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Daniel Bryan & The Negotiation of Kayfabe in Professional Wrestling

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Daniel Bryan & The Negotiation of Kayfabe in Professional Wrestling

by

Brooks Oglesby

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of Communication
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DEDICATION

This project would not be possible without the wrestlers who have sacrificed their health for fans like me. I thank my favorite babyfaces – Daniel Bryan, Shawn Michaels, Sami Zayn, Eddie Guerrero, Sasha Banks, Shinsuke Nakamura, Dusty Rhodes, Randy Savage, Emma, Mick Foley, AJ Lee, The New Day, Edge, The Hardy Boyz, Ethan Carter III, John Morrison, Diamond Dallas Page and everyone else who has kept me in belief over the years. I also thank my favorite heels – CM Punk, Kevin Owens, Pentagon, Jr., Andy Kaufman, Ric Flair, Kurt Angle, Andre the Giant, Dario Cueto, Kenny Omega, Chris Jericho, Bray Wyatt, Mark Henry, Paul Heyman, Brock Lesnar, and William Regal, without whom our heroes would have nothing to overcome.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis will examine the negotiation of kayfabe within the context of professional wrestling using a 2014 WWE storyline that arose from fan backlash as a primary text. The perceived marginalization of wrestler Daniel Bryan by the fans led to a disconnect between the narratives that were performed in-ring and the counter-narratives produced by the fans, which in turn led to an overtly co-authored narrative between in-ring performers and fans. In addition to studying the television narratives that characterize the “Yes Movement,” in WWE, I will analyze archived social media responses within fan communities on Twitter and Reddit to make sense of how professional wrestling fans constitute their collective identity and act upon their agency to alter live performances and narratives. This thesis will contribute to literature on professional wrestling specifically as well as performance studies and media studies about fandom in Communication. By analyzing the negotiation of kayfabe between professional wrestling audiences and performers, I will demonstrate how the Yes Movement backlash and eventual storyline illustrates the malleability of shared realities within subcultures.

CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

I should start by mentioning that I am writing this thesis because I cried on the floor of the Mercedes-Benz Superdome during the closing moments of WrestleMania 30. At the risk of spoiling it, Daniel Bryan won the WWE World Heavyweight Championship, defeating three main event-caliber opponents in the same night in front of 80,000 fans, one of which was me.

I've been watching wrestling weekly for as long as I can remember. Growing up with twin brothers, both nine years older than me, during the late-90s wrestling boom meant that wrestling was going to be in my life whether I wanted it to be or not, because I was small and agreeable enough to be their practice dummy. I have probably been Rock Bottomed and Stone Cold Stunned as much as any actual wrestler has (though I've had the benefit of trampolines, beds, and couches to break my falls). As I grew older and my brothers grew out of it, I would routinely put on trampoline matches with either a friend or my Diamond Dallas Page plush action figure. I have been grounded for pinching a nerve in my cousin's neck after applying Chris Masters' patented Masterlock, and I have been sent home from a friend's house for breaking his glasses while applying Chris Benoit's Crippler Crossface submission hold. Wrestling has always been a big part of my life, whether I'm watching it or, against WWE's advice, "trying this at home."

Wrestling had never made me cry, though. I mean, I did cry when Eddie Guerrero died,

and I cried when Ric Flair retired, but I'd never been that moved by what happened in the ring. It's not as if I don't know that it's all a sham. Come to think of it, I've probably cried at some point out of sheer frustration over being told that it's fake. There was a time in my life when I would argue the difference between "fake" and "pre-determined," showing YouTube clips of Mick Foley's ear getting ripped off or Mick Foley being falling 20 feet off the side of a cage or Mick Foley's tooth being pushed through his nose. But I've learned that it's a largely futile endeavor. It's just something you get or it's something you don't.

But what was different about Bryan's win? I think it was that I had a stake in it, or at least that's the way I felt. When Bryan arrived in WWE in 2010, I latched onto him, probably a combination of his indie cred, his in-ring ability, and his general lack of anything that would immediately indicate that he fights for a living. A lanky, nervous pale kid with a goofy smile who brushes his hair forward and looks like he's just happy to be there. Now there's a guy I can relate to.

Bryan became "my guy" pretty much immediately. In the world of professional wrestling, you want your favorite wrestler to win matches not only for the narrative catharsis, but because of the material rewards that come along with winning. More wins mean greater prominence on the television shows, which means more merchandising opportunities, bigger paychecks, and greater career success. So when he was briefly fired later that year, I considered boycotting wrestling for the first time in my life.

Luckily for me, he was rehired a few months later and I got the chance to watch him unceremoniously lose in 90 seconds every week for two years. Rumors would swirl about Bryan's standing in the company, that he was seen as a "good hand" that could make the other guys look good in the ring. He was a good loser, in other words. For me, that made Bryan a very real underdog. A talented, compelling wrestler who is continuously overlooked for main event

opportunities. In early 2013, crowds started to rally behind him, and that upswing carried through to August, when he won the WWE Championship for the first time. It was incredibly cathartic to see Bryan finally win the big one, but he lost it 5 minutes later and was soon shuffled out of the main event scene.

WWE had left their underdog story unfinished. You don't tell a story about proving yourself and overcoming obstacles only to put those obstacles right back immediately after. I was furious, and I wasn't going to support any wrestler they tried to foist on me as the next Hulk Hogan or John Cena. Daniel Bryan was the right guy. The larger-than-life meatheads never appealed to me, and I looked at Bryan and saw something fresh, a rare commodity when you've been watching for nearly 20 years. It took a prolonged fan backlash, at live events and on social media, for WWE's plans to change and ultimately give Bryan a chance, and every step toward that goal left me hopeful, yet still wary and uncertain until I saw Bryan end the show with the championship.

Returning to the Superdome, where I found myself teary-eyed as the confetti began to rain down. I reached down to my feet to grab a piece and came back up with two handfuls. I ended up filling my pockets, and I still carry around some of that confetti in my backpack. It remains a moment worth remembering, a phony victory in a sham sport that still feels like as genuine a triumph as I've ever felt. I'll probably never step into a wrestling ring, but in that moment, I was finally a welcome part of the fiction.

January 26, 2014. The stream on my laptop is choppy, but I can still follow along with the countdown easily enough. The buzzer goes off and Batista runs down to the ring, the 28th wrestler of 30. *At least he won't be #30. This is actually looking pretty good. Of course they'd save the final spot for Bryan.* I lean forward even further in my seat, adjusting the starchy Daniel

Bryan t-shirt I'd never wear outside of my dorm. I'm not superstitious, but I already bought my WrestleMania ticket, so it couldn't hurt, right?

I notice the cheers give way to boos as Batista climbs into the ring. He's enormous, muscular, and absolutely boring. A relic of a bygone era, the kind of wrestler I'd be embarrassed to cheer for. I take solace knowing that the powers that be backstage are hearing the same deafening jeers that I am. *This whole thing is almost too perfect. My favorite wrestler's going to win the Rumble and earn his spot in the main event of WrestleMania. If Batista were going to win, they'd save him for the final spot to make the moment as big as possible. And they're giving that spot to Bryan.* The countdown to the #29 entrant starts, briefly snapping me back into the match. *Maybe they'll swerve the crowd and put Bryan at 29.*

The countdown reaches zero, a buzzer sounds, and Big E Langston runs to the ring. Another ripped, larger-than-life figure, but, unlike Batista, a complete non-factor. He's been floundering in the midcard for months without any noteworthy storylines or crowd support. Just a body to fill a spot prior to the big #30 entrant. Big E starts tossing wrestlers around the ring, but the crowd is paying little attention. One by one, they rise to their feet behind the ring, turning toward the entrance ramp as the microphones pick up their "Dan-iel Bry-an" chants. My hands have made their way to my face, either involuntarily shielding my eyes or working the stress out of my cheeks. Cognizant of how ridiculous I must look, I quickly offer up a silent prayer. *Just in case.*

A 10 appears in the corner of the screen. *This is it. I'll know the main event in ten seconds.* Time slows down, and even the wrestlers in the ring seem to grow sluggish in anticipation. Finally, the buzzer sounds for the last time, and emblazoned in bright lights across the stage is the name of the final entrant – Rey Mysterio.

This is bullshit. Rey Mysterio is bullshit. Fuck this and fuck Rey Mysterio. Weeks of backlash, and they're still not listening. They don't even put Bryan in the match? They didn't even let him lose. It just doesn't feel fair.

I open Twitter and post a tweet announcing that my WrestleMania ticket is now on sale. I don't mean it. While I'm there, I notice that "Daniel Bryan" is trending worldwide. It's a small consolation, knowing that I'm not the only one complaining online. Switching back to the Rumble stream, I immediately notice how loud the boos have become. It's a constant hum, disregarding whatever exciting slams are happening within the ring. *Nobody boos Rey Mysterio, but they're doing it. It's not just Rey, and it's not just Batista. They're rejecting the whole thing.*

The mood at the closing moments of the 2014 WWE Royal Rumble was expected to be one of celebration. An elaborate pyrotechnic display went off behind Batista, the triumphant musclebound *babyface*, the embodied sign of "good" within the conventional "good versus evil" wrestling narrative (Barthes, 1972), as he posed for fans atop the turnbuckle. His return had been heavily promoted in the weeks prior, a major selling point for the annual pay-per-view, in which thirty professional wrestlers toss each other over the top rope until only one wrestler remains. The victor then goes on to headline WrestleMania, WWE's version of the Super Bowl, and the returning Batista had just secured his spot. Batista was a major star in the years prior, and WWE likely foresaw greater ticket sales and pop culture relevancy upon his return and subsequent victory (as, after all, Batista's victory was ordained by scriptwriters backstage).

What WWE did not foresee, however, was the incessant, overwhelming booing coming from over 15,000 fans within the arena. Despite scripted excitement from the broadcast announce team, the "voice" of WWE's performed narratives, the final 15 minute minutes of the

broadcast were overwhelmed by protest from the live audience, who heckled and booed independently of the narratives performed, chanting instead for their babyface of choice, Daniel Bryan.

Bryan was not one of the 30 performers included in the Royal Rumble match, as he was embroiled in a feud of his own down the card, and thus (thought to be) barred from the “nano-narrative” constituted within the particular match (Petten, 2010; Jenkin, 2014). His character's nano-narrative was thought to have been completed earlier in the night; he only re-entered the narrative when the audience imposed it through vocal protest.

Online fan responses suggest that reasoning behind this protest, which continued for several months, resided both inside and outside of kayfabe – the “illusion of realness” (Smith, 2006) within professional wrestling, conventionally characterized by suspension of disbelief by fans. Fans were dissatisfied with Bryan’s storylines in the latter half of 2013, as fans conventionally expect – or hope – that macro-narratives represent catharsis and triumph (Petten, 2010). Fans wanted Bryan, then playing the part of a perennial underdog, to overcome odds and eventually carry out the “excessive spectacle of good triumphing over evil” (Barthes, 1972). When Bryan did not receive that moment of triumph, fans began to protest, which became impossible to ignore at the 2014 Royal Rumble. Still couched within kayfabe, this reasoning for protest was reconcilable with the performed narratives in WWE.

The other major reason for protest, however, regarded the deservingness of Bryan Danielson, the person who performs as the character Daniel Bryan, to main event WrestleMania. Within kayfabe, Daniel Bryan carries with him the illusion of realness, in that his actions are not understood to be scripted. His losses, then, are attributed to his own failings, despite his actions, motivations, and victories being pre-determined by scriptwriters. By not winning (or even

participating in) the 2014 Royal Rumble, Bryan had no reason within kayfabe to spark protest. The WWE fandom, however, demanded success for Daniel Bryan *and* Bryan Danielson, despite the narratives performed. In mobilizing for this reason, which emerges outside the conventional confines of kayfabe,

In rejecting the chosen babyface, the audience created a breach in kayfabe. This disconnect between performed narrative and fan response raises a question: in live performances, who holds authorship over performed narratives? In addition, how do fans and in-ring performers work to constitute kayfabe, and how can it be reconciled in the event of a breach?

This study examines four primary media events – the Championship Ascension Ceremony, in which the breach in kayfabe appeared on WWE programming, the Royal Rumble pay-per-view event, in which a crisis emerged from the inability to reconcile the breach with the existing social order, the Occupy Raw segment, in which redressive action was taken to alter storylines and the larger context of kayfabe, and WrestleMania 30, the public attempt to reintegrate the breach of kayfabe into the context of WWE programming going forward. In addition, this study will examine online fandom responses on Twitter and Reddit to explore how this fan backlash arose, as well as how it converged with other forms of contemporary protest. In particular, this study will consider how the planned “Occupy Raw” protest represented convergence with the Occupy movement, suggesting that fandom identity is constituted not only in relation to a particular form of media, but also socioculturally. In all, this study seeks to gain insight as to how professional wrestling audiences and performers constitute and negotiate the confines and context of kayfabe, through examination of the ways in which audiences and performers constitute their collective agency to claim authorship of live performances.

My research will contribute to the field of Communication through my application of the social drama to these media events to better understand how shared performative contexts are constituted and negotiated between performers and audiences. In doing so, my research will demonstrate the malleability of agreed-upon performative contexts or “kayfables” within subcultures, as performers and audiences work to constitute, reify, or breach that shared performative context. In utilizing professional wrestling as a site of inquiry, I will highlight the ways in which WWE performances might offer robust insights for research on communication, fandom, and performance. Additionally, my focus on WWE’s fandom community and convergence will shed light on how fandoms constitute collective identity through lenses of performance and social drama, rather than simply the lens imposed by the particular source media.

Research Questions

Through examination of these media texts and the WWE fandom, I ask:

1. How do in-ring performers and audiences co-author the shared reality of kayfabe?
2. How can we understand fandom backlash as social drama?
3. How can performance as theory and method provide a framework to describe media texts?

My analysis of these texts will make the following contributions:

1. It will situate professional wrestling as a site worthy of inquiry not only in regards to production of popular images and narratives, but also how performers and viewers within this performative context work to uphold or trouble what constitutes kayfabe and/or professional wrestling.

2. It will extend contemporary research on fandom to the realm of live performance, offering insight as to how fandoms operate within the negotiated confines of source media.
3. It will contribute to existing performance studies research by extending the notion of constitution through repetition of acts to the shared context of kayfabe, to demonstrate the malleability of said contexts within subcultures such as professional wrestling.

Literature Review

Existing scholarship on professional wrestling is primarily situated within cultural studies, focusing on mediated messaging within the industry, such as the production of (hyper)masculinity (Chaudhuri, 2012; Soulliere, 2006; Oppliger, 2004), violent imagery (Atkinson, 2002; Barrett & Levin, 2015; Lemish, 1998) and the “quasi-political nature” (Barthes, 1972; Benton, 2015; Shoemaker, 2013; Taylor, 2014) of wrestling gimmicks. In a study on romantic archetypes in WWE narratives, Barrett & Levin (2013) found convergent examples of culturally-grounded narratives like the “gold-digger” and “cougar” that in turn carry with them raced, gendered, and aged connotations. Religious signs, similarly, are often taken up within WWE, with pay-per-view events like Armageddon and Judgment Day named to evoke “monstrous and the fantastic” (Dart, 2006).

These ideas suggest professional wrestling's position as a space of “partial recognition,” in which the audience can “marvel at the stereotype” without considering how these stereotypes might be reified outside of the wrestling arena (Taylor, 2003, p. 71). Chow (2013) offers an alternative framing, however, positing that, given the embodied politics of cooperation that must take place in the performance, this site might also be understood historically as a place in which

“the marginal, the excluded, and the immigrant have found friendship with others through a shared practice” (p. 83). This thesis extends current existing literature on professional wrestling by describing the media events and fandom interactions through the concepts of fandom, performativity, kayfabe, and convergence.

Fandom

Henry Jenkins defines fandom as the “social structures and cultural practices created by the most passionately engaged consumers of mass media properties,” (2010, p. 1). WWE broadly refers to its fandom as the “WWE Universe,” though the most passionately engaged consumers of WWE programming typically identify themselves as “smarks” (smart marks), or, as a collective, the IWC, or Internet Wrestling Community.

A facet of “participatory culture” (Jenkins, 2010) which opens itself to broad fan participation at a grassroots level, fandom is a site of “subcultural cohesion” through which “preferred and intended” meanings and messages offered by media texts might be altered and otherwise troubled (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington, 2007, p. 2). Existing fandom research focuses on particularly fandom communities, such as *Star Trek*’s Trekkers (Jenkins, 1992, p. 20) or *Harry Potter*’s Potterheads (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington, 2007, p. 2). Whether *Star Trek*, *Harry Potter*, or WWE, fandoms often coalesce around “immersive story worlds” – that is, serialized media texts with “a sense of long-term continuity, a deep character backlog, and a sense of permanence” (Ford, 2007). As an immersive story world, thousands of on-air personalities have performed within WWE in its 62-year history (Shields & Sullivan, 2012), with 120 current on-air personalities listed on the official WWE website as of November 2016. This character backlog is always set to be replenished, as another 42 personalities are currently listed

under WWE's developmental territory, NXT, which sets out to prepare future on-air performers for the flagship television programs. Jenkins (2014) refers to WWE as "the world's biggest alternate reality game," citing the company's blending of "real world" and "story world" to blur the sense of kayfabe within WWE narratives.

Textual Poachers (1992), Jenkins' pioneering work on fandoms, examines "filking," the creation and distribution of fan-made music at fan conventions, as an example of fandom's power to constitute new meanings from existing media. Jenkins posits that filking "may be a vehicle for building or commenting upon pre-existing media texts" (p. 265). Fandom can be understood as a "collective strategy, a communal effort to form interpretive communities" (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington, 2007). Though filking and other activities within fandoms build upon existing narratives to produce their own, WWE offers the unique opportunity to co-author narratives in real time through a live audience.

Jenkins connects fandom to the realms of performance and ethnography as well, evident in his experience at Philcon 1989, during which he participated in a "filksing" – an informal exchange and performance of fan music (1992, p. 262). The filksing at Philcon "preserved no formal separation between performance space and spectator space" (1992, p. 261), raising the audience to an active role and making explicit the stake that spectators have in given performance contexts. Reflecting on the filking experience at the Philcon fandom space, Jenkins considers the phenomenon "a spontaneous and ongoing process of popular creation, one building upon community traditions but continually open to individual contribution and innovation" (1992, p. 263). Filking, then, illustrates a convergence of fandom and performance, in which the performance of fans creates an impromptu fandom space where one did not exist prior.

Performance studies research posits fandom as a “performative consumption” that, while drawing on a text, “provides exogenous meaning” beyond that of the source (Dittmer & Dodds, 2008, p. 450). Centering inquiry around the communication between bodies within a given fandom space, performance research holds that members of fandoms police social status hierarchically “based on levels of commitment, interest and longevity, as well as other common social attributes like race, ethnicity, age and gender” (Borer, 2009, p. 1). Gendered power dynamics arise as a particular site of inquiry within cultural studies research, as well (Barrett & Levin, 2015; Barrett & Levin, 2013; Eklund, 2011; Soulliere, 2006; Oppliger, 2004). The “Yoko Factor” within Beatles fandom, for instance, situates women as a negative influence on the creativity of men within artistic spaces and fandoms (Scodari, 2007, p. 3). Likewise, feminized fandom spaces are stigmatized, with women fans of *Twilight*, for instance, characterized as “obsessive” or “childish” (Yodovich, 2016, p. 298).

The convergence of virtual spaces and fandom communities have extended performance and cultural studies research by illustrating the power that embodied politics hold even in such spaces (Eklund, 2011; Rakow, 2008). Outside of live events, WWE’s fandom largely organizes in virtual spaces, starting social media campaigns like #CancelWWENetwork, which arose a year after Daniel Bryan’s Yes Movement, in response to, again, widespread dissatisfaction over the Royal Rumble result (Stout, 2015). Though performance and cultural studies greatly overlap when considering fandom as a communicative phenomenon, some performance research on wrestling fandom contends that cultural critiques of wrestling, though correct in deeming various performances harmful in propagating popular imagery, misunderstand the ways in which contemporary wrestling fandoms, as co-performers, engage with such performances (McBride & Bird, 2007, p. 165).

Performativity

Performativity arises from theory that troubles the notion of social identity as static. Speech acts, or “verbal assurances and promises which seem not only to refer to a speaking relationship, but to constitute a moral bond between speakers” (Butler, 1988), situate speech as a socially constitutive act, with meanings continually negotiated among speakers and listeners.

In seeking to trouble positivist frameworks of speech communication through speech act theory, J.L. Austin (1962) divided utterances into three categories – locution, illocutionary force, and perlocutionary effect. Though communication research historically focused on locution (that is, the words themselves), this framework draws attention to the negotiation of meanings, particularly how illocutionary force (the implication or meaning entrenched within the words themselves) and perlocutionary effect (the action prompted by the locution and illocutionary force) demonstrate the malleability of meaning-making in communication.

Austin’s notion of “performative utterances” (1962) – spoken utterances that additionally constitute action – gave way to what is now understood as performativity. Speaking on the performance of gender, Judith Butler (1988) posits that gender is “in no way a stable identity,” but instead “tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (p. 519). Performativity sets social identity as constitutive, and, perhaps more importantly, “capable of being constituted differently” (p. 520). Just as gender is “real only to the extent that it is performed” (Butler, 1990), so, too, are other culturally-enmeshed performances.

This framing is crucial to understanding the co-authored context of professional wrestling narratives and performances, as it challenges authorship as an entity controlled solely by the performers. The performative context of professional wrestling is not fixed; it repeatedly comes

into being through the performance of performer and audience at each show, which in turn allows space for effective fan resistance, as in the case of Daniel Bryan's "Yes Movement."

Butler argues that these repeated acts must not be mistaken for natural, taken-for-granted, or fixed, or else "power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds" (p. 531). By using the lens of performativity to explore fandom and kayfabe constitution, I seek to gain greater insight as to the politics of power within cultural performances.

Kayfabe

Kayfabe is foundational to the performative context of professional wrestling. Understood by professional wrestlers as the "illusion of realness" (Smith, 2006), kayfabe is the "insistence that the unreal is real" (Shoemaker, 2013) within the context of professional wrestling. Emerging from carnivals, professional wrestling brought with it jargon that informs its historical and continuing orientation toward its audience. A *mark*, for instance, is someone susceptible to kayfabe, or someone who is not clued in to professional wrestling's scripted quality.

Similarly, any performance taking place within the performative context of kayfabe is known as a *work*. As the performance of professional wrestling is closer to theatre than competitive sport, any scripted act of violence, attack with a folding chair is classified by the performers as a work (Chow, 2014, p. 73). An unscripted act, one that breaks kayfabe, is known, conversely, as a *shoot* (Chow, 2014, p. 74). A fan that crosses the ringside barricade (and thus, the "fourth wall") would likely be met with "shoot punches" from angry wrestlers, for example. An interview in which Terry Bollea speaks candidly about his Hulk Hogan persona is known as a "shoot interview" within professional wrestling circles.

The earliest instance of staged or scripted wrestling as we know it arose in traveling carnivals, in which trained grapplers would challenge carnival-goers to a wrestling match. A “plant,” who was integral to the ruse, would then step forward, leading to a match that would end, as planned, with the plant’s victory. A mark would then feel confident enough to challenge the wrestler, who would easily defeat the mark before they realized they’d been hustled (Oppliger, p. 8, 2004). Kayfabe has evolved over the past several decades, but the core function of audience deceit remains.

Professional wrestling is a global phenomenon, with Mexico’s *lucha libre* (Hegarty, 2013; Neustadt, 2001), Britain’s *catch wrestling*, and Japan’s *puroresu* offering robust cases of culturally-situated permutations of kayfabe. World Wrestling Entertainment, based in Stamford, Connecticut, boasts the largest share of professional wrestling content and viewership, however, reaching over 650 million homes worldwide in 24 languages, per an April 2016 press release (WWE). As such, the presentation, constitution, and negotiation of kayfabe within WWE programming is the primary site for this study.

The term kayfabe, itself a form of carnival-speak for “be fake” (Shoemaker, 2013), as well as terms like “mark” and “work” speak to the policing of the boundaries of kayfabe within professional wrestling by the performers themselves. The conventional view holds that the performers (in tandem with the script writers, agents, and others backstage who guide the performances) are solely responsible for the constitution and upholding of kayfabe, which the audience then reacts to within the confines of the already-established performative context. This project, however, challenges that conception, instead offering co-authorship as a more productive means of understanding the production and upholding of kayfabe.

Convergence

Culminating in the aptly-named “Occupy Raw” segment, Daniel Bryan’s “Yes” Movement notably marks the convergence of professional wrestling, social media, and the “Occupy” generation. Convergence, within the field of media studies, refers to the “flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 7).

Professional wrestling is well-known for “genre mashing” (Reinhard, 2014), a form of convergence involving the blending together of otherwise disparate genres, narratives, or artifacts. Among other genres, professional wrestling storylines often borrow elements from film noir, superhero films, comedies, and soap operas (Reinhard, 2015; Reinhard 2014; Petten, 2010). Gimmicks are another common site of convergence within wrestling. For instance, The Road Warriors, a tag team popular in the early 1980s, wore face paint and spiked shoulder pads clearly inspired by the *Mad Max* film series (Reinhard, 2015).

Contemporary convergence research, even within the scope of professional wrestling, tends to focus on how new technologies converge with existing media, such as the WWE Network, a streaming service launched by the company in 2014 (Reinhard, 2015). For the purposes of this project, I will examine the discursive convergence between the “Yes Movement and the Occupy movement.

WWE fans, historically expected to consume wrestling narratives as intended, cheering the babyface and booing the heel, organized protests through social media channels in response to the kayfabe treatment of Daniel Bryan, himself a veritable representative of the anti-establishment sentiment of the Occupy movement. Though comparable to the Cold War jingoism

of Hulkamania or the beer-swilling rebellion of Steve Austin in terms of cultural attitudes reflected in wrestling, the rise of the “Yes Movement and #OccupyRaw represents a unique shift in the audience-performer relationship, resulting from the convergence of millennial grassroots organizing, social media, and professional wrestling, in which viewers demand an unprecedented degree of creative control.

This site of convergence demonstrates the transformative potential of recognizing audience agency, raising spectators to “spect-actors” (Boal, 1985) with a stake in the performative context. In actively shaping a performance, Boal notes that a spect-actor “practises a real act even though he does it in a fictional manner” (p. 119). Roland Barthes, similarly, notes that audience members might derive “intellectual pleasure in seeing the moral mechanism function so perfectly” (p. 18), which in turn speaks to Aristotelian constructions of theatre, in which the passions of the audience are performed onstage, functioning to sedate and pacify rather than motivate audiences to action (Boal, 1985, p. 47). Using social media to organize and protest the original narrative, and by extension, their role as passive audience members, this movement demonstrates convergence. The rejection of Batista, one of the most popular babyfaces of the prior decade, and the subsequent groundswell of support for Bryan offers not only insight as to what the millennial generation demands in a hero, but also the level of agency they demand in media narratives.

Conclusion

WWE, and more specifically, the Yes Movement as a site of fan resistance and eventual storyline, is a text with robust implications regarding the process of making and remaking the shared performative context of kayfabe. The selected broadcast media events offer a unique site in which an agreed-upon context is rejected by the viewing audience en masse during the

production of live performed narratives. The Yes Movement offers multiple written, visual, and virtual texts as ways to examine the constitution and negotiation of kayfabe, all of which point to co-authorship as a means of understanding how kayfabe is repeatedly brought into being through at live professional wrestling events. In understanding communication as fundamentally performative, I posit that kayfabe is not limited to the professional wrestling arena, and thus should be interrogated to better understand the ways in which we suspend disbelief and willfully “buy in” to sociocultural narratives in everyday life.

This study contributes to the field of Communication through my application of social performance theories to the realm of live dramatic performance, in order to better understand how shared sense of kayfabe are constituted and negotiated between performers and audiences. Additionally, my focus on WWE’s fandom community and convergence will shed light on how collective fandom identity is constituted not only alongside particular media, but also socioculturally, engaging with larger generational movements such as the Occupy movement.

Due to the focus on upholding conventional conceptions of kayfabe within the professional wrestling industry, access to “backstage” artifacts such as scripts or testimony from those within WWE is limited; this study, however, focuses on the communicative process of co-authorship rather than truth values within WWE performances, which I note as a potential site of future research. This study situates the shared subcultural context of kayfabe as a collaborative and malleable that is constituted through the repeated acts of professional wrestling performance, and continually negotiated between fans and in-ring performers.

CHAPTER 2:

PERFORMANCE AS THEORY AND METHOD

Performance as Theory

“What I had just done was not real; it was fiction. I fictionally bucked The Authority. I fictionally won a championship. I was surrounded by fiction, but succeeding in the fiction felt like a real accomplishment, and everyone around me was treating my success in the fiction as if it were a real accomplishment” (Bryan, 2015, p. 303).

Professional wrestling matches are often “called in the ring,” meaning the in-ring performers jointly improvise the maneuvers and storyline beats within a match to reach the ordained finish (Bryan, 2015, p. 215). In fact, wrestlers in smaller promotions sometimes meet in the ring without ever having spoken to their opponent, leaving no room to plan performances in advance (Bryan, 2015, p. 140). The wrestlers (and sometime, the referee, being fed directions from the production team through an earpiece) surreptitiously communicate through the match, whispering between headlocks to negotiate the flow of the match based on the unique responses of the present live crowd. This allows for flexibility as well as a feeling of reciprocity between those in the ring and those in the crowd.

This process is a point of pride among wrestlers. For example, a match between Ricky “The Dragon” Steamboat and “Macho Man” Randy Savage at WrestleMania III is widely-considered by fans to be one of the greatest matches of all time, for its tight in-ring storytelling and fast-paced physicality (for the time, as it took place in 1987). It was later revealed, however,

that Savage had meticulously laid out every hold and storytelling beat in the match, assigning each move to a number and committing the sequence of over 100 numbers to memory along with Steamboat (Wrestling Observer Live, 2000). Though the match continues to receive high praise from wrestling fans, some veterans within the industry place an asterisk on such praise, as it lacked the organic quality of matches that are called in the ring (Austin, 2014). To some, the artistic qualities of putting together a wrestling match are secondary to its effectiveness in engaging the audience, whereas others hold the process of “calling it in the ring” to be a necessary component of a quality wrestling match.

Just as professional wrestling grapples with what it is and what it isn't, so too does performance studies. As with its objects of study, performance is particularly difficult to place within static parameters. “Variously envisioned and employed,” performance emerges as a generative theoretical and methodology in part due to this definitional fluidity (Madison & Hamera, 2005, p. xi). Its amorphous quality allows for vast application, emerging as a potential framework in any study that interrogates a process of meaning-making. Performance, when thought of as a “generative force” (Madison & Hamera, 2005, p. xii), is a framework that shapes itself to meet the unique needs and parameters of a given study, honoring the fluidity of its subjects. Performance, too, is often “called in the ring.”

Performance works to challenge the implied detachment “between thinking and doing, interpreting and making, conceptualizing and creating” in other modes of inquiry, instead choosing to engage with texts as they live and breathe (Conquergood, 2002, p. 153). To understand how fans and wrestlers constitute and negotiate this shared construction of kayfabe, I must engage with them as they are – living beings whose repeated communal acts are integral in the production of both kayfabe and the texts themselves. These fans and wrestlers are not merely

static components of a narrative, but passionate and expressive actors with deeply-felt convictions about the world they want to escape into.

Cultural performances, through this understanding of performance as a living and breathing form of inquiry, are likewise fluid and malleable, with Turner suggesting that “we never cease to learn our own culture, which is always changing, let alone other cultures” (Turner, 1980, p. 144). Conquergood builds upon this notion of a continually building and rebuilding of shared context, noting the presence and impact of “reflexive mechanisms” in societies that teach and regulate behaviors of the bodies within them. Conquergood explains that “the function of these reflexive mechanisms is ‘to make believe’ in the richest sense of that phrase, in the sense of construing and impressing beliefs, interpretations of the world, upon participants” (1983, p. 29). This would suggest that a sort of kayfabe exists outside of the context of professional wrestling, and in fact all cultural performances, from the overtly-staged to the everyday, share a degree of kayfabe – a willful suspension of disbelief in an effort to engage meaningfully with a surrounding culture. This is illuminated through a theoretical framework of performance, as the fabric of a shared performative context itself is “caught and clarified in the focusing power of performance” (Conquergood, 1983, p. 29).

Performance as theory sets out to “decipher the multiple operations of performance within a written text, a lifeworld, and in domains of cognitive and imaginary expressions,” noting that elements of performance are always present within social domains (Madison & Hamera, 2005, p. xxiv). Situating texts as a “living memory” that arise through communal action, this orientation allows for a robust deployment of performance theory to better understand how inquiry and the text itself are generated through action. Looking toward performance theory that interrogates the process of social unrest, as seen during WWE’s fan

backlash, I posit the social drama as one such framework that can provide clues as to how the communal upholding and deconstruction of kayfabe is done through a perspective of performance.

Victor Turner's social drama emerges from postmodern theory, particularly as it relates to its focus on subjectivity. Rejecting ideals of objectivity, postmodern theory instead posits a "death of the subject," situating subjects as "fragmented, multiple, and shifting" (Bell, 2008, p. 173). In addition to the notion of a fully-known self, postmodernism also rejects "'Truth' as obtainable and language as referential" (Bell, 2008, p. 201). Turner connects postmodernism and research on social processes by exploring "the contingent, ad hoc, and emergent character of the phases of social drama" (Boje, 2003, p. 1), extending postmodern theory's focus on fluidity and context to research on social unrest.

Within postmodern theory, actors continually perform and negotiate their identities. Postmodern theory shifts the fundamental question of the self from "Who am I?" to "How am I a subject – in history, language, and in material ways?" (Bell, 2008, p. 174). Performances that take up a postmodern understanding of identity work to "applaud the gap between 'appearances' and 'reality'" (Bell, 2008, p. 185), challenging existing social parameters of fantasy and reality. Further, postmodern theory revels in these moments of fragmentation, which reveal "how social reality invades spectacle during moments of conflict" (Boje, 2003, p. 1). Recalling Barthes' description of professional wrestling as a "spectacle of excess," postmodern theory, too, sets itself overtly in the liminal space between social fiction and reality.

In her research on online cultural performances related to the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, Elizabeth Bell (2006) notes how the unique difficulties imposed by the impermanence and anonymity of online spaces and texts affect the exploration of social dramas. The looming

possibility of deletion marks the overt precarity of online texts, and thus examining “their historical and authorial specificity, a part of any postmodern critique that rejects ahistorical, atemporal, universal narratives, is difficult if not impossible” (p. 2). In addition, Bell concludes by positing that the social drama surrounding Bill Clinton “might best be sandwiched between Gary Hart’s aborted bid for the Democratic Presidential nomination in 1984 and Arnold Schwarzenegger’s successful bid for the California governorship in 2004” (p. 7), the conceit reflecting the postmodern rejection of stasis. Social dramas such as these, as with postmodern conceptions of fluid identity, are couched in the histories, values, time, and context of the surrounding culture.

Social drama is defined as “an eruption from the level surface of ongoing social life, with its interactions, transactions, reciprocities, its customs making for regular, orderly sequences of behavior” (Turner, 1985, p. 196). It illuminates the processual communicative and performative phenomena that occur during and following a breach in an agreed-upon social context. As with performance studies in general, social drama is “propelled by passion” and “compelled by volitions,” marking the experiential and affective as meaningful and crucial components of inquiry (Turner, 1985, p. 197).

Social drama sets out a sequence of four stages that occur within a given community of people who otherwise “share values and interests and who have a real or alleged common history” during social conflict or unrest (Turner, 1980, p. 149). The first, the “breach,” causes the disruption in an existing social harmony. Often arising from a combination of affect and reason, the “will to assert power or identity” within the actor catalyzes the breach of social order (Turner, 1985, p. 197). In turn, this breach “incites the will to resist his action among

representatives of the normative standard which he has infringed,” which leads to the second stage, the “crisis” (Turner, 1985, p. 197).

In the crisis stage, the actors affected by the breach become aware of its presence and subsequent effect on social harmony. The breach, undermining agreed-upon social norms while still being felt within a social order, stands as a liminal body that must be reconciled.

Challenging the existing social order by virtue of its existence, the breach “dares the representatives of order to grapple with it” (Turner, 1986, p. 4). In this stage, it becomes clear to actors within the given society that the breach must be dealt with.

The next stage of the social drama is “redressive action,” during which the actors seeking to repair the breach of social order employ a variety of formal or informal mechanisms, from “personal advice and informal arbitration to formal juridical and legal machinery and, to resolve certain types of crises, to the performance of public ritual” (Turner, 1980, p. 151). The redress can be assimilationist in approach, using normative social pressures such as shame to reassert the prior structure of social order through integrating the perpetrators of the breach back within the prior parameters. The redress might, alternatively, take an exclusionary approach, seeking to permanently remove the breach and its perpetrators from the social order. As the breach and the prior social order are understood as mutually exclusive, the components and causes of a breach must either assimilate, legitimate, or be removed for a social order to remain consistent with its history.

This leads to the final stage, which splits into either “reintegration” or a “irreparable schism.” Reintegration refers to a reconciling of the conflicting actors back into a shared social context, whereas irreparable schism refers to the “social recognition and legitimation” of the

disconnect between actors, without further action to repair or reconcile the breach (Turner, 1986, p. 5).

Turner employed the social drama through an ethnographic lens, using it a means to understand ritual processes within specific cultures, and to explore how social factors like play and liminality manifest and affect social order (1980, p. 166). Additionally, Turner designates “star” groups, “groups to which we owe our deepest loyalty,” as key objects of study within the framework of social drama (1980, p. 149). Under this framework, the actions of key individual actors are paramount. I seek to expand this framework to collective actors, specifically in-ring performers and fans. Though Daniel Bryan, for example, might be considered a key actor from an ethnographic standpoint, my focus is not on how Bryan individually navigates or reconciles a social order, but instead, how these collective actors work to co-perform and negotiate kayfabe. In this study, I set out to use the social drama as a critical tool, positing that performance, and specifically the social drama, illustrates that the connection between these actors is fundamentally performative and fundamentally relational, allowing for active, malleable, and affective interpretations of communal subcultural constructions.

Performance as Method

“You want us to leave? What would you think if everyone in this coliseum just walks out to the parking lot right now? We can set up our own ring, and you can have Raw in front of an arena of empty chairs.” – Daniel Bryan

A methodology of performance lends itself to professional wrestling by marking the site as one that comes into being through its actors. Like the traveling carnivals from which professional wrestling emerged, WWE travels from arena to arena for each show, without a static space to mark where their performances are housed. What marks the performance, then, is not

the physical stage or context, but a coming together of audience and in-ring performer who work, either in tandem or in opposition, to negotiate a shared context.

Dwight Conquergood (1995) posits that performance studies “privileges threshold-crossing, shape-shifting, and boundary-violating figures, such as shamans, tricksters, and jokers, who value the carnivalesque over the canonical” (p. 138). Boundary violations, primarily those of the audience violating the set boundaries of their passive roles in kayfabe negotiation as well as the carnivalesque subculture of professional wrestling are key to this study. Turner (1982) situates performance as an approach concerned with “making, not faking,” which in turn offers “culturally-creating capacities” (Conquergood, 1995, p. 138). Coupled with the relative dearth of performance studies research on kayfabe, this suggests that a performance-centered methodology can provide unique, productive perspectives about the constitution and negotiation of kayfabe within the subculture of professional wrestling.

Though “professional wrestling” in its current form is largely done by professionals in stadiums in front of paying customers, choreographed forms of wrestling – and more importantly, kayfabe – can be produced just as well by two teenagers on their backyard trampoline in front of a camcorder. With no discrete spatial home, it is apparent that choreographed wrestling is a generative act that creates its own cultural context through action. During the “Occupy Raw” segment, in which Daniel Bryan refused to leave the ring until The Authority gave him a main event match at WrestleMania, filling the ring and ringside area with disgruntled fans, Bryan alludes to this spatially-unbound quality of wrestling, threatening to lead the fans out of the arena and perform in the parking lot instead (WWE, 2014). Triple H, the heel and one half of The Authority, stands opposite Bryan – and thus, the people – atop the stage, declaring, “This is the part where reality comes crashing down on all of you.” Stephanie

McMahon, the other half of The Authority, echoes Triple H's derision toward Bryan and the fans in general before demanding they clear the ring. Bryan, perched atop the turnbuckle, challenges the notion that The Authority's legal ownership of the spatial components of a wrestling arena implies total ownership of the performances therein, as well as their disregard for fan agency:

This is the problem. You guys, and people like you, underestimate the power of these people. Stephanie, last week, you told everybody here that you own this ring, that you own this arena, that you own me, that you own these people. Guess what? You don't own any of this! We own this ring!
(WWE, 2014)

The struggle between Bryan (and by extension, the agency of fans) and The Authority (and by extension, the agency of onscreen performers) is indicative of a social drama, with contesting forces within a given culture creating and responding to a breach in agreed-upon social norms. In this case, Bryan has disturbed the social order by refusing to leave the ring, leading to differing responses over a central question of this study: Who has the power in creating and negotiating this performative context? To answer this question, I will utilize the performance lens offered by social drama to analyze the four media events that best exemplify each phase.

Applying social drama to professional wrestling provides unique methodological challenges, particularly relating to parameters. In one sense, the Occupy Raw segment, ending with Triple H angrily acquiescing to Bryan's demands to the delight of the fans, illustrates the four stages of social drama within itself, a nano-narrative starting with a breach and ending with, in this case, a reintegration between the opposing social forces emerging through Triple H's agreement. On a larger scale, however, the segment represents the redressive action stage, a response to a breach created by fan backlash in the months prior. Though professional wrestling is a rich site to employ social drama, with its excessive spectacles and constant production of

new relational conflicts, its opacity with regard to what is a “work” makes the process of assigning discrete stages to any event a productive yet particularly challenging endeavor.

A methodology of social drama accounts for this murkiness, however, noting that the stages are only *typical* of cultural performances, rather than absolute or concrete components. Social drama, as a performance-centered method, honors the messiness inherent in engaging with malleable social practices. Liminality is integral to understanding cultural performances, in that it separates ceremony, which “indicates,” from ritual, which “transforms” (Turner, 1980, p. 161). Thinking of wrestling as transformative, in that it shapes itself through actions of the wrestlers and fans, the experience of liminality is not a weakness in the theory or method, but a means of engagement that mirrors the murky, messy, and fraught elements of performance. Just as Daniel Bryan is simultaneously a performer and a performer-performing-performer, as a performer of predetermined narratives with felt consequences, social drama accounts for contradiction and liminality.

Social drama does pose some methodological limitations, as its four-stage process imposes a rigidity in form that can potentially betray the complexity and variety of cultural performances that performance studies sets out to examine (Bell, 2008, p. 113). To counter the rigidity and implicit homogeneity that social drama might impose on such subjects, Richard Schechner suggests performance art as a methodology better-suited to “today’s world of terrorism, guerrilla warfare, prolonged civil wars and economic espionage” (2002, p. 67). While remaining cognizant of its methodological limitations, I utilize social drama as a methodological tool because WWE performances are explicit in their dramatism. Though I expect a degree of messiness in marking discrete stages of social drama in this series of media events, I posit that WWE performances typically follow a structure of breach-crisis-redress-reintegration, reifying

the relational context of fans and in-ring performers and making WWE conducive to the application of social drama.

In analyzing these media events through the lens of social drama, I start by following Turner's sequence, beginning with the creation of a breach, followed by crisis, redressive action, and either reintegration or irreparable schism. As the social drama begins with the breach, I begin my analysis there as well, interrogating the point at which the breach occurs before examining how it forms. Following this, I identify the point at which the breach widens and the representative order within the media events recognize the breach, marking the moment as the crisis. Continuing, I mark the redressive action carried out as the next phase, and, after identification of the redress, I can begin to analyze whether the community experiences reintegration or an irreparable schism. I then return to the media events and, now having four discrete points of analysis, examine the events chronologically through the dramaturgical lens offered by the social drama – social actors causing a breach in protest, and representatives of order working to redress it.

Accounting for challenges in applying the social drama to these WWE media events, I set forth four moments to exemplify the four typical stages of social drama. The first, the Championship Ascension Ceremony, took place on an episode of Raw in late 2013. Though it is impossible to pinpoint just where the breach formed from this fan uprising, this was perhaps the first time the breach in narrative expectations were laid bare, and it has since been situated as a germinal flashpoint of Bryan's rise in WWE and fan-produced retrospectives. This segment featured numerous former WWE champions – Shawn Michaels, Bret "The Hitman" Hart, Mick Foley, and even Daniel Bryan – as the backdrop to the current main eventers – John Cena and Randy Orton – who were feuding over the newly-established top championship. The former

champions lent a sense of legitimacy to the ceremony, but the focus was meant to be on Cena and Orton. The fans in the arena, which happened to be close to Bryan's hometown, ignored the given narrative of Cena versus Orton, instead chanting "Daniel Bryan" repeatedly until the segment ended.

The crisis in this social drama occurs at the Royal Rumble pay-per-view the next month, during which Batista is situated by WWE as a new top babyface, and the breach widens. This is also where the breach became public, as articles questioning WWE's booking decisions began to emerge, and fans on social media began to organize and rally around hashtags such as #HijackRaw and #OccupyRaw, which trended worldwide.

The redressive action came most clearly during the Occupy Raw segment, during which Triple H and Stephanie McMahon ultimately acquiesce to the demands of Bryan and the fans. No longer failing to address the breach, this stage takes steps toward repair of the social order, or in this case, the negotiated status of kayfabe. Taking in the language used by fans as well as simulating their organizational structure, this serves as a process exploring how best to address the breach, or whether it is possible or prudent to address it further.

The final stage of this social drama, WrestleMania 30, might be conceptualized as either reintegration or an irreparable schism. An extension of the redressive action, this stage reveals its success or failure. In one sense, it demonstrates a successful reintegration of kayfabe, by integrating the fan backlash into a storyline that fans responded to in positive ways. Bryan's onscreen marginalization emerged from a legitimate marginalization, and, though "real-life" issues bleeding into the world of kayfabe is a somewhat common occurrence in contemporary WWE storylines, it had not been seen to this degree. In blending these modes of engagement, fans continued to engage with the in-ring performers in desirable ways, cheering the babyface

and booing the heel. One could argue that, despite the empowering language and symbolic populist imagery in the storyline, this newfound sense of agency among WWE fans was just another work, especially when one considers this storyline in a larger context of WWE narratives that do not often feature such moments of catharsis for fan favorites.

When thinking of WrestleMania 30 as the moment of permanent schism, however, one could argue that the Yes Movement catalyzed an ongoing change in the ways live audiences perform “WWE fan.” Bryan himself comments on the change in fans in his book:

Wrestling has entered this postmodern era where fans understand that what they’re watching is entertainment. They choose to cheer for what entertains them, whether the character is good or bad, and they reject things they don’t want to see by booing, chanting “Boring,” or creating their own entertainment among themselves.
(2015, p. 273)

With WrestleMania 30 standing as evidence that fan backlash can bring about profound change for the wrestlers that fans care about, fans might think of themselves as more active participants in the production of these performances rather than merely passive spectators. Under a performance-centered methodology, the fans are always a “part of the show,” shaping and negotiating the performative context around them, but to fans themselves, this may have signaled a lasting change in where they see themselves in these performances.

The social drama, as part of a methodology of performance, illuminates the communicative and performative processes occurring throughout this WWE fan backlash and subsequent storyline integration. This methodology fits into the four major beats of the Yes Movement storyline, but, more importantly, it fits professional wrestling’s orientation toward kayfabe production and emphasis on human actors. Performance methodologies such as the social drama value affect, which is irrevocably tied to the appeal of professional wrestling itself.

Professional wrestling can and should be studied a vast array of methodologies; a textual

analysis of these chosen media texts, for example, could provide important insights for cultural communication research. An analysis of how Bryan portrays images of class conflict and masculinity through these media events might offer clues as to such messages are transmitted throughout a “low culture” staple like professional wrestling. The excessive spectacle provided by wrestling broadcasts offers a robust site to explore how wrestlers and fans take up signs (sometimes literally, in the case of fans) to mark their identities within this subculture. Interrogating the affective, communal process of negotiating and producing kayfabe, however, requires a methodology that foregrounds the animatic nature of professional wrestling. A methodology of performance must be employed to engage with a site that demands a willful suspension of disbelief from the viewer, and, in this case, the researcher.

Though my investment is with performative process rather than any sense of objective reality, I nonetheless note the existing barriers between fans and in-ring performers to illustrate the ways in which my positionality as fan might affect, limit, or trouble the research process. The carnivalesque nature of professional wrestling, for example does not readily provide access “backstage” to the scripting process, or to the set boundaries for kayfabe. There is no way for me to speak with absolute confidence as to what constituted a true, unexpected breach of kayfabe and what was a “worked shoot” - an act increasing in popularity in recent years in which a breach is scripted into the fabric of the program. For example, in the closing moment of an episode of WWE Raw on June 27, 2011, wrestler CM Punk interrupted a main event match and delivered a promo airing “real-life” grievances he had with his position in WWE, as well as grievances with the company's chairman, Vince McMahon. The segment ended with Punk's microphone being cut, and the show faded to black with Punk continuing to shout his grievances into the camera. This led to a spike in interest in WWE, but Punk would later confirm in

interviews that, though many of his sentiments were legitimate, the segment was planned to close the show, down to the timed cutting of his microphone.

Similarly, in Bryan's 2015 memoir, titled "Yes: My Improbable Journey to the Main Event of WrestleMania," he retells his meeting with Vince McMahon that seems to confirm that the WWE audience did in fact alter the broadcast narrative, as he says he was initially planned to face another wrestler in a lower-card, lower-stakes match (p. 272). It is important to note, however, that the author of the book is listed as Daniel Bryan, the WWE-trademarked character played by Bryan Danielson, and the memoir was released under the "WWE Books" subsidiary of WWE. This lays bare the possibility that even this memoir, which ostensibly breaks kayfabe, might in fact be in some way a work, still acting within kayfabe. In engaging with these performances in visceral ways, the researcher cannot escape becoming "mark," noting that "getting worked" is not only inescapable in this field, but that it can be a generative means of engagement in performance studies.

Though this study focuses on the collaborative process of negotiating performative contexts in professional wrestling, WWE and its performers independently shift and trouble the boundaries of kayfabe as well, in ways that I similarly cannot speak to with any degree of authority. WWE-produced reality television shows like *Tough Enough*, which lays bare the theatricality of professional wrestling attacks when teaching trainees how to be slammed in the safest way, and *Total Divas*, which purportedly show the "real lives" of WWE performers, trouble conventional notions of kayfabe. Do these programs breach kayfabe, or serve as a new evolution of kayfabe? How can an audience confidently ascribe authenticity to any act within an industry that sets "working the marks" as its lifeblood? It is my hope that future research projects will seek to interrogate these issues further.

This study seeks greater understanding of the process of constitution and negotiation of kayfabe within professional wrestling, analyzing four media events through the lens of social drama. As existing professional wrestling scholarship concerns itself with popular media messages, this study may lead to greater opportunities for effective change in narratives, in demonstrating to audiences their agency in shifting cultural narratives away from of messages of marginalization. Though important research continues to be done on potentially harmful media messages in professional wrestling, it is also important to examine how these performative and narrative contexts come to be, as well as how they come to be changed, so that we might better understand where power arises and how actors use it in the negotiation and production of shared subcultural contexts.

CHAPTER 3:

ANALYSIS

To understand the production and negotiation of kayfabe, I must first analyze the ways in which members of the WWE fandom make sense of their positionality within the subcultural performance of professional wrestling. Drawing from my own experience as a fan during these events, I center online spaces as a primary site for fandom identity negotiation during the backlash. In addition to organizing on *Twitter* through proliferation of hashtags like #HijackRaw, I look to SquaredCircle, a community on *Reddit* dedicated to professional wrestling, as an integral site of inquiry for contemporary WWE fandom.

101,763 fans reportedly attended WrestleMania 32 in 2016, the largest attendance numbers of any WWE event to date (WWE, 2016). WWE's week-to-week televised shows typically feature approximately 20,000 live fans, and when considering issues of access like high ticket prices, virtual spaces like SquaredCircle emerge as a place for fans to convene without the barriers that a globetrotting spectacle like WWE might impose. Boasting over 180,000 subscribers as of February 2017 – far more than any in-person gathering of professional wrestling fans, SquaredCircle offers one of the most robust fandom communities for professional wrestling. Though WWE has, in recent years, attempted to include fan responses in its broadcasts by featuring targeted hashtags in the corner of the screen, as well as occasionally featuring curated fan tweets in a scrolling chyron at the bottom of the screen, unofficial sites of discussion like SquaredCircle remain vastly more popular.

The site is designed for content aggregation, allowing fans to post relevant news, rumors, discussion topics, memes, jokes, or videos, which are then “upvoted” or “downvoted” by users, affecting the post’s visibility. Some of the most upvoted posts include a clip of John Cena unwrapping a Christmas present to find a steel chair, the press release announcing the suspension of current wrestler Roman Reigns for violating the company’s wellness policy, and a tweet from Daniel Bryan announcing his retirement from wrestling in February 2016. The makeup of the site itself privileges fan agency, allowing the subscribers of SquaredCircle to curate the content within this space.

In a thread discussing WWE’s rumored knowledge of the planned #HijackRaw movement within the fandom, the most upvoted comment response reveals a popular conception of a WWE fan’s role in WWE performances:

Does anyone feel like WWE could move way forward in this area if they'd just go back to allowing more wrestlers to interact with the crowd? Let them go off script to respond to chants. Let them get in yelling fights with fans at ringside. The crowd wants to feel like they're involved in the story and when they feel like they're just watching a play in a theater, they get bored and start trying to put themselves over like they have. [...]

That's what your live crowd wants. You want them to not hijack your show? You want them to go along with the stories you're trying to push? Make them part of it. Let them interact with the show. This show isn't for Vince, it isn't for Hunter, it isn't for any of the wrestlers. It's for the fans. And when they forget that, the fans will try to just take it. (SquaredCircle, 2014)

This fan situates WWE shows as “for the fans,” placing the reason for unrest as a lack of interaction between in-ring performers and audience members. At the same time, however, the fan tacitly places the onus on WWE performers to carry out acceptable narratives, at the risk of fans trying to “just take it” and disrupt those narratives. The level of agency desired by this fan appears to be surface-level. According to this fan, the disgruntled fan community wants to “feel like they’re involved,” keeping within the bounds of kayfabe by maintaining connotations of

deception. Limited to forms of interaction deemed acceptable, like “yelling fights with fans at ringside,” this type of engagement upholds the dominant theatrical mode of professional wrestling that considers the audience as passive consumers, or “marks.”

Even if WWE is “for the fans,” is it “by the fans” as well? How much of a stake do audiences want in live performances, if it breaches the social contract of kayfabe? Moving through the stages of social drama, I will include online fan responses such as the one above as a way of illuminating the felt and performed reactions of fans as the onscreen narrative shifts.

Breach

DECEMBER 9, 2013 - The annual “Slammy Awards” episode of WWE Raw opens with Daniel Bryan making his way to the ring, thrusting his index fingers into the air and leading the crowd in his signature “Yes” chant. He gets an enormous ovation from the Seattle crowd, which announcer Michael Cole attributes to being “brought up just up the road in Aberdeen, Washington.” A match designed to “pop the crowd,” Bryan easily wins his match with his signature running knee strike.

An hour later, WWE legend Shawn Michaels stands at the podium atop the ramp, ready to unveil the winner of Superstar of the Year. This is the first year that WWE has integrated fan voting through the new WWE app, so fans at home and in the arena have been voting for one of the five selected Superstars (WWE’s trademarked name for its wrestlers) throughout the evening. Brock Lesnar, CM Punk, Big Show, Randy Orton, John Cena, and Daniel Bryan are the nominees this year. After a drum roll, Michaels opens the envelope and announces the winner – Daniel Bryan. The crowd erupts in cheers as the announcers deem it a “major upset.” Building his acceptance speech to a crescendo, Bryan points out to the live crowd and to the camera, shouting:

The Authority, they don't want Daniel Bryan to be the Superstar of the Year. It's the people. It's the people here that have voted me Superstar of the Year. It's the people *right here in Seattle* that are voting me Superstar of the Year! And if you thought 2013 was good, 2014 is gonna be even better!

From here, Bryan's assumed nano-narrative for the night is complete, having competed in a match and accepted perhaps the most prestigious award of the show. His only remaining role is to stand in the background of the Championship Ascension Ceremony at the end of the show, where the breach emerges.

The ceremony, meant to promote the upcoming championship unification match between John Cena and Randy Orton, begins with Triple H and Stephanie McMahon, collectively known as The Authority, making their way to the ring. After going to a commercial break, the broadcast returns with over a dozen former WWE champions behind them in the ring. Bryan stands off to the side near the ropes, often disappearing from the camera's view. Bryan's sidelining stands in contrast to Triple H, who opens the segment with a speech about the importance of the WWE championship lineage: "All of you have etched your name in history in a way that only winning a championship can." After this line, the faces in the ring begin to change. Raised eyebrows and smirks appear on the faces of a few former champions, as the crowd begins to chant "Dan-iel Bry-an!" In the corner of the screen, obscured by the wrestlers in front of him, Bryan starts laughing to himself.

Eyes shifting around the arena, Triple H attempts to continue reciting his lines, shouting into the mic, "You are all here to witness a ceremony that symbolizes an epic moment in time!" Stephanie McMahon stares into the middle distance for a moment, seeming to realize the crowd's unwillingness to engage. Triple H pauses as the crowd noise builds around the arena.

Finally, Mark Henry, a former champion standing next to Bryan, raises Bryan's hand in the air, and the fans' chanting shifts to "Yes" chants. With a smile, Henry drops Bryan's hand and gives a playful "cut it out" gesture across his neck. The crowd does not relent, and after a few more seconds, Triple H attempts to reel the crowd back in to the established context of kayfabe, in which he plays a heel: "That's a lot of family for one building, Daniel. I should've known; a lot of them look just like you." The crowd boos, but largely settles down, allowing Triple H to finish his spiel and introduce the two competitors chosen to compete for the new unified championship.

In professional wrestling, no main event feud is complete without a dramatic staredown, so John Cena and Randy Orton make their way to the ring. They relinquish their respective titles and Orton stares daggers at Cena, but the crowd has reverted back to chanting "Dan-iel Bry-an!" Cena takes a moment to shake Bryan's hand, leading announcer Michael Cole to attempt to reconcile the two emerging narratives: "Great show of respect from John Cena, shaking the hand of Daniel Bryan, but what an incredible moment, ladies and gentlemen – this is the final time ever in the history of Monday Night Raw that you will see both the World Title and the WWE Title in the same ring."

The crowd prevents any reconciliation of their behavior into kayfabe, however. Orton recaps his heated conversation with Cena from last week, and pauses for emphasis. The crowd takes that pause as an opportunity to chant "Bo-ring." Hearing this, Orton turns from Cena and faces the audience briefly before returning his gaze to Cena. Any momentary success Triple H had in quieting the audience through acknowledging them was not shared by Orton, as the fans continued to chant a monotone "Bo-ring" over his words.

Cena responds by grabbing Bryan and pulling him into the center of the ring, to the delight of the crowd. The following exchange between Cena and Bryan, an example of Cena

attempting to reconcile the diverging narratives, also serves as an explanation of Bryan's appeal to the WWE fandom:

"Tell these people your name, please."

"My name is Daniel Bryan." Applause.

"Daniel, where are you from?"

"I'm from Aberdeen, Washington." Huge applause.

"Was either your mother or father a Superstar, a Hall of Fame WWE Superstar at all?"

"No, my dad's a log scaler, actually."

"So since you've been here, you've had to work for everything you've got."

"Yes!" Another burst of "Yes" chants break out. Cena turns back to Orton.

"Y'hear that? The reason they cheer for him is because he works and he earns it. A guy like you has been given every single thing in the WWE!"

Cena ends the promo by offering Bryan a title shot, should he win the unified championship at the next pay-per-view event. The crowd briefly rejoins the in-ring narrative, responding to Cena's prompts, but when the segment ends with Cena standing tall in the ring, the crowd is back to chanting for Bryan, who is no longer physically in the ring.

The social drama begins with "the breach of a norm, the infraction of a rule of morality, law, custom, or etiquette, in some public arena" (Turner, 1980, p. 150). The infraction in this case comes from the audience's rejection of the WWE's in-ring narrative, particularly the sidelining of Daniel Bryan in favor of John Cena and Randy Orton. Given WWE's variety-show structure that features a host of largely self-contained storylines, each feud's nano-narrative was previously thought to have been static. In this breach, however, fans realized their collective

ability to transform the confines of nano-narrative. Bryan was inserted into another nano-narrative through the will of the fandom, rather than anything done by any in-ring performer.

Though the breach was celebrated by fans on Twitter and Reddit, WWE ultimately continued with its original plans, with Randy Orton and John Cena in the main event. Turner (1980) explains that the breach is often an “expression of a deeper division of interests and loyalties than appears on the surface” (p. 180). If WWE perceived this breach as a surface-level infraction arising simply from fleeting hometown favoritism, one that the company and the in-ring performers within it would be able to ignore, the next step – crisis – was inevitable. The rising tide of support for Bryan was a rejection of numerous factors that became increasingly unacceptable to the fandom at large.

In addition to perceptions of Bryan being overlooked, this breach arose from feelings of general disenfranchisement. Thinking back to the SquaredCircle post explaining the reasons for fan backlash, the writer explains, “You want them to go along with the stories you're trying to push? Make them part of it.” Fans want to be made an active part of the performances in wrestling arenas, and when they do not feel like active participants, the performances become stories WWE is “trying to push,” with no perception of care for the fandom. We see through these responses, both in the arena and in virtual spaces, that audience members see themselves as co-performers.

As co-performers, fans that caused this breach seek to become “spect-actors,” liberated spectators who reject passive roles in theatre and instead transform the theatrical context through action (Boal, 1985). In contrast to Aristotelian theatre, in which “spectators delegate power to the dramatic character so that the latter may act and think for him” (Boal, 1985, p. 122), a liberatory theatre is one that raises the passive audience to one of action. In what Boal (1985) terms the

“poetics of the oppressed,” a spect-actor “assumes the protagonic role” in a performance (p. 122). Through this lens, we can consider the WWE fandom not only desiring to be active co-performers, but to be the protagonist in WWE narratives. WWE has offered vapid fan-centric narrativizing since Hulk Hogan dedicated matches to the “little Hulkamaniacs out there,” but the fans clearly desire more than lip service, and will take action against unacceptable performances, even if it causes a narrative and social breach. Boal (1985), too, noted the importance of fictional performances in the process of consciousness-raising: “No matter that the action is fictional; what matters is that is action!” (p. 122).

Turner (1980) goes on to note that a breach “may be deliberately, even calculatedly, contrived by a person or party disposed to demonstrate or challenge entrenched authority” (p. 150). Though ostensibly an unplanned breach, the breach formed at the Championship Ascension Ceremony worked to challenge entrenched authority by deliberately targeting The Authority, chanting over Triple H and their handpicked champion, Randy Orton. The breach worked to galvanize fandom action against the in-ring narratives, leading to more calculated modes of backlash such as the #HijackRaw campaign, as well as a phase of crisis.

Crisis

JANUARY 26, 2014 – Turner (1986) notes that the breach tends to widen during the crisis stage (p. 4). If the Championship Ascension Ceremony showed the possibility for disharmony between fans and in-ring performers, the 2014 WWE Royal Rumble amplified it, at once showing the power of fans to wholly reject a show, as well as the initial breach’s status as much more than a fluke occurrence. While Bryan was initially peripheral in the Championship Ascension Ceremony, he was completely absent from the majority of the Royal Rumble pay-per-

view, losing to Bray Wyatt in the opening match and not being seen on camera for the rest of the night.

During the unified WWE World Heavyweight Championship Match between Randy Orton and John Cena, the crowd begins chanting for Daniel Bryan before the pre-match introductions conclude. A few minutes into the match, Orton applies a side headlock, and the crowd changes its jeers to “bo-ring” chants. Orton and Cena continue to go through the motions of the match as the crowd finds new things to chant, mostly unrelated to the in-ring action. At one point, they chant “We want Divas” – WWE’s trademarked name for the women who wrestle for the company. At another point, they chant “Undertaker,” a legendary wrestler who only appears once per year at WrestleMania, so it is clear the fans are not anticipating any interference from The Undertaker. Aside from “boring” and “this is awful” chants, the fan reactions to the match betrayed any sense of performative cohesion, a disconnect that could not be reconciled with quick thinking, as it was, however temporarily, when Cena brought Bryan into his promo during the Championship Ascension Ceremony.

Prior to the Royal Rumble Match, which determines who will headline that year’s WrestleMania, WWE holds a live panel with three former Royal Rumble winners to predict this year’s winner. Though none mention Bryan, former winner Ric Flair excitedly announces the returning Batista as his pick. The crowd boos and, shaken by the unexpected response, a wide-eyed Flair shouts back, “Learn to love it!” The crisis represents a “momentous juncture or turning point in the relations between components of a social field - at which seeming peace becomes overt conflict and covert antagonisms become visible” (Turner, 1980, p. 150). Intentionally or not, Flair demanding that fans “learn to love it” became a visible antagonism between WWE and its fandom. It stood as an imposition of an unwanted theatrical context,

reminiscent of George Ishikawa's notion of "finished theatre," a bourgeois spectacle serving to sedate rather than to inspire action in audiences (Boal, 1985, p. 143).

The breach most evidently widens during the Royal Rumble Match when the final entrant, Rey Mysterio, enters the match, confirming Daniel Bryan's absence from the match, and by extension, his absence from the main event of WrestleMania. What initially appeared to be excitement and collective anxiety turns into an aural wall of jeers as soon as Mysterio's music plays and he runs into the ring. A longtime babyface, Mysterio had never experienced such a negative reaction, but the crowd never positively responded to any of the high-flying moves they would usually cheer for. Whereas fans at the Championship Ascension Ceremony clearly targeted their displeasure toward Triple H and Randy Orton, these fans rejected the entire match, all 30 entrants, and their own feelings of helplessness and forced passivity.

After all 30 competitors have entered, the elimination process continues until only one wrestler remains. Eliminations, usually the most exciting part of the Royal Rumble Match, no longer get a positive reaction from the crowd. For several minutes, the constant hum of boos overwhelms everything, despite the announcers and in-ring performers failing to acknowledge it. When only 3 wrestlers remain, a fan stands up at ringside and starts a "No!" chant in response to Batista gaining momentum. The booing and chanting continues throughout the arena until only 2 wrestlers remain: Batista and Roman Reigns, a newer wrestler described by an announcer as an "upstart" and a "young gun."

According to the storylines leading up to the event, Batista is the babyface and Reigns, a member of a villainous faction, is the heel. Yet Reigns' offense on Batista is the only thing since Mysterio's entrance at #30 to garner any cheering from the crowd. The breach widens here, as we see that the backlash is not only pro-Bryan, but anti-Batista, as Batista, in this instance, has

become the embodied sign of status quo within WWE, the embodiment of the finished theatre. Having no other avatar on which to project themselves, the fans cheer for Reigns to defeat Batista, a last-ditch effort that their wishes to change the plans for this year's WrestleMania might be heard. Batista eliminates Roman Reigns, however, and perhaps it is then that the crowd realizes most concretely that, for better or worse, the validation they seek will not be solely ordained by the performances inside the ring. In any case, a winded Batista climbs up to the second turnbuckle and, despite the Daniel Bryan chants and continued booing, points to the WrestleMania 30 sign as fireworks erupt behind him.

The social media reactions were immediate and enormous, with "Daniel Bryan" trending worldwide on Twitter. On SquaredCircle, one fan claimed "WWE just turned heel." Another frustrated fan pleads, "WWE, listen to these fucking fans and tell me with a straight face you did the right thing." Marking WWE's power to retell the night's performances through editing, one fan quips, "A moment of silence in honor of the WWE audio technician who will have to redub the crowd for this match for the DVD release." WWE legend Mick Foley even took to Twitter to voice his displeasure, asking of his own employer, "Does @WWE actually hate their own audience? I've never been so disgusted with a PPV." Bryan posted the following on Twitter, cultivating fan support and building upon fan perceptions of marginalization:

Sorry guys, the machine wanted me nowhere near the Royal Rumble match. But I thank everyone for their support. YOU are the #YESMovement. They try to keep US down and away from the top spots, but they can't ignore the reactions forever. Keep voicing your opinions. #YESMovement

Liminality emerges during the crisis phase, taking "a menacing stance" in the space between the two diverging performances of fans and in-ring performers, and "daring the representatives of order to grapple with it" (Turner, 1986, p. 4). The specter of conflicting kayfables becomes impossible to ignore as fans and in-ring performers diverge more and more.

Crowd protests continued at live events, daring WWE to validate or integrate their backlash, but fans also used this phase of crisis as a catalyst to build a greater movement, culminating with the #HijackRaw movement.

Chicago has become notorious in WWE's fandom for its rowdy, irreverent crowds, in part due to popular wrestler CM Punk, their similarly iconoclastic hometown hero. Punk, who always got a huge ovation from the Chicago crowd, abruptly left the company after the 2014 Royal Rumble, which only added to fan displeasure over the way the WrestleMania card was taking shape. As such, Chicago was chosen by fans as the site of #HijackRaw, a plan to "change the road to WrestleMania 30." A fan made a Twitter account to disseminate information about the plan, posting a flyer with four main objectives: "Embarrass the brass," "Daniel Bryan in the title match," "Prove that Punk is a WrestleMania main event talent," and "Elevate mid-carders." The tweet alongside the posted flyer says, "Our power is in our coordination. Our objective is to be one. This is how we #HijackRaw."

The movement was not without detractors, as many members of SquaredCircle derided the plans as childish or futile. One such fan responds to the aforementioned tweet:

This shit is getting embarrassing. NOTHING the Chicago crowd can do will change a god damn thing. They aren't going to hear the boos and suddenly say YOU GUYS WERE RIGHT, BRYAN VS PUNK IRON MAN MATCH WRESTLEMANIA 30 FOR THE TITLE, BOOK IT, YOURE STRIPPED RANDY. Raw on Monday is going to be a normal Raw with a slightly louder and more obnoxious crowd. They're going to childishly chant for Punk all night, which is dumb because he left the company on his own accord. Other than that, they're just going to boo Batista and Triple H, and cheer Bryan. Chicago can't make a god damn difference because they're a little louder. WWE knows what people are pissed about, and are choosing not to do anything.

The plan detailed collective actions to carry out during the live broadcast of Raw, including turning your back to wrestlers associated with The Authority during their segments and directions as to which stipulations for Bryan the crowd should chant "Yes" or "No" for. Though

the crowd was loud and happy to chant throughout the show, no new form of collective protest appears on the broadcast. Instead, the show's main event featured Triple H ambushing Daniel Bryan. Triple H stands over Bryan and shouts, "I am getting tired of your little fantasy crap" as the WrestleMania sign looms over their heads. Bryan quickly kicks Triple H in the head, but Triple H recovers and incapacitates Bryan with his signature move. As The Authority surrounds the downed Bryan, Stephanie McMahon mocks Bryan and the Yes Movement as a whole by mimicking his "Yes" chant as the crowd boos. Though #HijackRaw was in some ways a short-term failure, it provided a means for WWE to begin to realign the diverging kayfabes. The redressive action had begun.

Redressive Action

MARCH 10, 2014 – One week after Daniel Bryan challenged Triple H to a match at WrestleMania, he makes his way to the ring as announcers speculate over what he might be up to, one positing that he might offer an apology to The Authority for his insubordination. Bryan grabs a mic and starts by affirming that "the Yes Movement is alive right here in Memphis, Tennessee!" He addresses his rumored apology, saying, "If you think I'm going to apologize for standing up for myself, I've got one word for you." He pauses, allowing the fans to chant "No" along with him. Bryan then builds upon the notion of he and his fandom as a collective as he reveals the plans for what would eventually become known as Occupy Raw:

Tonight is when it ends, because we are all tired of you. You are not listening to me. You are not listening to these people. You are not listening to any of us! But tonight, we're gonna make it so you have to listen to us. Because tonight, the Yes Movement is in full effect, and tonight, we are going to occupy Raw! You see, I'm not going to leave this ring until I get what I want, which is a match with Triple H at WrestleMania. And I know you've heard people say that all the time, they're not leaving this ring. But tonight, I am not alone.

With that, a few fans in Daniel Bryan shirts make their way to ringside. Not only taking up the language of the fandom's #HijackRaw movement, the Occupy Raw movement immediately resembles Occupy Wall Street, marking a site of convergence between professional wrestling, mass protest, and online fandom. Bryan says he doesn't care about the lawfulness of what they're doing – the Yes Movement is going to overtake the arena in protest. As Bryan finishes his speech, the few fans, who have multiplied into well over a dozen, begin to fill the ring

I've talked a few members of the Yes Movement earlier today, and I'd like them to come down here right now. Because you see, we are not going to take it anymore. We are one. We stand together. We are united! And we are not going to leave this ring until The Authority gives us what we want! Isn't that right? Isn't that right? Isn't that right?

Bryan holds the mic in front of several of the fans joining him in the ring with each "Isn't that right?" question, repeating the process until the show cuts to a commercial break. When the broadcast returns, over 100 fans have filled the ring and covered the ringside area as well, chanting "Yes" in unison with the thousands still behind the ringside barricade.

Turner (1985) notes that redressive action, when carried out through formalized judicial process, privileges cognition (p. 197). In the absence of such institutions, such as in the martial and spectacular kayfabe of professional wrestling, however, "will and emotion reassert themselves" (p. 197), as seen in the climactic impassioned display of a ring filled with chanting fans. The Yes Movement carries out this protest due to a failure of professional wrestling's conventional cultural process of challenging an opponent to a wrestling match, and as such, will and emotion take hold. As the fan backlash stemmed, in part, from a perceived lack of agency to actively participate in the co-performance of professional wrestling, the visual provides a moment of catharsis, and of a breaking down between spectator and actor. This performance of intersubjectivity allows fans a glimpse of the "utopian performative," a fleeting yet deeply-felt

sense of communal betterment through mutual generosity of co-performers (Dolan, 2001, p. 472). In this moment, fan conceptions of themselves as active agents, spect-actors, and co-performers have been validated through the physical invasion of a space in which they are usually forbidden.

As Occupy Raw continues, Triple H and Stephanie McMahon enter the arena, standing atop the ramp in suits, without the usual fanfare of entrance music. Triple H derides Bryan's "little" movement before saying, "This is the part where reality comes crashing down on all of you." Working to impose a dominant narrative over the fans, he demands they vacate the ring before they call security. Bryan, however, notes the importance of fans to the context, offering that he could simply lead the fans into the parking lot and wrestle there, leaving The Authority to hold Raw, as Bryan puts it, "in front of an arena of empty chairs." Hardly an excessive spectacle, the specter of such a threat challenges the unchecked authority of The Authority by highlighting the importance of fan performance as well.

Adding to the visual power of the horde of fans, two security guards approach the ring before quickly shrugging and giving up. Stephanie McMahon chides the fans for buying into the movement's "false power," but Bryan fires back, claiming that the fans have the power in this space. Triple H turns his back to the ring and says, "This ends now. Get the next match ready, play someone's music, get this show on the road, go." Triple H and Stephanie step aside as wrestler Damien Sandow's music plays and he comes to the ring in wrestling gear. Unable to pass through the Yes Movement, Sandow gives up and walks off. In this, we see a social drama on a micro-level. If the filling of the ring represents a breach, and The Authority's response and escalation represents the crisis, Triple H's attempt to continue the show as usual represents an

attempt at reintegration without redressive action, skipping over a phase that ultimately renders the attempt at reintegration powerless.

Starting another “Yes” chant, Bryan says The Authority knows exactly what the people want – a match between Bryan and Triple H at WrestleMania. Triple H reels in frustration, telling Bryan he is simply trying to protect him. Will and emotion once again takes over as Triple H raises his voice from a mutter to a shout: “You want to fight me at WrestleMania? You’re on!” The crowd erupts in cheers and “Yes” chants as Triple H demands they get out of his ring. As he begins to storm off, Bryan stops him. “I’m sorry, I misspoke earlier. That’s not exactly all that I want.”

The crowd lets out an audible “ooh” as the pieces start to come together. Though never spoken on WWE television until this point, online fandoms had been “fantasy-booking” a number of scenarios that would ultimately see Daniel Bryan compete for the WWE World Heavyweight Championship at WrestleMania, despite the trajectories laid out at the Royal Rumble. Until the day of Occupy Raw, countless fans had made predictions and posted dream scenarios on Twitter and Reddit, among them Daniel Bryan defeating Batista and taking his spot in the championship match, Bryan and Triple H both being inserted into the championship match, and the eventual result – Bryan being added to the championship match if he can defeat Triple H earlier in the same night. Until this point, the feud between Triple H and Bryan had been contained in its own nano-narrative, as had the championship feud between Randy Orton and Batista. Through this prolonged push from fans, however, Bryan is able to demand what fans have actually been demanding on virtual spaces, despite a lack of in-kayfabe build for it. Bryan couches the reasoning explicitly in the demands of fans, saying:

“As much as these people want to see me fight you at WrestleMania, what they really want is to see me fighting for the WWE World Heavyweight Championship. So here is

what we really want. If I beat you at WrestleMania 30, I get added to the WWE World Heavyweight Championship Match, so that then the main event would be Randy Orton versus Batista versus Daniel Bryan!”

As the crowd erupts once more, Triple H tosses his jacket to the floor and rushes toward the ring. In a karmic gesture, the security guards drag Triple H away from the ring as he angrily agrees to the match. Through this event, we see redressive action toward the breach between fans and in-ring performers through the convergence of kayfables. In one kayfabe, Bryan finally has an opportunity to fight back against The Authority and earn a chance at the WWE World Heavyweight Championship at WrestleMania. In another, Bryan – or perhaps Bryan Danielson – finally has an opportunity to prove to WWE brass that he, the wrestler chosen by the fans, can be the “face” of the company and headline their biggest show of the year. This redress works to reconcile both kayfables, negotiating both convergent narratives into that of Bryan’s opportunity for hard-fought success. Turner (1980) explains that redressive ritual often involves a moral “sacrifice,” a representative of the breach “offered for the group’s ‘sin’ of redressive violence” (p. 151). Bryan emerges as the scapegoat in this redressive action, an avatar of fan backlash to reap the consequences of Occupy Raw, whether through a cathartic victory at WrestleMania or a painful defeat.

Reintegration

APRIL 6, 2014 – Finally, I’m in the arena. The Mercedes-Benz Superdome is cramped as I and 75,166 other fans stand shoulder-to-shoulder, chest-to-back in the concourse. There’s some chatter about how they only opened one of the four entrances into the arena. It’s hot. We lurch forward a half-step. Someone behind me steps on the corner of my “YestleMania” sign. My “Yes” foam fingers, “Yes” shirt, and “Yes” jacket are unharmed. Event security asks the crowd to make way for an elderly person in a wheelchair. We try, but we physically can’t. We lurch

forward bit by bit, and eventually make a path just wide enough and just long enough, before collapsing back in on each other.

It's a stacked card, but the fans, by and large, are here for Daniel Bryan. During my five-day WrestleMania trip, I never walk anywhere in New Orleans without seeing at least one person trotting down the street, mimicking Bryan's chant. While out on a beignet run, I hear a group of fans comparing their indie cred, one talking about how they saw Bryan wrestling in front of 30 people in some warehouse in Philadelphia 10 years ago. Signs on Bourbon Street offer Bryan-themed cocktails. On my way to a WWE fan convention the day prior, a man sitting on the pavement with an outstretched cup asks me what all the Yes-ing is about, and for some spare change. For a subculture that's become increasingly niche since the late-90s wrestling boom, WWE fans have completely taken over the city.

After an hour or so of lurching, I make it to my seat, a low-level riser at the corner of what is usually a football field. Between me and the enormous WrestleMania entrance ramp, on what is usually the 50-yard line, is the wrestling ring where it's all about to happen. The value of what the fans have done – all the backlash, all the hand-wringing, all the merch-buying, all the online complaining, all the travelling, all the hoping – rests on whether Bryan wins or loses tonight. I look around at the masses of fans around me as the traditional pre-show fan ritual of call-and-response begins. Someone mimics Ric Flair's famous "Woooooo!" which prompts another fan to do so, and before long, an auditory wave of wooing is pulsing throughout the arena. When that dies down, someone else starts a Yes chant, and I slip my hands into my two ridiculous red foam fingers, two huge index fingers pointing upward. To be in here, surrounded by these expressions of anticipation and adding to them, is invigorating.

One elaborate fireworks display later, the show begins. The most succinct way of understanding the version of kayfabe set forth by WWE is to examine their pre-match video packages, used to recap a feud and build hype for an imminent match. The video package for Daniel Bryan vs. Triple H, introduced by announcer Michael Cole as “The Authority versus the people,” chronicles Bryan’s journey from his independent background and as a rookie in WWE to a WrestleMania-caliber talent. We see images of Bryan’s first United States Championship victory interspersed with a few crowd signs and light clapping from some fans. The number of crowd shots, and the evident passion of the fans, increases, as a voice-over claims, “The WWE Universe is becoming a believer in Daniel Bryan.” As the background music – “Monster” by Imagine Dragons – approaches its chorus, an “I came to see Daniel Bryan” sign flashes onscreen. We see Bryan with a buzz-cut and a close shave throwing up his signature Yes taunt, which quickly transitions to a shot of Bryan with longer hair and a beard growing unkempt. Again, the shot changes and we see the contemporary Bryan, enormous beard and all, backed by a wall of fans holding up “Yes” signs. As these images flash onscreen, the chorus sings, “I’ve turned into a monster / and it keeps getting stronger,” reinforcing the narrative of Bryan’s success growing uncontrollably alongside fan support, all leading to tonight’s dramatic climax. The Championship Ascension Ceremony appears in the package, as does the Occupy Raw segment – though any mention of the Royal Rumble remains absent. As the package fades to the sound of deafening “Yes” chants, Bryan looks at the camera and emphatically says, “They don’t have the power, we have the power!”

WWE performances are perhaps at their most excessive and spectacular during ring entrances. Triple H, for example, enters the arena seated on a golden throne, shrouded in a red robe. Three women pose at the sides and foot of his throne, later removing the robe and spiked

shoulder pads he wears during his entrance. He steps down from the throne, removes his golden skull mask, and stares daggers into the camera as green laser lights shoot around the arena and his theme song begins to play. It's an entrance befitting The Authority, the embodied sign of evil, of power, and of the disenfranchisement of the fandom.

Bryan's entrance is less gaudy. He makes his way to the ring the way he always does, with no additional fanfare. But when he climbs atop the turnbuckle, thousands of fans throw their arms skyward in unison along with Bryan. What was once considered the background for the performance has come alive, and it is hard to imagine it ever dying down. Bryan takes off his shirt before the bell to reveal athletic tape around his chest and shoulder. If anyone is just tuning in, the tape marks him as an underdog. Behind the two wrestlers, a fan holds a sign that says, "If Daniel Bryan loses, we riot," as the bell rings.

After kicking out of Triple H's signature Pedigree, Bryan reverses a back suplex and lands his signature running knee for the pinfall victory. Now officially in the main event of WrestleMania, the crowd comes unglued, springing to their feet as the referee slams his hand to the mat for the third time. On SquaredCircle, one fan writes, "Bryan kicked out of a pedigree and HHH didn't kick out of the running knee. Our boy is officially big time." It appears now that the redressive action was effective in reintegrating the divergent kayfables. Bryan celebrates in the ring until an incensed Stephanie McMahon enters and slaps him, allowing Triple H to attack Bryan from behind. Triple H grabs a steel chair, a staple of professional wrestling and an object historically imbued with the ability to end a match with a single strike, and slams it against Bryan's already-injured shoulder. The elated crowd shifts to boos as I try to make sense of what's happening. *Are they really injuring Bryan so there's an excuse for him to lose? I didn't*

drive 12 hours to see my guy lose at the biggest show of the year. All this, and they could still blow it.

Referees help Bryan backstage as the show continues with the rest of its undercard. Three hours later, Randy Orton and Batista make their way to the ring, followed by Daniel Bryan. This time, he can only raise one of his arms to lead the audience, the other hanging to his side. Several minutes into the match, Orton and Batista both hit their signature moves on Bryan, sending him crashing through an announce table. Another staple of professional wrestling and object with increased strength through kayfabe, a trip through a table usually means the end of that wrestler's in-ring activity that night. Officials come to ringside and load Bryan up on a stretcher as the crowd groans and boos. As they roll him up the ramp, Bryan begins to stir and Yes chants erupt once more. Bryan responds, rolling off the stretcher and crawling back into the ring as doctors plead with him to reconsider.

Bryan, gaining a second or third wind, lands his signature running knee on Orton. Batista, always the spoiler, grabs Bryan and tosses him out of the ring. Batista attempts to pin Orton, but Orton kicks out right before the three-count. The fans, fully engaged and invested in the in-ring performances with Bryan's return to the fray, begin to chant, "This is awe-some!" Batista lands his signature powerbomb on Orton, but Bryan capitalizes, landing his running knee on Batista before applying his signature submission hold – the Yes Lock – causing Batista to tap out.

Daniel Bryan is the WWE World Heavyweight Champion. I join in as he grabs one unified championship belt in each hand and leads the crowd in the most cathartic Yes chant yet. It wasn't for nothing; they actually listened. He actually got his chance, and he did it. I'm yelling and frantically taking videos on my phone as confetti begins to fall around the Superdome. Fireworks explode as Bryan celebrates at ringside. He stops to hug Connor Michalek, an 8-year-

old fan with medulloblastoma in the front row who had become known to the WWE fandom after his family launched a successful social media campaign to help him meet Bryan back in 2012. He looks Connor in the eye and says, “You helped me win tonight. Thank you very much.”

At some point during the celebration, I find myself standing on my chair. I don’t remember making the conscious decision to climb up. As I’m up there, someone shoves my back and mutters, “Come the fuck on.” I had gotten a little carried away and ended up blocking the view for some fellow fans. Back on the ground, I realize my eyes are watering. All the mental energy (and money) I’d spent to be a part of the Yes Movement had paid off in that one moment of vindication. I have no great desire to fall on my back 300 days a year the way WWE wrestlers do, but in this subcultural context, I still want a stake in the in-ring performances. This moment, then, represents a moment of convergence, where fan and in-ring performer become co-performers, engaging dialogically and responding earnestly to the other’s performances.

In this way, this event represents reintegration, in which the “disturbed social group” – in this case, the fandom responsible for the backlash – is reintegrated into the larger performative context of kayfabe (Turner, 1980, p. 151). The narratives had coalesced, but for reintegration to occur, the implicated people themselves must consent to this reconciliation. Had the redressive action not been perceived as sufficient by the fandom, the backlash could have continued, or the fans could have removed themselves from WWE arenas permanently, marking an irreparable schism. Fans, myself included, responded extraordinarily well to both the redressive action and attempt at reintegration, and thus the Yes Movement transformed into a celebratory movement rather than one characterized by backlash and protest. No longer in imminent danger of breach, kayfabe remains intact, though such breaches reveal its malleable and situated quality.

With no marked exodus from the social context of professional wrestling, this social drama leans closer to reintegration than irreparable schism. This is not to say, however, that the social drama between fans and in-ring performers is complete or permanently resolved. Conquergood (1995) situates performance as “kinesis, as movement, motion, fluidity, fluctuation, all those restless energies that transgress boundaries and trouble closure” (p. 138). Likewise, social drama is never static, never complete, never attaining closure. Social drama arises from conflict within cultures, and will thus arise as long as societies do. The power relationship between wrestler and fan, as well as the limits imposed by the ringside barricade and the backstage curtain remains in negotiation. Every night, wrestling arenas are filled with new fans and different wrestlers trying out unique matches, so why shouldn’t these relations remain in flux?

Though in the moment, the barricade between co-performers was lowered, fans continue to feel alienated from the kayfabe negotiation process. One side effect of the Yes Movement is the lesson that breaches can bring about change, and so practices such as chanting for wrestlers outside of a segment’s nano-narrative have become more commonplace. Similarly, the deep sense of connection between Bryan and the WWE fandom, particularly their felt role in his success, has led to backlash over new babyfaces that fans don’t feel they have a stake in. Roman Reigns, for instance, though positioned as a top heroic figure in WWE since 2014, has accrued near-constant boos since then, as fans view him as a hand-picked corporate choice rather than an “organic” fan-picked choice. Going back to the SquaredCircle responses, fans see performances without a sense of their active input as ones WWE is just “trying to push” on them. As the reintegration only repaired the singular breach created by the Yes Movement, WWE will continue to grapple with social drama as long as conflict exists in its world – and what is

professional wrestling without conflict, fighting, and melodrama? But social dramas between fans and in-ring performers are riskier for the industry, as irreparable schism carries with it palpable risks, recalling the specter of the “arena of empty chairs” Bryan threatened Triple H with. Through this, social drama reveals that raising fans to a felt status of co-performers and stakeholders in the performances they help to generate and negotiate might prevent irreparable damage to co-constructed contexts like the kayfabe of professional wrestling.

FEBRUARY 8, 2016 – My phone won’t stop vibrating. I keep trying to ignore the buzzing and go back to sleep, but every time I try to drift off, another buzz pulls me back into the world of the living. Anxiety strikes suddenly as various terrifying possibilities flood my brain. Maybe someone died. Oh, God. In any case, there’s no going back to sleep. I roll over to the nightstand and squint at my phone’s screen. The first notification I see is a tweet from my friend Eddy which says he doesn’t want me to log onto Twitter because “it’ll break his heart.” Oh, God. Opening up Twitter, I immediately see the tweet sent out minutes earlier by Daniel Bryan: “Due to medical reasons, effective immediately, I am announcing my retirement. Tonight on Raw, I’ll have a chance to elaborate. #gratitude.”

It takes a second to register. Bryan had been on the injured list for several months at that point, but I’d always expected an eventual return. I had actually attended that year’s Royal Rumble a few weeks earlier, wearing all my best Yes Movement attire, hoping to finally see Bryan shock the world, enter at #30, and culminate his next redemptive narrative at that year’s WrestleMania. That, of course, did not end up coming to pass.

There had been fake retirements before. A few years ago, Mark Henry gave a moving, tearful retirement speech in the ring, ending with John Cena joining him in the ring and hugging

him. To Cena's surprise, Henry quickly lifted him up and slammed him down into the mat, shouting that he had "a lot left in the tank!" It doesn't seem like that kind of thing to me, though. Given that Bryan's fandom arose primarily from online spaces, it would have been in poor taste for him to use it to "work" us.

That night, I watched on my laptop as Daniel Bryan climbed into the ring one more time, surrounded by chanting fans in the same Seattle arena that caused the breach two years earlier. No spandex in sight, Bryan is wearing a plaid button-down and jeans. His trademark scraggly beard has been significantly shortened, as has the hair on his head – if the fans had any doubt as to the legitimacy of this retirement. Before he begins his speech, Bryan lets the noise of the fans wash over him, bowing his head and standing with his eyes closed. As the "Dan-iel Bry-an" chants grow, his stoic expression gives way to a smile, and after a few seconds he starts his speech:

So just now, I was able to close my eyes and feel that. Like, literally feel it in a way that I've never gotten to feel it before. Because when we're here, we always have to keep our eyes open. But just that experience, I'm – literally I'm never going to forget it.
(WWE, 2016)

In this, Bryan highlights a major draw of professional wrestling: the ephemeral but visceral feelings that these co-performances evoke. When audiences and wrestlers come together and create this kayfabled space, they work together to create embodied experiences that move, that inspire, and that can never last. The experience of an arena chanting your name. The moment when a wrestler walking down the ramp laughs at the sign you're holding. That space between the referee's second and third smack on the canvas, when you don't know if your favorite wrestler is going to kick out. Holding a title belt for the first time and, for a split second, dropping character as the gravity of the moment overwhelms you. Fans crave these gripping, cathartic moments, and they're willing to fight for them.

My sadness over Bryan's retirement, then, stems from the loss of the potential to co-perform in this capacity again. As a fan, I can – and do – revisit the WWE archives and watch my favorite moments from his wrestling career. I can even pause at certain moments and see myself among the fans. The archives are there, in online fandom spaces, in YouTube videos, and in the pictures I took from inside the arena, but the ephemeral, somatic experience cannot be replicated (Taylor, 2003, p. 36). Though this is true of all attempts at replicating such performances, the attempt to “relive” or “re-perform” the collective catharsis of Bryan's championship victory, however doomed an endeavor, is now explicitly impossible.

I include Bryan's retirement as a foray beyond the reintegration stage of social drama. With kayfabe reintegrated, however tenuously, I seek to illustrate that anxiety over the performative boundaries of professional wrestling are only one such anxiety held by fans. The spectacular performances within the professional wrestling arena are risky. Wrestling matches have ended in death or paralysis. Wrestlers of the 80s and 90s dying far too young has become sadly routine. Bryan was forced into retirement after suffering at least 10 documented concussions, which ultimately caught up to him. He had begun to experience post-concussion seizures and, after consulting with doctors, found that a lesion had developed on his brain (ESPN, 2016). Thus, Bryan formally retired from in-ring competition when WWE Raw came to his home state, where the Yes Movement began.

Retirement is a part of professional wrestling, and yet another way in which we can see how fans and wrestlers re-negotiate kayfabe to suit their desires. Whether retirements are promoted in advance or serious injuries occur suddenly, fans often know to shift from a kayfabe concerned with embodied signs of good and evil toward a kayfabe chiefly concerned with the well-being of the in-ring performers. During his retirement speech, Bryan said he would be

starting “a new life” in which he is no longer a wrestler. Bowing out of the prior kayfabe in conjunction with the audience, Bryan also, in a sense, marks the end of the Yes Movement. The reintegration of kayfables and the actors involved are doomed to fade, to give way to the next fans, the next wrestlers, the next kayfables, and the next dramas. But they’re alive in the moment, all together in the arena, struggling to invest and direct and act and react, collectively building an embodied memory. There’s something special that happens in the wrestling arena, and you feel it when you let yourself get swept away. You feel it again when you realize that you can contribute to that sense of kayfabe. When you’re a fan, you grasp for this feeling. And even when your heroes leave the arena, and even when you leave the arena, you keep grasping.

CHAPTER 4:

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates the malleability of kayfabe through its co-production and negotiation by fans and wrestlers. The Yes Movement serves as just one example of the ways in which fans can assert their status as co-performers to bring about change in the social and performative context of subcultures. Throughout these events, both the in-ring performers and the fans struggle to challenge the other's degree of agency in guiding professional wrestling performances, and the framework of social drama works as a tool to interrogate the process of reintegrating the divergent kayfables.

The process of recreating, reifying, and negotiating kayfabe is fundamentally managed by all vested actors in the professional wrestling arena, as illustrated by the tensions between fans and wrestlers in asserting their own versions of kayfabe before eventually reintegrating. The Yes Movement formed as backlash to a perceived denial of catharsis, both for Bryan and for his fans. As such, a breach emerged, but only through action that diverged from prior repeated action – in this case, performing fan as passive and ultimately reactionary. At every stage, the animatic and fluid nature of performance is at the forefront, so I use a lens of performance to examine the Yes Movement as well as my own experience as fan and researcher.

In this study, I foreground my dual positionality as a fan-researcher for two reasons. First, I seek to illustrate the embodied, impassioned experience of live co-performance. My interest in pursuing this study, after all, arose from the admittedly ridiculous experience of crying at a

professional wrestling show. This leads me to my second reason: my status as fan is inextricable from any academic project I pursue with regard to professional wrestling. My lens as a “Bryan mark” informs the way I engage with performances in arenas as well as the way I engage with the selected media texts. My lens informs the very selection of those texts, as plenty of professional wrestling phenomena and storylines might be examined through social drama. Andy Kaufman’s infamous foray into the squared circle, for example, might be understood as a breach of one immersive story world – the “Hollywood” comedy scene – into another, that was redressed by a piledriver that sent him back where he belonged. We might look at the tragic death of wrestler Owen Hart during an in-ring stunt gone wrong to examine how mortality manifests within a framework of social drama. I chose Bryan’s Yes Movement, however, because I was part of it, and thus can speak to the experience of co-performance firsthand.

Though professional wrestling offers a robust site for Communication scholars through lenses of performance, cultural studies, and narrative inquiry, I posit kayfabe as a particularly generative point from which future research might grow. Kayfabe foregrounds the necessity of belief in a co-produced social narrative, which provides a framework for understanding communicative phenomena far beyond the professional wrestling arena. Family communication scholars might extend kayfabe to the transmission of religious narratives, or to the upholding of rituals like belief in Santa Claus. We might utilize a framework of social drama and kayfabe to better understand the social and performative contexts of cults. We might examine kayfabe in the realm of interpersonal communication as an extension of face theory (Goffman, 1967), one that leaves behind connotations of fakery and deceit in favor of a joint and willing suspension of disbelief. Kayfabe, when understood as a communicative process in which multiple actors work to negotiate and engage within a co-performed social context, is ubiquitous within organizational and interpersonal contexts, and thus demands further study.

In addition to analyzing the negotiation and co-performance of kayfabe and situating professional wrestling as a productive site of Communication research, I also demonstrate how fan backlash might be understood through a lens of social drama. As a framework situated within performance studies, this also allows for insight as to how fandoms work to co-create performative contexts like kayfabe. Fandoms are living, dynamic actors made up of passionately invested fans whose contributions to the social context in which they operate must not be sidelined. Fandom carries with it a connotation of reaction – a group that consumes, then reacts or produces its own derivative content. Situating fandom within social drama raises them to actors and stakeholders in their communities, making clear the power they always had to challenge, alter, or enact the performances within a given space. Their presence is necessary in creating and recreating contexts like kayfabe, but their passivity in doing so is not, with the Yes Movement standing as an example of how fandoms might effectively communicate their dissatisfaction through changing their performance.

Limitations arose over the course of this study, primarily regarding methodology. Social drama, in designating four discrete stages, sets out a concrete means of interrogating social unrest, which aids its use as a tool, but also risks applying rigid parameters upon fluid social performances. Though I selected four media events and assigned a stage to each, the Yes Movement occurred throughout several months and dozens of events, necessitating the selection of only a few moments that I as the researcher deem major enough to constitute a stage of social drama. The moment the breach first occurred might have been prior to the Championship Ascension Ceremony, as I claimed, as my viewpoint cannot account for factors like the hundreds of non-televised live events that could have worked to generate the breach.

When extending social drama to the realm of live co-performance, then, we might consider the breach as not simply a moment, but a process in itself. Through this framework, sites like professional wrestling, with its prolific event schedule and massive repertoire of co-performers, would not be beholden to the rigid four-stage process laid out by Turner to examine social unrest. Utilizing social drama as a guiding outline rather than an inflexible four-stage process would not only expand the sites it could interrogate, but also allow for the fluidity and liveness of subcultural performance to come through in the research. Thinking back to the dynamic quality of a performance-centered methodology, I suspect that a looser application of the stages rather than trying to pin down four discrete moments would have produced a different picture of the Yes Movement and its negotiation of kayfabe.

In addition to these methodological concerns, I also layered archived social media responses throughout my analysis as a way of including firsthand testimony other than my own from within the Yes Movement. I selected Twitter and SquaredCircle because I contributed to the responses through these mediums, and because their archival systems are more easily accessible than, say, Facebook, Tumblr, or Instagram, all of which serve as sites for differing subsets of WWE's fandom. Social media sites such as these served as a vital site for organizing the fan backlash that occurred during the selected media events, but given the ephemeral quality of the embodied experience of protest within the arena, I can only speak to parts of the experience, those archived through texts. The backlash occurred in arenas by fans using their bodies and voices to disrupt in-ring performances, and this study could not fully capture their experience as it happened. My referring to the selected media events as "events" rather than "texts" serves to mark the events as living co-performances, situating performance as theory and method as a potential framework to animate texts in future media analyses.

To situate a wrestling event solely as a static text threatens to devalue the collaborative generation of kayfabe that occurs within a professional wrestling arena. Through this lens, as a researcher rewatching these media events, I am limited to what the camera captures, and my speaking back to the text does not affect its narrative in the ways that live fandom performance and fan backlash allows. I can only observe how kayfabe shifted, which is especially complicated without participating in the performance of kayfabe negotiation and interrogating fandom performance through my own embodied experience. To counter this, my added positionality as a fan offers a felt, generative means of engagement, bringing a sense of embodiment to the analysis of these media events.

Aside from the recounting of my experience at WrestleMania 30, I could only draw from video records of fans, viewing them as a researcher, disconnected from the generative experience of kayfabe negotiation in the moment. I also cannot confidently speak to fan intentions beyond archival data, as this study did not directly seek testimony from any actors involved in the Yes Movement. A common refrain among Bryan's detractors within the fandom claims that Bryan was never as popular as he looked; he just happened to connect himself to a fun, easily-repeatable chant. Though I, as a fan-researcher and as a mark, disagree with that sentiment, I nonetheless cannot make broad generalizations about fandom intentions. This study cannot claim with full authority why the breach occurred, only that it did.

In conclusion, this study used the Yes Movement to examine the ways in which fans and wrestlers constitute and negotiate the confines of kayfabe. I found that, in addition to the use of social media sites like Twitter and SquaredCircle, fans found performance as a means to communicate their dissatisfaction, which caused a breach between the performed narratives on either side of the ringside barricade. I used social drama as a framework to understand how these

discordant senses of kayfabe formed, as well as how they were redressed and ultimately reintegrated. In doing so, I posit that social and performative contexts within subcultures are more flexible than fans might realize, and use the negotiation and co-performance of kayfabe within professional wrestling to demonstrate the agency fans have in affecting such performances. Additionally, I situate professional wrestling – and more specifically, kayfabe – as a site of future Communication research. Professional wrestling keeps shifting, always in the process of reshaping itself and being reshaped by shifting audiences. Like Conquergood’s caravan of performance studies, professional wrestling can be broadly understood as “a heterogenous ensemble of ideas and methods on the move” (1995, p. 140). As such, research must keep up with the changes. Cultural studies research must keep up with changing portrayals of marginalizing characters and imagery, as much of the existing research focuses on the famously-crude “Attitude Era” of the late 1990s, which does not account for WWE’s shift to a PG-rated program a decade ago, which perhaps also signaled a shift to more “benevolent” racism and sexism. Performance studies, likewise, must account for changing senses of fandom agency in disrupting and challenging performed narratives, and changing ways of carrying out fandom backlash.

It is likely that the current reintegrated sense of kayfabe is not long for the world of professional wrestling. It is nearly impossible to revisit professional wrestling broadcasts of a bygone era and invest in an analogous way to the fans in the arenas. Not only does the broadcast represent a barrier precluding generative co-production of kayfabe, but it also signals a temporal discordance. The subculture of professional wrestling exists within a larger culture, and is thus beholden to the values of its time and place. As a viewer whose body is not implicated in the kayfables of decades past, that sense of communal engagement feels out of reach. This speaks to

the limits of archival records of live performances as well as to the power of those embodied, passionate, and fleeting performances themselves.

Though the populist, Occupy-inspired bent of the Yes Movement was specific to the sociopolitical climate in 2014, it was not unique in its co-generation of kayfabe, as professional wrestling has a storied history of fans and wrestlers working in tandem or in opposition to shape the stories they tell together. In the early 1960s, for example, professional wrestling arenas in Memphis, Tennessee were segregated, and black fans were relegated to viewing shows from a small balcony. A white wrestler, Sputnik Monroe, rapidly grew in popularity among black fans after he was repeatedly arrested on charges of vagrancy for fraternizing on the then-segregated Beale Street (Shoemaker, 2013, p. 133). In the ring, Monroe performed a villainous heel, but regardless of the in-ring sense of kayfabe, balconies were soon overcrowded with fans of Monroe, with lines for the balcony stretching out of the arena while many seats reserved for white patrons sat empty. This overcrowding of passionate fans, coupled with Monroe's ultimatum to only perform in desegregated arenas, eventually led to the arena's desegregation and greater prominence for Monroe.

This serves as just another instance of the ways in which kayfabe is constituted by what happens in the ring as well as how fans co-perform. Kayfabe is culturally-specific, malleable, and always in a state of flux. I have no misconception that this study asserts a lasting truth about the nature of kayfabe in professional wrestling or elsewhere, and given the exciting and ever-changing quality of the site, I don't want it to. Rather, I hope this study continues to pass the baton in examining contemporary live performances like professional wrestling, what these performances are doing, and where they might go. Professional wrestling offers a wide range of communicative phenomena that demands further study from numerous fields, and kayfabe is

only one facet of this unique, co-performed form of theatre. In the contextually-appropriate parlance, it's got its arm outstretched at the corner, desperately trying to get tagged in.

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