

Wrestling with Blackness: Play, Precarity, and the Black Geographies of Pro
Wrestling

A Dissertation

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

BY

Dewitt L. King

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
Doctor of Philosophy

Adam Bledsoe, Co-Advisors
Elliot Powell, Co-Advisors

June 2023

Dewitt King, 2023©

Acknowledgements

I have so many people to thank but not enough words to convey all the gratitude that I have for each of them. First, I would like to thank my co-advisors Adam Bledsoe and Elliot Powell. You have been incredibly supportive during my dissertation. Thank you so much for allowing me to be my authentic self intellectually. I also would like to thank my incredibly generous and thoughtful committee members, Karen Ho and Doug Hartmann, who always asked me the big money questions and who really pushed me to think about the broader implications of my work across multiple fields. Further, I want to thank my academic village that includes Yuichiro Onishi, Douglas Kearney, Jigna Desai, Susanna Blumenthal, Margaret Wherry, David Chang, Reginald Royston, Jenna Loyd, Keisha Lindsay, Edward Carr, Richard Schein, and George Lipsitz. Each of you have thought with me, believed in me, engaged with my work, and provided me with additional support during my journey as a doctoral student. Additionally, I would like to thank my extended graduate student community, which includes my Critical Black Studies cohort members (Kristen Reynolds, Chelsea Osademe, Ayaan Natala, Akeem Anderson, and Phoebe Young), my American Studies departmental peers such as Khoi Nguyen and Jonny Borja, and graduate students from outside of my program such as Joe Xu, Lauren Wilks, Sarah Edwards, AnneMarie McClain, and Maureen Mauk. Your confidence in me has been unwavering. Your friendship has been steadfast. I really appreciate each of you as colleagues, peers, and ultimately as friends. I would also like to thank the Institute for Advanced Study that hosted me as a Fellow for the 2022-2023 academic year. Your fiscal support gave me time to think, time to write, and time to grow as an intellectual. While I have thanked the those who are still living, I also would take the time to thank those who have passed away during my doctoral student journey. I would like to thank Cedric Robinson and Clyde Woods who I encountered much earlier in my academic career. You inspired me in so many ways and I am so thankful that I was able to spend time with you. I would also like to thank Will Graf who became a staunch ally and advocate for me the moment I met him in his office hours as an undergraduate student. And finally, I would like to thank three very important people in my life, who are no longer here in the flesh but will always be with me in the spirit, France King, my grandmother, Kim Arthur Brown, my aunt, and Ophelia Arthur, my great grandmother. Each of you played a pivotal role in the way I see the world. You nurtured my intellectual curiosity all my life, have always lifted me up, and have always provided me with the space to be myself. Thank you so much for always nurturing my spirit and my imagination.

Abstract

Wrestling with Blackness: Play, Precarity and The Black Geographies of Pro Wrestling centers the lives, histories, and experiences of Black people to understand how power works in spaces where precarity is the nucleus of the industry. Given that Black people have long been excluded from the formal economy in the US, they are the prototypes of the gig workers of today. The pro wrestling economy is built on precarity as pro wrestlers do not have a union, nor do they have an off season. Pro wrestlers are independent contractors who sign non-compete clause contracts while not being insured by their employer. Furthermore, pro wrestlers on average travel 300 days per year, pay for it out of pocket, and are not reimbursed. This dissertation situates the US pro wrestling industry as a site to study the structural elements of labor precarity. Despite professional wrestling being a multibillion-dollar international industry that is underwritten by melodrama, action, and the spectacular. It is I argue the heart of labor precarity in the US. As Roland Barthes remarks “it is the spectacle of excess.” Despite this excess, it arguably has the most labor precarity of any professional sport in the US. This dissertation examines labor precarity in pro wrestling centering the experiences of Black professional wrestlers using the concepts of play, performance, and Black geographic space as an analytic to understand how race and power operate in a sport where winners and losers are predetermined. Chapter 1 examines the gimmick of the the wrestling trio the New Day thinking through the ways they play not only with their gimmick but with the libidinal economy to navigate precarity in pro wrestling. Chapter 2 examines the relationship between the pro wrestling industry and Black women, specifically focusing on the mechanisms through which the the labor of Black women, historically and contemporarily, has been erased, suppressed, and omitted. Chapter 3 analyzes the way technological innovation of streaming services has shifted power relationships between companies, changed hiring practices, and produced an intimacy between local and global wrestling cultures. Chapter 4 introduces Black queer wrestlers on the margins of the industry illustrating how they have utilized digital grassroots political methods and branding to promote progressive change in the wrestling business industry. Together, these chapters craft a broader relational analysis that connects Black cultural production to political economic practices of value extraction, appropriation, and expropriation of Blackness, illustrating the co-production between Black cultural production and economic practice. By reformulating the understanding of Black cultural production and political economies through a centering of Black cultural geographies, *Wrestling with Blackness* develops an interdisciplinary conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between Black culture, labor, and anti-Blackness as a structural component integral to labor precarity.

Contents

Acknowledgements.....	i
Abstract	ii
Table of Contents	iii
Preface.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Vignette 1: Rolling 3 Deep: What is in a Name?.....	24
Chapter 1: Wrestling with Thee Gimmick.....	30
Vignette 2: Absent but Always Present	49
Chapter 2: Wrestling with Misogynoir	57
Vignette 3: Three and a Half Degrees of Separation.....	75
Chapter 3: Wrestling with The Digital	81
Vignette 4 Black Boy Not Quite Blue.....	109
Chapter 4: Wrestling with Progress.....	115
Epilogue	134
Bibliography	141

Preface

Entering the Squared Circle

It was not my fault; it was the internet's. This is the story that I tell when I recount how I became a professional wrestler. While my primary means of watching pro wrestling as a teenager in rural South Carolina was through a dish network enhanced television set. Web 1.0 was what truly allowed me to connect to the world of professional wrestling. While pro wrestling was not as popular in the “real world”, it occupied a unique space online. Professional wrestling fans paid homage to the spectacular nature of this art form by building a rich digital cultural infrastructure on the back GeoCities to show their love, care, and deep affection for the wrestlers and the business. Wrestling fan pages dominated the digital landscape of the world before Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Among these pages included websites that cataloged wrestling schools across the United States. This was how my story began as a pro wrestling trainee.

The first pro wrestler I emailed was a Canadian wrestler whose career I followed from Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW) to World Championship Wrestling (WCW) to World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE). Outside of being an incredible athlete and a good in ring competitor, this wrestler was far ahead of the curve as he was running his own website and engaging with fans before the age of social media. I emailed him telling him that I was interested in becoming a professional wrestler. He replied telling me the that first step was finding a reputable school. At 17 when I was supposed to be thinking about going to college, I was thinking about where I wanted to train to become a professional wrestler. Following his advice, I went to various websites taking down names and email addresses of school's state by state. After doing some cursory research, I decided that I did not want to wait until I graduated high school to begin training. So, I narrowed my search down to schools in my home state of South Carolina.

Despite the long and rich pro wrestling history that the state of South Carolina has, I did not initially find a wrestling school that met the criteria that I wanted. It seemed to me that urban centers such as New York, Los Angeles, and Oakland had wrestling schools that appealed to me. But digging deep into pro wrestling's fandom, I was able to reach out to a former WWE women's wrestler and veteran in the business. I emailed her and once we corresponded, she let me know that while she did not train men, she did know someone who was opening a pro wrestling school in Columbia, South Carolina. This school in question was less than 15 miles away from the small rural community I was from. This began my long bump filled journey.

The email exchanges between myself and that man who would become my wrestling teacher took place in the Fall, and it was decided that I would start my training at the top of the year. My trainer Big B mentioned that I would be joining two other young men (Little B and Medium D) in his first training class. So, it would be a new year, a new me, and new bumps and bruises. However, before I stepped foot into the ring, I had to master one of the core principles of pro wrestling. Deception. Pro wrestling is built on four pillars: trust, fidelity, deception, and chicanery. My grandmother who had been an athlete herself (captain of her high school basketball) had previously forbidden me in my sophomore and junior years of high school from participating in sports. Long story short. I tried on two occasions to join sporting teams. First, I expressed interest in the track and field team, and she evaded my request to join. I then tried again by joining the wrestling team only for her to demand that I quit. So going into this I had to master deception to pull off this gift, which was to train without my grandmother being aware.

I began my training at the top of the new year. During the first week of January, I saw Big B. It was an unseasonable cold winter in Columbia. Perhaps most surprising of all was that there was snow on the ground. And while his home was only approximately 14 miles from the rural Black

neighborhood I came from, it felt worlds apart. Outside of venturing forth to become a professional wrestler, this was the first time that I had gone to a white person's home. Despite school systems having been desegregated decades prior to me attending first grade, residential racial segregation had such a social inertia and order the realities of white and Black folk's lives in South Carolina to a strong degree. This was even more so on my mind as I had a month prior visited my grandfather's brother, my great uncle, and his family in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. That experience shifted how I understood the politics of race and the racial atmosphere of Alabama unsettled me so much that lingered on my mind months after I had left. That visit was key to me learning how place impacted things. While I had grown up in South Carolina and learned the "rules" of that place, Alabama was so radically different, with different "rules" and an atmosphere that evoked a decidedly different emotional response from me. So, as I drove to meet Big B at his house in a working-class neighborhood in section of Columbia, I did not frequent I was excited but also quite nervous as I did not know what to expect.

Meeting Big B left quite the initial impressions on me. Here I was Black, 17, 5'9 and 160 pounds and there was Big B, white, mid 30s, 6'3, and over 330 pounds with an inordinate number of tattoos all over his arms and upper torso. Outside of a tv show or a movie, he was unlike anyone that existed in life at the time as only a handful of times had a white person come to my home and when they did, they were married to a relative. Yet despite me being not quite sure how to interact with him, our initial conversation was positive as we were able to build a rapport. I explained to him that I was only 17 but I would be 18 in a few months and that I wanted to become a professional wrestler. He told me that while he had a day job, he wanted to open a wrestling school. He said that I along with 2 other young men would be in his first set of students. He let me know that he had been trained by a former WWE female wrestler who

worked for the company during the 1980s and that he very much had an old school wrestling mentality. Our conversation also shifted to money, and he explained how much the training would cost. However, because I was only 17, he would work out a payment plan for me. He said that we would begin in a week on a Saturday and in that moment, I felt like I was well on my way to becoming a WWE superstar.

The first day of training can best be described as always expect the unexpected because in the world of pro wrestling nothing is as it truly seems. I returned to Big B's house the following Saturday after our initial meeting. We went to this backyard, and I was immediately captivated by the sight of various pieces of a pro wrestling ring. It was explained to me that part and parcel of training to become a professional wrestler is to learn how to put the ring together and apart. So, before we took our first bump, me and the other trainees had to put the ring together. It had been explained to me during my initial meeting with Big B that we would only be training in his backyard for about a month as he was currently looking for locations for his wrestling school. We would later think that this was an exaggerated truth. And while the idea of training outside conjured ideas of Backyard wrestling which put bad taste in my mouth as that was a form of pro wrestling that was devalued and looked down upon. I was just happy to be near an actual wrestling ring that I internally downplayed my apprehension about training outdoors.

Meeting Medium D and Little B proved to be both the greatest thing and worst thing about my training. Both were older, Medium B being 25 and Little B being 21. Further, while Medium B was a white veteran of the Army, college student at the University of South Carolina, husband, and father of 3 small kids; Little B was 21, Black, a bodybuilder and college student at Benedict College, a Historical Black College and University. These two men became my brother in arms and in many ways guided me as "the baby" of this motley crew of aspiring pro wrestlers. And

while they were supportive of me, an undercurrent emerged between Little B and myself as the only two Black men. He became the favorite of Big B with Medium being the middle child and I the baby became the dark horse who was overlooked and underestimated at least at first.

Training to become a professional wrestler is a brutal ordeal. It is quite easy to assume because of what you see on TV or the constant decree that it is “fake” that learning how to become a professional wrestler is easy. But pro wrestling is an iterative process of practice, pain, and personality. Beginning with practice. The first thing you learn how to do is to bump. To bump is to learn how to take the move correctly. You practice bumping over and over until it becomes second nature. Now there is pain. When learning how to bump you must condition your body to the pain of the bump. Some bumps are more painful than others, but pain is part and parcel of this industry. Pain of the mind and the body. Your body must adjust to taking the punishment. Athleticism is only one part of the equation to becoming a good wrestler. Then there is personality. You can be athletic and be unable to translate that into becoming a good professional wrestler. Personality and charisma are essential characteristics needed to become a professional wrestler. Your personality is connecting to an audience and performing a character that generates affect. Each of them constitutes the raw building blocks that makes a good professional wrestler. But as each of us learned, being a part of the business is on so much more than simply becoming a good wrestler.

The six months of training that Little B, Medium B, and I had in many ways encapsulated the professional wrestling industry. We built bounds quickly but also fought with each other but also united against Big B in the end. While we learned how to work in the ring, bump (fall) correctly, and become effective characters in the ring, we witnessed the double-sided nature of pro wrestling. We learned quickly that what you see is not always what you get, and a friend today is

not necessarily a friend tomorrow. We learned that that this sport, this art form, on the margins of popular culture was a complex constellation of people trying to live out their dreams in the best way they knew how. Sometimes that meant that heroes become villains and villains became heroes both in the ring and behind the curtain.

Introduction: Wrestling with Ourselves

As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.

Proverbs 27:17

On the March 31, 2019, episode of *Last Week Tonight*, John Oliver devoted an entire episode to deliver a scathing critique about the labor practices of the World Wrestling Entertainment (*WWE*).¹ He began the episode by proclaiming that he was a fan of pro wrestling. He utilized and leveraged his cultural knowledge as a fan to provide history, context, and to “takedown” the WWE and its chairman, Vincent K. McMahon. This “takedown” was couched in a humor laden discourse fueled by intimate knowledge that only a fan would know. He delivered pithy one-liners, as he and the studio audience relived footage of key moments in WWE history such as Stone Cold Steve Austin’s Beer Truck assault on Vince McMahon, Mick Foley going through a flaming table and being thrown off the top of a Hell in a Cell cage, and the clash between the Big Show and Braun Strowman that collapsed an entire wrestling ring. Once he established himself as a fan, he talked about the precarity of pro wrestlers in the WWE. First, he illustrated this by comparing the life expectancy of pro wrestlers with those of football, basketball and baseball players. His graph showed that wrestlers died at a much earlier than other athletes. He then pivots to explain how the current industrial landscape came to be dominated by the WWE. When Vince McMahon purchased the WWE from his father in the 1980s; he dismantled the previous

¹ Last Week Tonight is popular show on HBO. The show is hosted by John Oliver. This was a widely popular episode at least on social media as the YouTube episode has approximately 7.2 million views with 165,000 thumbs ups and 5,5000 thumbs down. It should be noted that this is not John Oliver’s first time doing a WWE segment as he done others in the past. He did one last year when the WWE established a relationship with the Saudi government and did PPV event last May despite a lot of criticism from many media outlets.

pro wrestling industry structure through the destruction of the territory system which had been in place for over 40 years. He continued this commentary by proclaiming that despite the great fiscal success of the WWE, the wrestlers were not even “real” employees. He explained that WWE wrestlers were in fact independent contractors. He utilized the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) definition of independent contractors. The IRS defines independent contractors as “an individual in business for themselves, providing goods or services to another individual or business”.² Oliver makes the point of explaining that the IRS states that “you are not an independent contractor if you perform services that can be controlled by an employer (what will be done and how it will be done).” Because the WWE signs pro wrestlers to contracts which prohibit them from working outside of the WWE, they are independent contractors in name only. They do not have access to any of the benefits that an independent contractor normally would have. At this moment, there are approximately 3 WWE wrestlers who have requested their release. Their request has been denied and they are forced to wait for their contracts to expire before they can work for another promotion. And when that contract expires, they then have a mandatory 90 day non-compete clause which prevents them from doing anything wrestling related for 90 days.

He ended this episode with a funny montage segment which said, “he wished he lived in a world where his favorite wrestlers would be able to live until their 60s, to their 70s, have health care, pensions, and be able to enjoy their lives”.³ This segment made me do some introspection as I myself wanted to become a wrestler when I was 17 and it made me wish I lived in a world where

² “Independent Contractor Defined | Internal Revenue Service,” <https://www.irs.gov/businesses/small-businesses-self-employed/independent-contractor-defined>.

³ WWE: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO), 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m8UQ4O7UiDs>.

Black wrestlers won championships, where their labor was not taken for granted, and where they were treated with dignity, care, and compassion.

On April 7, 2019, WrestleMania 35 took place.⁴ This was exactly one week after John Oliver's episode. This episode sent shockwaves throughout the wrestling and non-wrestling communities. Those in the pro wrestling community were not surprised as the precarity is known by all, accepted by those at the top, grudgingly tolerated by many, and suffered through by those trying to work their way up the industrial ladder of the industry. However, this information was new to many people outside of the industry. They expressed their confusion, sadness and in some cases anger all over social media. Many were taken aback by this information because they see celebrities (or micro celebrities in the case of pro wrestlers) as having some measure of power, privilege, and excess capital. Because of the timing of this episode, the WWE was quick to respond by stating that "Oliver's segment was one-sided, did not provide accurate representation of WWE of the progress made in the last 20 years and the WWE's wrestlers were well looked after". Even he was reported that they invited him to WrestleMania. This sentiment was reiterated when TMZ accosted Paul White (The Big Show) a long-time employee of the WWE and asked him for his opinion of John Oliver's segment. White responded ambivalently stating "everyone has a right to their own opinion, but I have had a long career and we all know the risks when we step in the ring... it's a part of the industry".⁵ While this mentality is shared by many veterans in industry, many recognize that the WWE has them in a chokehold and that they are or can be in a perilous predicament if they are injured. Jesse Ventura, pro wrestler and the former

⁴ WrestleMania is the largest PPV of the Year of the WWE. It is the equivalent of the Super Bowl (NBA Finals). In the last 5 years, it has become not just a WWE event but a pro wrestling event as fans and wrestlers from all over the world congregate for a jam packed wrestling weekend that begins on Friday and ends on Sunday with many non-WWE organizations putting on shows or having wrestlers of yesteryear make appearances.

⁵ Big Show Says John Oliver Is Wrong About WWE | TMZ Sports, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=srGEBTT2ETI>.

governor of Minnesota, attempted to unionize wrestlers in the WWE (then WWF) in 1986. In a YouTube shoot interview, Jesse Ventura explained how this attempt was thwarted by Hulk Hogan informing Vince McMahon of this unionization attempt.

Despite John Oliver's segment, WrestleMania 35 was a huge success as it simultaneously boasted a record attendance of 82,265 people while earning 16.9 million dollars becoming the highest grossing sporting event in the history of the MetLife Stadium.⁶ Yet even with this success, social media commentary hints at a renewed interest in not only talking about but fixing the precarity of pro wrestlers in the industry. This interest is both internal and external to the pro wrestling industry as fans, pro wrestlers and other industry professionals (bookers, agents, commentators, costume designers) on social media are having more conversations about the exploitative practices of this company and how wrestlers are treated. Furthermore, with the changing landscape of wrestling due to an adjusted business model.⁷ The new competition that has emerged in the US (externally and internally) has acknowledged the precarious nature of independent contractor status and have started conversations about changing pay structure and adjusting gender disparity in the salaries of pro wrestler. Most notably this can be seen in the new US based promotion, *All Elite Wrestling* (AEW) helmed by former WWE star Cody Rhodes and Tony Khan, a co-owner of the Jacksonville Jaguars. Abroad this can be seen in the UK based promotion, *World of Wrestling Sport*, which happens to be the first wrestling company on record

⁶ On WWE.Com, they did a write up about the success of WrestleMania providing historical context. Mania 35 is seen as being the most successful mania to date.

⁷ In chapter three, I make the argument that WWE Streaming has allowed the WWE to remake territories globally as they are using these services to penetrate new media markets and they are hiring new talent from across to globe to appeal to these markets which the goal of sitting on their own mini territory once they have momentum. UK NXT is indication of this process as they were made a physical territory last summer. This has had huge impact on the local British wrestling scene. They have outlined a plan that they would replicate this in Japan, Australia, with long term hopes of doing this in China, India, Latin America and the Middle east. Huge markets that do not have any wrestling presences aside from them.

to give pro wrestlers access to health care and benefits via a union agreement. All of this has put the WWE's relationship with pro wrestlers on the radar of the fans, the wrestlers, and industry insiders as they must now navigate and negotiate wrestler precarity in the public eye as a publicly traded company.

Just one year later everything would be upended because of the Covid-19 Global Pandemic. The WWE response to the pandemic verified every single critique that John Oliver levied against them. WWE is indeed a precarious space, but even more sadly it is not just the WWE, it's the entirety of the professional wrestling business. It is an industry that is built on precariously precarious labor. With those most vulnerable being the ones that would not survive the instability of this historical moment.

Why Pro Wrestling

Pro wrestling is a multibillion-dollar transnational industry that fuses the physicality and raw excitement of sports with the high drama and immersive quality of daytime soap operas. It has been an indelible part of American culture for over 100 years despite being situated on the margins and in the periphery of the US cultural imagination.⁸ Nonetheless, the largest pro wrestling promotion in the world is in the US. In 1980, *World Wrestling Entertainment* (WWE) was formed through the forced consolidation of multiple US wrestling promotions to become the World Wrestling Federation that would later through litigation be renamed to the WWE.⁹ And while it is not the only pro wrestling company in the US, the WWE has become synonymous

⁸ Sharon Mazer, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998).

⁹ Tim Hornbaker, *Death of the Territories: Expansion, Betrayal and the War That Changed Pro Wrestling Forever*, 1st edition (Toronto, Ontario, Canada: ECW Press, 2018).

with pro wrestling. In 1999, the WWE became a publicly traded company that has dominated the pro wrestling media landscape for nearly 20 years.

And while the WWE has been understood as a lesser form of entertainment due to pro wrestling's predetermined match outcomes, it was declared an essential service by the governor of Florida on April 9, 2020. However, this designation did not prevent a wave of furloughs and firings that commenced on April 15, 2020, which have continued well into 2021. These firings and furloughs sent shock waves through the pro wrestling community as wrestlers inside and outside of the WWE were impacted as the independent wrestling scene came to an economic standstill due to Covid-19. The WWE's contract structure, which allows wrestlers to be fired at will while simultaneously being unable to quit, illustrates the precarious precarity that has always been present in pro wrestling. Further, it highlights one of the key features that makes it organizationally distinctive from other sport organizations (NFL, NBA, MLB) and the television and film industry. Organizationally, professional wrestling sits firmly between these industries despite not sharing any of these organizations labor protections such as unionization. Thus, the pro wrestling economy presents us with an interesting set of social, cultural, and economic conditions as it works with, but also outside of, and sometimes against, formal and informal economies in the US.

Wrestling with the Scholarship

As Roland Barthes exclaims pro wrestling “is the spectacle of excess.”¹⁰ Despite this excess, pro wrestlers wrestle with scarcity the entirety of their careers. This ultimately positions this project

¹⁰ Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Cultural theorist Roland Barthes is one of the earliest scholars to have written about pro wrestling. In *Mythologies*, Barthes framed pro wrestling as a spectacle of excess. I use Barthes language to frame that pro wrestling is a

to utilize the pro wrestling economy as stand in for the US economy which allows for to better understand sets of relations, processes, and systems that produce, reproduce, and intensify labor precarity in the US. The pro wrestling economy is an excellent case study to utilize as it can provide us with proactive solutions to mitigate harm in future and ongoing ecological, political, and economic crises.

The study of pro wrestling as an academic subject has primarily focused on examining its cultural production and gendered performance, audiences constitution/fandom, and a categorization of the type of media text that it is and how that media text is understood.¹¹ Other scholars focus their intellectual labor into examining the rhetoric around professional wrestling, how it's been shaped by technological innovations, and more explicitly what is the form, function, and changing dimensions of kayfabe in the business.¹² However, my work aligns with scholars who have begun to think through labor and materiality within the professional wrestling

spectacle of excess in its pageantry (costumes, lights), sounds, in ring action despite being precarious in its remuneration and labor policies.

¹¹ Chad Dell, *The Revenge of Hatpin Mary: Women, Professional Wrestling and Fan Culture in the 1950s* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006); Nell Haynes, "Kiss with a Fist: The Chola's Humor and Humiliation in Bolivian Lucha Libre," *Jls Journal of Language and Sexuality* 5, no. 2 (2016): 250–75; Heather Levi, *The World of Lucha Libre: Secrets, Revelations, and Mexican National Identity*, Illustrated edition (Duke University Press Books, 2008); Benjamin Litherland, *Wrestling in Britain: Sporting Entertainments, Celebrity and Audiences.*, 2018, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9781351180443>; CarriLynn D. Reinhard and Christopher J. Olson, eds., *Convergent Wrestling: Participatory Culture, Transmedia Storytelling, and Intertextuality in the Squared Circle*, 1st edition (Routledge, 2019); Caroline N. Bayne, "Feminist, Yet Not: Professional Wrestling and the Irreconcilability of the Feminine and the Feminist," *Cinephile: The University of British Columbia's Film Journal* 13, no. 1 (March 1, 2019): 39–45, <https://doi.org/10.14288/cinephile.v13i1.198200>; Nicholas Sammond, ed., *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2005).

¹² Jessica Fontaine, EERO LAINE, and Micheal Altman, "Toward a Work-Shoot Approach to Kayfabe in Professional Wrestling," *Pro Wrestling Studies Journal* 3, no. 1 (2022): 1–15; Brian Jansen, "'It's Still Real to Me': Contemporary Professional Wrestling, Neo-Liberalism, and the Problems of Performed/Real Violence," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 50, no. 2 (July 1, 2020): 302–30; Lisa Jones, "All Caught up in the Kayfabe: Understanding and Appreciating pro-Wrestling," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 46, no. 2 (May 4, 2019): 276–91; David S Moon, "Kayfabe, Smartdom and Marking Out: Can Pro-Wrestling Help Us Understand Donald Trump?," *Political Studies Review* 20, no. 1 (February 1, 2022): 47–61; CarriLynn D. Reinhard, "Kayfabe as Convergence: Content Interactivity and Prosumption in the Squared Circle," in *Convergent Wrestling* (Routledge, 2019).

industry.¹³ Further, my contribution wishes to push a much needed analysis of race and racialization, in my case Blackness, as many scholars do not interrogate how race has shaped the professional wrestling industry.

My work is building off a current body of scholarship that is thinking about precarious labor in combat sports and the performance arts.¹⁴ McClearn argues that “the under-fulfilled promises of representation motivate unpaid and underpaid fighter labor that ultimately benefits the UFC to a much greater degree than it does the fighter themselves”.¹⁵ And while mixed martial arts (MMA) is a younger sport than pro wrestling (and boxing), its labor practices are intimately connected as pro wrestling in the US and Japan are foundational to the development of MMA in the US.

McClearn’s work positions me to think across sport organizational spaces to see what institutional structures support precarious labor practices in combat sports. It also allows me to connect my project to labor geography as geography as a discipline does not fully engage with the study of sport despite the inherent spatiality of sports.

Furthermore, the work of contemporary sport sociologist like Ben Carrington and David Andrews who study ways race, power and political economic processes shape and are shaped by sports.¹⁶ The work of Carrington serves as a model for my work as he frames the Black athlete as a contested dynamic political category with agency.¹⁷ Building from him, I add to this

¹³ Broderick Chow and Eero Laine, “Audience Affirmation and the Labour of Professional Wrestling,” *Performance Research*, June 24, 2014.

¹⁴ Eero Laine, *Professional Wrestling and the Commercial Stage*, 1st edition (Routledge, 2019); Jennifer McClearn, *Fighting Visibility: Sports Media and Female Athletes in the UFC*, First edition (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2021).

¹⁵ Jennifer McClearn, *Fighting Visibility: Sports Media and Female Athletes in the UFC*, P.4

¹⁶ David Andrews, “Sport, Spectacle and the Politics of Late Capitalism: Articulating the Neoliberal Order,” in *Routledge Handbook of Sport and Politics* (Routledge, 2016); Ben Carrington, “The Critical Sociology of Race and Sport: The First Fifty Years,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 39, no. 1 (2013): 379–98.

¹⁷ Ben Carrington, *Race, Sport and Politics: The Sporting Black Diaspora* (SAGE, 2010).

theorization by also considering the labor and cultural production of Black athletes as a point of entry to understand the relational nature between Black culture and Black economies.

Unlike football, basketball, or baseball, there is not a primary pipeline for pro wrestling training. Because of this lack of industrial pipelines, this industry works outside of traditional norms.¹⁸

While every state has a board that can choose to issue or not issue a pro wrestlers license, there is no formalized training or organization to monitor the sport. As a result, pro wrestlers who are considered” independent wrestlers”, those who are not signed by a major company aka not signed by the WWE, are left to their own devices for health care, training, gear, and bookings.

Furthermore, payment of services is often disputed as there is a culture of promoters not paying talent on time or at all. This culture pervades wrestling across the world but there are slight differences between payment and booking practices in the US, Mexico, Japan and Europe.

Because of this economic scarcity, numerous alternative economies have emerged as a means of survival for the pro wrestlers who hope one day to make it to the WWE.

Wrestling with Racial Capitalism

Racial capitalism at its core is linked to the Black radical tradition and sees that capitalism and race/racism are not disconnected formulations but are co-constitutive of the other. While I build on the work of Cedric Robinson, I am also in conversation with many other scholars across several fields, including Black studies, sociology, history, ethnic studies, anthropology and

¹⁸ Joe Otterson, “WWE Selects 15 College Athletes for First NIL Program Class,” Variety (blog), December 8, 2021, <https://variety.com/2021/tv/news/wwe-nil-program-class-1235129204/>. Now this has recently changed after NIL was implemented by the NCAA. The WWE was quick to make a NIL pipeline into their training system NXT.

cultural studies who are having critical conversations about racial capitalism.¹⁹ Popularized by Cedric Robinson, this school of thought has experienced a resurgence in recent years and has circulated across disciplinary borders.²⁰ This intellectual surge is pushing scholars to rethink how we understand the relationship between race/racialization, asymmetrical power differentials, and political economies in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Racial capitalism can be defined as an understanding that capitalism in its very construction is shaped by the forces, structures, and logics of race and nationalism.²¹ Robinson sees an intimacy and connection between race and capitalism that cannot be decoupled in understanding how difference orders social reality. However, with the circulation of this concept and the intellectual engagement that comes along with it, analytical tensions around the use and deployment of the term have emerged. In a recent essay, sociologist Julian Go contends that these tensions are centered around three issues: racial signification, a lack of theoretical depth, and an understated or over inflated relationship between racism and capitalism.²² However, I push back at this argument as I would suggest that these issues are intellectual growing pains that all ideas go through. And it's less about racial capitalism as a framework and more of a structural issue about the way ideas, terms and phrases are adapted and disseminated across academic and lay audiences. Furthermore, while I agree that there needs to be a concerted effort to resolve some of

¹⁹ Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity* (UNC Press Books, 2016); Peter Hudson, "Racial Capitalism and the Dark Proletariat," *Boston Review* 12 (2017); Jordanna Matlon, "Black Masculinity Under Racial Capitalism," *Boston Review*, July 12, 2019; Jordanna Matlon, "Racial Capitalism and the Crisis of Black Masculinity," *American Sociological Review* 81, no. 5 (October 1, 2016): 1014–38; Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Unpayable Debt*, Sternberg Press / *The Antipolitical* (Cambridge, MA, USA: Sternberg Press, 2022); Kendra Strauss, "Labour Geography III: Precarity, Racial Capitalisms and Infrastructure," *Progress in Human Geography* 44, no. 6 (December 1, 2020): 1212–24

²⁰ Justin Leroy and Destin Jenkins, eds., *Histories of Racial Capitalism*; Robin D G Kelley, "What Did Cedric Robinson Mean by Racial Capitalism?" *Boston Review* 12 (2017): 1; Julian Go, "Three Tensions in the Theory of Racial Capitalism," *Sociological Theory*; Michael Ralph and Maya Singhal, "Racial Capitalism,"

²¹ Cedric J Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

²² Julian Go, "Three Tensions in the Theory of Racial Capitalism," *Sociological Theory*

the issues of misapplication that Go suggestions, but I only see this being resolved through a thorough engagement with Black studies by scholars inside and outside of the field. In other words, scholars from all positionalities must engage with Black thought critically and reflectively.

As Jodi Melamed reminds us, when thinking about what racial capitalism is and what it is not, we must not disentangle it fully from the Black radical tradition because as she explains “the Black radical tradition is antiracist, anticapitalism, and collective making because it is a name for struggles that arrange social forces for Black survival over and against capital accumulation”.²³ Furthermore, these diverse engagements grant us a bountiful cadre of thinkers to help us think about this concept in new diverse ways which engender new intellectual formations and theoretical permutations. This is illustrated in the work of Breanna Bhandar. In *Colonial Lives of Property*, Breanna Bhandar draws upon the intellectual work of Robinson to change how we understand and grapple with the notion of property at the intersections of race, ownership, and power.²⁴ She builds upon Robinson’s concept of racial regimes. Racial regimes are defined as “unstable truth systems”.²⁵ Framing racial regimes in this way gives Bhandar analytical flexibility and what she calls contingency, which allows her to think through how power functions. Which, as she explains, frees her from thinking about a set of power relations merely existing. Building from both Bhandar and Robinson, I use racial capitalism and racial regimes to think about the ways Black wrestlers are constructed as subjects in the pro wrestling industry.

Further I push this even further following Melamed and Bhandar by attaching Walter Rodney’s

²³ Jodi Melamed, “Racial Capitalism,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015) P.80

²⁴ Brenna Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership* (Duke University Press Books, 2018).

²⁵ Cedric J Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film Before World War II* P.XII

underdevelopment theory to my understanding of racial capitalism.²⁶ Walter Rodney is another scion of the Black Radical Tradition, and his framework allows for me to think about the ways Black cultural production and labor are intimately connected not only to capital but to relationality of cultural and economic development within the pro wrestling industry. Thinking with Rodney allows me to theorize how value is creatively extracted in a precariously precarious industry.

Wrestling with Black Geographies

Sport geographies exist in a perpetual state of becoming. It has been stated on numerous occasions that “the field of geography has not yet systematically analyzed the sport from this critical vantage point.²⁷ To combat this, I engage with Black and feminist geographies to animate my project that at its very core is a critical sport geography of professional wrestling. In *Space, Place, and Gender*, feminist geographer Doreen Massey reframed the conversation about around space in the discipline of geography. She pushed back against former notions of space that conceptualized of it as static never changing container. She argued that space, like gender, was always being constituted and reconstituted.²⁸ I marry this framework to the conceptualizations that argue that like gender, space was always already racialized.²⁹ I then suture these to the work of Katherine McKittrick. Building off conversation between Black studies and critical geography, McKittrick brings forth a new way to understand spatiality through Black geographies. She defines Black geographies as ““subaltern or alternative geographic patterns that

²⁶ Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2018).

²⁷ Natalie Koch, ed., *Critical Geographies of Sport: Space, Power and Sport in Global Perspective* P. 4

²⁸ Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, 1st edition (Polity, 2013).

²⁹ David Delaney, “The Space That Race Makes,” *The Professional Geographer* 54, no. 1 (February 1, 2002): 6–14; Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Fatal Couplings of Power and Difference: Notes on Racism and Geography,” *The Professional Geographer* 54, no. 1 (February 1, 2002); Bobby M. Wilson, “Critically Understanding Race-Connected Practices: A Reading of W. E. B. Du Bois and Richard Wright,” *The Professional Geographer* 54, no. 1 (February 1, 2002): 31–41

work alongside and beyond traditional geographies and a site of terrain of struggle”.³⁰ So, I take feminist geographies which I connect to geographies of racialization which I then entangle with Black geographies to push geographies of sport to help me understand the way space and place shape the organizational structure of the pro wrestling industry.

One of my primary interventions in the field of geography is to connect political economic analysis of space to cultural geographies through sport geographies. Despite being a critical field, sport geographies have been overlooked and devalued because of the idea that sports are worth the study or provide critical insight into the world. In doing this project, I hope to begin to dispel this notion so that geographers and other scholars who privilege space as an analytic will see the purchase in studying a seemingly mundane and ubiquitous cultural formation as sports.

Wrestling with Abandonment

Ultimately, this dissertation seeks to push our understanding of the way precarious labor impacts racialized bodies and differing subjectivities through a lens of racial capitalism to unpack how Black athletes navigate the organizational spaces of the pro wrestling industry. This project pushes us to examine the ways in which the ideology of meritocracy is interwoven and embedded in logics that frame our understanding of hard work, value, and success in sports. In order to understand how precarity functions within the pro wrestling industry, I have a few provocations that are essential to this project. First, I assert that before there was a gig economy, there was a pro wrestling economy. Essentially, a pro wrestling economy is the gig before the

³⁰ Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). P. 7

gig. Next, I contend that the pro wrestling economy is built on genealogies of precarity that sit on the margins of traditional and informal economies, I define this pro wrestling economy as a Tap Out Economy. Finally, I define Tap Out Economies as economies that are animated by anti-Blackness, never hegemonic, always at the margins, and are always precariously precarious. At the heart of this, at the very root of precarity in professional wrestling is a hyper deregulated organizational space that is organized around abandonment.

Abandoned. Forgotten. Deregulated Regulation. Each of these words describe the material impacts of organized abandonment. Coined by Peter Drucker to define the ways organizations needed to adjust to new economic conditions; it was further theorized by David Harvey to think through changes to the built environment wrought by influxes of global capital, and more recently it has been utilized in the work of Ruth Wilson Gilmore to think about economic crisis and the anti-state state as an apparatus (Drucker, 2013; Gilmore, 2008; Harvey, 2018).³¹ So, for the purposes of this dissertation project, I define organized abandonment as the willful and deliberate ignorance sutured to fiscal negligence, coupled with the systematic disruption of institutional continuity and knowledge. Further when thinking about this through a framing that connects it to racial capitalism that underscored by an understanding that accumulation is tied to the dispossession of Black people, then this concept allows me to engage in a granular analysis of Black athletes looking at the ways they are connected to flows of cultural production and capital accumulation while also being attentive to the disposability as both Black people and as

³¹ Peter F. Drucker, *Post-Capitalist Society*, Reprint edition (New York, NY: Harper Business, 1994); Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Forgotten Places and the Seeds of Grassroots Planning," in *Engaging Contradictions*, ed. Charles R. Hale, 1st ed., *Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship* (University of California Press, 2008), 31–61; David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital*, Updated edition (London; New York: Verso, 2007).

athletes in institutes and systems that discards of their humanity via abandonment while extracting capital (cultural/economic) from them when they are alive and in death.

In this project I theorize that Blackness is a dialectical construct that continually oscillates between legibility and illegibility. These dialectical oscillations allow Blackness to be assumed to be easily and superficially understood and discerned, while also allowing it to be rendered invisible, inert, and inscrutable. Blackness is constructed antithetically to whiteness which then positions it in an uneven relationship that is hinged on them being binaries. Thus, making it everything that whiteness is not while also positioning it in opposition to modernity and later postmodernity. However, as we have learned from Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic*, Black people and culture have never not been modern.³² Thus, Blackness becomes the glue, the thread, and the linkages that frame our understanding of what is good, what is bad, what is human, and what is not. It becomes this “infinite resource” in Western Society (white supremacy heteropatriarchy) that is continually mined for value. Through the organizational abandonment of Black folks in a racial capitalistic system. Black athletes become vectors of capital accumulation, Black cultural production is continually dispossessed at various scales, and the very humanity of Black folks is abandoned so that Non-Black folks can continue to consume Blackness for cultural and economic gain.

Data and Methods

In the essay *Strangers in a Village*, James Baldwin said “People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them”.³³ In this quote, Baldwin metaphorically talks about the relationship

³² Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*, Reissue edition (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993).

³³ James Baldwin and Edward P. Jones, *Notes of a Native Son* (Beacon Press, 2012). P.119

between American history and Black American history. In simple terms, you cannot have one without the other. There is a mutually constitutive relationship between the two yet, Black history in America is often obscured, subjugated, and discarded. However, to find these histories, you need methods that are keen and sensitive to these discrepancies. This informs the methods that I utilize in this project. This dissertation triangulates multiple qualitative methods including autoethnography, ethnography, discourse analysis, archival methods, and digital methods to examine the pro wrestling industry.

Ethnography provides the methodological infrastructure of this project. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz refers to the practice of ethnography as a thick description. For Geertz, ethnography “is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another”.³⁴ Furthermore, as anthropologist Hannah Appel contends ethnography can be used to provide us with” a helicopter window view “.³⁵ This view is neither too far nor too close as its position allows us, in the words of Sara Ahmed, to reorient ourselves to think through power in new ways. This method was employed when going to live shows in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Toronto.

What I refer to as autobiography in some instances, autoethnography in others, and what I occasionally think of as phenomenology constitutes an additional method for this project. Embodied knowledge is essential to this project. Drawing on the work of anthropologist Yvonne Daniels, I use this method to center my personal experience, the affect I have felt, and my experience as a Black male independent wrestler to inform how I see and understand the pro

³⁴ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays By ...* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). P. 10

³⁵ Hannah Appel, *The Licit Life of Capitalism: U.S. Oil in Equatorial Guinea*, 2019 P.3

wrestling industry. As Daniels suggest embodied knowledge is rich and powerful and contributes to fuller more complex understanding of the sociality of the world.³⁶ Following this intellectual thread, I push my project to incorporate embodied knowledge as a central aspect of understanding how Black wrestlers navigate the pro wrestling industry.

Due to the long and rich history of this industry, there must be an analysis of the print culture of pro wrestling. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) and articulation provide a pathway to further examine the organizational structure of pro wrestling. Documents such as newspaper articles, pro wrestling magazines, press releases, and investor reports will be examined to add clarity and depth to understanding the infrastructure of pro wrestling. Fairclough explains that CDA is a form of critical social science geared understanding toward the nature and source of social wrongs.³⁷ Articulation can be defined as “generative concept that can be understood as a way of characterizing a social formation without falling into the twin traps of reductionism and essentialism”.³⁸ Both methods provide the right optic to examine unequal systems of power across race, gender, and organizational space. Moreover, because of their critical positioning they are one of the best tools to examine things that have been erased, suppressed, and disappeared.

Following the work of Historian Marisa Fuentes, I utilize Black newspapers, magazines, and blogs as an archive to frame a history that was lost and hidden. Fuentes explains “that history is produced from what the archive offers” but she goes further to contend that for Black histories, especially those enmeshed in archival and epistemological violence you must “write a history

³⁶ Yvonne Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

³⁷ Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis the Critical Study of Language* (Harlow, Munich: Longman, 2010).

³⁸ Kuan-Hsing Chen and David Morley, *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (Routledge, 2006). P.112

about what an archive does not offer.³⁹ Pushing this position even further, I employ Saidiya Hartman’s method of critical fabulation. Hartmann defines a critical fabulation as “playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view” which then allows us “to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done.”⁴⁰

Because of the importance of digital spaces and practices to this industry as well as the early adoption of technology by wrestling companies and wrestlers, this project will employ digital methodologies. Critical Techno Discourse Analysis (CTDA) will be deployed to understand the ways Black wrestlers and Black cultural operates in the digitally and in the digital organization spaces of the pro wrestling industry. This method allows us to understand the capacious precarity of Black culture in the pro wrestling industry and the subjectivity of Black wrestlers at the intersections of gender and sexuality. CTDA can be defined as a “multimodal analytical technique” that incorporates critical theoretical approaches i.e., intersectionality, critical race theory, etc. to understand the relationship between culture and technology.⁴¹ As Brock states “this approach provides a holistic analysis of the interactions between technology, cultural ideology, and technological practice”.⁴²

This study uses CTDA to analyze discourses that are circulated about Black pro wrestlers on social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Cameo, Twitch and YouTube. Furthermore, this study will focus on subsection of Black pro wrestlers with social media accounts and fan

³⁹ Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016). P. 146

⁴⁰ Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): P.11

⁴¹ André Brock, “Critical technocultural discourse analysis,” *New Media & Society* 20, no. 3 (2018): 1012–30.

⁴² André Brock, “Critical technocultural discourse analysis,” *New Media & Society* 20, no. 3 (2018): P.1013

sites keeping in mind gender, sexual orientation, and company affiliation. The primary source of this data comes from a close reading of message board comments as well as articles posted about wrestlers on wrestling news sites. This study will examine supplementary data from online interviews, tweets, Instagram posts, and podcasts. Each of these platforms contributes to the overall media ecosystem of the pro wrestling industry.

Dissertation Organization

Wrestling with Blackness draws on the Black Radical Tradition, Black geographies, and cultural studies, and a diverse set of qualitative research methodologies to examine Black people in professional wrestling. I examine the professional wrestling industry through an interdisciplinary Black studies framework that is wedded to the relationship between Black cultural production and political economic process. From the work of Stuart Hall and CLR James, I understand that sport and culture are contested terrains.⁴³ I weave discursive analysis across a multitude of pro wrestling media including newspaper articles, documentaries, podcasts, vlogs, blogs, and wrestler interviews to show the multiple ways that labor precarity manifests itself in the professional wrestling industry and how it is animated by anti-Black racism.

As an interdisciplinary Black studies scholar, I am reflective of my positionality as a Black male scholar and former independent professional wrestler. At the time of this writing, I have been a fan of professional wrestling for over 20 years, and I was an independent wrestler from 17 until I was around 19 years old. This situates me intimately to both Black and pro wrestling community.

⁴³ Hall, Stuart. 1993. "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" *Social Justice* 20 (1/2 (51-52)): 104–14. James, C. L. R. *Beyond A Boundary*. Reprint edition. Durham: Duke University Press Books, 1993. Hall and James deeply influence how I think about culture and how I apply that to the study of sports as space of contestation.

Moreover, as a part of my research I became a member of the Internet Wrestling Community where I participated in the fandom weekly, in group chats, and in Twitter Spaces. I acknowledge that my experiences and identity inform not how I understood the texts that I interpret, but it informs the academic knowledge that I produce.

This dissertation oscillates between scales as I move between the micro and macro, internal and external analyses of the industry. I wrote a preface to introduce the reader to the world of professional wrestling through my point of view. I follow this with three vignettes that are aligned with three chapters that examine different aspects of Blackness and labor precarity in the industry. My method is framed by my hope to provide both a critical analysis and deep description of the practices, processes, and norms of this woefully understudied industry. I approach this project with great enthusiasm and a deep affirmation of the wrestlers who have come before me, the ones who are presently in the industry, and those who will be the future of the business.

Vignette 1 reflects on the relationship that I had not only to my training but to the wrestling gimmick that I choose to portray. The wrestling gimmick is a powerful vehicle to tell a story, yet it opens you up to being extremely vulnerable. This entry also speaks to the relationship between myself and the group that I trained with. Friendship in wrestling and the bonds that you form through training are important to a sustainable career in a harsh and overly precarious business. A scarcity mindset persists in this business, but the early days of my training showed me that it might be possible to work around and through those industrial norms.

Chapter 1 “Wrestling with Thee Gimmick” uses the wrestling trio the New Day to think about the way Black wrestling gimmicks function in the industry. I make the argument that the New Day utilizes play to navigate and negotiate the industrial precarity of the business. Further, I

suggest that their strategy of togetherness /collectivity that goes against American individual narratives underline the mythos of hard work and meritocracy allow them to be successful in extremely anti-Black business of professional wrestling.

Vignette # 2 seeds the intellectual landscape for what is to come in the second chapter. I use my autoethnographic experience as a wrestling trainee to think critically about the presence (or lack thereof) of Black women in wrestling during my time as an independent wrestler. Further, I connect this chapter to my grandmother's past as an athlete and her belief that I should not have anything to do with sports. This begins my exploration of precarity in sports.

Chapter 2 "Wrestling with Misogynoir" considers the relationship that Black women have to the professional wrestling business. Using Black women's geographies as an analytic, I argue that despite the erasure and suppression of Black women within professional wrestling they have always been a part of and have contribute to the business in multiple ways. Moreover, I speak about the ways that misogynoir manifests spatially in physical, social and digital space and how those shapes relations of power in the industry. I end this chapter by showing how Black women geographies are so important to professional wrestling and how they are never on the margins but always central to the success of the business.

Vignette 3 has me reflecting on the interconnectivity of the professional wrestling industry. Despite having been just a small time independent wrestling trainee on the periphery of the industry, from day one I was not but three and half degrees of separation from the core, the center of the industry. I think back to how these intimate connections and relationships work for and against me as I tried to embark on my own with our support from my peers or my wrestling trainer. Space, place, and the social relations that are produced play an incredibly important role in this industry.

Chapter 3 “Wrestling with the Digital” examines the way streaming technologies employed by the WWE have reconfigured industrial relations in the professional wrestling industry. I argue that WWE’s deployment of the WWE Network restructured the industry as it shifted not only hiring practices, but the local and global power relations of pro wrestling. As the WWE utilized streaming technologies to reach new global markets their international competitors utilized the same technologies to reach US markets while the smaller US independent wrestling companies collaborated to produce shows that were now national despite not having the “reach” of the WWE. This new dynamic has challenged WWE’s wrestling hegemony.

Vignette 4 is perhaps the most personal of the vignettes as I recall my friendship with the other Black wrestling trainee. I reflect on my initial impressions and how our relationship changed over time. Further, I think critically about what solidarity between Black folks looks like in the wrestling business when it is much more than being cordial but the real labor behind supporting each other. To truly be your brother’s keeper takes patience, takes practice, and takes a lot of self-reflexivity as you must bridge differences despite a similar racialization. This piece also serves as an entry way into the last chapter that thinks about material change in the professional wrestling industry.

Chapter 4 “Wrestling with Progress” examines how material change occurs in the professional wrestling industry. Positioning the WWE as the core and independent wrestlers as the periphery of the industry, I argue that material change actual occurs in independent wrestling scenes as they utilize fictitious progressive changes that are immaterial and plastic that occur in the core to push the entire industry to be more progressive. I use the coming out story of former WWE wrestler Darren Young and alongside the Black Queer centric show *Paris is Bumping* to think through my analysis.

The labor of Black folks is at the center of progressive practice in the US professional wrestling industry. Whether it's through the championing of inclusion by breaking down spatial and industrial barriers or if it is through the introduction of innovative moves, aesthetics, or other forms of black culture. Black wrestlers have contributed so much to a business that has often not reciprocated these affections. Despite often being denied prominent positions in wrestling companies in the ring, outside the ring, and backstage, Black pro wrestling has been integral part of the success and vitality of the business. But these wrestlers can also be assets to those outside of the business. In this current moment where moment of economic crisis Black wrestlers' relationship to the economy have provided others with the blueprints and infrastructure to navigate increasingly precarity of a business that in its conception was already engaging in practices that we continue to deal with the negative externalities associated with late stage capitalism. There Black geographies within pro wrestling are filled with hope, with knowledge, and with love to weather any storm on the horizon.

Vignette # 1: Rolling 3 Deep: What is in a Name?

“So, what is your name going to be, remember it has to be something that stands out”! This is what Big B told me at training, I had to pick a name that grabbed the attention of the crowd. Given this task, I began generating a long list of potential names. I would let Big B know what that name was and then he would ask me character questions. What makes this person tick? How do they talk? Are they a good guy or are they a bad guy? Initially, I decided to think about names that were currently being used in pro wrestling. I figured it might be easy to remix names that already had some traction. So, I would take a first name from one wrestler and a last name from another wrestler and put them together. But nothing I generated stuck, so I moved on to a different method. I was like what about the names of soap opera characters after all pro wrestling was often called a soap opera for men. Both my grandmother and great grandmother had watched soap operas all my life so that inspired me a bit. After I hit the wall with soap inspired names, I even thought about using names from romance novels as my mother was a huge fan and had an extensive collection. But still I could not find a name that I wanted to keep and build a character around. Eventually, I ended up settling or at least initially thinking about the name Rory Fox. I thought it was catchy and different. I wanted something that was not like me at all, I wanted something that was a far cry from DeWitt. I wanted to be someone completely different and not at all like me. Rory Fox was the name I chose. However, it did not last long.

At the beginning of my training, I was heavily concerned with the moves and taking bumps. In my mind my worth as a wrestler was based on how well I could work in the ring. Ring work for me was the standard. Yet as I began to wrestle and learn more about the business, I realized and was told by more experienced wrestlers that the character was key. However, in order to find a

character, one must have a name. So, while the first month and half focused on the basics of ring work, things changed because of an unexpected accident. Big B invited us to an independent wrestling show that he booked for. So, Lil B, Medium D, a few others, and I attended this match. It was meant to be both a bonding experience and a teachable moment. The show was at a bar in West Columbia. West Columbia is a part of town that I nor my family frequented. So, I was very much out of my element. This bar in question was a far cry from places I had been as it was very much a white and rural space, so Lil B and I stood out. At first it was a little uncomfortable being in the space as many patrons were looking at us with confusion on their faces. Reading their expressions, they were very much wondering why we were there. But as the show started, I quickly pushed my weariness of being one of two Black people in this place and focused my attention on the show.

As this was the first independent wrestling show I had ever attended. I was very interested in not only seeing my trainer Big B wrestle, but I wanted to see what the other wrestlers, my community and competition (lol) looked like in the ring. At first the show was uneventful, after watching three matches it became formulaic. It was the typical set up of having a ring announcer announcing each wrestler by name, then the wrestlers would each enter the ring via their entrance music. If the wrestler was a good guy (face) the crowd would cheer but if the wrestler was a bad guy (heel) the crowd would boo. While Big B was not wrestling at the top of the card or as the main event when his match came up, me and my fellow wrestling trainees were excited. His match started off very strong, he played a very good baby face in the ring. He used his size and strength to dominate the opponent, yet he had a crucial misstep in the match that was not predetermined. During a simple sequence of moves, he blew out his knee. He tore his Anterior Cruciate Ligament (ACL). ACL tears are frequently occurring injuries in professional sports,

especially professional wrestling. In professional wrestling wrestlers who suffer this injury are typically out for approximately a year plus as rehab and getting ring rust off is a must after suffering an injury of this nature. So, with this injury occurring so early in our training, everything shifted. Big B would not be able to show us the moves nor wrestle with us in the ring. Consequently, this also begins the shift in our individual and collective relationships with each other and our relationship with Big B. Previously, we were students of Big B but with this change in format we begin to become friends, allies, and co-conspirators. Further due to the severity of Big B's injury, our training which was once closed off to just us and his friend Big T was opened to a series of guest trainers and other local independent wrestlers such as Big M, a Black man in his 40's, and Medium J, a mid-20s white male wrestler and his girlfriend and manager, Keke (a 20 something white woman).

With this huge shift in training taking place, more pressure was placed on us to find characters and incorporate these characterizations into how we wrestled or "worked in the ring". With this push to find character or at least a name that would stick, all three of us had to make some type of adjustment in thinking about our gimmicks. Moreover, we became closer as time went on and stopped thinking about our characters as isolated entities which were exceedingly beneficial to each of us. I shifted my thinking from understanding that the character creation process was an isolated experience and began to think of it as more of a collective experience. Because of Big B's injury, I no longer relayed on him as much as I had and reached out to Medium D and Lil B to talk about what I wanted to do with my character. I was thinking about my character in relation to their characters. The character process for me then went from being one dimensional to multi-dimensional. Further, this character creation took place over a weird period where we realized we were probably not going to ever move from training in Big B's backyard. Initially,

when we all decided to go to him from training, he had assured us that training in his backyard with temporary. But during this time, we realized implicitly at first that this was a broken promise. While he had technically opened an official wrestling school, it was not in the actual building. While this did add tension to our individual and collective relationships with Big B, our characters started to take shape as we used our frustration to tap in our collective creativity. We became a unit through a variation of a trauma bond. For better or worse, it was us against the world. Medium D became the Reverend Sadie Grimm, Lil B became Father Dragon, and I became Deacon frost. I took inspiration from the comic book character as Deacon Frost was a vampire featured in the Blade comic book. Additionally, Medium A, who was not often around, became Padre Pierson to become a part of what would be our stable. Coincidentally, the fifth trainee, Georgia who we really didn't care for never adopted a persona as he sporadically came to train and never quite got the knack for pro wrestling. He eventually stopped training with us, and we never quite figured out why. So as our characters developed, we began to build move sets, choose costumes, and characterizations that complement each other. We became a cohesive unit that wrestled together and had each other's back. Being the youngest at 17, I was slotted into a position as the manager (part time wrestler), and they became a tag team.

This this configuration was successful as we became characters that the fans loved to hate. In the South, hypocritical men of the cloth resonated with the audiences. We were hypocrites who weaponized religion to make people feel bad and this generated a lot of emotion, as fans wanted to see us get beat up and lose matches. Now for those who for those who grew up in the southeast, religion is an omnipresent aspect of your life that moves across racial and class boundaries. Religion manifested in folks live in multiple ways, so our group tapped into the regional pathos around religion. As we grew as a trio, we became the ways characters should

present themselves in the ring. We started to think about entrance music and costumes. But understanding how to interact with the crowd only came after we began wrestling live.

As our relationship with Big B deteriorated and as I made my way through my senior year of high school, things quickly began to shift as 8 months later we would begin wrestling at live shows. Through Big B's contacts, we received a weekly booking with a promoter called the Cowboy. We wrestled a show every Saturday for 6 months in Laurens, SC. Laurens is an infamous at least it was to me as it was such an overtly racist place. In the small town, there was a redneck store that had that had white supremacy and nationalist clothing and apparel. While it sold the confederate flag it also had other items that let me know it wasn't the everyday racism that I experienced in Columbia, but something that was quite different. At the time it felt like racism on steroids. The racial geographies of South Carolina are quite interesting as this was in the northwestern portion of the state that is also known as Storm Thurmond Country. Laurens SC was 33 miles south of Greenville and 35 miles south of Spartanburg. So, every Saturday, we would get a car and drive 80 or so miles to Laurens. Often, Medium D or Lil B would drive but I also occasionally was the driver. As we began establishing ourselves as a viable independent wrestling group, our relationship with Big B had become even more strained as the "school" was closed anticlimactically as Big B got married and his wife soon after was expecting a child. The closing of the school and Big B's shifting away from wrestling (for good reason) pretty much put the nail in the coffin in our collective relationship as we felt resentful, and he was frustrated with us for not listening to him.

However, despite our relationship with B falling completely falling apart. As a wrestling unit we excelled and become popular as we started to book more shows across South Carolina and Georgia. Our gimmicks were a hit as we fine-tuned working the crowd in Laurens County

during those weekly shows where we were only paid 5 dollars apiece. One of the major lessons I learned in working the Lauren's crowd was that I could not escape the racism through pro wrestling. Pro wrestling would and could not inoculate me to realities of racism. Despite being Deacon Frost, and coming out in a white suit, often we the crowd expressed their displeasure at me for cheating or cheap shooting the good guys instead of booing me they would call me Lamont Sanford from Sanford and Son. While I had an afro during this time, my character did not resemble Lamont enough for me to be mistaken for him and it seemed to be that at least for this place this was the least racist they could in a town with a shop that catered to white nationalism and neo nazi propaganda. Learning that I could generate a reaction from the crowd even under these racist circumstances was an important lesson for me. For a wrestler, that was the first step to me mastering my craft as a wrestler. You want a reaction whether it's a cheer or a boo, not getting a reaction is the worst possible reaction. Further it made me reflect on the name I initially wanted. Rory Fox. Despite wanting to be a Rory Fox, I was a Lamont to them I was not a Rory, and it became self-evident that names held power. In the name there was power, and it was illustrated in the responses I would receive. As we wrestled in different places such as Myrtle Beach where we were garnered a lot of praise or in Savannah GA, where the crowd went crazy. I listened and learned from the crowd. While I was never called Rory, I never was called Lamont Sanford anywhere else other than Laurens.

Deacon Frost, the Reverend Sadie Grim, and Father Dragon became a formidable trio that was able to book shows and carve out a small niche on the independent wrestling scene. Despite our short-lived shelf life, we became each other's rock in a business that was unpredictable, unrelentless, and full of smoke and mirrors as that Saturday night crowd in Laurens, SC.

Chapter 1: Wrestling With Thee Gimmick

“Practice without thought is blind; thought without practice is empty.”

Kwame Nkruma.

Before the New Day enters the ring, their entrance theme sets the tone. The booming voice of Big E fills the arena by stating some variant of “Don’t you Dare be Sour, Clap with the 5 time Tag Champions the New Day, and Feel the Power”.⁴⁴ Big E’s ad libs are the preface before the New Days theme song “ New Day, New Way “floods the arena with a high energy bustling beat and infectious lyrics that state “ the time is now, the moment is here , Get rid of your fears, there’s no time for the tears”.⁴⁵ The New Day comprised of Kofi Kingston, Xavier Woods, and Big E are arguably one most celebrated tag teams in all of professional wrestling. As a trio, the group has in various combinations won the WWE Tag Team Titles (Raw/Smackdown/NXT) a total of 12 times. Individually, they are equally impressive as Kofi Kingston became the 2nd (in 2019) and Big E became the 4th (in 2021) Black wrestler to win the WWE World Heavy Weight Champion, while in 2021 Xavier Woods won the King of the Ring tournament.

⁴⁴ Big E contribution to New Day’s entrance theme came after the group “got over”. Getting over is wrestling terminology for wrestlers, gimmicks, and finishers becoming popular with the audience. I would suggest that Big E’s ad lib is what Moten refers to as improvisation which is an essential way that he understands Blackness as a concept. Improvisation is a feature that each member of the New Day employee in various ways.

⁴⁵Tufayel Ahmed, “Jim Johnston on Raw 25, Making WWE’s Most Famous Music,” Newsweek, January 22, 2018, <https://www.newsweek.com/raw-25-jim-johnston-man-behind-wwes-most-popular-music-composing-theme-songs-786522>. Former composer Jim Johnston composed this song. He is known for composing very popular wrestling theme songs like the Undertakers and SCSSA’s. Because of the initial gimmick that the New Day was given by Vince McMahon this theme was created in the vane of Black gospel music with an inspirational message. The New day had to take that and spin it on its head to move past Black flat imagery.

While they are undoubtedly extremely skilled in the ring, their incredible success can be attributed to their gimmick. A gimmick that in its initial conceptualization characterized the New Day as three angry Black men with a hefty chip on their shoulder. Upon their debut, white and non-Black fans of color were quick to respond on social media about which previous Black group this reminded them of, many mentioning the Nation of Domination. This annoyed Black wrestling fans as the groups shared little to no similarities outside of being Black and male. At live shows it also fell flat as the crowd were very apathetic to them, but the trio were able to resuscitate this gimmick, and bring it back to life when they infused the gimmick with their lived experiences and elements from their personality like the love anime and video gaming, engagement with Black boy joy, and playfulness interlaced with libidinous humor. When the New Day took control of their gimmick, they changed the course of each of their careers.

This chapter utilizes the New Day as a case study to examine the role of the gimmick in professional wrestling. Moreover, I connect the gimmick to cultural and economic structures that recontextualize the relationship between racialization and political economic processes within, around, and betwixt labor precarity.⁴⁶ In my analysis, anti-Blackness is at the heart of uneven relations of power that are entangled and enmeshed in ideologies that give coherence to the larger logics that broadly frame Black athletes as disposable commodities and fungible subjects. Further, I argue that the New Day utilizes play to navigate the industrial precarity of the professional wrestling industry. Reframing their gimmick from flat and banal stereotypes of “angry” black men, the New Day pivot away from being typecast as one-dimensional men to

⁴⁶ Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, First edition (Univ of Minnesota Press, 2013). In many ways, this portion of my work is deeply inspired by Ferguson and his intellectual need to push sociology. For this project, I am wanting to push geography but also cultural and media studies as I am trying to really unpack the relationship between Black cultural production and political economic processes that extract value both cultural and economic from Black culture. I see culture and economics have uneven but deep intimate and connected relationship with power being the central binding agent.

becoming funny, non-conventional plucky faces or quirky, snarky, and slightly lascivious heels. The New Day seamlessly transitions from face to heel and back again without losing the organic essence of their character as humanized Black men who do not neatly fit inside stereotypical boxes and who audaciously human whether they are good or bad. Through play, the New Day assert their agency and insulate themselves from the harsher elements of anti-Blackness in this business as well as provide future generations of Black wrestlers with a blueprint to at least mitigate systematic precarity. Additionally, I suggest that New Day provides infrastructure for Black wrestlers to transform their gimmicks that might be dehumanizing into something that is human while also giving them perspective on how to be comfortable in the capacious and multifaceted nature of Black experiences.

Gimmicks R Us

In the *Theory of the Gimmick*, Sianne Ngai provides a framework in which she thinks through critically what a gimmick is, what it represents, and how we might understand it. She states that:

“In our everyday encounter with the gimmick, we are thus registering an uncertainty about labor-its deficiency or excess – that is also an uncertainty about value and time. These metrics become inseparable in a system necessitating unceasing innovation as competing capital moves around the world in search of profit, labor from abandoned lines”⁴⁷

While it is very possible that Sianne Ngai might be an ardent professional fan of professional wrestling, it is much more likely however that Ngai has written a text that resonance with an industry that partial operates outside of the popular culture imagery, where it is dismissed as a childish banal low cultural tradition. While the gimmick she speaks to resides outside of the pro wrestling, her approach and framing comes to the heart of the matter of not only the gimmick in

⁴⁷ Sianne Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 2022). P. 1-2

relation to late-stage capitalism but the gimmick that resides in the beating chest of the pro wrestling industry.

For this chapter, the gimmick is one of the driving forces behind the pro wrestling industry. It is more than the character, music, and costumes of professional wrestlers. If the gimmick is the electromagnetic force, then kayfabe is gravity, if the gimmick is light then Kayfabe is heat.⁴⁸ I argue that the gimmick is ideology given body and flesh. The gimmick is the friction of regimes of capitalism colliding against the regimes of race, gender, sexuality, etc. Its racial capitalization realized to the nth degree. It's the way money is made, celebrity is conveyed, legacies are built, and knowledge is transmitted.

Kayfabe and the Realness of it All

Kayfabe is what is real. Kayfabe is what is fake. It is the heart, the very engine of the gimmick in professional wrestling. Understanding kayfabe is essential as it is part of the very fabric of the professional wrestling industry. Furthermore, it gives crucial insight into the ways in which professional gimmicks are constructed, how they function, and in what ways they are deployed. Kayfabe is omnipresent in the business as it creates an underling tension that saturates cultural, social, and economic institutions of professional wrestling. Like pro wrestling itself, Kayfabe is a

⁴⁸Jeremy Rehm and Ben Biggs, "The Four Fundamental Forces of Nature | Space," <https://www.space.com/four-fundamental-forces.html>. I use this metaphor of energy to convey how I see relations of power. Theoretically, I often frame power through how I understand energy in physics. In physics, there are 4 fundamental forces of nature: the weak force, the strong nuclear force, the electromagnetic force, and gravity. I use the metaphor to show the connection between kayfabe and the gimmick as processes of power.

highly contested term.⁴⁹ But one thing they all seem to agree on is the ubiquity of it.⁵⁰ It is slippery, allusive, and built on floating signifiers, significations, and the ideological underpinning of western culture.

Media scholar Benjamin Litherland offers us a few ways to understand kayfabe:

Kayfabe, an old carnival term reflecting professional wrestling's fairground and circus roots, sits centrally in many such accounts, and refers to the practice of sustaining the in-diegesis performance into everyday life.⁵¹

Kayfabe, then, sits at the intersection of these histories: the contradictions, and ambiguities inherent in this type of performance; the sorts of relationship generated between performer and audience; and the different types of work required to uphold these systems.⁵²

As both a scholar and former professional wrestler, I agree with Litherland assessment and his foresight to link kayfabe to the cultural practices of fairgrounds and the circus and more broadly to celebrity culture, but I would also urge him to be more direct and name kayfabe as part of the ideological apparatus that governs hegemony. Kayfabe is a discursive practice that is not neutral, nor does it operate the same way irrespective of race, gender, class, etc. as the originator's relationship to power shifts how kayfabe works and its effects. I argue that kayfabe is deeply imbricated in regimes of gender, sexuality, ability, and most certainly of anti-blackness. Thus,

⁴⁹ Benjamin Litherland, "Breaking Kayfabe Is Easy, Cheap and Never Entertaining: Twitter Rivalries in Professional Wrestling," *Celebrity Studies* 5, no. 4 (October 2, 2014): 531–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2014.981047>; Jessica Fontaine, EERO LAINE, and Micheal Altman, "Toward a Work-Shoot Approach to Kayfabe in Professional Wrestling," *Pro Wrestling Studies Journal* 3, no. 1 (2022): 1–15; Lisa Jones, "All Caught up in the Kayfabe: Understanding and Appreciating pro-Wrestling," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 46, no. 2 (May 4, 2019): 276–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00948705.2019.1613410>; Wilson Koh, "'It's What's Best for Business'—'Worked Shoots' and the Commodified Authentic in Postmillennial Professional Wrestling," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 34, no. 5 (July 4, 2017): 459–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2016.1222573>; DiArron M, "Wrestling with Race: #Kofimania as Social Movement and Kayfabe as Discursive Space," *Pro Wrestling Studies Journal* 3, no. 1 (2022): 81–103; Fiona A.E. McQuarrie, "Breaking Kayfabe: 'The History of a History' of World Wrestling Entertainment," *Management & Organizational History* 1, no. 3 (August 1, 2006): 227–50, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744935906066371>; CarrieLynn D. Reinhard, "Kayfabe as Convergence: Content Interactivity and Prosumption in the Squared Circle," in *Convergent Wrestling* (Routledge, 2019).

⁵⁰ Kayfabe is highly examined topic to the point of oversaturation in professional wrestling. Many pro wrestling scholars focus so much on kayfabe that power and the material experiences of wrestlers and fans do not enter the discussion. It is my hope that my work bridges the gap and shows the connection between the immaterial (discourse) and the very real, sometimes heavy materiality of pro wrestling.

⁵¹ Benjamin Litherland, "Notes on Kayfabe," *Pro Wrestling Studies Journal* 3, no. 1 (2022): 123–28. P.123

⁵² Benjamin Litherland, "Notes on Kayfabe," *Pro Wrestling Studies Journal* 3, no. 1 (2022): 123–28. P.124

kayfabe is about relations to power and how they can manifest through discourses that bring ideologies to life through gimmicks which I surmise is ideology given flesh.

When Kofi Kingston began his wrestling career with the WWE in 2008, he utilized a gimmick that he cultivated on the independent scene in Boston. Kofi Kingston as the name might suggest had a Jamaican gimmick. What is most interesting about this is that Kofi is Ghanaian and was born in Kumasi before his parents migrated to Boston, Massachusetts. His gimmick includes a reggae-based entrance music song entitled *SOS*, primary green, yellow, and black gear (colors of the Jamaican Flag), and Kingston even had a Jamaica accent. This gimmick relied heavily on the fungibility of Blackness. In fact, it was so fungible, that even internally Kingston had to stay in character when answering phone calls from WWE management. And as the story goes when he forgot to do it, so a few years into his career the accent was promptly dropped without an official word or character change. The music, the clothing, all stayed the same, in fact the only time his accent disappearance was mentioned when a veteran ribbed (a wrestling term for a joke) asked him what happened to his accent in a live in ring segment in front of a large audience.⁵³

Kofi Kingston's negotiation of kayfabe is illustrative of the way this process is not exempt from being shaped by Black cultural production. It relies on the unknowability and fungibility of Blackness to resonate with non-Black audiences who often cannot fully "see" and understand Blackness. Kofi Kingston and the New Day use kayfabe to their advantage to ride waves and currents of ideological formations about Black people just enough to be transgressive when the moment allows. I suggest that many Black wrestlers manage Kayfabe so successfully because they are already used to living between worlds (realities of being) via DuBois's notion of a

⁵³ Kofi Kingston on Defeating Chris Jericho & Losing His Jamaican Accent | WWE on FOX, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2prHvZBmbHw>.

Double Consciousness.⁵⁴ Furthermore, Kofi and The New Day are experts at using kayfabe to be transgressive through double speak, banter laden innuendo, and the acute awareness of power relations that is born from precarity and being on the margins. They however couch this in play and jokes which often translate to pro wrestling culture of ribbing. Ribs are jokes that wrestlers play on each other. However, often senior wrestlers use ribbing to enforce hierarchies on younger wrestlers. Ribs operate in a unique duality of bonding on the road and between the scenes but also being tool to control and disempower. Despite this, the New Day has taken an active role and utilized ribs as a part of their gimmick to disrupt the normative practices in pro wrestling. This translates to Black wrestlers being given a greater range of gimmicks and for them getting opportunities to present ideas and bring more of themselves into their characters.

Play in Pro Wrestling

Play (or ludic) is a complex concept. Scholars from multiple fields including but not limited to psychology, philosophy, anthropology, geography and sport studies have engaged in the examination of this concept in hopes understanding its role in society.⁵⁵ While play is often framed as related to games, leisure activities, or the surplus of energy, I see it as a logic that is

⁵⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014).

⁵⁵ R. F. Dearden, "The Concept of Play," in *The Concept of Education* (International Library of the Philosophy of Education Volume 17) (Routledge, 1967); Roberte Hamayon, *Why We Play: An Anthropological Study* (HAU Books, 2016); Benny Karpatschof, "Play, But Not Simply Play: The Anthropology of Play," in *Children's Play and Development: Cultural-Historical Perspectives*, ed. Ivy Schousboe and Ditte Winther-Lindqvist, *International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development* (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2013), 251–65; Lasse Juel Larsen, "Play and Space – towards a Formal Definition of Play," *International Journal of Play* 4, no. 2 (May 4, 2015): 175–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21594937.2015.1060567>; Tara Woodyer, "Ludic Geographies: Not Merely Child's Play," *Geography Compass* 6, no. 6 (2012): 313–26,; Bernard Suits, "Tricky Triad: Games, Play, and Sport," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 15, no. 1 (May 1, 1988): 1–9; Thomas M. Malaby, "Anthropology and Play: The Contours of Playful Experience," *New Literary History* 40, no. 1 (2009): 205–18.

deeply wedded to American exceptionalism through the protestant work ethic and meritocracy.⁵⁶ For the purposes of this chapter, play can be understood as a sociocultural practice embedded in systems of power that are constructed in relation to the idea of work. Because play is often framed in opposition of work, I am interested in thinking through the ways that play informs an individual's relationship to power, both through power being wielded upon to control/harm (precarity) and power being given to or utilized by individuals (agency). With this conceptualization in mind, understanding play becomes tantamount to unpacking culture in pro wrestling as play is one of its building blocks.

Pro wrestling roots are deeply embedded in carnivals and circus culture.⁵⁷ While carnivals and the circus are spaces of spectacle, they can be also understood as cultural hearths of play. Play is part and parcel of pro wrestling and remains an important aspect of the business despite the corporatization via the WWE's hegemonic hold on professional wrestling. So, it is no surprise that play plays an important part in the development and deployment of gimmicks. And for the New Day, this is quite apparent as play is an essential component of the New Day's gimmick. Xavier Woods embodies play as a conceptual apparatus in pro wrestling both in his gimmick and in his practice as a gamer.

In 2015, Xavier Woods launched UPUPDWNDWN, a gaming YouTube.⁵⁸ This channel became so extremely popular with not only within the confines of pro wrestling fandom but also gaming

⁵⁶ I see a relationality between work and play, it's not a binary but works in relation. Further, I think about play as potential disruptor of logics of hard work leads to success as if systematic barriers are not always present.

⁵⁷ Sharon Mazer, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle*, Second Edition, 2nd edition (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020).

⁵⁸ Xavier Woods Extended Career Interview 2020, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tul-xFz1o4U>.

fandom. Furthermore, while it was assumed that Wood's had ownership of this channel it was not the case as he explains who owned the channel in an interview. When asked he stated that:

"For those who have asked – @UpUpDwnDwn is owned by WWE and always has been. Hence why we are allowed to stream on that platform. Unfortunately, at this point in time, we are not allowed to be on twitch but hopefully we are given permission at some point. Hope that clears it up!"⁵⁹

While this was surprising to many fans, this announcement aligns with the underlying politics of the wrestling industry. Ownership is highly contentious in professional wrestling as wrestlers have no ownership over their names or characters unless they file copyright for them.⁶⁰ However, despite not having ownership of this channel, Wood's has been able to carve out a niche of his own that increases his cultural capital not only in wrestling but in gaming community circles. Further, Woods provided the blueprint for other wrestlers who realized the currency in gaming before esports took off.⁶¹ And I would assert that that this YouTube channel primed the pump for wrestlers to utilize the platform Twitch as an additional source of income.⁶²

Moreover, while Woods was not the first WWE wrestler to start a YouTube page, he was the first that was able to seamlessly interrogate it in his gimmick and as a part of his brand in a way that did not disrupt his relationship with the WWE.⁶³ Moreover despite this channel pushing kayfabe

⁵⁹ Sanchez Taylor, "Xavier Woods Reveals Who Owns UpUpDownDown," *WrestleTalk* (blog), May 19, 2021, <https://wrestletalk.com/news/xavier-woods-reveals-who-owns-upupdowndown/>.

⁶⁰ It should be noted that all ownership over characters and names belong to the WWE because they file for copyright. Because of this many wrestlers when they wrestle in other companies have different names, it wasn't always like this but to prevent wrestlers from autonomy during the Monday night wars the WWE made a rule to often not let wrestlers use their legal names in their gimmicks. To combat this, some wrestlers like Stone Cold Steve Austin have changed their legal name to retain some type of ownership of their character.

⁶¹ Justin Barrasso, "G4 Hosting Gig a 'Dream Job' for WWE's Xavier Woods," *Sports Illustrated*, April 27, 2021, <https://www.si.com/wrestling/2021/04/27/wwe-xavier-woods-g4-video-game-show-host>.

⁶² Despite Woods being the host of the channel, numerous wrestlers would make multiple appearances and play games with him. I suggest this show and uneasiness of the pandemic for pro wrestlers created a perfect storm for Twitch to be another way for these independent contractors to make additional money in the uncertainty of the earlier parts of the pandemic.

⁶³ Matt Cardona/Zach Ryder was the first WWE star to have a YouTube channel. His channel was very successful as it generated a lot of buzz and got him "over" with the wrestling fans. Ultimately, however his YouTube channel had a much different relationship with the company. Eventually it was discontinued and in April 2020 Ryder was released as the official start of the pandemic.

to its limit as it featured Woods and other wrestlers playing video games backstage outside of their characters. This channel still operated as an extension of his gimmick as his character when examined has always been about play and Black boy joy. Black boy joy emerged on social media as a hashtag and in many ways served as a counter to hegemonic assumptions about hegemonic Black masculinity which played on stereotypes that constructed them as angry, hypersexual, and hypermasculine while also pushing back at the adultification of young black boys.⁶⁴ Woods both in his wrestling persona and on his YouTube channel, engages in Black boy joy through wacky almost slapstick humor, a full leaning into his Blerd (Black Nerd) identity, and through sonorous laughter, his signature sound.⁶⁵ All these characteristics have become part of his brand as a Black man and as a professional wrestler.

Through play, figuratively and literally via video games, Xavier Woods has been able to weather some of the industrial precarity of professional wrestlers through his labor on this channel.

Woods works in an industry and has a job that is built on a house of precarious cards. Xavier Woods, like the other wrestlers, is an independent contractor who is unable to quit but can be fired at will. However, in his relatively short main roster career has become an almost indispensable member of the crew and has name value in multiple industries that would allow him if ever fired to land on his feet in ways that he would not if he not put time and effort into UPUPDWNDWN.

⁶⁴ Herman Gray, "Black Masculinity and Visual Culture," *Callaloo* 18, no. 2 (1995): 401–5.

Black masculinity in the WWE despite its complexity has always been through gimmicks put into boxes and very limiting categories that lean into stereotypes about Black men. The New Day offers a more nuanced rendering of Black masculinity.

⁶⁵ Jessica H. Lu and Catherine Knight Steele, "'Joy Is Resistance': Cross-Platform Resilience and (Re)Invention of Black Oral Culture Online," *Information, Communication & Society* 22, no. 6 (May 12, 2019): 823–37; Kofoworola D. A. Williams et al., "Examining Hashtag Use of #blackboyjoy and #theblackmancan and Related Content on Instagram: Descriptive Content Analysis," *JMIR Formative Research* 6, no. 8 (August 1, 2022)

Tapping into Libidinal Economies

On Dec 2, 2019, the New Day launched a podcast entitled *New Day: Feel The Power*. This WWE sanctioned podcast can be seen as part of a larger strategy that the WWE uses to increase their social media presence as social media metrics are part of how they prove their worth to shareholders and to media companies for television deals. However, this podcast also served to become what media studies scholars have called Black Digital Enclaves that recreate and replicate the intimate spatial and sonic sensibilities of Black barber and beauty shops.⁶⁶

Listening to this podcast is reminiscence of Black conversations outside of the white gaze, on stoops, in backyards, on the corner, and around the way. Moreover, despite this podcast also making kayfabe in the 21st century just that much harder maintain, it also taps into the ubiquity and the access that fans want to micro celebrity of athletes via social media. As Litherland suggests this intimacy taps into logics that “critics, fans, scholars and wrestlers themselves speak of kayfabe they are using a shorthand term for a set of pleasures and forms of presentation and reception that underpins the celebrity culture more generally”.⁶⁷ There is a unique tension where some want the insider scope and to know slightly more than the next fan. But this podcast did much more than let the fans know slightly more about these men, it allowed them to be human and multidimensional. These conversations became a doorway into the sociality of these three Black men. Furthermore, this space also gave us an unexpected moment where the libidinal economies of pro wrestling were placed front and center.

⁶⁶ Catherine Knight Steele, “Black Bloggers and Their Varied Publics: The Everyday Politics of Black Discourse Online,” *Television & New Media* 19, no. 2 (February 1, 2018): 112–27, Catherine Knight Steele, “The Digital Barbershop: Blogs and Online Oral Culture Within the African American Community,” *Social Media + Society* 2, no. 4 (October 1, 2016); Sarah Florini, “The Podcast ‘Chitlin’ Circuit’: Black Podcasters, Alternative Media, and Audio Enclaves,” *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* 22, no. 2 (July 3, 2015): 209–19,

⁶⁷ Benjamin Litherland, “Notes on Kayfabe,” *Pro Wrestling Studies Journal* 3, no. 1 (2022) P.127

Andre Brock states that libidinal economies underpin and animate the cultural resonance and power of Black Twitter.⁶⁸ Libidinal economies for Brock tap into joy, pain, and ideologies that govern the lived experience. Just as these libidinal economies order social media digital life and eco systems so do they serve as a driving force in professional wrestling. On the January 20, 2020 episode of the podcast when Big E was asked what his dream match would be, Big E explains “ that unlike others, he doesn’t want a five-star match, with high work rate he wants to wrestle Bill Goldberg because he wants to see Big Beefy Men, Slapping meat”.⁶⁹ This proclamation set off his teammates Kingston and Woods along with his college roommate who was a guest on the show into multiple fits of uncontrollable laughter. In fact, they laughed so much that it brought tears to their eyes. This has since become mantra that fans chant when they see two large wrestle each other. Big Meaty Men slapping meat has taken a life of its on and many ways it makes sense coming from Big E is who is the most overtly libidinal of the New Day. This is not to say as a group each member does not engages in antics which can be seen as libidinal as Kofi twerks and Wood shakes his hips (and his hair, that he often presses) with wild abandonment but it to say the Big E has the most fetishizable body of the New Day. He has the largest frame which consists of a very pronounced chest, very thick thighs, and very large and pronounced butt.⁷⁰ In a prior gimmick, he wore a singlet that because of the shape and size of his butt left little to the imagination which made many presumably straight white male fans visible uneasy. Both at live shows and in comments on twitter and in YouTube, comments about

⁶⁸ André Brock, *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures* (NYU Press, 2020).

⁶⁹ “The New Day: Feel the Power on Apple Podcasts,” *The New Day: Feel the Power*. Episode 9

⁷⁰ Of the trio, BIG E is the “thickest”. He is a former college foot player and a powerlifter. His body is the topic of many conversations by fans on social media and on wrestling message boards.

Big E's butt, his ass became a dominate discourse within pro wrestling fandom.⁷¹ And seeming aware of this reaction, Big E has sat on the lap of white male commentators taunting and teasing them. Big E's body tapped into that sexualized undercurrent that irrespective of sexuality Black men evoke when othered via the white gaze.

Big E directly engages and ride the wave of the libidinal economies in pro wrestling to be fully human, to exist and persist in space that it always telling him to be more serious, to be less silly and that the only way he can be successful is by being an individual. Each of these remarks have come from veterans in the business who have always wanted Big E to go solo and leave the New Day behind. However, despite their "wise" counsel, the Hearld of Big Meaty Mean Slapping Meat has continued to be silly and libidinous. In many ways the libidinal phrases and utterances from Big E have taken a life of their own and become an unescapable part of 21st century pro wrestling culture as more than a logos, but as an ethos.

Working the Gimmick

Despite their turbulent origin story as a trio, the New Day has been able to work their gimmick to their benefit in ways few Black wrestlers have previously. Outside of the Rock and perhaps the Junkyard Dog, I would suggest that the New Day are the most popular Black male wrestlers in the WWE of the 20th and most certainly in 21st century. They were given a stereotypical gimmick about 3 angry Black men, given a gospel choir inspired theme, and thrown out to the proverbial wolves (the crowd) with some in the back hoping for the best and others looking forward to them

⁷¹ Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: NYU Press, 2010). In many ways the Black male bodies like Big E are the site for fantasy, pleasure and titillation through a fetishization. Big E 's body I suggest taps into mythos of the Black Buck.

failing to take their spots as wrestling has very much a scarcity mindset built into its precarious landscapes. Yet they were able to infuse authentic aspects of their personality in the gimmick through what Sara Ahmed might call a reorientation to illustrate more complex interpretations of Black masculinity.⁷²

In 2017, New Day shocked the world when Kofimania unexpectedly took center stage in February of 2017. While Kofi was at the center of this storyline, the New Day were key supporting actors and co-conspirators as Kofi has to navigation against the backstage authority and other wrestlers which were symbolic of systematic inequality, unfair rules, and constantly obstacles to win the World Heavyweight Title at WrestleMania 35. Kofi's booking leading up to this historic win has been called racialized booking, which is booking based on positionalities of one's racist.⁷³ Kofimania was very much booked as a black man being against system of oppression as it resonated with not only Black wrestlers and fans, but other wrestlers and fans of color in a way that generated so much affect when Kofi won the title.

In 2020, after the murder of George Floyd, Kofi Kingston and Big E had an in-ring segment where they kneeled and raised their fist. This segment shocked fans not because New Day broke kayfabe, as this falls directly in line with their gimmick, but because this was done in a WWE ring. Vince K McMahon despite his yearly tweets about his love for MLK is very much a conversative White man who is engages in overt displays of anti-Blackness. Furthermore, it has been documented that he has strongly come against Colin Kaepernick kneeling protests as its

⁷² Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, First Edition edition (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2006).

⁷³ M, DiArron. "Wrestling with Race: #Kofimania as Social Movement and Kayfabe as Discursive Space." *Pro Wrestling Studies Journal* 3, no. 1 (2022): 81–103.

industry lore suggests those protests was part of his motivation to revitalize the XFL.⁷⁴ So this moment was pivotal and instrumental as it allowed younger wrestlers with less cultural capital to also practice various forms of protest in a ring and in a company with a history of anti-Blackness. Both instances show materially the ways that the New Day gimmick has shaped and changed the professional wrestling industry. In many ways, this trio has taken their song to heart and not only felt the power but used the power to win championships and speak truth to power, even in the most unlikely of places, namely that of the wrestling ring. Through the performance of their gimmick, this trio has created a very particular Black geography that reframes normative relations of power, even if these disruptions are temporary, they recalibrate socio-spatial practices that are multi spatial and multiscalar, as these process impact and involve physical, social, and digital space as well of the geographical imaginary which is in the realm of ideology.

Conclusion

On April 25, 2023, former WWE writer Britney Abrahams filed a lawsuit against the WWE in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of New York.⁷⁵ While this lawsuit did not evoke surprise from wrestling fans or those who follow the wrestling business as the WWE is constantly embroiled in legal action as plaintiffs and defendants.⁷⁶ The content of this lawsuit

⁷⁴ Pete Blackburn, "No Kneeling, No Criminals: XFL's New Rules Draws Cheers, Jeers on Twitter," CBSSports.com, January 25, 2018.

⁷⁵ Dan Gartland, "Former WWE Writer Sues Company Over 'Offensively Racist' Scripts," Sports Illustrated, April 26, 2023, <https://www.si.com/wrestling/2023/04/26/wwe-writer-racial-discrimination-lawsuit>.

⁷⁶ "WWE Concussion Lawsuit – WWE Concussion Lawsuit Blog," May 18, 2019, <http://wweconcussionlawsuitnews.com/>; Michael McCann, "Detroit Cops Sue WWE's McMahon Amid Shareholder Revolt," Sportico.Com (blog), January 17, 2023, <https://www.sportico.com/law/analysis/2023/vince-mcmahon-sued-by-stockholders-1234701386/>; AG, "Martha Hart Comments On Vince McMahon Suing Her After Owen Hart's Death," WWF Old School (blog), May 16, 2020, <https://wwfoldschool.com/martha-hart-comments-on-vince-mcmahon-suing-her-after-owen-harts-death/>; David Bixenspan, "WWE: The 5 Most Interesting Excerpts from WWE-Related Lawsuit Filings & Case Law," Bleacher Report, accessed June 5, 2023, <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/883214-wwe-the-5-most-interesting-excerpts-from-wwe-related-lawsuit-filings-case-law>; Rob Fahey Contributing Editor, "WWE Sues Jakks and THQ over Alleged Bribery and Racketeering,"

nevertheless did raise the collective eyebrows of the professional wrestling ecosystem as the plaintiff, a Black woman who served as a writer during her tenure, opened a proverbial Pandora's box on how industrial racism operated in the WWE writer's room. She charged the company and a list of individual defendants with "unlawful discrimination and a hostile work environment, as well as unlawful retaliation for complaining of defendants' unlawful employment practices, including her complaints of racial harassment and discrimination, and other wrongdoing".⁷⁷ Further while it's no surprise that the WWE engages in questionable behavior as historically there have been gimmicks that were not only outdated or out of touch but were anti-Black, xenophobic, misogynistic, homophobic, etc. For example, during the Attitude era, a feud between the Nation of Domination, whose gimmick was inspired by the Black Panther party and Degeneration X (an anti-establishment group of white men), Black face was employed when DX did a parody of the Nation in an in-ring promo segment. Additionally, during the Reality era, Vince McMahon in character spoke the N word in a backstage skit with Booker T, a Black wrestler, Sharmell, a manager and Booker T's wife, and John Cena during his previous gimmick as a white rapper who was hailed as the Doctor of Thuganomics. So, pro wrestling fandom is very aware of WWE's history of highly offensive gimmicks. However, this lawsuit did pull back the veil back not only on how gimmicks were created but in what ways they continued to be steeped in racism, most especially anti-Blackness racism, in the contemporary moment.

GamesIndustry.biz, October 20, 2004, <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/wwe-sues-jakks-and-thq-over-alleged-bribery-and-racketeering>; Melinda Fulmer, "WWE Files Suit Against Toy Maker," Los Angeles Times, October 20, 2004, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2004-oct-20-fi-jakks20-story.html>.

⁷⁷ *Abrahams v. World Wrestling Entertainment* 1:23-cv-03109

In the lawsuit, Abrahams recounted multiple instances where Black wrestlers were given gimmicks that were unabashedly anti-Black or told to speak with stereotypical accents and/or dialogue that illustrated antiquated understandings of Blackness. For example, Bianca Belair, highly decorated Black women's wrestler was given a script where she was supposed to say "Uh-Uh! Don't make me take off my earrings and beat your (expletive)!", another gimmick involved Apollo Crews a Black Nigerian American man being instructed to speak in a very thick "Nigerian accent" and still another gimmick wanted a white male wrestler to have a hunter gimmick where he stalked and captured a Black male wrestler who was his prey.⁷⁸ Abrahams did more than use her labor to write storylines, she also used it to inform and education her coworkers about these dangerous, ugly, and distasteful stereotypes repeatedly. Being unknowledgeable about different communities itself is not indictive of microaggressive activities predicated on white supremacist logic, but the repeated inability after it was explained by the plaintiff why that it was offensive or how it might look from the perspective of Black people is what Charles Mills calls epistemologies of ignorance.⁷⁹ The suggestions and corrections that Abrahams offered resulted in workplace hostility and ultimately her unlawful firing from the company because she took a chair from WrestleMania 38, a normative work practice that other writers participated on numerous occasions.

This lawsuit has shown us not only the power that the gimmick has in this industry, but it also communicates the importance of the New Day to the professional wrestling business. The success of the New Day opposes the individualistic attitudes that govern US culture. On their

⁷⁸ Ibid

⁷⁹ Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 1st edition (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999). The epistemologies of ignorance show the mechanisms behind the weaponization of "lack of knowledge", or what I often call strategic ignorance which is utilized to maintain hegemony.

Podcast, the New Day disclosed that they been told internally that for true success they should break up, but they have each responded in various ways some obvious and not so obvious ways, letting their critics know that they are going to do what they want, how they want, and as they are the captains of their ship. They said time and time again that they do not want to break up their group despite veterans in the business giving their opinion that they should. They are living proof that being your brother keepers is not just empty words but can be a generative practice. The power of the New Day is in their collective knowledge, support, and love for one another. Through their gimmick, this trio talks about the power positivity or feeling the power. In many ways they are very aware of the uneven power relations as Black men in an anti-Black world. And while not all Black studies scholars see agency as something they can wield for their purposes, the New Day at least presents us with how Black agency look in pro wrestling that it can be utilized to negotiate space and follow the dreams that one might have.

Xavier Wood is a lifelong wrestling fan and has exclaimed numerous times that he is living his wildest dreams as a member of the New Day.⁸⁰ When he debuted on the roster in a generic dancing gimmick that many Black wrestlers are given as faces, he could have easily been a casualty of this short sightedness. Typically, gimmicks are given to wrestlers without any input from them. If wrestlers do not get over (become popular with the crowd), they languish backstage where they are on the road and attend shows but are not used until they are eventually released, or their contract expires. Fortunately, along with Big E and Kofi, Woods decided to take matters in their own hands by pooling their labor and cultural capital to build characters that tapped into aspects of their personalities. The New Day have not been able to only feel the

⁸⁰ Xavier Woods Extended Career Interview 2020, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tul-xFz1o4U>. In this video, Xavier woods speaks deeply and reflectively about this career, his motivated, why he loves video games, his start with the WWE, how New Day came to be and how he sees himself fitting in the wrestling world.

power, they have been able to shape it, and work with it to make the WWE slightly better for Black wrestlers, to give Black wrestlers in and outside even if just incrementally, a slightly better chance in the business. The legacy that they will leave behind will include colorful costumes, head gear adorned with unicorn horns, obscure references to anime, and pancakes, plenty of pancakes for everyone to eat. But most of all, they will leave behind a legacy the complexity of the Black experience and how collectivity is where power truly resides.

Vignette #2: Absent but Always Present

My pro wrestling journey was intimately connected to the absent presence of Black women in professional wrestling. I did not encounter any Black women while training nor did I encounter any Black women as wrestlers at the shows I worked on. However, my grandmother was absent but always present in the back of my mind as she vehemently disapproved of my interest in becoming a professional wrestler. In fact, my training can be understood as my first attempt to “work” a crowd.⁸¹ In this case, the crowd was my grandmother as I used deception to embark and fund my training to become a professional wrestler.

At the time, my grandmother’s disapproval did not only encompass my participation in pro wrestling it included my participation in all sports. This position frustrated me to no end, and I was stymied. In my sophomore year, she did not support me joining the track team and in my junior year, she made me quit the wrestling team that I joined after two weeks. This puzzled me as my grandmother herself had been a basketball player. In fact, she was the captain of her high school basketball team. Because of her participation in basketball and the constant barrage of questions that I received as a young Black man about why I wasn’t playing a sport, it seemed quite odd that she would be the lone dissenter against me becoming a participant in US sporting culture.⁸²

⁸¹ Work in this context means to manipulate the crowd to garner a reaction. If you are a good guy, then you want to be cheered. If you are a bad guy, you want to be booed. So, in this context I was a teenager aka a heel who thought I was a babyface trying to manipulate my grandmother into believing nothing new was going on in my life.

⁸² US sporting culture as I understood at that time meant compensatory engagement if you were a Black male. The amount of time I was asked if I played a sport or why I didn’t play a sport. Also, this didn’t end after high school as even during college and graduate school. Well into my 20s, I was seen as an athlete first and perhaps a human third or fourth.

After the initial excitement of beginning my journey as a pro wrestling student, I was met with the realities of the day-to-day aspects which included lying to my grandmother to train after school and on the weekends. While at first, I had assumed this deception would be easy, things shifted as the reality of the situation that made themselves visible on my body. The initial part of training is learning how to bump. Once you learn how to safely fall you then learn incorporate that into taking more complex moves alongside learning how to strike your opponent's safely and give moves with precision. However, at the start of this unless you are a wrestling prodigy (those annoying souls exist- Lil B was one of them) you become bumped and bruised along the way.

As I was learning how to bump properly, the bumps, the bruises, and the bloody toes and elbows began giving me away. Because I had not actively participated in sports at such a high level due to sports being prohibited by my grandmother, I did not have a highly developed mind muscle connection.⁸³ This meant that while I was lucky enough to be quite strong, sturdy, and durable I didn't know how to turn my mind off to let my body follow the instructions given to me. This resulted in me taking longer "to get" certain aspects of the training and as a result I would not always tuck my chin or fall correctly. This meant on days when I was not training, I was at 17/18 walking around like a man of 70/75. I was very much walking around like I was Grady from Sanford and Son.

⁸³ Mind Muscle connection is something I learned about way after the fact when I acquired a personal trainer. In layman's terms is the connection between your mind and body, via your central nervous system. For example, having an acute awareness of your body as an athlete allow you to move and adjust your motion without hesitation. Athlete performance is increased with a better mind muscle connection.

It is important to note that learning how to safely bump is pivotal to becoming a proficient professional wrestler. A bump still does damage to the body. A simple back bump where you take a move and fall on your back has been said to be equivalent to a small car accident.⁸⁴ So, as I was trying to stay in incognito about my training, I had tells (signs) that put my grandmother on alert. She was confused by these injuries that began appearing on my body. And while I was preoccupied with keeping up the pretense of my time being spent with my friends studying at the library, my minor injuries began to tell on me.

While my grandmother knew something was going on and asked me multiple times about my injuries. I would not disclose what was going on with me to her, even after multiple inquiries about my condition. She was quite vexed and upset that I was now suddenly very injury prone. However, she did not like my secrecy stop her from learning the truth. She decided to utilize a proxy to figure out what was going on with me and employed the services of one of her close friend's daughters, C. C had always played the role of a big sister to me and was affectionately known as a play daughter to my grandmother. These fictive kinships were bonds stronger than covalent bonds that make up water between C's family and mine. So, because I trusted C and in my teenage mind was able to be "real" with her, after some prodding and questioning when she asked what I was up to I told her that I was training to become a professional wrestler. Basically, I slipped out of kayfabe.⁸⁵ I spilled the beans, and she immediately told my grandmother.

My grandmother wasted no time in confronting me with my deception. But being the brash 17-year-old that I was, I argued back to her that in the past I had tried to go with her to do sports and

⁸⁴ I have heard the bumps are very hard on the body. All bumps are not equal. This should be noted as front bumps, differ from back bumps, and back bumps differ from flip bumps. It's been stated by a few wrestlers that a hard bump equals the impact in a car wreck.

⁸⁵ Kayfabe is such a loaded term in pro wrestling. It's the great white whale so to speak. In this case, I was using it to mean I needed to keep up the lie.

she blocked me at every attempt. So, this time I took matter in my own hands to do what I wanted to do. During the argument neither of us would back down but it ended in a stalemate with both of us knowing where the other stood on the matter. While this was not the last time, that we argued about this, this was the first time during my pro wrestling journey where a Black woman was present in the narrative.

The second occurrence of a “Black woman” entering my professional journey occurred during a conversation I had with my trainer during a training session. Big B would often structure our training sessions so that we were in the ring 1 to 2 hours, we would talk about stuff another 1 hour, and we would work on character for another hour. This varied as it depended on who showed up to the training session. Most of the time it was three of us (Medium D, Lil B, and me) but occasionally the two less frequent members of our group Medium A and Georgia, two additional white men in their early to mid-twenties. Medium A was a likable nice guy and close friends with Lil b, however Georgia lived in the state of Georgia so came to trying infrequently and was overtly racist. We clashed a lot in and outside of the ring. On this day after having a productive in ring session. Big B began talking to me, Lil B, and Medium D about his neighbor the Fabulous Moolah.

The Fabulous Moolah is quite a polarizing figure within professional wrestling. For some, she is the tough as nails veteran and indelible pioneer in women’s professional wrestler and for others she is the devil incarnate who is responsible for much of inequity that women’s wrestlers faced in the US during the 60s and the 70’s well into the mid 90’s. Yet for my trainer, The Fabulous Moolah would be considered a close pro wrestling social relation as he was trained by one of her former students, Susan Green. Because of the closeness to his relationship with Susan Green,

who also lived in West Columbia, a suburb of Columbia, South Carolina and Moolah living across the street from Big B.⁸⁶ The Fabulous Moolah would often come up in conversation.

During one of those conversations, Big B mentioned that some people had assumed that the Fabulous Moolah was passing. My immediate response was passing what? He then looked at me sheepishly and said you know what I mean. I said, “I do not know what you are referring to, so please explain”. He said, “that he had heard that Moolah had Black ancestry and was a Black woman”. Lil B and I immediately looked at each other that I often casually remarked to as Black telepathy or Blackpathy for short, where the only Black people in a space communication with each other without words via a look where we know exactly what the other is thinking. In this exchange, we both shared our incredulity with each other in this conversation and at the fact that this person was being framed as having some proximity to Blackness. Because what about the Fabulous Moolah made them/ him see Blackness?

It should be noted that I had never heard anything about Moolah passing as white before this conversation nor have I heard anything about her passing after it. This is quite telling as Black folks in South Carolina have a very shrewd understanding of the history of Black people, of racialization, and who is racialized as Black. One example of this is the story of Essie Mae Washington-Williams. She was a teacher, an author, a Black woman, and the eldest child of Strom Thurmond. After Thurmond’s death in 2003, she was featured heavily in South Carolina local news cycle with the headline being Extra, Extra Mrs. Essie Mae Washington- Williams is the Black daughter of the former governor, senator, and segregationist. Her emergence as a

⁸⁶ From time to time, we would train at her house and under her direction. Susan Green’s tag team partner Lelani Kai (another student of Moolah’s) coupled with the spatial proximity to Moolah who lived across the street from Big B.

central figure in local media ecosystems of South Carolina served to reignite interests in often latent discourses around race and racism because of Thurmond's history of racism in politics.

Secondarily, however, it illustrated the scope and magnitude of Black knowledge. As I heard from elders in my family and in the larger Black communities that I was connected to, that Black people had always known about his Black daughter and that he had a relationship with her, so this news was only new to nonblack audiences but not to the Black folk of South Carolina. So, for Moolah to have passed as white, with white people knowing this, and allowing her to remain white despite being Black in the south seem highly unlikely as it goes against the racial logics of the south as I know and understand them.⁸⁷ However, this narrative did provide me with food for thought later when I encountered a story years later about an actual Black women's wrestler that Moolah had trained and the alleged abuse that she suffered at the hands of Moolah and her ex-husband and fellow wrestler, Buddy Rogers.

I encountered the story Baby of Sweet Georgia Brown a few years after I had put pro wrestling firmly in my rear-view mirror in 2006.⁸⁸ In the FreeTimes, a local small South Carolina newspaper, Murfee Faulk wrote about pioneering yet tragic career of Susie McCoy who would later become Sweet Georgia Brown to wrestling fans in the 60s and 70s. Because McCoy had passed away in 1989 this article was presented through the eyes of her son who was born 10 years into her career as a wrestler. McCoy was trained by Fabolous Moolah and managed by both Moolah and Buddy Rogers. This began in the late 1950s and extended well into the early 1970s.

⁸⁷ Growing up in SC provided me with a very particular education on race and racialization, even prior to me going to college to think critically about race. I received an education in the day to day practices of being Black in South Carolina.

⁸⁸ Murfee Faulk, "Baby of Sweet Georgia Brown | Archives | Postandcourier.Com

This piece provided a glimpse into the world of professional wrestling that we often are privy to and from perspectives who have been erased from the history of the sport. I was deeply engrossed in this piece initially because despite having stopped training and performing in shows, I still considered myself a fan of pro wrestling. However, the more I read the sadder I became as the story shed light on the cruel realities of the professional wrestling business as exploitive and soul crushing especially to the most vulnerable and those who are the most precarious. This story was chalked full of longing, sadness, and pain not only in the son's search for answers but having to deal with the premature loss of his mother while trying to get some semblance of closure not only about his relationship to her but to the circumstances of his birth which implicated Buddy Rogers, the ex-husband of the Fabulous Moolah.

Unfortunately, the story told in this article is not an isolated incident in the world of pro wrestling. Numerous narratives have emerged over the years showing how injurious the sport has been to wrestlers since it began. These injuries have been just physical, but emotional, psychic, and spiritual as this is a business built on and animated by precarity of the highest magnitude. This article successfully connected the larger shortcomings of the business and then succinctly frames Black women's experiences in pro wrestling during the 60s and 70s. How Black woman in this industry are literally and figuratively wrestling with racism and sexism, how these multiple interlocking systems of oppression within a business that in its creation is already oppressive has built a business where Black women have been present but treated as absent.

In many ways my grandmother's relationship with sports and her views of my involvement in them are intimately connected to her understanding of the perilous potential of my involvement in sports. Institutionally, she learned early on how disposable athletes are as she told me later that she injured her knee at a state championship basketball game when another player tripped her on

purpose. She proclaimed her knee was never the same again. Despite my grandmother's objection to me not only wanting to be a professional wrestler but enduring the training required, she was a fan of the sport herself and is one of the reasons that I watched it. During my early teens, WWE (WWF then) and WCW were something that we watched together. She had been a fan of wrestling herself when she was younger as South Carolina has always had a deep, rich, and complex pro wrestling history. This high despite being disconnected from the sporting pipelines of football, basketball, and baseball is still connected to larger institutions and systems of US sporting culture without the safety net of potential fame and fortune or at the very least a college scholarship.

Thus, pro wrestling for my grandmother became the proverbial boogie man as a harbinger of harm to me, as potential space of my exploitation, and for dreams that Langston Hughes might suggest "cannot fly".⁸⁹

⁸⁹ This is reference to the poem Dreams by Langston Hughes. It's the only Black poetry I remember learning about in the public schools of South Carolina. This poem was introduced to me in the 7th grade.

Chapter 2: Wrestling with Misogynoir

“Above all else, Our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's may because of our need as human persons for autonomy.”

- Combahee River Collective

In 2015, a diva's revolution emerged in World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc (WWE). It was sparked by a twenty-nine second tag team match in the diva's division. This match was the catalyst that ignited a social media campaign by fans of women's wrestling on twitter. Collective Twitter rage made this 29 second match the final straw, as the fandom realized the women deserved much better. They began tweeting the WWE directly, including various memes, gifs, and colorful language to get the point across that the “divas”, these women wrestlers, deserved the same chances and opportunities as the men. Immediately female wrestlers in WWE began to retweet, like, and respond to the outrage of the fans. Eventually this spread as a variety of actors (wrestlers-male and female, referees, bookers, writers, etc.) in the wrestling industry began to participate in this social media blitz. The premise of this campaign centered around equality for women wrestlers and utilized the hashtag #GiveDivasaChance on Twitter.⁹⁰ After trending on Twitter for two weeks, the Chief Executive Officer of the WWE, Vince McMahon and his daughter, the Chief Branding Officer, Stephanie McMahon, replied on Twitter letting the fandom and the world know that they had received the message. Cryptically, Vince McMahon tweeted

⁹⁰ Sarah J. Jackson, Moya Bailey, and Brooke Foucault Welles, #HashtagActivism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice (MIT Press, 2020). Hashtag Activism is a relative research area of scholarship. However Black feminist scholars have done a lot of work theoretically and empirically to think through the impacts of this form of justice. In the case of the WWE, what makes it so interesting is this hashtag was a multiracial group that included straight and queer people. While many of the fans were fans of the women more generally this group included fans who were very anti-Black toward Black female wrestler. It was a very interesting set of dichotomies present.

saying "We hear you. Just keep watching. " Approximately 9 months after this social media uproar, the results of the campaign were realized as a storyline was introduced that focused on 9 divas called the divas revolution. Fast Forward to 2018, and no longer are the women called divas, they are now known as superstars (just as the men are). No longer are the women held back in the ring, they are competing in ladder matches, and headlining shows. And no longer do they compete for a diva's title, now they compete for a woman's title. But the misogyny that Black women experience in this business is very much something that they and the business continues to wrestle with.

Despite the success of the #GiveDivasAChance hashtag, the precarity that Black women in professional wrestling experience was never truly addressed. Initially, many wrestling fans were content and happy with the changes in the division. But within the women's wrestling fandom community, a splintering began to occur as many recognized that despite so much progress being made, an inequity in the treatment of Black women persisted and manifested itself industrially, through the characters Black women were given, through the treatment of Black women by fans at live shows, and through unrelenting microaggressive attacks on Twitter to Black female wrestlers. Despite the unity and cohesiveness that was demonstrated during the social media campaign, a certain pathological disdain that manifested as mistreatment seemed to be aimed at female wrestlers of color, especially those who were Black. These women despite being a part of the diva's revolution that many championed were still deemed unworthy by some fans and were put in a position that exposed their precarity and vulnerability as they could not always respond to fan comments and could not express their views in the same way that their nonblack female peers could or in the way their Black male counterparts could. As bell hooks suggests Black women face a very particular systematic struggle. She explains that:

“No other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women... When black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black men; and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on white women.”⁹¹

This framing succinctly illustrates why a hashtag centered on the uplift of women would always fall flat as the concerns of white women are always centralized. The experience of Black women and other women of color not being address allows for the maintenance of normative power geometries industrially in professional wrestling.

In this chapter, I use the framework of a Black women’s geography as an analytical tool to understand the ways that misogynoir has manifested itself, historically and contemporary, for Black women’s wrestlers. Misogynoir is the interlocking oppressions of sexism and anti-Black racism that Black women uniquely experience.⁹² I argue that it manifests itself as Black women being absence but always present in wrestling. Moreover, I suggest that this framing allows me to explicate the way Black women’s labor is hidden, suppressed, and extracted historically and contemporary. Furthermore, in these processes of labor extraction, I attach it to the concept of luminosity to think through what it means for Black women’s representation to be sideline while their cultural capital takes centers stage.⁹³

⁹¹ Bell Hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman*. (London: Pluto Press, 1981). P.7

⁹² Moya Bailey, *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women’s Digital Resistance* (New York: NYU Press, 2021). Coined by Moya Bailey and Trudy, this is a concept that rose to prominence because of the way it manifested on Twitter. While it occurs at all spaces, there is a particular speed through which it circulates in digital space that makes it particularly destructive. I have been thinking through about how digital space shapes it and hopefully in a forthcoming paper I will get to explore more of the ways it digital amplifies the impacts of it.

⁹³ Jennifer McClearen, *Fighting Visibility: Sports Media and Female Athletes in the UFC*, First edition (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2021). I was introduced to this term in the work of McClearen which she builds from the work of Banet-Wesier, Deleuze, and McRobbie. I am more interested in thinking just not about the “shining light” but there almost might be sonic and spatial dimensions to this theorization.

A Black Woman's Geography

Pro wrestling is a spectacle that is a producer of space. It is a spatial enterprise. This industry aligns with Katherine McKittrick's assessment that "Black matters are spatial matters".⁹⁴ As pro wrestling matters are matters of place. Thus, power relations in the professional wrestling industry are continually constructing and reconstructing geographies that are underwritten by ideologies, uneven power arrangements, capital accumulation/dispossession, and knowledge/cultural production. However, for Black wrestlers, not all these produced geographies are traditional.

As Katherine McKittrick notes, traditional geography is premised on the idea that only knowable space is mappable and discernable. Yet the geographies produced by these Black wrestlers, include Black geographies. Black geographies are an ontological shift that changes the way we understand the very production of space and place. As McKittrick argues that:

"Spatial acts can take on many forms, and can be identified through expressions, resistances, and naturalizations "⁹⁵

Understanding this is key to thinking about the way Black spatiality operates. Black spatiality is never static, it is continually being made, unmade, produced, and unproduced. Black Geographies are constituted by absence, which can be sometimes invisible, other times silence or hushed or at other times spaces of intensification, that are hypervisible, overtly loud, and deafening.

⁹⁴ Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

⁹⁵ Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). p. xix

Thus, a Black woman's geography emerges in professional wrestling through the space that they produce despite their absence which is predicated on misogynoir. These Black women geographies have taken shaped the professional business historically and contemporary. Further despite the suppression of Black women in wrestling, despite their historical eraser they have impacted business and continue to impact in spite of structural barriers as these Black geographies are sites "of political struggle itself".⁹⁶ As an analytic, a Black woman geographies allows us to understand/see/examine the unknowability and understand how Black culture production is continually shaping, reshaping, and reframing knowledge, is continually being mined for cultural and economic capital, and illustrates how Black cultural production has become the underwriter of US popular culture in the 20th century.

A Bit of Black Girl Magic

The documentary *Lady Wrestler: The Amazing Untold Story of African American Women in the Ring* chronicles the triumphs, the trials, and the tribulations of Babs Wingo, Ethel Johnson, and Marva Scott during the 1950s to the 1970s.⁹⁷ Throughout this documentary we learn about these Black women wrestlers who became pivotal parts of the business yet were entirely erased from pro wrestling history. Only now, about 50 years later, are we learning about their stories and celebrating them as pioneers in this industry.

⁹⁶ Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). P.6

⁹⁷ *Lady Wrestler: The Amazing, Untold Story of African American Women in the Ring*, Documentary, 2020.

The sisters, Babs, Ethel, and Marva were trained and managed by Billy Wolfe, a wrestling promoter and manager, and Mildred Burke, a female wrestler and the wife of Billy Wolfe.⁹⁸

Wolfe was a member of the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA) and turned Columbus, Ohio into one of the centers of women's wrestling during this time period. He is given the credit of attempting to integrate women's wrestling and cultivate Black female wrestlers and he utilized his position in NWA to make this a reality. As Bradley Gardner has argued, the territory era of wrestling was marked by the consolidation of power in territories via spatialization. Bookers and promoters had a lot of power within the confines of the territories that they operated in. This power extended to controlling wrestlers as Gardner notes that the power promoters wielded over wrestlers was not "just an abstraction but is manifested materially and geographically".⁹⁹ A promoter could ensure a wrestler could get booked(work) or just as easily ensure that they are not hired. This extended to pay, especially in the case for women's wrestlers, as there was a fee associated with their "handlers" who booked shows for them.

The story of these three sisters is especially important as they illustrate a recurrent historical narrative about the labor of Black women. Many historians including Tera Hunter, Dania Berry, and Kali Gross have produced scholarship that shows the complexity yet often fraught nature of Black women's labor in the US that often runs parallel and perpendicular to the labor histories of white women and Black men.¹⁰⁰ Every few years we learn about another pioneering Black

⁹⁸ Billy Wolfe and Mildred Burke were married. During this period, female wrestlers even white women had to be managed by men in order to be paid in wrestling business. This is connected to the 1974 Equal Credit Opportunity Act. Before this, women needed their husband signature to get credit cards or bank accounts, and single women could be denied access to banking and credit.

⁹⁹ Bradley Gardner, "High Risk Maneuvers: Geographies of Power and Labor Practices in Professional Wrestling's Territorial Era," in *Critical Geographies of Sport: Space, Power and Sport in Global Perspective*, 2016. P. 207

¹⁰⁰ Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War*, Reprint edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998); Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Nicole Gross, *A Black Women's History of the United States*, Illustrated edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020).

women in an industry who was erased from narrative. One recent example was the story narrated in the film *Hidden Figures*. In this movie, three Black female mathematicians worked at NASA and were instrumental to NASA's mission of space exploration and innovative. So not only do we have hidden figures, but we also have hidden figure fours.

Lady Wrestler highlights the way that Black women have long been a part of the wrestling business and when given the chance can become highly skilled grapplers, and very popular as they main evented shows with thousands of fans in attendance. Yet this story also lets us know that misogyny is a recurring structural issue that Black women run into across various industries including television, film, music, sport, education, and healthcare to name but a few.

¹⁰¹The absent but always presence of Black women in professional wrestling is very much tied into the ways that these industry's labor precarity is animated by anti- Blackness.

These sisters along with other Black women wrestlers during these times not only navigated anti-Blackness but sexism as states like California and NYC did allow women to wrestle in matches.¹⁰² These women encountered what I am going to call Jane Crow Spatialities. I argue that these spatialities were predicated on the interlocking systems of anti-Blackness being co-produced with sexism. While I have theorized about Jim Crow Spatialities in forthcoming work,

¹⁰¹ Daphne A. Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 2021); LaShawn Harris, *Sex Workers, Psychics, and Numbers Runners: Black Women in New York City's Underground Economy* (University of Illinois Press, 2016); Tsedale M. Melaku, "Black Women in White Institutional Spaces: The Invisible Labor Clause and the Inclusion Tax," *American Behavioral Scientist* 66, no. 11 (2022): 1512–25; Tomika Ferguson and James W. Satterfield and Jr, "Black Women Athletes and the Performance of Hyper-Femininity," in *Critical Perspectives on Black Women and College Success* (Routledge, 2016); Tsedale M. Melaku, *You Don't Look Like a Lawyer: Black Women and Systemic Gendered Racism* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019); Jennifer H. Lansbury, "'The Tuskegee Flash' and 'the Slender Harlem Stroker': Black Women Athletes on the Margin," *Journal of Sport History* 28, no. 2 (2001): 233–52.

¹⁰² Nationally, professional wrestling is not regulated. However, controls are in place at the level of the state via state athletic commissions. Not all states have them, but even those that do impose different rules depending on the state in questions. So in this case California outright banned women from performing and so did New York City. In particular NYC was a blow as wrestling in Madison Square Garden has long been a big accolade in pro wrestling circles.

I do think there is a particular distinction between the two in terms of the way that it shapes the mobility patterns of Black women.¹⁰³ Despite these women encountering, virulent racism and sexism, in the US as well as abroad in Japan and Australia, they made history that effectively is unable to fully be erased, that has produced lasting knowledge, and that has impacted the professional wrestling industry. These sisters embodied and conveyed Black Girl Magic even before it was named as such.

Wrestling At Thee Seams

In 2013, WWE introduced the show Total Divas. It was the first time that the WWE had a television product that focused on the women in the company. This show debuted right before what became the Reality Era of pro wrestling. This era is framed around the blurring of the lines between what is real, what is fake, and what might be part of a storyline. This era of wrestling reshaped WWE's engagement with the wrestling product.¹⁰⁴ This show centered the Divas as an entry point into the world of professional wrestling. The initial press release stated that:

“WWE and E!, two pop culture giants, partner to bring viewers the first-ever look into the world of the WWE Divas in the all new docu-series, “Total Divas.” Cameras will follow the lives of five Divas – both in and out of the ring – giving a first-hand look at the electric personalities, compelling personal lives and incomparable in-ring performances that have helped make WWE the most successful organization in sports entertainment history.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ In an article that I currently have in review, I am thinking through Jim Crow Spatiality as socio spatial process. However, when thinking about the mobility of Black women, I am thinking that the processes are similar but are produced through different means.

¹⁰⁴ This era of professional wrestling lasted between 2014 to 2016. It is categorized by a blending and engagement with reality tv. The WWE utilized the WWE network to make various reality tv shows during this time. Further, the WWE was actively courting the Catching up with the Kardashians fanbase for the Total Divas show as it became a hit with women.

¹⁰⁵ Nick Paglino, “Official Press Release For E!’s ‘Total Divas:’ Meet the Divas, Promo Videos, Show Details & More,” *Wrestlezone* (blog), July 12, 2013, <https://www.wrestlezone.com/news/275119-official-press-release-for-es-qtotal-divasq-meet-the-divas-promo-videos-show-details-a-more>.

While the initial cast listed 5 divas, the show ended up having 7 women on the cast: Nikki and Brie Bella (The Bella Twins), a third-generation wrestler Natalya, newcomers dubbed Divas- In Training, Eva Marie and JoJo Offerman, and Ariane Andrews and Naomi/Trinity Fatu (The Funkadactyls). This was a varied and eclectic cast of industry veterans coupled early career and newly signed talent to the business. furthermore, it was quite diverse as the Bella Twins and JoJo Offerman are Latinx while Naomi and Cameron were 2 of the 3 Black women on the main roster at that time. While this show ended up being quite entraining and full of drama, the most interesting facet of it was the introduction of a supporting character of Ms. Sandra Gray, a long-time seamstress with the WWE and the work Auntie of Naomi and Cameron.

Despite having three Black women wrestlers on the main roster in 2013, the WWE's track record with Black women was quite appalling. While the WWE was created in 1980, it did not hire a Black woman wrestler until September 14, 1998.¹⁰⁶ After her hire then Jazz, another Black female wrestler, was hired in later 2001. The next hire would be Shaniqua, a Tough Enough winner around 2003 and then Kristal, a Diva Search runner up in 2005. What is unique about these hires is aside from Jackie and Jazz, none of these women overlapped in the ring, and after them being released there was not another Black woman on the main roster until Alicia fox debuted on Smackdown in 2008. So, to learn that Ms. Sandra had been employed by the WWE since the mid to later 90s adjusted how one might understand the contributions that Black women have given to the business of pro wrestling and their labor.

¹⁰⁶ The WWE has a unique track record with the hiring of women. In the 1980s they did not hire any Black women. There was a women's title and a women's tag title. The only Black women to show up on WWF screen during this time was named Sapphire and she managed Dusty Rhodes. She was on screen from 1989 to 1990. Another Black would not show up until 1998.

Much like Ruth Carter of Black Panther acclaim, Sandra Gray performed a vital function as she literally operated at seams of the wrestling business for many years.¹⁰⁷ This was invaluable as Sandra Gray not only highlighted the present of Black cultural production even in the whitest of spaces and sports, but she provided continuity for Black women in this business and served as invaluable role as a “Work Auntie” to Naomi and Cameron engaging in a politics of care and compassion with them. Pro wrestling is a very harsh space that is extremely political with many customs, and rules, that Black wrestlers often cross unknowingly. She became a popular part of the show as fans watched how she not only supported Naomi and Cameron, made their costumes, and even chastised them when needed. Even when she left the WWE, only to return to the world in wrestling to work for AEW in 2019, fans held Ms. Sandra Gray in high regard letting her know of their appreciation for what she does through social media engagement primarily on Twitter and Instagram. Furthermore, she inspired another generation of Black costumers as many men and women in the industry as wrestlers who made their own costumers or designers have mentioned Sandra as an inspiration for them to work in the business. While representation can be cumbersome and a burden, it can also be the small push people need to take that leap of faith.

Through fictive kinship relations, Sandra Gray performed multiple forms of labor and care.¹⁰⁸

First, she designed wrestling gear with Naomi’s curvaceous body in mind. This was essential as

¹⁰⁷ Black Panther’s Costume Designer Ruth E. Carter Breaks Down Her Iconic Costumes | Vanity Fair, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FmvBrpkgBF0>; “Ruth E. Carter Designs Costumes to Stand the Test of Time | Podcast | American Masters | PBS,” American Masters, February 9, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/podcast/ruth-e-carter-interview-wakanda-forever/>. Despite the notoriety that Ruth Carter received for her Black Panther designs, she has a long track record in the field of doing great work and being an indelible part of US Black culture.

¹⁰⁸ Daniella Cook and Tiffany Williams, “Expanding Intersectionality: Fictive Kinship Networks as Supports for the Educational Aspirations of Black Women,” *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 39, no. 2 (June 1, 2015): 157–66.

on the *Total Divas* that had many moments where Naomi shared how she was scared her costume would unravel with the complex movement she was engaging in. Second, she engaged in a variant of mothering and supporting two younger Black women in a work environment that is precarious and can be very hostile.¹⁰⁹ This was a labor of love and care. Moreover Ms. Sandra adds to the long legacy of Black women in the wrestling business even if she isn't in the ring. Her Black women's geography was absent but always present and stitched through the numerous costumes she made that captivated audiences all over the world.

My Labor, My Shine

In the middle of the 1990s, the women's division in the WWE was in complete disarray. The roster did not have any depth. It was not reflective of the racial diversity in the US despite the WWE attempt to import women's wrestler from Japan. The storylines given to the women were flat, banal, and tinged in misogyny, and xenophobia. Furthermore, it was on shaky ground because by 1993 it was on going on its second attempt to make a functional women's division. In this attempt the division was centered around Alundra Blaze. Unfortunately, despite checking all the boxes that Vince McMahon looked for in female talent: being white, tall, and blond. She did not have sex appeal that he wanted. So, in August 1995, she lost the title to Rhonda Singh. Industry lore suggests that this was done to give her time to get a rhinoplasty and breast implants. During this time a conflict emerged between her and McMahon which caused her defunct to their biggest competitor, WCW. So, on December 18, 1995, Alundra Blaze debuted as Madusa in

¹⁰⁹ I myself have been a beneficiary of these relationships during jobs. In many ways these relationship function to insulate you from precarity by the sharing of knowledge and teaching you now navigate the local politics of place. Avoiding the landmines at the job are half the battle when the benefit of the down is rarely given to you.

WCW and promptly threw the WWE women's title into a trashcan.¹¹⁰ After this occurred, the WWE would once again deactivate their women's division and it would not return until 1998.

When the women division returned, the first champion was a Jackie Moore, a Black women wrestler. While Jackie was not utilized to her full potential, she did inspire other women wrestlers most notably being Jazz who was signed a few years later. While the amount of Black female wrestlers stayed far and few between in the division compared to white women. Their absent presence was felt in other ways, most notably being the theme music. While the central characters in the WWE women's division continued to be white women, Black women aesthetics become a part of their gimmicks. For example, Trish Stratus, WWE hall of famer and very popular wrestler theme music entitled "Time to Rock and Roll" was produced by Jim Johnson and performed by Lil Kim. Ironically, one of Trish's biggest rivals Victoria after losing her initial theme "All The Things She Said" by T.A.T.U because of copyright, received the theme song "Don't Mess With" also produced by Jim Johnston but performed by Nicki Minaj.¹¹¹ While this practice began in the late 1990s, it is still persisting currently and is indictive sonic Black geographies that are part and parcel of a Black women's geography in pro wrestling.

I argue that despite the absence of Black women in wrestling or the lack of depth in the sparse representations that they had. Black women's aesthetics are an integral part of pro wrestling culture. The cultural production of Black women can be seen in the way female wrestlers wear their hair, style their clothing, and even in sonically in their theme music. Media scholars frame

¹¹⁰ This one of the most infamous moments during the Monday Night War era. During this time, WCW would often poach WWE stars and they would immediately debut on tv. The placing of the title in the trash was part of WCW's not so cold war with WWE. It was meant to convey WCW's disrespect of WWE as Madusa was told that a women's division would be built around her in WCW. Spoiler alert, that never came to fruition.

¹¹¹ Its very ironic that Lil Kim and Nicki Minaj created themes for opposing wrestlers when they also engaged in a feud years later. Both of these themes were made in the late 90s/00 of music when Lil Kim was a household name and Nickie was a rapper in NYC who had not yet made it big.

luminosity as a theory to think through visibility, the politics of representation, and power.¹¹²

However, in order to think about this from the perspective of those who are invisible, those who light is dimmed and those who have a shine that might only be visible to certain audiences. I am thinking about the luminosity of Black women's culture which I would argue can extend far outside of the spectrum of visibility. I don't think of Black cultural products as simply luminous; I also see them as shining and shining in Black women's and black girlhood culture, but they also have a sonic quality of them. These Black sonic geographies constitute and shape spatial flows of the culture that Black women create, nurture, and improve. They are visible to some, invisible to other, yet still are productive, and shape spatial relations of power.

Conclusion

On Monday, May 16, 2022, the relationship between the WWE and two of its most popular Black Female performers imploded. At the start of the show, it was announced that there would be a six-person match to determine the new number one contender for women's champion Bianca Belair. The six-competitors included solo competitors such as Becky Lynch and Asuka as well as two tag teams, Nikki Cross and Piper Niven, and Naomi and Sasha Banks, the tag team champions. The result of the match was for Naomi to pin Sasha Banks and become the number 1 contender for Bianca, while Sasha would be become the #1 contender for Rhonda Rousey, the women's champion on Smackdown. They would both face champions ultimately losing. From a booking perspective this did not make any sense as to why you would have your newly crowned tag team champions face each other just after winning the titles a month prior before they properly had one feud with another team. The industry lore suggests that this booking decision

¹¹² Jennifer McClearen, *Fighting Visibility: Sports Media and Female Athletes in the UFC*, First edition (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2021).

was the catalyst that led to Naomi and Sasha walking out.¹¹³ It was suggested that upon hearing this Naomi and Sasha went to Johnny Ace, the Head of Talent relations, to ask for adjustments to this story for it to make sense like using this match to start a feud with the other tag team so that they could have a title defense at the next PPV. It was then stated that after going back and forth with him, they took this to Vince McMahon. From there, it was stated that things seemed worked out, but they were not as it is allegedly that Johnny Ace told them that they were ungrateful and that they were paid to wrestle, not have opinions. This infuriated the women and after having a conversation with themselves they decided to take a stand and walk out. It should be noted this all occurred hours before Raw in the early part of the afternoon. Bookers had ample time to rewrite the script and change the match.¹¹⁴ Instead of doing so the powers that be backstage decided to make an example of these Black woman by pulling the veil back slightly and during Raw announcing that they had walked out of Raw due to backstage creative differences. Throughout the 3-hour show various references were made to them being unprofessional and letting the fans down.

During the show, the WWE released the following statement on their website:

When Sasha Banks and Naomi arrived at the arena this afternoon, they were informed of their participation in the main event of tonight's Monday Night Raw.

¹¹³Alfred Konuwa, "Sasha Banks And Naomi Walk Out Of WWE Raw; Banks Unfollows WWE," Forbes, accessed June 10, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alfredkonuwa/2022/05/17/sasha-banks-and-naomi-walk-out-of-wwe-raw-banks-unfollows-wwe/>; Justin Barrasso, "What's Next for Sasha Banks and Naomi After Their Walkout?," Sports Illustrated, May 18, 2022, <https://www.si.com/wrestling/2022/05/18/wwe-sasha-banks-naomi-raw-walkout-consequences>. This situation set the internet on fire as all fans could do was fight, speculate and wonder what happened before Raw. As part of my field work, I would be online as I watched Raw and Smackdown weekly.

¹¹⁴ The WWE attempted to put the onus on Naomi and Sasha by stating that they let the fans down and were unprofessional because they could not change the show in time. This is quite an interesting tactic as Vince McMahon regularly rips up scripts and makes the writers rewrite shows right before the show goes live. So if anything because of the mercurial nature of Vince, the writers are more than equipped to handle a rewrite. Luckily the majority of fans say through this smoke screen and actually held the WWE's feet to the fire. For many, this was the beginning of the end for Vince and Johnny ace as Vince was forced to resign in July of 22 and Ace was released in August of 2022. Despite Vince fighting his way back, the fans overall have soured against him.

During the broadcast, they walked into WWE Head of Talent Relations John Laurinaitis office with their suitcases in hand, placed their tag team championship belts on his desk and walked out.

They claimed they weren't respected enough as tag team champions. And even though they had eight hours to rehearse and construct their match, they claimed they were uncomfortable in the ring with two of their opponents even though they'd had matches with those individuals in the past with no consequence. Monday Night Raw is a scripted live TV show, whose characters are expected to perform the requirements of their contract.

We regret we were unable to deliver, as advertised, tonight's main event.¹¹⁵

This immediately put the wrestling world on high alert as this was uncharted territory. Typically, disputes stay backstage and are not discussed on commentary, at least not directly and they are not discussed on the website. In many ways, this announcement was the WWE itself breaking kayfabe. While many fans wondered why the WWE would do this, Black fans knew immediately this was to punish Sasha and Naomi for stepping out of bounds. After all the WWE had called them unprofessional, this word that is dog whistle that is often weaponized and functions more implicit way to dehumanize, denigrate and control Black people. Professionalization is a more friendly tool of white supremacist logic.

This became a bittersweet moment for fans who loved both Sasha and Naomi because they had just won the tag titles at WrestleMania 38 on April 3, 2022. It was Sasha's first win at WrestleMania and Naomi's first tag team title reign. At first some fans assumed it was a work (a storyline) or a worked shoot (a storyline based in some reality), then it was assumed that it could be a situation that could be fixed. Fans were holding out hope that this fractured relationship could be quickly mended but unfortunately on that Friday, May 20, 2022, they received the news that Naomi and Sasha were indefinitely suspended. This was followed by Michael Cole, a senior commentator once again apologizing to WWE fans for Naomi and Sasha not wrestling on Monday and officially announcing their suspension. Both Michael Cole and his fellow

¹¹⁵ This statement was posted on the WWE.com website.

commentator Pat McAfee looked visibly uncomfortable during this segment.¹¹⁶ Fans immediately went to Twitter to voice their displeasure while the most racist, tone deaf, and insular fans went on to twitter to opine about Naomi and Sasha being unprofessional saying that they signed a contract, and they were low class for not abiding by it.

Social media is a double-edged sword for wrestlers as it allows them to control and grow their brands, but it also exposes them to the more unsavory portions of the pro wrestling fandom. While all wrestlers experience some form of harassment, Black women wrestler's experience at much higher rates and often take extended breaks from their accounts. During this situation Naomi and Sasha stopped online interaction and engagement, I have argued and theorized that these "pauses" or breaks as digital cultures of dissemblance. Darlene Clark Hine coined the term cultures of dissemblance to account for the ways Black women mitigated trauma during slavery. She states that: "By dissemblance I mean the behavior and attitudes of Black women that created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors".¹¹⁷ I contend that do to magnified nature of these micro aggressive attacks via social media, that Black women have constructed a "Digital Cultural Dissemblance" that follows the principles that Hine states while also accounting peculiarities of digital space.

Fast forwarding one year, the wrestling landscape for Black women has changed but also retained many of its thornier qualities. Across multiple companies including AEW, Ring of Honor, and other smaller independent companies, Black women wrestlers have been at the top of the card. In WWE, Bianca held Raw women's title for over 400 days, in AEW Jade Cargill was

¹¹⁶ While Coles commentary enraged many fans, most were aware that he actually serves as the mouthpiece for Vince McMahon as he wears an inner earpiece where Vince directs traffic from backstage.

¹¹⁷ Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989). P. 912

the TBS Champion and held an undefeated streak is 60-0, and former WWE wrestler Athena, has been a dominate women's champion in ROH, and Trish Adora, inaugural and current Pan-Afrikan World Diaspora Wrestling World Champion has wrestled in multiple companies showing the world that she is more than a force to be reckoned with. Despite all this headway Black women are still disrespected in wrestling and still do not get the industrial support that they deserve. However, despite this long running trend, both Naomi, now going by Trinity and Sasha, now going by Mercedes, are still in the business.

Despite their departure in 2022, these women have cemented their status is not only wrestlers but as entertainers and household names. It should be noted that after their departure, there were multiple attempts made by the WWE to get them to return but their attempts were unsuccessful as each lady decided to take a leap of faith. Because of the structure of the WWE contract, they had to wait out the remaining time as they were not able to secure a release from their contract. Since her departure, Mercedes has utilized her celebrity to work in multiple fields including film and television, additionally she has moved on to wrestle and win championships in Stardom (a Japanese women's wrestling company), while Trinity (along with Mercedes) has walked the runway at New York Fashion Week, before joining Impact Wrestling where she has been immediately thrust into the title scene. Both women knew their worth, both women were not going to allow the company take away their joy of wrestling nor their self-worth as pro wrestling is an isolating harsh business that chips away at people self-esteem.

Mercedes and Trinity continue the histories created, forged and blazed by the labor of Babs, Ethel, and Marva. While the histories of these women were erased, their tenacity, charisma, and innovative wrestling move sets lives on in the Black women wrestlers of today who are part of the Black Women's geographies that they produced. Black women in wrestling and other fields

will continue to be producers of culture, innovators, path breakers, and will always shine despite the misogyny they encounter in physical space, in social spaces, and on the Internet.

Vignette 3: Three and a Half Degrees of Separation

Pro wrestling is an interconnected mess. Very much like the Hollywood inspired mythos around Kevin Bacon's supposed super connectivity. Pro wrestlers are only separated by a few degrees. In the US popular culture imaginary, the actor Kevin Bacon is often invoked as shorthand to talk about the six degrees of separation. This is a theory that suggests that between all humans, there are only six degrees of separation between in any two individuals.¹¹⁸ This has become a game that people play to show how Kevin Bacon is a point of intersection for relationships in Hollywood.

But this is also true of relationships in pro wrestling. However, the difference between Hollywood and the world of professional wrestling, is that instead of there being a "Kevin Bacon", all wrestlers fill that role. Moreover, instead of there being six degrees, there are approximately three and a half degrees of separation in professional wrestling no matter where you are located. I learned this quickly in the first two months of training as I realized how close I was to the center of the business despite being on the outside looking in. I was close enough to the WWE to see it and almost taste it, but not quite close enough to be a part of it.

As a pro wrestling trainee, I was only three and a half degrees of separation from the WWE. The first degree was Big B, my trainer who was trained by former WWE superstar Susan Green. Big B was a part time independent wrestler who wrestled on the weekends. While he had a day job for the state of South Carolina, he had built quite a reputation in the independent wrestling scene

¹¹⁸ Daniel Ganninger, "The Six Degrees of Separation and Kevin Bacon - Knowledge Stew," December 31, 2022, <https://knowledgestew.com/the-six-degrees-of-separation-and-kevin-bacon/>.

in SC, NC, and Georgia. The second degree is Susan Green, who was Big B's wrestling trainer. Susan Green is a pioneering women's wrestler who was a tag team champion in the WWE in the 1980s. Occasionally, we trained at her home where she had a ring step up that was as stiff as a bed of nails. In the wrestling world, we were her wrestling grandkids but instead of baking cookies for us, we received head locks, snapmares (a wrestling maneuver that starts with a face lock and the opponent is flipped over), and stiff clotheslines. Big B explained that training with her was beneficial for us as her ring was much harder than most of the rings that we would be in. So, his rationale was that bumping in this ring would make us tougher and when we wrestled more regularly, the bumps would be less impactful as our bodies would be conditioned for harder impacts.

The third degree were the lower to middle management in the WWE that consisted of the agents (formerly active wrestlers who now work backstage in various capacities). Through Susan, my fellow wrestling trainees and I were connected to the agents in the WWE. Because so many wrestlers have worked for and been fired by the WWE, there is an incredible network of wrestlers in the WWE, out of the WWE, and in the indies who know each other and have long standing relationships that consist of friendships, frenemieships, and long standing rivalries fueled by enmity. The final half degree is the instability of the business itself. Wrestling was constantly in flux, so sometimes you were very popular within the community or other times quite unpopular.

While the manifestations of these three and half degrees of separation vary by individual, what they looked like for me, and my fellow wrestling trainees were free attendance at wrestling shows when they came to town. In my third month of training, Big B announced to us that we would be going to a WWE house show. A house show is a non-televvised show that frequently

came to Columbia because there was not the infrastructure at the time for televised shows to happen locally at the time. While I had been to WWE wrestling shows prior to this, this was the first time that I did not have to buy tickets to attend. Lil B, Medium D, and I met at Big B's house and went together to the show. It was quite an adventure as we were filled to the brim with excitement about the show and were really looking forward to seeing some of our favorite wrestlers live and in action. While we did not go backstage, the show provided us with time to bond as a unit and forced us to be students of the game of wrestling. Built into wrestling is the idea that you are constantly studying and looking to improve. This show, while entertainment for the fans in attendance, was the equivalent of a good lecture for Lil B, Medium D and me. This event functioned as a field trip with a homework assignment attached to it as Big B asked us various questions about in the following weeks during our training sessions.

Three weeks later we were once again presented with the opportunity to go to a wrestling show for free. However, it was not a WWE show. We went to an Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW) show. While I was surprised that Big B had contacts in WWE, I was even more surprised that he had "pull" with ECW. While WWE had monopolized the wrestling industry, there were still other large wrestling promotions in the US and ECW along with World Championship Wrestling (WCW) were the less familiar alternatives. But in the case of ECW, it was the little train that could of national wrestling promotions as it did not have the cultural capital of the WWE, nor did it had the deep pockets of the Ted Turner backed WCW. But what it did have was a loyal and fearsome fanbases coupled with innovative raw and edgy wrestlers, many of whom would later go on to become mega stars in the WWE. Because of its gritty reputation that included an owner who rarely paid his wrestlers on time, I was very surprised that we received

complimentary tickets and went to the show for free. I also wondered how this impacted the bottom line of a company that was always in the red and never in the black.

Despite the chokehold that the WWE has on the wrestling business via strategic monopoly that began in the 1980s, these degrees of separation highlight the complex relationships that not only develop because but flourish despite of the WWE's dominance. These degrees of separation for some are entry points for wrestlers to be immediately signed to deals and quick ascend the ladder of success and go straight to the top of the card. However, these degrees of separation can work inversely as they can form barriers or even force fields that prevent wrestlers from making headway in the business. Some wrestlers, because they do not have the "look" especially women have been discouraged and pushed out of the business. Because "everyone knows" each other, if you a proverbial scarlet letter attached to your forehead, then you can easily become persona non grata.

I experienced a variation of this after our group departed from Big B and I tried to go on it alone. I wasn't really talking to Lil B or Medium D at the time. I had just had a major personal set back and was trying to come up with ways to keep my pro wrestling dream alive. So, I went back to the internet which was my lifeline and found another school/wrestling promotion that was in Charlotte. Because I lived in Northeast Columbia, I was only seventy five miles south of Charlotte, NC. I figured trying to forge a relationship with this group might be worth it.

After a few emails with a wrestler in this school, I was invited to come to a show where I could potentially wrestle. It was in rural parts outside of Charlotte proper and the show was taking place at a national guard armory. After a long winding drive up the interstate and then in the backroads of rural North Carolina, I was there. Because I was early, I introduced myself to a few of the wrestlers and then went into the ring to warm up and show them what I could do. After

running the ropes and doing a few moves, they let me know that while they liked me, I would not be included in the show, but I could stick around and watch it. I found this curious when I watched the show and saw wrestlers with way less athleticism than I on the card. I would later learn that these people already knew me because they knew Big B and immediately inquired about me. I learned this later from Big B when we had a conversation a few weeks later. Cryptically, he told me that he knew all the stuff that we (meaning me, Lil B and Medium D) got up to. It had surprised me and quickly made me realize I could not go at it alone. So, I reached back out to Medium D and Lil B. I told them what happened, and we decided that it was best that we try as much as possible to do everything as a trio.

This was an important lesson that I learned. It let me know that eyes were always on me. People would smile in your face and sometimes stab you in the back or let others inform how they felt about you. It taught me a lot about relationships in the world of professional wrestling, the good, the bad, and the ugly of it all.

That conversation with Big B was the catalyst for me gaining a better understanding of the three and half degrees of separation in pro wrestling but also in the ways community worked. When that opportunity was taken from me, I went back to the drawing board and built a stronger foundation with Lil B and Medium D. As we began to trust each other and share our varying experiences, we quickly learned that your reputation precedes you and shapes your interactions and experiences with other wrestlers, bookers, agents, and promoters. Wrestling is an impossibly small world. If you are to survive it, you must make the best of your opportunities and always be “respectful” to protocols of the business. But you must also build a strong bond with your fellow wrestlers to navigate uneven labor practices. Because even the smallest independent wrestling

company can deliver a blow that can change the course of your career because after all everyone knows everyone as they are only separated by three and half degrees of separation.

Chapter 3: Wrestling with the Digital

On August 22, 2015, *NXT Takeover: Brooklyn* turned the pro wrestling industry on its head. The show took place in Brooklyn, New York, at the Barclays Arena. World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) branded this unique event as a wrestling triple header, as *Takeover* would take place on Saturday, *Summerslam* would take place on Sunday, and *Raw* would take place on Monday in the same venue. This was the first time that *NXT Takeover* would take place outside the Full Sail Arena in Orlando, Florida, where the capacity crowd reached only four hundred. The live attendance capacity for the Brooklyn event exceeded fifteen thousand. Because of this vast difference in scale and in scope, numerous changes and adjustments were taking place behind the scenes. Furthermore, while the wrestling industry was buzzing about this event, a lot of pressure was placed on the writers, the wrestlers, and a plethora of pro wrestling intermediaries to make this a good show.¹¹⁹ But one common denominator remained the same, as this historic event was exclusively streamed live on the WWE Network. This was an incredibly huge gamble for the WWE that paid off in dividends. The explosive success of this pay-per-view (PPV) marked the debut of a well-known and highly athletic independent wrestler Uhaa Nation while providing a showcase for Sasha Banks and Bayley, one half of the four horsewomen of *NXT*. Their match was voted Match of the Year by pro wrestling experts. Additionally, it provided WWE fans with a viable alternative to the main roster's wrestling product of *Raw* and *SmackDown*.

¹¹⁹ I use the term *pro wrestling intermediaries* to account for the wide variety of laborers who are often behind the scenes and on the sidelines in pro wrestling. This includes camera people, referees, announcers, commentators, agents, former wrestlers who put matches together, as well as hair and makeup people, costumer designers, and miscellaneous production staff. A lot of labor goes into the production of pro wrestling shows.

The success of this event can be attributed, at least partly, to the infrastructure implemented by the WWE Network and earlier incarnations of *NXT*. In 2014, *NXT* was reintroduced as the flagship show on the brand-new WWE streaming network. Following the consolidation of the former developmental territory Florida Championship Wrestling (FCW), *NXT* became the brainchild of WWE wrestler and business executive Paul Levesque, also known as HHH in pro wrestling circles.¹²⁰ Along with the late Dusty Rhodes, HHH is responsible for *NXT*'s production that seemed to tap into wrestling fandom's need and want for a change to the wrestling product. *NXT* became an exciting and innovative take on wrestling that brought with it the raw grittiness of the independent wrestling scene and the production values of the WWE. It was the best of both worlds to wrestling fandom at large that was neatly delivered to them through a streaming service tapping into a market that had already possessed a conditioned consumer's awareness of the utility and benefit of such a service.

The WWE Network was the first attempt by a pro wrestling company in the industry to consolidate wrestling content under a singular hub. This new affordance changed the way the consumer interfaced with the wrestling product, but more important, it "disrupted industrial relationships" in the pro wrestling industry.¹²¹ The professional wrestling industry is an example of the exceedingly complex nature of the culture industries, as industries exist and coexist in multidimensional industrial ecosystems that are fraught, fragile, and interdependent. But pushing this premise further, it can also be understood that this disruption extended past the relationships

¹²⁰ Levesque is a former pro wrestler (full time, 1995–2011) (part time, 2011–22), executive vice president of Talent, Live Events and Creative for the WWE since 2013, originator and senior producer of *NXT*, and husband of Stephanie McMahon (the daughter of Vince McMahon, owner of the WWE).

¹²¹ Corey Barker and Andrew Zolides, "WWE Network: The Disruption of Over-the-Top Distribution," in *From Networks to Netflix: A Guide to Changing Channels* (London: Routledge, 2018).

between the WWE and TV networks such as USA, The CW, and SYFY to the entirety of the pro wrestling industry, especially as it concerns labor relationships, which highlighted, magnified, and abated (in some cases) the industrial precarity of pro wrestlers.

I argue that the adoption and utilization of streaming services by the WWE Network has resulted in two fundamental shifts industrially within the pro wrestling industry. First, streaming services have changed the hiring practices in the WWE. The WWE has shifted its focus from a model that privileges wrestlers who are white, male, tall, clean-cut, and muscular, to a model that more favorably looks at diversity across gender, race, nationality, and body type. The second shift is centered on the WWE's status as the dominant wrestling organization in the US. Due to the widespread adoption of streaming services by the wrestling industry, small wrestling organizations in the US (and abroad) have begun to combat WWE's hegemonic headlock on the industry by creating their own streaming platforms that allow them to reach consumers who were formerly outside their spatial purview due to the limited mobility of their wrestling product when compared with the WWE's. Furthermore, many smaller organizations have begun to build partnerships and utilize the streaming services to produce joint events such as the *All In* PPV that sold ten thousand tickets in September 2018, a feat that has not been done in the US by a non-WWE or WCW company since 1993.¹²² These are not isolated or incidental but are important because there is a coterminous relationship present between hiring practices and the collective action of small pro wrestling companies. The very industrial fabric of this industry is built on labor not collectively having power and power being attributed only to a select few who have

¹²² All In was a PPV that took place on September 1, 2018, in Chicago. It was an event made up of multiple pro wrestling organizations, including Ring of Honor, National Wrestling Alliance, Impact Wrestling, New Japan Pro Wrestling, and two Mexican wrestling companies, AAA and CMLL.

had to transcend the industry to move within it, for example, Stone Cold Steve Austin, the Rock, John Cena, and the infamous Hulk Hogan.

Second, I argue that the WWE's streaming network is creating "digital wrestling territories" through a deployment of what I am calling "digital global intimacy." I define this as the digital reterritorialization of digital space through the WWE's repackaging of various wrestling products (wrestling TV shows) that operate outside the central product. These products appeal to different (or additional) audiences than the flagship products *Raw* and *SmackDown*. The WWE is reconstituting wrestling space through digital technologies. The reconstituted digital wrestling spaces resemble the wrestling territories of the 1950s, the 1960s, and the 1970s. The geographer Bradley Gardner explains that during the wrestling territories era that predated the 1980s, uneven power relations animated and created the material space of these territories. This was illustrated during that time frame through the way that wrestling owners were able to mitigate working conditions by subdividing wrestling spaces into distinctive territories.¹²³ Despite this product having a digital deployment, there are material impacts in its production and its presence in the wrestling industry. Just as Gardner argued that the National Wrestling Alliance's (NWA) control of the industry for over forty years was predicated by spatial control through a specific spatial formation that hinged on hyperlocal specificity, I argue that the WWE is replicating this digitally through the WWE Network, as it is creating separate autonomous "digital territories" that are spatially outside the US yet affect local wrestling markets in the countries that they are placed in. This is illustrated in the WWE's construction and implementation of *NXT UK*.

¹²³ See Bradley Gardner, "High Risk Maneuvers: Geographies of Power and Labor Practices in Professional Wrestling's Territorial Era," in *Critical Geographies of Sport: Space, Power, and Sport in Global Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2016).

Central to each of these arguments are the power relationships between the wrestlers and the wrestling industry. This essay is framed and builds on the foundational work of critical media industry scholars who have examined relations of power across multiple industrial frames.¹²⁴ This framing positions this essay as a midlevel industrial analysis of the pro wrestling industry.¹²⁵ A midlevel analysis “accounts for the complex interactions among cultural and economic forces” while understanding the dialectics of culture and the power present within systems.¹²⁶ Power is central to the examination of the material and discursive changes propagated by shifts in technology within this industry, with productive power becoming central to this essay’s analysis. Productive power can be understood as “power that produces specific ways of conceptualizing audiences, texts, and economics.”¹²⁷ This is important when considering how streaming services can illustrate the industrial precarity of pro wrestlers while serving as a tool of industrial resistance and emancipation when wrestlers use them as a collective.

¹²⁴ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2012); Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity, 2018); Aymar Jean Christian, *Open TV: Innovation beyond Hollywood and the Rise of Web Television* (New York: NYU Press, 2018); Arlene Dávila, *Latinos, Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Alfred L. Martin Jr., *The Generic Closet: Black Gayness and the Black-Cast Sitcom* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021); Travis Vogan, *ESPN: The Making of a Sports Media Empire* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015); Vogan, *Keepers of the Flame: NFL Films and the Rise of Sports Media* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014); Kristen J. Warner, *The Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting* (London: Routledge, 2015).

¹²⁵ Timothy Havens, Amanda D. Lotz, and Serra Tinic, “Critical Media Industry Studies: A Research Approach,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 2.2 (2009): 234–53.

¹²⁶ Havens, Lotz, and Tinic, 237.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*

Wrestling with Space: Culture, Embodiment, and Power

Sport scholars have long been concerned with the body as a category of analysis in the examination of power in sporting culture.¹²⁸ Central to this intellectual focus has been the work of the French theorist Pierre Bourdieu and his conceptualization of habitus. Habitus can be understood to contextualize the body's relationship to structure and power in the world.¹²⁹ Sport scholars across multiple fields have taken habitus and employed it to understand power dynamics across sports, especially in combat sports. For example, the sociologist Kyle Green uses habitus to examine embodied practices in martial arts, connecting it to performances of masculinity and sociality.¹³⁰ So it is no surprise that pro wrestling scholars have centered the body in their examination of pro wrestling as a sport and a performance. The work of Broderick Chow has engaged in the embodied politics of labor that are embedded in pro wrestling both as a physical sport and as an elusive performance.¹³¹ In both instances, studying the body in combat sports becomes invaluable to understanding the granularities of power and the varying subjectivities that are nestled within the institutional bodies of these sports.

As race became more of a central element in the examination of the body in sports scholarship, a shift occurred, placing greater importance on the analysis of Black people and their bodies

¹²⁸ Joshua I. Newman, Holly Thorpe, and David Andrews, eds., *Sport, Physical Culture, and the Moving Body: Materialisms, Technologies, Ecologies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020).

¹²⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

¹³⁰ Kyle Green, "It Hurts So It Is Real: Sensing the Seduction of Mixed Martial Arts," *Social & Cultural Geography* 12.4 (June 1, 2011): 377–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2011.574796>.

¹³¹ Broderick D. V. Chow, "Work and Shoot: Professional Wrestling and Embodied Politics," *TDR/The Drama Review* 58.2 (222) (June 1, 2014): 72–86, https://doi.org/10.1162/DRAM_a_00347.

because Blackness in the US had become synonymous with “naturalized” athleticism in US sporting cultures and traditions in the twentieth century.¹³² The media scholar Samantha Sheppard examines Black bodies in media texts, and she seeks “to scrutinize the performative embodiment of Blackness that is confirmed and contested by representations of Black athletes in film.”¹³³ The work of Sheppard and the performance scholar Harvey Young seek to decouple the pathologizing ideologies around Black bodies and athleticism,¹³⁴ which then reorients it in and from systems of oppression as well as from being sites of oppressive racialized regimes.¹³⁵ As Sheppard contends, Black bodies are often seen as “sites of excessive force.”¹³⁶ Reframing these mediated narratives does work in resisting and reformulating these ideologies that often cohere to violence done on and to Black folk’s bodies.

Racialization is an iterative process that discursively constructs and materially affects the body, yet it does not operate as a singular force that shapes how the body is imagined. Bodies are gendered, are classed, are framed through ability and disability, and are, more recently, digitized. With the advent of technological innovations, digital embodiment vis-à-vis the digital spatial reformulations of media technologies such as streaming services and social media engagement became yet another way bodies are constructed and materially affected.¹³⁷ I contend that digital

¹³² Louis Moore, “Fine Specimens of Manhood: The Black Boxer’s Body and the Avenue to Equality, Racial Advancement, and Manhood in the Nineteenth Century,” *Melus* 35.4 (2010): 59–84, <https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/35.4.59>.

¹³³ Samantha N. Sheppard, *Sporting Blackness: Race, Embodiment, and Critical Muscle Memory on Screen* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020).

¹³⁴ Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body*, illustrated ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

¹³⁵ Sheppard, *Sporting Blackness*, 5.

¹³⁶ Sheppard, 3.

¹³⁷ Niels van Doorn, “Digital Spaces, Material Traces: How Matter Comes to Matter in Online Performances of

territories are predicated on digital embodiment. Digital embodiment is integral to the creation of digital wrestling territories, as they are central to the way that labor practices are being disrupted. Bodies that previously held more value prior to this digital embodied age are now constantly being challenged, twisted, and reoriented through a digital reterritorialization that is connected to a digital embodiment of pro wrestlers in part due to the parasocial bounds that they cultivate via social media activity and the streaming services that circumvent scale at the local, regional, national, and sometimes even global level. More diverse bodies across race, gender, and body type, often which reflects the fans, have become the bodies that fans want to see, that fans admire, and that have increasing social capital in the pro wrestling business.

Pro wrestling occupies a unique space in American culture. Whether you know it as Pro Rassling, know of it as the WWE/WWF, or even see it as sports entertainment, this industry has been a part of Western culture for at least the last one hundred years.¹³⁸ Pro wrestling is seen as a legitimate sport by some but is often compared to the theater and even jokingly referred to as a “soap opera for men” by others.¹³⁹ These latter comparisons are quite apropos, as pro wrestling and soap operas are both serialized, narrative dramas that have cultivated passionate and active fans. This unique hybridity extends throughout every aspect of this industry.

Gender, Sexuality and Embodiment,” *Media, Culture & Society* 33.4 (May 1, 2011): 531–47, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443711398692>.

¹³⁸ Brendan Maguire, “American Professional Wrestling: Evolution, Content, and Popular Appeal,” *Sociological Spectrum* 25.2 (February 16, 2005): 155–76.

¹³⁹ Sam Ford, “‘He’s a Real Man’s Man’: Pro Wrestling and Negotiations of Contemporary Masculinity,” in *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom* (London: Routledge, 2017); Henry Jenkins, “What World Wrestling Entertainment Can Teach Us about the Future of Television (Part One)—Pop Junctions,” January 21, 2014, <http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2014/01/what-the-world-wrestling-federation-can-teach-us-about-the-future-of-television.html>; Nicholas Sammond, ed., *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2005). The work of Sam Ford and Henry Jenkins is especially important to pro wrestling scholarship in media studies.

The study of pro wrestling is an interdisciplinary enterprise whose intellectual foundations lie in media studies, rhetoric, theatre studies, and communication. Much of the intellectual foci in pro wrestling studies centers on examining cultural production, gendered performance, and national identity; understanding its audience; and typologizing the type of media text that it is.¹⁴⁰

However, there has been a turn toward studying the politics of labor in pro wrestling. A subsection of pro wrestling scholars has reflected on the way that pro wrestling labor is exploitative, is precarious, and has had to quickly adjust to the global COVID-19 pandemic because it is an industry operated without a social safety net.¹⁴¹

Cultures of Convergence

Wrestling is convergence. This simple yet impactful statement encapsulates the unique relationship that pro wrestling has to other media texts and industries.¹⁴² The wrestling industry is uniquely positioned between the television and sports industries. This hybridity manifests

¹⁴⁰ Broderick Chow, Eero Laine, and Claire Warden, eds., *Performance and Professional Wrestling* (London: Routledge, 2016); Laine, “Stadium-Sized Theatre: WWE and the World of Professional Wrestling,” in *Performance and Professional Wrestling* (London: Routledge, 2016); Benjamin Litherland, “Breaking Kayfabe Is Easy, Cheap, and Never Entertaining: Twitter Rivalries in Professional Wrestling,” *Celebrity Studies* 5.4 (October 2, 2014): 531–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2014.981047>; Benjamin Litherland, Tom Phillips, and Claire Warden, “Scholarly Grappling: Collaborative ‘Work’ in the Study of Professional Wrestling,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 36.1 (2021): 213–28, <https://doi.org/10.1353/dtc.2021.0040>; CarrieLynn D. Reinhard and Christopher J. Olson, eds., *Convergent Wrestling: Participatory Culture, Transmedia Storytelling, and Intertextuality in the Squared Circle* (London: Routledge, 2019); Rachel Wood and Benjamin Litherland, “Critical Feminist Hope: The Encounter of Neoliberalism and Popular Feminism in WWE 24: Women’s Evolution,” *Feminist Media Studies* 18.5 (September 3, 2018): 905–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2017.1393762>.

¹⁴¹ Broderick Chow and Eero Laine, “Audience Affirmation and the Labour of Professional Wrestling,” *Performance Research*, June 24, 2014; Jessica Fontaine, “Headlocks in Lockdown: Working the at-Home Crowd,” *Popular Communication* 20.4; CarrieLynn Reinhard, Jessica Fontaine, and DeWitt King, “An Online Work Is Still Work: Virtual Labors of Professional Wrestlers,” *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research*, September 15, 2021; Andrew Westerside, “Wrestling with Technology: Audiences, Politics, and the Ecosystems of Attendance during COVID-19,” *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media* 18.2 (May 4, 2022): 263–80.

¹⁴² As they explicate, “The convergence of various references, genres, identities, and practices makes professional wrestling an excellent platform for examining and considering the ideological implications of a wide array of popular culture texts” (Reinhard and Olson, *Convergent Wrestling*, 1).

itself in political, economic, and cultural processes that emanate from it as well as those forces that shape it. The interlocking relationship between innovation as a telos, the increasing reliance on media technologies in sport, and the unrelenting labor precarity makes understanding how streaming technologies have affected labor practices in professional wrestling paramount.¹⁴³ Innovation is an ideological undercurrent in pro wrestling that pushes for new ways of doing (new wrestling moves, gimmicks, costumes, and entrances), new audiences to capture (new markets, new fans), and new ways to conceive of pro wrestling (new approaches). Innovative industrial production and cultural production are always at the forefront of this genre.¹⁴⁴ Essentially, pro wrestling is a space of innovation.

Grappling with Space

Pro wrestling is spatial. During the territory era, pro wrestling was divided into autonomous semi discrete spatial units across the United States (including portions of Canada). This spatiality was intensified after the territory system was destroyed in the 1980s with the rise of the most prominent pro wrestling company in the US, the WWE. In the present-day formulation, cross-continental travel has become the norm. Currently, pro wrestlers travel by plane and car, and for those with seniority and money, by bus, over two hundred days a year, town to town and city to city. Because of this spatial orientation, an analysis that includes space and place is necessary to understand how changes in the spatiality of pro wrestling affects its industrial practices.

¹⁴³ Aymar Jean Christian, *Open TV: Innovation beyond Hollywood and the Rise of Web Television* (New York, NYU Press, 2018).

¹⁴⁴ Building from Christian, who thinks about the way innovation is deployed in the TV industry, I pull at an ideological undercurrent that I see is a foundational aspect of the pro wrestling business, which manifests itself as new moves, new characters, but also as a business that is constantly an early adopter of technology with a let's-see-what-sticks mindset.

Pro wrestling grapples with space. Whether it is fighting to be a part of the American culturally imaginary, or if it is vying for respect industrially when compared with other sports, and even if space is utilized as a means of control over the modes of spatial production, pro wrestling and wrestlers have continually fought with and for space. This fight lends itself to the deployment of a spatial analysis that engages the interlocking relationship between space, place, and power.¹⁴⁵

To understand the spatial formations of pro wrestling we must understand space. As Doreen Massey suggests, “Space must be conceptualized integrally with time; indeed, the aim should be to think always in terms of space-time.”¹⁴⁶ Temporality is of the utmost importance when labor and capital are central concerns in analysis. Secondly, Massey exclaims that “the spatial is an ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification, “which engenders infinite possibilities when thinking about industrial relations which may complicate things, but it also opens spaces to understand resistance strategies and how agency can manifest itself in a multitude of ways.”¹⁴⁷

This conceptualization of space highlights the way that power and disempowerment work in the production and construction of space, which opens space, figuratively and materially, for geographies of race forming the foundation for theorizing racialized space, the emergence of the subfield of Black geographies, and the digital turn in critical geography.¹⁴⁸ Geographies of race

¹⁴⁵ . See Cindi Katz, “Power, Space, and Terror: Social Reproduction and the Public Environment,” in *The Politics of Public Space* (London: Routledge, 2013); Setha M. Low, *On the Plaza: The Politics of Public Space and Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008); Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Cambridge: John Wiley & Sons, 1994); Massey, *For Space* (London: SAGE, 2005); Linda McDowell, *Gender, Identity, and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Gillian Rose, “*Geography and Gender, Cartographies and Corporealities*, ”*Progress in Human Geography* 19.4 (December 1, 1995).

¹⁴⁶ Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 2.

¹⁴⁷ Massey, 3.

¹⁴⁸ See James Ash, Rob Kitchin, and Agnieszka Leszczynski, “Digital Turn, Digital Geographies?,” *Progress in Human Geography* 42.1 (2018): 25–43; David Delaney, “The Space That Race Makes,” *Professional Geographer*

contributed to understanding of the way space and place were related to process of racialization and unequal power systems.¹⁴⁹ The interwoven relationships between race, space, and place are predicated on power relationships that are animated by racialized ideologies and regimes that engender sets of relations with bodies that frames some bodies normative, makes other bodies vulnerable, while rendering some incommensurable.

Black geographies emerged as a subfield that repositioned geographers' understanding of the processes of spatialization through its ontological resituating of theory and method. Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods define "Black geographies as the racialized production of space that is made possible in the explicit demarcations being invisible/forgettable while at the same time always producing in a variety of modalities."¹⁵⁰ Putting Black geographies into conversation with digital geographies, an emerging subfield ,which centers the ways in which code, data, and technology are active in the production of space provides us with a new grammar that is aware of the ways power is shaped by technology and racialization.¹⁵¹ Thus, a Black digital geography that is attentive to a relationality of racialization allows for a theorization that can account for the granular changes in space, place, and power through industrial pivoting to

54.1 (February 1, 2002): 6–14; Martin Dodge and Rob Kitchin, "Flying through Code/Space: The Real Virtuality of Air Travel," *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 36.2 (February 1, 2004): 195–211; Sarah Elwood, "Digital Geographies, Feminist Relationality, Black and Queer Code Studies: Thriving Otherwise," *Progress in Human Geography* 45.2 (April 1, 2021): 209–28; Rob Kitchin and Martin Dodge, *Code/Space: Software and Everyday Life*, illustrated ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014); Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Matthew Zook, Martin Dodge, Yuko Aoyama, and Anthony Townsend, "New Digital Geographies: Information, Communication, and Place," in *Geography and Technology* (New York: Springer, 2004), 155–76.

¹⁴⁹ Clyde Woods, "Life after Death," *Professional Geographer* 54.1 (February 1, 2002): 62–66.

¹⁵⁰ Clyde Woods and Katherine McKittrick, *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2007), 3.

¹⁵¹ Sarah Elwood and Agnieszka Leszczynski, "Feminist Digital Geographies," *Gender, Place & Culture* 25.5 (2018).

stream technologies. Moreover, it gives us a way to grapple with the changing politics of digital embodiment in a sport that relies on social media technologies for continued cultural relevancy.

The examination of the industrial changes of the pro wrestling industry in the wake of the WWE Network necessitates a spatial analysis that not only understands the flows of media but conceptualizes how gender, race, and the body play a part in the industrial infrastructure. Thus, this spatial analysis centers power, difference, and technology in the production of space. Further, this notion of invisibility or forgettability is exceedingly important when thinking about industrial relationships, especially those that are often hidden, suppressed, and below the line.¹⁵²

Wrestling Futures: We Are *NXT*

NXT debuted on February 20, 2010, on the SYFY Network.¹⁵³ Following the demise of WWE's third brand, ECW, *NXT* was used to fill a void that this cancellation left in the WWE's television production schedule. Even in its first iteration, *NXT* was always branded as being innovative and connected to the future of pro wrestling. But this innovation was never clearer when it shifted from the SYFY Network to become a web series in September 2010. Before its rebranding on the WWE Network, *NXT* had five seasons and oscillated between WWE traditional production that focused on wrestlers and storylines to how reality shows were originally framed (many debate that this has shifted since the proliferation of reality TV in the last fifteen years), but at

¹⁵² Below line refers to a labor separation in the media industries between creatives (writers, producers, directors, actors) and the production team (rest of the laborers).

¹⁵³ WWE established a relationship with the SYFY Network in 2006. Originally, it showed a rebranded ECW. ECW was an independent wrestling organization that the WWE acquired rights to at the end of the Monday night wars between WWE and WCW. This show lasted from 2006 to 2010. Immediately after its cancellation, *NXT* began showing on this network until September of that year, when *SmackDown* moved to the SYFY network. With this move, *NXT* became a web series.

this time it understood that unlike other WWE products, *NXT* was improvisational and on the fly. Many current WWE talent who debuted on *NXT* have mentioned in interviews and podcasts how different it was, and when they look back at themselves, how cringey it was. Others recognize the *NXT* freedom and creativity from the mandates that control their autonomy.

Even in its first iteration, *NXT* countered traditional hiring practices. On the first season of *NXT*, independent wrestling darling Bryan Danielson debuted as Daniel Bryan. Even though he was trained by WWE Hall of Famer Shawn Michaels, Daniel Bryan was not the prototypical model of a WWE superstar. Bryan was an average of height white male who was in shape but not exceeding muscular or cut. He was quite ordinary and often called “vanilla,” which is shorthand for ordinary and mundane used by certain sections of pro wrestling fandom. He embodied the ordinary and every day. However, while his looks (and body) did not scream WWE superstar, he is an extremely skilled grappler who wrestled all over the independent scene, including Japan, which is held in high regard in American wrestling circles.¹⁵⁴ He was a fan favorite of this show, and despite him not winning the “WWE contract,” he endeared himself to the WWE Universe (this is the name the WWE calls its fandom) in a way that would serve him well when he became a fixture on the main roster. In season 2, this similar story was picked up again, as the narrative centered on another independent wrestling darling, Kaval. And while he won, unlike Bryan, he did not have the staying power and left the WWE shortly after he was on the main roster.

Industry lore said that he was difficult to work with and hated the WWE. It should be noted that

¹⁵⁴ Japan is one of the central hubs for pro wrestling. Japanese wrestling has distinctive stylistics because it incorporates stiff strikes, suplexes (a suplex is an offensive where you lift and throw your opponent. This move has numerous variations and is a standard move in amateur and professional wrestling), and more realistic interaction between opponents. Japanese wrestling is intimately connected to various martial arts such as judo, Muay Thai, and MMA. Traditional Japanese wrestling is called strong style.

while he was just as atypical as Daniel Bryan in stature and had an explosive in-ring style, he was also Afro Latino.¹⁵⁵ While many pro wrestlers try to declare that the pro wrestling industry is a brotherhood and is color-blind, Kaval's racialization as a Black man positions him differently industrially than Bryan, who is racialized as a white man. Despite their similar backgrounds in the independent wrestling scene, the affect that they generated during their *NXT* seasons was quite different. Despite the constant disavowal of racism in pro wrestling, it is a space filled with precarity where the most vulnerable are the most precarious in an industry where meritocracy is an elusive illusion.

The third season pushed back at normative hiring practices even more so than previous seasons, as this was a season of all women. This season introduced wrestling fans to three women of color: AJ Lee, who is Latinx; Naomi, who is Black; and Maxine, whom they touted as a multiracial woman of color. But this was even more innovative, as the main roster women at this time were not allowed to work to their full ability. Yet on this season of *NXT*, Naomi and AJ Lee had a match where they were able to use moves and sequences that up till recently only the men were allowed to do in the WWE. It has been noted constantly on podcasts that during this period the women were not allowed to wrestle as well as or like the men. If they did, they and/or the agents were punished backstage. Agents in pro wrestling lay out the matches for wrestlers. This means the moves, the sequence, and the ring psychology are dictated by an agent (retired or semiretired pro wrestler). This match was so good, in fact, that it was considered the best match

¹⁵⁵ See Tim Havens, *Black Television Travels: African American Media around the Globe* (New York: NYU Press, 2013) Industry lore for Havens is a material discourse that emerges in media industries practices that include iterative day-to-day practices, larger-scale business practices, organizational structure, and political economic forces.

of the year for women in the WWE despite these women only being developmental talent at the time.

NXT's third season highlighted Naomi's and AJ's wrestling prowess by featuring their in-ring ability and not sexualizing them in ways that had been traditionally done in the WWE at this time. Their digital embodiment shifted normative practices within the WWE. First, AJ Lee and Naomi are women of color whose bodies were not the typical bodies that the WWE understood as the standard. Neither one of them had breast augmentation, neither were blond, neither one had blue eyes. Further, Naomi is a dark-skinned Black woman with abs cut from steel and a curvy body that is more reminiscent of a track and field sprinter. Second, their bodies, which were not normative based on previous female hires by the WWE, were showcased to audiences in live arenas where the show was taped, on the SYFY Network until the fourth episode, where it was then converted to a webcast deployed through the WWE website. *NXT*'s third season began the WWE's engagement with digital media, which in many ways set the tone for how the WWE has grappled with the digital content but also in the way these practices have shifted professional wrestling. AJ Lee's and Naomi's digital embodiment had a snowball effect, as they influenced a generation of women wrestlers coming behind them despite not winning the competition:

Kaitlyn, a more muscular blonde woman, won that season. Many women wrestlers (especially women of color) have mentioned in interviews how either AJ or Naomi or both have influenced them to not only watch wrestling but become wrestlers.

You could mark this time as a key moment where women were able to push back at traditional roles that they had on the main roster. In fact, when *NXT* was rebranded and reintroduced, it had

a women's division instead of a diva's division. The rebranded *NXT* division is an important part of the genealogy of women's wrestling in the WWE. While many critique WWE for not counting the Knockouts Division in TNA, which predated *NXT* women division or women's wrestling in Mexico or Japan, which have a much longer history of equity for female wrestlers. It is important to understand how industrial shifts and innovative practices propagated material changes especially around difference in the context of labor. So, it is important to understand that the material impact of the women's revolution that is just now being fully actualized on the main roster started from the seeds that were planted in *NXT* season 3 and which then were tended, cultivated, and bloomed in the rebranding of *NXT*.

In each season, from season 1 to season 5, the original *NXT* pushed back at conventional norms of the pro wrestling industry. Whether situated within a larger industrial frame or more specific aspects of the production of the text, *NXT* pushed the envelope and opened space for a new type of pro wrestling. I contend that the reception of *NXT* was a catalyst for the vision for the rebranding of *NXT*. When *NXT* was rebranded and broadcasted on the WWE Network, it was free of network constraints. Creatively, the content was not managed or supported by Vince K. McMahon, who has been described as a perfectionist, a micro manager, and tone deaf. Instead, it was driven by HHH, a wrestler who listened to writers and seemed to want a collaborative space to produce the best wrestling content possible. Now while HHH is beloved when he is behind the scenes, industrial lore sees him differently as a talent: narratives describe him as manipulative and opportunistic, which coincides with his nickname of "The Game." Each of these narratives has been constructed and propagated by industry lore, so even if they are not true, their

discursivity holds industrial weight and shapes the tone of industrial practice. The more innovative and open practices can be seen in all aspects of the rebranded *NXT*.

The rebranded *NXT* is centered as innovation in the wrestling product, with an inclusive and diverse roster and innovative training. This is all situated as industrial through the WWE Performance center. While many *NXT* superstars come to the WWE with prior training from the independent wrestling scene, just as many are coming to *NXT* without any prior wrestling experience. I maintain that the PC center is the industrial anchor for this differing framework in pro wrestling. Moreover, this shift in hiring practices through the PC center proved to be a unique and different sort of visibility. As Gardener suggests, hiding the business controlled the wrestlers in the NWA territory, but the inverse works for *NXT*, as selected exposure controls the wrestlers.¹⁵⁶ Because of social media and streaming technologies, the more often a wrestler can connect to wrestling fans, the more they can push back at industrial precarity.

The parasocial relationships established between wrestlers and fans mitigate and give additional agency to the wrestler.¹⁵⁷ For example, when a wrestler would move between companies and make a debut or sign a contract, it was secrecy and intrigue that surrounded the potential hire and debut. Now with the PC Center, when a wrestler signs, they are either announced like they were traded from another place, or they are shown to be part of the incoming class. Even highly skilled independent wrestlers are grouped along with people who are new to the business.

¹⁵⁶ Bradley Gardner, "High Risk Maneuvers: Geographies of Power and Labor Practices in Professional Wrestling's Territorial Era," in *Critical Geographies of Sport: Space, Power, and Sport in Global Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2016).

¹⁵⁷ Industrial precarity and the migration of it via social media is talked about at length in a conference paper I presented on October 27, 2018, at a conference at DePaul University, titled "Grappling with Misogynoir: A Tree of Woe."

Additionally, this visibility is needed, as the WWE has made a concerted effort to recruit or hire specific individuals from specific target markets. For instance, on September 6, 2016, the WWE signed seven recruits from China (another recruit was signed earlier that year in June), after a highly publicized WWE tryout. Currently of these recruits, only two are still signed, and only one has been featured in WWE content. This format has been repeated in India, the Middle East, and more recently in Latin America. The only difference is as they recruit and train, they then use those recruits from those regions as their intermediaries in those locations. And despite this almost predatory approach, *NXT*, when compared with the main roster, is innovative and inclusive. There are still industrial constraints within the pro wrestling industry that wrestlers in *NXT* still must navigate, but they often use different industrial logics at different registers.

While *NXT* was not the only exclusive WWE content on the network, it was the only directly pro wrestling content, as WWE used interviews, specials, and reality show–inspired media products as network content. Only two years after the success of *NXT Takeover*, the network decided to produce more directly pro wrestling content. In the summer of 2016, WWE began a slew of wrestling tournaments using some internal talent, but most of the talent used were prominent wrestlers in the international independent wrestling scene. As *NXT* grew, so did the number of popular indie wrestlers who previously would have been told they did not have the WWE look. This tournament was first called the Global Cruiserweight tournament before being renamed the Cruiserweight Classic (CWC). This was a tournament of thirty-two men from all over the world. While quite a few wrestlers were from the US, they were racially diverse, and there ended up being a representative from every continent except Africa and Antarctica. Additionally, it was noted that each man had to be less than 205 pounds, so the weights ranged from 147 to 200

pounds. This is notable because pro wrestling and the WWE has pushed the larger-than-life characterization of its wrestlers, often adding height and weight to the wrestlers to make them more impressive. Tournaments began in June and ended in September. It was met with such fanfare that the WWE signed a little over half of the guys from the tournament, two of whom were former WWE wrestlers who had been released. In fact, this tournament was so successful that it became its own brand and show called *205 Live*. It debuted two months later on November 29, 2016, exclusively on the WWE Network. Following this addition to the WWE, both a women's and a British wrestling tournament took place, the Mae Young Classic and the United Kingdom Tournament. Like the CWC, both tournaments were successful and resulted in independent talent getting signed to the WWE. However, the UK tournament resulted in a new brand based in the UK.

Intimate Global to Local: From *NXT UK* To AEW

Outside the US, there are four other pro wrestling epicenters: Japan, Mexico, Canada, and the UK. I define these epicenters as pro wrestling culture and industrial hubs where pro wrestling has an industrial infrastructure that includes pro wrestling schools and independent wrestling organizations.¹⁵⁸ Additionally, each of these epicenters have a distinctive wrestling style (or styles). Despite not being as pervasive as the US wrestling scene or as revered as the Japanese,

¹⁵⁸ Dan Glenday, "Professional Wrestling as Culturally Embedded Spectacles in Five Core Countries: The USA, Canada, Great Britain, Mexico, and Japan," *Revue de Recherche en Civilisation Américaine*, no. 4 (October 16, 2013)

Mexican, or Canadian wrestling scenes, the UK wrestling scene has a long and interesting history.¹⁵⁹ And this wrestling scene became even more interesting during the summer of 2018.¹⁶⁰

On June 18, 2018, it was announced that *NXT UK* would become its own autonomous brand and began a taping schedule for its own show starting in July 2018. This announcement was quite startling, as this was the WWE's first attempt at materially going outside the US wrestling scene to control another wrestling epicenter's territory. But things became even more complicated the following month. On July 16, 2018, it was announced that ITV would revive *World of Sport* wrestling (*WOS*), formerly a staple of British wrestling that aired from 1965 to 1985.¹⁶¹ In both the US and the UK, this move was quite the talk of the wrestling industry, as UK wrestlers and fans understood that this was a direct response to the hard work that had been put into UK wrestling over the last year and a half. Utilizing similar principles that *NXT* had adopted, UK independent wrestling flourishing. But the biggest shock for this announcement was generated when it was discovered that the wrestlers working for *WOS* would be unionized labor.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ Benjamin Litherland, *Wrestling in Britain: Sporting Entertainments, Celebrity, and Audiences* (London: Routledge, 2018).

¹⁶⁰ . Marc Middleton, "Sky Sports Says Goodbye to WWE as 30-Year Partnership Ends," *LordsofPain.Net* (blog), December 30, 2019, <https://lordsofpain.net/sky-sports-says-goodbye-to-wwe-as-30-year-partnership-ends/>.
———. "WWE NXT and NXT UK Also Airing on BT Sport, More on WWE Partnering with BT Sport," *LordsofPain.Net* (blog), December 31, 2019, <https://lordsofpain.net/wwe-nxt-and-nxt-uk-also-airing-on-bt-sport-more-on-wwe-partnering-with-bt-sport/>, "British Wrestling in Turmoil: New Restrictions on NXT UK Talent Imminent | WrestleTalk," <https://wrestletalk.com/news/british-wrestling-in-turmoil-new-restrictions-on-nxt-uk-talent-imminent/>.

¹⁶¹ ITV is a television network in England. It is free to air. It operates in England, Wales, Scotland, Isle of Man, and the Channel Islands.

¹⁶² "Actors' Equity Association," <http://www.actorsequity.org>.

In the US, pro wrestlers are independent contractors. All attempts at unionization in the US wrestling scene have either been stopped by wrestling owners/promoters or been thwarted by their feckless peers. It is industry lore that the most recent attempt at unionization in the early nineties was curtailed due to Hulk Hogan going behind the back of his peers and letting Vince McMahon know what they were organizing. It is rumored that Hogan sabotaged fellow wrestlers to keep his industrial power in WWE. So, this was indeed huge news, as the independent contractor status of pro wrestlers is central to their overall industrial precarity. Furthermore, this unionization was predicated on their hybridity, as both athletes and performers. In the British context, these pro wrestlers are understood to be performers, as they unionized through Equity, an actor's union. This loophole thus allowed the wrestlers to become part of a union that classified them as actors that fit them somewhere between soap opera actors and stuntmen. This was an incredibly important industrial moment for the pro wrestling industry. Many wrestlers and fans alike hope one day that a similar fate befalls wrestlers in the US.

The formation of *NXT UK* created buzz and speculation for the WWE's long-term development plans. However, the wrestling world would not have too long to wait, as HHH availed the wrestling world of his plans during a conference call in December 2018. In this conference call, HHH unveiled a systematic plan where the WWE was going to extend its *NXT* model from the US to about six other regional territories. Below, a direct quote from his presentation sums up WWE's rational and approach:

Going into individual markets around the world, we will create scaled versions of the template we've created: organizing tryouts, recruiting talent, establishing Performance Centers and building, on the ground, *NXT*-style brands. You can already see this template starting to take shape in the UK. We have the talent, we have a UK Championship, and now, we're ready to give those fans more.

[The June UK shows in London] will kick off the next step in the evolution of our European brand. But we're not stopping there. We're taking action in regions all over the world. [The Greatest Royal Rumble and the ten-year agreement with the Saudi General Sports Authority] includes localized tryouts, training, a

possible on the ground Performance Center and even a Middle Eastern brand. Imagine, imagine that engagement—when a kid of Riyadh or Dubai or Jakarta can grow up as a WWE fan, be recruited by us, be trained by the WWE, become a champion in their home country, go on to compete globally in NXT, debut on Raw or SmackDown and one day, step out into a sold-out stadium, on The Grandest Stage of Them All, at WrestleMania. Imagine what that could create in that market. Imagine what that can create in places where the demand for WWE is the greatest, but the supply is limited only by geography.

We envision NXT style promotions, not just for fans in Europe, or the Middle East, but also India, South America, and more. It's the same grassroots territory feeder system that existed before—except now, not on a national level but on a global level. And all under the WWE banner.¹⁶³

As the media studies scholar Benjamin Litherland expounds, the WWE is attempting to “globalize local territories on a transnational streaming network.”¹⁶⁴ The model that the WWE previewed wants to establish local *NXT*s in wrestling epicenters such the UK (which they have begun) and Japan, while also establishing them in brand-new markets such as China, India, South America, and the Middle East. However, there were not any plans or mentions of an *NXT Africa*.¹⁶⁵ This aligns with the sentiments of many industries upon hearing this news; while the term *grassroots* connote progress, this practice feels neo-imperialist and neocolonial when thinking about these attempts to enter the Middle East, China, and most especially, South America and India. While the pro wrestling community has mixed feelings about this expansive approach, this has sparked discourse in the pro wrestling industry, where pro wrestlers, pro wrestling intermediaries, and fans are critically thinking about the future of pro wrestling.

¹⁶³ Jamie Greer, “Triple H & the Plans for NXT ‘Global Localization,’” *Last Word on Pro Wrestling* (blog), December 3, 2018, <https://lastwordonsports.com/prowrestling/2018/12/02/triple-h-the-plans-for-nxt-global-localization/>.

¹⁶⁴ This reference is taken from a Twitter back-and-forth between Benjamin Litherland and me about the WWE and the UK wrestling scene

¹⁶⁵ See Adam Bledsoe and Willie Jamaal Wright, “The Anti-Blackness of Global Capital,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 37.1 (February 1, 2019): 8–26. The exclusion of *NXT Africa* has me thinking about the ways that anti-Blackness functions as a process of the Global Intimate. In “The Anti-blackness of Global Capital,” Bledsoe and Wright make an argument that explains how global capitalism and anti-Black violence produce and shape a global anti-Blackness. This framework aligns with

What HHH calls global localization, I call digital global intimacy. I pull this term partly from the feminist geographers Alison Mountz and Jennifer Hyndman, who argue and conceptualize global intimacy by understanding that “scale is a leaky category that remains fluid, contingent, and overlapping. One scale is not mutually exclusive of others.”¹⁶⁶ And rather than seeing scale as a binary that is either global or local, they understand that the global and the local are constitutive of the other. I then attach the term *digital* to it, as I use AJ Christian’s notion of innovation to think about streaming as an innovative technology that shapes digital space. Marrying these two concepts form the analytic of digital global intimacy. This digital global intimacy can be seen in WWE industrial practices that include the organization going into new spaces around the world to reshape space digital space to make local yet global wrestling into digital wrestling territories. Conversely, these digital global intimacies shape industrial practices locally in the US.

On January 10, 2018, it was announced that a PPV titled *All In* would take place in Chicago on September 1, 2018. This PPV was organized and spearheaded by Cody Rhodes, former WWE superstar and the youngest son of Dusty Rhodes, and by Young Buck, a tag team composed of two brothers who had yet to go to the WWE despite interest from the organization. Over the course of 2017, these three young men developed a deep love and commitment to the pro wrestling industry, worked in North America at various independent promotions such as ROH and the revived NWA, and had international success at New Japan. Despite their success as top-drawing independent wrestlers, many within the industry were skeptical of their ability to pull off a show of this magnitude. But it was done. On September 1, 2018, *All In* was a global pro wrestling success, with over ten thousand in attendance in a major WWE wrestling territory

¹⁶⁶ Alison Mountz and Jennifer Hyndman, “Feminist Approaches to the Global Intimate,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 34.1–2 (2006): 450–51.

(Chicago) while being streamed through ROH and previewed on YouTube and the television network WGN. The success of this event shows that through collective action, pro wrestling could indeed combat the WWE's hegemonic hold on the wrestling industry. By utilizing the techniques that the WWE cultivated in the proliferation of NXT, these independent wrestlers were able to strike a mighty blow to the WWE's unwavering dominance.

On November 22, 2018, news broke across the internet that Tony Khan, son of the billionaire co-owner of the Jacksonville Jaguars Shahid Khan, had filed copyrights for trademarks related to an upstart wrestling organization. The LLC All Elite Wrestling filed five trademarks: "AEW," All Elite Wrestling," "AEW Double or Nothing," "AEW All Out," and "Tuesday Night Dynamite." Wrestling fans pay close attention to copyright trademark filings, which can indicate new talent making debuts or new creative directions for companies. The speculation around the LLC trademark included the veteran wrestler Chris Jericho and the well-known wrestling commentator Jim Ross. Direct connections were made between the wrestlers behind *All In* and Tony Khan with this project. This speculation proved to be true, as AEW debuted officially as a company on TNT on October 2, 2019. And while this is not the first time that a wrestling organization or the threat of an organization reared its head over the last eighteen years, it is the first time that someone with as deep pockets as Ted Turner has been connected to the pro wrestling industry. When Turner invested in World Championship Wrestling (WCW), he nearly ran Vince K. McMahon and the WWE out of business. Ironically, this news comes as McMahon is rumored to be trying once again to establish the XFL.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁷ The XFL was a joint venture by the WWE and NBC. It was football league that had one season in 2001. In January 2018, it was announced that McMahon would try it again. Some note that this revival was spurred on by debates within the NFL around kneeling and protest, as industry lore suggested that XFL players were going to be prohibited from any form of political protest. In 2020, XFL was stopped in the middle of its comeback season due to

After the success of the *All In* PPV, it is not a coincidence that there is interest not only from businesspeople but from industry professionals in adding competition to the pro wrestling landscape in the US. The US is the only wrestling epicenter where there is no longer any viable competition. While a variety of wrestling organizations have notable talent and TV deals, none have the scale alone to compete with the WWE. However, collectively and through social media, many wrestlers are utilizing their agency as free agents and rallying together to push back at their precarity using parasocial relationships that they cultivate on social media as well as the streaming service. Utilizing their collective strength, coupled with new industrial norms, that is, watching professional wrestling via streaming despite a consumer location, has spatially reframed the consumption and production of pro wrestling, as it no longer as wedded to a single space. Now it can move, shift, and operate at various scales, which means there have been two fundamental changes. First, there has been a change in the relationship between wrestlers and the industry. Second, there has been an industrial change in the parasocial relationships between wrestling fans, wrestlers, and the industrial constituents. Both changes are hallmarks of new power geometries that have appeared in response to the use of innovative media technologies.

In January 2021, it was announced that the WWE Network in the United States would be migrating to the Peacock Network. However, this transition only affects American customers, as the WWE Network will remain the same outside America. Additionally, it was announced that AEW and TNA Impact wrestling had reached deals to broadcast their wrestling shows to many

the COVID-19 pandemic. On April 13, 2020, XFL filed chapter 11 just three days after league president informed the media that operations would cease and that all players would be terminated. On August 3, 2020, a consortium that included DeWayne “The Rock” Johnson purchased XFL.

countries in sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁶⁸ This news was historic, as it was the first time that this region had pro wrestling broadcast to it as the WWE was broadcasted only to Egypt and South Africa. While these two announcements were quite surprising to wrestling fans, they are indicative of the volatile industrial logics that are part of the pro wrestling industry, as WWE's streaming network has disrupted the industrial landscape of the pro wrestling industry.

In August 2022, it was announced that *NXT UK* was ending and being rebranded as *NXT Europe*. This news more than was shocking: it was an abrupt ending to a brand that was finally getting its footing locally as the last episode of *NXT UK* aired on September 1, 2022, not even a month after the announcement. Immediately after this announcement, *NXT UK* wrestlers and trainers were fired, let go from their contracts, or sent to the original *NXT* in Florida. This change once again reset the independent wrestling scene in the UK. Further, this dissolving and rebranding of *NXT UK* to *NXT Europe* illustrates both the dynamic spatiality of these digital territories to the company's brand and their importance to the future of the company: moving from *NXT UK* to *NXT Europe* is indicative of a scaling up of not just area or magnitude but of control and authority of pro wrestling on mainland Europe. However, while *NXT Europe* is touted to be coming, there has not been affirmative news or plans disclosed since its announcement in 2022.

Global Strength, Local Vulnerability

This chapter has examined how the WWE Network has been the catalyst for industrial change in the pro wrestling industry. The rebranding of *NXT* can be understood as the manifestation of a

¹⁶⁸ Broadcast Pro ME, "TNT Africa Announces Channel Refresh for 2021," January 22, 2021, <https://www.broadcastprome.com/news/tnt-africa-announces-channel-refresh-for-2021/>.

global capitalist approach employed by the WWE to solidify its dominance globally in the pro wrestling industry. While the WWE's neoliberal grassroots approach divorces itself from NWA's mafia-like approach of yesteryear, the WWE's approach still relies on asymmetrical power relationships between wrestlers and companies to control the industrial landscape. However, the subtleness of the WWE's current approach makes it harder to combat. Because it is slippery, indirect, and diffuse, it has been commandeered and utilized by pro wrestlers themselves to combat the WWE's industrial imperialism. While the technological affordances of streaming technologies make it easier for the WWE to penetrate markets, it also makes their territories, material and digital, more vulnerable, and less solvent to smaller local wrestling companies and international wrestling companies that are also able to use those same technologies.

Vignette # 4: Black Boy Not Quite Blue

When I decided to become a professional wrestler, I had no idea that the decision would be so mentally cumbersome. I knew that my body would be pushed to the limit, but I had no idea it would spur me toward introspection. In my effort to learn the art of pro wrestling, I also went on a parallel but often perpendicular journey where I wrestled with internal turmoil as it related to how I saw myself as a young Black man. Who was Dewitt? What type of man would he become? And most importantly, what type of Black person is he? These were all thoughts that began to bubble to the surface of my psyche. When I think about what sparked these critical reflections, only one name comes to mind, Lil B.

My friendship with Lil B was exceedingly complex. It was uncharted territory to a sheltered 17-year-old who was (and still is) socially awkward. What evolved into a friendship began as a frenemieship. Lil B who was the one only other black person that I encountered during my wrestling training (aside from Big M) was my friend and foe wrapped in highly opinionated package with copious amounts of muscles and tattoos. He was the Michael Jordan to my Scott Pippen and Medium D's John Stockton and in the eyes of Big B, he was most definitely Beyonce of our little group.

My first meeting with Lil B occurred the first day of training at Big B's house. It was on a Saturday in January. The new year had just passed, and my foray into pro wrestling was very much giving new year, new you, and new adventure. We, meaning, Lil B, and Medium D, started training on the same day to be Big B's inaugural wrestling class for a wrestling school that never left the backyard. Our first meeting was in the backyard where Big B had us set up the wrestling ring. This is a common practice. Wrestling trainees and newer wrestlers learn how to

take apart and assemble the wrestling ring. In professional wrestling it's a sign of respect. And after doing so we went around to talk about our professional wrestling aspirations.

My First impressions of LIL B were instant relief as I was not the only Black person. I was so happy to see him. However, our relationship started off rocky. As the Beyonce of the group, he got most of the early attention from Big B and we even joked that he was his namesake since they shared the same name. Outside of his height, LIL B was everything the WWE would want in a wrestler. He was highly athletic, in great shape. He was 5'7 and 150 pounds. He was muscular with great vascularity. He was what industry folks would call TV ready based on his aesthetics.

We didn't really get to know each other all that well in the first month of training. We trained weekly but didn't have all that much in common. I was in high school; Lil B was in college and Medium D was in college, but he was also married and had 3 kids. So those interactions that first month were very surface level. It was a quick hello, how are you at the start of training and a very fast goodbye, at the end of training. In many ways that worked to Big B's advantage as us three had no loyalty to the other. Initially, however, I became much closer to Medium D at the start. He would sometime bring his three small kids to training. And for whatever reason small kids like me. It must be my winning personality. So, I would always speak to them and see how they were doing. Lil B and I were mostly cordial but there was an underlining tension that I did not at all understand that was brewing beneath the surface. So Medium D became our go between ironically enough. But when we were all on the same page, we did great things as fellow wrestling trainees. However, this changed over time as we all got to know each other a little better. Our social dynamics were always in flux especially as Medium A (who had already been a friend of Lil B) and Georgia would come in and out of the group.

Because Lil B was positioned as the favorite, this meant that Medium D and I also designated roles with this group. Medium was the tallest of the trio. He was around 6 feet and 190 pounds. He was a taller, lanky white guy who was slotted in the role as Mister Dependable. He wasn't the strongest or most athletic member in the group, but he was very dependable and often served as the base when we tried out moves for the first time. He was the group's dad so to speak. And then there was me, I was 5'9 and 160 pounds. At this point in my life, I had yet to go into a gym and I had not participated in any sports outside of the occasional game of kick ball. I became the dark horse of the group as some of the moves I got instantly such as the more complicated spots, which are a series of maneuvers but while others were a bit harder for me to master. For example, when learning to grapple you need to have a particular finesse as to not actually hurt the opponent. I was what my family had called "heavy handed" so finesse was not my strong suit so when doing wrist locks or practicing striking (punches primarily) I would often use more force than was needed. So, I struggled with things that required dexterity while excelling as things that required explosive speed and power in the ring. This inconsistency frustrated Big B to no end because he couldn't understand why I couldn't be just like Lil B. But what he did not realize and neither did I, if I am to be honest, because this was the result of me having an undeveloped muscle mind connection. In layman's terms my brain and my central nervous system were wrestling for control of me. Instead of working in concert, they were working against the other. So, at the time, Big B frustration in me not being just like LIL B rubbed me the wrong way and I projected that onto how I felt about LIL B.

However, this changed about a month into the training when LIL B asked me one day if I could give him a ride home after practice. He explained that it would be temporary, but he needed someone to take him home for the next few weeks. I said yes since my grandmother was always

on me about following the golden rule of doing to others that you want them to do to you. So, with each car ride after practice that was approximately 25 minutes as Lil B lived south of Big B further down I 77. These 25 mins rides allowed us to get to know each other better and provided the infrastructure for what would later become a friendship. I learned that in addition to him being into fitness as an amateur body builder and material artists, he was also a college student. He was attending Benedict College, an HBCU in Downtown Columbia. But perhaps most surprisingly, I later learned during one of these car rides that his roommate was his partner and that he was gay. He explained to me that Big B knew and that was part of his initial conversation about training with Big B. He told me in no uncertain terms that he was not going to be around homophobic people. His candidness took me aback as that conversation was so unexpected. He was not only unapologetically Black, but he was unapologetic queer.

My 17 year old self had never met anyone like him. My family could be what you might call in the nicest way possible, very country and churchy. Furthermore, I was socially behind the curve because I was sheltered so this meant my social skills were lacking. I was what my family called book smart but lacking common sense lol. So, Lil B was the first out gay Black person in my peer group that I had met. While my grandmother had a few Black gay acquaintances (She was much more progressive than others in my family as I think back) they were all much older and I never had any conversation or interaction with them outside of a hello, how you are. Lil B was someone that I got to know and became friends with. He was very confident and tenacious. He always spoke his mind and was not afraid of conflict (this served us well when we disagreed with Big B later one). But that downside of this directness was that when it was aimed at you it was uncomfortable. And because I was very much a sensitive Pisces, I took a lot of critiques to

heart early on. This, however, was before I realized that we both projected our insecurities onto the other without communicating clearly how we felt about things.

Our friendship also flourished as we had a very oppositional relationship with Big M. Big M was a 40 something Black man who wrestled on the independent scene. He would come around occasionally to work out in the ring with us and we would often see him at shows that we did. Unfortunately, solidarity between Big M and us (LIL B and myself) never came to be, he had an allegiance to Big B that I never quite understood. He did not ever take an interest in forming any type of relationship with Lil B or myself. Further, we learned later that he would report back to Big B about things that we did when we wrestled independent shows. He sadly functioned in the role of an overseer, but we never understood how that served his purposes. This always baffled me, and I never learned all that much more about him outside of knowing that he was a snitch. Thinking back on it, it was very much a wasted opportunity for all of us, as we could have learned a lot from him and maybe we could have brought a new perspective to him being much younger than him at the time.

Despite the state of South Carolina having so many Black folks in it. LIL B and I were quite isolated in the professional wrestling scene. Outside of seeing Big M here and there, we never really met any other Black wrestlers, male or female. Most of the fans at the shows were almost always white as well. We were so fortunate to have each other during that time as wrestling trainees. And it never occurred to me how I would feel until if I was as the only Black person training until about 2 months into training.

Loneliness is part and parcel of the professional wrestling business. Professional wrestling pushes you to deceive and to constantly deceive you must make a partition in your mind like you are a half working hard drive with a fan that works some of the time. I was already disconnected

from my family during the early part of my training because I lied about what I was doing and then still disconnected after the secret was revealed. But loneliness really set in when Lil B was absent.

My first bout with this loneliness was during a 3-week period when Lil B did not come to training. At first, I felt that I could finally show my stuff. I wanted the attention from Big B, and I naively thought that with Lil B gone I could be the star lol. While Big D did focus more attention on me and while I did rapidly get better as Big B realized I was more than a diamond in the rough. I did miss Lil B. Retrospectively, even Medium D participated in the foolery as he told me during training how much I had improved and did some moves much better than LIL B did. While I initially preened, I realized later that I did not like how that made me feel and I quickly peeped how quickly people switched up. Black solidarity is a powerful thing I realized after the fact of course. Both Medium D and I would later learn that Lil B's absence was based on a dispute with Big B. And his absent began a longer story of us three eventually breaking away from Big B and doing our own thing in the independent wrestling scene of North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia for about a year and a half.

Despite us not always getting along, Lil B and I had each other's back. Solidarity was present, at least most of the time. With us of us being under 25, we lacked the maturity that would have allowed us to be better friends to each other. However, despite the issues that we had, we had each other back when it came to navigating the pro wrestling industry. Like brothers we fought, but we also took up for one another. And even after we both left wrestling, we stayed in touch for a bit of time, checking up on each other every now and again.

Chapter 4: Wrestling with Progress

On August 15, 2013, during a routine TMZ interview at Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) in the baggage claim area, an opportunity presented itself for the WWE to cement itself as an inclusive and diverse corporation. Darren Young, a Black professional wrestler, was asked by TMZ reporters if a gay wrestler could succeed in the WWE. He responded that yes, they could succeed, as he was gay. This unexpected response turned the wrestling world on its head. This clip went viral on social media and gave the WWE the mainstream media attention that it craves. WWE was quick to take advantage of this unexpected spotlight in the popular cultural imaginary as they released the following statement:

“WWE is proud of Darren Young for being open about his sexuality, and we will continue to support him as a WWE Superstar. Today, in fact, Darren will be participating in one of our Be A Star anti-bullying rallies in Los Angeles to teach children how to create positive environments for everyone regardless of age, race, religion or sexual orientation.”¹⁶⁹

Furthermore, many prominent WWE stars, such as John Cena, CM Punk, and The Big Show, when asked about Darren Young’s coming out, responded with supportive affirmations and carefully curated sound bites, that echoed WWE’s statement of supporting diversity, equity and inclusion in professional wrestling.¹⁷⁰

However, despite this sentimentality, Darren Young along with Emma and Summer Rae, were fired on October 20, 2017. While being released by the WWE is not an uncommon practice, it should be noted that Darren Young has never been rehired nor has been seen on WWE television since. This is interesting because Emma in total has been released by the WWE twice and was

¹⁶⁹ Houlihan, “Video: WWE Superstar Darren Young Comes out and WWE Speaks out in Support | GLAAD.”

¹⁷⁰ It should be noted that much of the media response focused on the reaction of white male wrestlers. In one interview with John Cena, his girl friend at the time Nikki Bella was not even asked her opinion about Young coming out.

most recently rehired in the Fall of 2022, while Summer Rae was featured in the Women's Royal Rumble in 2022. While industry lore often explains that unexpected releases are often due to "budget cuts" or bad behavior by the wrestlers, there were never even a sustained speculated reason for Darren Young's release. Moreover, despite the WWE hiring of more queer wrestlers since Darren Young TMZ viral moment, there has been little structural change to the treatment or portrayal of queer wrestlers. During the early portions of the Covid-19 Pandemic, many of those queer wrestlers who were hired in subsequent years were fired during what I am calling the pandemic releases.¹⁷¹ Additionally, despite fans requesting for more nuanced portrayals of queer wrestlers and the showcasing of queer on screen relationships in the WWE, this has yet to occur despite Stephanie McMahon acknowledging that it was in the works.¹⁷² So the question becomes, is the WWE the center of progressive change in the professional wrestling industry ?

This chapter seeks the answer to this question by examining the branding strategies that the WWE employed as it transitioned from a family-owned company to a publicly traded company and as it moved between the debauchery fueled Attitude Era to the kid friendly PG Era to almost real but not quite Reality Era. I utilize this chapter to analyze the mechanisms through which the WWE has welded ambivalence as a brand and wedded it to flat, inorganic, and plastic representations of aggrieved groups of people including not limited to Black and Queer wrestlers. I argue however that despite having a hegemonic control of the pro wrestling industry globally, the WWE is in fact not the center of the material progressive change in pro wrestling. Further, I contend that much of this change originates not from the core (WWE) but from the

¹⁷¹ Prior to the global pandemic of 2020, mass releases had been a thing of the pass. Prior to mass release of wrestlers on April 15, 2020, there had not been such a large number of wrestlers released at the same time since July, 5 2005.

¹⁷² Savitz, "WWE Sees Opportunities to 'Integrate LGBT Storylines' In Programming."

periphery (independent wrestlers/promotions) through the labor of Black wrestlers, particularly Black queer wrestlers, who are fighting the good fight and wrestling with progress by collectively using their voices and labor to effect real change that impact larger companies and entities such as the WWE and AEW.

Getting the F Out: WWE's Rebranding Strategy

At the end of the 20th century, the WWE became a publicly traded company. The WWE, known as the World Wrestling Federation (WWF) at the time, established its Initial Public Offering on October 19, 1999. This occurred during the highly popular Attitude Era when pro wrestling was in its second popularity boom in the United States.¹⁷³ This was also during a period when the WWE was fighting a war on two fronts. The first war was between the WWE and World Championship Wrestling. Officially dubbed Monday Night Wars, this was a proxy war between Vince McMahon and Ted Turner for control of the wrestling industry in the United States. This war ended in 2001 when WWE purchased WCW. The secondary war was between the WWE and WWF, the World Wildlife Federation. The WWF, which was an established company in 1961 prior to the start of the WWE in 1980s won its legal fight and in 2002 the World Wrestling Federation lost its F and replaced it with an E for entertainment. The WWE did more than get the F out, as they also pivoted towards a branding strategy that was intent on the maximization of profit at any cost.

¹⁷³ Pro wrestling in the US is framed as having two major booms in popularity in US Culture. The first popular era is called Rock n Wrestling era in the 1980s. Hulk Hogan, The Macho Man Randy Savage, Mr. T and Cyndi Lauper are connected to this era. The second era is called the Attitude Era. Popular wrestlers and personalities connected to this era are Stone Cold Steve Austin, The Rock, The Undertaker, Sable. Degeneration X and Mike Tyson.

To signal the coming changes, the WWE utilized parody peppered through its media content to prepare fans. All the imagery was centered around the motto “getting the F out”. In late 2002 after the court ruled against the WWE, a series of commercials appeared during the broadcasts of Raw and Smackdown. In the initial commercial, a little old white lady was pruning a bush that was in the shape of WWF logo. Her neighbor an older white man who was peeping over her fence and watched her set the bush on fire. In the aftermath of this pruning by fire it was revealed that the bush had retained its W but lost its F. In another commercial, the WWF logo appeared on a man’s head in a bar and was talking to women. Upon offending the woman in a lame attempt who replayed with a slap to his head which resulted in him losing his F. In both instances, the WWE used imagery that aligned with the WWE’s outlandish and sometime garish aesthetic of the late 90s. While this served as a quick and efficient way to transition from WWF to WWE, it also conveyed that the changes were only at the surface. Because as fans soon found out after, much more than a name change occurred.

WWF’s transformation into the WWE paved the way for the transition from one wrestling era to another. The company’s ethos also shifted as the E, this signifier for entertainment, became the new underlining logic to making the company more than its ways by disabusing it from of its wrestling roots and framing it as entertainment to make it an appeal to a much broader audience and consumer base. So, for many longtime fans and wrestlers, the F literally and figuratively was out, but the F in question was the fighting and the fun. In the ashes of the Attitude Era emerged the PG Era.¹⁷⁴ The most immediate change was the television rating on the television shows transitioning from TV-14, which was adopted in 1997, to PG in 2008. But other changes included

¹⁷⁴ This era is framed very much by disapproval from fans from the changing of content that was previously racier and adult to content that was much more family friendly.

kid specific television shows like the short-lived WWE *Sunday Morning Slam*. This show was made with kid viewership in mind, and it captured the essence of this tonal change in WWE. This show was on the CW network and shown on Saturday morning, only the second WWE show during this timeslot. Additionally, one of the mandates of this show prohibited wrestling moves or spots or spots where an opponent's head or neck were struck. In press release for the show, it was stated that:

“Tag-team champion Kofi Kingston is in action in the premiere of this pro-wrestling series intended for children. WWE stars are profiled, and community initiatives are highlighted, while featured matches bar any moves or holds aimed at the neck.”¹⁷⁵

While this neck/head mandate greatly limited wrestlers move sets, it did push the wrestlers and agents to be creative and rely on comedic wrestling to have entertaining matches that worked around the imposed limitations. Some of the matches that were broadcast on this show ended up being quite enjoyable and garnered praise from fans. But despite the common place moves like DDTs and headlocks being barred, the most interesting aspect of this policy shift was the heavy-handed repositioning toward the community through WWE's foray into philanthropy and community service.

As Sarah Banet-Wesier suggests branding “is now both reliant on, and reflective of, our most, basic social and cultural relations”.¹⁷⁶ Moreover, she suggests that “it is cultural phenomenon more than an economic strategy” yet I see it as a point or space of interrelation between culture and economy.¹⁷⁷ Branding is one method to examine the relationality between cultural production and economic process with power being the common denominator in the ways in which these relations not only reshape space, and place but aide and abate the flows and

¹⁷⁵ Paglino, “WWE Promotes New Rule Instituted For Saturday Morning Slam.”

¹⁷⁶ Banet-Weiser, *Authentic™* P.4

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid*

circulation of knowledge and capital. Thus, even diversity, equality, and inclusion when seen as profitable can be utilized to increase capital accumulation and wielded with impunity through care as a political strategy to be a mechanism/apparatus of control which allows normative ideologies, structures, and power relations to persist. Things stay the same, just with a new glossy coat of paint on it.

Be a Star: Kind of, Sort of

In 2011, WWE created the Be A Star Campaign. On the WWE's website the mission state of this campaign is as follows:

To Promote a culture of inclusion and respect through programs and partnerships that educate, enrich, and empower people to create a positive social environment for all, regardless of age, race, religion, sexual orientation, or physical or intellectual ability.¹⁷⁸

Wrestlers are no longer just in the ring, throwing punches, hitting drop kicks, or putting each other through tables. They are now going to events to promote inclusivity, engaging with the community often outside of their characters as goodwill ambassadors for the company. It should be noted that Black and Brown wrestlers are more often than their white counterparts called to do this on their days off the road. This is important because the typical WWE schedule when it's a brand split has them attending televised shows like Raw and/or Smackdown and House Shows, non-televised programming. This schedule typically only gives them off 2 days off a week. So, most wrestlers are only home for two days before hitting the road again where they spend the bulk of their time traveling by plane, car, and sometimes bus. While employers can adjust the

¹⁷⁸ "About Inclusion." This statement comes directly from the WWE community website.

duties of their employees, does this hold true for those who are not employees but are independent contractors?

Moreover, as the WWE began to see the benefit of philanthropy and community driven care as part of the company's brand, they began to celebrate federal holidays such Black History Month, Women's History Month, Asian American and Pacific Islander Month, National Hispanic Heritage Month, and most recently Pride.¹⁷⁹ This did not happen all at once but gradually between 2010 to 2018 as the WWE begin to include content and programming related to these celebrations on their website. This coincided with their more diverse hiring practices allowing them to utilize the wrestlers from these communities to show how diverse and inclusive they are. I have argued in a forthcoming paper that these more diverse hiring practices have been predicated on them trying to tap into new markets internationally and domestically via the use of streaming technologies as professional wrestling is continually trying to reinvent itself. Further, the television show *Total Divas* has been attributed to the growing female viewership, but media scholar Chad Dell work has shown us historically that women, especially grandmothers, have always been strong parts of pro wrestling fandom.¹⁸⁰ With each of these various factors coming into place, the WWE has made it a mission to be seen and understood as this post racial and post-feminist all-inclusive world where everyone has the same opportunities and is treated the same.

¹⁷⁹ The WWE website has been utilized as the crown jewel of their social media presence. In the WWE community section of the website. There are numerous photo galleries of current and former wrestlers who belong to which ever community that they were showcasing. For example, during Black History Month they will feature all the current and many of the former Black wrestlers that they have employed. From the late 1990s into mid-2010s, the WWE has increased the diversity of its roster by hiring Black, Latinx, Asian American, and out queer wrestlers at higher rates. They capitalized on their more "diverse" roster by including them in photo shoots and at community events.

¹⁸⁰ Dell, *The Revenge of Hatpin Mary*.

Most recently the WWE has begun to celebrate queer communities and have begun to do photo shoots to media appearances to have their presence felt in those spaces. But the labor of this “soft form” of community work and activism falls on the shoulders of the Black, Brown, and queer wrestlers that the employ. When WWE partners with organizations such as the Boys and Girls Clubs, often the Black and Brown wrestlers are always in attendance. For example, Naomi and all three members of the New Day (Kofi Kingston, Xavier Wood and Big E) and Sin Cara, a Latinx wrestler, have been every active in engaging with community work centered around young people. While many are happy to do it and have often spoken positively about it, this emotional labor does not translate to their status within the company. Despite the predetermined nature of professional wrestling, wins and losses do actual matter. They are used to access status in the company and as a wrestler wins so does the likelihood of them winning a championship which despite being determined by the booker is indicative of pay and other fiscal benefits including bonuses added to their base pay. Furthermore, for some wrestlers this is all that do and one of the better examples is Darren Young’s former tag team partner Titus O’Neil who rarely competes in the ring but is frequently doing humanitarian work on behalf of the WWE. The last match that Titus wrestled was on Nov 9th, 2020, where he lost by submission.

It should be mentioned that while this might be framed by some or even the wrestlers as “good labor” care work is extremely laborious and can be quiet disquieting to those who are most vulnerable, further it can be weaponized and an example of this occurred when Titus O’Neil was utilized to clean up a PR blunder a month after a dustup occurred between the WWE and two Black female wrestlers. The WWE received bad press for airing out backstage matters against two Black female wrestlers on air on July 18, 2022. O’Neil was deployed to deliver a promo

about the inclusivity of the WWE.¹⁸¹ This tactic mirrors what was done 6 months prior during Tony Khan's digital altercation with Big Swole. It is a common tactic to weaponize Black people against each other to counter claims of organizational racism/anti-blackness/inequity. One of the more unfortunate impacts of this often-employed strategy is that it has in the past destroyed Black solidarity within the pro wrestling industry.¹⁸²

Despite O'Neil beginning his career alongside Young as a tag team, their careers are quite different places presently. Despite O'Neil still being employed by the WWE, his role within the company has shifted. Currently, he serves as a Good Will Ambassador doing PR on the behalf of the WWE but is not currently utilized as an in-ring talent. While Young has found success as a grappler overseas in New Japan much to surprise of many fans who wrote him off after he was released by the WWE. Japanese wrestling is highly regarded in the industry and Young has amassed a lot of cultural capital as he flourished and one championship in New Japan. Both diverging narratives are indicative of the precarity in the professional wrestling industry that is animated and fortified by anti-Blackness.

¹⁸¹ On July 18, 2022, Titus O'Neil delivered a 3:46 promo during Monday Night Raw about how diverse and inclusive the WWE is. The response to this online was split but many quickly realized this was damage control as two Black female wrestlers had been called unprofessional on Raw and Smackdown after they walked out prior to the show. The backlash to that situation was growing as fans were not at all happy about how the WWE tried to put the onus on Sasha Banks and Naomi. Further, it had just come out that Vince McMahon was being sued and had paid off former employees for sexual misconduct and that one of the women in question was Black.

¹⁸² While what occurred in AEW surrounding Big Swole seemed to shatter the bonds of solidarity between some (not all of the wrestlers), this was not the case with O'Neil as he appeared with Naomi, Sasha Banks and Bayley at baseball game in September 2022. At this time, Naomi and Sasha were suspended from the WWE and still not yet granted their releases. Appearing publicly with them despite being utilized as a diversity stand in speaks highly of the bonds that these individuals have with each other and the understanding of their industrial precarity in a business.

Plastic Ambivalence

So, how does the WWE simultaneously promote diversity, equity and inclusion while also holding on to and maintaining normative industrial power relations? Sarah Banet-Weiser explains “the ambivalence of brand cultures, then, is about incongruity-not all brand cultures mean the same things, either culturally or individually”.¹⁸³ This formulation explains the utility of ambiguity as a cultural tactic and strategy that can be utilized as means to generate profit. But this process has a tag team partner that it calls in assistance, namely that of plastic representation. Kristin Warner defines plastic representation as “a combination of synthetic elements put together and shaped to look like meaningful imagery, but which can only approximate depth and substance because ultimately it is hollow and cannot survive close scrutiny.”¹⁸⁴ Putting these frameworks into conversation gives us a theorization that I am calling Plastic Ambivalence.

I define Plastic Ambivalence as a set of tactics, logics, and strategies that marshals ambiguity along with flat, inorganic representation to make assumptive notions of progressive culturally and economically viable in environment that is predicated on uneven power relations.

Normativity remains intact, hegemony wins, and nothing really changes materially below the surface. I argue that WWE’s deployment of plastic representations, both as media texts and industrial practices, allow them to maintain a level of ambiguity which enables them to engender relationships with a variety of audiences and constituents who inhabit contradictory positionalities. This Plastic Ambivalence allows the WWE to produce imagined progressive content without progressive industrial practice. However, I contend that it also allows for Black

¹⁸³ Banet-Weiser, “Thinking Critically About Brand Cultures.”

¹⁸⁴ Warner, “In the Time of Plastic Representation.” P. 35

Queer wrestlers on the margins to push and advocate for progressive industrial collective collational practice through work, play, and digital fictive kinship practices.

On the Margins: Labor of Progress

Despite the end of the Territory Era in US and Canada through forced consolidation by the McMahon family in the early 1980s, independent wrestling in the United States was not destroyed.¹⁸⁵ Independent Wrestling has remained a vibrant part of the business and a source of talent for national companies like the WWE and international companies like Consejo Mundial de Lucha Libre Co., Lucha Libre AAA Worldwide, New Japan Pro Wrestling, and All Japan Pro Wrestling. In addition to providing talent to larger promotions, they are also providing the blueprint for progressive culture in the professional wrestling business by leading by example and through iterative practice on the ground.

This is illustrated through the tireless labor of Billy Dixon. Billy Dixon is an independent wrestler who is unapologetically Black and unapologetically queer. In the Summer of 2020 during the start of the global pandemic, he announced that he wanted to run a wrestling show entitled *Paris is Bumping*. This show was an homage to the highly touted film *Paris is Burning*. Despite the uncertainty of the pandemic coupled with the rage, helplessness, and sadness from the murders of Ahmad Aubrey, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd. He worked hard to make this show a reality. This show was Dixon's brainchild and was streamed on Independent Wrestling TV (IWTV) a collaborative independent wrestling streaming service the was founded in 2018 after the WWE launched their streaming platform the WWE Network in 2014.

¹⁸⁵ Despite the success and monopoly on wrestling that the WWE has had since the 1980s, Independent or Indy wrestling has been part and parcel of the wrestling business since the territory era. What was left behind after the consolation of the territories were sets of social relations across the regions that where remnants of form territories that still shape local wrestling in those areas.

I have argued in chapter three that the use of streaming technology by the WWE has not only disrupted industrial practices across the industry but has allowed for those on the margins who also use this technology to fight for industrial change themselves through collective, grass root movements in the independent scene.¹⁸⁶ Those on margins of the industry gain strength through collectivity in digital spaces. Through digital collectively, these individuals can share the burdens and cost of running wrestling shows. The utilization of this network is one of many examples that highlight this phenomenon.

In October of 2020 at a venue in Maryland but broadcasted to the world via digital streaming, Paris did bump, and it was a success. In fact, it was such a success that in 2021 it ran again, and it expanded by including more wrestlers of color, more folks from across the LGBTQ+ community, and straight allies. Furthermore, shows such as *Black Wrestlers Matter*, *For the Culture* and other Black centric shows took place shortly before or after *Paris is Bumping*. 2020 was the year of the independent Black wrestler. These shows produced organic, fully fleshed out images and representations of Black folks in professional wrestling. They included a full spectrum of Black talent from across the diaspora, who were of various genders, sexualities, and body types. These shows are indicative of a growing movement of Black queer wrestlers working in community with other Black wrestlers and other non-Black queer wrestlers. You could see bonds of solidarity forming between Black wrestlers. There was a concerted effort on the part of the presumably Straight Black wrestlers to not dissociate themselves from Black queer wrestlers.

At the *Paris is Bumping* inaugural show Dixon says quite plainly that “this is what the future of wrestling executives is going to look like” in reference to himself as a queer Black man in

¹⁸⁶ See chapter 3.

wrestling.¹⁸⁷ Billy Dixon, I assert, is using his labor to re-envision a wrestling future where he is not only included but centered. Dixon engages in a Black Futurity of Wrestling through his labor and practices in the present in physical and well as digital space. Thus, I argue that Billy Dixon (and other wrestlers) builds on a rich history of Black queer activism and on the ground struggles, through this legacy of activism they have brought forth material change in a precariously precarious industry. This imagined progressive sensibility that the WWE has created is being inverted on the margins of the industry the practices from plastic to organic.

Digital Quare Coalitions

I argue that Dixon (and others) engage in Digital Quare Coalitions. I theorize that this is a process that occurs discursively in digital spaces. However, these power relationships manifest materially at local wrestling shows through various practices including but not limited to fellowship through social media interplay and support. From retweets, to podcasts, to engaging with each other on Instagram live and on Twitter spaces, these interactions constitute a togetherness that has material impact pro wrestling culture and policy. No longer are Black wrestlers isolated and disconnected from each other, no longer do Black queer wrestlers feel abject loneliness and longing for community.¹⁸⁸ They not only have community to support them

¹⁸⁷ Bell, "Paris Is Bumping Is pro Wrestling Realness."

¹⁸⁸ Crawley, *The Lonely Letters*; Bost, "Loneliness." The concept of loneliness of Black queer folks is something that both Crawley and Bost addresses in their work. In many ways, I see this loneliness as a symptom that impacts Black wrestlers more generally and Black queer more acutely. Despite never saying he was lonely Darren Young in interviews has spoken about his coming out being a sacrifice for future generations. This statement always seemed tinged with a bit of sadness that I might connect to loneliness and disconnection. In many ways this theory of Digital Quare Coalitions actively combats the potential loneliness of queer Black folk that Bost and Crawley reference.

through the precarity. They have a community to celebrate their wins and success. They have each other. A brotherhood. A sisterhood. A village.

This formulation engages the work of Cathy Cohen and E. Patrick Johnson to think through the ways that broad-based collective action and vision of Black queer folks occur digitally but have very real and material impact. Furthermore, it is important to note that these relations are buttressed by the parasocial relationships between Black wrestlers, this includes relations with Black fans, and Black wrestling intermediaries. These parasocial relations are interwoven into these digital spaces and digital places. These constitute what Dodge and Kitchen might call coded spaces. They define this coded space as “code that matters to the production and functioning of a space “. ¹⁸⁹ I push this conceptualization a bit further to include sociality and labor involved in that spatial production. So, for the purposes of this chapter, I frame these spaces produced by code as Black coded spaces built by Black labor and sociality in digital spaces that underpinned by parasocial relationships between Black wrestlers and Black fans, Black fans and Black wrestlers, Black wrestlers amongst themselves, and Black fans amongst themselves, that are initiated on social media and reconstituted in physical spaces that continually reshapes the industry.

In *Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens*, Cohen offers us a way to not only envision a radical queer politics that is inclusive to Black queer folks, but she illustrates the importance of collectivity and centers power in her analysis. ¹⁹⁰ Building from this framework, Elliot Powell suggests that these queer coalitional practices have sonic and aural qualities through collective

¹⁸⁹ Dodge and Kitchin, “Flying through Code/Space.” P. 198

¹⁹⁰ Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens.”

resonance.¹⁹¹ If they can be sonic, then I suggest that then they can also be digital. Furthermore, as Johnson explains ‘Quare’ offers us a way to critique stable notions of identity and, at the same time, to locate racialized and class knowledges’.¹⁹² So I pivot away from queer to utilized quare as a bridge to engage with racialized regimes of knowledge. The material aspect of this framework allows for Dixon and others to make coalitions across groups and to easily connect it to the lived experiences of aggrieved groups and communities.

This grounding is what I suggest allows for the material changes that have occurred as *Paris is Bumping* has gone from one show in 2020, and 2021 to an entire weekend in 2022. While the wrestling industry remains precarious, these collective practices have opened space and allows room for Black wrestlers all orientations and Non-Black queer wrestlers to flourish even if it is on the margins of the industry. But despite being on the margins because independent wrestling is a large labor pool for companies like WWE, AEW and TNA, it does in fact change the material conditions of what is to through the hiring of wrestlers who not only embodied progressive political practices but makes it a cultural norm in the business through everyday practices.

One example is my attendance at independent wrestling shows in the summer of 2019. During a trip to Toronto which held an NXT PPV on Saturday, *Summerslam* (a main roster *PPV*) on Sunday, and a *Raw* on Monday, I was able to attend in addition to an NXT PPV on Saturday night, 4 independent shows taking place on Friday and Saturday from the morning to the afternoon in the same location. At these independent shows which featured numerous wrestlers

¹⁹¹ Powell, “Coalitional Auralities.”

¹⁹² Johnson, “‘Quare’ Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother.” P. 3

of color, international wrestlers, and wrestlers at various levels of experience and notoriety I noticed a shift in the protocol and procedure.

At the beginning of the show, it was announced that racist and homophobic language was not tolerated and if fans engaged in that behavior, then they would be ejected from the event. This was quite a surprise to me as someone who had been going to shows since I was 16 years old and had worked multiple wrestling shows from 17 to 19. I had never encountered a directive like this before. This is not a policy or procedure that the WWE had adopted. It should also be noted that these small independent shows were being taped and streamed on IWTv. So, I suggest this seemingly small example is indicative of companies on the margins leading the charge for transformational change in a way that was not only organic but in the words of AJ Christian reparative.¹⁹³

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic upended labor practices globally in the professional wrestling industry. However, it was more acutely felt in the US wrestling landscape due to the under and deregulated nature of the business.¹⁹⁴ From the national wrestling companies to smaller local independent promotions, no one was safe from economic uncertainty. Despite the Governor of Florida designating national wrestling companies, such as WWE and AEW, as essential services. The precarity in pro wrestling still reached a fevered pitch due to the mass firing of independent contractors aka professional wrestlers by the WWE.

¹⁹³ Reparative Media with Dr. Aymar J an "AJ" Christian. Media Scholar AJ Christian has an upcoming monograph about reparative media. In many ways, his work has pushed me to think about the possibilities of the work that media can do to repair and in many ways media can fix or attempt to fix things.

¹⁹⁴ Reinhard, Fontaine, and King, "AN ONLINE WORK IS STILL WORK." Fontaine, "Headlocks in Lockdown."

While AEW, the proverbial new kid on the block, did not mass release wrestlers. AEW had no issue in not renewing contracts during the early portion of the pandemic. While folk at this current juncture of the pandemic call themselves quietly quitting their jobs at that time AEW was quietly releasing many talents but there was one incident where they were an AEW wrestler was loudly released.¹⁹⁵ The owner Tony Khan at the end of 2021 took to twitter to “shoot” on Big Swole, a Black female wrestler. He responded to tweet that was promoting an interview that she had done after she parted ways with AEW. In this interview Big Swole was diplomatic but very direct about the state of diversity in the company. Tony Khan took issue with what she said, and he quote tweeted the initial tweet. In his quote tweet he stated that him and another exec were brown and the listed a few Black wrestlers who had won matches in the month December before stating that her contract was not renewed because “her wrestling wasn’t good enough”. This generated an online frenzy. Fans, wrestlers, and everyone in between jumped into the fray. Some wrestlers in the company “took the side” Khan, while others tried to defend Big Swole, and still others deleted their twitter pages to avoid the melee. Unfortunately, there were many casualties in this Digital Battle Royale. AEW had lost a lot of its built-up sweat equity as the more diverse, inclusive, and equitable alternative to the WWE, Tony Khan reputation was tarnished, and Big Swole was harassed for many weeks following by the Internet Wrestling Community.

Misogynoir is plentiful in digital pro wrestling spaces. While AEW had that PR nightmare, WWE had one of their own that would occur shortly. While the WWE had multiple iterations of furloughs (and then firings) of backstage employees and then mass firing of the pro wrestlers who are independent contractors after all. This practice began in April of 2020 and only abated

¹⁹⁵ This entire twitter dustup happened when I was online doing research. I was at my computer watching it unfold in real time. I was a part of the shock and dismay as Tony Khan’s comments reverberated through the pro wrestling industry.

around the summer 2022 due to some of the many deeply buried skeletons of Vince K McMahon rearing its head. It became quite apparent to fans and even some wrestlers that care was an elusive commodity that few truly had access to in this business.

The WWE's carefully curated image of care, underscored by diversity, equity and inclusion over the last 15 years was stretched to its limit when Vince K McMahon was charged with sexual impropriety and the misuse of company funds.¹⁹⁶ As soon as this emerged, Twitter immediately became a very potent discursive space for the public to voice their feelings about the charges, about Vince McMahon, and what they thought should be done. While there were many diehard fans who did not care, many wrestling who identified as woman/femme, younger, of color, and/or queer wanted him gone and because the company is publicly traded, and its value is predicated by its stock he shockingly announced his retirement soon thereafter. This was a temporary fix. A band aid on larger systemic issues. As with any wrestling storyline, the heel always returns, and the heel indeed did return when Vince McMahon returned to the WWE in January of 2023. Leaving many fans and some wrestlers according to industry lore shaken up and uncertain as many wrestlers who were fired in the earlier parts of the pandemic were hired back during his time away from the company.

However, the lessons that the wrestlers learned during the pandemic (which includes becoming content creators on Only Fans, Twitch, Cameo, and many other platforms) have provided them with a measure of fiscal insulation. These new skills and practices will come in handy as they must wait and see where the chips fall, but whatever comes there way because of the progressive

¹⁹⁶ Palazzolo and Mann, "WSJ News Exclusive | WWE Board Probes Secret \$3 Million Hush Pact by CEO Vince McMahon, Sources Say"; Palazzolo and Mann, "WWE's Vince McMahon Steps Back From CEO Role Amid Misconduct Probe"; Palazzolo, Mann, and Flint, "WSJ News Exclusive | WWE's Vince McMahon Agreed to Pay \$12 Million in Hush Money to Four Women."

political movements in the independent wrestling scene, wrestlers from aggrieved groups will have opportunities than they would not have had in past to stay afloat where they are often the most disposable as they are the last hired and the first fired.

Black wrestlers have been able to build, cultivate, and reinforce these fictive kinships bonds through parasocial relationships with each other and fan communities which offers them some industrial insulation and care have flourished despite the disparity during the global pandemic. Kinship and care practices between Black wrestlers was central to them weathering the storm of the pandemic and the already persist precarity of the industry. Through parasocial relationship that are strengthened through what I called *Digital Black Fictive Kinship ties*, Black wrestlers have worked hard to support each other emotionally, and economically. Whether it's helping each other book shows, or making shows that feature and center Black wrestlers, these bonds have been invaluable to them as most precarious of the precarious in industry that is not only built on inequity but animated by anti-Blackness. This labor that is done on the margins, in the trenches of this industry works against current as these practice spills over and become the norm through constant extraction, fetishization, and utilization of Black cultural production in the professional wrestling industry. Despite the precarity of this industry, Black independent wrestlers have tirelessly labored to make pro wrestling more than it was and their work, their labor has not been in vain. As Billy Dixon has noted in a 2023 tweet "The goal is to leave the business and the world a lil bit cleaner than you found it".¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁷ This comes directly from Billy Dixon's twitter account. While his Twitter presence has waxed and waned, when he is on social media he is followed and engages constantly peaks about and what he hopes to see in the business of professional wrestling.

Epilogue: We all We Got

On April 3, 2023, it was announced that the WWE and Endeavor (parent company of the UFC) were merging to form a multibillion dollar live global sports and entertainment company.¹⁹⁸ Despite the gravity of this news, this announcement was not all that surprising considering 4 months prior, Vince McMahon had fought his way back into the WWE after a “forced” retirement in July of 2022.¹⁹⁹ For many this news was met with skeptical optimism as it was suggested that Vince’s return signaled that the company was being prepared to be sold. Many fans feared this as it was speculated that the WWE would be sold to a Saudi Arabian public investment group.²⁰⁰ While this merger will push the WWE and the wrestlers into uncharted waters, for many it will be a much more tenable solution than the Saudi Arabian government having ownership as many fans feared what would happen to wrestlers who were female, and LGBTQ+. There was also some sadness when hearing this news as many fans celebrated Vince McMahon’s absence. After Vince McMahon’s departure the company remained profitable, many wrestlers that were fired during the pandemic budget cuts were rehired, and the approach to the wrestling business had shifted to being slightly more modern as it was helmed by Co-CEOs Nick Khan and Stephanie McMahon.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁸ Alex Sherman Calia Mike, “WWE Agrees to Merge with UFC to Create a New Company Run by Ari Emanuel and Vince McMahon,” CNBC, April 3, 2023, <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/04/03/wwe-ufc-merger-endeavor.html>.

¹⁹⁹ Jordan Valinsky, “Vince McMahon Returns to WWE as a Board Member | CNN Business,” CNN, January 9, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/09/business/vince-mcmahon-wwe-return/index.html>; Justin Barrasso, “How Vince McMahon Seized Control of WWE Again,” Sports Illustrated, January 13, 2023, <https://www.si.com/wrestling/2023/01/13/vince-mcmahon-wwe-return-board-of-directors-sale>.

²⁰⁰ Vaishali Kaushik, “Fans Criticize Vince McMahon Is Saudi Arabia Potential Buyer,” January 12, 2023,

²⁰¹ Matty Breisch, “Stephanie McMahon, Nick Khan Named Co-CEOs Of The WWE,” ClutchPoints, July 22, 2022, <https://clutchpoints.com/wwe-news-stephanie-mcmahon-nick-khan-named-co-ceos>.

While there is speculation about the future of the WWE and professional wrestling more generally as this merger will take place in the second half of 2023, this uncertainty is not new to the wrestling business as I argue that it is part and parcel of a business that is built on the instability of being on the margins of both the popular cultural imaginary and of industrial regulation.²⁰² But as media scholar Jennifer McClearn has illustrated in her work, the UFC also wrestles with precarity and does not value the labor of its employees.²⁰³ Thus, this merger comes at quite a historical moment as labor relations are at the forefront of everyone's mind.

The global pandemic brought with it more than a shift in the way people understood public space, public health, and personhood.²⁰⁴ It reignited people's introspection on their relationship to labor in the United States. As I am writing this, there is a writer's strike. On May 2, 2023, the Writers Guild of America went on strike.²⁰⁵ This follows in the wake of multiple university strikes that occurred across the country in 2022 and in 2023 including the University of California, Temple University, Rutgers University, the University of Michigan, and The New School as well as unionization efforts across multiple industries such as Amazon, Trader Joes,

²⁰² Professional wrestling since its inception had been deregulated and plagued by labor precarity. Thus, uncertainty is built into its DNA.

²⁰³ Jennifer McClearn, *Fighting Visibility: Sports Media and Female Athletes in the UFC*, First edition (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2021). It's going to be very interesting to see how scholars like McClearn who study the UFC, and scholars like me who study pro wrestling think through what the future looks like as these business merge.

²⁰⁴ Andrew Westerside, "Wrestling with Technology: Audiences, Politics and the Ecosystems of Attendance during COVID-19," *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media* 18, no. 2 (May 4, 2022): 263–80; Naveen Donthu and Anders Gustafsson, "Effects of COVID-19 on Business and Research," *Journal of Business Research* 117 (September 1, 2020): 284–89; Jordi Honey-Rosés et al., "The Impact of COVID-19 on Public Space: An Early Review of the Emerging Questions – Design, Perceptions and Inequities," *Cities & Health* 5, no. sup1 (July 21, 2021): S263–79; Zelalem M. Temesgen et al., "Health Care After the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Influence of Telemedicine," *Mayo Clinic Proceedings* 95, no. 9 (September 1, 2020): S66–68

²⁰⁵ Los Angeles Times Staff, "Writers' Strike: What's at Stake and How It Could Disrupt Hollywood," *Los Angeles Times*, June 6, 2023, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/business/story/2023-05-01/writers-strike-what-to-know-wga-guild-hollywood-productions>.

Starbucks, Apple and Home Depot to name a but a few.²⁰⁶ According to a recent Gallup poll 71% of Americans approve of labor unions, but what is even more shocking is this is the highest support in labor unions in the US since 1965.²⁰⁷ So this is indeed a unique time in history to think about labor precarity, to build policy that is centered on the rights of a worker, and to learn how the most vulnerable have navigated some of the most precarious industrial landscapes.

In *Beyond A Boundary*, C.L.R James utilizes the sport of cricket to tap into the sociopolitical climate of the West Indies. This text uses James’s experiential knowledge to explore the colonial milieu of the Caribbean vis a vis Trinidad and its relationship to the metropole, England. The sport of cricket becomes the vehicle for James to reflect on, think through, and grapple with race, class, colonialism, religion, systems, institutions, and power. James states that:

“Cricket is an art. Like all arts it has a technical foundation. To enjoy it does not require technical knowledge, but analysis that is not technically based is mere impressionism”²⁰⁸

This designation allows for an explicit understanding that cricket is embedded in sociocultural processes. Cricket does not operate in vacuum where social relations are absent but in fact are weaved and wedded to existing power relationships. Moreover, as James explicates that cricket is “a dramatic spectacle that belongs with theatre, ballet, opera and dance”.²⁰⁹ And if cricket can find a home in those artforms, pro wrestling must certainly can find one as well as all of these

²⁰⁶ “Multi-State University Strike Wave in the US Continues,” World Socialist Web Site, April 14, 2023, <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2023/04/14/univ-a14.html>; Michael Sainato, “‘Many of Us Are Struggling’: Why US Universities Are Facing a Wave of Strikes,” The Guardian, April 21, 2023, sec. US news, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/apr/21/us-universities-wave-strikes>. “Unionization Increased by 200,000 in 2022: Tens of Millions More Wanted to Join a Union, but Couldn’t,” Economic Policy Institute

²⁰⁷ Gallup Inc, “U.S. Approval of Labor Unions at Highest Point Since 1965,” Gallup.com, August 30, 2022, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/398303/approval-labor-unions-highest-point-1965.aspx>.

²⁰⁸ C. L. R. James, *Beyond A Boundary*, Reprint edition (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 1993). P.178

²⁰⁹ ²⁰⁹ C. L. R. James, *Beyond A Boundary* P. 196

cultural formations share a deep connection to drama, athleticism, and a troubled relationship to uneven systems of power.

Like James, I think power can be decoded through every day and the often overlooked forms of cultural production that can be sport but also be forms of art. Pro wrestling is too an art form that is a dramatic spectacle that through careful study, reflection, and critique, tell us a lot about the cultures, politics, and relationships that are in it, under it, around and that run through it. Thus, my study of pro wrestling is centered on thinking through how it as a sport, as an artform, as a soap opera, and as a cultural product can be utilized to think critically about labor inequality.

Professional wrestling can be utilized as a blueprint and a model to help us forecast what is to come. We can utilize this industry to make plans of action to address the multitude of interlocking crises that we are encountering that impact our health, our access to housing, and the very planet that we inhabit. We are in the fight of our lives as we wrestle with the present to ensure a future. As we deal with the confluence of crises that are intimately connected as we transition from what we call late stage capitalism into hyper capitalism where gig economies dominate the landscape. We can turn to professional wrestling and the Black wrestlers who have long dealt with this variation of organized abandonment to provide us with the answers to the test ahead for all of us.

In the first chapter, I examine gimmicks in the professional wrestling business using the trio the New Day as my case study. I argue that the New Day utilizes play and taps into libidinal economies to not only navigate the precarity that they experience as independent contractors in a business that treats them as if they are employees sans the job stability and benefits. Further, I suggest that the New Day's use of play does not break kayfabe as they bend and use it to be transgressive and to provide correctives to stereotypical imagery about Black people within

wrestling. These practices I expound have opened space in the business for Black wrestlers to be multidimensional while also providing them with the infrastructure to reimagine what it means to be Black and a pro wrestler.

I embark on a journey of discovery in the second chapter as I analyze the relationship between Black women and their labor in the professional wrestling industry. I connect the past to the present through a weaving of the narratives of three Black wrestling sisters to the current conditions of Black women in the professional wrestling industry. I argue that Black women's labor is absent but always present in the professional wrestling industry. I frame this analysis by positing misogynoir as the structural component that situates Black women to be absent, but their labor to be present via extraction, appropriation, and institutional dispossession.

The third chapter examines industrial disruption through the utilization of streaming technologies in the professional wrestling industry. These disruptions operate both at the center of the industry as well as the margins changing hiring practices while also challenging WWE's 40 year dominance as the premier wrestling company globally and domestically. I argue that the WWE's adoption of streaming services to enter new wrestling markets has made them vulnerable to independent wrestling companies domestically and to the large global companies in other pro wrestling cultural hearths. Domestically, streaming services have been adopted by smaller wrestling companies and utilized to reach larger audiences than they would have otherwise. International wrestling companies have been able to penetrate the US market through the same means that that the WWE uses to penetrate their markets. Moreover, I connect these practices to the diversification of hires in the business as wrestlers of color became commodities for representational politics.

And in the fourth chapter, I investigate the ways in which progressive change as a process occurs in the professional wrestling business. I argue that in the case of professional wrestling the margins shape progressive changes that the center adopts (and sometime takes credit for). I frame this analysis through the stories of former WWE wrestler Darren Young and independent wrestler Billy Dixon. Using Youngs's coming out story and Dixon's production of a Black queer wrestling show, I illustrate the ways the WWE (the center) use ambivalence and plastic representation to appear to be progressive while the independent wrestling promotions and wrestlers (the margins) exactly put progressive theory into practice through coalitional politics.

Wrestling with Blackness is a dissertation that examines labor precarity in the professional wrestling industry through the history, cultural production, and point of view of Black professional wrestlers. Using cultural analysis of media texts, digital culture, and autoethnographic experiences, this project examines how precarity in this industry is rooted in anti-Black racism. While this text acknowledges the impacts of this form of oppression, this project also thinks about Black agency and how Black people navigate, negotiate, and work around systems of domination and oppression. Care becomes the throughline in this analysis that puts Black cultural production into direct conversation with political economies. Care as iterative practice in this precariously precarious industry allows Black wrestlers to survive, sometimes thrive, retain hope, and even have joy. As anthropologist Traci Canada has shown with care networks in football, affective care labor is an effective avenue to circumvent even the most strident prevalent forms of labor precarity, inequality, and disparity.²¹⁰

²¹⁰ Tracie Canada, "Playing Through a Pandemic: Football Bodies, Racialized Violence, and Institutionalized Care," in *Sport and Physical Culture in Global Pandemic Times : COVID Assemblages*, ed. David L. Andrews, Holly Thorpe, and Joshua I. Newman, *Global Culture and Sport Series* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023), 623–44, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-14387-8_25.

It is important to remember that the past, present, and future are always discursively entangled in professional wrestling. The stories of Ethel, Babs and Marva are linked to the narratives of Trinity and Mercedes, Kofi, Xavier, and Big E are connected to Darren Young and Billy Dixon. The thread that connects them is care, collectivity, and coalitions. Labor precarity which at its very root is anti-Black racism given form and function is fought by care and the disavowing fictitious narratives of meritocracy, and individualism. We are all we got, literally and figuratively. Care is community. Community is care. Even precarity backed by anti-Blackness cannot stand up this formidable tag team. Afterall, iron sharpens iron, and what is sharper than iron forged into a mighty sword & shield wielded in community with care.

Bibliography

- Abdel-Shehid, Gamal. 2005. *Who Da Man?: Black Masculinities and Sporting Cultures*. Canadian Scholars' Press.
- "About Inclusion." n.d. WWE Community. Accessed June 3, 2023. <https://community.wwe.com/about-inclusion>.
- "Actors' Equity Association." n.d. Accessed December 18, 2018. <http://www.actorsequity.org>.
- Adams, Mary Louise, Kiri Baxter, Douglas Booth, Kyle S. Bunds, Michael D. Giardina, Mariana Clark, Simon C. Darnell, et al. 2020. *Sport, Physical Culture, and the Moving Body: Materialisms, Technologies, Ecologies*. Edited by Joshua I. Newman, Holly Thorpe, and David Andrews. None edition. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.
- AG. 2020. "Martha Hart Comments On Vince McMahon Suing Her After Owen Hart's Death." *WWF Old School* (blog). May 16, 2020. <https://wwfoldschool.com/martha-hart-comments-on-vince-mcmahon-suing-her-after-owen-harts-death/>.
- Ahmed, Tufayel. 2018. "Jim Johnston on Raw 25, Making WWE's Most Famous Music." *Newsweek*. January 22, 2018. <https://www.newsweek.com/raw-25-jim-johnston-man-behind-wwes-most-popular-music-composing-theme-songs-786522>.
- Alexander, Bryant Keith. 2003a. "Fading, Twisting, and Weaving: An Interpretive Ethnography of the Black Barbershop as Cultural Space." *Qualitative Inquiry* 9 (1): 105–28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800402239343>.
- . 2003b. "(Re) Visioning the Ethnographic Site: Interpretive Ethnography as a Method of Pedagogical Reflexivity and Scholarly Production." *Qualitative Inquiry* 9 (3): 416–41. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800403009003006>.
- Ali, Christopher. 2016. "Critical Regionalism and the Policies of Place: Revisiting Localism for the Digital Age." *Communication Theory* 26 (2): 106–27. <https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.12091>.
- . 2017. *Media Localism: The Policies of Place*. University of Illinois Press.
- Andrews, David. 2016. "Sport, Spectacle and the Politics of Late Capitalism: Articulating the Neoliberal Order." In *Routledge Handbook of Sport and Politics*. Routledge.
- Andrews, David L. 2001. *Michael Jordan, Inc.: Corporate Sport, Media Culture, and Late Modern America*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Aparicio, Ana. 2008. "Reconstituting Political Genealogies: Reflections on Youth, Racial Justice, and the Uses of History." *Souls* 10 (4): 361–73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10999940802523919>.
- Arias, Santa. 2010. "Rethinking Space: An Outsider's View of the Spatial Turn." *GeoJournal* 75 (1): 29–41. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-010-9339-9>.
- Ash, James, Rob Kitchin, and Agnieszka Leszczynski. 2018. "Digital Turn, Digital Geographies?" *Progress in Human Geography* 42 (1): 25–43.
- Ashe, Bertram D. 2007. "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic: An Introduction." *African American Review* 41 (4): 609–23.
- Avilez, GerShun. 2020. *Black Queer Freedom: Spaces of Injury and Paths of Desire*. 1st edition. University of Illinois Press.
- Bailey, Marlon M. 2014. "Engendering Space: Ballroom Culture and the Spatial Practice of Possibility in Detroit." *Gender, Place & Culture* 21 (4): 489–507. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2013.786688>.
- Bailey, Marlon M., Lia T. Bascomb, Felice Blake, Darius Bost, Ariane Cruz, and Pierre Dominguez. 2019. *Black Sexual Economies: Race and Sex in a Culture of Capital*. Edited by Adrienne D. Davis and Adrienne D. BSE Collective. Illustrated edition. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

- Bailey, Marlon M., and Rashad Shabazz. 2014. "Gender and Sexual Geographies of Blackness: New Black Cartographies of Resistance and Survival (Part 2)." *Gender, Place & Culture* 21 (4): 449–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2013.786303>.
- Bailey, Moya. 2021. *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance*. New York: NYU Press.
- Banet-Weiser, Sarah. 2012. *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture*. NYU Press.
- . 2013. "Thinking Critically About Brand Cultures: An Interview with Sarah Banet-Weiser (Part One) — Pop Junctions." *Henry Jenkins* (blog). April 10, 2013. <http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2013/04/thinking-critically-about-brand-cultures-an-interview-with-sarah-banet-weiser-part-one.html>.
- Barker, Corey and Zolides, Andrew. 2018. "WWE Network : The Disruption of Over-the-Top Distribution." In *From Networks to Netflix A Guide to Changing Channels*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315658643-36>.
- Barrasso, Justin. 2021. "G4 Hosting Gig a 'Dream Job' for WWE's Xavier Woods." *Sports Illustrated*. April 27, 2021. <https://www.si.com/wrestling/2021/04/27/wwe-xavier-woods-g4-video-game-show-host>.
- . 2022. "What's Next for Sasha Banks and Naomi After Their Walkout?" *Sports Illustrated*. May 18, 2022. <https://www.si.com/wrestling/2022/05/18/wwe-sasha-banks-naomi-raw-walkout-consequences>.
- . 2023. "How Vince McMahon Seized Control of WWE Again." *Sports Illustrated*. January 13, 2023. <https://www.si.com/wrestling/2023/01/13/vince-mcmahon-wwe-return-board-of-directors-sale>.
- Barthes, Roland. 1972. *Mythologies*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Bayne, Caroline N. 2019. "Feminist, Yet Not: Professional Wrestling and the Irreconcilability of the Feminine and the Feminist." *Cinephile: The University of British Columbia's Film Journal* 13 (1): 39–45. <https://doi.org/10.14288/cinephile.v13i1.198200>.
- Bell, Brian C. 2020. "Paris Is Bumping Is pro Wrestling Realness." *Outsports*. October 31, 2020. <https://www.outsports.com/2020/10/31/21542716/paris-is-bumping-lgbt-pro-wrestling-realness-billy-dixon-candy-lee-butch-vs-gore>.
- . n.d. "Pro Wrestling Meets Ballroom Culture at Billy Dixon's Paris Is Bumping - Outsports." Accessed June 2, 2023. <https://www.outsports.com/2020/8/29/21406092/paris-is-bumping-billy-dixon-pro-wrestling-ballroom-lgbt-iwtv>.
- Benjamin, Ruha, ed. 2019. *Captivating Technology: Race, Carceral Technoscience, and Liberatory Imagination in Everyday Life*. Durham: Duke University Press Books.
- Berry, Daina Ramey, and Kali Nicole Gross. 2020. *A Black Women's History of the United States*. Illustrated edition. Boston: Beacon Press.
- "Big-Name Companies Where Workers Are Fighting to Unionize." n.d. *Cheapism* (blog). Accessed June 11, 2023. <https://blog.cheapism.com/companies-that-are-unionizing/>.
- Bixenspan, David. n.d. "WWE: The 5 Most Interesting Excerpts from WWE-Related Lawsuit Filings & Case Law." *Bleacher Report*. Accessed June 5, 2023. <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/883214-wwe-the-5-most-interesting-excerpts-from-wwe-related-lawsuit-filings-case-law>.
- "'Black Panther' Costume Designer Ruth E. Carter Made History at the Oscars." 2023. *Mashable*. March 13, 2023. <https://mashable.com/article/ruth-carter-oscars-wakanda-black-panther>.

- Blackburn, Pete. 2018. "No Kneeling, No Criminals: XFL's New Rules Draws Cheers, Jeers on Twitter." CBSSports.Com. January 25, 2018. <https://www.cbssports.com/nfl/news/no-kneeling-no-criminals-xfls-new-rules-draws-cheers-jeers-on-twitter/>.
- Bledsoe, Adam, and Willie Jamaal Wright. 2019. "The Anti-Blackness of Global Capital." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 37 (1): 8–26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775818805102>.
- Bois, W. E. B. Du. 2014. *The Souls of Black Folk*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
- Bost, Darius. 2017. "Loneliness: Black Gay Longing in the Work of Essex Hemphill." *Criticism* 59 (3): 353–74. <https://doi.org/10.13110/criticism.59.3.0353>.
- . 2018. *Evidence of Being: The Black Gay Cultural Renaissance and the Politics of Violence*. University of Chicago Press.
- Bost, Darius, La Marr Jurelle Bruce, and Brandon J. Manning. 2019. "Introduction." *The Black Scholar* 49 (2): 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2019.1581970>.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Bournea, Chris, dir. 2020. *Lady Wrestler: The Amazing, Untold Story of African-American in the Ring*. Documentary.
- Brand, Dionne. 2002. *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*. Toronto: Vintage Canada.
- Breisch, Matty. 2022. "Stephanie McMahon, Nick Khan Named Co-CEOs Of The WWE." ClutchPoints. July 22, 2022. <https://clutchpoints.com/wwe-news-stephanie-mcmahon-nick-khan-named-co-ceos>.
- "British Wrestling In Turmoil: New Restrictions On NXT UK Talent Imminent | WrestleTalk." n.d. Accessed December 19, 2018. <https://wrestletalk.com/news/british-wrestling-in-turmoil-new-restrictions-on-nxt-uk-talent-imminent/>.
- Brock, André. 2018. "Critical technocultural discourse analysis." *New Media & Society* 20 (3): 1012–30.
- . 2020. *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*. NYU Press.
- Brooks, Daphne A. 2021. *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press.
- Brooks, Siobhan. 2010. *Unequal Desires: Race and Erotic Capital in the Stripping Industry*. Illustrated edition. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Burgess, Jean, and Joshua Green. 2018. *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*. 2nd edition. Polity.
- Calia, Alex Sherman, Mike. 2023. "WWE Agrees to Merge with UFC to Create a New Company Run by Ari Emanuel and Vince McMahon." CNBC. April 3, 2023. <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/04/03/wwe-ufc-merger-endeavor.html>.
- Canada, Tracie. 2023a. "Playing Through a Pandemic: Football Bodies, Racialized Violence, and Institutionalized Care." In *Sport and Physical Culture in Global Pandemic Times : COVID Assemblages*, edited by David L. Andrews, Holly Thorpe, and Joshua I. Newman, 623–44. Global Culture and Sport Series. Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-14387-8_25.
- . 2023b. "Black Mothers and NFL Moms Safety Clinics: An Ethnography of Care in American Football." *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 47 (2): 103–25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01937235221144431>.

- Carter, Kelly. 2020. "The Effect of Superstar Gig Workers on Shareholder Value: Evidence from Professional Wrestling." *Managerial Finance* 47 (2): 227–43. <https://doi.org/10.1108/MF-10-2019-0524>.
- Chiari, Mike. n.d. "Tony Khan Fires Back at Big Swole over Former AEW Star's Comments on Expired Contract." Bleacher Report. Accessed May 30, 2023. <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/10022585-tony-khan-fires-back-at-big-swole-over-former-aew-stars-comments-on-expired-contract>.
- Chow, Broderick D.V. 2014. "Work and Shoot: Professional Wrestling and Embodied Politics." *TDR/The Drama Review* 58 (2 (222)): 72–86. https://doi.org/10.1162/DRAM_a_00347.
- Chow, Broderick, and Eero Laine. 2014. "Audience Affirmation and the Labour of Professional Wrestling." *Performance Research*, June. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13528165.2014.928516>.
- Chow, Broderick, Eero Laine, and Claire Warden, eds. 2016. *Performance and Professional Wrestling*. 1st edition. Routledge.
- Christian, Aymar Jean. 2018. *Open TV: Innovation beyond Hollywood and the Rise of Web Television*.
- Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong. 2009. "Race and/as Technology." *Camera Obscura*.
- Cohen, Cathy J. 2020. "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" In *Feminist Theory Reader*, 311–23. Routledge.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 2006. "New Commodities, New Consumers: Selling Blackness in a Global Marketplace." *Ethnicities* 6 (3): 297–317. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796806068322>.
- Conquergood, Dwight. 2013. *Cultural Struggles: Performance, Ethnography, Praxis*. Edited by E. Patrick Johnson. Illustrated edition. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Cook, Daniella Ann. 2014. "Connecting the Disconnected: Scholar Activists and Education Reform in Post-Katrina New Orleans." *International Journal of Educational Reform* 23 (3): 207–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/105678791402300304>.
- Cook, Daniella, and Tiffany Williams. 2015. "Expanding Intersectionality: Fictive Kinship Networks as Supports for the Educational Aspirations of Black Women." *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 39 (2): 157–66.
- Crawley, Ashon T. 2020. *The Lonely Letters*. Illustrated edition. Durham: Duke University Press Books.
- Daniel, Yvonne. 2005. *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Datta, Tiyashi, Dawn Chmielewski, Milana Vinn, and Milana Vinn. 2023. "WWE, Endeavor-Owned UFC to Merge into \$21 Bln Entertainment Giant." *Reuters*, April 3, 2023, sec. Deals. <https://www.reuters.com/markets/deals/endeavor-group-acquire-wwe-93-billion-deal-2023-04-03/>.
- Dávila, Arlene. 2012. *Latinos, Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People*. 1st edition. University of California Press.
- Dearden, R. F. 1967. "The Concept of Play." In *The Concept of Education (International Library of the Philosophy of Education Volume 17)*. Routledge.
- Delaney, David. 2002. "The Space That Race Makes." *The Professional Geographer* 54 (1): 6–14. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0033-0124.00309>.
- Dell, Chad. 2006. *The Revenge of Hatpin Mary: Women, Professional Wrestling and Fan Culture in the 1950s*. New York: Peter Lang.

- Dodge, Martin, and Rob Kitchin. 2004a. "Flying through Code/Space: The Real Virtuality of Air Travel." *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 36 (2): 195–211. <https://doi.org/10.1068/a3698>.
- . 2004b. "Flying through Code/Space: The Real Virtuality of Air Travel." *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 36 (2): 195–211. <https://doi.org/10.1068/a3698>.
- Donthu, Naveen, and Anders Gustafsson. 2020. "Effects of COVID-19 on Business and Research." *Journal of Business Research* 117 (September): 284–89. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2020.06.008>.
- Doorn, Niels van. 2011. "Digital Spaces, Material Traces: How Matter Comes to Matter in Online Performances of Gender, Sexuality and Embodiment." *Media, Culture & Society* 33 (4): 531–47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443711398692>.
- Douglas, Delia D. 2012. "Venus, Serena, and the Inconspicuous Consumption of Blackness: A Commentary on Surveillance, Race Talk, and New Racism(s)." *Journal of Black Studies* 43 (2): 127–45. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934711410880>.
- Dozal, Mario A. 2020. "Playing the Savage: Professional Wrestling's Portrayal of the Exotic Through James 'Kamala' Harris." *Pro Wrestling Studies Journal* 1 (1): 41–55.
- Dozal, Mario A., and Gabriela I. Morales. 2019. "'I've Been in the Danger Zone!': Botchamania as a Site of Cultural Convergence for the Modern Internet-Savvy Wrestling Fan." In *Convergent Wrestling*. Routledge.
- Drucker, Peter F. 1994. *Post-Capitalist Society*. Reprint edition. New York, NY: Harper Business.
- Dunn, Carrie. 2015. "'Sexy, Smart and Powerful': Examining Gender and Reality in the WWE Divas' Division." *Networking Knowledge: Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network* 8 (3). <https://doi.org/10.31165/nk.2015.83.378>.
- Dunn, Chris, Ryan Callahan, Jeniffer Pepperman, Christine Lubrano, Mike Heller, Vince McMahon, and Stephanie McMahon. n.d. "WORLD WRESTLING ENTERTAINMENT, INC."
- EAVES, LATOYA E. 2017. "Black Geographic Possibilities: On a Queer Black South." *Southeastern Geographer* 57 (1): 80–95.
- Editor, Rob Fahey Contributing. 2004. "WWE Sues Jakks and THQ over Alleged Bribery and Racketeering." *GamesIndustry.Biz*. October 20, 2004. <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/wwe-sues-jakks-and-thq-over-alleged-bribery-and-racketeering>.
- Ellis, Trey. 1989. "The New Black Aesthetic." *Callaloo*, no. 38: 233–43. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2931157>.
- Elwood, Sarah. 2021. "Digital Geographies, Feminist Relationality, Black and Queer Code Studies: Thriving Otherwise." *Progress in Human Geography* 45 (2): 209–28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132519899733>.
- Elwood, Sarah, and Agnieszka Leszczynski. 2018. "Feminist Digital Geographies." *Gender, Place & Culture* 25 (5). <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0966369X.2018.1465396>.
- "ENDEAVOR ANNOUNCES UFC® AND WWE® TO FORM A \$21+ BILLION GLOBAL LIVE SPORTS AND ENTERTAINMENT COMPANY." n.d. Accessed June 10, 2023. <https://corporate.wwe.com/news/company-news/2023/04-03-2023>.
- "Endeavor Confirms WWE-UFC Deal to Create a \$21 Billion Sports Company - Variety." n.d. Accessed June 10, 2023. https://variety.com/2023/biz/finance/endeavor-wwe-ufc-deal-confirmed-1235571549/?sub_action=logged_in.
- Evans, Gavin. n.d. "Stephanie McMahon: WWE May 'Integrate LGBT Characters' Into Storylines." *Complex*. Accessed June 2, 2023. <https://www.complex.com/sports/a/gavin-evans/stephanie-mcmahon-wwe-plans-integrate-lgbt-characters-storylines>.

- “‘Fake’ Sport, Real Exploitation: How pro Wrestling Mirrors American Capitalism.” 2014. Salon. August 12, 2014. https://www.salon.com/2014/08/12/fake_sport_real_exploitation_how_pro_wrestling_mirrors_a_american_capitalism_partner/.
- Faulk, Murfee. n.d. “Baby of Sweet Georgia Brown | Archives | Postandcourier.Com.” Accessed June 12, 2023. https://www.postandcourier.com/free-times/archives/baby-of-sweet-georgia-brown/article_9307e6b8-7701-5e47-a3b4-58afb8f0b971.html#newsletter-popup.
- Feldscher, Kyle. 2023. “How WWE’s Vince McMahon Ruthlessly Got His Job Back despite Allegations of Sexual Assault and Misuse of Company Funds | CNN Business.” CNN. January 14, 2023. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/14/media/wwe-vince-mcmahon-explainer/index.html>.
- Female Locker Room, dir. 2023. *Trinity Fatu / Naomi Breaks Her Silence on the Walk Out*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i6Ct4raeX0Q>.
- Ferguson, Roderick. 2013. *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*. First edition edition. Univ Of Minnesota Press.
- Fishman, Scott. 2020. “WWE Alum Darren Young Recalls His Coming Out Experience: ‘I Own Who I Am.’” TV Insider. June 18, 2020. <https://www.tvinsider.com/938521/wwe-darren-young-lgbtq-wrestlers-block-the-hate/>.
- Florini, Sarah. 2014. “Tweets, Tweeps, and Signifyin’: Communication and Cultural Performance on ‘Black Twitter.’” *Television & New Media* 15 (3): 223–37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476413480247>.
- . 2015. “The Podcast ‘Chitlin’ Circuit’: Black Podcasters, Alternative Media, and Audio Enclaves.” *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* 22 (2): 209–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19376529.2015.1083373>.
- Fontaine, Jessica. 2022. “Headlocks in Lockdown: Working the at-Home Crowd.” *Popular Communication* 20 (4): 292–304. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2021.1985503>.
- Fontaine, Jessica, EERO LAINE, and Micheal Altman. 2022. “Toward a Work-Shoot Approach to Kayfabe in Professional Wrestling.” *Pro Wrestling Studies Journal* 3 (1): 1–15.
- Ford, Sam. 2017. “‘He’s a Real Man’s Man’: Pro Wrestling and Negotiations of Contemporary Masculinity.” In *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*. Routledge.
- “Former WWE Wrestlers’ Lawsuit over Brain Damage Is Dismissed.” 2021. AP NEWS. April 20, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/nfl-new-york-city-head-injuries-new-york-nhl-018105b0a317dd35bdf679e2dca0507b>.
- Fulmer, Melinda. 2004. “WWE Files Suit Against Toy Maker.” Los Angeles Times. October 20, 2004. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2004-oct-20-fi-jakks20-story.html>.
- Ganninger, Daniel. 2022. “The Six Degrees of Separation and Kevin Bacon - Knowledge Stew.” December 31, 2022. <https://knowledgestew.com/the-six-degrees-of-separation-and-kevin-bacon/>.
- Gardner, Bradley. 2016. “High Risk Maneuvers: Geographies of Power and Labor Practices in Professional Wrestling’s Territorial Era.” In *Critical Geographies of Sport: Space, Power and Sport in Global Perspective*.
- Gardner, Jodi, Mia Gray, and Katharina Möser. 2020. *Debt and Austerity: Implications of the Financial Crisis*. Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Gartland, Dan. 2023. “Former WWE Writer Sues Company Over ‘Offensively Racist’ Scripts.” Sports Illustrated. April 26, 2023. <https://www.si.com/wrestling/2023/04/26/wwe-writer-racial-discrimination-lawsuit>.

- Gilbert, Daniel A. 2018. "The Gridiron and the Gray Flannel Suit: NFL Football and the Modern U.S. Workplace." *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 42 (2): 132–48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723518756850>.
- Gill, Rosalind. 2016. "Post-Postfeminism?: New Feminist Visibilities in Postfeminist Times." *Feminist Media Studies* 16 (4): 610–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2016.1193293>.
- Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. 2002. "Fatal Couplings of Power and Difference: Notes on Racism and Geography." *The Professional Geographer* 54 (1): 15–24. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0033-0124.00310>.
- . 2008. "Forgotten Places and the Seeds of Grassroots Planning." In *Engaging Contradictions*, edited by Charles R. Hale, 1st ed., 31–61. Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship. University of California Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pncnt.7>.
- Glenday, Dan. 2013. "Professional Wrestling as Culturally Embedded Spectacles in Five Core Countries: The USA, Canada, Great Britain, Mexico and Japan." *Revue de Recherche En Civilisation Américaine*, no. 4 (October). <https://journals.openedition.org/rrca/548>.
- Gone, Gone Baby. n.d. "WWE News: WWE Makes Nice with GLAAD and Forms Anti-Bullying Partnership." Bleacher Report. Accessed June 3, 2023. <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/637499-wwe-news-wwe-makes-nice-with-glaad-and-forms-anti-bullying-partnership>.
- Gray, Herman. 1995. "Black Masculinity and Visual Culture." *Callaloo Callaloo* 18 (2): 401–5.
- Green, Kyle. 2011. "It Hurts so It Is Real: Sensing the Seduction of Mixed Martial Arts." *Social & Cultural Geography* 12 (4): 377–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2011.574796>.
- Greer, Jamie. 2018. "Triple H & The Plans For NXT 'Global Localization.'" *Last Word on Pro Wrestling* (blog). December 3, 2018. <https://lastwordonsports.com/prowrestling/2018/12/02/triple-h-the-plans-for-nxt-global-localization/>.
- Griffin, Rachel Alicia. 2012. "I AM an Angry Black Woman: Black Feminist Autoethnography, Voice, and Resistance." *Women's Studies in Communication* 35 (2): 138–57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2012.724524>.
- Gumbs, Alexis Pauline. n.d. *Mother Ourselves: A Black Queer Feminist Genealogy for Radical Mothering - Twin Cities*. Accessed May 29, 2023. <https://primo.lib.umn.edu>.
- Haley, Sarah. 2016. *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity*. UNC Press Books.
- Hall, Stuart. 1993. "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" *Social Justice* 20 (1/2 (51-52)): 104–14.
- . 2013. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage.
- Halliday, Aria S. 2020. "Twerk Sumn!: Theorizing Black Girl Epistemology in the Body." *Cultural Studies* 34 (6): 874–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2020.1714688>.
- Hamayon, Roberte. 2016. *Why We Play: An Anthropological Study*. HAU Books. <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/30221>.
- Harris, LaShawn. 2016. *Sex Workers, Psychics, and Numbers Runners: Black Women in New York City's Underground Economy*. University of Illinois Press.
- Hartman, Saidiya. 2008. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe* 12 (2): 1–14.
- Harvey, David. 2007. *The Limits to Capital*. Updated edition. London ; New York: Verso.
- Havens, Timothy. 2016. *Black Television Travels: African American Media around the Globe*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9780814737200.001.0001>.

- Havens, Timothy, Amanda D. Lotz, and Serra Tinic. 2009. "Critical Media Industry Studies: A Research Approach." *Communication, Culture & Critique* 2 (2): 234–53. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1753-9137.2009.01037.x>.
- Haynes, Nell. 2013. "Global cholas: reworking tradition and modernity in Bolivian lucha libre." *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean anthropology*. 18 (3): 432–46.
- . 2016. "Kiss with a Fist: The Chola's Humor and Humiliation in Bolivian Lucha Libre." *Jls Journal of Language and Sexuality* 5 (2): 250–75.
- Hine, Darlene Clark. 1989. "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West." *Signs* 14 (4): 912–20.
- Ho, Karen Zouwen. 2009. *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street*. E-Duke Books Scholarly Collection. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Honey-Rosés, Jordi, Isabelle Anguelovski, Vincent K. Chireh, Carolyn Daher, Cecil Konijnendijk van den Bosch, Jill S. Litt, Vrushti Mawani, et al. 2021. "The Impact of COVID-19 on Public Space: An Early Review of the Emerging Questions – Design, Perceptions and Inequities." *Cities & Health* 5 (sup1): S263–79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23748834.2020.1780074>.
- Hooks, Bell. 1981. *Ain't I a Woman*. London: Pluto Press.
- Hornbaker, Tim. 2007. *National Wrestling Alliance: The Untold Story of the Monopoly That Strangled Professional Wrestling*. Illustrated edition. ECW Press.
- . 2018. *Death of the Territories: Expansion, Betrayal and the War That Changed Pro Wrestling Forever*. 1st edition. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: ECW Press.
- Horton, Donald, and R. Richard Wohl. 1956. "Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction." *Psychiatry* 19 (3): 215–29.
- Houlihan, Ryan. 2013. "Video: WWE Superstar Darren Young Comes out and WWE Speaks out in Support | GLAAD." 2013. https://www.glaad.org/blog/video-wwe-superstar-darren-young-comes-out-and-wwe-speaks-out-support?response_type=embed.
- <https://www.latimes.com/people/sonaiya-kelley>. 2023. "Why Oscar-Winning Costume Designer Ruth E. Carter Feels Great about the State of Hollywood." Los Angeles Times. May 24, 2023. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/books/story/2023-05-24/oscar-winner-ruth-e-carter-costume-design-book>.
- Hunter, Tera W. 1998. *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War*. Reprint edition. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Inc, Gallup. 2022. "U.S. Approval of Labor Unions at Highest Point Since 1965." Gallup.Com. August 30, 2022. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/398303/approval-labor-unions-highest-point-1965.aspx>.
- Jackson, Sarah J. 2016. "(Re)Imagining Intersectional Democracy from Black Feminism to Hashtag Activism." *Women's Studies in Communication* 39 (4): 375–79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2016.1226654>.
- Jackson, Sarah J., Moya Bailey, and Brooke Foucault Welles. 2020. *#HashtagActivism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice*. MIT Press.
- Jackson, Sarah J., and Brooke Foucault Welles. 2015. "Hijacking #MYNYPD: Social Media Dissent and Networked Counterpublics." *Journal of Communication* 65 (6): 932–52. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12185>.
- Jackson, Sarah J., Bailey Moya, and Brooke Foucault Welles. 2019. "Women Tweet on Violence: From #YesAllWomen to #MeToo," February. <https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/handle/1794/26794>.
- James, C. L. R. 1993. *Beyond A Boundary*. Reprint edition. Durham: Duke University Press Books.

- Jeffries, Dru. 2019. *#Wwe: Professional Wrestling in the Digital Age*. Indiana University Press.
- Johnson, E. Patrick. 2001. "'Quare' Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 21 (1): 1–25.
- Jr, Alfred L. Martin. 2021. *The Generic Closet: Black Gayness and the Black-Cast Sitcom*. Indiana University Press.
- Karpatschof, Benny. 2013. "Play, But Not Simply Play: The Anthropology of Play." In *Children's Play and Development: Cultural-Historical Perspectives*, edited by Ivy Schousboe and Ditte Winther-Lindqvist, 251–65. International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-6579-5_15.
- Kassing and Sanderson. 2014. "New Media and the Evolution of Fan–Athlete Interaction." In *Routledge Handbook of Sport and New Media*. Routledge.
- Katz, Cindi. 2013. "Power, Space, and Terror: Social Reproduction and The Public Environment." In *The Politics of Public Space*. Routledge.
- Kaushik, Vaishali. 2023. "Fans Criticize Vince McMahon Is Saudi Arabia Potential Buyer." January 12, 2023. <https://www.insidesport.in/wwe-news-roundup-fans-criticize-vince-mcmahon-following-his-return-for-wwe-deal-with-saudi-arabia-another-potential-buyer-added-for-wwe-vince-mcmahon-to-appear-at-royal-umble-fans-worry-about-tri/>, <https://www.insidesport.in/wwe-news-roundup-fans-criticize-vince-mcmahon-following-his-return-for-wwe-deal-with-saudi-arabia-another-potential-buyer-added-for-wwe-vince-mcmahon-to-appear-at-royal-umble-fans-worry-about-tri/>.
- Kitchin, Rob, and Martin Dodge. 2014. *Code/Space: Software and Everyday Life*. Illustrated edition. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.
- Koch, Natalie, ed. 2016. *Critical Geographies of Sport: Space, Power and Sport in Global Perspective*. 1st edition. London ; New York: Routledge.
- Koh, Wilson. 2017. "'It's What's Best for Business'—'Worked Shoots' and the Commodified Authentic in Postmillennial Professional Wrestling." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 34 (5): 459–79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2016.1222573>.
- Konuwa, Alfred. n.d. "Sasha Banks And Naomi Walk Out Of WWE Raw; Banks Unfollows WWE." Forbes. Accessed June 10, 2023. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alfredkonuwa/2022/05/17/sasha-banks-and-naomi-walk-out-of-wwe-raw-banks-unfollows-wwe/>.
- LAINE, EERO. 2016. "Stadium-Sized Theatre: WWE and the World of Professional Wrestling." In *Performance and Professional Wrestling*. Routledge.
- Laine, Eero. 2019. *Professional Wrestling and the Commercial Stage*. 1st edition. Routledge.
- Lansbury, Jennifer H. 2001. "'The Tuskegee Flash' and 'the Slender Harlem Stroker': Black Women Athletes on the Margin." *Journal of Sport History* 28 (2): 233–52.
- Larsen, Lasse Juel. 2015. "Play and Space – towards a Formal Definition of Play." *International Journal of Play* 4 (2): 175–89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21594937.2015.1060567>.
- LastWeekTonight, dir. 2019. *WWE: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO)*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m8UQ4O7UiDs>.
- Leszczynski, Agnieszka, and Sarah Elwood. 2015. "Feminist Geographies of New Spatial Media." *The Canadian Geographer / Le Géographe Canadien* 59 (1): 12–28. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cag.12093>.
- Levi, Heather. 2008. *The World of Lucha Libre: Secrets, Revelations, and Mexican National Identity*. Illustrated edition. Duke University Press Books.
- LGBT In The Ring Ep. 47: Billy Dixon & Paris Is Bumping*. 2020. <https://open.spotify.com/episode/5k305QO02fVEn761N01WY>.

- Lipsitz, George. 1988. "Mardi Gras Indians: Carnival and Counter-Narrative in Black New Orleans." *Cultural Critique*, no. 10: 99–121. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354109>.
- Litherland, Benjamin. 2014. "Breaking Kayfabe Is Easy, Cheap and Never Entertaining: Twitter Rivalries in Professional Wrestling." *Celebrity Studies* 5 (4): 531–33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2014.981047>.
- . 2018. *Wrestling in Britain: Sporting Entertainments, Celebrity and Audiences*. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9781351180443>.
- . 2022. "Notes on Kayfabe." *Pro Wrestling Studies Journal* 3 (1): 123–28.
- Litherland, Benjamin, Tom Phillips, and Claire Warden. 2021. "Scholarly Grappling: Collaborative 'Work' in the Study of Professional Wrestling." *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 36 (1): 213–28. <https://doi.org/10.1353/dtc.2021.0040>.
- Louis Moore. 2010. "Fine Specimens of Manhood: The Black Boxer's Body and the Avenue to Equality, Racial Advancement, and Manhood in the Nineteenth Century." *Melus* 35 (4): 59–84. <https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/35.4.59>.
- Low, Setha M. 2008. *On the Plaza: The Politics of Public Space and Culture*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Lu, Jessica H., and Catherine Knight Steele. 2019. "'Joy Is Resistance': Cross-Platform Resilience and (Re)Invention of Black Oral Culture Online." *Information, Communication & Society* 22 (6): 823–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2019.1575449>.
- M, DiArron. 2022. "Wrestling with Race: #Kofimania as Social Movement and Kayfabe as Discursive Space." *Pro Wrestling Studies Journal* 3 (1): 81–103.
- Maguire, Brendan. 2005. "American Professional Wrestling: Evolution, Content, and Popular Appeal." *Sociological Spectrum* 25 (2): 155–76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02732170590883960>.
- Malaby, Thomas M. 2009. "Anthropology and Play: The Contours of Playful Experience." *New Literary History* 40 (1): 205–18.
- Marable, Manning, and Leith Mullings. 2015. *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America: Problems in Race, Political Economy, and Society*. Reprint edition. Haymarket Books.
- Marez, Curtis. 2021. "Precarious Locations: Streaming TV and Global Inequalities." *American Studies* 60 (1): 9–31. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ams.2021.0001>.
- Marisa J. Fuentes. 2016. *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Massey, Doreen. 1994. *Space, Place and Gender*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Massey, Doreen B. 2005. *For Space*. 1st edition. London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Mazer, Sharon. 1998. *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- . 2020. *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle, Second Edition*. 2nd edition. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- McCann, Michael. 2023. "Detroit Cops Sue WWE's McMahon Amid Shareholder Revolt." *Sportico.Com* (blog). January 17, 2023. <https://www.sportico.com/law/analysis/2023/vince-mcmahon-sued-by-stockholders-1234701386/>.
- McClearen, Jennifer. 2021. *Fighting Visibility: Sports Media and Female Athletes in the UFC*. First edition. Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- McDowell, Linda. 1999. *Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- McKittrick, Katherine. 2006. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- McQuarrie, Fiona A.E. 2006. "Breaking Kayfabe: 'The History of a History' of World Wrestling Entertainment." *Management & Organizational History* 1 (3): 227–50. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744935906066371>.
- Melaku, Tsedale M. 2019. *You Don't Look Like a Lawyer: Black Women and Systemic Gendered Racism*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- . 2022. "Black Women in White Institutional Spaces: The Invisible Labor Clause and the Inclusion Tax." *American Behavioral Scientist* 66 (11): 1512–25.
- Melamed, Jodi. 2015. "Racial Capitalism." *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1 (1): 76–85. <https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethstud.1.1.0076>.
- Middleton, Marc. 2019a. "Sky Sports Says Goodbye to WWE as 30-Year Partnership Ends." *LordsofPain.Net* (blog). December 30, 2019. <https://lordsofpain.net/sky-sports-says-goodbye-to-wwe-as-30-year-partnership-ends/>.
- . 2019b. "WWE NXT and NXT UK Also Airing on BT Sport, More on WWE Partnering with BT Sport." *LordsofPain.Net* (blog). December 31, 2019. <https://lordsofpain.net/wwe-nxt-and-nxt-uk-also-airing-on-bt-sport-more-on-wwe-partnering-with-bt-sport/>.
- Mills, Charles W. 1999. *The Racial Contract*. 1st edition. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Moon, David S. 2022. "Kayfabe, Smartdom and Marking Out: Can Pro-Wrestling Help Us Understand Donald Trump?" *Political Studies Review* 20 (1): 47–61. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478929920963827>.
- Morgan, Joan. 2015. "Why We Get Off: Moving Towards a Black Feminist Politics of Pleasure." *The Black Scholar* 45 (4): 36–46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2015.1080915>.
- Mountz, Alison, and Jennifer Hyndman. 2006. "Feminist Approaches to the Global Intimate." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 34 (1/2): 446–63.
- "Multi-State University Strike Wave in the US Continues." 2023. World Socialist Web Site. April 14, 2023. <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2023/04/14/univ-a14.html>.
- Ngai, Sianne. 2022. *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form*. Cambridge Massachusetts: Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press.
- NostalgiaMania - Wrestling, dir. 2021. *Commercial - WWE - Get The "F" Out (2002)*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1kJQssUklqA>.
- Oates, Thomas P. 2014. *The NFL: Critical and Cultural Perspectives*. Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press.
- . 2016. "Race, Economics, and the Shifting Politics of Sport Media: The Case of Jimmy the Greek." *Radical History Review*. 125: 159–67.
- "Official WWE Statement on Sasha Banks & Naomi | WWE." n.d. Accessed June 9, 2023. <https://www.wwe.com/article/official-wwe-statement-sasha-banks-naomi///>.
- Paglino, Nick. 2012. "WWE Promotes New Rule Instituted For Saturday Morning Slam." *Wrestlezone* (blog). August 26, 2012. <https://www.wrestlezone.com/news/260179-wwe-promotes-new-rule-instituted-for-saturday-morning-slam>.
- . 2013. "Official Press Release For E!'s 'Total Divas:' Meet the Divas, Promo Videos, Show Details & More." *Wrestlezone* (blog). July 12, 2013. <https://www.wrestlezone.com/news/275119-official-press-release-for-es-qttotal-divasq-meet-the-divas-promo-videos-show-details-a-more>.

- . n.d. “WWE Promotes New Rule Instituted For Saturday Morning Slam - Wrestlezone.” Accessed June 3, 2023. <https://www.wrestlezone.com/news/260179-wwe-promotes-new-rule-instituted-for-saturday-morning-slam>.
- Palazzolo, Joe, and Ted Mann. 2022a. “WSJ News Exclusive | WWE Board Probes Secret \$3 Million Hush Pact by CEO Vince McMahon, Sources Say.” *Wall Street Journal*, June 15, 2022, sec. Business. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/wwe-board-probes-secret-3-million-hush-pact-by-ceo-vince-mcmahon-sources-say-11655322722>.
- . 2022b. “WWE’s Vince McMahon Steps Back From CEO Role Amid Misconduct Probe.” *Wall Street Journal*, June 17, 2022, sec. Business. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/wwe-appoints-vince-mcmahons-daughter-as-interim-ceo-amid-probe-11655467082>.
- Palazzolo, Joe, Ted Mann, and Joe Flint. 2022. “WSJ News Exclusive | WWE’s Vince McMahon Agreed to Pay \$12 Million in Hush Money to Four Women.” *Wall Street Journal*, July 8, 2022, sec. Business. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/wwe-vince-mcmahon-agreed-to-pay-12-million-in-hush-money-to-four-women-11657289742>.
- Pegoraro, Ann. 2014. “Twitter as Disruptive Innovation in Sport Communication.” *Communication & Sport* 2 (2): 132–37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479514527432>.
- Powell, Elliott H. 2019. “Coalitional Auralities: Notes on a Soundtrack to Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 25 (1): 188–93.
- Purifoy, Danielle M, and Louise Seamster. 2021. “Creative Extraction: Black Towns in White Space.” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 39 (1): 47–66. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775820968563>.
- Puskar, Jason. 2019. “Counting on the Body: Techniques of Embodied Digitality.” *New Media & Society* 21 (10): 2242–60. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819843300>.
- Ralph, Michael, and Maya Singhal. n.d. “Racial Capitalism.” *“Racial Capitalism”*. Accessed August 2, 2021. https://www.academia.edu/41603109/Racial_capitalism.
- Ray, Victor, and Danielle Purifoy. 2019. “The Colorblind Organization.” In *Race, Organizations, and the Organizing Process*, 60:131–50. Research in the Sociology of Organizations. Emerald Publishing Limited. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S0733-558X20190000060008>.
- Rehm, Jeremy, and Ben Biggs. n.d. “The Four Fundamental Forces of Nature | Space.” Accessed June 8, 2023. <https://www.space.com/four-fundamental-forces.html>.
- Reinhard, CarrieLynn D., and Christopher J. Olson, eds. 2019. *Convergent Wrestling: Participatory Culture, Transmedia Storytelling, and Intertextuality in the Squared Circle*. 1st edition. Routledge.
- “Report - WWE’s Vince McMahon Paid Total of \$12M to 4 Women to Quiet Sexual Misconduct Allegations - ESPN.” n.d. Accessed June 1, 2023. https://www.espn.com/wwe/story/_/id/34212870/report-wwe-vince-mcmahon-paid-total-12m-4-women-quiet-sexual-misconduct-allegations.
- Rhoden, William C. 2007. *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete*. Reprint edition. New York: Crown.
- Richey, Lisa Ann. 2011. *Brand Aid Shopping Well to Save the World*. A Quadrant Book. Minneapolis [Minn.], Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Robinson, Cedric J. 2000. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press.
- Rodney, Walter. 2018. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Brooklyn: Verso.
- Rose, Gillian. 1995. *Geography and Gender, Cartographies and Corporealities*.

- “Rumors Suggest Saudi Buyers Are Among Frontrunners To Purchase WWE.” 2023. TheSportster. January 11, 2023. <https://www.thesportster.com/rumors-saudi-buyers-purchasing-wwe/>.
- “Ruth E. Carter Designs Costumes to Stand the Test of Time | Podcast | American Masters | PBS.” 2023. American Masters. February 9, 2023. <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/podcast/ruth-e-carter-interview-wakanda-forever/>.
- Saha, Anamik. 2018. *Race and the Cultural Industries*.
- Sainato, Michael. 2023. “‘Many of Us Are Struggling’: Why US Universities Are Facing a Wave of Strikes.” *The Guardian*, April 21, 2023, sec. US news. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/apr/21/us-universities-wave-strikes>.
- Sammond, Nicholas, ed. 2005. *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books.
- Sanderson, Jimmy. 2009. *Professional Athletes’ Shrinking Privacy Boundaries : Fans, Information and Communication Technologies, and Athlete Monitoring*.
- . 2011. *How Social Media Is Changing Sports: Its a Whole New Ballgame*. New York, NY: Hampton Press Inc.
- Sandomir, Richard. 2002. “SPORTS BUSINESS; Wildlife Fund Takes Down Wrestlers in Name Game.” *The New York Times*, May 7, 2002, sec. Sports. <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/05/07/sports/sports-business-wildlife-fund-takes-down-wrestlers-in-name-game.html>.
- Satterfield, Tomika Ferguson and James W., and Jr. 2016. “Black Women Athletes and the Performance of Hyper-Femininity.” In *Critical Perspectives on Black Women and College Success*. Routledge.
- Savitz, Jodi. 2016. “WWE Sees Opportunities to ‘Integrate LGBT Storylines’ In Programming.” NBC News. August 11, 2016. <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/wwe-plans-integrate-lgbt-characters-programming-n627411>.
- Scott, Darieck. 2010. *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination*. New York: NYU Press.
- Shabazz, Rashad. 2015. *Spatializing Blackness: Architectures of Confinement and Black Masculinity in Chicago*. 1st edition. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Silva, Denise Ferreira da. 2022. *Unpayable Debt*. Sternberg Press / The Antipolitical. Cambridge, MA, USA: Sternberg Press.
- Slow Factory, dir. 2023. *Reparative Media with Dr. Aymar Jean “AJ” Christian*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xWYrOwdB66o>.
- Smith, Neil. 2008. *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space*. 3rd edition. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Staff, Los Angeles Times. 2023. “Writers’ Strike: What’s at Stake and How It Could Disrupt Hollywood.” Los Angeles Times. June 6, 2023. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/business/story/2023-05-01/writers-strike-what-to-know-wga-guild-hollywood-productions>.
- Steele, Catherine Knight. 2016. “The Digital Barbershop: Blogs and Online Oral Culture Within the African American Community.” *Social Media + Society* 2 (4): 2056305116683205. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116683205>.
- . 2018. “Black Bloggers and Their Varied Publics: The Everyday Politics of Black Discourse Online.” *Television & New Media* 19 (2): 112–27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476417709535>.
- . 2021. *Digital Black Feminism*. New York: NYU Press.
- Strauss, Kendra. 2020. “Labour Geography III: Precarity, Racial Capitalisms and Infrastructure.” *Progress in Human Geography* 44 (6): 1212–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132519895308>.

- Suits, Bernard. 1988. "Tricky Triad: Games, Play, and Sport." *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 15 (1): 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00948705.1988.9714457>.
- Tate Shirley Anne. 2017. "Libidinal Economies of Black Hair : Subverting the Governance of Strands, Subjectivities and Politics." *Image & Text : A Journal for Design* 29 (1): 95–111. <https://doi.org/10.10520/EJC-a787a8380>.
- Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahatta, ed. 2017. *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*. Chicago, Ill: Haymarket Books.
- Taylor, Sanchez. 2021. "Xavier Woods Reveals Who Owns UpUpDownDown." *WrestleTalk* (blog). May 19, 2021. <https://wrestletalk.com/news/xavier-woods-reveals-who-owns-upupdown/>.
- Temesgen, Zelalem M., Daniel C. DeSimone, Maryam Mahmood, Claudia R. Libertin, Bharath Raj Varatharaj Palraj, and Elie F. Berbari. 2020. "Health Care After the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Influence of Telemedicine." *Mayo Clinic Proceedings* 95 (9): S66–68. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mayocp.2020.06.052>.
- THE HANNIBAL TV, dir. 2020. *Xavier Woods Extended Career Interview 2020*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tuI-xFz1o4U>.
- "The KofiMania Journey, Explained." n.d. Accessed June 7, 2023. <https://www.thesportster.com/wrestling/kofi-kingston-wrestlemania-story/>.
- "The New Day: Feel the Power on Apple Podcasts." n.d. The New Day: Feel the Power. Accessed June 7, 2023. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-new-day-feel-the-power/id1488342885>.
- TMZSports, dir. 2019. *Big Show Says John Oliver Is Wrong About WWE | TMZ Sports*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=srGEBTT2ETI>.
- "TNT Africa Announces Channel Refresh for 2021." 2021. *BroadcastPro ME* (blog). January 22, 2021. <https://www.broadcastprome.com/news/tnt-africa-announces-channel-refresh-for-2021/>.
- "Unionization Increased by 200,000 in 2022: Tens of Millions More Wanted to Join a Union, but Couldn't." n.d. Economic Policy Institute. Accessed June 11, 2023. <https://www.epi.org/publication/unionization-2022/>.
- Valinsky, Jordan. 2023. "Vince McMahon Returns to WWE as a Board Member | CNN Business." CNN. January 9, 2023. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/09/business/vince-mcmahon-wwe-return/index.html>.
- Vanity Fair, dir. 2020. *Black Panther's Costume Designer Ruth E. Carter Breaks Down Her Iconic Costumes | Vanity Fair*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FmvBrpkgBF0>.
- Vogan, Travis. 2015. *ESPN: The Making of a Sports Media Empire*. 1st edition. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Warner, Kristen J. 2015a. *The Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting*. 1st edition. Routledge.
- . 2015b. "The Racial Logic of Grey's Anatomy: Shonda Rhimes and Her 'Post-Civil Rights, Post-Feminist' Series." *Television & New Media* 16 (7): 631–47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476414550529>.
- . 2017. "In the Time of Plastic Representation." *Film Quarterly* 71 (2): 32–37. <https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2017.71.2.32>.
- Weheliye, Alexander G. 2005. *Phonographies : Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*. Duke University Press.
- Westerside, Andrew. 2022. "Wrestling with Technology: Audiences, Politics and the Ecosystems of Attendance during COVID-19." *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media* 18 (2): 263–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14794713.2022.2097988>.
- "What World Wrestling Entertainment Can Teach Us About the Future of Television (Part One) — Pop Junctions." 2014. *Henry Jenkins* (blog). January 21, 2014.

<http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2014/01/what-the-world-wrestling-federation-can-teach-us-about-the-future-of-television.html>.

- Wilderson, Frank B. 2010. *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. Illustrated edition. Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books.
- Williams, Kofoworola D. A., Sharyn A. Dougherty, Emily G. Lattie, Jeanine P. D. Guidry, and Kellie E. Carlyle. 2022. "Examining Hashtag Use of #blackboyjoy and #theblackmancan and Related Content on Instagram: Descriptive Content Analysis." *JMIR Formative Research* 6 (8): e34044. <https://doi.org/10.2196/34044>.
- Wilson, Bobby M. 2002. "Critically Understanding Race-Connected Practices: A Reading of W. E. B. Du Bois and Richard Wright." *The Professional Geographer* 54 (1): 31–41. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0033-0124.00312>.
- Wood, Rachel, and Benjamin Litherland. 2018a. "Critical Feminist Hope: The Encounter of Neoliberalism and Popular Feminism in WWE 24: Women's Evolution." *Feminist Media Studies* 18 (5): 905–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2017.1393762>.
- . 2018b. "Critical Feminist Hope: The Encounter of Neoliberalism and Popular Feminism in WWE 24: Women's Evolution." *Feminist Media Studies* 18 (5): 905–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2017.1393762>.
- Woods, Clyde. 2002. "Life After Death." *The Professional Geographer* 54 (1): 62–66. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0033-0124.00315>.
- Woods, Clyde Adrian. 1998. *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta*. Verso.
- Woods, Clyde, and Katherine McKittrick. 2007. *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*. First Edition. Toronto, Ont. : Cambridge, Mass: Between the Lines.
- Woodyer, Tara. 2012. "Ludic Geographies: Not Merely Child's Play." *Geography Compass* 6 (6): 313–26. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8198.2012.00477.x>.
- "Wrestling Loses WWF to Wildlife." n.d. CNET. Accessed May 27, 2023. <https://www.cnet.com/tech/services-and-software/wrestling-loses-wwf-to-wildlife/>.
- "WWE & Board of Directors Announce New Co-CEOs Stephanie McMahon and Nick Khan." 2022. July 25, 2022. <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20220725005475/en/WWE-Board-of-Directors-Announce-New-Co-CEOs-Stephanie-McMahon-and-Nick-Khan>.
- "WWE and Twitch Enter Multi-Year Partnership." 2023. Esports.Gg. June 5, 2023. <https://esports.gg/news/gaming/wwe-and-twitch-enter-multi-year-partnership/>.
- "WWE Apologizes for John Cena Rap, Forms Partnership with GLAAD." n.d. Accessed June 3, 2023. <https://www.baltimoresun.com/bs-mtblog-2011-03-wwe-apologizes-for-john-cena-rap-forms-partnership-with-glaa-story.html>.
- "WWE Concussion Lawsuit – WWE Concussion Lawsuit Blog." 2019. May 18, 2019. <http://wweconcussionlawsuitnews.com/>.
- "WWE, Endeavor-Owned UFC to Merge into \$21 Bln Entertainment Giant | Reuters." n.d. Accessed June 10, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/markets/deals/endeavor-group-acquire-wwe-93-billion-deal-2023-04-03/>.
- "WWE Extends Its Be A STAR Campaign." n.d. Accessed June 3, 2023. <https://www.sportskeeda.com/wwe/news-wwe-extends-be-a-star-campaign>.
- WWE ON FOX, dir. 2022. *Kofi Kingston on Defeating Chris Jericho & Losing His Jamaican Accent / WWE on FOX*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2prHvZBmbHw>.

- “WWE Sold to Endeavor, Will Merge with UFC to Form New Company.” n.d. Accessed June 10, 2023. <https://wrestlingjunkie.usatoday.com/2023/04/03/wwe-sold-to-endeavor-will-merge-with-ufc-form-new-company/>.
- “WWE Sued by Former Writer for Alleged Racial Discrimination.” n.d. Accessed June 3, 2023. <https://www.ctinsider.com/business/article/wwe-writer-sues-racial-discrimination-17922301.php>.
- “WWE Writer Fired after Podcast Gaffe | Slam Wrestling.” n.d. Accessed June 3, 2023. <https://slamwrestling.net/index.php/2021/06/25/wwe-writer-fired-after-podcast-gaffe/>.
- “WWF & Anor v World Wrestling Federation Entertainment Inc, [2002] EWCA Civ 196 | England and Wales Court of Appeal (Civil Division), Judgment, Law, Casemine.Com.” n.d. <https://www.casemine.com/judgement/uk/5b46f1fb2c94e0775e7ef55d>.
- “WWF Buys World Championship Wrestling - Mar. 23, 2001.” n.d. Accessed May 27, 2023. <https://money.cnn.com/2001/03/23/deals/wwf/>.
- “Xavier Woods Provides Update on WWE’s Policy on Twitch Streaming.” 2021. EssentiallySports. May 20, 2021. <https://www.essentiallysports.com/wwe-news-xavier-woods-provides-update-on-wwes-policy-on-twitch-streaming/>.
- Zestos, George K. 2016. *The Global Financial Crisis: From US Subprime Mortgages to European Sovereign Debt*. London: Routledge.
- Zook, Matthew, Martin Dodge, Yuko Aoyama, and Anthony Townsend. 2004. “New Digital Geographies: Information, Communication, and Place.” In *Geography and Technology*, 155–76. Springer.

