tumblr.com/post/116189799302/every-little-girl-wants-to-grow-up-and-be-bull> (Accessed 18 March 2017.)

<sup>300</sup> <http://www.wwe.com/superstars/bull-nakano>

<sup>301</sup> A method by which one includes the Twitter account of the wrestler themselves in the tweet or label on the photo; this method increases the likelihood of the wrestler themselves seeing the tweet and potentially “liking” or sharing it with their followers.

replicate looks exactly to what they originally looked like, but for that one it was important to get it as close as possible. I worked really hard on matching it the best I could and I think I did a good job with it.”<sup>302</sup> In this instance, accuracy is key; she sketched the final version out first (by studying images and video), because what Courtney was striving for was to have the look be immediately recognizable, as a copy of something someone else has already created. These effects, however, are not generally the sort that Courtney will sport when she attends a show, nor are they the types of looks that she will recreate on fellow fans.

Courtney’s creations are more often, in her words, “tweaked versions of [wrestlers’ makeup] (usually to make it slightly more wearable), or a makeup look based off of a wrestler/attire/something related to wrestling.”<sup>303</sup> That is, they follow the nature of the sparkling red and black Nakamura tribute look that held up through an August Saturday on Coney Island. These can be inspired by favorite wrestlers’ characters/persona, or their wrestling costuming and gear. The looks range from the most simplistic to increasingly elaborate designs; they can take anywhere from a few minutes to over an hour to create, with most averaging about forty to sixty minutes to complete<sup>304</sup>. The length of time it takes for Courtney to complete a look is dependent on the nature of the look, the amount of products involved, and the effects that Courtney is attempting to create (glittering, color-shifting, muted, etc.) with the finished version.

---

<sup>302</sup> Courtney Rose, follow-up interview, email, March 2016

<sup>303</sup> <http://wrestlingwithmakeup.tumblr.com/post/96687800037/welcome-to-wrestling-with-makeup-here-i-shall> (Accessed 20 March 2017.)

<sup>304</sup> Courtney Rose, follow-up interview, email, March 2016

How Courtney determines which wrestler she will transform into makeup can vary, depending on the scenario. In some cases, she will see a photo that has a color scheme she would like to try to imitate. From time to time she will put out an open poll or Tweet for individuals to suggest ideas for her next look. If there is a major upcoming event (or if a new champion is crowned), she might opt to recreate a look based on the looks of the wrestlers involved. Some looks are more about challenging herself to try a new technique or make an extreme look more wearable. Finally, she might simply choose to challenge herself to create something based off a particular favorite wrestler, whether one of her own or, in some cases, that of a friend<sup>305</sup>.

One of the earliest looks that Courtney shared on her site was inspired by an iconic photo of Macho Man Randy Savage and his wife Miss Elizabeth. Courtney wrote that she “had just gotten some new makeup and wanted to play around with it, and while I was surfing Tumblr I stumbled upon a photo of Macho Man and Miss Elizabeth. They were in orange/white/yellow outfits, which I had in my makeup



**Figure 11: Courtney's Macho Man & Miss Elizabeth eye makeup**

---

<sup>305</sup> Wrestling With Makeup notes via [wrestlingwithmakeup.tumblr.com](http://wrestlingwithmakeup.tumblr.com) and Courtney Rose, follow-up interview, email, March 2016

collection, so I figured why not, and I created a [sic] eye makeup look based on it.”<sup>306</sup> When she posted the pictures to her Tumblr site, she captioned it “Take the color and fun of Macho Man Randy Savage and mix it with the femininity and softness of Miss Elizabeth and you get this. Or at least I did.”<sup>307</sup> The look, as is bright and colorful, yet by Courtney’s standards, considerably more wearable than the half-mask painted face of Chris Hero, or the bright blue lines of Bull Nakano. “Wearability,” I would argue, is extremely relative. This eye makeup, while a far cry from Finn Balor’s demon paint, is beautifully blended, striking, and eye-catching. It is not, perhaps, the best option for one who wants to blend in, and for many female fans, this “blending in” is often the goal: to take up little space, to try to look like “one of the guys.” Seeking out other women to feel a sense of safety and belonging becomes a part of negotiating the fandom space, both online and at shows, and by creating looks that make her stand out, Courtney offers a way for fans to find her.

There are seemingly endless arrays of tests for female fans, and one of the most frequent demands to know if you look as though you are there to watch wrestling, or if you look as though you are there to attract attention, with the latter being dismissed as negative. Making yourself try to look attractive by wearing extremely visible makeup would seem to fall into that latter category and render you more vulnerable to implications that you are there to be a “ring rat,” to command male attention particularly. But the informants I have interviewed through the course of this project, and the push back from numerous female fans I have observed online,

---

<sup>306</sup> Courtney Rose, follow-up interview, email, March 2016

<sup>307</sup> <http://wrestlingwithmakeup.tumblr.com/post/97827015207/take-the-color-and-fun-of-macho-man-randy-savage> (Accessed 15 March 2017.)



is not merely for inclusion by a strict masculine standard. It is allowing a range of female fans, and a range of female fan responses, to be seen as valid and equally deserving of presence. Deliberately choosing to highlight the feminine, willingly drawing attention, then, becomes an act, however small, of rebellion. It suggests a refusal to conform to a particular standard in order to be a “real fan.” By creating and sharing these looks, making them available for free rather than charging or only creating professionally, Courtney celebrates this refusal.

For instance, Courtney tries to emphasize accessible products (much of what she uses can be purchased in a drugstore or the less expensive side of a larger makeup store) and techniques that can be mimicked. In most cases, Courtney does not document her process anywhere; she remembers it enough to recreate it if she so desires, but she is constantly shifting and improving based on products that she has available to her (or, at times, what better suits the person she is doing the makeup on). There are, of course, exceptions, and these exceptions serve as more literal illustrations of the ways in which Courtney connects her art to the wrestling fan community. For instance, when she created her Neville<sup>308</sup> and Stardust looks, she documented the processes at some length, and cross-published them to another website, along with her own. Posting content in multiple locations allows the maximum amount of exposure; fellow fans are able to repost and reblog the links as well as share the images in a way that connects directly back to Courtney. In this case, Courtney posted the guides to Femmezuigiri, a collaborative feminist wrestling

---

<sup>308</sup> A personal favorite, and one that she later would recreate on me—perhaps because I was one of the ones to request it initially, as Neville is one of my favorite performers. Though his moveset is flashy and focuses on high-flying moves, his overall look and character are coded extremely masculine.

site that took contributions from a variety of fans on a wide range of wrestling-related topics. Though that particular site is currently inactive, the links still exist, offering fans the opportunity to learn how to create these looks on their own.<sup>309</sup> These detailed guides go step-by-step through the process of creating the looks, although I would argue that a certain amount of familiarity with makeup and makeup artistry is necessary to recreate them. However, in all three cases, Courtney takes time to explain each piece of makeup and makeup brush that she uses, emphasizes when (cheaper) alternatives will be viable, writing, for instance, “The one I used was Lights, Camera, Lashes by Tarte, but any mascara will do.”<sup>310</sup> Additionally, she offers photos of the process as well as the finished product, acknowledging the different phases along the way and noting which modifications she makes for herself that might not be necessary for another viewer. Furthermore, Courtney is responding, through these posts, for calls from others to create makeup art for particular wrestlers. The Neville look, shown below, was one that multiple fans had requested (myself included), and one that received positive feedback and recognition on social media.

---

<sup>309</sup> Her three guides on this site can be found at <http://www.femmezuigiri.com/a-look-that-defies-gravity-neville/>, <http://www.femmezuigiri.com/dust-your-mug/>, and <http://www.femmezuigiri.com/undertakermakeup/>

<sup>310</sup> “A Look That Defies Gravity,” <http://www.femmezuigiri.com/a-look-that-defies-gravity-neville/>



**Figure 12: Courtney's "Neville" look at the end of her step-by-step tutorial.**



**Figure 13: The Neville look recreated on me, with color adjustments to reflect my skin.**

It was not surprising to me that Courtney's makeup work received positive feedback, although I expected that Courtney would receive the most recognition for her looks from other women, particularly those interested in makeup—thus the detailed guides, allowing other women to attempt to recreate the looks. Makeup is seen as a feminine coded hobby that would receive little to no comment from men, outside of perhaps exclamations of how beautiful she was (or, conversely, questioning why someone would want to wear so much makeup to a wrestling show). This, however, is true only about half of the time, in Courtney's opinion. "I'm

inclined to say [I hear most from] female wrestling fans, but honestly I get the most feedback from males, at least on Twitter. Twitter is where I mainly publicize my looks...It's interesting that on Twitter I get more feedback from male wrestling fans, but I would say on Facebook and Instagram, I get far more positive feedback from women, specifically those who are into makeup, whether or not they watch wrestling."<sup>311</sup> The feedback on Twitter, by and large, is highly complimentary. Men and women alike seem captivated by the skill and work that goes into the looks. In spite of the frequent bashing online about women who attend wrestling shows "dressed too sexy," Courtney notes that she has not received any negative feedback when she wears these kinds of elaborate looks to shows, only compliments or, on occasion, feedback from the performers. Courtney takes this highly feminized art form and draws her inspiration from idealized masculine bodies, examining bodies at work, and transforms their signature appearances into glitter, glitz, and glamor. In her follow-up email interview, Courtney noted that, "As time has gone on, I think my goal is to have enough people think of me when they think about makeup or wrestling so that they can call on me if they ever need some looks."<sup>312</sup> Though Courtney does enjoy her professional, paid opportunities, her experiences connecting with fellow fans have proven even more valuable. Upon sharing that she will be traveling to a wrestling show, she frequently finds the afternoons and evenings before unofficially "booked" with fellow fans who want her to do their makeup for the show. Though "enough people" may be relative, the number of tweets Courtney receives requesting

---

<sup>311</sup> Courtney Rose, follow-up interview, email, March 2016

<sup>312</sup> Courtney Rose, follow-up interview, email, March 2016

makeup assistance suggest that her community building thus far has been effective, and growing.

### **Niki, Texas digital artist**

Niki is, initially, a bit reluctant to participate in an interview about her artwork (or her experiences in wrestling, for that matter). Nevertheless, as of November of 2016 she is a recognizable artist in the wrestling fan community. Her visual artwork has been turned into coloring books, t-shirts, and even lapel pins, to say nothing of the buttons and prints she makes herself to give as gifts to friends and wrestlers, yet her artwork is not a topic she often discusses. In fact, when asked about said artwork, she tends to brush off praise. “I’ve never been able to draw, but, I’m at least able to create things that look a certain way,”<sup>313</sup> she says during our in-person interview, in San Antonio, October of 2015. Though this could be argued to be a mere case of false modesty, it more importantly speaks to broader notions about the definitions of artistic ability as well as the challenges that women face breaking into the fandom as artists. When I asked Niki, “What’s the biggest misconception about you, you think?” she replied, fairly nonchalantly, “People usually assume I’m a guy.”<sup>314</sup> This speaks volumes about the culture surrounding fandom. If someone shares a piece of art, and does not explicitly identify themselves as a woman, the broader assumption will be

---

<sup>313</sup> Interview, Niki P., in person, October 2015

<sup>314</sup> Interview, Niki P., in person October 2015

that a man has created it<sup>315</sup>--if credit is given to the artist at all. Then again, as Kate (another artist who will be discussed in the following section) notes, this kind of assumption in fandom pervades in similar ways throughout the Internet: the default is always to assume that everyone online is male until proven otherwise. Speaking to this topic, Kate noted that “In wrestling specifically, I think it’s just presumed unless told otherwise that everyone is male. I think it’s gotten better than it has, but it’s funny because the majority of artists I know in the wrestling fandom identify as female, or as non-male. So you have to just fight against preconceived notions. Women in wrestling don’t have a lot of large voices, and it’s frustrating that that is still the case in 2016.”<sup>316</sup> Niki stands as one of the most visible and, arguably, most successful wrestling fan artists currently, and while she is certainly one of the most successful female artists, many people may not realize that she is a woman. As she jokingly puts it, “I’m pretty sure a lot of people aren’t sure if I’m a boy or a girl even though I post about my period all the time.”<sup>317</sup>

Niki, in general, does not post full photos of herself, nor selfies, at least not ones where her face is visible. In fact, it is a running joke that when she does share photos of herself with wrestlers, she has taken the time to edit the photo with a skull-shaped “sticker” over her face.<sup>318</sup> The creation of wrestling-themed art is not Niki’s full time job, and sharing her full name or her face online is a route she is not

---

<sup>315</sup> I would argue that this is subverted when the art being created is romantic in nature, particularly when the art depicts male wrestlers in sexual or romantic situations—these artists are typically assumed to be female even without identifying as such.

<sup>316</sup> Kate F., follow-up interview, email, September 2016

<sup>317</sup> Niki P., follow-up interview, email, March 2015

<sup>318</sup> Niki has experienced trouble and harassment, which she does not detail in any of our interviews or on-record discussions, that have led her to take these precautions. This is, unfortunately, the case for a number of the individuals I have spoken to—they frequently face harassment or threats online particularly, and have had to take a number of precautions to avoid further issues.

interested in taking. This has not stopped numerous wrestlers and wrestling promotions, both American and internationally based, from hiring her to create t-shirt designs, coloring books, lapel pins, and even wrestling-themed underwear for them. Her style is immediately recognizable to wrestling fans if a wrestler uses one of her drawings for a shirt, even when her name is not immediately listed as the artist.<sup>319</sup> Even her online handle, punkrockbigmouth, is fairly gender neutral; one might be forgiven for not immediately guessing that she is a woman, although it is not a thing she attempts to disguise. Niki creates digital art in between shifts at her full-time pharmacy job, and pictures she has tweeted of her workspace show that doodles of wrestlers surround her, that she draws whenever the impulse strikes.

Like Courtney, Niki's decision to combine wrestling and art came relatively recently--she shared her first digital piece in August of 2014, which, coincidentally, focused on Seth Rollins turning on his Shield teammates (as discussed in chapter three), followed by Rollins winning his Money in the Bank contract. The story of what led Niki to draw sounds almost unbelievable. Over our lunchtime interview, when asked how long she had watched wrestling, Niki replied, "It's been, like my whole life. But I did stop, from like 1997 to about 2013. Because, I don't really like tits, or that's all that anybody values in a female performer when they're out there. And I didn't like Stone Cold Steve Austin cause I'm from Texas and I see that guy every day...the Rock is funny, but, it just wasn't my scene."<sup>320</sup> Many of my informants took similarly timed breaks during their wrestling fandom history, and it is

---

<sup>319</sup> By choice-Niki will, at times, request that wrestlers not list her as the creator of a shirt, although that does not happen often.

<sup>320</sup> Interview, Niki P, in person, October 2015

not coincidental to me that in many cases the years overlap. The “Attitude Era” in the WWE, as discussed in earlier chapters, offered a very particular narrative about the role of women as both wrestlers and fans—a narrative that strongly implied women’s relationships to wrestling had much more to do with men than anything else. Yet by the early 2010s, many of us began to make our way back, whether drawn in by a particular wrestler or simply a pull of nostalgia, and the move toward a more “PG” era offered more potential interest. Wrestling for many, including Niki, was a family affair, with parents, siblings, and grandparents taking part. Niki, for instance, had continued to periodically watch pay-per-views with her brother and grandfather, or her boyfriend. She described her viewing time as “casually interested,” although when the Shield debuted in November of 2012 she, like many other fans, took notice—particularly of Seth Rollins. The following summer, as she described it to me, “I had a dream of Seth Rollins, and it was...vivid. And when I woke up I was like...that was weird! It made me notice him more...So then I started watching [again]...”<sup>321</sup> Most fans who took a hiatus admittedly did not have a dream awakening calling them to return to wrestling, but many of my informants described feeling drawn back due to interest in a particular wrestler--Seth Rollins, The Shield, or CM Punk feature prominently in these stories.

For Niki, the gap between wrestling fandom and original artwork creation took a bit more time. Along with her break from professional wrestling viewing, Niki had also stopped creating original artwork for approximately ten years. She says that

---

<sup>321</sup> Interview, Niki P, in person, October 2015



her desire to draw again was inspired by the work of Jon David Guerra, creator of the Internet comic Nightmare Pro Wrestling:

I was interested in [drawing fan art] prior to actually doing it...There was a convention in town, Alamo City Comic Con. At the comic book convention they have Artists' Alley and it's like five blocks of artists selling prints and stuff! It was so amazing to me! I was like--I spent hundreds of dollars in there...It was so bad. Like, buying fan art! All this crap that I like! And I went by one booth and it was Jon David Guerra and he does a comic book of monsters who are wrestlers, so it's comic book monsters and wrestling, all combined, and I was just like "this is the greatest thing that I have ever seen, in my entire life." So I bought it, and I was all excited, and then I started looking up online and I see, like, ArtByNash's<sup>322</sup> stuff, and I think Lisa (SkyHighRollins<sup>323</sup>) did a lot of Seth Rollins that's really good, I love her charcoal stuff, so, and basically I just kinda hid like a gollum watching everybody else!<sup>324</sup>

The experience that Niki describes is one that is extremely common among female wrestling fans in particular--the sense of waiting and watching, and then slowly coming to realize that there are other female fans out there. In attending shows, or even in watching wrestling at home, it can feel extremely disconnected; the faces that are most noticeable in the crowd, or at least the majority, seem to belong to men, even if the numbers suggest a more even breakdown. Thus, the experience of Internet fan culture, and the "fan economy" so to speak, serves as not only a means through which to share art, but also a means by which to connect to other fans, even ones that are physically far away. Artwork serves as a sign of shared fandom, whether it is a background photo on a cell phone or a printed copy purchased at a convention or

---

<sup>322</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/artbynash/?hl=en> A wrestling artist who focuses on photorealistic drawings of her favorite performers

<sup>323</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/skyhighrollins/?hl=en> and <http://skyhighrollins.tumblr.com/>, artist who creates both original drawn pieces and online edits

<sup>324</sup> Interview, Niki P, in person, October 2015

given as a gift. Fans will, at times, even use fan art in their signage at wrestling shows, thus sharing the work with a wider audience.

When Niki began creating her own artwork, she had been once again watching wrestling for over a year. It seemed only fitting to discover that the first piece she created and shared, in October of 2014, was of fan favorite Seth Rollins, although by that time the Shield had broken up and Seth had become the “golden boy” of the Authority. The piece, called “Buy In,” shows Rollins cradling his briefcase along with select slogans (Rollins’ catchphrases, blended with audience chants and accusations) wrapped around his image, thereby encapsulating the arc of Seth Rollins’ state in the WWE as of the summer of 2014. The piece is an accurate physical representation of Seth Rollins; it would be recognizable to a wrestling fan as an image of Seth, particularly one who was following along with his storylines. Yet this piece is not about a photorealistic style, as is the case with “ArtByNash,” one of Niki’s inspirations. Rather, I argue that this work is about capturing spectators’ emotional responses to Seth Rollins. That is, the ways in which fans loved him, hated him, and loved to hate him. Though there are numerous fan artists who make their work available for sale through sites like Etsy, RedBubble, and Society6, to name just a few, Niki was not interested in participating in the economic side of art exchange. Niki was not creating this piece to sell, nor was it, like some of her other pieces, designed to pass on to a wrestler. Instead, it was a piece created by a fan, *for other fans*, many of whom had shared in the experience of watching Seth’s rise and fall and felt emotionally invested in his journey. Though Niki would later, periodically, see

financial compensation for her work, that was not and is not the goal of many of her pieces.

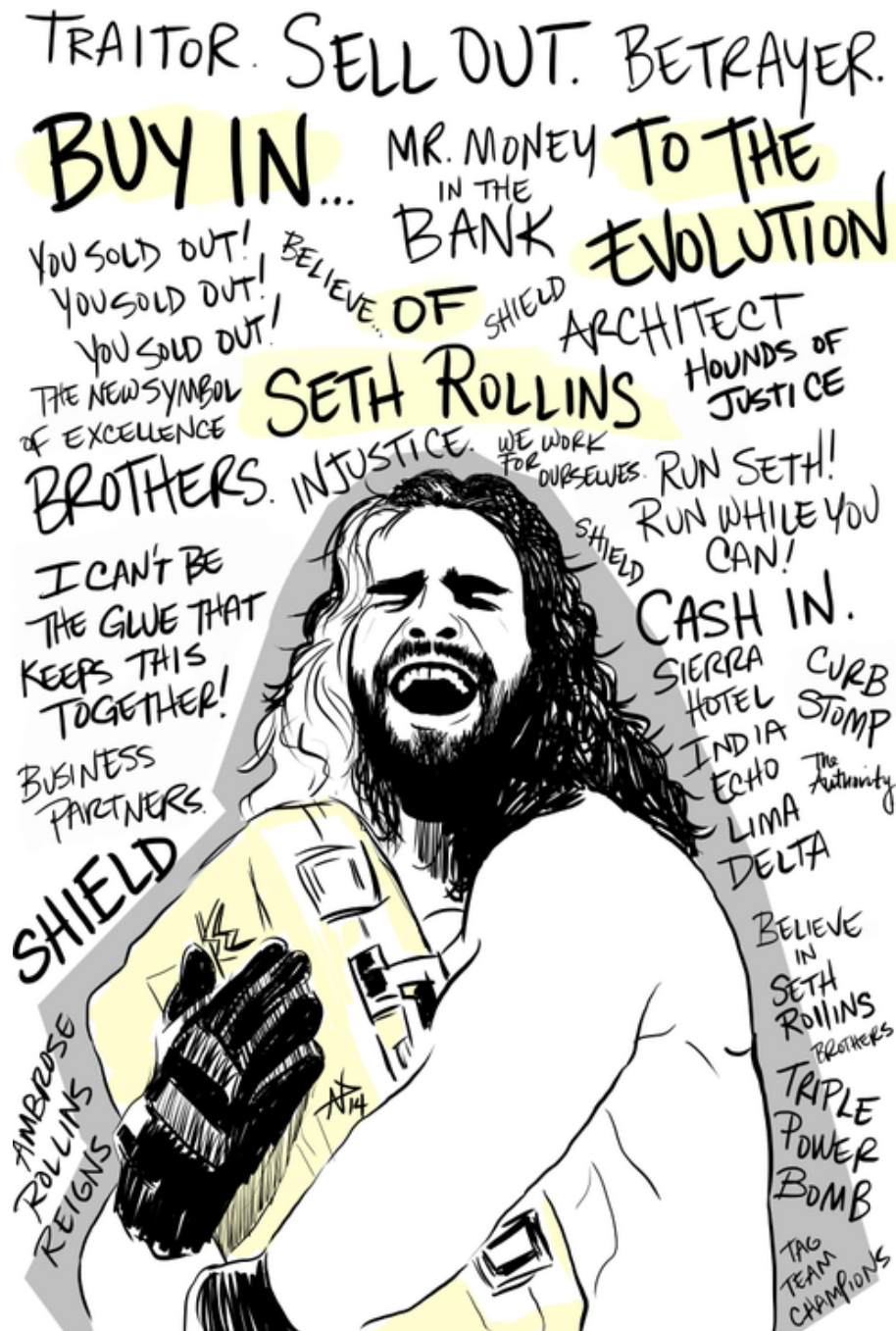


Figure 14: "Buy In," by Niki (punkrockbigmouth)

Niki continued to create pieces from here, sharing them usually on her Tumblr site first, and later cross-posting them to Twitter, receiving considerable praise and numerous “notes” on Tumblr complimenting the work. Yet, as noted from the beginning, Niki is intensely critical of the way that her “traced” style, as she calls it, that has evolved naturally, compares to artists who have received training. She self-deprecatingly describes herself, in her Instagram bio, as someone who can “draw, but not very well.”<sup>325</sup> In our interview, as well as other conversations, Niki has expressed frustration with her own limitations and lack of training, referring to herself as a “failed artist.” Yet her style is distinct, strong, and skillful, creating works that are immediately engaging and recognizable, and though Niki herself might doubt their skill, the wrestling fan community helps to elevate and celebrate what it is that she creates. Further, the art that Niki is creating celebrates what is joyful and enjoyable in wrestling, rather than dwelling in negativity—she highlights much of what has changed since the “Attitude Era” that turned off so many of my informants, while still poking playful fun at what can be done better, even now. Her “Plethora of Divas,”<sup>326</sup> for instance, celebrates the wider variety of body types and personalities that female wrestlers in the WWE now possess. Her characters are typically drawn in black and white, with occasional splashes of color for contrast or detail (shoes, hair, etc.), although this “plethora” is more colorful to better showcase the range of attire and skin tones on display. Niki’s work captures character, emotion, and situation with relatively simple strokes and particularly detailed attention paid to the faces; she

---

<sup>325</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/punkrockbigmouth/>

<sup>326</sup> The women’s division in WWE was, up until April of 2016, known as the “Divas’ Division”—it has since been rechristened the Women’s Division, with a new belt to commemorate the change.

embraces the caricaturish and the ridiculous in wrestling alongside its ability to strike a deep emotional response, sometimes simultaneously in one piece.

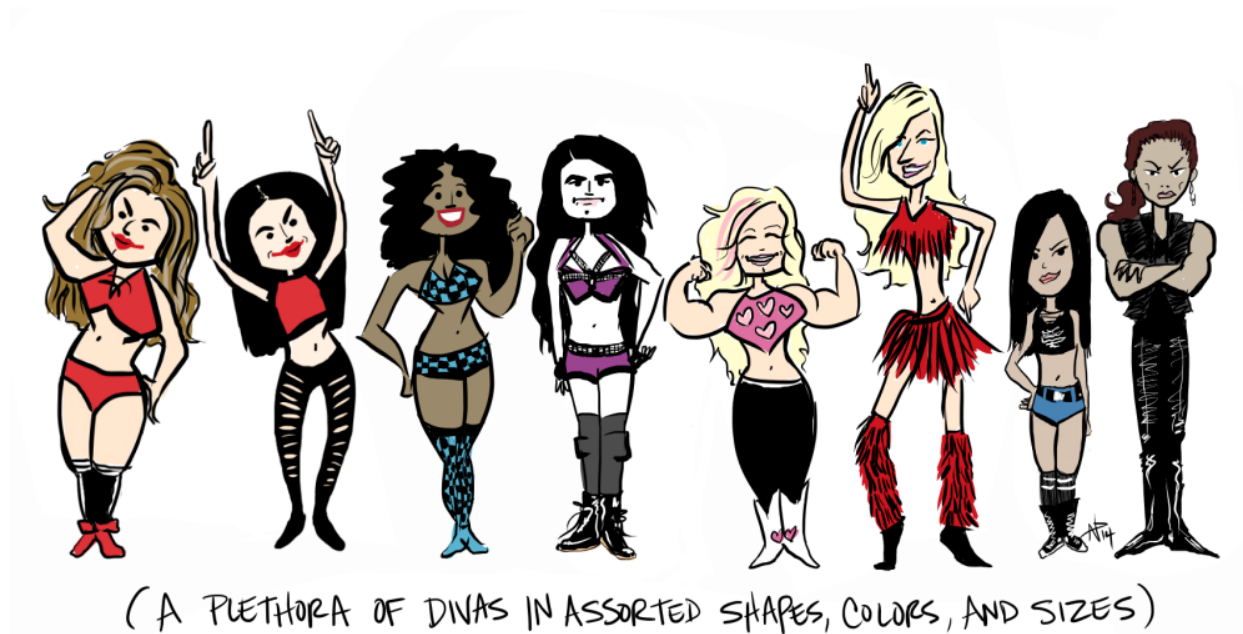


Figure 15: "A Plethora of Divas," Niki (punkrockbigmouth)

Like Courtney Rose, Niki's art focuses on the over-the-top. Though her drawing style is grounded in realistic interpretation, she often chooses to focus on either some of the more over the top performers, or on the more fantastic elements of their characters.<sup>327</sup> Her pieces like the ones shown above take her, she states, approximately two to three hours of "nonstop" work, though she noted that at the beginning it took longer to be satisfied with what she created..<sup>328</sup> These polished pieces garner plenty of praise, but she receives instantaneous, sizeable response from

<sup>327</sup> Niki's favorite wrestler to draw, at the time, was Shinsuke Nakamura—not yet a part of the WWE.

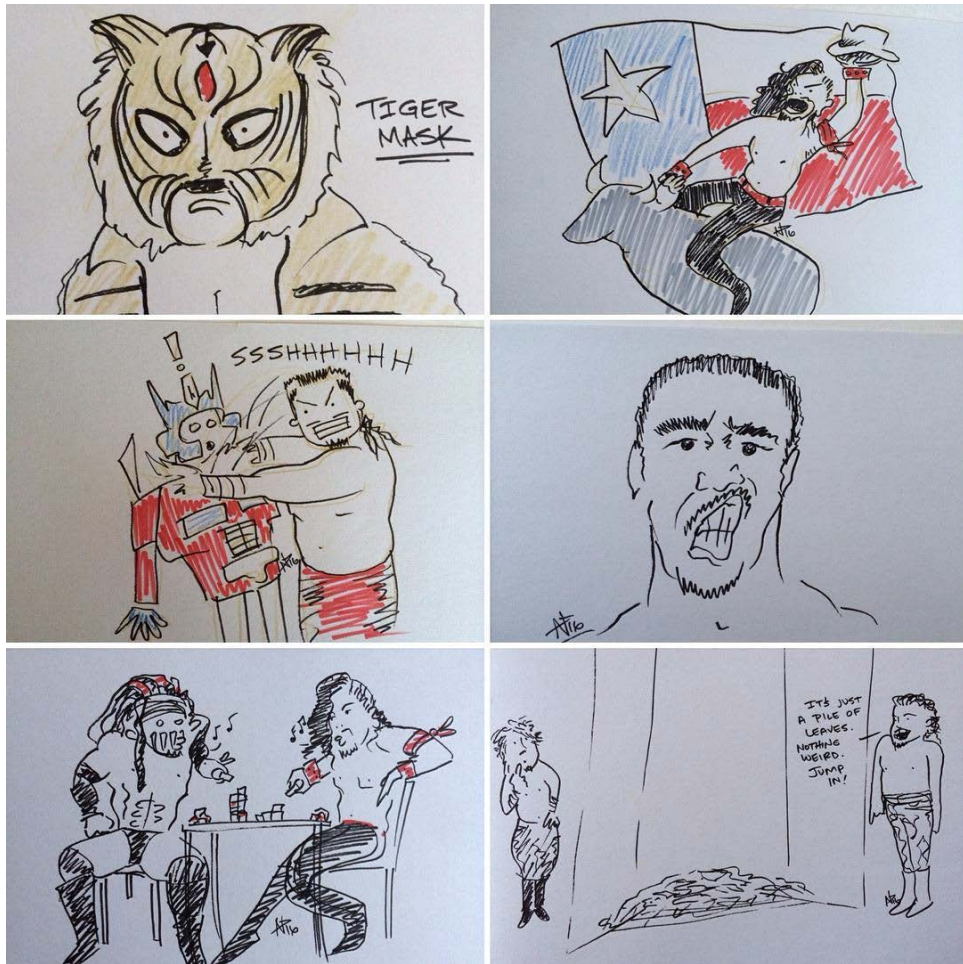
<sup>328</sup> Interview, Niki P, in person, October 2015

her Twitter followers when she announces that she will be doing quick sketches to pass the time, asking them to reply with their favorite wrestler and a scenario. These “crappy doodles,” as she calls them, are faster, and, as she described it, “I like to draw with the Sharpie, and screw it up, and then have to start over again. You know, no erasing. I can't draw where I have a pencil and then I try real hard, and I erase stuff that I mess up. I can't do that. If it's fucked up, it's fucked up.”<sup>329</sup> She will then take

---

<sup>329</sup> Interview, Niki P, in person, October 2015

these requests and create pencil and marker drawings based on the tweets she received.



**Figure 16: A collected set of "Crappy Doodles." From top, the requests were: Tiger Mask; Shinsuke riding a mechanical bull; Goto fighting a Transformer; AR Fox; Shinsuke and Finn playing Lego; and Goto playing a prank on Yoshi-Hashi.**

She will then post the completed drawings on her Twitter and, periodically, Instagram account, replying to the person who had requested them. Though they primarily exist digitally, Niki has been known to later mail the physical copy of the drawings to

fellow fans, physical representations of the connection that the digital drawings received.

Although the praise and encouragement are helpful, Niki has remained more interested in simply creating for her fellow fans. For instance, while there was a brief time in which Niki would charge for commissions of polished work,<sup>330</sup> she would simultaneously send out Christmas or Valentine's cards with original sketches for free, and frequently hosts giveaways for prints or buttons that she has designed. While earning an income from creative work is something many artists dream of, I would argue that within the wrestling fan communities, that is seen as less of a focus versus sharing and connecting with other fans. That being said, Niki's profile has increased to the point that she occasionally takes individual fan requests, but chooses to focus her attention on the designs that she has been hired to do for a number of independent wrestlers and wrestling companies. Her work appears on t-shirts, for instance, for some of the most popular independent (here used to mean non-WWE, which is the general application of the term in wrestling fandom) wrestlers in the world; it is still a surreal experience to see them get in the ring with Niki's artwork splashed across their chests. One of her personal favorite experiences, however, sprung out of an idea that she had just for fun: namely, creating a wrestling coloring book for Ring of Honor (ROH), an American-based independent promotion. Initially, as Niki described it in our interview in October 2015, she made only a few coloring pages and made all the first round of copies herself. She then attended the Ring of

---

<sup>330</sup> Niki's health currently limits her from taking on additional projects, though she will still share occasional "crappy doodles" and digital drawings at her own pace.



Honor show and gave out the copies of her coloring pages to only her favorite wrestlers, particularly those who she knew had small children:

But I knew that the Young Bucks had these little girls and I like the little girls, they're cute! So I thought well, you know, it'd be fun to have a coloring book for them. Because, you know, they're kids. And so, I thought I'd make a Young Bucks themed one. I was thinking of just doing a full Ring of Honor themed one... And then, day leading up to it, I made about ten copies of the coloring book.<sup>331</sup>

In keeping with her usual style, Niki did not charge anyone for the book, but rather offered copies to wrestlers as gifts. The wrestlers were delighted by it--some, according to Niki, were even upset that they did not receive copies of their own, something Niki described as “awkward.”<sup>332</sup> Following our interview, some copies, however, made it into the hands of management and several months later Niki shared a post on her Tumblr that declared: “ROH Coloring Book now available for just \$9.99!”<sup>333</sup> The ROH website enthusiastically describes the coloring book as “This is the first ever Ring of Honor Coloring Book!! Whether you're a young member of the Honor Nation or if you're like the Briscoes and have been here since day one, this book is the ultimate collector's item or canvas for the inner artist in you! *Designed by a FAN - for the best fans on the planet !!* Get your copy of the The Best Coloring Book on the Planet Today!! (emphasis mine)”<sup>334</sup> At heart, designing for, and connecting to, fellow fans is the essence of Niki’s work, and her greatest joy in what she does. When asked what the best part of wrestling fandom was, she answered

---

<sup>331</sup> Interview, Niki P, in person, October 2015

<sup>332</sup> Interview, Niki P., in person, October 2015

<sup>333</sup> “Coloring Book Available!” <http://punkrockbigmouth.tumblr.com/post/134524157576/roh-coloring-book-now-available-for-just-999> (Accessed 20 March 2017)

<sup>334</sup> “Ring of Honor Coloring Book” <http://www.rohwrestling.com/product/ring-honor-coloring-book>

“Meeting like-minded, supportive, loving, giving people. I am astonished by the generosity of the friends I’ve made.”<sup>335</sup>

Though she draws a number of fan favorites, including wrestlers like Dean Ambrose and Seth Rollins that have some of the largest female fan bases, Niki sees and experiences relatively little negative feedback regarding her work. This is, I argue, due to the nature of the work that she creates. There is some particularly pointed criticism that is aimed toward female wrestling artists that Niki has escaped, as much that much of that criticism and dismissal comes toward one of two types of art. The first might be called more “feminized” art--art that is softer, more romantic, or more “cutesy,” rather than Niki’s more cartoonish, black-and-white style, a style that pushes against broad and delimiting definitions of femininity. It is worth noting that artists who work in Niki’s style are generally assumed *not* to be female; they are the exception to the rule that everyone online is male (until proven otherwise).

The second set of criticism is aimed at artists, particularly female artists, who engage in sexual themes in their work, particularly homosexual themes or “shipping” (imagining characters in relationships with one another). As was noted in chapter three, this kind of art especially centers around wrestlers like The Shield, whose intensity and bond was alternately interpreted by a number of fan artists and fanfiction writers. But all wrestlers have their devoted fanbases, and those who create within that fan base are interested in seeing their fantasies coming to life in fictional or artistic form. Sexual imagery is not and never has been Niki’s style; it is something that she does not incorporate into her artwork, although she does not personally

---

<sup>335</sup> Niki P., follow-up interview, email, March 2016

criticize other artists who do. When it comes to the world of professional wrestling, I would argue that much of the backlash against creative work within fandom comes when fan artwork (be it visual or literary in nature) offers an alternative interpretation of the hyper-masculine, heterosexual storytelling that happens in the ring. Much of this backlash is directed against the female fans who create work that incorporates these elements. Niki's work, therefore, is "safe" in that it does not transgress that particular boundary; however, on more than one occasion, Niki has encountered male fans who were surprised to learn that "punkrockbigmouth" was "a girl,"<sup>336</sup> although she acknowledged that this surprise did not lead to backlash or dismissal of her work outright.

Yet for Niki, escaping backlash is also about the ways in which she chooses to engage in fandom, by celebrating that which she enjoys and what other fans enjoy, rather than choosing to focus on what is negative or disliked. Niki said, in a follow-up in March, "Sometimes I'll receive an unwelcome random comment, but it's easily ignored. I also mute a lot of people I find negative... Seeing something you disagree with and just HAVING to comment on it. Who cares?...Why get into a big fight? I'm here to relax."<sup>337</sup> For Niki, art is an escape, an opportunity to share and connect with other fans, and to offer a colorful, cartoonish reminder of what is most joyful and spectacular about the fandom we all share.

### **Kate, Richmond graphic artist**

---

<sup>336</sup> Niki P, interview, in person, October 2015

<sup>337</sup> Niki P., follow-up interview, email, March 2016

“Excuse me. Do you know how long it would take to get here from Trenton?”

There was a lull in the ring and the audience, and the Brooklyn Catholic school gym was quiet enough for me to hear the purple-haired girl next to me trying to get my attention, although I did not really have the answer she was looking for.

“I’m not actually from here! Adam might know,” I said, tapping my friend on the shoulder, as she added “Me neither!”

At the end of the night, Kate and I would exchange Twitter information and a perusal of her most recent tweets would confirm for me that she had seats next to mine at an independent wrestling show in Richmond a few weeks later. My connection to Kate began as many wrestling fan connections do--through a shared wrestling experience, whether experienced together physically or online. For Kate, as with my other informants, professional wrestling fandom does not pay her bills, but she has begun to explore the ways in which the two can merge.

Kate’s experiences with the world of wrestling, for better or worse, shaped the fusion of her professional and personal lives. Her experiences have led her to experience elation with the potential for advancement and deeper connection to fellow fans who want to discuss broader issues within fandom, and frustration with the “IWC,” or Internet Wrestling Community who tell her to “just relax” when she expresses a complaint or concern. When I initially interviewed Kate, in October of 2014, we were on our way to an independent wrestling show in Richmond. She shared her nightmarish experiences of trying to date as a wrestling fan, the endless sea of questions and “tests” of her fandom, and the ways in which she felt as though she needed to keep herself even more in check when tweeting or posting about

wrestling. “You don’t want to end up as a story on a podcast,”<sup>338</sup> Kate said during our interview—that is, you do not want to become the kind of fan that becomes *infamous* for their behavior, particularly not when you have hopes to have your artwork noticed by the WWE, a project that Kate would develop after our interview.

Kate is a 29-year-old graphic designer based out of Virginia. In her day job, much as is the case of my other informants, professional wrestling plays very little part. Kate comes from an art and design background, and sells (through a variety of sites) shirts, prints, mugs, bags, and other pieces that are emblazoned with her own designs or phrases. A number of these designs pertain directly to her love of wrestling--bags that proclaim “Pro Wrestling Saved My Life,” or “Wrestling Makes Everything Better.” However, in April of 2015, Kate decided to change her aim up slightly, and put her graphic design skills to work in direction connection to her weekly WWE viewing in an attempt to address the disparity between men’s and women’s wrestling on television. This was an experiment that would become the *Raw Breakdown Project*, a series of statistical analyses of the ways in which *Monday Night Raw* used their time—what percentage was spent on matches versus interviews? How long was the longest match? And, most importantly for Kate and the purposes of this dissertation, How much time did the women receive, versus the men? When asked where the initial inspiration came from, Kate said,

I’d been trying to figure out a way to combine my love of wrestling and design in a couple different ways, but wanted to do something that wasn’t like what everyone else was doing either...At the same time, I was looking for a new job, and was doing the requisite, “what am I missing from my portfolio and resume” sort of deal. A lot of design jobs were looking for people who had experience designing info graphs. I had, frankly, none of that. My day job

---

<sup>338</sup> Kate F., interview, in person, October 2014

didn't have much in the way of providing me that opportunity, so I decided to basically, do it myself. I also had been observing people complaining about the amount of time the women were getting on *Raw*. I started just timing the segments, but decided to see how it actually compared to the rest of the show...<sup>339</sup>

The frustration with the role that women were playing in professional wrestling is not unique to Kate. Numerous fans, online and in-person, were sharing their exasperation that the women were reduced to single storylines or brief matches, in spite of the purported "Divas Revolution" that WWE was attempting. Though, as Niki highlighted, the number of female wrestlers had both increased and diversified, they were not being given a fair share of time on television to showcase what they could do. Yet in spite of what seemed obvious to many fans, there was pushback from more vocal parts of the fan base, as well as from the larger, male portion of the fan base, who felt that the dissatisfaction was largely imagined or at least exaggerated. After all, women were having matches on the pay-per-views and on television; surely the complaints were overblown. Kate's goal was to analyze this as clearly and simply as possible, creating a weekly post where she combined her time analyses, counted number of appearances, and, depending on the week, an additional set of statistics. These bonus statistics ranged from amount of time that the Cruiserweight division was given, to the number of scarves a particular wrestler wore, to the amount of time given to a trombone--while often comical, they served to highlight the elements of wrestling that were frequently receiving more focus than the women's division. Rather than simply list these statistics in a spreadsheet or series of tweets, however,

---

<sup>339</sup> Kate F., followup interview, email, September 2016

Kate combined the charts and analysis with small, faceless images of some of the wrestlers who appeared that night, and turned them into an appealing design. Sharing the statistics by themselves might help to prove the point, but making the design appealing and eye-catching helps to draw the audience in, as well as lending deeper authenticity to what it is that she is presenting them. Though it may seem on the surface that there is little “art” in the sharing of statistics, Kate centralizes the artistic as part of her persuasive methods.

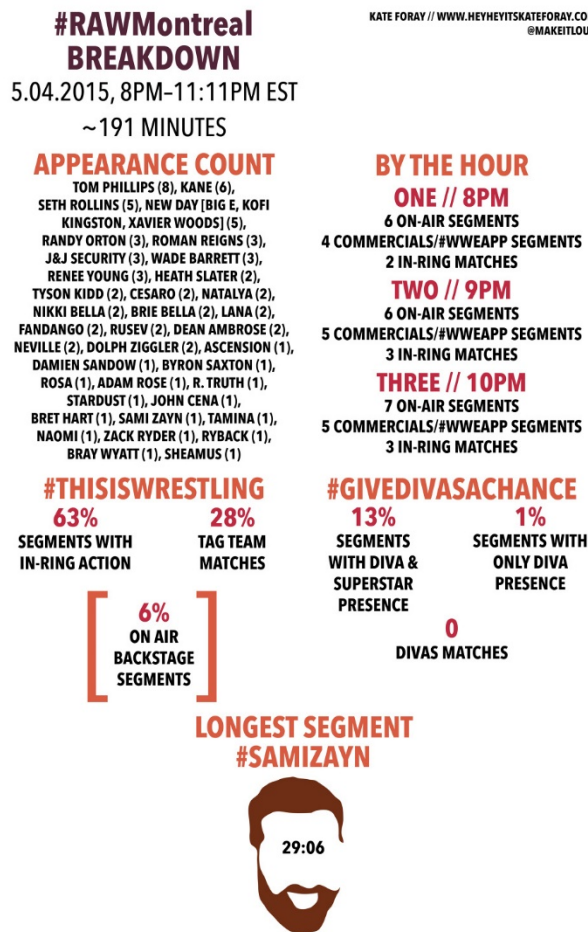


Figure 17: Kate's first "Breakdown," from May 4th, 2015.

The data<sup>340</sup> offered, from the onset, a clear, well-researched and supported contradiction to the claim that fans' concerns over women's wrestling were "overblown." On this night, there were zero Divas matches (as noted above, not yet the "Women's Division"), and only 1% of the three-hour show dedicated to only women. The creation of this first Breakdown—and each Breakdown since, as Kate is still creating these in March of 2017--required Kate to pay close attention throughout the show, closer than perhaps the average fan might need to. For accuracy, Kate committed to timing each segment and making note of every wrestler who appeared, whether in ring, backstage, or both, and to then take the time after the show concluded to unpack the data and put it in conversation.

What happened was, overall, tremendously positive--a reaction Kate laughingly described as "kinda shocking in wrestling, right?"<sup>341</sup> The Breakdown Project has become Kate's calling card since then, even affording her the opportunity to create breakdowns for Rolling Stone's online site. As she describes it, "it's cool that people associate me with things like statistics in wrestling, especially when it comes to the women. I think having evidence to support claims like 'the women aren't getting enough time' have really helped when detractors suggest you're imagining it. You can't fake facts. It's really cool to be part of that."<sup>342</sup> Like Courtney and Niki, much of Kate's work has been self-taught outside of her professional background and training, but the work that she puts in has not gone unnoticed. She admitted that "...I literally had no idea what I was doing for probably

---

<sup>340</sup> "Raw Breakdown: Montreal, May 4, 2015" <http://rawbreakdownproject.com/Raw-Montreal-May-4-2015> (Accessed 22 March 2017)

<sup>341</sup> Kate F., follow-up interview, email, September 2016

<sup>342</sup> Kate F., follow-up interview, email, September 2016



the first 5 weeks or so, but people seemed somewhat receptive to them, so I decided to give it 3 months. Then 6. Then figured I'd go for the year and see what happened."<sup>343</sup> The project has since been compiled into an "Annual Report," as well as consolidated into a poster featuring all of the wrestlers who have appeared on Monday Night Raw in the last year.

Kate's work, not unlike Niki's, is frequently assumed to be that of a man. Just as makeup is coded female, the work of data and analysis is still heavily coded masculine; women's thoughts and opinions on wrestling are frequently dismissed as "feelings," rather than seen as legitimate, quantifiable analysis. When women online attempt to discuss what makes them frustrated, they often find themselves dismissed. Niki, for instance, recalled an instance where, "Ru [another female fan] posted a review of a NJPW show where Captain New Japan took off his belt when he saw Maria and she talked about how disgusting it was. She got comments about her writing having too much estrogen."<sup>344</sup> Conversely, when women discuss their interest in a particular wrestler or set of wrestlers, their interest is dismissed as illegitimate and too focused on lust and physicality rather than wrestling talent. Kate recognized this tendency in the fandom, noting that

People on reddit still think I'm a guy when I post over there. Data and numbers and design in general feels sometimes like a very male-dominated field which shocked me because when I was in design school, I definitely graduated with more women than men. But as I interview for new jobs in the design field, I run into a lot of men who are running the startups and are in the managerial positions. I suppose since I'm someone in charge of something as (relatively) big as this, in another presumed male-dominated fandom (wrestling), it's just expected that I'm a man. It's frustrating, but I try to make

---

<sup>343</sup> Kate F., follow-up interview, email, September 2016

<sup>344</sup> Niki P., follow-up interview, email, March 2016

sure that people know right away that I'm a woman doing this, and I'm not the only one creating content in wrestling."<sup>345</sup>

Kate's statement also speaks to the broader mission of a number of artists, especially female artists: to use social media not only to self-promote, but to promote the work of fellow artists. It is not uncommon for a Twitter "thread" (series of tweets that connect to one another) to begin with an individual "tagging" fellow artists or linking directly to their work, offering interested parties a place to find more art, more writing, more research, on a topic that their followers are passionate about.

One of the challenges of that sharing, however, can be in finding popular and safe spaces to share this content. When I first began my research, Tumblr was one of the most popular platforms for sharing, particularly among women and non-male-identified artists and fans. Though the site remains in use, and remains particularly active for sharing art and fan fiction, it has fallen out of favor for everyday use or as a platform for sharing work. This is in part due to the fact that "Tumblr girls" is a disparaging term used by male and female fans alike,<sup>346</sup> shorthand for the epitome of "fangirls more than fans," and not a place for art to be taken seriously. It is, however, increasingly important to post art of all kinds to as many platforms as possible, and it behooves artists and writers to share their work in as many places as possible, as long as they can maintain creative control. This might include Tumblr even now, but more often includes Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or personal websites. For a number of my informants, it does *not* include online forums and messaging sites such as Reddit. Initially, this may seem surprising—Reddit features a large, highly active sub-forum

---

<sup>345</sup> Kate F., follow-up interview, email, September 2016

<sup>346</sup> And wrestlers, in some cases, such as Seth Rollins, discussed in chapter three.

known as r/squaredcircle, sometimes affectionately (or not so affectionately) referred to as Wreddit, a portmanteau of wrestling Reddit. It would seem that Reddit would be the ideal space to share work, if one wanted to have it reach the largest number of wrestling fan eyes. Yet as Kate describes it,

Wreddit, in general, is a cesspool. It's worse than Twitter because you can't just mute or block someone if you don't want to interact with them anymore. I hate it for what it is, but acknowledge that it is a piece of the fandom where you can get acknowledgement for your work.

There's a hive mind mentality on Reddit in general, and it shows itself pretty clearly on Wreddit. Nowadays I try to avoid the usual threads that I know will make me angry (basically any thread discussing women superstars or women fans), because honestly? You don't get heard. I've been downvoted more times for expressing my opinion there than in any other subreddit I visit, and I honestly don't poke through a lot of subreddits in general. I don't post my Breakdowns there very often...<sup>347</sup>

While it can be argued that this is a challenge for any fan artist or writer who wants to engage with other fans, I argue that it is particularly fraught for those who do not identify as male. There is already a strong preconceived notion about “fake fans” and “wrestling fangirls,” much as there is in other male-dominated subcultures. As noted when discussing live events, female fans are often up against a barrage of questions and “proving” opportunities. Daring to disagree or question the majority, or post an even mildly dissenting opinion, can open one up to a cavalcade of abuse, whether male or female—but when one expresses this dissent *and* identifies as female, the response becomes even harsher. It is unfortunately not uncommon for responses to escalate from mere disagreement to threats of violence or assault, and at times the anonymous nature of online engagement affords the opportunity for these threats to

---

<sup>347</sup> Kate F., follow-up interview, email, September 2016

pile on. Kate, who of all my informants has faced harassment and threats the most, both at shows and online, describes “The \*blatant\* negativity. The, “well why the fuck are you still here” negativity. The “can you just let me enjoy this and stay out of my mentions” negativity”<sup>348</sup> as a major deterrent for individuals to openly acknowledge themselves as wrestling fans—and even more so for fans to openly identify as female. The gatekeeping nature of particularly male fandom, the desire to keep it small and select, or to believe that you are unique, is powerful, and occurs in a vast majority of popular culture and fandom. Wrestling, so long perceived as male dominated, can be particularly hostile to fans who are perceived as “doing fan wrong” in some way—believing the presented narrative, watching wrestling for the attractive men, or participating in a litany of other sins. Kate, however, persists in the creation of her Breakdowns, and demonstrates through the data that, for example, this November 2016 example demonstrates, the percentages for women’s wrestling are at least somewhat increasing. The visuals of the Breakdowns have evolved as well, involving more information and even more data, as though providing additional

---

<sup>348</sup> Kate F., follow-up interview, email, March 2016

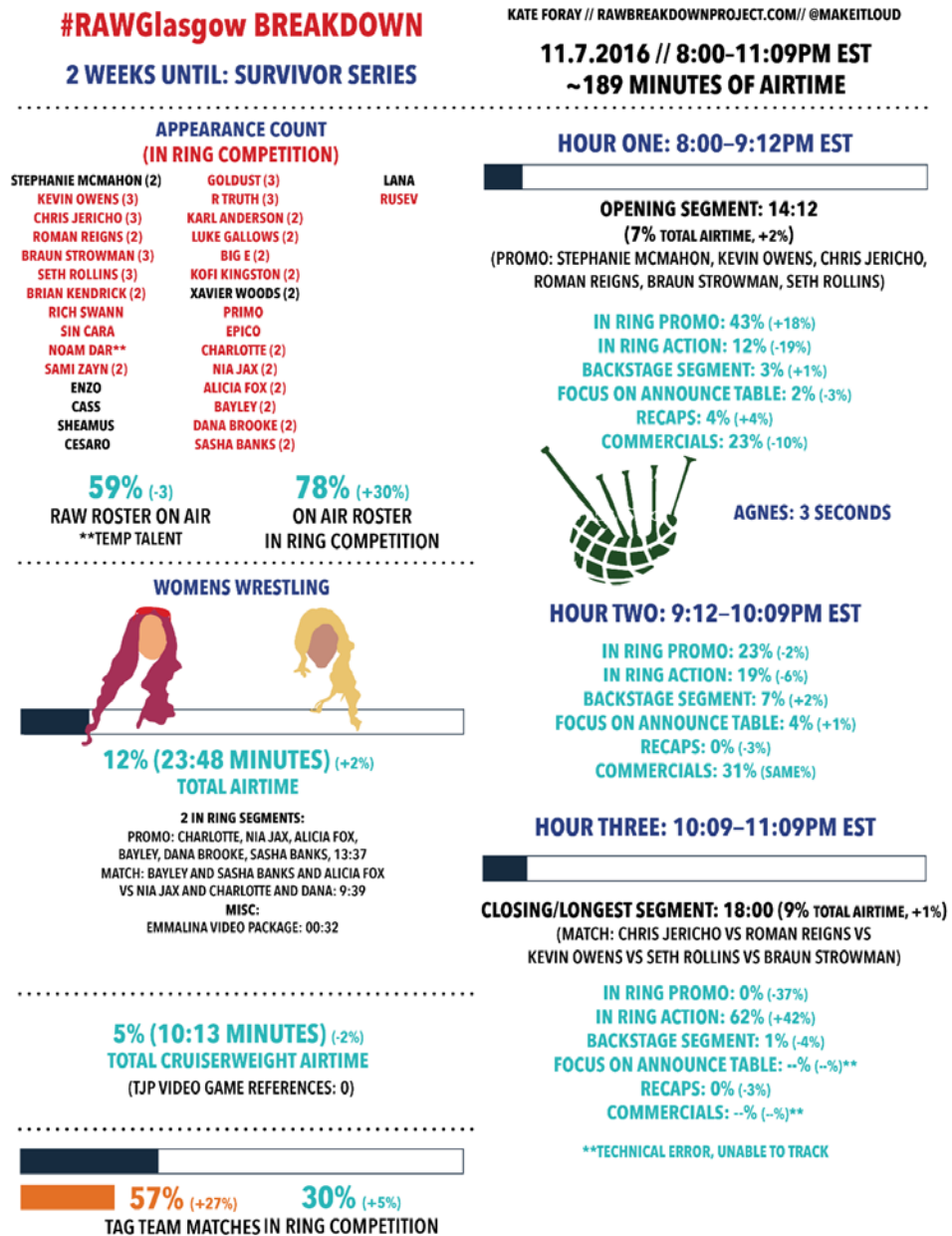


Figure 18: A more recent Breakdown, from November of 2016.

sources to back up her conclusions. In spite of Kate's engaging with the world of data, her subjectivity as a woman makes her suspect; it turns out that you can argue with facts *if* you choose to dismiss the person who is presenting them.

## Conclusion

These three artists, all of whom have established their presence in both fandom and in the world of professional wrestling itself, shared stories and individual experiences regarding the ways in which their art has led them to unique opportunities. Since their initial interviews, all of these women have continued to create and grow their artistic branding. Niki, for example, helped design a fanzine—for Shinsuke Nakamura—and has had her artwork turned into limited edition lapel pins, as well as designing additional shirts for Ring of Honor and New Japan wrestlers. Kate had the opportunity to see her work featured in *Rolling Stone*, and has launched a Patreon<sup>349</sup> site to allow her to grow the Raw Breakdown Project beyond its first year, as well as sell hard copies of the First Annual Report. Courtney was recently hired again by Chris Hero—this time for a somewhat simpler look—and has had her makeup art featured in wrestling magazines. Though wrestling art remains a hobby for all of these women, in part due to the changeable nature of wrestling fan culture, the connective element remains. These artists continue to share stories of connecting to other fans, at shows or online, but perhaps more importantly, they work to push back against definitions of “acceptable” female fan behavior. By refusing to blend in, and refusing to make themselves invisible, they do the work of “attacking and rebuilding” that is 70,000 notes strong—and growing.

---

<sup>349</sup> A website designed for “patrons” to pay a flat rate every month to help support a particular artist or individual, rather than buying specific pieces. The system is usually tiered—Kate’s begins at \$1—and patrons are offered rewards based on their monthly subscription level, designed to incentivize higher pledges but also to give artists more support for creating bonus content.

## Chapter 5: Fans and their fictions

“Let’s start with these handcuffs”

-- Seth going from 0- fan fiction real fast<sup>350</sup>

--flawlessglamazon.tumblr.com

6 erotic internet fan fictions later, and I’m almost convinced Chuck Taylor, and I would be a hell of a romantic couple<sup>351</sup>.

-- Johnny Gargano, September 22, 2014

There really should be more erotic fan-fiction where Johnny Gargano and I bang each other<sup>352</sup>.

-- Chuck Taylor, January 22, 2015

On an episode of *Monday Night Raw* on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016, tag team champions “The New Day” entered the ring to cut a pre-match promo about their opponents, Roman Reigns and Dean Ambrose, formerly of The Shield (as discussed in chapter four). The match had been designed, at least in kayfabe, to try to push Ambrose and Reigns to turn on one another prior to the upcoming pay-per-view event; their close friendship and “brotherhood” were anathema to the scheming Authority, who wanted to see Ambrose defeated. Yet the promo that The New Day cut hinted at a world well beyond that of the ring. Over the course of their promo, members Big E (Langston) and Kofi Kingston began to talk about

---

<sup>350</sup> The portion in quotations is taken directly from a “promo” given by Seth Rollins, a wrestler discussed at length in the previous chapter, on the televised Friday Night Smackdown on Friday, October 24<sup>th</sup>—the commentary beneath was added by the fan who posted, but the 200+ shares of this comment suggest that she was far from the only one thinking it.

<http://flawlessglamazon.tumblr.com/post/100874151056/lets-start-with-these-handcuffs>

<sup>351</sup> Both Johnny Gargano and Chuck Taylor were independent wrestlers at the time this tweet was made—since then, Johnny Gargano has signed with WWE. Johnny Gargano, Twitter post, September 22, 2014, 3:51 PM., <http://twitter.com/johnnygargano> & <https://twitter.com/JohnnyGargano/status/514155141747204098>

<sup>352</sup> Chuck Taylor, Twitter post, January 22, 2015, 12:05 PM, <http://twitter.com/SexyChuckieT> & <https://twitter.com/SexyChuckieT/status/558309448121602048>

“Ambrose...Reigns... Ambreigns.”<sup>353</sup> When the third member Xavier Woods expressed confusion, Langston and Kingston began to explain vaguely to Woods about the Tumblr and Twitter phenomenon of fan fiction and “shipping,” although they strongly suggested that he not go “searching” for it. The promo was interrupted by the entering Ambrose and Reigns, but the Internet response was instantaneous—and mixed. A number of fans made joking posts on both Tumblr and Twitter about how someone must have been reading their fic.<sup>354</sup> Kate ahead and added a heart-filled “Ambreigns” design to her online shop--after all, it was correctly identified as a popular “ship.”<sup>355</sup> A small percentage of fans, however, began tweeting directly to Woods, Kingston, and Langston, thereby linking them directly to examples of fan art and fan fiction and, in so doing, revealing themselves to be outliers in the fandom community. Fan fiction, as multiple scholars (and fiction authors) have noted, is intended as a creation *for* fans, *by* fans--and, most frequently, created by female and non-male<sup>356</sup> fans--in order to connect writers to other fans. In writing fan fiction, authors are participating in acts of rebellion and reclaiming by eroticizing the male bodies on display. This is especially true in wrestling fandom: the writing of fan

---

<sup>353</sup> *Monday Night Raw*, February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016. One of the hallmarks of Internet fan fiction is the creation of name “mashes” to represent couples—usually formed by combining either their first or last names to form a new, nonsensical word. Though “Ambrose/Reigns” would convey a similar message, most “ships” end up spawning a shorthand such as this.

<sup>354</sup> “Fic” is short for fan fiction, and is often used online as a shorthand.

<sup>355</sup> “Ship” is short for “relationship,” and is the usual term used to describe romantic pairings of characters within fan fiction.

<sup>356</sup> There are multiple fan fiction authors in wrestling fandom, including Amanda, whose work is discussed at length in this chapter, who identify as non-binary. Their perspectives and responses, while not part of the “heterosexual female” mold, still stand as crucial for understanding the ways in which those for whom wrestling is not intended (i.e. those who are not straight men) can use fandom to shape a narrative that feels more desirable.



fiction rewrites the narrative that is being presented, offering stories that move beyond the hyper-masculine world of wrestling.

Fan fiction is hardly a new practice<sup>357</sup>, though it has experienced a highly visible presence over the last twenty or so years—since, as several authors have noted, the rise of the World Wide Web. Bronwen Thomas writes that “fanfiction’s origins have been traced back to science fiction magazines in the 1920s and 1930s, but links have also been drawn with oral and mythic traditions.”<sup>358</sup> Occasionally text posts circulate on sites like Tumblr (and offer citations from authors like Lev Grossman, quoted at length below) reminding readers that things like *The Aeneid* can be argued to be a particular sort of fan fiction—after all, Aeneas was a character in *The Odyssey* before *The Aeneid*. As Abigail de Kosnik notes in “Should Fan fiction Be Free?,” “... a large market clearly exists for fanfic-style writing. Over the last dozen years, revisions and expansions of preexisting literary texts have appeared in contemporary fiction...Sena Jeter Naslund's *Ahab's Wife* (1999)<sup>359</sup>, Linda Berdoll's *Mr. Darcy Takes a Wife* (1999) and *Darcy and Elizabeth* (2006)...are books that all achieved critical acclaim and/or commercial success, and all retell well-known stories.”<sup>360</sup> While I do not intend to make the argument that these sorts of works are equivalent to fan fiction, there is a broader point to be made about the power of taking characters and a world that already exists, and rewriting it to push back against what

---

<sup>357</sup> Some discussion of the history of fan fiction can be found in the first chapter of this dissertation.

<sup>358</sup> Bronwen Thomas, “What is Fan fiction and Why Are People Saying Such Nice Things About It?,” *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* (2011), Vol. 3: 1

<sup>359</sup> A retelling of *Moby Dick* that, as the New York Times put it in their review, “reworks the great whaling novel from a female, liberal, Protestant point of view”

<sup>360</sup> Abigail de Kosnik, “Should Fan Fiction be Free?,” *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (Summer, 2009): 121

has been missing. Unsurprisingly, as briefly discussed in chapter one, fan fiction has been the subject of numerous articles, to say nothing of multiple academic volumes. But, most fundamentally (and relevant to this dissertation), is that fan fiction also represents a considerable presence in virtually any fandom--wrestling included. In his article in *Time*, "How Harry Potter Became The Boy Who Lived Forever" in July of 2011, Lev Grossman sums up the fan fiction phenomenon when he writes:

Fan fiction is what literature might look like if it were reinvented from scratch after a nuclear apocalypse by a band of brilliant pop-culture junkies trapped in a sealed bunker. They don't do it for money. That's not what it's about. The writers write it and put it up online just for the satisfaction. They're fans, but they're not silent, couchbound consumers of media. The culture talks to them, and they talk back to the culture in its own language.

Right now fan fiction is still the cultural equivalent of dark matter: it's largely invisible to the mainstream, but at the same time, it's unbelievably massive. Fan fiction predates the Internet, but the Web has made it exponentially easier to talk and be heard, and it holds hundreds of millions of words of fan fiction. There's fan fiction based on books, movies, TV shows, video games, plays, musicals, rock bands and board games. There's fan fiction based on the Bible. In most cases, the quantity of fan fiction generated by a given work is volumetrically larger than the work itself; in some cases, the quality is higher than that of the original too. Fan fiction.net, the largest archive on the Web (though only one of many), hosts over 2 million pieces of fan fiction, ranging in length from short-short stories to full-length novels.<sup>361</sup>

It is from here that I wish to enter into the world of wrestling fan fiction, created by a community of fans from many walks of life spread across the globe, coming together to share stories ranging from a few hundred words to hundreds of thousands, all centering around the wrestlers that they love. A search for "Wrestling" on two of the largest fan fiction sharing sites--fanfiction.net and Archive Of Our Own--reveals over 5,000 stories on the former, and over 4500 on the latter.<sup>362</sup> Clearly, the world of

---

<sup>361</sup> Lev Grossman, "How Harry Potter Became the Boy Who Lived Forever," in *Time*, July 7, 2011 (Accessed via *Time* online 20 October 2014)

<sup>362</sup> This comes with the caveat that some authors will publish the same story to both sites, to cast a wider net.

professional wrestling offers inspiration to numerous writers. For this chapter, I interviewed two fan fiction authors, both incidentally based out of Texas: Amanda, and Christine.<sup>363</sup> As was the case with the artists discussed in the previous chapter, writing fan fiction is not their day job, but rather a passion and a method by which to connect to other fans and explore elements of their personalities (Amanda is a lawyer, and Christine is a self-published author whose roots began in fan fiction). Both fan fiction writers came to the genre in different ways, and both shared different explanations as to why fan fiction is (or is not) personally connected to their lives.

My interest in exploring the work of these two fan fiction writers hinges on the fact that both Amanda and Christine fervently agree on the central reason why fan fiction survives and thrives. That is, both agree that the creation of fiction in fandom is, ultimately, intended as the name suggests: an act of creation and connection for other fans and by fans. Furthermore, both insist that fan fiction empowers them to push back against what we are told is acceptable behavior for non-male fans, and instead to claim a space of one's own. As Kristin M. Barton & John Malcolm Lampley observe in their introduction to *Fan CULTure: Essays on Participatory Fandom in the 21st Century*, "It's not so difficult to understand why all this is happening. Yes, instant communications and sharing go a long way...Fandom may start with the property, but it ends up being all about the people."<sup>364</sup>

## **The Rules of Fic**

---

<sup>363</sup> I may also refer, in brief, other authors whose stories I have read but who I was not able to interview for this dissertation; their works are shared publicly, and are readily accessible.

<sup>364</sup> Kristin M. Barton and John Malcolm Lampley, *Fan CULTure: Essays on Participatory Fandom in the 21st Century*. (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2013), 4.

Before venturing further with the work of Amanda and Christine, however, it is crucial to establish some base rules about what fan fiction is, how it operates, and perhaps importantly, what fan fiction *is not*. As Henry Jenkins observes in *Textual Poachers*,

...fan culture reflects both the audience's fascination with programs and fans' frustration over the refusal/inability of producers to tell the kind of stories viewers want to see. Fan writing brings the duality of that response into sharp focus: fan writers do not so much reproduce the primary text as they rework and rewrite it, repairing or dismissing unsatisfying aspects, developing interests not sufficiently explored.<sup>365</sup>

Fan fiction, in other words, represents a sort of active "talking back" to a pre-existing product, be it literary, television, musical, film, or some other form of artistic expression. Fans who are dissatisfied with the product that has been offered to them (or fans who want to engage further with the world that has been built for them) can turn to the world of fan fiction, where circumstances work out the way that they would like to see them, there is focus on characters that they want to hear more about, or storylines and representations are created to more accurately reflect the diversity of the creators. Alexis Lothian writes that "Fan writers...build their subcultural sphere by sharing and storing texts and interpretations. Abigail Derecho describes fan fiction as a literature of archives, relating its production of new stories around old texts to Jacques Derrida's description in *Archive Fever* of the archive as "always expanding and never closed," where every addition to the archive alters what the archive itself constitutes (Derecho 2006, 61)."<sup>366</sup> By continually speaking back and writing back to

---

<sup>365</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture: Updated Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 162.

<sup>366</sup> Alexis Lothian, "An Archive of One's Own: Subcultural Creativity and the Politics of Conservation." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 6. doi:10.3983/twc.2011.0267, 2011

the existing archive, fans that write fan fiction are able to resist the dominant narratives to create ones that more accurately reflect or speak to the world the way they wish it was. In the world of professional wrestling fan fiction specifically, this can be dissatisfaction with the storylines that are being presented; the relationships that are being depicted (or not depicted); the presence or lack thereof of a favorite wrestler on television; or, at times, revising the history of characters that are being presented. Henry Jenkins, in *Textual Poachers*, outlines roughly ten “styles” of fan fiction—all of these are applicable to the world of wrestling fandom. The list of terms is as follows, with the initial types in bold and my summaries, particularly as they pertain to wrestling, after the colon:<sup>367</sup>

1) **Recontextualization**: This approach entails filling in the gaps and providing additional explanation. It might focus on off-screen actions that explain on-screen behavior; or it might mean explaining a particularly brutal match by showing a squabble between two characters beforehand, or make a theoretically innocent night on commentary more sexualized.

2) **Expanding the series timeline**: This might include writing about events that precede the start of a storyline; writing about events that occur after it ends; or sometimes creating past moments that explain current traits or moments—what was the history of, for instance, “El Generico and PAC” before they came to the WWE? Or, what will happen after CM Punk retires?

3) **Refocalization**: This style can be subversive, shifting attention from primary figures and focusing on secondary characters—often women or minorities—who do not get as much screen time—the “rare pair” phenomenon. Who are the wrestlers that don’t get much time on television?

4) **Moral realignment**: This takes villains & makes them protagonists of their own narratives—this of course shifts “heroes” alignment as well, coloring them as the “bad guys.” This is particularly prevalent in the WWE fiction world, where “heels” are given deeper intentions, warmer backstories, or friendlier backstage presences, and faces might be harboring darker secrets.<sup>368</sup>

5) **Genre shifting**: This is fic that entails putting the characters into new genre settings, including courtroom dramas, murder mysteries, or other pre-existing type. I argue that this is the category that best describes AUs, or “alternate universes,” in

---

<sup>367</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture: Updated Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 162-177

<sup>368</sup> This was the case for Christine and sparked her story “Sweat, Chains, and Love,” reflecting that someone like John Cena can’t be “that good all the time,” according to her interview.

which, as Lev Grossman states, all bets are off and “the canon is fired.”<sup>369</sup> In wrestling fiction, sometimes this means removing the characters entirely from the world of wrestling and putting them into the West, the Civil War, or a college and coffee shop, to name just a few.

6) **Crossovers:** This incorporates blurring boundaries between different texts and/or source material—this is perhaps slightly less common in wrestling fiction, but it is not unheard of to incorporate wrestlers from various promotions, for instance, or bring in characters/people from outside the wrestling world.

7) **Character dislocation:** In these fics, a character is taken out of their context/world & given a new name, identity, character, etc., and this can happen in varying degrees. Sometimes this is “amnesia” fic, but this particular trope does not come up quite as often in the world of wrestling fiction, unless it is in conversation with, for instance, “personalization.”

8) **Personalization:** As “one of the most disputed subgenres of fan fiction,”<sup>370</sup> this includes the infamous “Mary Sue” stories in which authors create versions of themselves to interact with fictional characters. This category also encompasses work that involves the actors, sometimes interacting with their fictional selves. This is ubiquitous in wrestling fiction, with stories of “hot new divas,” “wrestler (x)’s little sister,” or “average everyday fan” who find their way into WWE and the arms of their given favorite.

9) **Emotional intensification:** This includes categories such as hurt/comfort, angst, or stories centered around “moments of narrative crisis.”<sup>371</sup> This is, for many, the most desirable form of fan fiction, particularly in such an intensely masculine, physical setting as the WWE. This allows characters to emote more strongly, or to offer one another comfort in the face of physical or emotional injury—injuries that make up a great deal of the storytelling on television.

10) **Eroticization:** This is often perceived as the sole goal of fan fiction. Though this is statistically not the case, it certainly represents a sizeable portion. Wrestling is no exception to this, with a large portion of stories, as well as Tumblr sites, dedicated to erotic fiction about the performers, whether with one another or with created characters.

For the purposes of this dissertation, it is also important to note that all of the above terminology does not presuppose a particular rating; all of the above can be rated anywhere from “G” to extremely sexually explicit. Furthermore, the relationships that are being explored can be friendly, romantic, or explicitly sexual;

---

<sup>369</sup> Lev Grossman, “How Harry Potter Became the Boy Who Lived Forever,” in *Time*, July 7, 2011 (retrieved from *Time* online 20 October 2014)

<sup>370</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture: Updated Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 171

<sup>371</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture: Updated Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 174

they can also be heterosexual or homosexual, or somewhere in-between. In this chapter, I will focus primarily on the largest genre of wrestling fiction: sexually explicit “slash fiction,” a term that theoretically traces its origins to the “/” between the names of the characters involved (as in Ambrose/Reigns, for instance). Though this is by no means the only form of wrestling fan fiction, it does make up the largest percentage (and is the particular focus of the two authors I interviewed). It is, in many ways, the inverse of the art as discussed in chapter four, where erotic or sexualized art makes up only a small percentage of the fan art that circulates in most online settings. What does and does not “count” as fan fiction is a topic frequently debated; similarly, there are arguments over the end goal of the creation of fan fiction. Most authors, when interviewed or polled, note that they consider their primary audience to be other fans, and not the people about which they are writing.<sup>372</sup> The creation and distribution of fan fiction is, like wrestling, a social act; it is not meant to be solitary, but rather shared (there are, of course, numerous authors who write their stories and do not share them in any kind of public domain; however, this is a different sort of activity). As Becca Schafner writes,

Fandom is what happens when fans of things—novels, movies, TV shows, plays, comic books—actively seek one another out. They go to conventions, but more and more commonly they go to the internet. They write fanfiction, they leave comments, they draw and make vids and user icons (truly an art unto itself), they friend each other on LiveJournal and DreamWidth (a fan-operated blogging site based on LiveJournal’s open source software)<sup>373</sup> and

---

<sup>372</sup> There have been multiple situations in the last ten or so years in which fans have presented performers with fan fiction directly, sometimes by bringing hard copies to conventions (including art work), other times by tweeting or messaging links to the fic in question directly to its subjects. The reaction to this kind of presentation has been mixed to say the least, by the authors themselves (many of whom have had their work presented to actors without their consent) as well as the subjects--this is something I will discuss in this section.

<sup>373</sup> This was written in 2009; by 2012-2016, the years in which I became re-immersed in wrestling fandom, much of the “friending” had moved from LiveJournal to Tumblr.

follow each other on Twitter. And they do all of these things because there is someone on the other end who loves what they love.<sup>374</sup>

Fan fiction, at its heart, offers connection--someone wants to read what you have written because they love these characters, too; because they have imagined what you have imagined. Frequently, comments on fan fiction include at least one variant on “I thought I was the only one who noticed their chemistry!” The seemingly simple act of sharing what feels, to many, like self-indulgence can offer an opportunity for more--positive feedback, a budding friendship, or, at the very least, an eager audience.

While some authors choose to remain anonymous for a variety of reasons, identifying only by pen names and being careful not to connect their fannish identity to their “real life” or professional one, for many, is a gateway into that fandom.<sup>375</sup> Jenkins adds that in most cases, “writing becomes a social activity for these fans, functioning simultaneously as a form of personal expression and as a source of collective identity (what it means to them to be a “fan”).”<sup>376</sup> There is a reason that online fandom communities frequently offer fan fiction or images as rewards, gifts for charity donations, or holiday exchanges: fan fiction is meant to connect to other fans, to raise questions about a shared passion, to try and capture and extend the world in which fans enjoy dwelling. I wish to turn now to the particular ways in which female wrestling fans participate in this capturing and engaging, this connecting to other fans: the creation of fan fiction (a variety of types), the distribution of fan fiction

---

<sup>374</sup> Becca Schaffner, “In Defense of Fanfiction,” *The Horn Book Magazine*, 2009

<sup>375</sup> Among my interview subjects, a number mentioned that they started looking for fan fiction about professional wrestling not long after they started participating in the fandom online (or when they re-entered the wrestling fandom)—and they were not disappointed.

<sup>376</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture: Updated Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 154



(circulated in a variety of ways), and, furthermore, the ways in which female fans discuss their relationships and involvement in this type of work.

### **Wrestling With Eroticism**

It is unsurprising that wrestling spurs so much fan fiction, a sport in which, by and large, highly attractive, very fit people compete with one another, dressed in what can barely be considered clothing (trunks or tights for men, some combination of shorts or tights and then bra-like tops for women), with the men typically arriving at the ring wet, oiled up, or both. Within the matches themselves, there are a variety of holds that require the participants to come in very close proximity to one another in ways that, taken out of context, look particularly sexually suggestive--bodies very much on display, legs spread, chests out, with plenty of grabbing at thighs or hips. Furthermore, the narratives of the matches focus strongly on history and chemistry; while it is not unheard of for participants to be thrown into a match seemingly at random, it is far more the norm for commentary to discuss the history between the individuals who are about to grapple. How have their characters interacted before? Are these friends now turned enemies, or do they show one another respect? Is this about a title, or something more? Further, the pain that is presented, partially by virtue of it being staged, is often strongly eroticized; the language of the commentators during these matches does little to dissuade that image, although ostensibly all of it is simply the language of competition.

The descriptions of a sampling of the first two pages of the results for “World Wrestling Entertainment” on Archive Of Our Own, often abbreviated as AO3,<sup>377</sup>

offer a glimpse at the varied world of options available to would-be wrestling “shippers:”

Life can certainly throw you a curveball, often when you least expect it. Eliza Lopez feels like she has had more than her fair share of curveballs. Running from a failed and even dangerous relationship, Eliza is seeking refuge for herself and her two young sons with the one person she has left in her life that she can trust, her brother Colby (better known to the WWE Universe as Seth Rollins). Read to find out how living with Colby and meeting his friends, and more specifically meeting Jon Good (Dean Ambrose), changes her life in ways she never would have expected. (Dean Ambrose Love Story)

—“Never Saw It Coming,” by ambroseansky<sup>378</sup>

It's a lifeguard AU! In an attempt to restart his life Seth Rollins leaves the midwest to guard a pool down in Orlando FL. Slow build, multi-chapter, fluffy stuff intermixed with sexy stuff intermixed with lifeguarding.

--“To the Rescue” by strykelass<sup>379</sup>

Dean Ambrose is an up-and-coming singer and guitarist who's seeking a backing guitarist in his band for touring and other performances.

Seth Rollins is the man chosen for the job. All Dean knows about him is that he can play pretty damn well, and that he apparently likes to wear makeup and glitter.

Dean's immediately interested, but he's also totally, completely, one-hundred-percent straight.

But there's no harm in some fun on stage, is there?

--“Glitterbaby” by

Randomosities<sup>380</sup>

Being asked to take a heel turn was not something that Bayley had ever expected, and neither was being put into an on-screen relationship with Seth Rollins. Will working together on-screen lead to something developing between them off it?

--“The New Authority” by Armbar\_Nation<sup>381</sup>

---

<sup>377</sup> Theoretically, fanfiction.net cannot host “adult” fan fiction (although it does), and thus it is at risk of being deleted; I pull from Archive Of Our Own wherever possible, as their mission is to host all kinds of fiction without censorship.

<sup>378</sup> “Never Saw It Coming,” <http://archiveofourown.org/works/8633515>, currently 47 chapters, 84,347 words

<sup>379</sup> “To the Rescue,” <http://archiveofourown.org/works/5632096>, currently 63 chapters, 236,427 words

<sup>380</sup> “Glitterbabies,” <http://archiveofourown.org/works/8632192>, currently 1 chapter, 1209 words

<sup>381</sup> “The New Authority,” <http://archiveofourown.org/works/8161741>, currently 23 chapters, 80,564 words

Set after RAW where SD team invaded RAW and confronted team RAW. Dean and Roman have a sweet filthy reunion in his locker room.

--"Rock my World" by xxambreignsxx<sup>382</sup>

Sasha's important – Charlotte wouldn't say important to her, but important in her life, at least – and this seemingly endless back and forth over the title proves it. Written for Challenge #086 - "sweat" - at Femslash Ficlets on Dreamwidth., "make it look so easy (doing something so hard),"by Suicix<sup>383</sup>

Fill for the prompt, "I'd love to see a romantic reunion for Kane and Taker with them getting to be together again at the 900th Smackdown after being separated"

--"At Long Last" by CrimsonLotus<sup>384</sup>

Roman Reigns has always been obsessed with serial killers. For his final thesis a few months before college graduation he seeks an interview with the one psychopath that led him to his fixation, Dean Ambrose. What happens when Roman finally gets the chance to meet Dean? Will Roman find the answers that he has been looking for? Like, why did Dean kill seven innocent souls? Why doesn't anyone know anything about Dean Ambrose except his name?

--"I'm Just A Sick Guy," by Ambreigns69<sup>385</sup>

The titles and descriptions of these fics--a small sampling of the four thousand plus (and growing) available on Archive of Our Own (hereafter AO3)--displays the vast range of options that fan fiction writers and readers have available to them. These fics fit into nearly all of the ten categories discussed earlier in this chapter; although some cross over into multiple categories. The fics range tremendously in length, anywhere from a few hundred words to tens of thousands of words, and "ratings," from G all the way up through M. Accordingly, the fics also draw a wide range of responses; for some, there are a dozen or so views and perhaps one or two likes or comments, while for others the views rank in the tens of thousands and the likes and comments in the

---

<sup>382</sup> "Rock My World," <http://archiveofourown.org/works/8624524>, currently 1 chapter, 2,059 words

<sup>383</sup> "make it look so easy (doing something so hard)," <http://archiveofourown.org/works/8627551>, currently 1 chapter, 370 words

<sup>384</sup> "At Long Last," <http://archiveofourown.org/works/8623138>, currently 1 chapter, 2,011 words

<sup>385</sup> "I'm Just a Sick Guy," <http://archiveofourown.org/works/8622814>, currently 1 chapter, 1,250 words

hundreds. Characters range from tremendously popular to relatively obscure, although some of the most eccentric and charismatic on-screen players see a larger amount of stories written about them. Though this is by no means an exhaustive list of the kinds of fiction that are available to interested parties, it demonstrates the ways in which the wrestling fandom is permanently growing, and responding to what is being presented on screen--taking the narrative, in other words, and filling in the blanks that have, for so long, left female fans out in the cold.

Though both Christine and Amanda, the interview subjects in this chapter, share a similar disdain for the so-called “Mary Sue” fics (as noted under the “Personalization” strategy, that is, stories in which characters are created as literal avatars of the authors), both acknowledged the ways in which the creations of these kinds of stories are essential in speaking back to wrestling fandom, and “filling in the blanks” in a more literal way.

### **The lawyer & the author: Amanda and Christine**

When I began the research for this project, my own forays into wrestling fan fiction had been tentative. Much of what I had come across fit into the “Mary Sue” category or felt too unrealistic and “out of character” and, perhaps most importantly, did not center around wrestlers that captivated my interest. Just as the most successful wrestlers are able to make fans feel things in the ring, the most successful fan fiction authors are able to make readers feel something through the computer screen by using familiar characters in unfamiliar situations. For most fans, the process that sparks interest in writing fan fiction begins with reading fan fiction, and, in some cases,

subsequently writing “Mary Sue” fiction to test the waters. Neither Christine nor Amanda began their writing in this fashion, although to judge from the numerous offerings online, many authors, particularly females, do so.<sup>386</sup> However, both Amanda and Christine shared the experience of coming to writing after reading, and stumbling across wrestling fan fiction almost accidentally and--it would turn out--their stories actually intertwined. I interviewed Amanda and Christine together during a research trip to Texas, and Amanda offered the story of the creation of their first fan fiction:

At some point when I was in law school, I was on Livejournal, and I stumbled upon Livejournal communities of wrestling slash fiction. And slashing, slash fiction was something I knew about, sort of tangentially, in my life...And I would occasionally read it...I was just surfing around, and it was all, like--really horrible. It was all really bad...There was always so much Edge and Christian<sup>387</sup>. But for some reason, I had free time or something, and I was just like, well let me see if I can write this. But I was really uninspired. And I thought, I like Punk, and I like Jericho. So I will write a story about them. And it was, just, like...the lamest plot, and, it was like, there was nothing behind it. I didn't get INTO it, because I didn't have any feels about it.<sup>388</sup>

Amanda's use of the term “feels” is not an accidental misspeak. Within the world of fandom, particularly online fandom, characters and stories deal largely in emotional appeal. When one has a strong reaction to a specific element, the term “feels” has become a catchall fandom shorthand for feelings, a combination of emotional and, at times, physical response, an affect that other fans immediately understand even if the words seem unintelligible. The writing of fan fiction as well as its consumption is about an intense emotional response. As Alexander Cho puts it, “affect is the

---

<sup>386</sup> In some cases, authors do not indicate their gender in their profiles or identify themselves in any way; however, among those that do, the majority of stories that include original characters are written by women.

<sup>387</sup> Two wrestlers that operated as a tag team, frequently the topic of fan fiction for that very reason.

<sup>388</sup> Interview, Christine & Amanda, in person, October 3, 2015.

condition of surplus and intensity... Rather than understand meaning strictly as a formula of signifier and signified, an attention to affect is a focus on excess, that which overfills or cannot be captured in language. As Jack Katz states, there is a whole register of “ways of expressing something going on that talk cannot grasp” (cited in Thrift 2004, 60).”<sup>389</sup> The language of fandom is constantly evolving, often unintelligible to an outside observer, but immediately significant to those within. The immediate understanding of the slang and fan terminology marks someone as an insider, part of a particular subset of fandom. Reading fan fiction becomes an active of connectivity, just as much as creating it can be.

Christine, whose interest in fan fiction has subsequently turned into a career in self-publishing erotic romance, came to the wrestling fiction world by reading as well. She said,

I started getting into it because of a broken leg. I had broken my leg playing roller derby and I was stuck on the couch all summer and...I was reading something on Bleacher Report<sup>390</sup>, and it was like one of those gazillion slideshows they do of like the "ten craziest wrestling pictures!" or something. And so there was a picture that was a manip<sup>391</sup> of Cena and Orton. *Fifty Shades* was already out, so I vaguely knew of fan fiction, and I had heard of *Star Trek* fan fiction before but I had never really paid attention to it. And so, one of the comments underneath the picture was something along the lines of, "you should see the fanfics written about them." And I was like oh, let me go down this rabbit hole. And so that's what I did, I started Googling Cena/Orton fanfics, and fanfic dot net came up. And I would up not really reading any Cena/Orton fics, because, I was already in love with Punk by that point—So I found slaygirl190's *Summer of Punk*<sup>392</sup>, and I started reading that, so I read her story, I think she had already written the first two installments? And so I

---

<sup>389</sup> Alexander Cho, “Queer reverb: Tumblr, affect, time,” in *Networked Affect*, ed. Ken Hills, Susanna Paasonen, and Michael Petit (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), 45

<sup>390</sup> An online sports site that frequently features news stories about wrestling.

<sup>391</sup> Slang for “photo manipulation”—typically a photo edited combining two pre-existing photographs, not always sexual in nature.

<sup>392</sup> “John Cena has it bad for CM Punk who can barely tolerate him. With Punk leaving the WWE, maybe it's time to take a chance?,” 34 chapters, 66,272 words, <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/7422104/1/The-Summer-of-Punk>, “

read, like, all the way through, like her two, and then I read a few more, and um, there was a couple other authors that I liked. I had already published a book by that point, but I had stopped writing, because, mostly because of derby, I was teaching full time, I had JUST stopped teaching, like a few months ago...I wasn't playing derby because my leg was broken, so, I was like, well, you know, these people wrote this, I can try it. And so, I kinda kicked it around in my brain for a little bit, and I wrote *Sweat Chains and Love*.<sup>393</sup>

Those kinds of moment of happenstance were common to a number of my interview subjects. Though it was not necessarily connected to fan fiction specifically, the ways in which Internet communities helped to forge connections between wrestling fans that might otherwise have felt isolated seems to be universal among non-male wrestling fans. The physical space of the wrestling arena can be overwhelming, and connections can be difficult to make. The virtual world, while vaster, ironically makes those connections easier by offering lower stakes and frankly more accessible ways of communicating with other fans. Out of that connection and happenstance, then, comes a potential desire to give back in the form of creation, whether visual art or fan fiction. Later, Amanda would confirm that it was, in fact, meeting Christine through another moment of happenstance that would spur her back into the world of fan fiction. Their conversation was energized and warm, affirming a friendship that began more or less online and has continued to grow:

Amanda (A): Yeah, so I just kinda wrote, it was just a porn without plot, with really, just nothing there, and, I remember somebody really liked it, cause it must've been like a drop of water in the desert, that was that community, and all that stuff. And then, like, I remember, I had like, some like other vague ideas, but I never wrote them. And then I just kinda forgot about it, until, fast forward, I was at Comic Con--

Christine (C): Our eyes met across the line...

---

<sup>393</sup> Interview, Christine and Amanda, in person, October 3, 2015

Jess (J): That's beautiful.

A: I remember I was at Comic Con, and Christine was in the VIP line, because she had, you had broken your ankle?

C: Yeah, I was still recovering, I wasn't on crutches anymore but I was still in a brace.

A: Yeah. And I remember that time, I looked over, and I noticed you cause you were wearing like a Houston roller derby shirt, you looked like a cool person, and then, you know, cause it was like all these fuckin' dudes and shit, and I was trying to talk with these dudes in front of me, and they were sort of talking to me but not really? So I saw her and I was like oh she looks cool! I remember I liked your hair.

C: Oh yeah \*laughs\* I'm actually going back natural again, I already decided. \*laughs\*

A: She had her little natural afro puff--I thought she looked cute! And then, I was wearing my Heels Wear Pink shirt from Barbershop Window--And I tweeted it to Barbershop Window and they retweeted me, and Christine tweeted me like "hey I saw you at Comic Con!" So we became friends on Twitter, and through Twitter, like, Christine wrote something about *Sweat, Chains, and Love*--And I'm like, what's this? And I'm like ooooh, it's a--

C: Yeah, I would post my links on Twitter, I didn't give a shit.

A: And I clicked through it and I'm like "ooh, she writes a CM Punk/John Cena fanfiction!" You know, and at first I was like haha, oh, how weird and silly, that she writes this, it's fifty shades of John Cena, how funny, I'm gonna read this entire story!

C: And still laughing, a hundred and forty thousand words later!

A: And I'm sitting there at work, at my lame old job, and I'm reading this story, and, you know, so that's how I had it in my head that like, it existed. But I didn't, I didn't really look at anybody else's, and then, the Shield happened. And, then, I remember, I would watch the Shield, and I remember I liked Seth, and I just started thinking a lot about him, and stuff like that, and, I, think I might've also liked Dean? I can't remember. I know I really liked Seth-

-

C: I know I liked Dean FIRST.

A: Seth I noticed first, cause he was the prettiest to me, and Dean was interesting. And--



J: And Roman was there.

A: Yeah, Roman was there. And I remember, so then I remember, like, because I hadn't ever heard of fanfiction dot net until I read *Sweat Chains and Love*. And then, I remember, it was over Christmas, and I was staying at my sister-in-law's house, and I remember like, I was thinking about this for some reason like that, and I started, I thought, I wonder if people wrote Dean Ambrose and Seth Rollins fanfiction? And I like looked it up, and it was just like, people, there was that first little trickle of Mary Sue/Dean stories?

C: Like you do...I don't really care for those. No.

J: I try not to judge, but I don't enjoy that.

A: I remember there was all that around. And there was like, there were SOME Seth stories, where like somebody was his little sister and was hooking up with Dean or whatever. And, this was over Christmas. And then I went to bed, and then I woke up in the morning and I had that idea. And it was CHRISTMAS. It was CHRISTMAS. That I woke up with that story in my head. And we were driving back, to Austin, on Christmas, and I remember that I was driving, and I had the whole what I know now is the first chapter of For Real, I thought it was just gonna be this one story I was going to write, and never write fanfiction again—And, I had that in my head, and I was driving back to Austin, and it was developing in my head. And then we went out for Chinese food, and then I remember that I got my laptop, and I got in bed, and I told Stephen<sup>394</sup>, I told Stephen about it! And he was like "aw, you're writing wrestling fanfiction, that's so cute!" And it was like, eight o'clock at night, and I wrote it in four hours, and I posted it at midnight. So that's what that was.<sup>395</sup>

The creation of “Mary Sue,” as mentioned when discussing the major types of fan fiction, can be challenging: the term is a catch-all for a self-insert story, in which the improbably beautiful, perfect, frequently implausible invented character interacts with characters that a reader might already know and love. These stories are at times platonic, but they are most often about heterosexual relationships, allowing a “Mary Sue” female character to stand in for the author’s desires and wishes. In these stories,

---

<sup>394</sup> Amanda’s husband

<sup>395</sup> Interview, Christine and Amanda, in person, October 3, 2015

characters such as “Eliza Lopez” (younger sister to Seth Rollins, whose real name is Colby Lopez)<sup>396</sup> enter into the world of professional wrestling and, almost instantly, find themselves surrounded by adoring wrestlers, culminating in a romantic (and, sometimes, sexual) relationship. Creating these stories can serve as an important gateway for younger or newer authors particularly. It affords them the opportunity to create a character who can behave in precisely the manner that they like, and allows them to have a surrogate in a familiar form.

When fan fiction is dismissed or denigrated, however, it is these types of stories that are often an integral part of the masculine dismissal; their given impression of self-indulgent wish fulfillment renders them ridiculous and unimportant to their critics. Yet, as many authors have argued, the creation of Mary Sue and self-insert stories offers its own form of pushing back, albeit perhaps less subversively than through slash fiction. Though the stories are seen frequently as less narratively complex, or dismissed as mere fantasy fulfillment, there is nothing “mere” about it. As Chander and Sunder describe it, “Mary Sues help the writer claim agency against a popular culture that repeatedly denies it.”<sup>397</sup> If one does not yet feel comfortable working exclusively with pre-existing characters and relationships, the insertion of an original character marks the first steps. It allows authors to take the reins on the narrative in a tentative way, before attempting to do so with characters that must follow particular rules.

---

<sup>396</sup> “Never Saw It Coming,” <http://archiveofourown.org/works/8633515>, currently 47 chapters, 84,347 words

<sup>397</sup> Anupam Chander, and Madhavi Sunder, “Everyone’s a Superhero: A Cultural Theory of ‘Mary Sue’ Fan Fiction as Fair Use.” (*California Law Review*, vol. 95, no. 2, 2007): 609-610

Christine, however, spoke further to her point about why she does not enjoy reading Mary Sue fan fiction, focusing one of the biggest challenges that come with this kind of story when she said:

I'm not interested in reading about some female running around with all three boys in the Shield, that doesn't interest me. I don't think I've ever read a Mary Sue all the way through. Because, I don't care about an outside character. I wanna see a dynamic of the two men who are onscreen that I see every Monday, I wanna see what you came up with for their dynamic in your story. This other female, who just exists out there in the world, she's not on screen, so I'm not gonna be like, I'm not gonna be watching the show later on and be thinking how I can compare it to this story, because she doesn't exist. So that doesn't do anything for me. I've never enjoyed a Mary Sue.<sup>398</sup>

Since professional wrestling dynamics are, by and large, relationships between male performers, creating slash fiction is seen as the “next” step for many authors. Though there are those who would argue that fan fiction is inherently “lesser” than creating entirely new characters, citing lack of “originality,” among other critiques, fan fiction authors offer an alternative spin. Writing these characters in ways that feels authentic and realistic requires playing by the rules, so to speak. Readers, consciously or unconsciously, have a set of expectations about the ways that a given character (Dean Ambrose, Seth Rollins, Shinsuke Nakamura) will behave, and a story that violates those expectations will seem unrealistic at best. While readers might initially seek out a story because they want to read more about their favorite characters, they will swiftly abandon it if the character behaves in a way that feels inauthentic. The performance of writing fan fiction is all in the details--the highest praise one can receive, according to authors’ notes as well as conversations with Amanda and

---

<sup>398</sup> Interview, Christine & Amanda, in person, October 3, 2015

Christine, is being told that their work was “in character”; that a scene felt wholly believable; that it seemed as though this was precisely what occurred after the cameras were turned off. Yet even when playing by the rules, there are acts of subversion (in perversion) that can be expressed. Centering emotional connections, even in the midst of highly sexualized narratives, pushes back against the official storylines that suggests that the only ways men can interact in the wrestling world are violent and/or for the pleasure of a specifically heterosexual male audience. Writing and reading slash fan fiction allows female pleasure, and the female (or gay male) gaze, to be centralized, claiming connection to other fans who have long felt that the cameras were not intended for them.

One of the questions that frequently surfaces in discussions of the appeal of slash fan fiction centers around its appeal to heterosexual women. What would be appealing about creating fiction in which women rarely appear,<sup>399</sup> where there is no female character to identify with? Though female characters sometimes play a part in slash fan fiction, they are usually background characters or friends (or, occasionally, jealous rivals), not romantic interests. Would it not seem more logical for *more* women to continue creating “Mary Sue” or self-insertion fan fiction, so that there might be a character women can connect with? The topic has been written about frequently in fandom studies (as discussed briefly in chapter one), but the primary arguments seem to come down to a version of the following:

Consider the following accounts of why women write male same-sex pairings:

---

<sup>399</sup> As with the Charlotte/Sasha story mentioned earlier, slash involving two female characters does exist (usually called “femmeslash”), but it is not nearly as prevalent, particularly in wrestling fan fiction.

- Given the priority given to the hero in the original, the female reader may identify with the hero, not the heroine, and then use the hero to "'feel' the adventure with"
- Rewriting masculinity places emotional responsibility on men;
- Male slash is erotic to the female writer; and
- It rearranges the expected sexuality.<sup>400</sup>

Why are women, in particular, drawn to the world of gay male fan fiction? What is it about that mode of storytelling that seems most appealing? In Raven Davies "The Slash Fan fiction Connection to Bi Men," Davies writes "These groups share a love of fantasizing about the sexual activity and relationships between male characters, left unfulfilled by mainstream heteronormative entertainment. They all suffer from the same tired boy-plus-girl story formulae, concocted by those fearful of pushing a few harmless buttons. Slash provides adult, creative, thought-provoking fiction for...the many women who fantasize about male bonding, desiring something besides a few tame comedies."<sup>401</sup> Don Tresca's "Spellbound: An Analysis of Adult-Oriented Harry Potter Fan fiction" in Barton and Lampley's *Fan CULTure*, further summarizes a great deal of the current thinking on the topic when he writes:

For the most part, slash is written by heterosexual women for an audience of heterosexual women. Researchers (such as Catherine Driscoll, Sonia K. Katyal, and Sharon Hayes and Matthew Ball) suggest that the subgenre, while frequently written with very explicit homosexual sex, is not about homosexuality at all, but is instead a female idealization of male-female relationships that are acted out on male bodies (Driscoll 83; Katyal 487; Hayes and Ball 223–224). The writer uses the men in the stories to ascribe emotions and behaviors that she craves from men in her own romantic life (Hansen 3). Slash stories frequently play with notions of gender roles, especially as they relate to sexuality, endowing one of the males in the slash relationship with typically feminine characteristics and the other with predominantly male characteristics (McCardle 11), thus allowing the writers

---

<sup>400</sup> Anupam Chander, and Madhavi Sunder, "Everyone's a Superhero: A Cultural Theory of 'Mary Sue' Fan Fiction as Fair Use." *California Law Review*, vol. 95, no. 2, 2007: 609-610

<sup>401</sup> Raven Davies (2005) The Slash Fan fiction Connection to Bi Men," *Journal of Bisexuality*, 5:2-3: 195-202

to dismantle common stereotypes and assumptions regarding masculinity and femininity and reconstructing them in original and challenging ways (Hayes and Ball 225). Slash allows women to experience a fantasy of authentic love which can only exist between equals, people who are strong and share adventures as well as emotions (Cicioni 169). Because of the lack of strong female characterization and heterosexual romance narratives in early television science fiction texts such as *Star Trek* and *Doctor Who* (1963–present), the authentic love had to be expressed in a romantic relationship between two men. Female fans who wanted to engage with the programs in a more “feminized” manner were forced to use “male homosexuality to reconstruct men ... and change them into people with whom women can coexist more comfortably” (Bacon-Smith 248).<sup>402</sup>

This is, by and large, the accepted assessment of the larger world of fan fiction

writing. Yet immediately, this was complicated in the case of my informants:

Amanda identifies as bisexual as well as genderqueer; Christine, though cisgendered, identifies as asexual. The writing of fan fiction is therefore about more than simply women taking pleasure in the sight (or imagined sight) of attractive male bodies performing--it can serve as an act of resistance, allowing the author to experiment with feeling embodied in a physicality different from their own. The work of Ika

Willis speaks to this when she writes that

slash reading, writing, and fantasizing can enable a female-bodied person to experience her body as (if it were) male...I argue that slash similarly allows us to change our embodiments (the bodies we feel ourselves to have) without changing our physical or corporeal bodies, although some slash fans may (and do) go on to do this.<sup>403</sup>

For Amanda, that exploration of characters feels closer to embodiment; rather than seeing the male characters as separate entities, Amanda feels that the experience of writing and ascribing some of their own personality elements to the characters is a

---

<sup>402</sup> Don Tresca, “Spellbound: An Analysis of Adult-Oriented Harry Potter Fan fiction.” In Kristin M. Barton and John Malcolm Lampley, *Fan CULTure: Essays on Participatory Fandom in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2013), 38

<sup>403</sup> Ika Willis, “Writing the Fables of Sexual Difference: Slash Fiction as Technology of Gender,” *Parallax*, (22:3, 2016): 292

freeing one, a way of putting things out into the world in a safer manner. Particularly, Amanda noted, this is the case when they write Dean Ambrose, especially in “For Real” (which will be discussed further into this chapter).<sup>404</sup> The notion that the act of creating fan fiction serves to reinforce a binary is complicated by theorists, yes, but also by the lived experience of the individuals that I spoke to during my research.

Even within the more “traditional” interpretation of gender roles in fan fiction, however, is a more nuanced view that modern theorists have posited, that my informants echoed. That is, Christine--and Ika Willis, among others--reflected that there is a particularly empowering element to removing women, who are traditionally objectified in the world of wrestling, from the narrative. Willis echoes this sentiment, writing

In the overdetermined representational field of patriarchy, the convention of presenting the female body as the object of the sexualized male gaze means that the female body, and particularly its sexualized zones, bear too many negative, patriarchal and heterosexist meanings and connotations to be easily resignified – especially in terms which will be easily readable in the realist, often lowbrow vernacular of pornography. Slash can be seen as a radical solution to this problem: instead of resignifying female bodies, slash writers explore possibilities for female sexuality and subjectivity on the relatively unmarked bodies of men<sup>405</sup>.

The (often marked, though not in the way Willis mentions) bodies of male wrestlers are continually on display for female consumption in the ring, and thus it is unsurprising that this translates well to the “easily readable” form of slash fan fiction.

Christine said that

...just the fact that, when you're a female, you're constantly bombarded with your gender being sexualized, it's constant, but when you're reading about two men, you don't have that sense of...something's being done to a woman,

---

<sup>404</sup> Interview, Amanda, in person, October 2, 2015

<sup>405</sup> Ika Willis, “Writing the Fables of Sexual Difference: Slash Fiction as Technology of Gender,” *Parallax*, (22:3, 2016): 294-295

you're more outside watching it instead of feeling it, instead of putting yourself in the heroine's position, you're watching it from afar, so it's not you, it's not your gender...you're just watching, you're not involved, at all. I think also another thing too, is that, and this is, why once I start realizing that a fic is gonna have men crying, I stop reading it, is women like to see men be vulnerable, and they don't show that in het stories, whether it's fic or for-money stories, the man tends to be, you know, the woman's fainting and crying, you know, other bullshit, where the guy is just like "oh baby, I wore tight jeans and I'm hot, do you wanna be with me or not?"...And that's just really all there is...But when there's two MEN, at least one of those guys is gonna show some vulnerability, and I think women wanna see that, cause it's not really shown on TV, it's not really shown in movies, it's not really shown in romance, because the female character's the one who's always vulnerable, and here you get to see that. So I think, for me, those are my two things, and my also thing is, I also, for me personally, if there's no woman involved, I don't have to see myself in that position.<sup>406</sup>

The absence of women in that position can, then, be as empowering as the creation of a self-insert character, or the invention of a female protagonist. By removing the (non-wrestling) women<sup>407</sup> from their traditional roles in professional wrestling—often as vulnerable prizes to be competed over—creating stories about the relationships between the men serves as a source of power. When women in WWE are given their own storylines, they frequently center around their relationships with men, or their desire to have those relationships.<sup>408</sup> Rather than have, for instance, CM Punk and John Cena compete over the affections of AJ Lee, slash fan fiction allows them to be vulnerable with one another, *about* one another, in ways that are both emotionally and sexually satisfying for female readers. Writing fan fiction allows the reader and the author to make new meaning of the connections that are on display in the ring, in

---

<sup>406</sup> Interview, Christine & Amanda, in person, October 3, 2015

<sup>407</sup> Female wrestlers also frequently end up in storylines centered around their relationships with men (or lack thereof), but those storylines are resolved between the women themselves, and thus are not what I am examining here.

<sup>408</sup> These storylines are becoming slightly less frequent, but still represent a sizeable portion of women's storylines that do not center around a title.



whatever way that meaning seems most significant to them.

Part of that deep dedication, too, results in the sense that the chemistry in the ring is, in many ways, more “believable” or at least genuine between same-sex performers. That is, storylines between two women, or storylines between two men, demonstrate more potential for off-screen narratives to be captured in fiction. When women are introduced into the equation in a feud between men--a valet, a girlfriend, even a wife--the relationship between the man and the woman feels at worst actively disconcerting; at best, lukewarm.<sup>409</sup> This may be due to the fact that many of these interactions imply that the woman in question is the equivalent of a belt to compete for; her affection and attention is the prize, and any displays of affection are more reflective of possessiveness than anything else. During my interviews of Amanda and Christine the question of dynamics and relationships in professional wrestling came up multiple times, with both asserting that, as authors, they feel that they take the on-screen chemistry of two wrestlers and transform that chemistry into something different. As Christine said, if that chemistry did not already exist, she would not be able to create it, but instead feels that she is “taking what’s there, and turning it into something *else*.”<sup>410</sup> For these two authors, at least, there is not the desire to convince anyone that the interactions within the world of the story are reality; instead, it is taking the characters, not the performers, and transforming their relationship to portray a highly desirable fantasy.

---

<sup>409</sup> Arguably, in my years of data collecting, this is contradicted in the instance that an on-screen couple is also an off-screen couple. For instance, former WWE superstars AJ Lee and CM Punk have recently married; their on-screen interactions mirrored that chemistry and frequently felt far more authentic than her interactions with other male wrestlers. Some things, perhaps, can’t be faked.

<sup>410</sup> Interview, Christine & Amanda, in person, October 3, 2015

Yet, in part because of that distinction (characters versus the actual performers, except when they are one and the same) wrestling fan fiction is particularly complicated, and accordingly, results in divisive experiences in terms of how the creation and sharing of that fiction is received. Generally speaking, fan fiction tends to fall into one of two very broad categories: “Real Person Fiction” (or RPF), which is written about real people--actors, athletes, musicians, the list goes on--and fiction that focuses on characters themselves, whether from television, movies, books, comics, et cetera. In the world of professional wrestling fandom, however, the lines between “actor” and “character” are blurred at best, and downright invisible in many cases. Salmon and Clerc note this particularly, writing:

Although most evident in AU stories, all wrestling fan fiction plays with the line between real and reel in a way less common in most other kinds of media fan fiction. Only boy-band slash fiction features as much play between character and performers as wrestling stories. Both are universes where the line between “work” (staged) and “shoot” (unplanned) are blurred to a greater extent than in tradition narratives. The public perception of wrestling as completely fake and wrestling fans as dupes has contributed to the importance of being a smart “mark.” Fans know the outcomes are predetermined, but the ability of the performers to make the matches seem “real” is a key element in their enjoyment of the spectacle. This is a response to both the public stigma of being a wrestling fan and to the industry’s tendency to blend real life with in-ring storylines...Characters in wrestling are not fictional creations completely distinct from the actors that portray them; wrestling personae are often based on the men’s characters...and real life is often incorporate into storylines to blur the boundary between shoot and work. Frequent heel and face turns make it impossible to treat wrestlers as consistent characters similar to those in traditional drama and comedy. The wrestling universe is also not a separate, self-contained, coherent universe like those in standard television programs. All storylines must take place in the ring and in the present without recourse to flashbacks or flash-forwards. The range of narratives and outcomes is narrow compared to other story-telling forms (angles that feature a tag team have one ending—the end of the team so one or both members can pursue a singles career). Female fans, at least those who write fan fiction, seem to prefer blurring the line rather than maintaining it as male fans tend

to.<sup>411</sup>

In some fan fiction, authors will, for instance, refer to the wrestlers by their character/onscreen names--i.e. Sami Zayn, Seth Rollins, Wade Barrett, Dean Ambrose. This is perhaps one of the clearest signals of separation between real and fictional--the usage of a character name, even if this is ostensibly taking place “behind the scenes” or in an alternate universe. Other authors, however, pepper their narratives with the “insider” knowledge of having characters refer to one another by their shoot names, i.e. Rami Sebei, Colby Lopez, Stu Bennett, and Jon Moxley.<sup>412</sup> (This is further complicated by the fact that a number of wrestlers, such as John Cena, Randy Orton, and Shinsuke Nakamura, to name just a few, wrestle under their real names.) While they are not the majority, this situation can prove difficult for authors who want to maintain the realm of fantasy and television rather than letting reality seep in. In theory, this displays a point of pride; the author in question knows wrestling enough that they know the real names of the wrestlers. Yet for a number of readers, this qualifies as blurring the boundary too far, implying a heavy dose of reality in the fantasy that drives it into questionable territory. Christine, for example, describes herself as wanting to maintain a “wall” in her stories, and further notes that reading stories in which authors use real names is off-putting enough to make her stop reading. She says that:

Yeah, like I feel weird about that line sometimes...I think there's only been one time where I've actually mentioned someone else's real [life], like, I think

---

<sup>411</sup> Susan Clerc and Catherine Salmon, “ ‘Ladies Love Wrestling, Too’: Female Wrestling Fans Online,” in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 185

<sup>412</sup> The shoot/real names of the above-mentioned wrestlers, in order.

“The Helping Hand?”<sup>413</sup> I mentioned Cena's divorce, because that was requested, but other than that, I purposely—it feels icky. Even though I'm mentioning their behind the scenes stuff, I still consider them as in character, like I wouldn't write about what Punk and AJ do at home, like that kinda makes me wanna hurl in my mouth, so I wouldn't do that. Like I'm not gonna judge, if other people do that, that's fine, but I personally won't do it, and I won't read it... But, that's, and I know not everyone's [that way], some people are comfortable with it, I'm just personally not, I try to maintain that--the character wall.<sup>414</sup>

The presence, or lack thereof, of that “character wall” can lead to some of the wider spread fan debate and discussion over fan fiction and its place. For some fans, the writing and sharing of fan fiction is a disgusting aberration, at least judging by what they are bold enough to say online. Other female fans, in these instances, might go out of their way to show wrestlers stories that are being written about them, arguably as part of larger narrative about female fandom competition. There is, these women suggest, a good and right way to do fandom, and these authors are *not* performing correctly--the act of writing sexually explicit fan fiction, even if it is intended for other fans and not the performers themselves, renders the authors unwelcome in fandom. The women who instead choose to share the fan fiction that others write with the wrestlers, rather than the intended fan audience, elevate themselves and put themselves on a moral high ground. One fan, who actively tweeted links to wrestlers to let them know that they had “accidentally” found fan fiction about them, tweeted that “IMO it's gross. I worry about the minds of those writing them [adult fan fiction].”<sup>415</sup> The notion that they just “stumbled” upon it is questionable at best--the

---

<sup>413</sup>A two-chapter Cena/Punk story Christine wrote as a gift for a reviewer and fellow author, that briefly makes mention of Cena's real-life divorce and uses his ex-wife's real name <<https://www.fanfiction.net/s/8706846/1/The-Helping-Hand>>

<sup>414</sup> Interview, Christine & Amanda, in person October 3, 2015

<sup>415</sup> <https://twitter.com/ShirleighShirlz/status/473568207014756352> (Accessed 22 March 2017).

majority of authors post their stories to AO3 or fanfiction.net, sites that are designed specifically for the writing and sharing of stories, without censorship. Still, the female fans that seek to “out” fan fiction writers suggest a hierarchy of fan culture, in which those who write fan fiction should be ashamed, or feel as though they are corrupting fandom. The women who share it with the talent are, in this, performing fandom in the way that is right and desirable, the way that is meant to be emulated. Thus the writing of fan fiction can often feel very fraught and secretive, and the courage to post up the first story can feel daunting. For Christine and Amanda, the writing of the stories and the sharing with wrestlers follow two very different codes. As Christine said, when asked about this concept:

I think it's one, it's silly, for people to, for fiction writers and readers to assume that they don't know that it exists, like if YOU know it exists, and you have the Internet, why would you think that they don't know that it exists because they have the Internet too?...And I think as long as readers and stuff, and artists, aren't sending it to the celebrities? Then I think that's--you know, I think that's fine, I think that there's that wall between that, when you start sending your shit to them like "hey check out this story I wrote about you getting fucked in the ass by your tag team partner!" I think that's, that's weird. So, you know, you probably shouldn't do that... Because you wouldn't walk up to your friend and say "hey I wrote this sexual story about you, so go ahead and read it!" you wouldn't do that, so I think that that's definitely crossing a boundary. Just because it's on the Internet doesn't mean that it's OK to do that.<sup>416</sup>

The online anonymity that can breed intense closeness and allow fans to open up to one another much more quickly than they might ordinarily also has the potential to blur other kinds of boundaries, in ways that most female fans, especially those who write fiction, would disavow. Though the women that share these stories with the wrestlers may behave as though they have the moral high ground, most authors take

---

<sup>416</sup> Interview, Christine & Amanda, in person, October 3, 2015

care to specify in their authors' notes and personal sites that the work they create is intended for the eyes of other fans--and perhaps wrestlers if they choose to go looking.

**“I’m not writing that:” When subtext becomes text (and vice versa)**

What is it about wrestling that lends itself so strongly to fan fiction that can draw directly from real events? During my interview with Christine and Amanda, Christine and I particularly discussed multiple instances in which the world of wrestling, however briefly, seemed to cross directly into the world of erotic fan fiction, perhaps affording an opportunity to understand why it is that slash fiction is so popular in wrestling.

Christine: Yeah, I mean, it comes across, but like in WWE it's never mentioned, and it's funny because they'll use terms...I remember, because I was writing *Sweat Chains and Love* at the time, I think it was Night of Champions, [and the match] was Cena and Punk, and they kept using the word "dominate."<sup>417</sup> And it just cracked me up because I'm writing this bondage story about these two men, and the commentators keep being like "oh, Cena really wants to dominate Punk, and Punk wants to show that he's the dominant one of the two!" and it was like "ARE YOU READING MY SHIT?!" I mean it was hilarious, because they kept using that terminology...

Jess [me]: Yeahhhh, I remember even before I started watching, there was whatever [match]...Randy like handcuffed Cena?<sup>418</sup>

Christine: That's like the gayest match in history, it's like--

Jess: Because that's WHAT HAPPENED. And they were just like "these are tough competitors"--

---

<sup>417</sup> Night of Champions 2012, a pay-per-view that featured CM Punk versus John Cena; throughout the match, the commentary team frequently used the language of “dominance” and “submission”—innocent enough, in wrestling terms—to describe the relationship and struggle between the two.

<sup>418</sup> John Cena and Randy Orton, wrestlers discussed in earlier chapters, were frequently paired together (called “Centon”) in wrestling fan fiction, particularly that written before I returned to watching regularly. They have wrestled numerous times, and more than one match involved handcuffs, but the match in question was an “I Quit” championship match in 2009.

Christine: They were TOTALLY SERIOUS, they were like straight-faced "these two really care about winning" and I'm like "yeah they sure do, they can't wait to hit the climax." What IS this? They never mention--they use this terminology, that if you're watching it & you're thinking about it it's \*snort\* but it's always tongue in cheek--...<sup>419</sup>

Jess: Yeah, exactly, there's just so many--Punk getting cuffed and beaten with a kendo stick<sup>420</sup>-

Christine: Oh my GOD, I needed a cigarette--

Jess: I don't SMOKE, but I'm just like--

Christine: Curtis Axel grabbing his butt, just WHOO! WHOO! SHIT... I mean it was like, how was everybody in the audience just not throwing their panties at the ring, I'm like what IS this?!

Jess: And then, there's screaming about "I loved you, you betrayed me!" and it's just like-

Christine: Does no one else hear...see, this?<sup>421</sup>

For Christine, the visuals of these matches, particularly those involving handcuffs and weapons coupled with the commentary, served as inspiration to create two main types of fan fiction: one that incorporated BDSM<sup>422</sup> dynamics into existing wrestling characters and set in the wrestling universe, and an "alternative universe" fiction (AU) that utilized character names and traits from wrestling and set them in a non-wrestling narrative. Though some of Christine's stories are more about imagining the behind the scenes of what is "really" occurring, her two most successful stories fall

---

<sup>419</sup> Interview, Christine and Amanda, in person, October 3, 2015

<sup>420</sup> After a particularly intense match, part of a larger storyline in which CM Punk abandoned his manager, Paul Heyman, CM Punk was kneeling in the middle of the ring with his hands cuffed behind his back, resulting in him being beaten with a kendo stick as "punishment." Though the context was not intended as erotic, the reaction by female fans suggested otherwise.

<sup>421</sup> Interview, Christine & Amanda, in person, October 3, 2015

<sup>422</sup> An acronym for the combination of bondage, discipline, submission, sadism, and masochism, although the S is not duplicated-relationships within this range of dynamics can vary tremendously.

into the AU model. “Sweat, Chains, and Love,” a fic that grounds itself in the world of professional wrestling, offers the alternative BDSM interpretation of the relationship between John Cena and CM Punk,<sup>423</sup> with a description that reads “John Cena has wanted CM Punk for months. He's never had the chance to act on it but lately Punk seems to be receptive to John's attention. But John has a big secret. If he can win over Punk, can he convince him to stick around after he learns what makes John tick? My first ever fanfic. Rated M for m/m slash, language, and eventual BDSM scenes.”<sup>424</sup> The story reached thirty chapters by its conclusion (though Christine acknowledged to her readers that she had originally intended to reach thirty-one, the thirtieth felt like a “good cut off point”), and clocked in at an impressive 173,808 words. Although this story does utilize real matches and feuds as background, the storylines and interactions between the characters place them firmly into the BDSM scene. Even such seemingly minute details as CM Punk’s chosen ring gear in a given match are given backstage explanations of what Cena would choose for him. When reading Christine’s work, or interviewing her, it is very clear that she does not believe that this is the reality of what is occurring--that is, she does not believe that the details in her story are uncovering the “truth” behind the scenes.

Rather, it is about fulfilling particular fantasies and dynamics, taking a favorite character (in this case, CM Punk) and exploring him as a sexual being by pairing him with a character that he had in-ring chemistry with. The critique and dismissal that fan fiction is “delusional,” the product of “crazy fangirls” is rejected

---

<sup>423</sup> “Sweat, Chains, and Love,” <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/8293016/1/Sweat-Chains-and-Love>

<sup>424</sup> “Sweat, Chains, and Love,” <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/8293016/1/Sweat-Chains-and-Love>



entirely by the ways in which Christine speaks about her own work, and the notes that she incorporates into each chapter. Christine felt that with Cena, in particular, “no one could be that good all the time”<sup>425</sup> and thus envisioned an alternate explanation and method for him to act out. The story leans heavily not only on physical depictions of dominance and submission, but also on the emotional vulnerability and connection that these kinds of relationships can involve. A representative scene is excerpted below:

[John] moved back down Punk's body, grabbing the lube he'd put on the nightstand earlier as he did so. John lined their cocks up and drizzled the cool liquid over both of them before capping the bottle and throwing it on the floor. Punk gasped and his hips started rolling as John grasped both their cocks in his fist and started stroking. "You're so hard, Phil. I want you to think about the fact that you have to stay like that all night. No matter how bad you want to come, I won't let you." John took his finger, slick with lube and started pressing inside his lover. He leaned down to whisper against Punk's ear. "Even when I'm fucking you hard and coming deep inside you – you still won't be allowed to come." John added another finger as Punk moaned. "You'll have to hold it back ... all night."

Punk groaned and closed his eyes. He was already on the verge of orgasm and John telling him what he wouldn't be allowed to have wasn't helping. But he accepted his punishment and when John replaced his fingers with his cock he didn't resist. John slipped inside him and he relaxed so that he could get past that first tight ring of muscles.

John finally sank all the way inside his lover. He reached down and grasped the back of Punk's thighs, pushing his legs up until his knees touched his chest. John started to thrust slowly. "Are you going to be kissing any more Divas?" Punk shook his head no, but when John slammed his cock into his spot he gasped and answered appropriately. "No, Sir." John started moving his hips faster, leaning down on Punk so that his legs bent even further back. "And will you be running away from me again?" Punk shook his head faster this time, as he was starting to pant and writhe beneath him. "No, Sir I won't. I promise." John released one of Punk's legs, but ordered him to keep it up there. He took Punk's cock into his hand, pumping fast. "And will you be dragging your feet to follow my orders the next time you pout at getting punished?"

---

<sup>425</sup> Interview, Christine & Amanda, in person, October 3, 2015

Punk sucked on his lip ring but desperate moans still spilled from his lips. John moved both his hand and his hips even faster as he waited for Punk's response. Finally those green eyes opened and focused right on John. "Actually, I probably will," he forced out. John had to laugh. "Well, you get points for honesty," he said before kissing him fiercely. He thrust his tongue between Punk's lips, dominating his mouth just as he dominated his body. He ate up all of Punk's whimpers and moans as he pushed his sub hard.

John broke their kiss so that he could watch his beautiful sub struggle to hold back his orgasm. Punk was flushed and sweating as he strained against his bonds, but he was doing like John asked, like he'd ordered, accepting his punishment and fighting not to come. Knowing that Punk was doing this for him – that Punk willingly allowed him to control his mind and body had his cock hard with love and power. He started thrusting with brutal strength against Punk's spot and jacking him even faster until Punk was shouting and cursing, begging to be allowed to come. John's back tightened and his balls drew up as Punk's ass started to clench on his cock. "Don't you fucking dare come," he ordered from between gritted teeth. He thrust hard into Punk one last time, making his lover throw back his head and scream. John's cock pulsed and then he was coming in strong steady waves, releasing deep into his lover. He groaned, feeling the pleasure course throughout his body until he finally collapsed on top of Punk. He sucked at his lover's neck above his collar as he enjoyed the last little aftershocks of his orgasm. After a few minutes he raised himself off of Punk and let him drop his legs down. He could tell by the wild look of desperation on Punk's face that he'd managed to hold back. But John wasn't finished with him yet...

John stroked him lightly a few times and Punk bit his lip to stop a moan from escaping. Eventually John's hand stilled and he just held Punk with a gentle grip. Somehow that comforted him and although he was still craving release John's soft kisses on his neck and shoulders lulled him to sleep.

Punk's breathing deepened as he fell asleep but John was still wide awake. He lay there wondering if he'd done the right thing in telling Stephanie to kill the program with Punk and AJ. He knew Punk would probably be furious if he found out and now John had another secret that he was keeping from his lover. But he and Punk had argued twice in as many days. And AJ was a cute girl with an admittedly great body who had a crush on his boyfriend. What if Punk decided he no longer wanted to be John's sub and instead would rather be with a woman? That was a worry that often popped up into John's head. Punk was so strong and submission was new to him. Although John knew his lover's submission was deep and real, he also knew that at any time Punk could very well decide he no longer wanted to submit and could walk away. And the flirtations of AJ could be what lead to that happening. So many times programs on screen lead to romance off screen. Stephanie and Hunter were

just the most famous example. A tense knot of fear settled in his stomach at the thought of losing Punk. John tightened his arm around his sleeping lover, but he couldn't even smile as Punk snuggled back closer against him like he always did. He would do whatever he had to do to keep Phil as his own. With those thoughts in mind he couldn't help but feel that he'd done the right thing tonight by texting Steph. He started to relax knowing that AJ would have no more reasons to put her hands on his sub. Yeah, he'd done the right thing. John closed his eyes and slept.<sup>426</sup>

For Christine, emotional connection and vulnerability is essential in creating a story that feels genuine. She incorporates details of relevant storylines for the time in WWE that contains the story, but is not beholden to them; they serve to establish the connection between her two main characters, both fan favorites. Further, Christine recognizes the importance of establishing dialogue, boundaries, and negotiation between the characters, believing that she owes it to her readers to depict the complicated dynamics of BDSM responsibly along with making those fan favorite characters recognizable in the wrestling sphere. She said that:

Yeah, I've had people send me messages, like for example for Sweat Chains and Love, I've had people send me messages um saying "oh yeah, this has awakened some secret desires within me, I wanna go out and try it" and I'm just like WHOA WHOA WHOA WHOA WHOA WHOA. Don't just go out randomly trying bondage shit with people you don't know, PLEASE don't do that! So I actually ended up having to put a note at the end of the story, and I probably should've put it at the beginning, but I had to respond to several people where I had to be like "please be careful, don't just go out there and just try bondage with just anybody, definitely don't try this by yourself, you know, cause, safe sane consensual please!"<sup>427</sup>

The responsibility and role of the fan fiction author is a complicated one, but with both authors I spoke to directly, there was considerable discussion of the importance

---

<sup>426</sup> "Sweat, Chains, and Love," Chapter 14, by luvcmpunk314, <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/8293016/14/Sweat-Chains-and-Love>

<sup>427</sup> Interview, Christine & Amanda, in person, October 3, 2015

of establishing clear communication, both between the characters in the story itself and with one's readers.

In "Bad Boyfriend," Christine's other best-received story, "Seth Rollins is a young lawyer on his way up. He takes his prized motorcycle into a local bike shop for repairs where he meets shop owner, Dean Ambrose. There's immediate attraction, but Seth doesn't want to get involved with bad boy Dean. But Dean isn't used to hearing the word no. Can he convince Seth to let him be his Bad Boyfriend? Rated M for m/m sex & cursing."<sup>428</sup> Here, Christine takes the dynamics of the relationship between Seth and Dean--wrestlers who refer to one another in interviews as "wrestling soulmates"--and shifts the setting entirely, letting the characters' personalities remain. The story is peppered with references to other familiar wrestlers in new roles--co-workers at the shop, therapists, and friends--allowing readers who are interested in both wrestling and those who are unfamiliar with it to feel engaged. An excerpt from this story follows below:

Seth immediately sensed something was off. Dean's voice was even lower than usual, and anger practically sparked right through the phone lines. "Are you alright?"

Dean laughed, but there was no humor in it. "Nope. I'm not alright. Having a pretty shit fucking day actually. How's your day? Everything going swell in lawyer-ville?"

Seth sat his beer down. "Dean, what's going on? What happened?"

Dean was quiet for a long time.

Seth stood there in his kitchen listening to the clock tick and the refrigerator hum. His skin prickled with anticipation, and his belly clenched tight with the beginnings of desire. He knew what Dean was going to say before he said it.

---

<sup>428</sup> "Bad Boyfriend," <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/9426739/1/Bad-Boyfriend>

"Seth, I need you."

Seth nodded even though he knew Dean couldn't see him. "I'll be right over." Seth hung up and left his beer abandoned on the counter. He stuffed his feet into a pair of tennis shoes and grabbed his keys. He was in his car headed to Dean's within two minutes.

Seth walked up to Dean's house. He started to knock, but something made him turn the knob. The door was unlocked and swung open when he pushed. He closed and locked the door behind him, then went into the dimly lit house looking for Dean. He found him in the living room sitting on the couch. His chest and feet were bare, a pair of faded jeans the only thing he had on. Dean didn't say anything when he came into the room. He just sat there rubbing a finger back and forth over his bottom lip, his eyes focused and watching him.

Seth swallowed hard and walked forward. When he reached the couch he dropped to his knees between Dean's legs. "You said you needed me." He kept his gaze locked on Dean's as he smoothed his palms up his denim covered thighs. Dean was still but his body was tense, his muscles tight. "I'm here for you." Dean eyes were sharp and bright with a furious mix of anger and passion. And they watched him closely. Very closely. Seth had to look away for a moment before he could finish. "You can do ... whatever you want to me."

Dean slowly took his hand away from his mouth. "Stand up."

- - -

He looked down at Seth and saw those dark eyes on him. Seth didn't say anything, but he could tell from the hungry yet giving expression in his eyes and the way he slowly sucked his bottom lip that Seth wanted that too. He watched as Seth slowly reached back and his heart stopped for a moment thinking that he was about to remove the condom. But he didn't. Seth set his nails into his skin and deliberately raked his nails down his thigh. Dean lost it and shouted out Seth's name over and over, in rhythm with his frantic thrusts. He slammed into him once last time as his orgasm shot from his cock, holding him firmly in the grip of gasping, pulsing pleasure until he collapsed on top of his lover.

Dean rolled off of Seth, still breathing hard. He maneuvered Seth around so he could get the wet comforter from beneath him. Throwing it on the floor he laid back down, pulling the sheet over them both. He heard Seth take a deep breath before he spoke.

"I'm gonna need a minute."

Dean pushed Seth's damp away from his forehead, looking at that beautiful face and thinking of everything this man had given him tonight. "Stay, Seth. For tonight, just stay."

Surprise was clear on Seth's face. He scooted closer, reaching for him, but his eyes were already closing and he stopped moving in the middle of the bed. Dean pulled Seth the rest of the way into his arms and held him as he fell into a deep sleep. He lay there for a while, the violent storm gone out of his head, his blood no longer pulsing with anger and racing in his veins. He was calm now thanks to Seth. Dean took a deep breath and closed his eyes to go to sleep<sup>429</sup>.

Once again the emotional content and connection is privileged alongside the sex, in a way that is satisfying to many readers and in keeping with the idea that incorporating “feels” into the story is the best way to draw higher readership. One reviewer noted, for instance, “Super freaking amazing! This entire fic from beginning to end. So much emotion hate, anger, love, friendship, sadness, happiness everything in one. And not to mention the hot sex that this story was filled with. I'm so glad there was a happy ending though even though it was touch and go there for a bit. Thank you for writing such an amazing story.”<sup>430</sup> On top of the visual and auditory cues of the matches themselves, wrestling dedicates itself to maintaining storylines of deep feeling between men. Histories are emphasized; betrayals bear repeating again and again; “chemistry” and compatibility are the hallmarks of a successful match or tag team, at least according to the commentary team. Though characters may triumph in wrestling, it, too, will be “touch and go” for a while, whether that “while” is a few minutes, a few matches, or a few months. As Christine and Amanda both noted

---

<sup>429</sup> “Bad Boyfriend,” Chapter 12, by luvcmpunk314 <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/9426739/12/Bad-Boyfriend>

<sup>430</sup> Comments, “Bad Boyfriend” by luvcmpunk314, <https://www.fanfiction.net/r/9426739/> (Accessed 20 February 2017.)

during my interview with the both of them together, though the commentators are using terminology that might *sound* sexualized to those who are listening with a particular thought in mind, it is also firmly the language of competition and sport; the deep betrayals and pain are expressed only as feelings within friendships or, perhaps, brotherhood, and not with a romantic bent. Yet this physical, mental, and emotional closeness breeds fascination and intrigue among wrestling fans, leading to the creation of considerable slash fan fiction that explores the ways in which that chemistry manifests itself outside of the ring as well. Stories like “Bad Boyfriend,” though set outside of the ring, ask: “How do these characters and their long histories intertwine when there are no matches to fight?”

Fan fiction authors, particularly slash authors, often draw upon real events and histories--and, sometimes, tongue-in-cheek commentaries--in the creation of their stories. Amanda’s stories, typically, fall more into this range-taking real events in-ring and imagining the conversations and goings-on behind the scenes. For example, one of Amanda’s personal favorite pieces that they have written, a story entitled “Wrecking Now,” opens with the author’s note:

Dean Ambrose/William Regal slash. Ambrose has finally defeated Regal in FCW - but is their battle really over? Some Ambrollins implied.

**Notes:**

This story takes place after the second match in Ambrose & Regal's FCW angle and references and treats as real some events that occurred as a part of that angle. So, if you're not familiar with their work together, I suggest you head over to YouTube and hit the high points. Great matches and killer promos. If you're an Ambrose fan or a Regal fan, you definitely won't be disappointed. And if you're a fan of both – seriously, what are you waiting for? At minimum, there's a great fan-made video called "True Villains" that should give you enough to go on. I'll reblog it on tumblr (mxjoyride).<sup>431</sup>

---

<sup>431</sup> “Wrecking Now” by mxjoyride, <http://archiveofourown.org/works/885666/chapters/1707030>

Amanda's stories ground themselves firmly in the in-between, falling most often into the categories of recontextualization as well as expanding the series timeline (along with eroticization). Their most popular and well-known stories, "Wrecking Now" and "For Real" center around Dean Ambrose and his on-screen rivals (or, initially, "brothers"), taking their cues from what happens on television. While "Wrecking Now," as Amanda notes in their introduction, functions more fully when one is familiar with the characters' history, the story swiftly establishes the existing relationship between Regal and Ambrose, as well as the imagined relationship between Ambrose and Rollins:

"Yeah, I don't know, man." Ambrose said. He was starting to feel more and more agitated by the second. That weird silence grew between them again and for some reason that pissed Ambrose off, too.

"I bet I could guess what your kind of thing is," Regal finally said.

"Oh, really now?" Ambrose said. "Try me."

"I bet Seth Rollins is your kind of thing," Regal said. Regal's remark registered too quickly for Ambrose to conceal the surprise on his face. How the fuck did Regal know anything about that? Ambrose fidgeted, trying to think of what to say, but for once, he was at a loss for words.

"Though, really, that's not a guess," Regal said. "I know he is. I don't think anyone else has noticed the two of you. But I have my ways and I have my reasons."

"And what are those, exactly?" Ambrose said.

"We're much more alike than you think," Regal said. "There's a lot of subtlety involved in this game. Particularly for a man like me. So one learns to pick up on things, to gather information others might not require, to communicate in ways others might not. Perhaps you understand."

"Does your wife understand?" Ambrose snarled.

Regal laughed. "As well as she needs to." Yet, Ambrose saw Regal fidget ever so slightly, fiddle with his wedding band, take too long of a drink.



"Hit a nerve?" Ambrose asked.

"Oh, dear boy, it's been hit for decades," Regal said. "But with all the vices I've given up over the years, I can't give up the conquest. My soul just won't allow it."

For whatever reason, Ambrose suddenly felt more at ease. "Conquest, " he said. "Yeah. That's a good word for it."

"You fancy yourself a bit of a conqueror?" Regal said.

"More than a bit," Ambrose said. The air between them fell silent again, but its weight felt different somehow. More inviting.

"I bet he begs for you," Regal said. "I bet he screams for you."

Ambrose grew warm all over at Regal's words – power tingled through him. "Yeah," Ambrose said. "He does."

Regal smiled. "That's always such a bloody gorgeous thing."<sup>432</sup>

“Wrecking Now,” compared to Christine’s works, is brief—three chapters, clocking in at 4,162 words. But the emotional connection co-existing with sexuality is explored here as well, allowing Amanda to play with the dynamics that existed in the ring and set them in the bedroom, reversing power structures and allowing these characters’ personalities and histories to intertwine in a new way.

Offering readers links to interactions between the characters in a pre-WWE setting granted the opportunity to grant context to the work, but that context was not required to enjoy the story as it stood. Amanda describes their work as sometimes “sparse,” but the dynamics feel powerful--less than five thousand words and three chapters still are able to capture characters’ voices, leading at least one commenter to

---

<sup>432</sup> “Wrecking Now,” [http://archiveofourown.org/works/885666/chapters/1707030?view\\_adult=true](http://archiveofourown.org/works/885666/chapters/1707030?view_adult=true)

remark “I love the way you write Ambregal. Their voices.....just.”<sup>433</sup> The deliberate cutoff after “just” is not a typo, but rather another example of “fandom speak,” suggesting an inability to put into words the pleasure that one has and is taking in reading the story. Another commenter noted that “Really glad to find fic of these two and such a lovely one at that. I really enjoyed all the details that made it all the more messed up, such as Dean being involved with Seth at the time and Regal being well aware of it. The contrast between Regal's and Dean's speech patterns was also really great.”<sup>434</sup> Shorter fan fiction may not draw the same volume of comments or “likes” online, which can be discouraging, but these stories often capture rarer pairings that readers are particularly interested in. Discovering that someone can--and will--write work that speaks to your particular interests, sexual or otherwise, can help to forge a deeper connection and appreciation between individuals who might never sit next to one another at a show to cheer on those favorite performers.

Amanda's best-known work, however, spans a far longer period, and draws on the deep and abiding fandom love for the trio of the Shield, a fandom that endures even to this day in spite of the breakup. The story was, as Amanda observed in our interview, if not *the* first Shield (and specifically “Ambrollins”) fan fiction, certainly one of the first, and became one of the most enduring standards within wrestling slash fiction fandom as a powerful exploration of their complicated relationship. *For Real*, an intensely sexual and violent story pairing Dean Ambrose and Seth Rollins, is approximately 30,000 words and 21 chapters; though the story began before the

---

<sup>433</sup> Wrecking Now,” [http://archiveofourown.org/works/885666/chapters/1707030?view\\_adult=true](http://archiveofourown.org/works/885666/chapters/1707030?view_adult=true), Comments

<sup>434</sup> Wrecking Now,” [http://archiveofourown.org/works/885666/chapters/1707030?view\\_adult=true](http://archiveofourown.org/works/885666/chapters/1707030?view_adult=true), Comments

Shield broke up, Amanda chose to continue the narrative afterward. Their story does not lean as heavily on real match details as Christine's works, which affords greater opportunity to create scenarios without worrying overmuch about whether or not they fit into the timeline of the WWE universe. The story emphasizes the emotional side, but the sexual reigns supreme here, with the two characters sharing in a bloody, violent understanding of what they need to take and give, as excerpted below:

Before long, Seth heard the shower door open behind him. He looked over his shoulder and saw Dean get in and shut the door. "Guess he couldn't wait," Seth thought. Seth noticed that Dean was already hard, but that wasn't really what got his attention. He looked up at Dean's eyes – they looked crazed and focused in a way that made fear well up in Seth's body. The fresh adrenaline mixed deliciously with everything else buzzing through Seth. While Seth's body felt afraid, his mind knew better by now, but Seth did his best to shut it down for the moment. "This is it," he told himself. "This time it's for real."

Seth suddenly worried that Dean saw him staring. He turned his head away. Dean approached behind him, and soon Seth could feel Dean's breath on his ear. Dean wrapped his arms around Seth and brushed his hands up to rest on Seth's chest. Seth knew Dean could feel his pounding heart.

"That's right," Dean hissed into his ear, "You should be scared. You know what I'm going to do to you." Dean slowly ran his fingertips up the length of Seth's neck, then pressed a fingertip against Seth's lips. Reflexively, Seth took Dean's finger into his mouth. Dean laughed a little bit – that fucking cocky laugh – then pulled his finger out of Seth's mouth, then Dean reached between Seth's legs and found Seth's growing hardness. At Dean's touch, Seth felt waves of violet electricity pulse from his cock throughout his entire body – he knew they were violet, but he didn't know why. – and he heard a moan escape his own mouth.

Dean laughed again. "You're such a fucking slut. You're fucking scared shitless because you know what I'm going to do, but here you are, fucking hard, moaning like a fucking whore, when anyone with any fucking sense would've already run away from me by now. Turn around. I want to fucking see you."

Seth obeyed. He watched Dean look him up and down, almost scornfully, then his eyes settled on Seth's now rock-hard cock, and he laughed yet again. If Dean was trying to make Seth feel ashamed, it was starting to work, as Seth felt another layer joining the growing storm within him. Seth's head was

swimming as Dean pushed Seth down onto his knees. Seth's lips parted and he felt himself start to salivate as he stared at Dean's cock. Dean grabbed Seth's head and slowly pushed his cock down Seth's throat until his whole length was inside. He knew just how to do it to avoid triggering Seth's gag reflex. Seth could breathe with Dean's cock down his throat but it wasn't easy. Dean held onto Seth's head and started slowly fucking his mouth, then Dean began to quicken his pace until Seth started to gag and retch, despite Seth's best efforts not to. Seth's eyes started to water. Dean kept going until Seth nearly vomited, then pushed Seth off him. As Seth struggled to catch his breath, Dean shut off the water and opened the shower door. Seth shivered as he adjusted to the temperature of the room. Suddenly, Dean pulled Seth up by his hair. Seth heard the blood rushing in his ears as he stood up.

"Come on," Dean barked. "Get out. Get on the fucking bed." Seth found his footing and stepped out of the shower. He swore he could see all the different colors of electricity coursing through his body. He tried to think of a way to describe how it felt – fucking exquisite was the only thing that came to mind. Seth walked toward the bed and, before he knew it, he felt Dean throw him onto bed, face down, bent over the edge of the bed. Seth heard a drawer opening and soon after he felt Dean spreading a generous amount of lube onto his ass. Seth shivered just a bit. Dean put his hand on Seth's upper back and pressed him down as he slowly entered him. After a few slow thrusts, Dean took his hand off Seth's back and pulled Seth by his chin up toward him, then slowly moved his hand down until he held Seth loosely around his neck. The sensation of Dean's hand around his neck drove Seth absolutely crazy, and when Dean thrust into him with his hand around his neck, he couldn't help but moan.

"You're fucking hilarious," Dean whispered. "This is all your fucking fault, you know."

Dean lowered Seth's head back down to the bed, but kept his hand around Seth's neck while he continued slowly fucking him. Dean tightened his grip around Seth's neck just a little bit, but in his mind, Seth felt Dean crushing his windpipe. Seth closed his eyes tightly and pressed his face into the bed. Tension built up inside him and he started to thrash, but it was no use. He felt sure that he had taken his last breath. Everything turned white. All of the tension in his body poured out of him and he was filled with peaceful euphoria. For a moment, he felt like he was floating out of his body, but he soon became aware of the sensation of Dean's other hand wrapped tightly around his cock. Seth felt his cock pulsing as he exploded onto Dean's hand. Once he was done, Dean waited a few moments before slowly let go, and out of the corner of his eye, Seth saw Dean bring that hand to his own mouth. After a little while, Seth felt Dean press his body hard against his, and Dean began furiously thrusting into him. It wasn't long before he heard Dean groan

and felt Dean's cock pulse inside of him. Seth was overcome with a wave of exhaustion and soon fell asleep with Dean still inside of him.

Seth woke up on his belly under the covers, and wondered how he got there. He noticed that his body finally felt sore. He turned onto his side and saw Dean sitting in the chair next to his bed, staring at his phone. As Seth stirred, Dean looked up at him, his eyes now filled with nothing but softness<sup>435</sup>.

In this story, as in so many others, those eyes full of softness are as essential as the rough, passionate sex. The sexual relationship draws a reader in, and in many one-shots or even multi-chaptered stories is sufficient to sustain readership and interest, as has been described by numerous fan fiction theorists and critics. Yet for many readers and reviewers, it is the something more between the characters that keeps them coming back--as one reviewer wrote after a few chapters had been published, "I'm enjoying this story more and more. At first it just seems like a fic with lots of hot sex (not that there is anything wrong with that), but over time you can see Dean and Seth's relationship goes much deeper."<sup>436</sup> Whether slash or Mary Sue, the establishment of something "much deeper" is the driving force behind fan fiction writing and sharing.

But the violence within this story cannot be ignored, going beyond the mere "hurt/comfort" storylines that Salmon and Clerc discuss as being so popular. In the joint interview with Christine, Amanda noted that they will deliberately choose to write, wherever possible, from the perspective of the person receiving the pain and violence, emphasizing that while it may appear the opposite, what is occurring is consensual. Amanda said specifically that "I know, especially when I'm writing

---

<sup>435</sup> "For Real," Chapter One, <http://archiveofourown.org/works/885625/chapters/1706953>

<sup>436</sup> Reviews, "For Real" Chapter Five, <https://www.fanfiction.net/r/8834420/0/11/>

particularly serious rough sex or BDSM stuff, I always wanna write it from the point of view of the sub, or the bottom, so it's clearer that they want this.”<sup>437</sup> Wrestling, in a sense, incorporates a similar dynamic, in the vein of fight choreography in theatre. There is a constant negotiation of the power dynamics that are occurring, and it is generally the person who must appear to bear the brunt of the pain that remains most in control. Lucia Rahilly’s “Is RAW War?” notes that “while acknowledgement of the mingling of pain and pleasure seems increasingly unavoidable in professional wrestling--particularly given the flimsy tenability of its moral framework-- the linkage between pain and sexuality as a particular strand of pleasure is constantly elided--the issue of wrestling as sexually provocative sadomasochism is publicly confounded.”<sup>438</sup> In Amanda’s fan fiction particularly, what is publicly confounded or elided in televised professional wrestling is brought to the forefront, allowing readers to explore what may appear to be dangerous fantasies in manners that are safe.

## Conclusion

Though Amanda and Christine share a number of similarities in what draws them and drives them in the creation of fan fiction, where they differ most notably speaks to one of the questions that runs most prevalently through studies of fan fiction. When creating fan fiction, do the authors see themselves as represented in one of the figures, or are they using the individuals to tell a narrative separate from their own experiences? For Christine, the power is in the disassociation and

---

<sup>437</sup> Interview, Christine & Amanda, in person, October 3, 2015

<sup>438</sup> Lucia Rahilly, “Is RAW War?: Professional Wrestling as Popular S/M Narrative,” *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 225

experimentation; how can she tell a story convincingly that draws upon elements that women particularly find desirable, without feeling the personal connection to what is occurring. The pleasure is in creating authentic connections between the characters, rather than attempting to explore her own desires as mirrored in these characters. As she puts it, "It's not me, so that's exactly—that's THEM... So that, I feel like that's a part of the fandom that I miss out on a little bit, because I don't really get into it, you know, like really involved in it, because I don't see it, my brain doesn't work that way. I'm very detached, I see "this story" and then I walk away and I'm done."<sup>439</sup> For Amanda, it is almost entirely the opposite, making their narrative in the larger world of fan fiction creation one of embodiment:

Amanda: So I guess it's interesting with you and me because I feel like, I, in a lot of ways in my life am a detached person, but the role of fic for me has been to write things that are very personal to me that I'm exploring, through these characters. You know like, this is not just like an interesting thought experiment for me, this is just like, a thing that makes me feel a thing? Like I write, you know, which is why I think, if you like compare our stories, you know, you write longer, yours is probably better, in that it's, you put work into outlines and quality and me, I'm just like--

Christine: That's because I'm obsessive, that's just--

Amanda: And me, in my stories are mostly like "I have a feeling"--

Christine: More free thinking, more free feeling--

Amanda: And I'm spitting out this feeling I have, to reflect this feeling I have, something that I was reflecting on that was personal to me.<sup>440</sup>

The sharing and creation, however, can lead, and often does lead, to shockingly deep connections between fans, and this, I argue, is the intent behind the majority of its creation. Though it is deeply personal and feels private, the act of sharing renders it into something more. Amanda and Christine both shared stories, over the course of

---

<sup>439</sup> Interview, Christine & Amanda, in person, October 3, 2015

<sup>440</sup> Interview, Christine & Amanda, in person, October 3, 2015

their interviews, of making friends through commenting on fan fiction, or by requesting fan fiction from another person, the act of which can render one extremely vulnerable. At a later point in our interview, after discussing a number of elements of fandom and fan fiction itself, the three of us reflected on this, saying

A: And it's like, I don't know, I've, I grew, and, like, I got spoiled in those early Shield days, like I enjoy fan fiction as a conversation, where, through writing fan fiction I met people, and it's a weird kind of friendship when you meet like, hey, I wrote this porn. And you also like this porn, and it's like, you're bonding over this thing, which is your sexual tastes, which is something that people don't often bond over, or know about each other--

J: It's how we started talking! It's very strange to me!

A: You know, or KNOW...and sort of the things that happen in fan fiction communities, where your friend is like "oh this reminded me of you" and it's like a porn of a dude being spanked or whatever, and you're like "oh thanks!"

J: Yeah, like within fan fiction communities, and like, making fan fiction friends, it's like "I feel like you know a lot of things about me sexually" that I would NEVER be able to just have a conversation about...<sup>441</sup>

C: Yeah, I wouldn't talk to a just, to just random friends about...

J: ... Cause I'm...it's that move where you put in a request to somebody, when they open up the prompts...

C: Yeah, yeah--

J: I ONLY submit stuff anonymously, because I'm like, I'm not ready, I don't know if I'm ready for you, fan fiction person, to know this particular thing...

C: Yeah, to know this particular thing that I desire...

A: There's this part of the conversation where it's a very vulnerable thing, where you're writing fan fiction and you're putting some of your deepest and weirdest desires out, and for me that's what I did, in a story, and people are just--people are coming to you like "this ALSO resonates with me", like this thing you wrote, just also resonates, and it's a good feeling, to know that your deepest weirdest desires are not as weird as you thought--

C: Right, yeah--

A: And I feel like the people who have deep weird sexual desires in common have other less private things in common with each other. "Oh, you liked my porn! Well we have all these other things in common!"

---

<sup>441</sup> Though it is not within the scope of this dissertation, there is literature surrounding the idea of fannish spaces as necessarily queered, and the ways in which women who move within these spaces perform queer sexuality and openness as part of the fiction of fan fiction. See Kristina Busse's "My Life is a WIP on my LJ: Slashing the Slasher and the Reality of Celebrity and Internet Performances" in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, for instance.



C: All these other things that we can talk about at McDonald's *without* getting stares.<sup>442</sup>

The connections that come from creating fan fiction and sharing it within a community are deep ones that operate from a place of trust, a trust that includes the communal understanding that the fiction is not intended for the people about whom it has been written. There are, of course, regularly exceptions, but the majority of fan-created work is not only fan fiction in that it is work *by* fans—it is work *for* fans.

---

<sup>442</sup> Interview, Christine & Amanda, in person, October 3, 2015

## Conclusion: Reflecting back

### **Critical reflection: On breaking binaries**

The research for this project spanned approximately two and a half years. It led me to attend over thirty live events, from signings at car shows to WrestleMania weekends, and I have met and spoken to dozens of fans. I recorded hours and hours of interviews over email and in person with nine informants. The in-person interviews took place in a range of locations, from hotel rooms in New Orleans to the Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., to the patio of a restaurant in San Antonio, Texas. I watched weekly programming and monthly pay-per-views totaling over eight hundred hours' worth of wrestling. Yet there is always something new happening, something more to try to capture. In the past month alone, another photo and video leak occurred, this time involving multiple WWE superstars, and there are rumors of numerous signings and firings coming up in the months ahead.

When I began the research for this project, I had certain sets of expectations about the stories I would receive from my informants. I assumed that my theory that female fans would universally have negative experiences to share would hold true, and further, that those negative experiences would come from the binary opposition of male fans “versus” female fans. I expected that I would have the opportunity to speak directly with employees of the WWE, clearly delineating between fan and wrestler. Finally, I assumed that the majority of my interviews and conversations would take place at live events, once more establishing a binary between “real” and “virtual” fandom engagement. My expectations, in other words, assumed an affirmation of binary oppositions and clear designations. The reality of the work

served, instead, to call these binaries into question, complicating ideas about everything from the nature of gatekeeping (as seen in the case study of the Rollins photo leak and female fan response), to the ever-blurred lines between fan and wrestler interaction (with artists like Courtney Rose and Niki), to the motivations behind fan fiction writing beyond “straight women who want to fantasize about men” (as in the cases of both Christine and Amanda), to the ways in which virtual interactions became just as meaningful as “live” ones, offering a different interpretation of liveness (the case studies of chapter three), to the gender identity of fans themselves (such as Amanda). The breaking down of these binaries, rather than being destructive to the work itself, ultimately made it stronger, if not as neatly packaged--something I would want to continue working with as this project goes forward.

The research of this project remains ongoing, and future directions might explore the relationship of the WWE to independent promotions, particularly as WWE continues to build financial ties to numerous independent promotions in moves that seem not dissimilar to the McMahons buying out the territories. I continue to seek out writers, artists, and fan creators of all kinds, including podcasters, in the hopes of continuing the conversation about all of the various ways to give back to the fandom community, particularly in terms of building connections with fans all over the world. I hope to develop connections to those within the wrestling community itself, with an eye toward speaking directly to them about fan interactions and the ways in which the performers perceive their relationships to their fans, especially female fans. In an expanded version of this project, I would conduct further

interviews with my informants to see what had changed since the first time we spoke. I would also be interested in speaking to more fans, male and female, to discuss a wider variety of experiences. I see this dissertation not as an end to the research, but a pause to gain feedback and discussion before continuing forward.

### **Personal reflection: On butterfly belts & hands to hold**

Wrestling, unlike most professional sports, has no off-season. This is predominantly taxing on the wrestlers themselves, who rarely, if ever, get to take any extended amounts of time off, but it can also make finding a “stopping point” for research on wrestling a challenging endeavor. If professional wrestling has a season finale, it takes place in late March or early April every year: WrestleMania, the “showcase of the immortals,” as a commentator once described it. Though I had been a wrestling fan at a young age, prior to 2013 I had never attended a live event. WrestleMania 29, in fact, was my first live wrestling experience, and it seems only fitting that this project draws to a close just after WrestleMania 33, which occurred on Sunday, April 2, 2017.

The world of professional wrestling, and in turn professional wrestling fandom, is ever-changing. Superstars debut and retire with some frequency, and sometimes the beginning and end of a career is startlingly close together. Some of the wrestlers that drew me back to professional wrestling have since left WWE, while others that I had not heard of when I first turned on that episode of *Monday Night Raw* in 2013 have become my fast favorites. When this project began, it seemed

unheard of to imagine that wrestlers like Shinsuke Nakamura, AJ Styles,<sup>443</sup> or Heidi Lovelace,<sup>444</sup> to name just a few, would ever appear on WWE programming--all were considered to be firm fixtures on the independent wrestling circuit, or “too old,” or lacking the right sort of look or character. Yet all three had matches over WrestleMania weekend in Orlando, April 1-2, 2017. When I drew the parameters for my research, I knew that I would necessarily exclude independent wrestling and wrestlers from my purview; now several of the up-and-coming stars that I watched in small Pennsylvania community centers or via live streaming from Japan have debuted on *NXT*, *Monday Night Raw*, and *Smackdown* (which is no longer *Thursday Night Smackdown*, and is no longer pre-recorded). Female superstars have gone from being called “divas” and wearing a championship belt shaped like a sparkling pink butterfly to being referred to as “women” and “women’s champions,” with a new belt to match. Fans gather on Twitter to live tweet events much in the way that they were gathering on Tumblr when I first began seeking out other female fans of professional wrestling—and fans continue to find one another, first meeting online and then taking pictures together when they finally reach their first show together, months or years later.

My informants, too, have progressed since the days of their initial interviews: Kate, for instance, has her Raw Breakdown Project approaching its second year,

---

<sup>443</sup> A wrestler who appeared with TNA Wrestling in the United States before making an even bigger name for himself in New Japan Pro Wrestling, who debuted at the Royal Rumble in 2016 at the age of 38.

<sup>444</sup> A female wrestler known as the “punk rock rag doll” on the independent circuit, whose look of a half-shaved head of jet black hair and numerous tattoos would, five years ago, have rendered her unable to appear on WWE television; she debuted as Ruby Riot in WWE’s developmental system in late March and is already a fan favorite.

having hit multiple stretch goals on Patreon. Niki has added multiple shirts and a new coloring book to her resume. Courtney Rose did Chris Hero's makeup for one of his last independent dates before he went to WWE. Christine published a new romance novel set backstage and in the ring of a small wrestling promotion, and is in the process of writing a sequel. Amanda co-created a zine, called *Red Leather and Danger*, dedicated to wrestler Shinsuke Nakamura—and copies of the zine ended up in Shinsuke's hands. Amanda now has a second volume in the works.

The world of female fandom is still fraught with challenges, online and in person. Yet there continues to be a push back against these challenges, and an increasing coming together of fans, offering promises to sit together at a show, to defend one another online, and anything in between. The fan informants for this project that began as names on a Tumblr page or attached to a Tweet have become my friends, a set of hands to hold or a phone number to text when a wrestler makes his long-awaited debut or return. On International Women's Day, female wrestling fans took to Twitter to recognize one another, to commend one another's artwork, writing, or podcasting and to link together disparate groups of fans who may not yet have had the chance to meet. In a befitting series of tweets, Kate shared personal sentiments that speak to the narrative of this project:

It's incredible to me how many awesome and amazing ladies that I know now, and it's (for the most part) through wrestling. When I first started watching wrestling, it was essentially alone, or with my brother. And, at the time, I had a huge group of girl friends. Not a single one would watch with me. And I knew they thought it was weird. Once I hit high school, I had the good ol' IWC. But on the forum I was on...it was all dudes and like, 3 women. So at least I had people to talk to about wrestling, right? But there's something really special about having women friendships. Outside of wrestling, it took me awhile to cultivate the meaningful friendships with women that I have. I cherish those. In wrestling? Man. I've been watching wrestling for 20 years. It

wasn't until the last 3 that I have been as fortunate as I am right now to know all of you.<sup>445</sup>

As I think of the connections I have been able to make, the thirty-plus events I have attended (with two more scheduled in the next three months), and the ways in which my personal fandom experience has shifted in the last four years, I too feel fortunate to be part of the female wrestling fandom, with eyes toward the future and WrestleMania 34 on April 8, 2018.

Jessica Lloyd Krenek

April 2017

---

<sup>445</sup> Kate (makeitloud), <https://mobile.twitter.com/makeitloud/status/839794553267896320>, March 8, 2017

## Appendices

### **Wrestling Events Attended, March 2013-December 2016**

#### **WWE/WWE Superstar Signings:**

- 1) Auto Show Signing: Wade Barrett, Baltimore, MD, February 2013
- 2) WrestleMania 29, MetLife Stadium, NJ, March 2013
- 3) House Show, Upper Marlboro, MD, May 2013
- 4) House Show, Washington, DC (September 2013)
- 5) Royal Rumble, Pittsburgh, PA (January 2014)
- 6) Monday Night Raw & Smackdown Supershow taping, the last shows before WrestleMania 30, Washington, DC (April 2014)
- 7) WrestleMania Axxess, Multiple Sessions, New Orleans, LA (April 2014)
- 8) Monday Night Raw, Washington, DC (June 2014)
- 9) House Show, Madison Square Garden, NY (July 2014)
- 10) Ringside Fest Signing: Roman Reigns, New York City, NY (October 2014)
- 11) House Show, Madison Square Garden, NY (December 2014)
- 12) Smackdown Taping, Washington, DC (March 2015)
- 13) NXT House Show, Philadelphia, PA (May 2015)
- 14) Awesome Con Signing: Seth Rollins and Natalya, Washington, DC (May 2015)
- 15) WWE Monday Night Raw, Washington, DC (June 2015)
- 16) SummerSlam, Brooklyn, NY (August 2015)
- 17) WrestleMania Axxess, Dallas, TX (April 2016)
- 18) Toys R Us Signing, Neville & Kalisto, Dallas, TX (April 2016)
- 19) WWE Battleground, Washington DC (July 2016)
- 20) Ringside Fest Signing: Finn Balor & Sasha Banks, New York City, NY (October 2016)
- 21) NXT House Show, Baltimore, MD (October 2016)



**Non-WWE/Independent:**

- 1) National Pro Wrestling Day, Easton, PA (February 2014)
- 2) WrestleCon Super Show, New Orleans, LA (April 2014)
- 3) FWE (Family Wrestling Entertainment) Show, Brooklyn, NY (October 2014)
- 4) Chikara, Richmond, VA, (October 2014)
- 5) Chikara, Philadelphia, PA (January 2015)
- 6) ROH/NJPW (Ring of Honor and New Japan Pro Wrestling) War of the Worlds, Philadelphia, PA (May 2015)
- 7) Chikara, Chicago, IL (June 2015)
- 8) ROH/NJPW Field of Honor, Brooklyn, NY (August 2015)
- 9) National Pro Wrestling Day 2016, Easton, PA (January 2016)
- 10) Shimmer Heart of Shimmer Women's Tournament, Dallas, TX (April 2016)
- 11) Mercury Rising Super Show, Dallas, TX (April 2016)
- 12) WrestleCon Super Show, Dallas, TX (April 2016)
- 13) Kota Ibushi Signing, Dallas, TX (April 2016)
- 14) EVOLVE 60, Joppa, MD (May 2016)
- 15) EVOLVE 66, Joppa, MD (August 2016)
- 16) Chikara King of Trios, Palmer Center, Easton, PA—3 shows (September 2016)
- 17) Chikara 2-Part Finale, Chicago, IL (December 2016)

## **APPENDIX II: Informant Biographies**

1. **Joan S., Texas, age 23:** An Texas business analyst and recent college graduate, whose favorite parts of attending wrestling shows are the opportunity to get caught up in the crowd and catch a look at Randy Orton.
2. **Hayley G., Chicago, age 24:** Chicago pediatric ER nurse who's training to become a wrestler in her spare time, having had her debut match in 2016.
3. **Emily F., Australia, age 25:** An Australian government employee who began watching wrestling at a young age; she connected with fellow wrestling fans across oceans through Tumblr, bonding particularly over Sami Zayn, Damien Sandow, and Chris Hero.
4. **Taylor M., Mississippi, age 25:** A high school English teacher who writes thought pieces about the deeper significance of the storytelling in the world of professional wrestling and how it could connect to literature, along with creating wrestling-based D&D characters.
5. **Courtney Rose, Chicago, age 28:** A Chicago-based librarian who uses her makeup artistry to connect with other fans & pay tribute to the performers that have inspired her, who began publishing wrestling-related articles as well as makeup guides in 2016 and continues to do so in 2017.
6. **Kate F., Richmond, age 29 :** A graphic designer whose current side project engages with turning the statistics of Monday Night Raw into visual art as a way of lending credence to the disparity between male and female wrestling time.
7. **Niki P., San Antonio, 32:** Pharmacist by day and fan artist for hire, whose art has found its way onto t-shirts for a number of independent wrestlers, as well as pins, prints, and even underwear
8. **Amanda T., Austin, age 32:** A Texas-based genderqueer lawyer who wrote one of the first Shield fan fiction stories that remains the "gold standard" to this day, and has since turned their attention to Shinsuke Nakamura, helping to create a zine of fandom tributes to his "red leather and danger."
9. **Christine R., Houston, 36:** A former roller derby skater and teacher who turned her time rehabbing a broken leg into forays into BDSM wrestling fanfiction, and has since transformed those works to contain original characters, to self-published success.

## Bibliography

- Apter, Bill. *Is Wrestling Fixed? I Didn't Know It Was Broken! From Photo Shoots and Sensational Stories to the WWE Network, Bill Apter's Incredible Pro Wrestling Journey*. Toronto: ECW Press, 2015.
- Assael, Shaun and Mike Mooneyham, *Sex, Lies, and Headlocks: The Real Story of Vince McMahon and the World Wrestling Federation*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2002.
- Auslander, Phillip. *Liveness: Performance in a Mediated Society*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Ball, Michael. *Professional Wrestling as Ritual Drama in American Popular Culture*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990.
- Barthes, Roland. "Myth Today." In *A Barthes Reader*, edited by Susan Sontag. New York: Hill & Wang, 1982: 93-149.
- Barthes, Roland. "The World of Wrestling." In *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*, ed. Nicholas Sammond. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005: 23-32.
- Barton, Kristin M. and John Malcolm Lampley, *Fan CULTure: Essays on Participatory Fandom in the 21st Century*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2013.
- Beekman, Scott. *Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Company, 2006.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1955: 217-242.
- Bennett, Lucy and Paul Booth, eds. *Seeing Fans: Representations of Fandom in Media and Popular Culture*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016.
- Bennett, Susan. *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*. London: Routledge Press, 1990.
- Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin Books, 1972.
- Blackshaw, Tony and Tim Crabbe. *New Perspectives on Sport and 'Deviance': Consumption, Performativity, and Social Control*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Field of Cultural Production*. Edited by Randal Johnson. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishing, 1993.
- Busse, Kristina. "Beyond Mary Sue: Fan Representation and the Complex Negotiation of Gendered Identity." In *Seeing Fans: Representations of Fandom in Media and Popular Culture*, eds Lucy Bennett and Paul Booth. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016: 159-168.
- Busse, Kristina. "My Life is a WIP on my LJ: Slashing the Slasher and the Reality of Celebrity and Internet Performances" in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*. Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2006: 207-224.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 2010.
- Butsch, Richard. *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Carlson, Marvin. "Semiotics and its Heritage." In *Critical Theory and Performance*, edited by Janelle G. Reinelt & Joseph G. Roach. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007: 13-25.
- Carter, Angela. "Giants' Playtime." In *Shaking a Leg: Collected Journalism and Writings*, by Angela Carter. New York: Penguin Books, 1998: 332-336.
- Chander, Anupam and Madhavi Sunder, "Everyone's a Superhero: A Cultural Theory of 'Mary Sue' Fan Fiction as Fair Use." *California Law Review*, Vol. 95, No. 2, April 2007: 597-626
- Cho, Alexander. "Queer reverb: Tumblr, affect, time." In *Networked Affect*, edited by Ken Hills, Susanna Paasonen, and Michael Petit. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015: 43-57.
- Clerc, Susan and Catherine Salmon, "'Ladies Love Wrestling, Too': Female Wrestling Fans Online." In *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*, edited by Nicholas Sammond. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005: 167-191.
- Crawford, Garry and Victoria Gosling, "The Myth of the Puck Bunny: Female Fans and Men's Ice Hockey," *Sociology*, July 2004, Volume 38, No. 3: 477-493.
- Davies, Raven. "The Slash Fan fiction Connection to Bi Men." *Journal of Bisexuality*, 5:2-3, 2005: 195-202

- de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Bord and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. New York: Random House Inc., 2010.
- de Garis, Laurence. "The 'Logic' of Professional Wrestling." In *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*, ed. Nicholas Sammond. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005: 192-212.
- de Kosnik, Abigail. "Should Fan Fiction be Free?," *Cinema Journal* , Vol. 48, No. 4 (Summer, 2009): 118-124.
- Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books, 1994.
- Dell, Chad. *The Revenge of Hatpin Mary: Women, Professional Wrestling, and Fan Culture in the 1950s*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2005.
- Dolan, Jill. *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara, Elizabeth Hess, and Gloria Jacobs. "Beatlemania: Girls Just Want to Have Fun." In *The Adoring Audience: Fan culture and popular media*, edited by Lisa A. Lewis. London: Routledge, 1992: 84-106.
- Farman, Jason. *Mobile Interface Theory: Embodied Space and Locative Media*. New York: Taylor & Francis Routledge, 2012.
- Frederik, Laurie, Kim Marra, and Catherine Schuler, eds. *Showing Off, Showing Up: Studies of Hype, Heightened Performance, and Cultural Power*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017.
- Frederik, Laurie. Introduction. In *Showing Off, Showing Up: Studies of Hype, Heightened Performance, and Cultural Power*, edited by Laurie Frederik, Kim Marra, and Catherine Schuler. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017: 1-23.
- Garfield, Simon. *The Wrestling*. London: Faber and Faber, 2007.
- Gorn, Elliott J. and Warren Goldstein, *A Brief History of American Sports*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004.,
- Gosling, Victoria. "Girls Allowed? The Marginalization of Female Sports Fans," in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Cornell Sandvoss, and C Harrington. New York: NYU Press, 2007: 250-260.
- Gross, Michael Joseph. *Starstruck: When a Fan Gets Too Close to Fame*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005.

- Grossman, Lev. "How Harry Potter Became the Boy Who Lived Forever," *Time*, July 7, 2011.
- Hackett, Thomas. *Slaphappy: Pride, Prejudice, and Professional Wrestling*. New York: Ecco Press, 2006.
- Halttunen, Karen. "Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-american Culture". *The American Historical Review* 100.2 (April 1995): 303-334.
- Harris, Sheryl and Allison Alexander. *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture, and Identity*. Creskill: Hampton Press, 1998.
- Hellekson, Karen and Kristina Busse, eds. *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*. Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2006
- Hills, Matt. *Fan Cultures*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Holland, Norman. "UNITY IDENTITY TEXT SELF." In *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980: 118-133.
- Hornbaker, Tim. *Capitol Empire: The Rise of the McMahon Wrestling Empire*. Toronto: ECW Press, 2015
- Hornbaker, Tim. *National Wrestling Alliance: The Untold Story of the Monopoly that Strangled Pro Wrestling*. Toronto: ECW Press,
- Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. London: Routledge, 1949.
- Iser, Wolfgang. "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach." In *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980: 50-69.
- Jamison, Anne. *Fic: Why Fanfiction is Taking Over the World*. Dallas: SmartPop, 2013.
- Jenkins, Henry. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture: Updated Twentieth Anniversary Edition*. New York: Routledge, 2012.
- Jenkins, Henry. "Where Fandom Studies Came From," from *Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Personal Weblog of Henry Jenkins*, <http://henryjenkins.org/2014/11/where-fandom-studies-came-from-an-interview-with-kristina-busse-and-karen-hellekson-part-one.html> Accessed 20 March 2017.

- Jenkins III, Henry. "'Never Trust a Snake:' WWF Wrestling as Masculine Melodrama," in *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*, ed. Nicholas Sammond. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005: 33-66.
- Johnson, William Oscar. "Wrestling with Success." *Sports Illustrated*: March 25, 1991. via the *Sports Illustrated Online Vault*, <http://www.si.com/vault/1991/03/25/123865/wrestling-with-success-vince-mcmahon-has-transformed-pro-wrestling-from-a-sleazy-pseudosport-to-booming-family-fun>, Accessed 25 February 2017
- Jones, Bethan. "'I Will Throw You Off Your Ship and You Will Drown And Die:' Death Threats, Intra-Fandom Hate, and the Performance of Fangirling," in *Seeing Fans: Representations of Fandom in Media and Popular Culture*, ed. Lucy Bennett and Paul Booth. New York: Bloomsbury, 2016: 53-66.
- Kennedy, Dennis. *The Spectator and the Spectacle: Audiences in Modernity and Post-Modernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Kennedy, Eileen. "Bad Boys and Gentlemen: Gendered Narrative in Televised Sport," *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, Vol 35, Issue 1 (2000): 59-73
- Kluck, Ted A. *Headlocks and Dropkicks: A Butt-Kicking Ride Through the World of Professional Wrestling*. Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2009.
- Larsen, Katherine and Lynn Zubernis, editors. *Fan Culture: Theory/practice*. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012.
- Lemish, Dafna. "'Girls Can Wrestle Too' ": Gender Differences in the Consumption of a Television Wrestling Series." *Sex Roles*, Vol. 38, Nos. 9/10, 19: 833-849.
- Leverette, Mark. *Professional Wrestling: The Myth, The Mat, and American Popular Culture*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003.
- Lewis, Lisa A, editor. *The Adoring Audience: Fan culture and popular media*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Lothian, Alexis. "An Archive of One's Own: Subcultural Creativity and the Politics of Conservation." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 6. doi:10.3983/twc.2011.0267, 2011.
- MacAloon, John J. "Olympic Games and the Theory of Spectacle in Modern Societies" in *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle: Rehearsals Toward a Theory of Cultural Performance*: 241-280.

- Maguire, Brendan. "Defining Deviancy Down: A Research Note Regarding Professional Wrestling," *Deviant Behavior* (21:6): 551-565.
- Markovits, Andrei S. and Emily K. Albertson. *Sportista: Female Fandom in the United States*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012.
- Matsyik, Larry. *Drawing Heat the Hard Way: How Wrestling Really Works*. Toronto: ECW Press, 2009.
- Mazer, Sharon. *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998.
- Meggers, Heather. "Discovering the Authentic Sexual Self: The Role of Fandom in the Transformation of Fans' Sexual Attitudes." In *Fan Culture: Theory/practice*. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012: 57-80.
- Morton, Gerald W. and George M. O'Brien. *Wrestling to Rasslin': Ancient Sport to American Spectacle*. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1985.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16.3, Autumn 1975: 6-18.
- O'Connor, Barbara and Raymond Boyle, "Dallas with balls: televised sport, soap opera and male and female pleasures." *Leisure Studies* Vol. 12 , Iss. 2 (1993): 107-119.
- Pope, Stacy. "'Like pulling down Durham Cathedral and building a brothel': Women as 'new consumer' fans?" *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 46(4):471-487.
- Rahilly, Lucia. "Is RAW War?: Professional Wrestling as Popular S/M Narrative." In *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*, ed. Nicholas Sammond. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005: 213-231.
- Reinelt, Janelle G. and Joseph R. Roach, eds.. *Critical Theory and Performance*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007.
- Sammond, Nicholas, ed. *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).
- Sandvoss, Cornel. *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005.
- Schaffner, Becca. "In Defense of Fanfiction." *The Horn Book Magazine*, 2009.



- Sehmby, Dalbir S. "Wrestling and Popular Culture." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 4.1 (2002).
- Shoemaker, David. *The Squared Circle: Life, Death, and Professional Wrestling*. New York: Gotham Books, 2013.
- Sontag, Susan, ed. *A Barthes Reader*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1982.
- Stiles, Maxwell. "Nine Bouts at Ball Park Arena" *Los Angeles Examiner*, Oct. 10, 1934. <http://www.wrestlingclassics.com/wawli/Nos.624-634.html>, Accessed 12 February 2016.
- Stone, Gregory. "Wrestling—The Great American Passion-Play." In *The Sociology of Sport: A Selection of Readings*, ed. Eric Dunning London: Whitefriars Press, 1971.
- Struna, Nancy L. *People of Prowess: Sport, Leisure, and Labor in Early Anglo-America*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996.
- Thomas, Bronwen. "What is Fanfiction and Why Are People Saying Such Nice Things About It?," *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* (2011), Vol. 3, 1
- Tolffoletti, Kim and Peter Mewett, eds. *Sport and its Female Fans*. New York: Taylor and Francis Publishing, 2012.
- Tompkins, Jane P., ed. *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.
- Tompkins, Jane P. "Introduction to Reader-Response Criticism." In *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980): ix-xxvi.
- Tresca, Don. "Spellbound: An Analysis of Adult-Oriented Harry Potter Fan fiction." In *Fan CULTure: Essays on Participatory Fandom in the 21st Century*, ed. Kristin M. Barton and John Malcolm Lampley. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2013.
- Twitchell, James B. *Preposterous Violence: Fables of Aggression in Modern Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Willis, Ika. "Writing the Fables of Sexual Difference: Slash Fiction as Technology of Gender." *Parallax*, 22:3: 290-311

## **INTERVIEWS**

Amanda T., Interview by author, Austin, TX

Amanda T., Interview by author (with Christine), Houston, TX, October 2015.

Amanda T., email to author, March 2016.

Christine, Interview by author (with Amanda), Houston, TX, October 2015

Christine, email to author, April 2016

Courtney Rose, Interview by author, New York, NY, August 2015

Courtney Rose, email to author, March 2016

Courtney Rose, email to author, March 2016

Emily F., Interview by author, Silver Spring, MD, September 2014

Emily F., Interview by author, New York, NY, August 2015

Emily F., email to author, March 2016

Hayley G., Interview by author, New York, NY, August 2015

Joan S., Interview by author, June 2014, Washington, D.C.

Kate F., Interview by author, Richmond, VA, October 2014

Kate F., email to author, March 2016

Kate F., email to author, September 2016

Niki P., Interview by author, San Antonio, TX, October 2015

Niki P., email to author, March 2016

Taylor M., Interview by author, New Orleans, LA, April 2014



