

Introduction

In 2016 Dr Benjamin Litherland, Dr Tom Phillips and Dr Claire Warden began a research collaboration centred on a shared interest in professional wrestling. All three of us have made contributions to the burgeoning field of professional wrestling studies,ⁱ and we approach wrestling from different but intersecting disciplinary backgrounds, cultural studies, media studies and performance studies respectively. Through our collaboration, we have found new ways of crossing disciplinary borders and new lexicons with which to discuss this hybrid 'sporting entertainment'. In response to the call for papers on collaborative scholarship, we wanted to explore the role performance studies had played in shaping not just our critical analysis of professional wrestling, individually and collectively, but also the understanding of our wider collaboration. We were also interested in examining how our relationship to professional wrestling had similarly shaped our relationship to performance studies in particular and professional wrestling more generally. Developed as the COVID-19 pandemic transformed both academia and professional wrestling, the following dialogue reflects on our collaborative relationship, considering how language and frameworks from the world of wrestling might be usefully co-opted in order to understand the nature of interdisciplinarity, methodological approaches, and academic labour.

In *Performance and Professional Wrestling*, Broderick Chow, Eero Laine and Claire Warden maintain that there is a "need for a theatre and performance studies approach to professional wrestling", mainly in the way that this most liminal and complex of popular cultural forms makes complex "the issue of what is false, true, and merely playing true (or playing false)".ⁱⁱ The roundtable discussion that follows between Litherland, Phillips, and Warden is an extension of this dialogue, indebted to performance studies in four key ways.

Firstly, this conversation maintains that the collaborative nature of wrestling provides a model for academic scholarship. In this it is particularly beholden to the way performance, in Elyse Pineau's words, "invites a reevaluation of how academia inscribes imbalances of power".ⁱⁱⁱ Collaboration, of the sort enacted in the following conversation (and, indeed, mirrored in the wrestling ring), has the potential to disrupt typical power relations that exist in higher education due to status, role, seniority, institutional clout, gender, and assumptions about what is and what isn't a suitable topic for academics to study, but, of course, collaboration can also pose its own challenges and reinscribe new forms of power. Secondly, performance always provides a meeting point for voices. This meeting point is deeply embodied and discursive. Ron Pelias's reading of performance as "an opening, a transitional, liminal space, where one learns", illustrates the potential of performance (and, we would say, performance studies) for encounter. For the three of us, from three different (though intersecting) disciplinary fields, the ability of performance studies to provide a fluid gathering space is vital. As Pelias suggests, the encounters need not be entirely amicable or straightforward; indeed, in words more akin to the ring than the stage, Pelias understands performance as "a slice in the side, a wound. It is an opening that deals with how the body bleeds, that tells a tale until wound turns into scar".^{iv} Pelias does not erase difference or disagreement here, instead seeing performance as a visceral, open space of learning from one another.

Thirdly, performance studies enables us to complicate the notion of liveness too, particularly in our technologically-driven world. Wrestling emerged, and continues to reinvent itself, through its association with technology, from the innovations in theatre lights in the nineteenth century, through television in the 1950s, to the internet today. Its liveness is always augmented and shifted because of technological

mediation. In this, it diverges from the history theatre which has usually prioritized and, indeed, valorised the live a priori. Performance studies, on the other hand, has illustrated the slippages between the live and the mediatized, even asking whether these two seemingly oppositional modes in actuality, always co-exist. As Marcy Rose Chvasta writes, “as more and more performers employ technology in their work, we must remember that reality/liveness association is not as simple as it seems. We must also remember our loyalty to praxis and accept that our bodies, whether in front of or on the screen, come to know through doing”.^v The body is the presence that collapses the live v mediatized dichotomy. Certainly, we would suggest, in no other art form is this clearer than in professional wrestling, for whether on screen or in a venue, the body of the wrestler is, in the words of semiotician Roland Barthes, “a basic sign, which like a seed contains the whole fight”.^{vi}

Finally, this conversation emerges from the impulse that an ethnographic approach might be a useful variation. This is by no means to resist the framings of previous scholars of wrestling history and practice; indeed, we acknowledge that the level of objectivity shown by many of these scholars has particular benefits. However, our conversation gently resists this objectivity, firstly in our unashamed acknowledgement of our acafandom,^{vii} and, secondly, in our commitment to collaborating with the wrestling community. Again, performance studies provides a deeper understanding of our ethnographic strategy. Dwight Conquergood describes the advantages of this way of working: “The power dynamic of the research situation changes when the ethnographer moves from the gaze in the distance and detached observer to the intimate involvement and engagement of ‘coactivity’ or ‘co-performance’”.^{viii} This form of scholarship extends the commitment to collaboration detailed above, in that our way of working and the way we approach our study, destabilizes usual scholarly hierarchies and opens the possibility for more transparent and solicitous approach to research and to the co-creative subjects of our research (in our case wrestlers).

These four approaches emerge from different disciplinary perspectives, some explicitly drawing from performance studies debates, have shaped our approach to the study of professional wrestling as a cultural form. In this conversation we resist the traditional journal article, convinced that this conversational and dialogic mode reflects the broader intentions of our project. In this, we follow the lead of other performance studies scholars exploring the conversational voice, for example Felipe Cervera and Eero Laine’s use of an epistolary model to reflect on the “collaborative turn in performance studies”.^{ix}

In using a conversational model to reflect on our experiences, we naturally consider the contexts of research within British higher education institutions (HEIs) in shaping our working practices. Understanding these contexts is important, particularly when looking at the way in which the outputs of our collaboration might be measured. As researchers at UK HEIs, a requirement of our jobs is to publish work and bid for research funding that might result in research outputs that our respective institutions can submit to the Research Excellence Framework (REF),^x a national assessment of the impact and quality of research that has a direct link to the amount of funding a HEI will receive. As a result, the value of academic collaboration is often in the tangible. For instance, it may appear to some that the most concrete output of our collaborative efforts is the publication of our book chapter ‘Is This Progress?: Punk, Participation and the (Potential) Radical Politics of British Professional Wrestling in the 2020 edited collection *Professional Wrestling: Politics and Populism*.^{xi} Yet this single output belies the nearly five years of work we have crafted together. Chief among this was a Research Grant proposal to UK funding body the Arts and Humanities Research Council in 2018. Entitled ‘British Wrestling: Making, Performing, Disseminating’, the project’s overarching aims were to reframe professional wrestling as a proud and innovative part of British creative industries, and to facilitate knowledge exchange and partnerships between wrestling and other cultural sectors. That the application was unsuccessful (despite recent

Parliamentary calls for increased academic work in this area),^{xii} means that the labour here – undocumented and unsubmittable to the REF – has no “value”. In some way the conversation documented here is a way for us as researchers to reflect and reclaim the value of our collaboration for ourselves and our peers, removed from the institutional demands that so often guide our practices.

This conversation unpacks the difficulties of interdisciplinary collaboration, and details the various ways that professional wrestling language can enable us to better understand current debates in social, cultural, and political contexts. Furthermore, the conversation reveals how wrestling can help us to understand the role of our own academic labour in studying such contexts, and ultimately proposes professional wrestling as a model for positive and fruitful collaboration.

Claire Warden: I wanted to start our conversation today thinking about how performance studies can collaborate in interdisciplinary ways and what is the importance of strong disciplines to these sort of mix, even messy methodologies and conversations? So I think one of the interesting things about including performance studies as part of broader collaborations is the way it understands everyday life as performance. Ultimately performance studies can be a useful collaborative discipline for every other discipline.^{xiii}

Tom Phillips: Speaking as a non performance studies scholar, I’ve definitely seen performance studies as impacting on my work; particularly when considering wrestling performance in relation to my own role as an aca-fan of wrestling. Because of that fandom, I know how wrestling works, and I fold that understanding back into my research to help me theorise fans’ performances. With an understanding of how wrestling is performed, I’m able to then theorise the different modes of performance that take place at wrestling events. In thinking about performance studies outside of wrestling, I think it has that use in terms of helping to “pull back the curtain”, understanding the motivation of how or why things are performed. As an audience studies scholar, I used to just completely ignore such notions - “It’s not about the intent of a text, it’s about how it’s understood.” But the use of performances as texts and understanding how they’re produced lends itself to good, solid research.

Benjamin Litherland: It’s interesting the extent to which debates about production have really come to the fore in contemporary media and cultural studies in the last few decades,^{xiv} and I’d be interested to see how that could translate into theatre or performance studies, as I’m sure it is already. Performance studies is in some ways particularly well equipped for helping media scholars think about things like the role of training and the physical experiences of work, but it might be able to learn from some of the questions that are being asked in production studies around working cultures and political economies of production. Similarly, there can be some other really productive conversations between media and performance studies, particularly as the boundaries between live theatrical experiences and cinema break down, whether via things like Secret Cinema, Punchdrunk or even emergent genres like Zoom escape rooms, which I’ve enjoyed this year. But outside of that, doing audience research, even framing theatre audiences as fans, seems to be a really exciting way to apply some of the insights of media studies to other cultural forms, as I know Kirsty Sedgman has been doing.^{xv} Regardless, those key questions about where media begins and performance ends are always so fascinating, whether you understand that textually or as I have done in my own work through something like Bourdieu’s notion of fields.^{xvi} A company like World Wrestling Entertainment is so intriguing because, while it is a form of arena sized commercial theatre, to riff on Eero, it’s also very clearly a media company.^{xvii} Understanding *which* text you are analysing is always a key question that someone studying wrestling needs to address: is it the live event or televisual text,

because anyone who has been to a Wrestlemania will be able to tell you that they are really quite different things, in ways both obvious and subtle.

CW: The other thing that performance studies enables is bringing bodies into play.^{xviii} This allows a deeper understanding of liveness, which I think is really important when we think about something like wrestling, but also when we think about something like cinema: at some point, there was a live performance that was happening. We see it mediated but it doesn't negate the fact that beneath it is something live and that liveness is that in people's bodies. I'm really interested in embodiment as a connective note between different disciplines, whether that be sports, arts, sciences, biomedicine. The body becomes a space where some of these really tricky but porous kind of interdisciplinary conversations can happen. Although bodies are profoundly different they become connective points between those different disciplines. And I think that's one thing performance studies can further: that conversation about embodiment and space.

BL: This has always been something we have been attuned to in media studies, but the pandemic has accelerated all of these questions. We all exist on screens now – this conversation is happening on Zoom – and we're all performing a variety of roles on those screens, as friends, as teachers, as family members. Because of this, we are returning to those fundamental questions about what performance is, how performances are mediated, and what the role of technology is in facilitating those mediations of performance and so on. And, indeed, for me at least the very real physical toll that those performances are taking on my back and eyes and the rest of my body! It's a real moment where those always slightly top down enforced disciplinary boundaries might begin to blur. Professional wrestling is an intriguing example of something that is often both a live entertainment and a mediated event, while also opening up conversations about the roles of spectators as part of those performances. But those knock-on questions about the ontology of cultural forms are at their most interesting, I think, when they begin to breakdown, and as we live in an ever growing mediated world we will see more and more assumptions breakdown.

CW: Strong disciplines are particularly important for this interdisciplinary work. This emerges in Eero's latest book which thinks about wrestling as commercial theatre.^{xix} The final section of that says we could study wrestling in far better ways if our disciplines are strong. Collaboration is more rigorous with strong disciplines in terms of structures, methodologies, theoretical workings, those sorts of things. And actually one of the things I felt from our collaboration over the years is that although the three of us have been kind of committed to interdisciplinary conversations, we have approached the work from strong disciplinary backgrounds. For me, the joy is learning from other disciplines as interdisciplinary work is created.

TP: Was that joy of learning from other disciplines intentional in our research collaboration? With you, Claire, that sense of independent strong disciplines is more obvious given your academic background. But then, I think Ben and I have reasonably similar backgrounds. Ben – did you make an active attempt to say, "Well I'm going to let Tom do the fan studies and audience stuff, and I'm going to focus on industry stuff"? Because I feel like either one of us could have done either one of those sub topics when we put our (unsuccessful) AHRC funding bid together. So Ben, was that a definite decision you made so we would have three distinct perspectives on our research?

BL: I don't think I was personally attached to doing industry studies necessarily, though I've enjoyed spending time in the ITV archives. I felt that if you are going to study British professional wrestling then you needed to speak to wrestlers, promoters and all of the other many skilled people in and around that world. Speaking to people in an industry is not the only way to research culture, and I don't want to

fetishize it as being more valuable than textual or audience research, but I think good research *about* culture is more often than not about listening to people. For me as a cultural studies researcher, culture, whether that's theatre or television or sport or whatever, is about understanding how people make meaning in contexts, and that often involves listening. Likewise, I think the value of interdisciplinary work is partly to do with listening. Listening to people from other disciplines, but also listening to people outside of the academy: of recognizing your own limitations, of respecting a whole range of experiences and expertise. Both, then, requires a type of confidence, as you say, Claire, and a type of humbleness: confidence in your own field, your own approach, and the intellectual traditions you work in, and the values and politics that you have, but also an acceptance that other people understand differently to you or perhaps know more than you! So industry studies isn't something that I think is always needed *per se*, but for the type of funding proposal that we were writing at that time, I thought it was important. I got the sense that professional wrestlers were bored of having academics simply talking *about* them. And that actually putting wrestlers in the same spaces with scholars and listening and sharing our ideas – whether at conferences, as part of a defined research project, as part of a professional wrestling promotion or event – was something we should do, and something we have managed to do even without securing the grant. Professional wrestlers have got lots to say, as anyone who has even a passing knowledge of the pro wrestling podcast ecosystem will be able to tell you.^{xx} Professional wrestling has not only survived but thrived outside of traditional academic settings and without more common sports or arts formal infrastructure, for better and worse. Listening to people who *create* culture sounds so simple, but it isn't something either media or theatre studies had always done particularly well, at least in a way that recognizes expertise without reproducing ideas of the creative genius whose interpretation is final.

TP: And now more than ever the study of that culture seems to be increasingly relevant. Sometimes I wonder how much of our research strategies are guided by the direction of cultural policy and concerns over the REF and Impact, but the production contexts of wrestling have seemed increasingly important to our understanding of it as a form, particularly in Britain where the independent sector has been flourishing over the last ten years. It can be that wrestling scholarship is quick to focus too much on the text, often in an American context. But Ben your approach shows that there are swathes of rich material to be found in those discursive contexts.

CW: I wonder how this leads us into another theme worth discussing, actually: what are the challenges of studying a cultural form that resists clear disciplinary boundaries. And I think one of the challenges is that you can end up writing stuff about wrestling that is less rigorous than it needs to be in order to properly do justice to this cultural form. A lack of clear disciplines can mean people work on wrestling in a bitty way. I definitely started out like that, writing about wrestling on days I did not want to write about modernism. Because it resists clear disciplinary bounding, there are times, I think, where there is a risk of wrestling scholarship being no discipline at all, almost like “fanboy” narratives. It can end up becoming quite woolly, using no theoretical frame. In essence one of the joys of researching wrestling is that you work across disciplines. That's fascinating and you end up talking to people from disciplines that you've not talked to before. But the challenge is them finding some sort of shared disciplinary lexicon for studying wrestling at all. That's pretty hard work so the risk is you just don't bother. This poses an interesting interesting dilemma for wrestling studies and what it might become in the future.

BL: You're right it did take us time to find that shared lexicon, but one of the reasons why the three of us have always got on is due to an understanding that we should not just study professional wrestling for the sake of it or because very few people have studied it before. Our job as researchers isn't just to fill gaps. We all believe that professional wrestling can reveal important things about, say, how improvisational performance is negotiated, or how popular culture is shaped by but also shapes broader social, political

or economic structures, or about the nature of mediated culture or so on. I think professional wrestling is productive for talking about these things.

The reason why I, and we, and others,^{xxi} keep returning to things like Donald Trump and kayfabe is because kayfabe is really helpful in making sense of how truthmaking in society and culture operates.^{xxii} Kayfabe is a useful term for understanding advertising or social media influencer culture or celebrity culture and all of these other things. That isn't because professional wrestling is the tail wagging the dog but because professional wrestling sits alongside all of these cultural forms and is shaped by similar forces, and for whatever reason professional wrestling has a neat term that captures the playful presentation of performance as authentic, and the playfully cynical response that audiences bring to that presentation. The problem with that neat term is trying to convince other people who don't necessarily watch or care about professional wrestling that it's a neat term nevertheless, that it captures some of pleasures and contradictions inherent in culture more generally, and it has been nice to see that picked up by people in and outside of the academy writing about things like Fox News or influencer celebrity cultures.^{xxiii}

There is a danger of only talking to people who already study professional wrestling, of only talking to people who are convinced by those arguments or the usefulness of that term. And I can understand the attraction of only speaking to people who're already convinced! I've lost count of the number of times I've presented on professional wrestling at a wider field conference and the first question is something like "is it fake, though?!". There is a value to building networks, and not having to explain the basics of what professional wrestling is or why it is interesting, and rereading all those old debates. I also think it's really important, however, that we go back and speak to, as you have done, Claire, modernists who maybe don't know why 1930s all-in wrestling is revealing of broader aesthetic and sensibilities.^{xxiv} Or as you have, Tom, about about the nature of cultural participation in a highly mediated society.

CW: And as your work does, Ben. This is one of the key strengths of the *Wrestling in Britain* book: that wrestling says about British history and culture in the very broadest sense of these words.^{xxv} This is why it is a particularly successful book. It's not just a book about wrestling; it uses wrestling to allow us access to a range of cultural, historical, socio-political changes in the world. This is what wrestling, and wrestling studies, can enable. It engenders far broader conversations. And opens up popular culture more generally. Wrestling scholarship could provide, maybe it doesn't yet, but *could* provide an intellectual meeting space. Wrestling compels us to look at the world and witness cultural shifts.

BL: And professional wrestling contains that ultimate question of whether it's a sport or whether it's theatre or whether it's something else entirely. It's a question that can sometimes feel trite or hackneyed, but it returns us to those questions of how cultural forms are categorized, who categorizes them, what social relations operate in the maintenance and reproduction of those categorizations. And we as academics doing research end up being actors in that reproduction, even when we are only doing desk research, we are active in those worlds and processes. Because what we decide is or isn't in our discipline or field can, one way or another, play a role in not just perception but on the type of laws or funding or social networks that maintain that world.

CW: You actually say that in your book, Ben. I often use your book when I'm trying to explain whether wrestling is a sport. I'll try not to misquote you, but in essence you make the point that asking this question can solidify what sport and art is. If you say wrestling isn't sport then it unhelpfully places barriers around our definitions of sport.^{xxvi} The question 'Is wrestling sport or theatre' always needs to be posed with the caveat that you propose in the book where you say, "Look. This conversation has to resist a sense of concretizing both those concepts [sport and theatre] as they are moving all the time".^{xxvii}

BL: I would be interested to return to a phrase Claire used earlier, which was about the risk of being a “fanboy” while doing research. We were all fans of professional wrestling before we were researchers, but as a term that has quite a long, contested and controversial use in media audience studies. Not just with regards to the gendered assumptions about who does or doesn’t consume and participate in popular cultures,^{xviii} but also the values, hierarchies and forms of cultural capital in play when do or do not acknowledge our own fannish identities in our research. I know in fan and audience studies, it’s often said that when you study popular television you have to announce an affective or personal stake in the research in a way you might not do so if you were studying, say, early modern theatre. Tom, the themes of positionality and subjectivity is something you have spent a lot of time writing and thinking about, so I’d be interested to hear how we might maintain those critical distances, and what it might mean to be a fan of the thing you are studying, particularly for a discipline like performance studies where perhaps the notion of “fandom” isn’t as central an organizing concept as it is in media studies?

TP: I think maintaining that ‘proper distance’^{xxix} in research is ultimately down to the individual scholar, the robustness of their research, and the methodologies that are being adopted. Because I think actually whichever discipline you’re writing for, if you’re talking about a text that you have some degree of passion for, I think it’s ethically responsible to acknowledge that in the work and reflect on how that passion informed your approach. Some fan studies will use aca-fandom as a methodological justification - “I’m studying this because I’m a fan of it, so automatically I know more.” But just having that fannish knowledge is not enough, because a good researcher might perhaps pick up on contexts that the aca-fan might miss because of their emotional investment. Ultimately aca-fandom should be an ethnical stance that one reflects on, not a methodological crutch. It’s when the performances of “fan” and “academic” merge in the research process that interests me, as someone who has conducted ethnographic research at wrestling events.

CW: I think there is something similar happening in performance studies. Much of the best performance study scholarship at the moment is written by people placing themselves in the performance in some way. Either they are facilitating their performance or, as researcher, they are in the performance.^{xxx} It can be autoethnographic and the closeness of some of this work is exciting. It can lead to excessive self-contemplation but it can also lead to a greater sense of understanding about how a particular movement or a particular practice feels in the body. This brings us back to embodiment. I wonder whether that notion of the aca-fan you’re presenting, Tom, leads us to think about how wrestlers and audience members viscerally experience the piece rather than always falling back on a detached sense of objectivity. I think, in fan studies and performance studies there might be a slight skepticism about objectivity at the moment. I think this can be unhelpful and lead to non-rigorous research. But I think it can also lead to much better research. It totally depends on the researcher and their openness to their own presence in that piece, their ability to analyse themselves in the work and- their willingness to frame it theoretically. For me that’s what delineates the best of that sort of work. So, I wonder whether the connection between aca fandom and autoethnographic performance practice/study is really about how you find yourself in the discipline.

TP: For me what you just described – the mediation of the researcher in particular spaces – and having to act as a researcher or as a fan or as a participant, but also an objective observer, can be understood as a form of academic kayfabe. That veneer of going into a space and having to act in particular ways to try and have a degree of academic authority; that you’re trying to signal that you’re there for work. You might be at a wrestling event because you’re going to write about it at some point, but at the same time you’re also enjoying yourself in a social setting. To maintain academic kayfabe is to commit yourself to the research process, but in doing so it blurs the lines between the professional and the personal, and your

social activities become part of the neoliberal discourse of 'relentless creativity' in UK Higher Education, typified by the REF.^{xxx1}

CW: I think that sense of veneer is an interesting one. It goes back to a desire to protect our academic reputations. There have been times I think where I've downplayed my own fandom of wrestling in a kind of kayfabe sort of way. I wonder if this is a problem for lots of scholars who work in popular culture, or maybe even for anyone who would call themselves fans of the things they study. You tell yourself a story: "I'm a serious academic". And you tell this to research committees and the REF too. In essence, I think we're always tied in with this sort of kayfabe storytelling.

BL: The thing about kayfabe is that it is the maintenance and presentation of performance beyond "the magic circle", from the ring and the arena into the outside world. As sociology tells us, this is something all of us do: maintaining more and more roles across more and more social spaces.^{xxxii} Professional wrestling gives us a case study for that when everything is heightened, where the promotional logics are quite explicit, where the demarcations of space are obvious but performances remain exaggerated. But none of these things are unique to professional wrestling: we all have these personas we are presenting and promoting and selling.

Which returns me to that central point of what professional wrestling is productive for examining, and that is the question of authenticity, one the one hand, and playful cynicism, on the other. Authenticity is something highly valued as an attribute both in interpersonal relations but also in consumer culture. Can you create the feeling of authenticity, to yourself and to others? Even when everyone knows something is constructed, we still have these rich ways in which we play along or get caught up, whether deliberately or less deliberately. At the same time, professional wrestling invites a certain type of reading practice, a kind of playful cynicism, capturing the ludic quality of living in a highly mediated, meta-modern culture, where nobody wants to be a mark, nobody wants to be *not* in on the joke. Those two things – the reaching for authenticity and the playful cynicism as a reading practice – make for interesting bedfellows and are an engine for so much contemporary culture, from advertising to memes to reality television. Studying how professional wrestlers manage it is helpful for understanding how people in other sectors or fields, including academic, might do so. But this across the board: if you've spent time on social media, this is now baked into your culture and presentation of self.

CW: Yes, and I think this leads us into a conversation around work. I can only speak for myself, but this imposter syndrome is something academics feel all the time and I'm sure people in other fields as well. Work is, in essence, a kind of overcoming of that imposter syndrome. It is kind of a kayfabe setup; you're constantly trying to tell the story of who you are as an academic but underneath that are insecurities about one's own work or position. Kayfabe is a really useful word to understand some of these things. I connect this with the wrestling language of work. When you think about wrestling's notion of what it is to work it feels in lots of ways quite similar to an academics. It enables a deeper understanding of connection with labour as Broderick [Chow] mentions in that article.^{xxxiii} Kayfabe also helps us to understand the way that we perform as academics. Going back to the notion of authenticity, it enables a critical reading of the way we present our character.

And perhaps, as academics, we also work a crowd. This isn't meant to be cynical. Rather, you are just trying to fulfil this role within the culture. For me, the way wrestling understands work in layered ways is really, really helpful. Going back to your point, Ben, an understanding of wrestling helps us understand culture: not just academia, but life. Through this you can begin to analyze the way that people function. Wrestling's multifaceted notion of work helps us to do that.

BL: And the professional wrestler as a *worker* is really the model for so much contemporary work, particularly in the creative and cultural sectors. I don't think Vince McMahon (chairman of WWE) pioneered this or drove it: he was, like others, responding to structural changes, but he was doing this earlier than a lot of industries. But the professional wrestler, as an independent contractor, with little union support, whose position in the industry requires them to hustle, to sell and promote themselves long after the "show" is over, to sell and shift merchandise. Their position is always contingent, their work rests on being able to sell themselves. And of course, you can see this across the not just the creative and cultural sectors, but a variety of industries. There is a reason why academics can see parts of that model in their own work!

CW: This is, this is tenure. It works in our British culture as well, of course. But I've always imagined the US tenure system as a kind of wrestling work. You're working towards this high pinnacle moment.

TP: In framing academia as wrestling, how is success measured? Is it "championships" - grants and publications? Or is it the kind of validation that wrestlers actually value? Do wrestlers value championships – awarded to them by promoters for storyline purposes – or do they value their performances being lauded by fans and their peers? And these are the questions we as academics ask ourselves: Is your worth measured in the value of the grants you bring in or the star rating of your publication? Or is your value in the connections you make with your peers, the collaborations you do, the feedback you get from your students? There is definitely a similarity there. We see these kinds of discourses played out by wrestling fans on social media when an independent wrestler gets signed to WWE – their "tenure" equivalent. Arguments flit between being happy for the performer for the job security and benefits they'll glean, and feeling as if the wrestler will lose some sense of creative autonomy by being part of the "machine".

CW: Maybe promotion works in the same way. When you start to deal with promotion criteria at universities, there are tensions between grant capture and being a superstar, and collegiality. In the past there has been the suggestion that if you have the big grants then it doesn't really matter; you can be a bit of an idiot and it's fine. But actually, on the ground, academia, like wrestling, values collegiality. I have seen this through Wrestling Resurgence,^{xxxiv} from talking to wrestlers and working with wrestlers. Actually what they value the most is somebody who works well with them, who collaborates well, who looks after them, takes care of them, will catch them when they jump out of the ring, won't let them fall on their head. Wrestling, despite revelations that came out this summer,^{xxxv} has always led me to see models of care, of collaboration. Work is a collaborative process even though it exists within a competitive system. When I watch two wrestlers plan a match I see something incredibly beautiful about their kinetic working together. It embodies that sense of touch that you get from like Merleau-Ponty: reciprocal touch.^{xxxvi} It's actually quite a beautiful thing. And this leads me to the question about whether professional wrestling provides a model for academic collaboration or a warning of how not to do it. Often I think it provides an interesting model for caring collaboration. But then, of course, I think about wrestling's horrendous history of not caring or collaborating. That history as we found out in summer remains. And so I chastise myself for my own naivety and lack of cynicism. Maybe I feel same way about academia where I think, "Well, the best academia and the best academics are all collaborative and friendly and warm, and hospitable, and we all work together." Perhaps I'm being drawn into this naïve position that I have taken in response to wrestling at times.

BL: "Collaboration" is interesting because it's a discourse that features so regularly in the type of workplaces that you expect to encounter in the "new spirit of capitalism": hot desks, shared workspaces, collaborative workspaces and all these other things. Like being "against creativity" it is hard to be "against

collaboration”,^{xxxvii} but often it is a very specific version of collaboration, one where the individual and individual success are still foregrounded as a key benefit. If we extend the metaphor of wrestling as workspace, good wrestling feuds are supposed to “put people over”, an insider term for who will win the match, but if a feud is especially successful then both people’s standing, in the eyes of the audience, should be raised. That isn’t always the case, though! Sometimes a wrestler just needs to lose in order to elevate the other person, which leads to lots of fascinating backstage manoeuvring and dealing, even if ultimately the match still involves both people protecting one another physically. In academia, then, collaboration should “put over” everyone, but sometimes that very clearly isn’t how it works. I think most people could point to an example of “collaborative” work in academia that masks power imbalances between senior academics and those in less secure positions. Collaboration, then, can take many forms. It can be kind of beautiful, and it can be kind of artistic and it can be productive for all, but we can also remain suspicious of something that is often touted as beneficial when sometimes it is not. We can be wary of, to borrow the wrestling phrase, people “going in for themselves”.

TP: Yes. While academia should strive for the “backstage” model of collaboration, too often it can emulate the kayfabe world of wrestling. In wrestling collaborations such as tag teams, it is generally understood that there is narrative mileage in having a team eventually split up and feud, which is not a model we would advocate!

BL: Right! And also in terms of academic “feuds” as well.^{xxxviii} Much of academic literature is about selecting which academic theories or fields or approaches to set oneself up against, which “feud” you are going to develop in your own writing. I wonder the extent to which the best academic feuds are based on a legitimate interpersonal grievance, where the public performance has an edge to it because you know the people don’t like either backstage either!

TP: To me this is an extension of that “academic kayfabe”, in that part of our job as researchers is to performatively disagree with others in the field.

CW: Extending this, I wonder who the jobbers of academia are.^{xxxix} How can we fight back against that kind of jobber mentality? In wrestling it has always been like this: the person who gets beaten down and that's their job, to get beaten down. It makes us reflect differently on the question about whether wrestling provides a good model or not for collaboration. While I understand that in the wrestling ring this remains a collaboration (the jobber consensually fulfils his role alongside the wrestler ‘getting over’), this jobber model is definitely something we need to resist in academia. We’ve all been academics for a while now we've all seen it; people who have been pushed down by others, not necessarily in a cruel way, but just ignored or given tasks to do that are not in keeping with promotion or tenure criteria. You end up with a kind of hierarchy. That's the wrestling model which I really want to actively resist in academia. I'm sure we all would want to actively resist that but I mean to really kind of fight back against it. It goes back to what Ben said about the star academic, the established scholar getting the RA to do all their work for them. There are great, supportive senior academics who are wonderful collaborators and encouragers, but there is there is a darker model that has always existed in academia. This is something to fight back against directly.

TP: Unfortunately in some ways we are hampered by the system. Like wrestling, the ‘rules of the game’ are rigged.^{xl} UK HEIs want the right kind of creativity, collaboration, and innovation, and see little value in creative research for research sake, particularly if it has little “Impact” or potential for monetisation. One could say the same thing about a wrestling match; it could be the most creative, innovative wrestling

match ever performed, but if only three people paid to see it, it doesn't matter. Creativity is being lost to the capitalist machine.

CW: Yes, agreed. And I think actually brings us back to performance studies really nicely to see that point, Tom. Because I think this is about ephemerality isn't it? This is about that performance in front of three people which may have been absolutely stellar and brilliant, but it's only three people. Where does it exist afterwards? How do we access it? This goes for like so much of contemporary society, right? That- that unless it's like recorded it somehow doesn't matter. I think we're losing the value of ephemerality in our culture. And maybe wrestling enables us to explore that in a little more depth. There's something precious about liveness, about witnessing it, feeling it viscerally, and experiencing that feeling of touch. Although many people access their wrestling through screens, I do wonder whether the actual practice of it – wrestlers working together – whether there's something to learn there about the value of the ephemeral, lived moment. The value of moment where you're there and you're in it and you're experiencing it. And it becomes sort of an act of resistance against the sort of things you're talking about, Tom.

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ⁱ See Benjamin Litherland, *Wrestling in Britain: Sporting Entertainments, Celebrity and Audiences* (London: Routledge, 2018); Tom Phillips, *Fight Like a Girl: Performance, Promotion and Fandom in Contemporary Women's Wrestling* (London: I.B. Tauris, Forthcoming); Broderick Chow et al., eds., *Performance and Professional Wrestling* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2017).

ⁱⁱ Chow et al., *Performance and Professional Wrestling*, 3.

ⁱⁱⁱ Elyse Pineau, "Teaching is Performance: Reconceptualizing a Problematic Metaphor." *American Educational Research Journal* 31, no. 1 (Spring 1994), 21.

^{iv} Ronald Pelias, "Performance is an Opening." *International Review of Qualitative Research* 2, no. 2 (Summer 2010), 173.

^v Marcy Rose Chvast, "Remembering Praxis: Performance in the Digital Age." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (August 2006), 167.

^{vi} Roland Barthes, "The World of Wrestling." In *Mythologies*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972, 18.

^{vii} In simple terms, aca-fandom has been positioned as the merging of scholarly and fan identities to produce research. Louisa Stein has argued that the context of aca/fan are 'most vitally understood as a contextual position that we bring to our work as well as to our investment in [texts] and/or their communities'. See Louisa Stein, "Post-SCMS musings on the value of the word acafan," Transform, accessed December 15, 2020, <https://louisaellenstein.com/2011/03/17/why-the-term-acafan-matters-but-maybe-we-could-lose-the-dom-in-acafandom/>. For further reflections on aca-fandom see: Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992); Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002); Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson, "Identity, Ethics, and Fan Privacy," in *Fan Cultures: Theory/Practice*, eds. Katherine Larsen and Lynn Zubernis (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 38-56.

^{viii} Dwight Conquergood, "Rethinking Ethnography: Toward a Critical Cultural Politics." *Communication Monographs* 58, (June 1991), 188.

^{ix} Felipe Cervera and Eero Laine, "The Planet, everyday: towards collaborative performance studies." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (2020), 90.

^x See "REF 2021," REF, accessed December 15, 2020, <https://ref.ac.uk/>.

^{xi} Benjamin Litherland et al. "Is This Progress?: Punk, Participation and the (Potential) Radical Politics of British Professional Wrestling," in *Professional Wrestling: Politics and Populism*, eds. Sharon Mazer et al. (New Delhi: Seagull Books, 2020), 119-139.

^{xii} Key recommendations of a 2021 report published by an All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into the British professional wrestling industry were for academics to further research the scope of the industry and help to develop safeguarding protocols. See All-Party Parliamentary Group on Wrestling, "The All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Professional Wrestling in Britain: Report.", Alex Davies-Jones MP, accessed June 28, 2021, https://www.alexdaviesjones.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/833/2021/04/Final-APPG-Wrestling-April-2021_compressed.pdf.

^{xiii} See Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (London: Routledge, 2004) and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 2006 [1990]).

^{xiv} See Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John T. Caldwell. eds. *Production studies: Cultural studies of media industries*. (London, Routledge, 2009).

^{xv} Kirsty Sedgman, *The Reasonable Audience* (London: Palgrave Pivot, 2018).

^{xvi} Litherland, *Wrestling in Britain*.

^{xvii} Eero Laine, *Professional Wrestling and the Commercial Stage* (London: Routledge, 2020).

^{xviii} See, for example, Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London: Routledge, 1997); Mark Evans, *Performance, Movement and the Body* (London: MacMillan, 2019); and Ben Spatz, *What a Body Can Do: Technique as Knowledge, Practice as Research* (London: Routledge, 2015). These three volumes reveal just three of the ways that performance studies compels attention to the body: when considering the abject, the active, and the phenomenological respectively.

^{xix} Laine, *Professional Wrestling and the Commercial Stage*.

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- ^{xx} For an analysis of pro wrestling's relationship to various digital media ecosystems, see CarrieLynn D. Reinhard and Christopher J. Olson (Eds.). *Convergent Wrestling: Participatory Culture, Transmedia Storytelling, and Intertextuality in the Squared Circle* (London, Routledge, 2019) and Dru Jeffries, (Ed.). (2019). # WWE: Professional Wrestling in the Digital Age. Indiana University Press.
- ^{xxi} David S. Moon, "Kayfabe, Smartdom and Marking Out: Can Pro-Wrestling Help Us Understand Donald Trump?", *Political Studies Review*, Online First, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478929920963827>
- ^{xxii} "Kayfabe" is an old carnival term reflecting wrestling's fairground and circus roots, referring to the practice of sustaining the in-diegesis performance into everyday life. See Litherland, *Wrestling in Britain*, 101.
- ^{xxiii} Reece Peck, *Fox Populism: Branding Conservatism as Working Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019): 102. Emma Grey Ellis, "The Post-Truth World of Influencer Romances", *Wired*. Available at <https://www.wired.com/story/internet-influencer-fauxmance>, accessed 18/12/2020.
- ^{xxiv} Claire Warden "Queer music-hall sport": all-in wrestling and modernist fakery. *Modernism/modernity*, 2,1 (2020), 147-164.
- ^{xxv} Litherland, *Wrestling in Britain*.
- ^{xxvi} Litherland, *Wrestling in Britain*, 13.
- ^{xxvii} See Litherland, *Wrestling in Britain*, 5-11.
- ^{xxviii} Suzanne Scott, *Fake geek girls: Fandom, gender, and the convergence culture industry*. (New York: NYU Press, 2019)
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- ^{xxx} Norman Denzin, *Performance Autoethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2018).
- ^{xxxi} Oli Mould, *Against Creativity* (London and Brooklyn: Verso Press, 2018).
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- ^{xxxiii} Broderick Chow, "Work and Shoot: Professional Wrestling and Embodied Politics," *TDR: The Drama Review* 58, no.2 (2014): 77-86.
- ^{xxxiv} "Wrestling Resurgence," Wrestling Resurgence, accessed December 15, 2020, <https://www.wrestlingresurgence.uk/>.
- ^{xxxv} In summer 2020 allegations were put forward via social media alleging numerous cases of emotional, physical and sexual abuse within the professional wrestling industry, with perpetrators including wrestlers, promoters, crew, and journalists. Shared under the hashtag "Speaking Out", this social movement became a way for victims of abuse to share their stories and raise awareness of a rampant culture of toxicity within the wrestling industry at large. One consequence of the movement was for the British Government to establish an All-Party Parliamentary Group inquiry into the British wrestling industry. See: Daniel Raza, "#SpeakingOut: Sexual misconduct in British professional wrestling's #MeToo movement," BBC, accessed December 15, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/54180329>.
- ^{xxxvi} Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1963), 16.
- ^{xxxvii} Mould, *Against Creativity*.
- ^{xxxviii} Sharon Mazer. 'The Game of Life' in *Performance and Professional wrestling*, 196-206.
- ^{xxxix} 'Jobbers' refers to a wrestler whose role in the match is to be defeated by the more popular, well-known, or financially-lucrative wrestler. See Tyson Smith, "Playing the Role of Jobber", *Medium*, accessed August 24, 2021, <https://medium.com/@tyson987654321/playing-the-role-of-jobber-dfc87b26ec68>.
- ^{xl} Sharon Mazer, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998).