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Professional Wrestling, Embodied Morality, and Altered States of Consciousness

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
Of the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

Much of the scholarly work on professional wrestling is based on the assumption that beyond a simple mimicking of sporting combat, the wrestling show is a spectacle that constructs and interrelates socially situated, morally significant categories. In this thesis, I focus on wrestlers themselves, and treat wrestling as a traditional practice that guides how wrestlers relate to their bodies and how they interact with their audience. This project was carried out using ethnographic methods of observation and interviewing. While participant-observation of three independent wrestling promotions provided context, twelve semi-structured interviews carried out with wrestlers at the Florida Wrestleplex in St. Petersburg yielded a model of what wrestlers experience inside the ring. The model emphasizes shifts of consciousness, performer-crowd intersubjectivity, and anomalous experiences of resistance to pain. Respondents describe an in-ring shift in consciousness, alternately referring to it as an “altered state,” “high,” or “trance.” After interpreting these results with reference to anthropological discussions of ritual, embodiment and practice, I argue that hardcore wrestling and the phenomenon of backyard wrestling are best understood as bodily practices that elicit altered states of consciousness for participants. By understanding what it feels like to wrestle, and what the experience of wrestling means to wrestlers, we can re-interrogate the coded messages of wrestling with regard to the practice by which they are produced. This project is intended to contribute to greater anthropological understanding of altered states of consciousness such as channeling or possession trance, as well as broader issues such as how cultural life is variably mediated by the body and by transcendent social narratives. It is my hope that by describing how they relate to their craft, this paper will humanize wrestlers, and place firmly in context some of the aspects of the genre that lead critics to suggest that wrestling contributes to social problems of violence, misogyny, homophobia, or jingoism.

Chapter One: Setting the Scene

Although most people realize that wrestling is immensely popular in the United States, it is certainly the case that I have met many people who know nothing about the phenomenon except for this fact of popularity. Since I myself fell into this camp when I began to study wrestling anthropologically, the most efficient way for me to describe the world of the people I have met through this research is to relate the story of how I first learned about professional wrestling as it actually exists in The United States. It is my intent that the following narrative will serve to set the stage for the analysis of my interview and observational data. Beyond that, I also hope to indicate that wrestling can be profitably approached by anthropologists as a cultural phenomenon. While news media coverage of wrestling often treats it as a human interest story, I want to show that wrestling is an activity that organizes life in meaningful ways for wrestlers and wrestling fans. As such, systematic applications of anthropological method and theory are appropriate for its understanding.

The Lunatic Wrestling Federation

I was raised in the town of Normal, Illinois. The Bloomington-Normal community, (we call them the Twin Cities,) just reaches a population of 100,000 souls, counting the students at the two universities. I attended one of these colleges, majoring in anthropology at Illinois State University. I was completely absorbed by my studies, and by a tightly-knit group of anthropology students, within which my education was fleshed out conversationally in philosophical debate and anthropological speculation. During the winter of my first semester, one of our group organized an overnight road trip for the lot of us. We were to head to her home town, a small town in the far southern reaches of the Chicago suburbs. The main attraction of the trip was going to be a wrestling show—something called the Lunatic Wrestling Federation. Our host explained that when she had been in high school, some of her friends had formed a wrestling federation “in their backyard.” I had never watched wrestling on television for more than a minute in my life, and I had no idea about live shows, or that local promotions even existed. But I was intrigued by what my friend told me and I went on the trip, two hours drive, north on I-55.

What I saw on that trip was a Lunatic Wrestling Federation show. The group had paid for one night’s use of a local community center that looked like a typical high school gymnasium—a huge room, bright as day with fluorescent lights, with bleachers on the sides and a concession stand with hotdogs and soda. The center of this room was occupied by a professional looking ring: a square platform raised to about waist level, with black metal posts rising at each corner. Three ropes wrapped in athletic tape ran around the ring, fencing it in. There were several types of LWF fans in the audience. Here and there was a father bringing two or three young boys with him. But most of the crowd consisted of high-school aged individuals, many of whom employed black trench

coats and black jeans to achieve the “gothic” look that was the popular expression of oppositional youth culture at the time.

The show itself featured a troupe of young men, (I guessed that, on average, their age was about 22, or 23 years,) performing the ritualized combat that I recognized from what little televised wrestling I had seen. Even though the matches were obviously scripted, with pre-determined outcomes, there was a Referee in the ring, and a paramedic at ringside. The LWF was obviously a wrestling federation in its own right, rather than a simple a lampoon of the televised shows. The LWF wrestlers had invented their own characters rather than simply imitating the famous personalities of the WWF, for example. Even though this was my first LWF show, it was evident that the action fit into what wrestlers call a *storyline*-- a narrative that continued from show to show, tracing the rising and falling fortunes of the individual wrestlers. The story line connects the shows, providing context for the fighting and maintaining fan interest--an aspect of the genre that often brings up comparisons to television soap operas.

The wrestlers entered the arena from an entry-way constructed of piles of gym mats. They passed through this entrance transformed into their wrestling personae just as an actor seems transformed upon entering from stage left or right. As each wrestler came into view, his (they were all male) theme music would blast from a P.A. and ring announcer/color commentator Billy Whack would introduce him, giving his name, weight and hometown. It was usually obvious at a glance whether the entering wrestler was an honest, sportsmanlike hometown hero, or a cheating, arrogant villain, delightful to the audience as an object of vehement ridicule. The heroes seemed to display a vaguely punk rock style, in a handsome, heroic way. But the defining characteristic of the heroes was that they were honest, which is to say they did not cheat in their matches. They displayed a genuine appreciation for the supportive reaction of the crowd. The villains were as a rule more outrageous and cartoon-like than their opponents. They hated, or were indifferent to the crowd, and lost no chances to perform this dislike; constantly calling out and mocking individual audience members, especially children. There was a jack-booted fascist caricature known as Supreme who heaped as much scorn on the audience members as they on him. His entrance music was a Marilyn Manson song. Many people (mostly his close friends and relatives in real life) took such delight in hurling invective at the Supreme that they had arrived at the arena with poster-board signs saying “you suck,” or “supreme jackass” in magic marker. Most wrestling federations will occasionally feature a Heel who elicits the invective of the audience by performing deviant sexuality. The LWF’s Dr. Gimic deployed this classic wrestling stratagem with his bizarre ringside poetry recitations and his sexually suggestive wrestling maneuvers. As they hurled insults at the good Doctor, it was clear that he was the one the fans most loved to hate. They could barely find words to express their disgust, and yet I saw they were smiling with joy.

The basic formal elements of the wrestling shows of today seem to have existed in the United States for at least a century, developing from within the tradition of the traveling carnival and the vaudeville hall (Morton & O'Brien 1985; Freedman 1983; Stone 1971). These elements include ritualized wrestling combat taking place in a ring

resembling the boxer's "squared circle." In this instance the word "ritualized" simply means that, rather than trying to defeat each other, the wrestlers dramatically, if also somewhat vigorously, enact a *match*. The winner is pre-determined. The dramatic goal of a match is to pin one's opponent to the mat for a three-count by a Referee. Of course, the word ritualized is appropriate for other reasons. The people in the audiences of the wrestling shows that I have attended were all aware that what they were watching was scripted—not a sport in the common sense. (The exceptions to this are mostly very young children.) And yet, wrestling audiences are generally very vocal and enthusiastic. It has been argued that the audience's performance of credulity in the face of the fantastic and ludicrous nature of the display is the primary quality of professional wrestling that qualifies it as "ritual;" and that this quality is missing from contemporary sports and drama, which therefore would therefore not be truly ritual. (Morton & O'Brien 1985:159) Regardless of the validity of this formulation of ritualism, the complex awareness of the spectators at wrestling shows is certainly a key part of the tradition of pro wrestling. Another basic element of the form emerges from the crowd's complex awareness: Wrestlers' identities assume a signifying function in order to sustain crowd interest. In other words, some wrestlers will have to portray antagonists, and some will have to portray protagonists. Wrestlers call a hero a *Babyface*, or *Face*. Villains are termed *Heels*. Heels behave offensively and cheat, Faces seduce the crowd with honesty, strength, moral certitude and good looks. Storylines allow these characters to interact. These interactions are enacted when a wrestler grabs the microphone and delivers an angry tirade about his opponent, (called *cutting a promo*), or during contrived interviews and skits. In this way, wrestling shows become ritualized, spectacular performances of socially constructed categories highly charged with moral and political meanings, as we shall see.

The LWF show displayed all these basic elements of the traditional form of professional wrestling. However, as the show progressed, it was clear that there were a few key qualitative differences between the show I was watching and the televised shows of the internationally popular World Wrestling Federation (as it was then known). Beyond the expected difference in general production value, I was struck by the radically creative characters that the LWF wrestlers had invented. Dr. Gimic is the obvious example. Although the sexually deviant Heel is a commonplace in the world of wrestling, Dr. Gimic resorted to a scatological and surreal sense of humor that obviously devolved from the particular age demographic into which he and his audience fit. Dr. Gimic wore a plush pink mask that complemented his diminutive suture to create an odd, teddy-bear-ish effect. His polka dot wrestling trunks seemed weirdly distended—'Is he wearing a diaper under that?' Furthermore, he claimed to be from outer space, and some of his poetry seemed to revolve around something called the Starship Child Molester. Later, when I tried to explain this joke/character to my parents—I found out in the course of this project that even my parents had enjoyed some live wrestling shows in their day—I was met with expressions of blank incomprehension, tinged with disgust: 'You think that's funny?'

One other quality of the LWF style of wrestling that distinguished it from the familiar, televised shows was the physicality of the matches. It was clear even to me, an

outsider to what was obviously a wrestling subculture, that the wrestling moves, ritualized though they were, presented real risk of injury, and demanded a tolerance for pain. A LWF wrestler would not only enact the chain of grips and submission holds that make up amateur, or Greco-Roman wrestling, he would also repeatedly pick up his opponent in the most contrived of ways, and after a suspense filled moment of improbable suspension, slam him down to the mat producing fantastic crashing sounds from the metal sub-structure of the ring—bodies bouncing and flying. These lifting and slamming maneuvers were so stylized that I, ignorant of the rules of the art form that is pro-wrestling, was often unable to determine which wrestler was supposed to have executed the blow and which was supposed to have been its victim. Even more stylized and spectacular were the instances when one wrestler would lie (apparently) unconscious in the middle of the ring, while the opponent climbed to the top of a corner post, then leap through the air, flipping and rotating in astonishing, gymnastic fashion, and land, smashing the victim.

The performance of these moves that involve falling onto the back is called *taking bumps* or *bumping*. Recently, when I asked an itinerant wrestler called the Natural Kenny King to describe taking bumps, he replied:

“To take a bump is basically just to let go of everything that you ever learned about gravity. You know, most people when they learn how to take bumps, or—when you fall, trip and fall, your first natural response is to [he extends his arm forward] “I got to put something down, I got to break my fall.” Takin’ a bump is letting go of all of that because you know that if you land the right way, you know, your body’s gonna, it’s gonna distribute evenly. And that was one of the first things I had to learn about bumping was you have to let go. And so taking a bump is essentially letting go.”

The keys to learning to take bumps are practice, and learning to land in a way that distributes the force of the impact over the largest possible surface area. This means landing flat on the back, and not trying to break the fall with the arms. Taking bumps is part of all wrestling, from the backyard to the big time. What made me notice the physicality of the LWF wrestling style was its relentless pace, its stylistic elaboration and the wild altitudes (off the top turnbuckle!) from which their moves led to the final bump.

Wrestling, however, is much more than just learning how to fall, and a third glaring difference between the LWF and the WWF involved the weaponry that worked its way into the ring. Wrestling shows have probably always featured some weaponry. The classical manner in which weapons might be used in a wrestling match reinforces the fundamental difference that organizes Heels and Faces into clearly defined and mutually supporting moral categories. For example: During a match, the Ref becomes distracted, perhaps by the Heel’s girlfriend or his sharply-dressed manager. With the Ref otherwise occupied, the Heel reaches into his trunks or under the stage and produces a wrench or lead pipe or some such thing. The Heel quickly delivers a few blows to the cranium of the crowd’s beloved Face, and again the weapon is hidden. When the Ref finally turns back to the action and sees the Heel pinning the now-incapacitated Face to the mat, he begins the three count that will end the match. This is the sort of cheating that defines the classical wrestling Heel, and this is the sort of dramatic irony that can cause an audience of wrestling fans to dizzying heights of consternation. This sort of cheating and weapon

use was included in that first LWF show I saw. However, there was also something more. For example, one of the matches was called a “shopping cart match.” During this match, a shopping cart full of flotsam was wheeled to the side of the ring and both wrestlers were allowed to use anything in it as weaponry. The cart contained a metal trash can, a toaster, a computer keyboard, baking sheets, a (real) stop sign—anything that looked dangerous or funny. After being hit on the head with a toaster, the wrestler called CM Punk, (the CM stands for chick magnet,) began to bleed—just a trickle from the hairline. Rumors and speculation flew around the audience: ‘It’s real blood!’ ‘No, it’s fake!’ Audience members who counted wrestlers among their personal acquaintances would confide to those sitting nearby that fake blood was in fact used occasionally in the LWF. But what about the match that was going on right then? Maybe the blood was real, and maybe it was fake. The question of fake or real had been dissolved into a zone of uncertainty, and the change in the crowd’s attitude was like a charge of static electricity suffusing the room. Even the audience members who recognized performers from school or work or even their own family were beginning to achieve a suspension of reality as they sensed not so much the staged nature of the spectacle, but rather the panic that follows the loss of situational certainty. The blood signaled the audience that here, in a void between real and unreal stood something dangerous, obeying rules alien to the laws of everyday reality.

The LWF Story

Years later, at a LWF practice session, I would interview Billy Whack, the LWF ringside announcer. I was observing the training session taking place at “the Factory,” LWF’s rental space in a complex of small warehouses in Mokena, Illinois. One wall was a huge garage door, which was open. Most of the space in the Factory was taken up by the ring, and in the deepest part of the room, behind the ring, a couch and some chairs were arranged around a TV and VCR. In the ring, approximately a dozen stocky young men performed drills, repeating the same moves, flipping onto their backs over and over, and within a few minutes, they were drenched in perspiration.

I asked Billy Whack to tell me the story of how LWF began. It seems that one suburban summer in the early nineties, he and some friends had gathered at a friend’s parents’ home to watch Wrestlemania, an annual Pay-Per-View wrestling show put on by the World Wrestling Federation, (now called World Wrestling Entertainment). After the show, the teen-aged wrestling fans went out to the yard, and:

“...we went in the front yard, and sure enough, somebody stuck four sticks in the ground and put a crappy rope around, and we just jumped around like idiots. And uh, we’re all winded and sore, and tired and we weren’t even doin’ any moves, just punchin’ and kickin’ and jumpin’. Like your typical crappy video game.”

This odd diversion was captured on video tape. The next day, the young man who would become Billy Whack eventually watched the tape with a friend of his.

“...it was the worst, poorly lit, crappy ... just videotape.... And uh I’m like ‘Wow, I’m like this is pretty cool.’ And then me and him came to the idea right away that we should probably try to organize this, do it a little bit better, maybe write a little story line, come

up with some characters and see what happens. Let's call it the Lunatic Wrestling Federation. Alright, sounds good. So my parents were going away, the, for like a weekend, in the summer of '93, so quickly, I ran out there and I we put four sticks in the ground, four poles in the ground, put these little clamp lights [up] and we jumped around like idiots and we videotaped it, and we had the little bell and everything. You know, we brought in more people. And uh, that's what we did for like the summer of '93."

The story of the LWF from that point on is either amazingly improbable or simply inevitable, depending on your opinions about youth culture and the media. The summer of 1994 saw more backyard LWF shows, now featuring a plywood ring built by the wrestlers themselves. Winters were periods of planning and writing future shows and storylines. 1995 was a breakthrough year for the LWF, when they had the opportunity to put on a show on a ten acre property that belonged to the family of Mr. Whack's then-girlfriend.

"So we figured, let's, let's try to promote this, see how many people we can get there. So we handed out fliers at the high school. And we had like three hundred and fifty people show up in her backyard for this party/wrestling event. And we had lights and we had little cameras and everything goin'. We were getting to be really good. Well, we decided to, you know, we were saving our money, let's just buy a wrestling ring. And we spent everything we had, which was about forty-five hundred bucks—we bought a wrestling ring from like Texas, and they delivered – they brought it up, delivered it, set it up. We jumped around like idiots. You see a re-occurring pattern. Um, we said let's trademark everything: [And at this point Billy's tone of voice shifted from relaxed, informal and unconcerned to serious and suddenly focused.] we have these names, we have these gimmicks, we had these ideas. And let's start putting on real shows. So we planned for a whole year and in like, in October of '97, we had *Bloodbath '97* at the Romeoville rec-center. Like ten bucks a head, and we were makin' money and we couldn't believe it you know? But it costs a lot of money, we found out we had to get a promoter's license, and we found out we had to take out an insurance policy just for the night on the audience, and um you know, we had to rent the venue, the place, and we had to rent a DJ, for the music equipment and stuff like that and uh we were finding out it was pretty costly you know? But we did it and then we found Lamont, and we started running shows in Lamont. It just, from that point on, it's just been growing and growing and building and building, and uh it just gets crazier, like each day, like I never know what's going to happen next. I'm meeting people I never thought I would meet before. I met Vince McMahon [the president of the WWF] a couple months ago, um I met Paul Heyman, [of] ECW, I met all these guys, I've met tons of wrestlers and uh, the people I've met through this, [gestures behind him to the young men training] we're running training camp on Wednesdays, we're doing shows, we're about to get a TV deal. We have an actual TV camera crew come out and film it, edit the tape, we sell the tape, [and] we're about to start sellin' merchandise off our web site."

The Wrestling Underground Comes to My Own Hometown

After my first LWF show, almost a year passed before I thought about wrestling again. I was back in the Twin Cities, and still at ISU, when I learned that a group of local kids had formed a wrestling federation and was putting on monthly shows, in the backyards of their parents' homes. They called themselves the FUW, which stood for Fucked Up Wrestling.

The obvious similarities to the LWF story led me to ask some of these downstate backyard wrestlers if they had ever heard of the Chicago-area promotion. This line of questioning made no headway, as nobody seemed to have had heard of LWF, nor any other instance of any other group wrestling in any backyard anywhere. No, in fact, they had come up with the idea on their own one evening when a group of people watching wrestling on television had morphed into a living-room wrestling session. Direct cultural diffusion seemed to have played no part in this bizarre ritual's spread to my hometown. Wondering how this might have happened led me to study the FUW for a class project during the spring semester of 2000, by which time, the FUW had made the transition from backyard federation to strong local promotion by putting on shows at the student centers of the local universities. They were using a wooden ring they had constructed themselves. I had no plans to go native when I started the 'ethnography of a wrestling federation' that eventually became my undergraduate thesis.

I got the phone number of the 19-year-old "president" of the FUW from a mutual friend and I set up a lunch meeting at a local diner. Disco Stu, as he was known to FUW fans, was a wrestler as well as the leader of the group. He was perhaps a bit underweight, and well dressed in corporate casual attire during our first meeting. He worked as a manager at a call center on the edge of town. I explained that I wanted to do an ethnography of his federation, and what that entailed. He agreed and suggested that we hang out for the rest of the evening, as he was going to be meeting up with some of the other wrestlers later and I could meet them. But first he would have to make a pit stop at his Grandfather's house, to help move a safe. But after that—meeting wrestlers. I offered to help move this safe, thinking it the natural thing to do. We talked about the history of the group, and I learned that after a few backyard performances in front of small crowds of friends, FUW had moved on to perform gigs on the ISU campus, and at the grand opening of a chain bookstore. Plans for a show at the local armory were in the works. Later, as I was helping about five other guys maneuver an immense steel box into the back of a pickup truck, I had a personal experience of the Tom Sawyer dimension of Stu's personality—his ability to get his friends involved and motivated in projects and plans that really involved a lot of hard labor. Stu told me to be at his house the next Monday at 8:00pm.

Monday Night

Stu shared a house with a few of his friends, but as I ethnographically hung around during March of 2000, it was often difficult to tell who lived there and who was just on the scene. The place was a haze of smoke in a disorienting proliferation of movie posters. There were more life-sized cardboard celebrities than living humans in the house. The place was absolutely littered with action figures—mostly mini wrestlers. One wall of the living room was entirely taken up by speakers and a huge television. My first visit was a Monday night, which meant that a crowd of FUW wrestlers was gathering there to watch wrestling. At that time, there were two federations running weekly televised shows on cable: Vince McMahon's WWF and Ted Turner's WCW. Their Monday night shows occupied the same time slot, so there was constant channel surfing between the two. WWF was generally favored. At least a dozen kids were all

around me eating fast food and drinking soda—wrestlers. A single topic took up 100% of the conversation for the next two hours: wrestling. That night I met the Hardcore Badass, a communications major at ISU. I explained my project and he said he had used the FUW as a subject of various class assignments himself. I will never forget the expression of disappointment that clouded his face when I explained that I knew absolutely nothing about wrestling. I also met Hardcore's friend Zero. His name is a reference to the Japanese fighter planes of the WWII era. The name was meant to imply that Zero's wrestling style was of the acrobatic *high flyer* variety, which is central to the style of pro wrestling that has developed in Japan. Hardcore was in jeans and a t-shirt, had a blond bowl cut and wore glasses. Zero had a thin halo of blue hair that was spiked straight-up, and a wide variety of facial piercings. Before they joined FUW, the two had performed in their own backyard fed, Danville Championship Wrestling, which used a trampoline for a ring. Also in attendance were Dre and Big Daddy, who were discussing ideas for their upcoming match. Big Daddy was wearing a black T-shirt with "ECW" printed across the front in large white letters. Underneath that logo in small letters were the words "hardcore wrestling." Dre was called "co-president" of FUW along with Stu. His prominent status derived mostly from his undeniable leadership skills. Also, Dre had built the wooden wrestling ring during his spare time, and donated it to FUW.

As the wrestlers at Stu's set about explaining wrestling to me, I scribbled in a notebook. I quickly learned that wrestling fans see the world of wrestling as divided into three levels. At the top were the *big three*, the WWF, the WCW, and ECW. These were federations that could operate on a national level. Besides staging live shows (*house shows*), the big three produced regular shows on cable and ran Pay Per View shows. In the middle, were the seemingly hundreds of *indies*—the independent wrestling federations. These are groups that possess the license and various certifications necessary in order to produce professional wrestling shows within one locality or on a limited circuit. The indies tended to put on their shows in bingo halls, local armories, VFW halls and similar places. These groups are probably very similar to the regional promotions that existed before cable television, and some of them are directly descended from these groups. It is possible to make a living as an independent wrestler working on a circuit of these federations, but this is very difficult and only a few wrestlers can achieve this. The third type of wrestling federation in the hierarchy is the *backyard wrestling federation* run by young wrestling fans. They will perform wrestling shows on their parents' property, probably in the backyard. These groups may use trampolines as rings. Others build rings out of old mattresses, others may simply spray-paint a square on the ground. The audiences at these shows are usually not charged admission, and are usually composed of schoolmates and friends of the wrestlers.

Professional Wrestling and the Music Industry Briefly Compared

One gets a better idea of how the three levels of wrestling relate to each other by considering the similar way in which the culture of pop music is structured. At a low level in the world of American pop music is the garage band—similar to the backyard federation in many ways. Most obviously, they are both named after parts of the suburban house—marginal areas at that. The garage and the backyard are intimately part

of the home, yet they are slightly aloof—beginning to participate in the outside world. In this way the terms *backyard fed* and *garage band* neatly represent the older sub-adults (*teens*) who typically participate in these groups, not to mention signifying the decidedly bourgeois typical setting of these youthful projects. To see backyard wrestling or a garage band perform does not cost money. Indeed, the audience will be mostly friends and schoolmates.

A serious step up from performing in a garage band would be to make the transition to working for a small recording label. At the time I was studying the FUW, there was a proliferation of what was called *indy rock*. This term derived from the fact that the small record labels that produced this music were supposedly independent from the so-called major labels. More interesting, in a conflation of economics and aesthetics, the term also came to stand for the specific musical genre that evolved in this context of small labels and small shows, independent of major corporate sponsorship. At indy rock shows, the visceral feeling of experiencing or performing in a rock band is seen as preserved, re-contextualized from the garage to the stage. Indy rockers usually performed in street clothes. In that social scene, the worst taboo for a performer was to behave like a “rock star.” It was assumed that people were performing for the love of the music and the experience of the audience members was supposed to be emotional and transcendent. The parallel is interesting: indy labels and indy rockers on one hand, and indy feds and indy wrestlers on the other. Each are defined as independent from the corporations that supposedly dominate the respective genres, and an underground aesthetic is cultivated in each scene.

In the world of wrestling in the late 1990s, the top tier was populated by the three most successful promotions—each of which enjoyed nation-wide popularity in the United States. The music world also has a corresponding top layer that is made up of major recording labels. The fans of indy rock criticized corporate music as bland and non-musical. Supposedly, the product produced by these companies is watered down in some way, so as to appeal to the largest possible audience, and the visceral experience of the live show is totally obliterated in a spectacle enjoyed only by those with unsophisticated musical tastes. Think of mass produced teen-pop, or the corporate rock popular on radio stations owned by media conglomerates.

The three-level scheme that we see in the music and wrestling worlds functions to classify specific activities. One is simply in a band with acquaintances, or one is on the indy rock scene, or one is signed to a major label. One is a backyard wrestler, one is an indy wrestler, or one is working for one of the national promotions. However, the three level schemes are also evolutionary patterns in a sense, in that an individual musician or wrestler can, through ambition and talent and social connections, elevate him or her-self to the next level. Also, individual federations can achieve these elevations. For example, in the Chicago area, LWF started in the backyard and became a strong local promotion. The same can be said of Bloomington-Normal’s FUW.

ECW is a case of an independent federation that was so famous that it came to be seen as one of the “big three” by wrestling fans. ECW began in Philadelphia, putting on

shows in a bingo hall. The group quickly gained national prominence, by embracing the hardcore style. ECW stands for Extreme Championship Wrestling. This meant that, in some matches the Face/Heel distinction was more or less discarded, and the action centered around extremes of violence, generous use of weapons and copious amounts of (real) bleeding on the parts of the wrestlers. The pick-you-up-and-slam-you-down moves were still there, but there might be thumbtacks all over the ring. Or coils of barbed wire. ECW crowds would chant “Ta-ble! Ta-ble! Ta-ble!” as they waited for the inevitable slam-you-through-a-wooden-table move. Folding step ladders also became a major part of ECW wrestling shows. Instead of jumping off the top rope to crush an opponent, wrestlers might reach under the ring and retrieve one of these ladders, to gain altitude and a much higher flight. As all of this was explained to me by the FUW members at Stu’s, they made it clear to me that there was a limit to the acceptability of this kind of thing. There was what they considered “garbage wrestling.” This was what resulted when wrestling was hardcore and bloody just for the sake of hardcore, bloody spectacle. In the FUW, the dominant thinking was that good wrestling was supposed to look like it hurt, but, to whatever extent possible, pain was supposed to be minimized. The use of hardcore spots and weapons in the FUW reflected this principle. Getting hit on the head with a steel chair (a *chair shot*) really didn’t hurt that much, at least considered in relation to the effect that the spot has on the audience. It looks brutal and makes a loud noise, but the pain is manageable.

The wrestling done at all three levels fits within the same idiom. However, there are some important stylistic differences between the wrestling at the different levels. Wrestlers see all moves as falling along a scale that runs from *low-risk* to *high-risk*. Low-risk spots involve little risk of injury to the wrestlers performing, while the opposite is true for high-risk spots. Low risk spots include punches and kicks, and submission-style wrestling that is an imitation of the holds and pins of amateur wrestling. Being thrown through a table is a high-risk spot. Generally, low-risk spots cause less pain than high-risk spots. The federations that are higher in the hierarchy will feature fewer high-risk spots. National promotions will feature less of the high-risk spots than most indy feds, and in backyard wrestling, kids have taken such risks with their bodies that the phenomenon has been sensationalized by mainstream media as a horror story about deviant youth. Pro-Wrestler Mick Foley discusses an episode of *20/20* on the subject of backyard wrestling in his 2001 book *Foley is Good*. According to his account of the interview, he was shown a tape of some rather mild backyard wrestling and asked to comment, then a tape in which “Barbed wire was featured, as was a cheese grater, and a lightbulb that caused a massive head wound.” (2001:56) Foley claims that when the *20/20* episode was aired, they showed the footage from the second tape, followed by Mr. Foley’s reaction to the first tape.

I believe that there are several reasons for this gradation of risk across the three levels. First of all, it makes sense once one considers the money at stake. In the national promotions, the stars are well paid. They have made it to the top, achieved the goal of all ambitious wrestlers. To miss out on performances at that level due to injury can translate to serious financial loss—both for the wrestler in question and possibly for the promotion itself. Therefore, the Monday night cable shows of the WWF and the WCW that I watched with the wrestlers of the FUW at Stu’s featured more talking and arguing than actual wrestling. The FUW wrestlers hated this, and they knew that the matches were not

particularly exciting to watch compared with the intensity of indy wrestling. (Of course, this knowledge never led them to skip a Monday night's shows.) For indy wrestlers, however, paychecks are not substantial. Many indy wrestlers view wrestling as a hobby, and the vast majority have day-jobs. At that level, more risks are going to be taken because, like at an indy rock show, it is the quality of the experience for the performer and the audience that is most important. In the backyard, many risks are taken, and the risk of each move is compounded by the total lack of training. Again, my FUW informants related to me that there is no excuse for being stupid and taking terrible risks with your body. They even told me that they had agreed that certain moves, particularly the "pile driver," were banned in the FUW.

As they read my reaction to the idea of hardcore wrestling, Stu decided, and everyone agreed, that after the TV shows were over, we ought to watch something called "the Mass Transit tape," as well as the famous Mick Foley/Terry Funk exploding ring, Japanese death match, each of which I will discuss in more detail below.

But the very first thing that they explained to me about the world of wrestling—the first distinction that I needed to make in order to understand wrestling—was the difference between *Marks* and *Smarts*. These are the two types of wrestling fans. According to the FUW wrestlers, Marks respond to wrestling in the manner intended by the people who write and perform in wrestling shows. They watch wrestling the same way little kids do; cheering the Faces and booing the Heels. In fact, Marks would not even use the terms Face and Heel. The thousands of screaming fans in the seats at the WWF shows were Marks. The FUW members held a low opinion of the Marks' intelligence, and had nothing but scorn for them. Smarts, or Smart Fans, on the other hand, (and my new informants were definitely smarts), were "smart to the business." Fully and openly cognizant of the staged nature of wrestling, Smarts followed the WWF and WCW not just to see the shows, but to keep track of what the feds were doing. They were much more interested in the behind-the-scenes action of personnel decisions and the hows and whys of booking the big shows. (The way that Smarts follow wrestling parallels the fandom of people who regularly consume the information in magazines like Entertainment Weekly—people as much interested in movie studio politics and the strategic maneuvers of ratings wars and contract negotiations as in movies themselves.) If Marks watched wrestling in order to see who would win, and even assumed an attitude of hoping that the Face would win, Smarts watched in order to see which wrestling star the bookers had decided to push that week so that they could comment on the decision later on the online message boards used by the global Smart Fan community.

Like all Smarts, the members of the FUW voraciously consumed the information on insider websites (referred to as "dirt sheets,") that report on the behind-the-scenes aspects of the wrestling world. Usually, the FUW wrestlers that I was with on a given Monday night already knew what would happen during the TV shows, including match outcomes, since they had already read the results leaked to the fan web sites. Beyond reporting on the big feds, online columnists also offered commentary on the state of wrestling in general and offered suggestions on how the big feds might improve their product. The message boards were, and still are, alive with Smarts doing this sort of second guessing. During the late 1990s, and early 2000s, the dirt sheets were always charged with gossip and debate since Turner and McMahon were always at war for

ratings, often raiding each other's rosters. (Any given Tuesday, Smart fans would know the relative Neilson ratings of the WCW and WWF shows, which were reported on the dirt sheets.) The internet also allowed Smarts to keep track of the wide world of independent promotions. Smart fans are also occasionally called *Internet Fans*, and maintained a lively practice of trading, via the mail, video tapes of old wrestling shows, independent shows and tapes of wrestling from Japan, where wrestling is hugely popular and typically much more acrobatic than in the mainstream of U.S. Wrestling.

Smarts know the real names of the famous wrestlers. They know all of the characters that a given wrestler has ever portrayed in the ring. Hardcore pointed out a wrestler on the screen named Kane. Kane was a huge man in a skin-tight, red and black suit. A mask covered his face. "He's huge as Kane now," I was told, "but his gimmick before he was famous was Isaac Yankem, evil dentist. He would come to the ring in scrubs and a little surgeon's cap." Smarts know huge amounts about the careers of huge numbers of wrestlers—who's worked with whom, who was *put over* (won). A smart fan will know who won the main event of every Wrestlemania ever, and will probably be able to list most of the other wrestlers in all the other matches too. The FUW wrestlers estimated that Marks do not remember storyline information from more than two months into the past. They based this on how much (i.e. little) time will pass before the storylines of the major feds begin to contradict themselves. Smarts, on the other hand, remember storylines reaching back to their childhoods, and in astonishing detail. As I could see in the FUW members that I was meeting, backyard wrestling was essentially an activity of a subset of smart fans.

Another thing that smarts know about is the Mass Transit tape. The Mass Transit incident involves an injury that took place at an ECW show. One dirt sheet, www.wrestleview.com, sums up the incident as follows: (original punctuation etc. retained)

On November 23rd, 1996 ECW was scheduled to run a house show in Revere, Massachusetts. Axl Rotten who was suppose to fight New Jack was unable to wrestle so local wrestler Eric Kulas asked to take his place. Kulas had just turned 18 but told Paul Heyman that he was 19 and was trained to wrestle which he was not. Before the match Kulas asked New Jack to blade him since he never had done it himself and New Jack agreed. But during the match when New Jack bladed Kulas with a exacto knife, New Jack accidently cut too deep and severed two arteries in Kulas' forehead. Kulas immediately passed out as the blood was spraying out of his head. EMS technicians rushed to the ring and stopped the bleeding before any permanent damage occurred. Eric Kulas had not wrestled since then and his family sued ECW for the incident but it was thrown out of the court.

While Stu cued up the Mass Transit tape, the FUW members related basically the same story to me, saying that Mass Transit lied about his age, and that he had never wrestled before. The setting looks like a school cafeteria—a narrow room, badly lit with a low ceiling. In the video, Eric Kulas appears as an obese youth wearing an improvised bus driver's uniform. That was his *gimmick*, his in-ring character—disgruntled bus driver. New Jack, arguably the most thorough practitioner of hardcore wrestling in ECW at the time, looks like a barrel of muscle. Why did Kulas decide this would be a good idea?

Why do some people stand outside during a hurricane to watch the storm? In the video, New Jack severely beats Kulas who, after about one minute in the ring with New Jack, lays motionless, on his back. New Jack begins a tirade about the young man at his feet, deriding him with compellingly hateful obscenities. Then he deploys the knife as Kulas lays still, working with a sawing motion, laterally across the forehead. Blood gurgles out of Kulas's head as New Jack rants some more, and departs the scene. The FUW members were totally disgusted with New Jack. Cutting a promo while the kid was receiving medical attention was taken to be over the line. Over and over, Stu called this incident "the worst night ever for wrestling."

Blading has probably been part of wrestling for generations. The traditional method of blading involves a razor blade hidden in the athletic tape wrappings at a wrestler's wrists. Through sleight of hand, and probably while lying in a corner of the ring, miming unbearable pain, a wrestler can retrieve this razor, and lightly break the skin on the forehead. If you have ever seen someone with a small cut on the top of the head, you may have been alarmed by the profuseness of the bleeding. Wrestlers will sometimes take advantage of the dense network of blood vessels just below their forehead skin in this way, and, considering their position under the floodlights, surrounded by the audience, it is a testament to the skilled practice of wrestling craft when, as is usually the case, blading goes unnoticed by the crowd. Performers in televised wrestling have the distinct advantage, in that they blade when the camera is directed away from their sleight of hand. Nonetheless, Stu or one of his friends would occasionally interrupt conversation on Monday nights, pointing at the TV and shouting "Right there! He bladed!" With the rise of the smart fan phenomenon, this secret wrestling method found its way into the internet discourse of the smart fans, and into the backyard. The development of the hardcore style led to the inclusion in matches of increasingly explicit and stylized forms of blading. This would include the use of bladed weapons in the play of the combat. This could mean cutting an opponent's head while that person is supposedly incapacitated in some way. Of course, if viewed as a simulation of real fighting, these spots are not particularly compelling. However within the logic of hardcore wrestling, these acts are intelligible parts of the match and of the genre. That is, they are actions that signify that this federation, these wrestlers are indeed hardcore—that this match has transcended real-or-fake and has moved into the creation of a new kind of space, similar in many ways to Artaud's "Theater of Cruelty." (Stoller 1997:122; Taussig 1987:442) I will argue that this ability to fuse the fields of real and fake is a property of all professional wrestling, and is not found exclusively in the performance of hardcore matches. Therefore it should be noted that the with respect to blading, hardcore wrestling stands out in that the weapon use is moved into the direct attention of the audience and itself takes on a signifying function. However, whether the act of blading is concealed or performed in full view, blood functions to break down the barrier between fake and real.

Unlike the Mass Transit tape, the exploding ring match that occurred August 18, 1995 between Terry Funk and Mick Foley evoked a genuine sense of awe in my new informants. Funk and Foley are icons of hardcore wrestling. The quality of this tape was even worse than the Mass Transit tape, and the audio was, of course, in Japanese. But the

viewer can see that the thick cables that usually run around a ring had been replaced with barbed wire. Sitting in each corner of the ring were plywood platforms, covered in bushy loops of barbed wire, and rigged with explosives set to detonate at any contact. Throughout the match, Funk and Foley take turns getting entangled in the ropes, and falling into the traps, which explode with bright flashes. About twelve minutes into the match, Foley leaves the ring and retrieves a ten foot tall step-ladder from beneath it. After getting back into the ring with the ladder, he charges at Funk and spears him in the face with the small platform at the top end of the ladder. By this point in the match, both of Funk's arms have been seriously burned and Foley's face is covered with so much blood that only his eyes, mouth and full beard are at all visible. "That's called wearing the crimson mask," Stu told me. Funk lies on the mat, twitching and panting. Foley sets up the ladder next to Funk, kicks Funk, then climbs five steps—till his feet are at a level with the shoulders of the nearby Referee. As he falls toward Funk, he leads with the elbow, landing his upper arm on Funk's chest. This leads Foley to quickly pin his opponent, but Funk kicks out of the pin before the Ref can count three. Foley struggles to his feet and heads back up the ladder. This time however, Funk manages to tip him over, sending him tumbling into the barbed wire ropes. But Foley somehow scrambles back on top of Funk and goes for the pin again. Funk kicks out again, but this time he is a second too late, and Foley wins the match. His face still painted scarlet with his own blood, Foley accepts a trophy that would look at home at a Jr. High track meet.

After the tapes ended, it was time for the weekly FUW meeting. The whole group that had assembled at Stu's headed out the door, and a car caravan headed over to the same local diner where I had my first meeting with Stu. We all strode past the "please wait to be seated" sign and went into the private banquet room at the back of the building. The room quickly filled with twenty or so wrestlers. I estimated their average age to be around twenty years. Most also were coming from watching the Monday night shows, and as each one arrived in the banquet room, he would typically greet the crowd with a joke that I didn't understand about the WCW and WWF shows, but usually everyone else laughed. At the beginning of the meeting, there was a short treasurer's report. The main topic at the meeting, however, was the planning for the next show. FUW had been hired by a fraternity to put on a show in the back yard of the fraternity house, which was near the ISU campus. The match-ups and the order of the bouts (together called "the card") was discussed as well as who would be put over. (For some of the matches that mattered less to the development of the federation's story-lines, the wrestlers involved in the matches were allowed to decide amongst themselves who would win.) After Stu and Dre finished their presentation, the meeting broke up into small groups and the wrestlers who would be working with each other in the upcoming show gathered to write their matches. Writing a match consisted of a three step process. The first step was to list all the moves that the wrestlers wanted to perform in the match, and felt capable of executing. These are moves that they have seen on TV or on traded tapes and found to be particularly visually impressive. When starting to write their match, one of the wrestlers involved will mention a move he wants to do, (or, more likely, a move he wants to *take*) and then see if his opponent is comfortable performing it. In my field notes I recorded snippets of conversation like:

Honkey Tonk Rob: I want to do a hurricanrana. ...been telling people I'd do one.

The Wifebeater: _____ did that once. I need to get that tape so I can see how to do my move. [Referring to his finishing move, “domestic violence”]

Honkey Tonk Rob: Do you want the guitar? [i.e., do you want me to hit you on the head with my breakaway prop guitar?]

The Wifebeater: I want the guitar.

In this way, the list of possible moves is generated. The second step is to figure out a brief outline of the match. The outline will include who will be ahead when, how long the match will actually last and who will win. This outline can be fairly complex even if it does not include the specific moves that the wrestlers will do. This is especially true for tag team matches and matches involving run ins. The third step is to fit the moves listed in step one into the outline created during step two. Once a match has been written, the wrestlers involved scheduled time to meet and “work the match,” by which was meant practice it on the federation’s gym mats which were stored in Stu’s garage, next to the disassembled plywood ring.

The FUW shows relied even more on comedic and “high-concept” characters and plotlines than the LWF shows. There was Brother Dan, one of the most effective wrestling Heels I have ever watched. Brother Dan was a parody of a man known to the college students in the Twin Cities as Preacher Dan. Preacher Dan was an itinerant preacher who favored a self-righteous, repent-or-go-to-Hell style of Christianity. He would preach, Bible in hand, on the ISU quad when the weather was nice. Brother Dan the wrestler would simply imitate Preacher Dan. He would come to the ring, escorted by a wrestler called Thee Angel. Holding a dictionary (as a prop Bible,) he would invite the audience members to pray and rebuke them as sinners if they voiced any incredulity. Brother Dan illustrates how wrestling Heels go about that all important task of rapidly moving the audience to denounce and hate them by embodying a localized idea of unpleasant social behavior. The FUW’s sexually deviant character was Little Bitch Johnson, who dressed all in black, with vinyl pants and a dog’s leash hanging from his neck. There was Mad Dog, who seemed to believe he was a dog, and wore one of those giant cones around his neck—of the sort that dogs are fitted with to prevent them from biting. He did not speak, only barked and growled. Klepto was a thief who occasionally made off with a title belt. The list is long. The FUW Babyfaces included the clean cut Mr. Nice Guy, the punkish Zero and Juda Goldman, who played Brother Dan’s Jewish nemesis.

It is not necessary to emphasize the differences between an organization such as the WWE, which produces wrestling shows that are globally popular, and which reported revenues of \$379 million in fiscal 2000 (see: Leverette 2003:190), and an organization of about 25 college-age people who held weekly meetings in a banquet room at a Denny’s and staged its wrestling shows in a wooden ring built by one of the members. FUW members actually paid dues rather than being paid to wrestle. What is more interesting is the similarity between the two groups, and the fact that a handful of these former backyard wrestlers claimed that someday they would try to work for bigger federations.

Within a given federation, the individual who makes the matches, writes the cards and determines who will get put over (win) is called the booker. In the FUW, bookings of shows were negotiated by a committee of wrestlers who took interest in that aspect of the show, while most members were content to focus on wrestling and went along with whatever the bookers wanted. In any federation, booking can fuel a great deal of behind-the-scenes arguing and politics. It is certainly not the case that wrestlers want to win rather than lose. However, the extended pattern of who a given wrestler is matched with, how close s/he comes to a title shot, how often s/he “does the job,” (i.e., loses) can either add up to stardom or lead to a career as an “enhancement guy” (someone who only serves to put over bigger stars.) Generally, a wrestler’s greatest fear, in terms of politics, is that s/he will be stuck with a gimmick that is not entertaining, or worse, one that is so unpopular that his or her career actually suffers. Mick Foley’s (1999) memoir includes a lengthy account of how (as he reports it) his career constantly suffered at the hands of the bookers at WCW.

Within the FUW there were occasional disagreements about how to use certain wrestlers and what sort of storylines to construct. The following exchange also comes from field notes from a FUW meeting at Denny’s in the spring of 2000:

Dre announced that the FUW had had to take out an insurance policy on the audience for the upcoming show at the National Guard Armory. Little Bitch, read the booking for the Frat house show, which he had prepared since the last meeting. After his plan was accepted by the group, there was a brainstorming session about possible future venues and ideas about how to promote shows. (The group eventually invested in some radio ads). After the meeting adjourned, Dre and Stu were about to head back to Stu’s house to finalize the booking for the after-prom show. [As co-presidents, they had a great deal of control over the booking.] But before they could leave, they were approached by both members of a tag team called the Creations, (since, according to the FUW storyline, they were created in a secret laboratory by their manager Dr. Igor Itself.) They had decided that they were sick of this lab creation gimmick. They had their own idea about an alliance of Heel characters that they wanted to call the Criminals. Dre and Stu expressed some surprise, since they had always thought that the idea of a mad scientist and his wrestling clones was highly entertaining, but Dre diffused the situation by telling them that they could change their gimmicks if they came up with something new. “Think about every detail,” he advised them, emphasizing that “in FUW, you’re in control of your own gimmick.”

When I look at my field notes from these meetings I am struck by how completely wrestling business jargon had been integrated into the conversation, and the extent to which the group functioned by conducting itself as a serious federation. This exchange also exemplifies a few things about typical local wrestling promotions. First, we see that since the FUW was working in the same idiom as the nation-wide promotions, FUW members had to deal with some of the same political/creative issues as the larger-scale groups. The fluency with which the FUW wrestlers used terms like *booking* and *gimmick* in their meetings reinforces the idea that the FUW members viewed their small production as part of a world of wrestling that included the indy scene and the nation-wide promotions, rather than a totally different phenomenon from the wrestling they watched on television as children. Their attitude toward their own product and its relation to the Big Three, was analogous to the attitude of members of a local rock band

toward their music and it's relationship to the music produced by large record companies. It is very important to note that virtually all of the FUW wrestlers had read Foley's book, and derived their ideas about how to book their shows from it. Foley's book presents a professional ethics for wrestlers. His ideal is that while one wrestler must win, and one must lose, a well performed match should make both performers look good. The jobber is there to make the winner look good, that is, make the winner look like s/he really won. However, the jobber should also be able to look like a serious contender—showing off his/her wrestling skill and thus earning consideration as someone deserving of a title push later on. And, perhaps most important, wrestlers need to feel invested in their gimmicks. They need to find them somewhat entertaining, or else they will have a hard time presenting them as entertainment to the fans. This last point was taken to heart by FUW wrestlers, who, as I hope that I have shown, invested great amounts of creativity into developing their gimmicks, storylines, moves and costumes. Stone (1971) reports on the enthusiasm and diligence with which many wrestlers work on their personae:

Identity work is the most crucial activity of the professional wrestler. The very mention of the task to Verne Gagne in an interview enthused that occasional world champion. He stated that decisions about identity—whether to be a hero or a villain, a “wrestling dentist” or a “mad dog”—are all up to the wrestler himself, as is his choice of other marks of identity—distinctive holds and techniques of “hooking” (manoeuvring an opponent into an inescapable position). Wrestlers often lose sleep perfecting their remarks and styles of delivery for television interviews. Gagne waxed poetic about the high points of creativity required for working up an identity that permits the wrestler's “real self” to emerge in the contest or the appearance. [1971:318]

Today, Smart Fans see Gagne as a legendary figure from wrestling history, and he never wrestled in anybody's backyard, as far as I know. Nevertheless I recognize the excitement in Stone's characterization of his respondent—indeed, it was contagious at the FUW booking meetings.

The rare wrestler who betrays a dislike of losing matches is generally regarded as foolish, or even a bit crazy by most wrestlers. I have never seen a wrestler so much as bat an eye when informed that he or she was booked to lose. At least not because they were being told to lose. What does upset wrestlers is the perception that their gimmick is being misused. Misuse of a gimmick would consist of a booking that does not take full advantage of the *heat*, or fan-enthusiasm, that a given gimmick could produce in the shows and the storyline. In this autobiography, Foley spills much ink complaining that WCW never did enough to integrate into the promotion's storyline the fact that he (really) lost an ear in one of their matches.

But, as is often the case in the world of wrestling, there are strange inconsistencies and apparent contradictions. *Getting a strap*, (being awarded a title belt) is often regarded by wrestlers as a true honor, especially in larger federations, or in the case of belts that have been held by wrestlers who have become legends in wrestling lore. Being tapped to carry a title belt, means that the bookers think of you as star quality, someone who can represent the federation, either as a great hero or as a convincing villain. The desire, common among wrestlers, to retain at least some creative control over his or her gimmick certainly stems from their desire to be able to work in multiple promotions

while using the same persona, but it may also be related to some of the sentiments expressed by former wrestler Mike Brannon, who wrestled as Dr. Red Roberts, in an interview with wrestling journalist Alex Marvez:

“Nothing else matches the ability to be involved in a fantasy world where you can be something not only that you’re really not but also be something that you aspire to be. Not only can you become successful, but you can revel in the fact that you become that persona. Other areas of life just don’t hold the same draw.” [Marvez 2000]

One of my interview participants, Agent Steele of IPW was telling me about his first match in front of an audience when he told me:

I ended up winning the match. And that ... felt like playing football or amateur wrestling again, even though it’s a work, its fake, quote-unquote fake, still feels like you did somethin’ and you accomplished somethin’ you entertained, the crowd’s on their feet cheering for you after you win. It’s what I liked about my first match. Similar to the feelings I got when I would uh make a sack in football. When I would make a lead block to spring a touchdown in football. When I would get a pin in amateur wrestling. It was the same high. It’s very similar. Very similar. Almost the same.

Certainly the win in pro-wrestling is actually an enactment of winning, but the power of the narrative elements of triumph and the participatory theater of adulation certainly have a power that is not conveyed by the common explanation of wrestling as an example of suspension of disbelief.

Going Native?

What I saw functioning, both at the FUW meeting and at the LWF practice session was a complex but remarkably smooth-running cyclical process for producing wrestling shows. My undergraduate paper was concerned chiefly with documenting these processes and the material culture of the FUW. Although I really had no idea what was causing wrestling, in a social-scientific sense, I was satisfied with my documentation of an obscure cultural form. I watched wrestling every Monday night and went to all the meetings. I saw the “Frat House Show,” and was generally impressed with the acrobatics involved in wrestling skill. I certainly had no idea that I might be able to perform in this way when, against my will, I was volunteered for a role in a *battle royal* match that was to take place at an after-prom event at a local high school. (For the high school audience, FUW switched its name from Fucked Up Wrestling to the Federation of United Wrestlers.) A battle royal is a brawl—a last man standing type of affair (see: Morton & O’Brien 1985:100). The battle royal was the first match on the card for the high school show. Battle royal matches were seen as opportunities for everybody to get a chance in the ring, even people who weren’t the greatest wrestlers. Besides the regular cast of characters, an FUW battle royal might include a guy in a robot costume, a guy in a nun costume, the ringside announcers or other surprises. Suddenly, I had to come up with a character and memorize my part in the match. As I worked on my character with Dre, we decided that I would be Leisure Suit Larry, a lounge singer/wrestler. I practiced on the mats with the people I would have to work with in the show. Rather than emerging to my own entrance music, I would sing it in a blatant rip off of Bill Murray’s *Saturday Night Live* lounge-singer skits. Since I had no wrestling experience, I wouldn’t have to take

any big moves, it was planned that I would simply be pushed over and fall out of the ring when my turn came to be eliminated.

In front of about thirty high school students fresh out of their Prom, and dressed in an improvised leisure suit made up of Salvation Army clothes, I sang L-O-V-E, an old Nat King Cole hit. I was surprised that some of the kids knew the words and joined in the song as two other wrestlers threw down in the ring behind me. I climbed into the ring and faced the Grunge Puppy. Grunge Puppy's gimmick was that he embodied the style of the late 1990's grunge movement with long dyed hair, slashed jeans and a soft cardigan sweater. Grunge Puppy was coming at me with a huge baking sheet held over his head with both hands. I gave him a straight legged kick to the gut and grabbed his weapon from him, brought it down on the top of his head. This made a wonderfully loud crash and drew an appropriate gasp of astonishment from the crowd. I seized Grunge Puppy by the throat and we both made a vertical leap. He landed flat on his back, dispersing the impact across as much of the surface area of his body as he could. I followed him down, gripping his throat all the way, and landing on my knees. This move is called a choke slam, and was Kane's *finisher*—his signature move with which he tended to finish off his opponents. Grunge Puppy being thus disposed of, Rick Bear, "sixteen time world champion" -and the FUW color commentator, was now in the ring. We squared off and exchanged mean looks. Suddenly, Rick lunged forward and stomped my left foot. I *sold the foot*, i.e. I jumped around as though my foot was in awful pain, and Rick Bear just pushed me out of the ring, disqualifying me and winning the battle royal. This was comedy wrestling, nowhere near as intense as the matches that would fill the rest of the card, but there was an odd dimension to the experience. I recall not feeling the blow of hitting the floor after falling from the ring, and I recall a hazy inability to estimate how long I had been performing. Being in the ring had seriously altered my sense of the passage of time.

I wrestled twice more with the FUW, each time at Tri-Lakes, a bingo-hall with three stocked fishing holes out back—a sort of redneck country club. These matches were also comedy-focused, meant to put some variety in a show that might culminate in Zero being thrown through a flaming table, or being pinned onto a roll of barbed wire. For me to wrestle in these matches required more training from my fellow FUW members. I learned more complex and intense moves. I first was shown how to bump on a hot gym mat in the scalding sun of Stu's backyard that summer. (My paper was turned in and graded—I was just a wrestler at that point.) The first time I fell to the mat, I made the mistake of holding my breath. This did not leave the air in my lungs anywhere to go when my body landed. As I lay on the ground paralyzed with pain, Zero and Kurt the Ref reminded me not to hold my breath on the way down. At Tri-Lakes I would take a spine buster from the Shooter Carlson Mann and I would punch a pregnant, bearded nun in the stomach. I would sing Happy Birthday, lounge-singer style, to Zero's sister, who was in the audience. I decided I ought to stop wrestling after repeatedly, accidentally calling other wrestlers by their real names during the course of my third show.

Even if/because I was a poor wrestler, Disco Stu decided that Leisure Suit Larry would manage the tag team Rhythm and Funk, which was made up of himself and

another musically-themed wrestler called Honky Tonk Rob. HTR was an Elvis-impersonating wrestler—a direct rip-off of the gimmick of the Honkey Tonk Man, who worked for the WWF. (Such borrowing of gimmicks is common at all levels of the world of wrestling.) As manager, I would escort them to the ring and sometimes promote them to the crowd—a cross between Don King and Dean Martin. In my capacity as manager, I experienced one of the heady joys of being in a wrestling federation—getting a spontaneous crowd chant. “Lar-ry! Lar-ry! Lar-ry!” chanted the crowd at the Aquarium, a bar in downtown Bloomington. The taste of fame that came from being a part of a small time wrestling promotion was gratifying, but I often felt confused and disoriented after the shows ended. I had wrestled, but didn’t feel like a real wrestler. One afternoon, backstage at one of the Tri-Lakes shows, I was reflecting on having gone native and on my gradual re-alienation from wrestling. Stu burst in the doors after his match. His opponent and various ringside characters—valets and managers and assorted goons—had preceded him into the “locker room,” really just a large dining room full of wrestlers and gym bags. Everyone was drenched in sweat. Stu was the focus of most of the excitement, though, as his head was streaked and smeared with blood. No one could see where the wound was. His demeanor was typical of wrestlers coming back from their matches: He rushed in, brushing past all of us, seemingly in a hurry to get someplace, but with no real destination. When a wrestler comes back from the ring, especially after an intense match, there are a few moments when he or she is like an agitated bull let loose in the room. Often, the wrestlers who have just finished working a match together will regroup in the locker room, and then have a spastic recap of the match, quickly listing specific spots that went well or badly. This conversation is typically shouted. Stu made eye contact with nobody, refused to sit still and would yield to neither examination nor first aid. Of course, we were all familiar with this type of behavior, so most people were content to let Stu jostle and rant and charge about for a minute. I grabbed a first aid kit and was eventually able to corral Stu into a restroom. After cleaning him off, I realized that the wound was negligible—barely a half-centimeter long. The shaking of his body was barely perceptible as he talked excitedly about the match, spot for spot, evaluating his performance. Conversation turned to joking and to how exceptionally well the show was going. Stu was going to appear in the ring once more to cut a promo on the wrestler who had inflicted this gratuitously violent beating, so after a little Hydrogen Peroxide was applied, several of us helped him dress the wound with yards of gauze which were then decorated with some theatrical blood.

I found out later that Stu had bladed during the match, and that he had not told anyone about this plan beforehand, except his opponent. The secrecy was due to his perception that some of the FUW wrestlers did not approve of blading, feeling it to be too extreme. So the blading was kept a secret from the audience, and from the rest of the locker room. He didn’t even tell me about it as I wiped the blood from his bald head! Another layer of deception was laid down as an outrageous bandage soaked in fake blood was used to cover a real cut! I began to realize that I lacked the skill and the tolerance for pain that were required for good wrestling matches—the ones that convert aggregations of individual wrestling spectators into a unified “crowd” fascinated by the reality of the violence and the spectacle of young men and women performing in pain. Furthermore, I

lacked the heart to survive as an actor in a field in which reality was so fragmented. I felt there was much to wrestling that I still didn't understand.

My moment of wrestling epiphany occurred as several of us were discussing a recent FUW show. Among the group was Dre. At the climax of the show in question, Zero had Powerbombed Dre through a table. The move had been spectacular, and the crowd had exploded when the table shattered beneath the two wrestlers. Dre was recounting the match, and the fantastic table spot, when he told us how good it felt. "It just felt so good—that table just exploded."—or words to that affect. I questioned him about this and he then proceeded to remark, in a thoughtful tone: "You know, when we're in the ring it's like a trance we go into."

After hearing this story, I finally began to conceive of wrestling anthropologically. Wrestling is a spectacular performance of ritual combat. As a spectacle, it simultaneously performs and constructs society. In the wrestling ritual, moral categories are animated by a group of initiates and confirmed by the audience. As theory leads us to expect from such a cultural formation, the wrestling show is enclosed in a liminal zone where everyday rules of behavior are radically edited, and a certain *communitas* is achieved. Most interesting to me, the initiates who channel moral categories during these ritual productions experience this elaborate communication as an alteration of consciousness—a trance. This conceptualization of wrestling in the United States at the end of the 20th century seems to show a pattern that is also present in other examples from the cross cultural record of extreme physical practices involving spectacular construction of morality and shifts in consciousness, as we will see.

After the conversation with Dre, I assumed that the trance-inducing quality of wrestling was the tool that allowed wrestlers to endure the physical demands of their craft. Also, it seemed to me to be closely related to the development of hardcore wrestling. In the indy feds and the backyard feds, where monetary rewards for wrestling are either nonexistent or miniscule, the feeling of wrestling is the reward for wrestling. In these contexts, wrestling evolved to include the tables matches and the thumbtacks and barbed wire—a shift that emphasized and refined the consciousness-changing properties of this century-old ritual technology. Wrestling probably always contained the seed of ritual violence-trance—witness the weapons and the tricks of blading that must have been around since the time of the carnival side show. What was new was the domination of the form by young people, who were learning the form entirely through mimesis, without formal training, and in their backyards. To what extent this trance inducing property is actually implicated in the production of wrestling, especially in an established independent federation is the subject explored in this Thesis.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

While there is some significant scholarship about wrestling, including useful historical accounts, most of this scholarship does not address the experience of the wrestlers themselves. Nor does any of this work capture the relatively recent developments in the world of wrestling resulting from the emergence of “Smart” wrestling fandom, something of which was described in the previous chapter. This is not a study of the wrestling audience, although that audience will be discussed from the perspective of the independent wrestlers I have met. My intention is to look at wrestling as a traditional practice, and try to learn something about it by directly interacting with wrestlers in the context of ethnography, producing a body of notes, transcripts and logs. My research builds on previous work, but goes beyond it to offer a more genuinely anthropological understanding of the culture of wrestling. To assist in this analysis, I draw on significant literature that does not address wrestling directly, but does offer important theoretical insights to my project.

Thus my examination of existing literature addresses three main bodies of work. First of these is the small but growing body of scholarly articles and books on professional wrestling. Most of these focus on the issues of belief and reality that seem unavoidable in any discussion of this subject. Many authors have been able to construct coherent analyses of the mythology that is attached to the ritual complex of wrestling while providing varying degrees of insight into the immediate effects, or local understandings of the actual practice of professional wrestling. A second body of literature is the growing number of ethnographic studies of communities defined not by a specific ethnos, but rather by the shared devotion to a specific physical practice. It will be shown that once these practices and the cultural arrangements that tend to accompany them can be conceived of as comprising cultural complexes, they might also be compared with one another, with the aim of finding patterns and correlations. This possibility of comparison is suggested by the third set of writings I will examine—that of a few scholars who have attempted to formulate high-level theories about the nature of these cultural practices. Specifically I will focus on some works of Marcel Mauss, Paul Stoller and Michael Taussig.

Scholarship on Professional Wrestling

Scholarly histories of wrestling have been written by Gregory P. Stone (1971) and Gerald W. Morton and George M. O’Brien (1985). Morton and O’Brien’s book is the key scholarly text on professional wrestling in the United States, containing a comprehensive survey of the history of the form, as well as a very insightful analysis of pro wrestling as an example of “ritual,” in the anthropological sense of that term (1985:156). Stone’s contribution is to an understanding of the social organization of the world of wrestlers and promoters during the 1950s, and 1960s. Another author, John Rickard (1999), has contributed a report of the activity’s spread to Australia. All three approach the history of wrestling as a way of determining how those of us in the present day come to find wrestling as an exotic phenomenon combining athletics and drama while failing to meet either the “theoretical norms for sport” –or the corresponding norms

for drama (Morton & O'Brien 1985:30). Thus, what follows is a brief history of professional wrestling drawn largely from these authors' work. The historically constructed shape of professional wrestling that emerges is quite ably summarized by Morton and O'Brien:

Theater is never real; the audience is never confused, except on rare occasions, that what is occurring on stage is reality. Theatre is completely symbol, and whatever meaning theatre has derives from the effectiveness of the symbol in reflecting reality. Football, on the other hand, which has often been mistakenly referred to as ritual, is completely real. The competition is not choreographed; the winners are not predetermined. Football, is, therefore, as unlike a fertility dance or a wedding ceremony as a plot is unlike a simile. Wrestling, however, solidly lodged between actual sport and actual theater violates neither principle; it is neither completely real, nor completely symbolic, and to be completely either would disqualify its being ritual. (Morton & O'Brien 1985:158)

Wrestling evidently never made a clean break from being sport, or a quick transformation to dramatic performance. Morton and O'Brien (1985), after surveying ancient examples of wrestling (as depicted on the walls of the Egyptian tombs, for example) as well as the history of wrestling in Europe, tell us that it was a regiment of Irish-American Union soldiers from Vermont who spread an Irish form of self defense to other groups of soldiers that they encountered on their travels during the American Civil War. The collar and elbow wrestling style (something of which I learned in 2001 from a backyard wrestler called Zero) was picked up as a between-battle pastime by the troops. After the war, in a society that knew neither football nor basketball and only a "fledgling" form of baseball, wrestling became a popular attraction at carnivals, saloons and vaudeville halls (Morton & O'Brien 1985:24). In the late 1800s and until the first World War, wrestling became a major spectator sport with colorful characters from around the world such as Bull Muldoon and George Hackenschmidt grappling for championships.

Wrestling had several qualities that prevented it from remaining a legit sport for very long. Without a time clock running down, evenly matched opponents might wrestle for hours, while inexperienced wrestlers could be beaten by a pro in minutes. Also, without clear leadership from a sports association analogous to the National Basketball Association, or today's baseball leagues, a standard set of rules was lacking. Also unclear was the extent to which the punishing submission holds belonged in the sport. Considering the extremely high risk of injury associated with some submission holds, (when they are "actually applied," as wrestlers would say,) wrestling risked becoming pure bloodsport if it retained holds that are essentially techniques for causing excruciating pain. (The film *Hitman Hart: Wrestling With Shadows* includes some footage of wrestling legend Stu Hart demonstrating some of the old tradition of painful submission-style wrestling, or "stretching.") The key point is that even when wrestling matches were attempted as a legit spectator sport, the wrestlers were immediately presented with a moral dilemma of spectacular physical immediacy: The wrestler wants to win, to become the crowd's hero, but is he willing to dislocate his opponent's shoulder, or break his opponent's leg in order to reach this goal? Of course, the crowd was also presented with the dilemma, but from a different angle: The spectator wants the home town boy to win, but who will he root for once real pain and injury become tactics? This dilemma set up

the template by which, to this day, Heels are characterized as willing to cross that invisible boundary between humanity and sadism, just for the sake of “winning.”

Also, consider the fact that during the 1880s, P.T. Barnum recruited for his show Ed Decker, winner of the Police Gazette title belt for the collar and elbow style, and John McMahon a wrestler from Vermont who “left his farm in 1884 to work his way to England to beat a self-styled world’s champion in just over five minutes.” (Morton & O’Brien 1985:29).

In Barnum’s Circus Decker and McMahon were gaudily outfitted to wrestle daily in twenty-minute prearranged bouts. One day Ed was the champion, the next [John] appeared with the emblem of eminence and pinned his adversary. [Morton & O’Brien 1985:29]

Ultimately, Morton and O’Brien argue that the spectacular, non-competitive form that wrestling still exhibits developed naturally in a society in which current norms of what constitutes sport were still developing and in which, for example, “walking contests were the rage of the country” (1985:23-24). In the absence of today’s formal leagues and associations, the form was quite free to evolve in response to economic factors. Stone is in agreement on this point, and all three authors presume to be in agreement with the earliest wrestling promoters as well: that judging by the ticket sales, people preferred the more theatrical version of wrestling to the “scientific stuff” (Stone 1971:304; Morton & O’Brien 1985:29).

Interestingly, it is also often pointed out in wrestling scholarship that fans quickly tire of *Face versus Face* matches in which each wrestler performs obedience to the rules (e.g. Barthes 1972). Having been to three professional wrestling “tournaments” in which Face vs. Face matches are mandated by the planned outcome of the tournament, I have seen several of these matches on the indy scene,¹ and can report that when two Faces wrestle each other, they usually enact a sort of embarrassment and awkwardness, as if they are unaccustomed to wrestling without a moral mandate. But of course the competitors, hard working Horatio Alger types that they are, will do “whatever it takes to win,” and thus the match goes on. Most interesting to watch are Face vs. Face matches in which the wrestlers improvise the match and gauge the crowd response as the match unfolds. In these cases, what most often happens is that one wrestler will become the crowd favorite as the other, during the heat of the fighting, surprises the audience with indications of a dark side: now a leg-twisting submission hold drawn out a little too long, then a rake of the eyes with the fingers bent like claws. If the two Faces in the ring are skilled performers—that is, if they understand what wrestlers call *ring psychology*, they will be able to tell a story to the audience, even without the aid of storyline and costume. Between the wrestlers and the crowd, the moral structure of the match is negotiated, as the wrestlers feed off of the crowd’s interpretation of the match. At the end of the match, the two will exchange hard looks for a few seconds, then shake hands and exit, reputations as fair players intact. On the other hand, if the match is *Heel vs. Heel*, you

¹ I am referring to: an FUW show called Keepin’ it Real, 5/6/00, Bloomington, Illinois; the Brian Pillman Memorial Tournament, 5/25/00, Cincinnati, Ohio ; and the Brett Peterson Memorial Tournament, 5/16-17/2003, St. Petersburg, Florida.

can expect pandemonium by the end of the match, as wrestlers and their managers and valets usually play these situations as evil buffoons vs. evil buffoons, giving the audience a wide variety of targets for mockery, booing, etc.

When television was introduced into American culture, wrestling quickly adapted to the new medium. By the 1950s, if not much sooner, wrestling in the United States was controlled by the so-called *regional promotions*, also known as *territorial promotions* or simply *the territories*. Apparently, a network of wrestling promoters had divided the country into about a dozen territories. Within each territory, the promoter's company, ran a show that traveled around a circuit of gymnasiums, stadiums and assembly halls. This was called "running the loop." Stone, writing when the regional system was still the primary organizing force in the world of wrestling, tells us that "In a general way, the territory staked out by each regional association [i.e. promotion] sets boundaries marking off contiguous TV viewing areas within which canned performances of regional heroes and villains are circulated." (1971:312) Of course, the "TV" that Stone is discussing is the more localized, pre-cable form of the technology. So wrestling promotions would run television shows that served as "a blatant hour's commercial" for the traveling live show (Morton & O'Brien 1985:49).

Mick Foley is one wrestler who spent most of his career wrestling in regional promotions. In his autobiography, he writes the following about CWA, a promotion that he worked for during the late 1980s:

The Championship Wrestling Association, or CWA, was better known simply as Memphis. Memphis was the city the entire territory worked around, with the Mid-South Coliseum being the site of weekly Monday night cards for a few decades. In addition, the Channel 5 TV studio hosted a Saturday morning wrestling TV show that was a local institution. The Show aired live every Saturday in Memphis, and then played a week later in the rest of the towns. The territory was run completely off the angles and story lines on television, and shows were run on a weekly basis in Nashville, Louisville, and Evansville. Other shows, called spot shows, were run on off days in various locations throughout Mississippi, Kentucky, Tennessee, and parts of Arkansas. [1999:157]

The primary benefit of the territorial system was that it limited the competition between the promotions for fans' attention. This is important because it had been determined that a given television audience could only watch two or three hours of wrestling per week without reaching a marginal point at which demand—that is, fan interest—would begin to drop sharply (Stone1971). Stone recounts an incident in which one promoter's TV show ran in an adjoining territory. According to Stone, "the local promoter remarked, 'Well, of course, he (the rival promoter) doesn't give a damn what happens to us here.'" (Stone1971:312) While he characterizes this sort of exchange as rare, Stone perceptively notes: "Probably alliances establish treaties about the distribution of canned performances, and this may be a major function [of the regional system]. If wrestling were more popular as a national TV attraction, and advertisers sought to sponsor it, a 'battle of the leagues' could develop." (Stone1971:312)

Of course, this is exactly what happened with the advent of nation-wide cable television broadcasting. "When Ted Turner's Atlanta station WTBS became, via cable

and satellite, the first truly national station, “Georgia Championship Wrestling,” broadcast Saturday and Sunday evenings, suddenly became a weekly national show.” (Morton & O’Brien 1985:52)

“The true sign of the impact of the cable broadcasts on the game of wrestling is seen in the fact that promoters in the alliance to which Atlanta belongs have bought up or killed off franchises in other wrestling areas and are moving their live shows onto what was traditionally others’ turf such as Ohio and parts of Michigan.” [Morton & O’Brien 1985:52-3]

Atlanta’s show was incredibly popular, and in 1982 was renamed World Championship Wrestling, or WCW, and the promotion ran shows until 2001. Another regional promotion that made the jump to national prominence by moving to cable television was the World Wide Wrestling Federation, control of which Vince McMahon inherited from his father. (The name was eventually shortened to World Wrestling Federation, and recently changed again to World Wrestling Entertainment.) Those who were fans of wrestling during the late 1990s will appreciate Stone’s prognostication because of the epic ratings battle that occurred between McMahon’s promotion and WCW, and because of which WCW was eventually destroyed. Besides WCW, McMahon’s only other significant challenger was ECW, which was eventually absorbed into the WWE corporation.

Interestingly, however, Stone guessed that such a battle of the leagues was ultimately unlikely, citing the immense control that the regional promoters seemed to enforce at the time of his writing. As evidence of the power of this shadowy syndicate of promoters, Stone describes a conspiracy of silence that kept the inner workings of the industry largely unknown to the public, and even hidden from sport sociologists such as himself. He writes:

When the sociologist first attempts to probe the present-day social organization of wrestling, his reaction is one of wonder at the fantastic extent of a marvelously controlled “conspiracy of silence.” As he continues his study, the wonder gives way to consternation at the impenetrability of the conspiracy. Finally, his attitude becomes one of dull resignation and reluctant acceptance of the fact that many of his conclusions will be more often inferences than demonstrations. [Stone 1971:309-310]

Here, Stone is referring to the fact that prior to the late 1990s, it was nearly impossible to find a wrestler who would admit that wrestling was anything other than a legitimate sporting competition. Wrestlers were expected to “protect the business” by never admitting to anyone that the outcomes of matches were in any way staged, or pre-planned. Mick Foley comments on the practice of protecting the business, and some of the comical outcomes of that practice several times in his autobiography. For example:

“Memphis [i.e. the leadership of CWA, based out of Memphis] had always been so adamant about “protecting the business,” to the point that the bad guys weren’t even supposed to talk to girls—lest they seem like real people.” [Foley 1999:166]

Foley also reports that wrestlers usually left even their closest family and friends in the dark about the inner workings of the business, and that some promoters forbade Faces and Heels to commute to shows in the same cars, since for them to be seen together in

public would constitute a breach of the secret. In wrestling parlance, maintaining the illusion that wrestling is real is referred to by the term *kayfabe*. For a wrestler to admit the predetermination of match outcomes, or for him to appear in public with his in-ring enemy, or to behave as his real self in front of the public is to *break kayfabe*.

By the 1990s, however, the conspiracy of silence was a thing of the past, and wrestling had changed in a very complex set of ways. How did this happen? First, it must be understood that when McMahon took his WWF promotion to the national level, the type of show he produced was actually a sanitized form of pro wrestling, with less intense violence, less blood, less overt sexuality—basically a more family friendly version of wrestling. As Foley writes:

“...Vince was the man responsible for starting the wrestling revolution in the mid-eighties. By combining a bold vision with a savvy marketing plan, Vince had gambled everything to turn his father’s regional northeast territory into an international powerhouse. His product had infuriated wrestling purists and most old-time promoters, who felt that Vince had turned their beloved sport into a circus. He had taken a low-class, vulgar, and bloody sport and turned it into clean family entertainment.” [1999:494]

For a sense of what the “beloved” albeit “low-class, vulgar, and bloody” regional form of wrestling was like, we can turn to Jim Freedman’s (1983) piece *Will the Sheik Use His Blinding Fireball? The Ideology of Professional Wrestling*. Freedman writes about a traveling wrestling show that comes to the agricultural town of Simcoe, Ontario. Freedman explicitly associates the working class environs of the Simcoe show with a primitiveness that is reflected in the form of the wrestling at the local show.

The advance men for the traveling wrestling show had come to Simcoe, Ontario, a week before the show to do the publicity. They taped show cards...to gas station walls, to the outside of the abandoned storefront windows. A casual clutch of middle-aged men stood facing one of the signs. One man, younger and more ragged than the rest, read the sign slowly with his mouth. A stout man in the rear muttered the whole thing was phoney. He worked his way closer to the sign. “That one there,” he said, animated. “I seen that one on TV. He’ll get tore up.” A moment later, he spotted his wife, returned from shopping at an uptown store. Her upper teeth were missing. “Hey, Midge,” he asked, “Wanna see the rassling?” [Freedman1983:67]

Freedman continues that “Here is professional wrestling in its original form, set amidst the fervent passions of a small town,” (1983:68) adding:

Thirty years ago professional wrestling thrived in this setting. Well-known wrestlers traveled the circuit in those days, from town to town where they were meaningful heroes. Each town knew them. Towns-folk embraced some and rejected others. The wrestlers were moral and immoral, baby faces or villains, confronting each other in full view where the towns-folk could see the fates of the demi-gods and demons of the ring. And in the fates of these caricatures of good and evil, they saw their own fates, they saw themselves and their neighbors and what they could become in the universe of their town. In the past thirty years, things have changed. Not the town but the wrestling. Wrestling has abandoned the small towns for the international world of television. The money is now made in the big city forums and domes. In these big-town arenas wrestling still plays on small-town sentiments, and as long as such sentiments survive, wrestling will always have a place. But big-town wrestling and its TV stations have taken the boy out of the country. They have wrested it from the moorings.

Wrestling's real past, and the mythological present from which it will ever draw its meaning, is in small towns like Simcoe. [1983:68-69]

Freedman's point that the local show is in some way closer to the essence, the "real past" of the tradition certainly reflects an impression that always amazed me as I attended live wrestling shows for the purpose of participant observation: the impression that a live wrestling show in an intimate hall or a bar is simply a different world than the one constructed by the cartoonish productions of the national promotions. From ringside at an independent show, the physical intensity of the wrestling is undeniable. The social scientist in the audience is immediately struck by the "efficacy of the performance" (Lincoln 1989:154). Through a display that is as obviously mimed (fake) as it is physically intense (real), the performers are able to manipulate the emotions and even the moral sensibilities of the audience members, uniting them into a singular *crowd*, and eliciting some striking outbursts from some of the most unlikely fans.

First Costello tortured Billy. There were groans and pain sounds from clean looking Billy as Costello, the man of a thousand holds, held the upper hand. Then Costello whipped Billy the Red against the ropes and met him on the rebound with an abdominal thrust. Costello had something hidden in his pants, a pencil maybe; this was dirty fighting. The crowd screamed revenge. Costello is not above pulling some dirty stuff, said a grey-haired woman next to me. Costello started jabbing with the object in his pants and the lady got out of her seat to scream at the referee. The referee looked but failed to call a foul. Then Billy decided to give Costello some of his own medicine. Billy seized the sharp object and jabbed away at Costello. No one breathed a word to the referee. Billy took Costello's two legs, spread them wide apart in front of him and checked himself as he prepared to kick Costello in the groin. Billy yelled to the audience: *Should I?* and they said *Yeah*. [Freedman 1983:69]

Wrestling is not easy on the genteel sensibilities of the class conscious. Billy's righteously indignant abuse of Costello's groin probably represents the parts of the old-school, local show that led Foley to represent it as "low-class, vulgar, and bloody" (1999:494). But what is to be made of Freedman's musings on the lumpen characters next to him in the bleachers? Should we be troubled by Freedman's search for an authentic "past" for wrestling in a Simcoe that he represents as contemporary to his observation thereof? Although his essay lays the groundwork for the argument that the culture of the proletariat is based on primitive, mimetic modes of understanding because of the nature of the proletariat mind, this is not the conclusion that he advances. Rather the factor that explains the author's Simcoe data is allegedly the salience of a two part ideology: in the ring, just as in the free market economy, fair play ought to be the norm but it is not. By succumbing to the sort of vigilantism exemplified by the crowd-sanctioned, illegal punishment of Costello's groin by Billy, the crowd acknowledges contradictory beliefs: that the good guys are fighting at a disadvantage, yet the competition itself cannot be inherently biased against the forces of good, since all men are equal in the marketplace.

Well over half of the matches are won by bad guys. For southwestern Ontarians this means that in spite of their good intentions and the widely recognized civility of which they are proud, as laborers and farmers they get little for being nice guys. The spoils go to those who use shortcuts or tricks, who play on others' fears, who care only about money and not people, who are profligates, fags, Arabs, Greeks, Germans, Americans,

Australians, imponderably obese and given to violence. Just as blue and white collars confront each other, so do fighters. The white collars have extra endowments: they are technically assisted, they turn politics to advantage, they wear sunglasses; they use putters; they are adulterated in some for or other.

There is a moral and political battle going on. Not between two individuals but between two explanations of how individuals fare in their daily affairs; one is the *ideology* of capitalism—that is, that all men are equal in the market place—the other, the *practice* of capitalism—that is, that good, honest men are at a distinct disadvantage. [This explains why Heels win more matches than Faces.]... The ideology of capitalism, that is democratic liberalism, is attested to only by exceptions such as the odd, decent fighter Dominic Denucci, who wins. (Freedman 1983:76)

(An interesting connection emerges here: Mick Foley began his career as a professional wrestler after several years of training at Dom Denucci's school in New York.) Just as the Horatio Alger story reinforces the myth of equal opportunity in the free market, Denucci's wrestling persona becomes a hero-to-be-emulated by virtue of his success despite the many obstacles to his inherent fairness. Freedman argues that the contradiction

“between the ideas, the ideology, or the ideal format for how individuals succeed, and the fact of just how many people actually do succeed within and according to this format, is quite understandable. It is perhaps the most important thing that they [the fans] know. A lot of them vote for the more conservative party in order to rectify this situation and to force certain persons to adhere to the format more closely than they do. [1983:77]

For Freedman, the task of a sociology of wrestling is to account for the cognitive dissonance that ought to explode out of the sheer illogic of the wrestling performance. He accomplishes this by linking the fans' suspension of disbelief to the false consciousness of the proletariat, which amounts to a suspension of disbelief of the promises of free-market capitalism.

Of course the fights are rigged, just as theater is rigged. But like theater, it is hard to keep this in mind at ringside. One elderly gentleman reckoned that “a lot of it may be false, sure, but at some point it gets pretty hot and heavy and he sure as hell wouldn't want to be in there.”

Some blows may purposely miss their mark, but most fans deny that this is true for all of them, and the fighters insist that it is never true. What is going on is that a good guy is trying to make the world safe for liberal democracy and he is losing. [1983:79]

To summarize Freedman's overall treatment of wrestling, we might say that his treatment of the mythology of wrestling is insightful and convincingly linked up with a coherent critical understanding of overarching cultural themes. Of the people at the show, the physicality of the performance, or local understandings of the performance, all we hear from Freedman are descriptions that construct otherness, rather than encourage empathy.

The local spectacle as described by Freedman was what Vice McMahon was allegedly trying to sanitize and re-package as children's entertainment during the 1980s. The cleanliness of a given wrestling promotion is, of course, a matter of relativity, and

much could be made of these connections between ideas such as hygiene, family and entertainment, but what is clear is that the supposedly family-friendly turn taken by wrestling in the 1980s amounted to a de-emphasis of high risk spots in favor of more emphasis on the fantastic and fabulous characterization of the wrestlers themselves. While wrestling had always come with a certain amount of carnival costuming and hambone acting, the televised wrestling of the eighties is usually not compared to the carnival traditions at its roots, but rather to the Saturday morning cartoons with which it competed for viewers—especially by the purists to whom Foley refers. It is worth noting that during the 1980s, Sgt. Slaughter was both a wrestler *and* a character in the G.I Joe cartoon series.

Most recent analyses of wrestling are really interpretations of wrestling manifested as this nationally televised entity in the 1980s and 90s (e.g. Lincoln 1989, Mondak 1989, Leverette 2003). The result of this focus is that these analyses tend to explain wrestling almost entirely as a system of signification, (or of discourse construction, or of myth construction) because these aspects of the form were consciously emphasized by the leaders of the national promotions, in response to economic considerations emerging from wrestling's 1980s scale shift to a national rather than a regional level of organization. In other words, when analysts saw televised matches between Sgt. Slaughter (as good guy) and the Iron Sheik (as bad guy), wherein the two men waved flags and shouted at each other before five minutes of fake punching and kicking, they appropriately cited Roland Barthes, (whose work I will discuss more fully in the next chapter,) and 'read' wrestling as possessed of its own highly symbolic logic which, not surprisingly, meshed with overarching social logics of patriotism and freedom, and good versus evil. These analyses tend to confirm Freedman's method of analysis. They divorce the manifest content of the wrestling show—that is, a display of hand to hand combat—from the latent content of the show—that is, the ideology signified by the format of the performance. In this model of interpreting wrestling, analysis of the manifest content of the show reveals the latent content.

Lincoln's (1989) treatment of wrestling comes in the form of a chapter in his book *Discourse and the Construction of Society : Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification*. His goal is to understand how the phenomenon of "symbolic inversion," which he finds in a variety of examples of expressive culture, can either undermine or reinforce "sociopolitical stability" (1989:142). His example of a symbolic inversion that assaults the social order is Marcel Duchamp's exhibition in 1917 of a sculpture entitled *Fountain*. *Fountain* was nothing more than a urinal hung upside down and signed by the artist (who used a pseudonym.) Lincoln interprets the hanging of *Fountain* and the events that followed it as a crisis in the Turnerian sense, that resulted in a social schism of the *avant garde* from traditionalists. Wrestling, on the other hand is Lincoln's example of how symbolic inversions can be orchestrated dialectically in order to reinforce a political mythology. His methodology was to watch a single televised wrestling show and then code the progress of that show in terms of the main variables that can be used to distinguish wrestlers: more or less honest, more or less patriotic, more or less ethnic, did they have elegantly dressed managers, did they win or lose, and so on.

The result of Lincoln's elaborate exercise in coding was the discovery that the honest wrestlers embodied a blue collar, Horatio Alger sense of fair play, and they were consistently beaten by characters so despicable that they came across as not only un-American, but as barely human. (Lincoln was treated to a performance by a tag team called the Moondogs, who wore tattered clothes, gnawed on large animal bones and grunted and howled rather than using language.) The matches in which the good guys finished last (matches #2-5 on a six-match card) constituted a turning of the American Horatio Alger mythology on its head—a symbolic inversion. This phase of the show represents what Freedman called “the *practice* of capitalism” (1983:76). The show was capped off, however by a main event (match #6) in which Sgt. Slaughter triumphed over a cheating Heel named Rice, thus re-establishing (re-inverting) the moral order in an overwhelming display.

The first exchange [in the Slaughter-Rice match] was perfectly choreographed and immensely revealing. Initially, Sergeant Slaughter forced Rice into a corner, where the suddenly vigilant referee ordered him to release his opponent and “break clean.” This Slaughter did with an elaborate show of sportsmanly compliance. Directly thereafter, positions were reversed, and the referee gave the same instructions to Rice, who began by ostentatiously imitating the sergeant's gesture of fair play, only to change this without warning into an illegal blow. Caught unaware, the sergeant showed surprise—and perhaps disappointment—but not pain, responding immediately with a punch of his own that sent Rice reeling across the ring. [Lincoln 1989:153]

The thrust of Lincoln's analysis is that “wrestling offers an extravagantly staged combat between good and evil,” and for this insight he cites Barthes's *Mythologies*. However,

Beyond this...there is another operative code that is both more subtle and more vicious: an ethnocentric coding for “Americanism” and lack thereof. In order to recognize this second code, which remained always subtextual to the primary moral code, it is helpful to consider...the repeated triumphs of evil. [1989:155]

As discussed by Freedman, the lesson of the repeated triumphs of evil is the inversion of the Horatio Alger myth, and Lincoln's grand point is that this inversion is simply a priming for re-inversion—Sgt. Slaughter's win—the definitive triumph of Americanism, patriotism, fair play, vigilantism, overwhelming retaliation—in general, American exceptionalism and militarism. But for the purposes of setting the groundwork for my own writing on wrestling, I wish to draw attention to the establishment in Lincoln's chapter of the mystique of the analyst. This mystique grants the scholar the ability to convert behavior to text; furthermore, it grants that in effecting this transformation, the scholar is able to discover something in behavior which is understandable—to *explain* wrestling. If wrestling shows can have “subtextual” elements, then it follows that that they must also have a text. I argue that while scholarly analysis of wrestling literally makes sense, more light will be shed on wrestling through an earnest attempt to know the wrestling ritual through participation and through direct interrogation of participants than through this focus on wrestling-as-text. In this respect, I am arguing for a more genuinely anthropological interpretation of the wrestling experience.

I see no intrinsic value in the activity of de-constructing the insightful wrestling scholarship of Freedman and Lincoln. However, I am motivated by the sympathy that I feel towards the wrestlers that I have known. As someone who has seriously considered the sacrifices that wrestlers make on behalf of their craft, it troubles me when less subtle analyses, based on the discourse-analytic method employed by scholars like Lincoln and Freedman, produce such sweeping conclusions as: “Since professional wrestling can be a factor in such legitimation, [i.e. the public legitimation of foreign policy decisions] wrestling may facilitate the continuation of a militant foreign policy” (Mondak 1989:147). Equally problematic is Sut Jhally’s (2002) one-sided condemnation of wrestling as a sustainer of social ills such as misogyny and bullying.

The first problem with these analyses is that the phenomenon typically called “wrestling” is really just the televised wrestling produced by the national promotions during the 1980s and 1990s. As I hope I have made clear, this, is a different sort of “reality” than the total universe of wrestling knowledge that is so highly valued by my informants – and yet critics either ignore that other reality (Leverette 2003), or present backyard wrestling as the media-induced degradation of the Nation’s youth (Jhally 2002). I argue that the essence of this inaccuracy is based on ignoring the varied history of wrestling, as well as the diverse contemporary manifestations of the tradition. Indeed, the wrestling performed at the Wrestleplex never played on simply nationalistic or sexist stereotypes—at least not in my experience. For the men and women who trained and performed there, wrestling was a tradition, preserved since the olden times of the traveling carnival show, and passed on from one generation to the next in the context of training. Respect for the business is a very strong sentiment backstage at wrestling shows, and it is manifested in the immense respect shown to trainers, and the simple but strict codes that determine how wrestlers interact with each other. Often the seriousness with which the tradition of wrestling is treated reaches an ironic level that is openly acknowledged by wrestlers, given the fact that the wrestling show is also in essence a fantastic put-on featuring grown men in tights pretending to fight. In any case, the “respect for the business” displayed by the wrestlers that I have met was my first clue that most wrestling scholarship relies on an inaccurate idea of just how large the tradition of wrestling is in the United States. This inaccuracy is the inevitable result of continuous scholarly deconstruction of wrestling-as-text conducted in the absolute absence of ethnographic consideration of what is a living tradition.

As a scholar I am bothered by such incomplete analyses, but as an ethnographer ethically bound to those who have lent me their knowledge of this living tradition, I have no tolerance for broad characterizations of wrestling as itself a social problem. And this leads me to the second problem with these simplistic analyses of wrestling as detrimental to the mental hygiene of America: By relying on the idea that the fans do not consciously understand what I have called the latent content of the wrestling show, these scholars have made the dual mistakes of underestimating fans and then speaking for them. These flawed analyses cease to hold water once evidence is found that at least some wrestling fans understand the complex ontological status of wrestling combat. Furthermore, they often see the inclusion of overly sexist and xenophobic thematic material into the show as the debasement of a traditional ritual that is valued in and of itself—and valued without

standing as a referent to a social mythology, or as referent to anything other than its own history. Such evidence is ample and easy to locate, given the enthusiastic use of the internet by Smart Fans. This thesis focuses on wrestlers, rather than on Smart Fans. However my description (in the introduction section of this paper) of my experience of watching RAW in 2000 with members of the FUW should provide an idea of the critical attitude with which Smarts typically meet the wrestling that comes to them through their television sets.

Here, I need to clarify something about wrestling shows. The shows of the WWE are highly exploitative of the sexist and racist sentiments of the audience, and the company deserves severe criticism, despite my arguments about the diversity that exists within the world of wrestling. While I write this, McMahon's show is the only nationally distributed wrestling show, (aside from one new challenger, TNA, which is relatively unknown as yet). This means that "wrestling" will continue to be misunderstood and undervalued by those who do not participate in the alternative forms of the genre presented in the wrestling underground.

Furthermore, I must clarify something about discourse-analytic interpretations of wrestling. Although I find flaws in some of the arguments suggested by this method, their prevalence can be traced to Barthes (1972), whose work on wrestling I address in Chapter 3. Barthes's treatment of the system of signs that renders wrestling intelligible to outsiders at no point divorces the intellectual content of the performance from the lived reality of that performance. Consider the following:

The physique of the wrestlers therefore constitutes a basic sign, which like a seed contains the whole fight. But this seed proliferates, for it is at every turn during the fight, in each new situation, that the body of the wrestler casts to the public the magical entertainment of a temperament that finds its natural expression in a gesture. The different strata of meaning throw light on each other and form the most intelligible of spectacles. Wrestling is like a diacritic writing: above the fundamental meaning of his body, the wrestler arranges comments which are episodic but always opportune, and constantly help the reading of the fight by means of gestures, attitudes, and mimicry which make the intention utterly obvious. Sometimes the wrestler triumphs with a repulsive sneer while kneeling on the good sportsman; sometimes he gives the crowd a conceited smile which forebodes an early revenge; sometimes, pinned to the ground, he hits the floor ostentatiously to make evident to all the intolerable nature of his situation.... [Barthes 1972:18, emphasis added]

Thus, although wrestling is "like" writing in some important ways, the actual bodies of the wrestlers are part of the system of signs. In an anticipation of Marvin Harris's contention that culture is best understood as an indivisible composite of action and mentation, Barthes proposes a semiotics wherein the pieces and parts of signs and symbols are not necessarily or even primarily mental entities. Barthes understood that while wrestling is similar to textual and dramatic presentations of moral lessons in many ways, it is a phenomenon unto itself. Rather than relying on a dead zone of unconsciousness in the minds of the fans, Barthes understood that the meaning of wrestling for the Parisian wrestling fan is the correct meaning. This meaning is completely contained both by the physical presence of the ritual and by the system of logic that can be found in the show. The mistake of many scholars who would mobilize

Barthes's system of reading cultural formations has been to ignore the intrinsic meaning that Barthes found in cultural gesture, while over-emphasizing the ability of text-based schematizations of cultural performances to reveal true, authentic or unconscious dimensions of experience. The fundamental aspect of Barthes's thought that is usually ignored by those who make bad use of his analytics is that his semiotics was not simply a system meant to render culture understandable. Rather it is a system that draws out an outrageous quality of specifically bourgeois culture—that within bourgeois systems of signification, the sign becomes the signifier of a higher level sign. In bourgeois culture, the nostalgia and sentimentality associated with the past and the family are recruited to the imperial project of binding individuals to nationalism, paternalism, and particularly to what is now called consumerism. In other words, Barthes's goal was never just to explain wrestling or margarine advertisements, but to show how bourgeois culture is based on a comprehensive set of misrepresentations—not an epistemology biased towards sympathetic portrayal of those who participate in a given cultural formation. In a final layer of irony, Barthes respectfully portrays wrestling as an effective type of drama, possessed of a directness and classical elegance that he probably found missing in the expressive culture favored by those whose social status compels them to look down on wrestling as low-class.

Scholarship on Analogous Practices

The second body of literature I discuss is the growing set of ethnographic studies of communities defined not by a specific ethnos, but rather by the shared devotion to a specific physical practice. Many cases of ethnographic studies of communities defined by a specific physical practice come from *Anthropology of Consciousness*, the journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Consciousness. Interest in the link between body and consciousness has been on the rise in the past few years within the society—in 2000, a special issue of A of C was published on the subject. Examples of these cases are: a study of marathon runners (Reischer 2001), a study of tattoo as embodiment of personal memories (Sarnecki 2001), a large study comparing sports to contemplation (Hunter and Csikszentmihalyi 2000), an article on the obscure Somatics movement of “mind-body centering” which began in Europe 150 years ago (Johnson 2000), as well as papers given at the 2003 Annual Meetings of the Society for the Anthropology of Consciousness, including papers on ultrarunners (Jones 2003), bellydancers (Galanti 2003), and professional wrestlers (McBride 2003).

Steve Mizrach (1997) described two such groups—ravers and modern primitives—and went so far as to speculate about characteristics that might be common to such subcultures generally. Mizrach proposed that the evolution of technologically based subcultural groups is accomplished through the construction of iterative discourse. A discourse may be considered iterative if it is “self-modifying,” meaning that its users consciously seek to advance that discourse by reacting to the most recent changes in its evolution with more linguistic or conceptual modifications (1997:133). Mizrach explores this hypothesis by discussing commonalities between three contemporary technologically based subcultural groups: hackers, ravers and modern primitives. A group can be considered technologically based if membership in that group is based on use of the technologies and techniques that make up the tradition of that group. Mizrach states that

as new subcultures develop, they will engage in a discourse in which the identity of the subculture is negotiated. Often this process leads to further group evolution and bifurcation. Mizrach states that this process of change will manifest itself in the form of linguistic evolution. This discursive/linguistic evolution is accompanied by a similarly rapid and branching evolution of the subculture's central technology and techniques. Throughout this argument, the term evolution is to be understood as a metaphor, with language being portrayed as a “code—much like the DNA code or the programming code that drives a computer—for sociocultural evolution.” (Mizrach 1997:142) Mizrach shows that as the discourses of the three groups that he studied evolved, the worldviews expressed within those discourses also evolved. For example, he reports hearing modern primitives, (people who embrace the painful practice of acquiring body art such as tattoos and piercings) articulate critiques of mainstream culture as preventing most people from experiencing an authentic connection to their bodies.

Mizrach (1997) also points out that the discourse of the modern primitives is carried out almost totally non-verbally as new trends and styles of body modification make their way through this community. He states that for a modern primitive, the discourse that is advanced on the canvas of his or her body is a statement about that person's identity, an advancement of what it means to be a modern primitive, and also, a means of becoming conscious of things that a person with an unmodified body cannot understand. That ravers report experiencing “trance” is also noteworthy for our purposes (Mizrach 1997:143).

Stanley Krippner is another writer who has used the concept of technology in order to define a specific cultural practice. He states:

Shamanism comprises a group of techniques by which practitioners deliberately alter or heighten their conscious awareness to enter the so-called “spirit world,” accessing material that they use to help and heal members of the social group that has acknowledged their shamanic status. Mythological worldviews arise from epistemologies which, in turn, are fueled by the motives, needs, and traditions of a group in a specific time and place. [Krippner 2000:98]

What is important for my argument in this formulation is the assertion that the practice in question is to be understood primarily as a set of goal-oriented techniques. While shamans will practice with varying motivations, the iteration of practice generates mythology because the practice is intrinsically epistemological. That is, rather than simply enacting myth, the shamans practice allows him or her to discover something that is unknown to the uninitiated. It is possible that continued interaction with this discovery through shamanic practice is as much or more of a priority for the shaman than creating or enunciating the mythology that arises from the circular process of shamanic practice and shamanic learning. It is not my desire to isolate whether the essence of shamanism is in the mystical aspect of the practice, or in its socially constructive (mythological) aspect. Rather, I wish to outline a framework for thinking about wrestling. While the discourse-analytic school of wrestling scholarship described above can be seen as concerning itself primarily with the mythological aspects of the tradition, my own project is to approach wrestling as a ritual technology in Krippner’s sense—a tradition with both mythological and mystical functions.

In her study of individuals who have completed marathons, footraces of approximately 26 miles, Erica L. Reischer asks “how do individuals engage the marathon in the service of a project of self-transformation,” as well as considering “how the marathon, as a cultural practice, particularly promotes the experience of self-transformation” (2001:20). Her finding that her informants often provided her with “narratives of self-transformation” in their responses to her conversing with them about marathon running is consistent with a general consensus that she found in other, non-scholarly writings on running (Reischer 2000:21). Just as the wrestling world has its dirt sheets, runners can enjoy a wide variety of literature that is created and consumed within what I would call the world of running. Wrestling and marathon running, just like the remainder of physical practices that will be discussed here, are physical practices that are embedded in a larger social world—a social network of participants who routinely engage in the actions not only of wrestling, running marathons, or whatever the case may be, but who also engage in peripheral and often social activities such as training, preparing gear, and most importantly, communicating within that social network, establishing an internal discourse in the space of magazines and web sites. Reischer discovered that runner’s magazines are filled with the thematic assertion that running 26 miles is such an accomplishment that it transforms the self—that after running the marathon, one has a sense of being able to do anything—of being a different person.

Reischer connects this discourse of achievement and self-transformation (well announced by her informants) to socially constructed ideas about individualism and worthy accomplishments being won by sheer effort. But she also draws a connection to the most basic, immediate effects of the physical act of running 26 miles. Apparently, this is something that is so draining and even painful that many runners believe that it is really beyond the limits placed on the human body by its own physiology. In the following excerpt, we see that Reischer strikes a balance between running as mythology and running as experience.

This dynamic, in which a physical act profoundly impacts one’s self-experience, suggests that this physical act is indexing an overarching meaning system, and establishes the body as the concrete medium between this symbolic order and the self. It suggests, too, the force of a more immediate corporeal experience. [2001:27]

Reischer suggests that the relationship between the self and world—mediated by the body—could be called a “trilectic,” in which all three parts mutually construct each other (2001:32). Each part of the trilectic is experienced in a way that is culturally mediated. To extend this idea, the human body as we receive it at birth has been formed by evolution with the result that certain actions produce certain effects on the consciousness. Over time, and within the socio-cultural context, these actions become organized into a pattern, or sequence such that the specific effects on the consciousness are tweaked, or refined. That there is a pattern implies that there is a community of interested parties who transmit that pattern and safeguard the truths discovered within the practice, while also critiquing the practice with the aim of tweaking the efficaciousness of the “immediate corporeal experience.” Thus simple running is converted to marathon running, a practice with more or less explicit rules that evolves within and is safeguarded

by a community—the social world of runners. This evolution is comparable to the evolution discussed by Mizrach’s (1997) of iterative discourses formed within subcultures. Thus we have the body and the self constructing practice within the relevant “world.” The practice in turn constructs the other parts of the trilectic when the body is transformed by the training and as the self is transformed by the redemptive power of the achievement narrative. But it is the intense effects of the biophysics of running for an extended period that effect a *fusion of the sensible and the intelligible*, to borrow Stoller’s words. These are fused into a singular world of running, and there is no way to determine to what extent the ideology of running on the one hand, or the action of running on the other acts in isolation to effect the transcendent mental states reported upon finishing the marathon. This fusion of mental and bodily behavior into a single phenomenon is what is hinted at by Barthes’s (1972) placement of bodies and words together within the semantic network. It validates Marvin Harris’s (1999) assertion that culture can never be understood as purely a mental entity, nor purely as physical behavior.

Another example of a cultural practice that involves control and manipulation of the body in order to affect the consciousness to a transcendent end is the practice of consensual sadomasochistic sexuality. After an ethnographic study of participants in the “leather community,” Mira Zussman and Annie Pierce conclude:

S/M play entails ritual process and facing such ultimate realities as the boundaries between life and death. Play induces trance and results in feelings of transcendence, absolute faith, trust, safety, protection and euphoria. Players experience heightened awareness, catharsis, recalibration and the achievement of balance. Play gives practitioners a feeling of unity with the divine, or even a sense of having achieved divinity oneself, and it is, for the most part, ineffable. [1998:35]

I refer the interested reader to the original scholarship for the specific effects of practical S/M. What is important here is that we again see that the practice is conditioned by the limitations and abilities of the human body, and that the practice evolves within a specific social network, along pathways that refine the consciousness-shift-inducing qualities of the practice. Like Reischer, Zussman and Pierce found a particular explanatory narrative in the interview transcripts. But instead of the ideas of individualism and achievement shared within running culture, participants in S/M were explicitly interested in achieving what one informant calls “*that* transformative experience” (Zussman and Pierce 1998:19). Furthermore, the authors found that in the literature produced by and for members of the leather community, there was frequent and explicit discussion of the religious or spiritual elements of the S/M practice. The authors even observed explicit borrowing from diverse religious practices such as Sufi dancing and elements of the Lakota Sun Dance. Of the Sun Dance-based S/M ritual, the authors write:

Despite the ritual borrowings, which could be considered by some to be inauthentic, there was no question that this was a serious religious event held by leather pagans attempting to create authentic, meaningful and effective ritual. The syncretic nature of their practice was understood by them as a way to reconstruct and revitalize a pre-Christian spirituality. While the “pre-Christian” roots of pagan leather spirituality may be equivocal, the “post-Christian” intent of the observance is indisputable. [Zussman and Pierce 1998:33]

The last sociological study of a physical practice that I will discuss here is the long study made by Loic Wacquant (1992) of a boxing gym located on the south side of Chicago. Because of the remarkable similarities between his and my findings, some of these similarities will be discussed here. An exemplary participant-observer, Wacquant trained with the all-male members of the gym for three years and became accepted as a member of the associated social group. Before reading his studies on this subject I was unaware of the intense ascetic practices involved in training to become a boxer. While training for a fight, these men must follow a rigid diet that forbids all sweeteners and thus all soda and dessert foods, as well as all alcohol. During training all sexual contact is also forbidden. Along with these deprivations, the boxer-in-training must also practice at the gym every day. And in this workout, he must not deviate from the prescribed order of exercises, and he must not spar with anyone without first receiving the approval of the head trainer.

For the purposes of this thesis, what is interesting in Wacquant's work are the many observations of how boxers form themselves over time into expert fighters, for there are many similarities between this process and the process of becoming a wrestler. On comparison, Wacquant writes:

Although this paper centers on one boxing gym, and relies heavily on the views of the trainers and boxers from that gym, I am confident that the analyses based on them have a validity that extends beyond the monographic. Indeed, comparison across time or space reveals a striking predominance of invariants over variations in the boxing universe.... [1992:224].

Also, Wacquant's theory of a Bourdieuan "pugilistic habitus" provides another perspective on the intersection of social, bodily and mental experience.

...I propose that the inculcation of what may be called the *pugilistic habitus*, that is, the specific set of bodily and mental schemata that define the competent boxer, rests on a twofold antinomy. The first owes to the fact that boxing is a sport situated at the borderline between nature and culture, a sort of empirically realized limiting case of practice, and yet that it simultaneously requires an exceptionally complex, quasi-rational management of the body and of time, whose transmission is effected in a purely practical mode, without the mediation of a theory, on the basis of an implicit and largely uncoded pedagogy. [1992:24]

The second "antinomy" upon which this inculcation rests involves the fact that boxing, while emblematic of the struggle of the individual who relies entirely on his own strengths, is learned in a way that is "nevertheless quintessentially collective." (1992:24) That is, the process of learning to box, just like the practice of boxing in matches, can only occur in the presence of shared belief in the rules of the game. In this way boxing "is born and lasts only in and through the group that it defines through a circular process." (1992:24) In this passage we see that Wacquant finds that boxing is only understandable when it is seen as a unified (i.e., mental and physical) technique that defines a group (a group that Mizrach would comfortably call a subculture) that in turn defines boxing through iterative, mimetic learning and through the immediacy of in-ring performance.

Wacquant goes to lengths to describe how boxing is the activity of a united body-mind rather than a set of rational choices on the one hand or the following of normative constraints on the other. He writes:

The surface simplicity of the boxer's moves could not be more deceiving: Far from being natural and self-evident, the basic punches... are difficult to execute properly and presuppose a thorough physical "rehabilitation," a genuine reshaping of one's kinetic coordination and even a psychic conversion. It is one thing to visualize and to understand them in thought, but quite another to realize them and, even more, to combine them in the heat of the action.

Theoretical mastery is of little help as long as the move is not inscribed within one's bodily schema; and it is only after it has been assimilated by the body in and through endless physical drills...that a punch becomes in turn fully intelligible intellectually. [1992:239-240]

Wacquant's characterization of how boxing insinuates itself into the body of the boxer emboldens me to mention the uncanny sensation that I have often experienced while watching wrestlers move—not only in the ring but simply as they walk about. The turtle-shape that the back of the wrestler seems to acquire after years of work, the flat buttocks, the light-footedness, the ability to fall flat on the hard mat under the weight of an opponent without seeming to feel anything—all these and many impressions that escape my powers of description lead me to the personal conviction that there is an ideal wrestling body that the bodies of wrestlers tend, over time, to approximate. While wrestling moves range from the deceptively simple to the obviously complex, all wrestling moves, like the boxing moves described above, can be visualized, but must be practiced part-by-part until they become second nature. Only in this way can the performers reach the level of competence needed in order to improvise matches while successfully hiding from the audience the secret signals and grips by which they help each other through the moves.

I can attest that the training sessions at wrestling schools, as well as the rules of conduct that students are held to at all times also have an "uncodified" and "practical" quality. Generally, in wrestling schools, students do conditioning exercises, do repetitive drills and then are told to improvise short exchanges based on the individual moves that they have been learning. But, more to the point, many times the student who shows up to training who is too shy to ask questions, or too shy to volunteer to try a new move is progressively isolated from the group, while the students who "want it" and are constantly asking questions or asking for more training are eventually rewarded. Wrestling trainers generally do not address groups of students with a lot of explicit instruction, they simply demonstrate and then give pointers here and there as the students try techniques. Moreover, trainers generally admit that they put wrestlers through "mental tests" so as to see their reactions. These might include verbal abuse as might come from a stereotypical drill sergeant, or, more commonly through repeated refusal to teach certain techniques.

A story from my fieldwork at the Wrestleplex might serve to illustrate the point. I had watched several training sessions at the Wrestleplex, watching from the bleachers as

the students performed repetitive exercises, drills and improvised wrestling exchanges. All of the training sessions that I had seen were led by IPW wrestlers Naphtali, Agent Steel, and Mikey Tenderfoot. But on one occasion, Navy Seal was there to lead training and many of the students were in attendance because of his prestige. This high esteem derived from the fact that he has wrestled at the highest levels of the wrestling world and because he himself had received training from people who are heroes of the business. I had never been introduced to him, and I arrived once the practice had already began. I assumed my usual spot at the side of the ring. As I sat there silently observing, Navy Seal suddenly turned and looked at me and said “Look, I don’t know who you are, but if you are here to laugh at these guys, that is not acceptable....” He believed that I was laughing at the inexperienced students because I was sitting holding my head, with one hand over my mouth, as is my habit. Several of the students tried to tell their teacher that I was alright—“No, he’s cool,” Mikey Tenderfoot mercifully volunteered. But Navy Seal was already on a tirade, very much directed at me, about how there can be no laughter at the training so that everyone can try the moves without fear. (Trying complicated and risky wrestling moves with doubt in your heart is a recipe for disaster, as can be imagined.)

Later, I realized that Navy Seal was less interested in berating me than in enacting the role of the trainer, whose job it is to put students through extreme stress in the context of training, so that while in the ring at a show, they will be prepared for the times when the match is complicated by unexpected problems—an injury, or a miscue, or some disturbance in the audience. Wrestlers must be able to handle anything during a performance, since the development of the promotion’s storyline *absolutely requires* that the match continue through to the planned ending. Let me put it this way: if you can’t handle being yelled at by the teacher at training, you probably won’t be able to protect the business by staying in character when fans riot, or if you break your ankle, or if your opponent has a heart attack in the ring.

According to wrestling lore, in the olden days, trainers could be unbelievably cruel. Mick Foley writes of his training by Dom DeNucci in his autobiography:

I wrote a little earlier about Dominic testing my will, which he did, but I have to explain what a healthy thing that is. Throughout the history of the business, wrestling trainers have often had two schools of thought about aspiring wrestlers. The first school is to take anybody who has the money, teach him the very bare essentials, and throw him to the wolves. Unfortunately, with so many “trained” wrestlers out there, and so few shows being run, most of the guys’ “careers” consist of only a few very small matches. The wrestling landscape is literally littered with thousands of wannabe wrestlers who don’t know a wristlock from a wristwatch.

The other school of thought is the “let’s show them wrestling is real” school. The concept is drummed into these poor unsuspecting kids in different ways, the most popular of which is to exercise them until they puke, and then get them in the ring and eat them alive. Some would intentionally injure a prospective student, so as to send him back to the real world with a different outlook on wrestling. A common ploy was to goad an unsuspecting student into the hands-and-knees amateur wrestling “referee position,” under the impression [that they would be] learning some technical skills. Once the student was in the position, the trainer would abruptly drop a knee on the back of the poor kid’s ankle, immediately breaking it, and therefore putting him in a cast so he could tell all his friends that wrestling was “real.” [1999:99-100]

Foley continues:

Thankfully, DeNucci subscribed to neither theory. He neither took my money selfishly nor tried to make an example of me. Yes, he made me respect the business, and yes, he put me in some holds that were sheer torture, but he never tried to prove himself by abusing me or anyone else. [1999:100-101]

Wacquant (1992:235-236) notes that boxing gyms have their own sets of rules for conduct while in the gym which are generally not posted, and reveals in a footnote that “The more unstable and socially dispersed the membership of the club, the more explicit the regulations.” (253-254) The lack of posted rules at the Wrestleplex suggests that in wrestling, social bonds are relatively tight. This would facilitate the level of trust that must obtain between wrestlers, who are responsible for each others’ bodies during performances, as well as insulating the secrets of the business from outsiders. As an example of one unspoken rule that was transmitted immediately but never elucidated at the Wrestleplex was the norm that, when arriving at a training session, a student ought to go around and shake hands with all the other students present. Once I caught on to this, I was a hand-shaking machine at the field site, and the wrestlers always warmed to me more quickly after that. I believe that this gesture of handshaking derives from the trust that must exist between all the workers, given the fact that they are responsible for each other’s safety in the ring. Another result of the handshake is that it breaks down any disinclination a student may have against touching other people.

Eventually, I interviewed Mikey Tenderfoot about his role as a trainer at the school.

Mikey Tenderfoot - I was trained by Navy Seal. Who’s done a lot of work over in Japan for Battle Arts. In Germany, south America, Canada—all over the place, the man’s been everywhere—WCW WWE, whatever, and uh, I was also trained by Jeff Bradley, who was the original Dudley Dudley in ECW, trained by Hiro Matsuda, uh been to big Japan been everywhere—been to Puerto Rico, everywhere. And they really instilled in me how to train somebody—the proper way to go about training somebody. You have to put people through mental tests. Even though it might not make sense to them, it’ll make sense to them when they finally accomplish it and everything will come together. So I think that, that—it’s implemented in me a sort of uh a unique training style to pass on the knowledge to future generations --cause that’s all it is. If you don’t teach anybody anything, how is anybody gonna get better?

McBride- Yeah. And how would wrestling continue, also?

Mikey Tenderfoot - Exactly. It wouldn’t. It would die. So you need to you need to really put a hands on approach with all the students especially when they’re involved in the company that you’re working for because you want the company to look good. And you want people to succeed inside the company and outside the company.

Another aspect of life at the Wrestleplex that Mikey’s words evoke is apparently also to be found in Wacquant’s gym. That is the encyclopedic knowledge of the history of wrestling (or boxing as the case may be.) Wacquant writes:

In the course of these endless conversations, head coach Richie and the older members of the gym reveal a near-encyclopedic knowledge of the names, places, and events that make up the pugilistic folklore. The outstanding fights of history, especially regional, are frequently evoked, as are the successes and setbacks of boxers on the rise or on the decline. Through a deliberate upturning of the official hierarchy of values, the great televised clashes (e.g., Leonard vs. Hawgler or Holyfield vs. Foreman) are less prized than are local confrontations, and the strings of names mentioned in gym gossip include many more obscure fighters than famous boxers known by the media or the general public. [1992:231]

The passage in its entirety applies to the Wrestleplex, once “wrestling” is substituted for “boxing.” At the Wrestleplex, and indeed at every meeting of Smarts or wrestlers that I have attended, the conversation is “endless” as well as packed with such a wealth of wrestling folklore as to make the notebook-wielding anthropologist despair. The main events of WWE shows are often unsatisfactory, whereas the exploits of Japanese and independent (i.e. “regional”) wrestlers is of intense interest.

However, a final passage from Wacquant’s work, a quote from an informant of his, will fully explain why I have decided to isolate consciousness alteration as the key factor by which we might come to recognize an example of a certain class of physical practice:

I come [to the gym] because I love to come there to work out. I hate it when I don’t come. You know like a doctor who love to perform surgery: gotta be there, it’s like a *natural high*. I can’t explain it, it’s just a natural high. It’s somethin’ I guess like a dope fiend who’s shooting up dope. Gotta have it, I just gotta have it! (amateur [boxer], age 31, delivery driver by day and security guard by night) [1992:241]

Relevant Theoretical Contributions

The final section of this literature review presents the work of scholars who have considered in a general way aspects of cultural life established co-operatively by consciousness, society, and the body. My presentation of these theoretical frameworks will provide the structure for the analysis of my observations, and justify my methodological choices.

Habitus

The first of general formulation of the relation between society and the body I will discuss was proposed by Marcel Mauss. In a lecture given in 1934, Mauss (1973) outlined an explanation of how society, individual consciousness and the biology of the human organism cooperate to create specific types of experience that he, as a practitioner of “descriptive ethnology” could arrange, and survey (1973:70). According to himself, Mauss’s thinking on this issue began to develop when he conceived of the notion of a “habitus.” (1973:73) A habitus may be thought of as the way of doing things—of physically behaving in the world. These patterns of behavior are interesting to social scientists because they “do not just vary with individuals and their imitations, they vary especially between societies, educations, proprieties, and fashions, prestiges.” (1973:73) Mauss gives several examples, asserting that Englishmen and Frenchmen have recognizably different manners of walking that they develop by imitating those

immediately around them—their own countrymen, obviously. This would indicate that there exist two separate *habiti* amongst the two groups. *Habitus* also varies across generation, according to Mauss, who explains that he was taught to run with his arms close to his chest, and to swim in a way that involves swallowing some water and spitting it out with each stroke, and to walk with his hands closed—all arbitrarily prescribed manners of carrying oneself that went out of fashion within his lifetime.

For Mauss, a *habitus* was created by the interplay of biology, sociology, and also psychology, which acts as an intermediary between biology and sociology. “It is the triple viewpoint, that of the ‘total man’ that is needed.” (Mauss 1973:73) This bears close resemblance to Reischer’s (2001) suggested “trilectic” of body, world and self. It could be argued that the three parts of her model correspond to Mauss’s biological, social and psychological respectively, although in Reicher’s analysis, it is the body (the biological) that mediates the interaction of world (the social) and the self (the psychological). That Mauss (1973:86) appoints the psychological self as the facilitating or mediating member of the triad probably reflects his Durkheimian belief that consciousness emerges from society and not the other way around. It would be wrong to think that Mauss saw simple vectors of causation moving between the three aspects of his model. Rather he compares the three aspects of *habitus* to three gears or “cogs”—the question is not the direction of causality but the differing ratios of the gears (1973:85). We might ask, for example, to what extent does *motion* in the realm of the biological (for example) bring about readjustments in the realm of the social, and to what extent are these shifts dampened or amplified by the connecting gear—the psychological?

Education is the dominant element of *habitus*. The meaning of this is that ideal habits, which are acquired slowly, are most often made explicit when they are prescribed to children or novices, as when children are instructed in etiquette or manners. However Mauss certainly conceived of *habitus* as including much more than codes of etiquette, for he emphasizes the predominantly wordless nature of this education when he states that “The notion of education could be superimposed on that of imitation.” (1973:73)

Technique

Whereas his idea of *habitus* is useful for the description and explanation of the socially conditioned patterns of bodily action, it is Mauss’s conception of a “technique of the body” that allows for more precision and thus the truly ethnological organization of data (1973:75). Mauss calls technique “an action which is *effective* and *traditional*.” (1973:73) He provides an elaborate typology, giving copious examples throughout, of techniques that vary by society, sex, age, generation, efficiency, and manner of transmission. Some of the techniques that might vary are manners of sleeping, horse-riding, squatting, climbing, walking, running, throwing, dancing, jumping, climbing, descending staircases, swimming, sleight of hand, juggling, spitting, and, of course “techniques of reproduction.” (Mauss 1973:80-85)

Actions of technique may be differentiated from “the effective traditional action of religion, the symbolical or juridical effective traditional action, the actions of life in

common, [or] moral actions” in that they are understood by those who perform them as “*actions of a mechanical, physical or physio-chemical order* and that they are pursued with that aim in view.” (1973:73) Mauss hypothesizes that religious and moral actions are non-technical, since they do not relate to the manipulation of bodies as the means to specific ends. Presumably once a religious act becomes goal oriented, (for example, an enchanting spell or a prayer for the remission of the suffering of the souls in Purgatory,) it becomes—or perhaps assumes—technique. In any case, that Mauss’ s example of a technique that includes actions of the physio-chemical order is the drinking of alcohol seems to support my proposal to look for examples of traditional techniques of consciousness use and alteration. This distinction between technique and non-goal-oriented action, in my opinion, corresponds to the distinction between the symbolic order of the world of wrestling that was examined by scholars such as Lincoln (1989), Mondak (1989) and Leverette (2003); and the practical level that is of interest to myself. In other words, wrestling, as conceived by the discourse-analytic school of wrestling scholarship, is primarily a referential system and thus more like these religious or symbolical actions that Mauss differentiates from technique, than a technique in the proper sense. The incompleteness of this conception of wrestling is what I hope to show with this thesis.

The focus of his argument about technique is that it is something that we can contemplate in order to understand something of the very nature of society. But it should also be noted that Mauss’s ethnological sensibility, that is, his belief in the value of a taxonomy of techniques, leaves one with the impression that Mauss was at least somewhat concerned with how the broadness or narrowness of an individual’s repertoire of techniques limits the variety and perhaps richness of the individual’s life experience. Consider the following example deployed by Mauss to illustrate that techniques for eating often vary across societies: “You will remember the story ...about the Shah of Persia. The Shah was the guest of Napoleon III and insisted on eating with his fingers. The Emperor urged him to use a golden fork. ‘You don’t know what a pleasure you are missing,’ the Shah replied.” (1992:84)

After many such examples, Mauss concludes that “...we are everywhere faced with physio-psycho-sociological assemblages of series of actions. These actions are more or less habitual and ...ancient in the life of the individual and in the history of the society.” (Mauss 1973:85) And furthermore, “one of the reasons why these series may more easily be assembled in the individual is precisely because they are assembled by and for social authority.” (Mauss 1973:85) Mauss’s example here is a unit of soldiers who are drilled upon the parade ground so that they might form into a more mobile and unified force, the lesson being: “in group life as a whole there is a kind of education of movements in close order. Hence there is a strong sociological causality in all of these facts.” (1973:85)

Implications

In light of these formulations, Mauss states “that there are two big questions on the agenda for psychology: the question of individual capacities, of technical orientation, and the question of salient features, of bio-typology, which may concur with the brief

investigations I have just made [i.e. the list of variable techniques and the examples thereof].” (1973:86) The story of the Shah who used no utensils reveals how such ideas of typology can rapidly mobilize orientalist, or ethnocentric sentiments. Moreover, Mauss asserts that the educational inculcation of habitus and technique

is above all a retarding mechanism... inhibiting disorderly movements; this retardation subsequently allows a co-ordinated response of co-ordinated movements setting off in the direction of a chosen goal. This resistance to emotional seizure is something fundamental in social and mental life. It separates out, it even classifies the so-called primitive societies; according to whether they display more brutal, unreflected, unconscious reactions, or on the contrary, more isolated, precise actions governed by a clear consciousness. (1973:86)

Today this passage can and should be answered with the objection that there will never be found a society that, as a whole, displays discernibly more brutal, unreflected, unconscious behaviors than any other. Thus this less-educated society is in fact merely hypothetical. The ethnocentric tones of Mauss’s formulation hardly need to be pointed out. Although primitiveness is no longer a key concept in anthropology, it is interesting that, for Mauss, primitiveness is not merely defined as different from advanced society. Following his model, we might say that a primitive society simply has less habitus—less culture than an advanced society. What is intriguing about this formulation is that it renders technique and culture as substantially the same thing. If this is the case, then wrestling, which would be conceived of as an elaborate set of techniques for training wrestlers and staging shows, *is* culture. This contrasts with analyses of wrestling that begin with the assumption that wrestling is an expressive activity that operates *within* a given culture. This assumption is, I think, the reason that the discourse-analytic school of wrestling scholarship always supports the hypothesis that wrestling is a discourse that constructs, supports or reinforces hegemonic narratives about patriotism freedom and the like. If wrestling is *part* of American culture, it *must* be indexing the American imperial myth. Or, in other words, this assumption might explain why it is never imagined by scholars interested in wrestling that the tradition might contain critiques of the social order, or may be in some way outside of, or emergent from that order. Of course, I am not arguing that a person who has not learned to wrestle is more primitive than someone who has not. But I do think that the close linking of the ideas of technique and culture will aid in the construction of a more anthropological understanding of (in this case) the culture of wrestling.

The “question of individual capacities, of technical orientation” is a less obscure matter, and thus it generates more specific questions. Given that we can accept that specific “physio-psycho-sociological assemblages of series of actions” are found in the world, varying in distribution across social groups, the entire variety of human experience—rendered in terms of meanings and sensuous experience becomes the chief field of interest for a new type of social science—an exploratory, qualitative science that focuses on the links between biology, psychology and sociology. The question is not *what* is the meaning, *what* is the quality of social life, but *how* is that life lived. That the limits of human experience ought to be explored seems to have been self-evident to Mauss, with his interest in “descriptive ethnology,” and it is hard to deny the appeal of exploration for its own sake. (1973:70-71)

Amongst scholars, William James (1885) has provided the most compelling discussion of the intrinsic worth of the exploration of the variation of human techniques that modify consciousness in a famous passage in the *Varieties of Religious Experience*, which was first published in 1902. In a chapter of that work entitled “Mysticism,” James writes:

Nitrous oxide and ether, especially nitrous oxide, when sufficiently diluted with air, stimulate the mystical consciousness in an extraordinary degree. Depth beyond depth of truth seems revealed to the inhaler. This truth fades out, however, or escapes, at the moment of coming to; and if any words remain over in which it seemed to clothe itself, they prove to be the veriest nonsense. Nevertheless, the sense of a profound meaning having been there persists; and I know more than one person who is persuaded that in the nitrous oxide trance we have a genuine metaphysical revelation.

Some years ago, I myself made some observations on this aspect of nitrous oxide intoxication, and reported them in print. One conclusion was forced upon my mind at that time, and my impression of its truth has ever since remained unshaken. It is that our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation. No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded. How to regard them is the question. Looking back at my own experiences, they all converge toward a kind of insight to which I cannot help ascribing some metaphysical significance. The keynote of it is invariably a reconciliation. It is as if the opposites of the world, whose contradictoriness and conflict make all our difficulties and troubles, were melted into unity. Not only do they, as contrasted species, belong to one and the same genus, but *one of the species*, the nobler and better one, *is itself the genus, and so soaks up and absorbs its opposite into itself*. This is a dark saying, I know, when thus expressed in terms of common logic, but I cannot wholly escape from its authority. I feel as if it must mean something, something like what the Hegelian philosophy means, if one could only lay hold of it more clearly. Those who have ears to hear, let them hear; to me the living sense of its reality only comes in the artificial mystic state of mind.

I just now spoke of friends who believe in the anaesthetic revelation. For them too it is a monistic insight, in which the *other* in its various forms appears absorbed into the One. (James 1885:387-389)

James’s interest in this field of research is clear, and is on a par with Mauss’s. Consider Mauss’s interest in

the techniques of Taoism, its techniques of the body, breathing techniques in particular. I have studied the Sanscrit texts of Yoga enough to know that the same things occur in India. I believe precisely that at the bottom of all our mystical states there are techniques of the body which we have not studied, but which were perfectly studied by China and India, even in very remote periods. This socio-psycho-biological study should be made. I think that there are necessarily biological means of entering into ‘communication with God’. At any rate, on this point we have the methods to understand a great many facts which we have not understood hitherto. (192:87)

For both writers, the goal of the proposed research is truth—plain and simple. Another aspect of similarity in the writing of the two men is that the distinguishing feature of the experience of these practical, mystical capabilities is that they begin with the shock of

otherness and end with inadequate attempts at communication, (foreignness compounded.) For Mauss, technique, when lived out in a particular social context constructs consciousness unique to that context—thus the habitus of a given race is fundamentally “other” than the habitus of a foreign race. The unintelligibility that exists across cultures in Mauss’s framework corresponds to the ineffability of a given mystical state as described by James: “This incommunicableness of the transport is the keynote of all mysticism. Mystical truth exists for the individual who has the transport, but for no one else.” (James 1985:405) Furthermore, James’s suggestion that the destination of all mystical “transport” is the absorbing of all otherness into “the One” is certainly intriguing, and calls to mind Mauss’s explanation that when training soldiers, or indeed, whenever applying the retarding mechanism of habitus to a population, “example and order, [order being achieved through imitative learning] that is the principle.” (1992:85) much could be made of the redemptive power imputed to the ideal type—“*the genus.*” Of course, while Mauss was interested in technique generally, here James has in mind specifically those techniques that elicit mystical consciousness—hence his emphasis on the “artificial mystic state of mind.” (1985:389)

In the methods section of this thesis, I argue that ethnography is increasingly carried out in fields that are unbounded, urban, and distinctly postmodern in style, and will tend to centralize the consciousness concept more and more, as it is found to account for variation in cultural behavior as much as the variables of mainstream social analysis. If we can see that James and Mauss were thinking of essentially the same field of reality, then we can envision how a study like Wacquant’s work at a South Chicago boxing gym is a test derived from this unified theory of mind and action. Since iteration of technique is the only access to the mentality of those initiated into the practice of a tradition, and since the habitus is learned gradually, in and through the traditional training, what anthropologists refer to as participant-observation seems to hold the only pathway to a valid sociology or anthropology of these traditions and the communities that safeguard them. The validity of participant-observation methodologies is also suggested by James’s contention that “Mystical truth exists for the individual who has the transport, but for no one else.” (1982:405) Connecting this issue to a theme in media scholarship in general and sociology of sport specifically, Wacquant writes that “a rigorous sociology of boxing ... must *break with the spectator’s point of view* that informs the preconstructed object of collective mythology, that is, the theoretical gaze ... fostered by the status of distant analyst and consumer of this ‘show business with blood.’” (1992:223)

The literature discussed above under the rubric “studies of analogous practices” falls within Mauss’s project of discerning individual capacities. I think it has been demonstrated that methods typically thought of as ethnographic are well suited to isolating and examining certain types of technique, especially by Wacquant (1992). However, it seems that this utility has thus far been shown only in the cases of those traditions that have more or less established traditions for training—for obvious reasons. Indeed boxers say that they are “in training,” and the IPW’s training program was what wrestlers call a “wrestling school.” Like habitus, technique is also intimately related to education—in a very broad sense of the word. “The techniques of the body can be classified according to their efficiency, i.e. according to the results of training. Training,

like the assembly of a machine, is the search for, the acquisition of an efficiency. Here it is a human efficiency. These techniques are thus norms of human training.” (Mauss 1973:77) Training is not just the foundation of technique, but participates in its essence. This is definitely borne out by Wacquant, and also, I believe, by my experiences at the Wrestleplex, and at various wrestling practice sessions. This formulation highlights the distinction between training and technique on the one hand, and the phenomenon of wrestling as a whole on the other—since it is the live show performed in the intimate setting (rather than the context of training) that is usually thought of as providing access to the essence of what wrestling is all about.

A final point about the fitness of certain traditional techniques for subjection to qualitative methodologies relates to the dual aspects of technique that could be called technology and method. These dual aspects of technique are seen in wrestling, and especially in the variations between various types of wrestling. On the one hand, as the tradition of wrestling has developed in the last twenty years, the repertoire of wrestling moves has come to include more complex, stylized and high-impact moves. This method is specific to wrestling, (although it borrows from some archaic systems of self-defense,) and it can be seen as developing and varying across generations and regions of wrestlers. (One IPW wrestler that I spoke with at the Wrestleplex proudly told me that at in IPW, an old school, distinctly Floridian style of wrestling was being preserved.)

On the other hand, the material culture of wrestling—the rings and the steel chairs, the barbed wire and thumbtacks—the technology of wrestling is also specific and varied in meaningful ways. The most spectacular example of this is seen in the development of hardcore wrestling. For example, consider the ring ropes replaced with barbed wire, the exploding platforms in the ring during the Foley vs. Funk Japanese Death Match. Or indeed, consider Disco Stu blading in front of 150 people during a show at a bingo hall in Bloomington, Illinois in the summer of 2000, or Zero being thrown through a burning table at the same venue the next month. Of course, much of wrestling technology is more mundane and more universal to wrestling than the burning tables or the hardcore weapons: the ring structures, the mats, the hairspray and costumes, the printing of tickets and programs and posters, the video cameras and concessions stands. Just as the search for particular techniques of the body help the social scientist find the limits of the practicing community, the same could be said of the search for the presence, absence and variation of practice-specific material culture—technology. That a specific consciousness is universal amongst the members of a specific group is a strongly held ideological position in many communities—especially those in which unity and conformity are promoted as values. The advantage of tracing the techniques and technologies of a specific community are evident given the much more ephemeral nature of the consciousness concept.

The Scholar’s Body

We have established that in order to understand any wrestling habitus that might exist, the scholar’s body itself must get into the ring. Now, a framework is needed that will provide a way of using that body and conceiving of how to communicate something

of that ineffable state of being that emerges only from practice. Within contemporary anthropology, Paul Stoller (1997) has gone a long way to establishing such a framework in his call for a “sensuous scholarship.” It is from Stoller that I have taken the critical distinction between scholarship that treats its object as text and scholarship that assumes that the human body is the substrate, medium and object of meaningful cultural life. Without invective, Stoller expresses regret that the various recent schools of post-structural and critical anthropology have over-emphasized the intelligibility of culture over its sensuousness. He writes:

In an abstract way, the models and metaphors constructed by the likes of Foucault ... powerfully deconstruct the Cartesian edifice. But concomitantly their bloodless language reinforces the very principle they critique—the separation of mind and body, which, as we have seen, regulates and subjugates the very bodies they would liberate.

This argument may seem unreasonable. The analysis of complex philosophical and political issues usually requires intricate arguments expressed in a densely packed discourse. But such a requirement I would argue should not necessarily exclude sensuous expression. Put another way, discussions of the sensuous body require sensuous scholarship in which writers tack back and forth between the analytical and sensible, in which embodied form as well as disembodied logic constitute scholarly logic. (1997:xv)

Stoller’s project is “an attempt to reawaken profoundly the scholar’s body by demonstrating how the fusion of the intelligible and the sensible can be applied to scholarly practices and representations.” (1997 xv) Note especially that the mode of analysis implied here provides a way of examining wrestling as a complex—a “fusion” of “intelligible” moral concepts and “sensible” bodily experience. Again we see the distinction between the aspects of practice that are fitting for discourse analysis, and those aspects that result from the immediate interactions of body, consciousness and society. I argue that this distinction is pointed at by in Mauss’s belief that there are more purely symbolic sets of actions that are not properly called technique because they do not arise from an intent to manipulate factors “*of a mechanical, physical or psysio-chemical order*” (1973:73).

One of Stoller’s main concerns is that “...in anthropology, for example, it is especially important to incorporate into ethnographic works the sensuous body—its smells, tastes, textures, and sensations. Such inclusion is especially paramount in the ethnographic description of societies in which the Eurocentric notion of text—and of textual interpretations—is not important.”(1997:xv) This concern is well considered by Stoller, who has conducted fieldwork among the Songhay people of Mali and Niger for decades—a people who, according to Stoller, rely not on visualist metaphors for organizing experience, but rather on various gustatory metaphors. In Songhay, sorcerers gain their power by eating it in the form of a specially prepared millet paste, and Griots—singers who preserve the ancient history of Songhay society in the form of epic poetry are said to have been consumed by history; also, two people getting to know one another are said to “eat” each other in Songhay expressions (Stoller 1997:6, 34).

Beyond discussions of non-visual epistemologies, Stoller’s (1989, 1997) greatest ethnographic achievement has been his prolonged exploration of a Songhay ritual

complex that involves the performances of troupes of spirit mediums, and also a sub-type of these rituals dedicated to a sub-class of spirits from the Songhay pantheon called the Hauka. The Hauka ritual is the single phenomenon most similar to American professional wrestling of any that I have found described in scholarly literature. As Stoller (1997:53) points out, most people who know about these ceremonies know them only through the short ethnographic film by Jean Rouch called *Les Maitres Fous*—the Foolish Masters; a film that gives relatively little ethnographic, or contextual details, but does include a remarkably well-filmed Hauka ceremony. Stoller explains:

In many Songhay villages there is a loosely organized group of men and women who constitute the local possession troupe. These men and women gather periodically to stage possession ceremonies. The head of the Songhay troupe is the ... zima or possession priest. Like the impresario of a theatrical company, the zima produces possession ceremonies in Songhay. He makes sure that the proper sacrificial animals have been purchased. He hires musicians and praise-singers. He requires the attendance of spirit mediums. But the zima is more than a producer. During ceremonies, he directs ritual action, orchestrating musical arrangements, overseeing costume changes, and interpreting spirit language. He is also responsible for the distribution of money that the troupe collects during a ceremony. [During these ceremonies,] Spirits invade the bodies of their mediums to speak to people in Songhay communities. Although the majority of mediums in Songhay are women, a large percentage are men. Contrary to much of the literature on possession, Songhay mediums come from all the social strata in the Republic of Niger. ...spirits mark their mediums by making them sick. The prepossession maladies are cured through initiation into the troupe. The cast of the Songhay possession troupe is completed by its praise singers (sorkos), and musicians. [1989:107-108]

The possession ceremonies staged by these troupes are major social events in the village of Tillaberi, where Stoller spent many years. During these ceremonies, the mediums become possessed by spirits of the Songhay pantheon who are characters from the history of the society. Ceremonies are typically carried out at the request of a non-initiated member of the community who has suffered some misfortune or wishes to gain the favor of the spirits. This individual hires the services of the troupe and pays the zima. At the ceremony, the spirits arbitrate disputes and assign people penances by which they can regain the favor of the spirits. The possession trance is triggered by a specific dance, and the burning of incense, but most especially the praise-singing of the sorko and the music of the monochord violin.

Beginning in 1925, a new set of spirits—the Hauka—began to possess mediums in Niger, and it is these spirits that had attracted the attention of Rouch during the 1950s. These spirits are interesting because after entering the body of their mediums, they claim to be members of the French colonial administration. Stoller describes seeing these spirits at a ceremony he watched: “Istambula, the leader of the Hauka, is there, as is General Malia, the General of the Red Sea. These “military” officers are served well by Bambara Mossi, a conscripted foot soldier who is exceedingly crass.” (1997:48)

The behavior of the Songhay, when possessed by the Hauka gives the unavoidable impression that it is a burlesque—that is, a lampoon of the French power elite. They may cross-dress, or break dietary taboos. The French spirits are demanding

and rude. They are prone to violent outbursts. Thus, Stoller (1984; cited in Taussig 1993) reports that audiences at these ceremonies find the Hauka funny as well as frightening. But there is another feature besides whiteness that sets the Hauka apart from other spirits of the Songhay pantheon—when possessed by Hauka, a person seems to have anomalous powers. Michael Taussig describes this phenomenon:

But in addition to the conspicuous play-acting mimicking of the European, conducted with wit and verve, there is bodily possession—which is what makes the mimicry possible yet generally works at a less than conscious level with special, even disturbing bodily effects: frothing at the mouth, bulging of the eyes, contorted limb movements, inability to feel pain. Strange “Europeans” indeed. [1993:241]

In *Les Maitres Fous*, possessed Songhay are shown beating their chests with burning branches and plunging their hands into pots of boiling liquids, as well as eating a dog. Throughout the ceremony, the possessed fling themselves to the ground repeatedly, like students at the Wrestleplex performing drills. In fact the film was considered so shocking that it was never widely distributed for fear that it would merely come across as affirming racist difference; several of Rouch’s fellow Africanists suggested that the film be destroyed. (Stoller1997:119).

This reaction clearly wounded Rouch. Should he destroy this film? In filming *Les maitres fous* Rouch’s intentions were far from racist; he wanted to demonstrate how Songhay people in the colonial Gold Coast embodied knowledge and practices “not yet known to us.” Just as in one of his earlier films, *Les magiciens de Wanzerbe* (1947), in which a sorcerer defies commonsense expectations by vomiting and then swallowing a small metal chain of power, so in *Les maitres fous*, Rouch wanted to document the unthinkable—that men and women possessed by the Hauka spirits, the spirits of French and British colonialism, can handle fire and dip their hands into boiling cauldrons of sauce without burning themselves. Always the provocateur, Rouch wanted to challenge his audiences sensuously to think new thoughts about Africa and Africans. Could these people of Africa possess knowledge “not yet known to us,” a veritable challenge to racist European conceptions of Africa’s place in the history of science? [Stoller 1997:120]

Stoller’s reading of Rouch’s intentions both conforms and contrasts with Mauss’s project of a descriptive ethnology of techniques of the body. In both cases, the formulation that each society might be engaged in its own epic, and eminently empirical investigation of the varieties of cognitive experience—to paraphrase William James—legitimizes an exploratory collection of data. We should also keep in mind Krippner’s (2000) formulation that mythology arises from shamanic practice precisely because that practice is empirical. Mauss required a universe of ethnographic data relating to specific bodily techniques. Rouch’s data was filmic. But, contrast the egalitarian goals of Rouch with the Mauss’s question of typology—a question aimed at refining the theoretical distinction between the primitive and the educated! Mauss’s framework can be rehabilitated for use within a more relativistic anthropology by asserting that the less educated and thus more brutish society is in fact a myth of scientific sociology—a hypothetical. This lets us keep his understanding of technique as learned, and preserves an insight that inspires me to see wrestling not as a part of American culture but as culture itself, alive in the world.

As such, I have applied anthropologically derived interview techniques and an analysis of wrestling experience based on local (wrestlers') conceptualizations of experience to how the wrestling show functions. In the following methods chapter, I explain in some detail the interview technique I designed for this study, and some of the justifications of this method that I have taken from current thinking on the nature of the ethnographic-observational encounter.

Chapter Three: Methods

Specific physical practices have been studied as ethnographic cases, resulting in cultural models supported by observations, interviews and participation. I take this approach to pro-wrestling. This study includes reports of semi-structured interviews and participant observation, carried out at the Florida Wrestleplex in St. Petersburg, Florida as well as the background information that I collected in Illinois. IPW, the wrestling federation formerly based at the Wrestleplex, was an indy fed of exceptional quality, featuring a regular roster of local performers, as well as occasional appearances by a wider network of itinerant indy wrestlers. Participant observation at the Wrestleplex led to a record of the context with reference to which the interviews can be understood. Interviews were transcribed and coded. Interview analysis yielded two results. The testimony included many qualitative evaluations of wrestling experience that provide a valid pathway to understanding that experience. Also, the coding of interviews helped to highlight the connections through which wrestlers come to an understanding of the world of wrestling. The model of wrestling experience forwarded by this study shows how these connections shape wrestling as a ritual technology.

Because of my familiarity with wrestling culture, and the relatively refined nature of my question about the relationship between wrestling technology and shifts in consciousness, I decided that the core of this thesis ought to be a focused probe for the presence of in-ring altered states of consciousness. I hoped for a simple, replicable test of my model. I also wanted to try out my intuition that the cultural dynamic at an indy federation would be similar to what I had observed in the FUW of Central Illinois. However, classical scientific methods of data collection, analysis and validation are inappropriate to this project. There are several reasons for this. Wrestling shows and wrestling culture are complex formations alive in the world, leaving no possibility of creating a meaningful control situation. Therefore, simple statements of causality are beyond the scope of this study. Further, the central question of this study is more concerned with the quality and meaning of wrestlers' experience than with any falsifiable hypotheses. That said, however, I am highly confident that other researchers could use the method I will outline with other wrestling federations and find basically the same result.

Methodologies based on the ethnographic traditions of inquiry are well suited for the exploration of social forms, especially in situations where recourse to the scientific method is denied or of limited utility. The information in this study was gathered through the ethnographic methods of interviewing, observing and participating. These methods generate textual records that can be conceptualized as an ethnographic data set (Spradley 1980:33). However, the use of the word *data* can be misleading, in that it is often difficult to determine the ontological status of the single ethnographic datum. On a more basic level, it is important to distinguish data entered into statistical tests for mechanical analysis and the records that are analyzed in ethnographic research (LeCompte & Schensul 1999:148). Even though ethnographies can include simple forms of data such as counts or spatial measurements, the main research questions of qualitative social research usually explore quality of experience and the interpretation of experience in the

social environment. Such projects contribute to a theoretical anthropology when these questions of quality and interpretation are used inductively to propose models of the “complex whole” of culture (LeCompte & Schensul 1999), or perhaps simply parts of that complex whole (Creswell 1998).

Observation: an Interaction Context

Classical ethnography evolved in the study of small, bounded groups where cultural variables such as kinship or religious ideology are the primary forces structuring social organization—the tropical island; the desert band. Whether guided by their own cultural bias, theoretical considerations or some of each, early practitioners tended to study culturally homogenous groups that were bounded not only by culture and language, but also by the geographical realities that tend to isolate small-scale societies. The methods and literary conventions of ethnography reveal this history in myriad ways. The assumption that an individual culture can be documented, or conceived as a whole and the assumption that idealized cultural variables can structure behavior across an entire society are examples.

Ethnography today is increasingly carried out in fields that are unbounded, urban, and distinctly postmodern in style. I argue that while classical ethnographic methods naturally highlighted the culture phenomenon, contemporary ethnographic studies of organizations, social trends, post-colonial borderlands, subcultures, etc. will tend to centralize the consciousness concept more and more, as it is found to account for variation in cultural behavior as much as the variables of mainstream social analysis such as kinship structures, ethnicity, and the immediate pressures of subsistence for examples.

In light of this shift, how will we conceive of context? How do we conceive of our observation of context, our participation in context, and how will we be able to use context to render cultural behavior understandable to the non-member? Does it make sense to study “the world of wrestling” anthropologically? Roland Barthes titled his essay on wrestling “The World of Wrestling” (1972:15-25). This is because he recognizes that wrestling can be understood as a system of signs that can be decoded using signification rules unique to wrestling. The limits of the internal logic of wrestling are taken to be the limits of this world. Wrestling, then, is exemplary of the new type of ethnographic context. Unbounded by geography or ethnicity, wrestling’s boundaries are coextensive with the activities of the social network of wrestlers, promoters and fans, in as much as these activities relate to the liminality of the wrestling show. While I have always taken the title of Barthes’s essay as validating an ethnographic approach to wrestling, his analysis relies on discovering the intelligibility of the wrestling spectacle, not on the experiences of individual wrestlers. For Barthes to represent such an emphatically embodied spectacle as a system of essentially linguistic variables might seem a contradiction that crystallizes the essential limitations of the culture-as-text school of analysis. There was no contradiction for Barthes, however, because for him, the body itself can signify, and thus is itself an integral part of wrestling’s semiological system. In describing how the audience knows, at first sight and at every succeeding moment, a Heel to be a Heel or a Face to be a Face, he writes: “It is therefore in the body of the

wrestler that we find the first key to the contest.” (1972:17) For the wrestler embodies his position in the spectacle’s moral universe with every action, posture, gesture, and costume. For Barthes, meaning (in the world of wrestling, at least,) is signified by expressive culture that is interchangeably embodied, vocal and textual, as we see in this passage:

“The physique of the wrestlers therefore constitutes a basic sign, which like a seed contains the whole fight. But this seed proliferates, for it is at every turn during the fight, in each new situation, that the body of the wrestler casts to the public the magical entertainment of a temperament that finds its natural expression in a gesture. The different strata of meaning throw light on each other and form the most *intelligible* of spectacles. *Wrestling is like a diacritic writing*: above the fundamental meaning of his body, the wrestler arranges *comments* which are episodic but always opportune, and constantly help the *reading* of the fight by means of gestures, attitudes, and mimicry which make the intention utterly obvious. Sometimes the wrestler triumphs with a repulsive sneer while kneeling on the good sportsman; sometimes he gives the crowd a conceited smile which forebodes an early revenge; sometimes, pinned to the ground, he hits the floor ostentatiously to make evident to all the intolerable nature of his situation....” (1972:18; emphasis added)

We see that for Barthes wrestling is essentially linguistic and essentially embodied. But I believe it would be an oversimplification of his analysis to say that he deployed a textual metaphor for culture. Rather, it is this linguistic nature of wrestling that grants it the status of “world.” I agree that wrestling deserves this status, and I agree that the world of wrestling turns on the axis of its own system of symbols. However, my focus on wrestlers, rather than on wrestling-explained leads me to a conceptualization of context that exceeds the boundaries of the wrestling spectacle itself. More precisely, I conceive of the context of this study as the social network connecting the meaningful bodies of wrestlers. The world of wrestling is constructed within this network. For illustration, consider IPW and the associated wrestling school. The federation maintains a corporate identity and a bureaucratic structure. This discrete organization is a social group that could easily be mapped using the techniques of social network analysis; for example, by mapping the exchange relationships between students, who pay for instruction, and the prestigious trainers who condition the students’ bodies and dispense wrestling knowledge so that they (the students) may come to embody wrestling ideology. That the learning of wrestling is embedded in a social network is made clear by the lack of printed material on how to wrestle. Technique, both physical and psychological is passed on from one wrestler to the next. The strong temptation to call this an oral tradition is a testament to the pervasiveness of the culture-as-text (i.e. culture-as-language) metaphor. How much is revealed about academic assumptions about the nature of society by the fact that the term oral tradition has no counterpart that would describe a tradition passed down the generations via mimed and repeated gesture, rather than through the telling of stories and explanations? The passing of wrestling technique from one generation to the next is probably best described as an gestural/oral tradition.

The relevant context for this paper is the extent of the social network wherein the algebra of wrestling (the set of connections between meanings and gestures, ideology and the body) is transcribed as traditional (non-textual) knowledge. Ethnographic observation in and of this context is compatible with the move, suggested by Michael V.

Angrosino and Kimberly A. Mays de Pérez (2000), towards seeing observation as an interactional context. In this research, I assumed a situational identity at the field site, helping with the operation of the ringside camera at two shows. Given that the shows I helped with were benefits for the American Cancer Society memorializing an IPW wrestler named Brett Peterson, who had died of cancer, I felt that this manner of participation saw to some of the ethical responsibilities of the ethnographer; first by compensating my informants for the information I extracted from them, and second, by aligning the goals of the research with goals of those studied. At training sessions, observation was non-participatory by necessity. However, since there were usually one or two spectators at training sessions at the Wrestleplex—girlfriends, lackeys or prospective students, this observation was somewhat normal for the context. The records of these experiences of observation, logs and notes, reveal the position of the researcher as a body entering the social nexus of wrestling (its social life), and subsequently the world of wrestling (its full meaning). This is true, in that the record of observation highlights the responses of members of the local culture to my presence, and the history of the negotiation of my status at the field site.

A key quality of observation as context of research, according to Angrosino and Mays de Pérez, is related to the distinction between ideal culture and culture as it is actually lived. Methodical observation based on minimal interruption of the natural environment being observed supposedly allows the observer a broad view of the cultural system, and hence the ability to discern the patterns and rules of general cultural norms. The researcher who assumes a negotiated and specific role at the field site, on the other hand, will be confronted with behavior that may only make sense in a single situation and moreover, the research participants will expect the researcher to behave in a manner appropriate to that moment (Angrosino & Mays de Pérez 2000). The relationship between these behaviors and general cultural norms will likely be apparent to the researcher who has achieved a certain amount of cultural competence. The point is that extrapolating cultural norms from situational behavior is not done directly. This is because the normative aspects of culture are assumed to be shaped by power relations, and power is assumed to be distributed unequally amongst members of a culture. Since this project focuses on the quality and meaning of the wrestling experience, rather than on culturally prescribed behaviors, this way of observing is especially appropriate here. Also, note that the underpinnings of methodical observation rely on visualist metaphors, while contextual observation is appropriate for studying embodied experience in the manner suggested by Stoller (1997), especially because of the emphasis of the position of the scholar's body relative to lived experience. This level of access resulted in a certain level of comfort and familiarity that facilitated the collection of interviews, as well as simply facilitating more comprehensive surveillance of the scenes of cultural activity.

My analysis of narrative information from interview texts is complemented by information gathered during participant-observation at the Wrestleplex without which, these texts are not intelligible. Furthermore the experiences of the many hours that I have spent with wrestlers over the years was vital in building up the cultural knowledge I brought to the interview situations.

Interviews: Eliciting Narrative Accounts

In designing this study, I focused on adapting the ethnographic semi-structured interview to the task of investigating the shifts of consciousness that take place in wrestling matches. Rather than simply a method of collecting facts, the interviews were designed to elicit a series of short narratives that would contain descriptive, first person accounts of the experience of wrestling. As well as providing a valid pathway to understanding that experience, the narrative form of the answers is assumed to consist of enunciations of the culturally conditioned relationships between culturally meaningful aspects of that experience. Because I was interested in narrative answers, a strictly structured interview format was out of the question. The project required conversational spaces in which the wrestlers would provide reports of their own experience, according to the themes that they judged most important to the interviewer's ultimate comprehension of life in wrestling. Thus the interview protocol was composed of a list of six separate topics, or talking points. In order to create a comfortable conversational space, and to allow informants the freedom to guide the conversation through ideas that they deemed important, the topics were not necessarily discussed in the same order in every interview. If sufficient information for analysis had been elicited before all the topics in the protocol were brought up by the researcher, then the interview was terminated without redundant questions being asked.

As is standard practice in ethnography, I began my project at the Wrestleplex with key informant interviews. These key informants were the IPW wrestlers Naphtali, Rod Steel and Agent Steele. These three interviews, carried out on March 27th, 2003, served multiple purposes. I was able to ask the "grand tour" questions that allow the ethnographer to be oriented to the field situation. Also, I was able to coordinate scheduling of observations and future interviews at the time of these interviews. I also interviewed Ron Neimi, the promoter of IPW who provided me with a great deal of insight into the business of running wrestling shows and general information about the IPW organization. Most importantly, in these interviews I tried to begin to establish what items would be included in the interview protocol, and how they might be rendered sensible to members of this local cultural scene.

Seven short interviews were carried out, following the protocol, during the day on May 18th, 2003 as wrestlers gathered for that evening's show. The wrestlers interviewed performed as Mark Zout, The Natural Kenny King, Mikey Tenderfoot, Comic Book Guy Anderson, Billy Fives, Lennox (the only Female wrestler at the show), and a tag team of two wrestlers (interviewed together) referred to as Balls Azules. The two gentlemen who comprised Balls Azules attended high school. I estimate that the remainder of those interviewed were aged throughout their twenties. One wrestler was African American, the remainder would be classified by the larger society as "white." All the informants spoke English as a first language, except Lennox, who was born in Italy.

All those interviewed signed an informed consent instrument approved by the IRB of the University of South Florida. I asked each respondent how I should refer to them in written reports or publications. Each informant agreed that I would refer to him

or her by their “gimmick name” —the name that they use while performing. Generally anthropologists are expected to maintain the anonymity of their informants, often inventing pseudonyms by which to call the subjects they discuss. However, professional wrestlers almost always value exposure and publicity. Wrestlers and wrestling federations must self-promote to the fullest possible extent. All my informants were very willing or even eager to give me an interview, and this is certainly at least partly because they understood that I was working on publishing something about IPW. Since the IPW is now defunct, I will mention here that many IPW wrestlers are continuing their fine work with an organization called the National Wrestling Alliance, especially in that group’s NWA-Florida division.

Activity in wrestling federations is generally organized in a production cycle that spans from one show to the next. Shows then, are the major social events in the wrestling world, and while bell time was 8:00pm, the tribe began to gather as early as 12:00 or 1:00 in the afternoon. The excitement and anticipation during the hours immediately leading up to a show is expressed in a flurry of rehearsing, last minute preparations and socializing. The wrestlers I approached all gladly assented to my interview requests as everyone milled about the building talking and joking loudly. I will now describe each of the six topics, or prompts that made up the interview protocol.

Topic 1 is the story of how the informant became involved in Pro wrestling. So, the interviews would begin when I raised this topic with a query such as “Would you tell me the story of how you became involved in wrestling, and how you got involved here at the Wrestleplex?” Many methods texts warn against this type of compound questioning. However, given that I was hoping to elicit narrative, rather than discover a discrete piece of information, I found that these questions clue in the informant as to the direction in which the conversation is headed, and lead to longer sequences of related concepts in the response. This line of questioning established something of the informant’s personality and history, while conveniently keeping the conversation on relevant personal history and away from irrelevant or overly personal information.

I have been in the locker room at dozens of wrestling shows and I have watched countless training sessions. There, as in most situations where more than one wrestler is present, discussion is largely made up of recalling, retelling, and discussing matches. These discussions are inevitable and irrepressible at the margins of the training sessions, before the shows and at the bar afterwards. The scene at the IPW Wrestleplex was no exception. On the day of the show, as I moved from one conversation circle to another, I was subjected to a flood of ethnographic data as elite wrestlers from the storied past of the form were name checked and quickly associated with their most memorable matches and opponents. Just as much time was spent going over and over IPW matches in fine-grained detail, especially matches from recent shows. When a wrestler talks about a match that he or she worked, usually the match as it went off is compared to the pre-arrangements and plans that had been made. These conversations are structured around recalling individual spots, whether they went off well, or badly. In these conversations, a wrestler talking about a match he/she was involved in often will recall what was going through his/her mind as the match unfolded as a way of piecing the match back together.

Topics 2 and 3 were designed to elicit narratives similar to the ones that permeate the air of the locker room. Topic 2 is the informant's memory of his or her first match. Topic 3 is the informant's memory of his or her most recent match. Since discussions of this sort are part of life in cultural scenes the responses to these topics were usually easily recalled and enunciated. These topics led the informant to begin thinking about and describing the experience of wrestling at shows, and it was my hope that these topics would refresh the experiential memory of the wrestler.

Topic 4 is the altered state of consciousness experienced in the ring. Whether it represented a continuation of the flow of conversation, or a change of subject, this topic was introduced in the same manner in each interview. I would simply retell the story related to me by Dre—the story of his being put through a table by Zero in the FUW show of May 6, 2000. I would end the story by relating how Dre had told me that story in order to explain that during the particularly intense match, what might have appeared painful, in fact “felt so good,” and constituted something “like” a “trance.” I would then and then ask the informant if he/she would agree with his choice of the word “trance.” Here, from an interview transcript, is an example of my speech:

“Um I uh.-- there's one other thing that I ask everybody about that I want to make sure that I touched on with you, and that's a story: one time I was interviewing a wrestler back in Illinois and I was talking to him, he had just gotten thrown off of a stage and through a wooden table and we were sittin' around talking about it later, and uh he was like 'you know, when I went through that table, it felt so good, he was like 'uh! it just felt great.' And I was like that's really interesting, because to me it looked awfully painful. And I so I asked him about it and he said 'yeah you know, I mean when we're in the ring, it's kind of like a trance we go into' that's what he said. Do you think a lot of guys feel like that? That they would use that word, that idea to describe being in the ring?”

To this, my informant replied “I don't know necessarily that I would say *trance*. You go into like a altered, a altered state...” Even though many methods texts recommend avoiding yes or no questions as a way of preventing truncated answers from the respondent, I was generally very satisfied with how this way of questioning led respondents to try to refine my understanding of the wrestling experience. We will see that in several examples, as in the one quoted just above, an initially negative response to the question is followed with a more subtle description of being in the ring that affirms the consciousness altering quality of the experience. In this way, a somewhat leading and complicated question functions as a straw man—a low level theory that I invite the wrestlers to directly critique.

Topic 5 was also introduced by a direct question: “Have you ever experienced anything in the world of wrestling that has changed your life?” This question was designed as a probe for Absolute Unitary Being, a state of consciousness hypothesized by Eugene d'Aquili and Andrew B. Newberg (2001). AUB is basically an operationalization of the apparently cross-culturally present state of consciousness in which a more authentic, supramundane, potentially mystical reality is sensed. AUB has two defining qualities. The first is the sensation that the universe is a singularity, a unity that connects all things and beings, including person experiencing AUB. The second mark of having experienced this consciousness is a sense that the experience has fundamentally changed

one's life or personality. Although many reviewers have expressed concern that the logic of searching for universal experiences of mystical consciousness with the models and methodologies of neuroscience is inherently circular, some scholars of the anthropology of consciousness have found the concept practically and analytically useful (Jones 2003; Newberg & d'Aquili 2000). Topic 5 was a way of testing to see if the in-ring consciousness might be related to AUB. Put another way, is the in-ring alteration of consciousness transcendent? As we will see in the results chapter, this seems not to be the case for the wrestlers I interviewed.

Topic 6 was the critical reception of wrestling in media external to the world of wrestling. Wrestling, because of its nature as a cultural world almost unto itself, is often reported on as a human interest story in various media. However, wrestling's claims to its own meaning system and to its own visual language has led to a series of misreadings and derisions from outside of the culture. Wrestling as human interest story is often a temptation for 'journalists' to indulge in the delicate realism and knowing jokes that mark the discursive practice of othering social inferiors. Media reports of injuries and even deaths occurring as youngsters tried to imitate professional wrestling, while apparently having no effect on the popularity of wrestling, are another source of bad press for wrestling in general. Many wrestlers feel that wrestling is unfairly blamed by mainstream media for various social ills. In many clear examples of the misreading of the forms of wrestling culture, journalistic and academic dissections of wrestling as graphically violent enactments of anti-gay, anti-woman gender norms have implicated wrestling in U.S. society's culture of machismo (Jhally 2002). These various representations of wrestling are not only one sided, but also fall into the trap of interpreting wrestling as if it were a necessarily an ideological discourse rather than a logical practice, let alone an embodied way of knowing. This should not be surprising, but it does seem incumbent upon myself, a social researcher with access to the meanings and embodiments of the world of wrestling, to give a voice to those who experience the frustration and alienation that follows from being represented and silenced by that representation. Many of the wrestlers that I have interviewed have feelings on this subject and were ready for the question with well thought out responses. At least one wrestler brought up the subject before I did, anxious to have his feelings on the subject included in the interview.

This study was designed to focus quite tightly on professional wrestlers and their interpretations of their own performance experience. Thus, it is not directly a study of the wrestling audience in the tradition of cultural studies or media studies. Such a study would certainly be interesting, and could provide a more detailed impression of that specific performance of credulity that occurs at wrestling shows, and which generally puzzles people unfamiliar with the genre. However, the reader interested in general theories of the media audience in contemporary culture will find that my analysis touches on three aspects of this issue as it pertains to pro wrestling: the role of the Mark (from the perspective of indy wrestlers), the fandom of the Smart, and the creative, extra-textual activity of backyard wrestling.

I did not interview the fans in the stands with me. The primary reason for this was that this would have been too intrusive from the perspective of the federations running the shows I observed. In South and Central Florida, competition for fans between the independent federations is fierce, with supporters of different groups bad-mouthing competing feds on internet bulletin boards. Competing federations occasionally run shows on the same night, which is usually interpreted by wrestlers as federations attempting to harm one another's bottom lines. So, messing around with the precious fans once they were in the seats seemed like a really bad idea—especially at the Wrestleplex where, as a newcomer, my right to exist in the building was not always perfectly established in everybody's mind. But, more to the point, my research has led me to focus on the descriptions of the wrestling fans drawn from interview texts. In these texts we find out why and how the presence and performance of the audience-as-crowd is a *sine qua non* of a successful pro wrestling show.

This study used the methods of ethnography as adapted to an unbounded field. Interaction and participation in the field supported an interview procedure. The extent to which we find culture or consciousness represented in interview responses depends on the extent to which analysis accounts for the authorship of interview responses. In this case, the pattern across different interview transcripts could be taken as evidence of shared local understandings of how the wrestling ritual functions, or as the standardization of the effect of the ritual. The implications of such patterns for our understanding of the body and of consciousness will be explored after judgments are made about why wrestlers decide to embody wrestling logic—even with their breaking bones and spraying blood.

Chapter Four: Analysis

What follows is an excerpt from *In Sorcery's Shadow*, by Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes, in which is described a ceremony of a troupe of Songhay mediums:

THE COMING OF SERCI

In the early afternoon of that same Thursday, men and women associated with the Tillaberi cult of possession came into the compound of Adamu Genitongo. They greeted him and me and entered the Sohanci's [the possession priest] hut, which they called the spirit house, a grass hut that was the domain of supernatural beings. The Sohanci instructed his wife, Jemma, to bring the adepts food to eat. She brought them a plate of steaming rice which she drenched with a pungent black sauce. From my vantage under the single tree in the compound, I heard the mediums chattering as they ate their meal. Soon thereafter, the acrid smell of the resin *ceeyndi* wafted out of the spirit house.

"Why are they burning that resin?" I asked the Sohanci.

"They are preparing themselves for the festivities this afternoon," he told me.

When the shadows stretched from the thatched canopy to the spirit house, it was time to begin the ceremony. The drummers sat behind their gourds and struck up a rolling beat. The violinist took his place directly behind the drummers on a low stool and played some of the syncopated melodies from the huge repertory of sacred spirit music. The cracking echo of the gourd drums carried far in the still dry air of Tillaberi. Attracted by the music, people trickled into the Sohanci's compound. Men and women strolled into the compound wearing their most flamboyant clothing, for a possession dance is a dress-up occasion.

As the spectators arrived, so did the vendors, with small tables of goods balanced on their heads. A possession dance gave them the opportunity to sell cigarettes, hard candy, and chewing gum to the audience. The tempo of the music quickened. The buzz of the audience heightened. Some young children sauntered onto the dance grounds in front of the musicians' canopied stand, but they were ignored by the crowd and the major personalities of the possession cult.

But now a number of older women swept onto the dance ground. Holding one-foot-wide strips of cloth horizontally in front of them with both hands, the women formed a circle and danced counter-clockwise. Moving to the slow melodious beat of what is called the *windi*, they danced with deliberation, pressing their right feet into the sand three times before taking a step forward. Eventually these women broke the circle and formed a line at the edge of the dance ground. The musicians picked up the beat and played a tempo called the *gani*, or dancing music. As each dancer moved toward the canopy and the gourd drums, the musicians accelerated the tempo. One by one the dancers came closer and the tempo became faster still. The tempo reached a climax when the dancers, now performing directly in front of the musicians, furiously kicked up sand.

The most talented dancers received tips from the appreciative audience. When this occurred, the dancer held up the gift, usually a coin worth 50 or 100 francs, and threw it to one of the drummers who put the money in a common kitty. When many people come to a possession dance and dancing and music are particularly good, the cult can sometimes collect as much as 5,000 francs (\$20).

At the peak of the dance contest, much to the delight of the audience, the aged Sohanci glided onto the dance ground. Inspired by the dancing of his younger colleagues Adamu Jenitongo danced frenetically to a captivating beat. Several people from the audience, concerned that the dance might strain the heart of this old man, gently urged him from the dance ground.

The dancing continued for about two hours. The musicians played their favorite spirit rhythms, and people who were not spirit mediums danced in front of the musicians' stand. As the golden glow of late afternoon enveloped the Sohanci's compound, an old woman ordered the children to leave the dance ground. The musicians played the music

of the *genji kwarey*, the family of spirits to which Serci, the social advisor, belonged. The chief of the Tillaberi mediums, a large old woman whose loose jowls flapped as she walked, entered the dance ground accompanied by two other spirit mediums. They formed a circle and danced, moving counterclockwise. A sorko in an indigo robe leaped onto the dance ground. He sang praises to the *genji kwarey*, the white spirits. He sang:

“Dugunda’s husband. Garo Garo’s husband. Zaaje. White salt. Master of evil. You have put us with your own covering of clouds. Mercy and Grace.

“Only God is greater than he.

“He is in your hand. He gave the angels their generosity.

“You are the father of Kangey.

“You are the birth of language. You brought about victory.”

The sorko repeated the praise song as the musicians played the rhythms associated with Serci. The three mediums approached the musicians. The jowly woman took another step closer to the musicians. The sorko stood directly behind her. He screamed into her ear Serci’s praise songs.

Gradually the tempo increased. Now standing directly in front of the musicians, the large woman moved only her head and arms to the music. She turned her head to the left as she slid her right hand along her right thigh. Then the woman slid her left hand along her left thigh and shook her head to the right. She shook her head from left to right, left to right, left to right. The violinist, sensing that the spirit Serci was just above the dance ground, made his bow fly. Swinging her body and pumping her arms to the music, the woman perspired profusely. The sorko shouted directly in her ear. The woman grimaced and her face cracked like the surface of a dry water hole. Tears streamed from her squinting eyes and mucus ran from her nose. Something unseen grabbed her body and threw it to the ground. A voice shouted: “Ah di, di, di, di, di, a dah, dah, dah, dah, a dah.” A deep groan escaped from the old woman’s body. Again animated, the woman squatted on the sand with her hands on her hips and spat at the musicians. The drummers welcomed Serci, for that was the spirit now inhabiting the old woman. “Welcome, Welcome, Duganda’s husband, Garo Garo’s husband.”

Two attendants gently lifted Serci off the sand and guided him to a newly woven palm-frond mat. There, the attendants washed Serci’s feet, ankles, hands, and head as though he were being prepared for Islamic prayer. Meanwhile, another attendant brought Serci his costume, a billowing white robe with gold embroidery around the neck. Once Serci was dressed in his robe, another attendant wrapped a white turban around his head. The Sohanci walked over to the mat and presented Serci with a string of silver worry beads.

The sorko in the indigo robe who had been shouting in the old woman’s ear spoke to the woman who was sponsoring the possession dance on her son’s behalf. He bade her to come with him to Serci’s court. The sorko escorted the woman and her son to the mat upon which Serci sat. Following the lead of the sorko, the woman and her son sat on the sand in front of the spirit. The woman asked the sorko what she had to do to insure the successful marriage of her son. The sorko, serving as an interpreter, posed the same question to Serci.

“Sorko,” Serci began in a quavering and distant voice. “a white chicken, a red chicken, and a red-and-white speckled chicken must be sacrificed.”

“Good,” the sorko said. “And what else?”

“Sorko, the young boy must take the egg of a white hen and bury it at the base of the gao tree which is at the crossroads at the eastern edge of town.”

“Praise be to God,” the sorko proclaimed.

“Sorko. If these things are done, the marriage will bring healthy children into the world.”

The sorko turned to the woman and her son and repeated Serci’s words to them. Serci then beckoned to the son and grabbed the young man’s head with both of his hands. Placing his mouth on the young man’s ears, Serci screamed a word into it three times. Finished with his work, Serci pushed the young man away.

“Sorko.”

“In God’s name, I am listening.”

“Sorko. Tell them that they must never stray from the path of their ancestors, the path of the spirits.”

“Okay,” the sorko said.

As the sorko communicated this admonition to the mother and her son, the Sohanci slowly placed his hands over Serci’s temples. He lightly shook her head from left to right. The body of the old woman slumped; she had lost consciousness. The Sohanci caressed her forehead and her temples. Attendants massaged her feet and legs. She opened her eyes, but appeared dazed. She coughed and asked for water.

“Old woman,” the Sohanci said to her. “we thank you for your pain. We thank you for your work.”

The woman took a few sips of water. “Sohanci, you have your burden, and I have mine. So it is in this world.” [1987:93-97]

The people in the audience that hot afternoon in Tillaberi must have known the jowly woman as their friend, neighbor, kinswoman—someone that they saw at the market, in the mundane world. During the ceremony, however, that is just her body. Inside it is a spirit named Serci. Indeed, only God is greater than he.

The question of belief begs to be asked—it is a reverberation of the shock of otherness. Some who know nothing of professional wrestling assume that wrestling fans believe that wrestling is an athletic competition. In fact this isn’t really the case—even in the case of the so-called marks. As Friedman puts it:

One elderly gentleman reckoned that “a lot of it may be false, sure, but at some point it gets pretty hot and heavy and he sure as hell wouldn’t want to be in there.”

Some blows may purposely miss their mark, but most fans deny that this is true for all of them, and the fighters insist that it is never true. What is going on is that a good guy is trying to make the world safe for liberal democracy and he is losing. [1983:79]

I don’t understand why Friedman insists on appealing to these master narratives in order to explain wrestling’s complex ontological status, instead of acknowledging the possibility, suggested by the fans, that not all of these blows are missing their true mark. In any case, it seems that there is something to be gained by approaching the issue of belief—of local understanding—with some caution. I raise this point in order to discuss a potential objection to my comparison of wrestling gimmicks to a Songhay spirits such as *Serci*, the social advisor, or the *Wicked Major*, a French colonial administrator. Certainly, the wrestlers do not believe that they are being possessed by spirits. Dwayne Johnson of the WWE does not believe that he performs while possessed by a spirit called the Rock. Before considering this difference between wrestling and possession ritual, I will present some of my findings in a narrative form that I model on Stoller’s, with the goal of presenting some points of comparison between the two traditions.

The following passage is reconstructed from field notes made at a Lunatic Wrestling Federation show on February 22nd, 2000. I had returned to Chicagoland to observe the show. My friend had put me in touch with a friend of hers, Mike Brooks. He was a wrestler with the LWF and also one of the leaders of the group, but he was not in the show that night, since he had injured his leg. My key informant for the evening, he brought me to the venue, a huge sports bar in Chicago Heights called Gym Schooze. This was to be LWF’s first performance in a bar. It was dark outside and we sneaked

around among the dumpsters and crates behind the bar, looking for a back way to get in. (Brooks must not be observed out-of-character, so to speak. This would be breaking kayfabe, a serious taboo.) We found a door and next thing I knew, I was standing in a small “green room” with couches and chairs and two small tables. There were piles of props and costumes chaotically distributed. Guys were walking around in spandex outfits, painting each other’s faces and dying and spiking up their hair. They were taking turns in a shower in the adjoining bathroom. One guy was shaving his chest. One wrestler, known as Brawn the Lumberjack, was walking around in a flannel shirt and carrying a chainsaw. One especially young looking fellow was wearing a striped referee jersey, with a small patch on the sleeve shaped like the state of Illinois. Three guys were dressed like pimps with brimmed hats and thick, leopard-print winter coats. Another young man was wearing a black T-shirt, black pants and had painted his face with a demented clown motif in black and white. All of his head was shaved except his bangs, which were dyed black. He looked as if he weighed 225 pounds. In the corner, a six-foot-tall 120 pounder dressed as a circus ringmaster was asking if anyone had seen his shoes.

There were cans of hair dye and hairspray everywhere. Everyone had a huge gym bag full of clothes. Computer printouts of the order of the matches (the *card*) were taped to the wall here and there around the room. In one corner was a metal garbage can and a spool of (real) barbed wire. Also, there was a pile of long, thin, empty boxes that at one point had contained tube shaped fluorescent light bulbs. At one table, an Emergency Medical Technician was taking a wrestler’s blood pressure. On the table sat a huge tackle box full of first aid equipment. At that time, Illinois law dictated that your blood pressure had be below a certain level immediately before wrestling or boxing, for safety reasons. In turn, every wrestler was okayed to perform by the EMT. It was also an Illinois law that an EMT or registered nurse must be on duty for the entire wrestling show. The LWF would have to pay for this, but this EMT was a friend of theirs, so he came for free, under the condition that they let him be in the show. Later in the night he came out to the ring for a few minutes as “the EMT!” and hit one of the wrestlers with a steel chair.

Also in the green room were three valets, the beautiful girls who escort some of the wrestlers to and from the ring. These girls wandered between the green room and their own dressing room to the side, where a fourth girl was doing hair and make-up. The LWF security team comprised another group backstage. Big guys in jeans and LWF T-shirts had taken up positions at doorways, or were running here and there on errands. Since, unlike the wrestlers, they could be seen by the audience members, the Security guys and the valets were often sent out into the bar for this or that.

Outside of the green room was a long hallway. Thirty feet along the hall was a television set connected to the stationary camera that pointed at the ring. Here, little groups of wrestlers gathered to watch their colleagues working. During a match, they would watch as they waited for their own turns, and occasionally the group would sigh or yell or “Oh!” in unison. Occasionally they would all burst into laughter. Further down the hall, there was a 90-degree bend and a little ramp up. At the top of the ramp was the

entrance, beyond which, one was in-view of the crowd. Beyond the entrance was a ramp that led to the ring like a bridge. The ring was in a cavernous room and surrounded by guard rails and then seats on three sides. The top of the ramp was an amazing space. This is where Mike Brooks spent most of the evening. When a wrestler saw that the match before his was taking place, he would head for this spot and stand in quiet. A quiet wrestler is a rare sight backstage at a show. But here they stand, heads bowed, one in front of the other, in line, in the order in which they will be introduced to the audience. They focus all their attention on the show going on outside, and wait for their music to hit.

I remember the first match at that show, which I watched from the audience. After the announcers (a strait-laced play-by-play man and color commentator/ring announcer Billy Whack) had taken their place at the announcer's table, Whack announced the first wrestler, a Heel who's name, sadly, I can't recall (I'll call him Mr. X). Mr. X was escorted by several allies, including the pimps mentioned earlier. Mr. X walked around the perimeter of the ring calling out members of the audience and mocking them. A young boy in the audience gave back some abuse and Mr. X chased him at least twenty feet into the crowd. Anyone who had applauded instinctively when Whack announced Mr. X's name was by this point ready to kill him, or at least ready watch him get killed. Mr. X climbed into the ring, took a long drink from a bottle of water, and spit a fine mist, dampening some fans in the front row. Once all the heels were assembled in the ring, they took turns with the microphone, patiently and condescendingly describing to the audience what a dirty ghetto Chicago Heights is.

Finally, Billy Whack is able to regain control of the situation and introduce Mr. X's opponent. Mr. X had done such an excellent job of getting over as a heel, that the crowd would have cheered anyone pretty well at that point, but it turned out that a local fan favorite was coming to the ring: Dr. Gimic. I could hardly believe my eyes. Not only was the pedophile from outer space still in the show, he was totally over as a Face—which is wrestling lingo meaning that the fans had bought into, or embraced the character as a hero. Mr. X had a few exceedingly crass things to say to Dr. Gimic, and the match was on. Mr. X was easily six feet tall—at least a foot taller than Dr. Gimic. But some how the little alien in the fat suit and the huge goggles could fly around the ring, and underneath Mr. X, and off of the corner-posts until Mr. X was in a daze.

All that was left was for Dr. Gimic to go for the pin, but he seemed to have other plans. With Mr. X laid out in the middle of the ring, Dr. Gimic jumped out of the ring and crawled underneath. In a second he emerged with a sheet of plywood; the sheet was about the size and shape of a door. On one side of the board, great tumbleweed-like loops of barbed wire were affixed with staples. Dr. Gimic placed this in the center of the ring, wire-side-up. He grabbed hold of Mr. X, lifted him and slammed him down onto his back, onto the barbed wire. Then, he leapt back out of the ring and again reached underneath the ring apron. He retrieved an identical barbed wire-board construction and dropped it on Mr. X, business-side-down. Then he climbed to the top of a corner-post. Many people in the crowd were screaming, but most of them just stood and stared. Dr. Gimic seemed to sail through the air for an eternity, flying horizontally off the top of the

post. Suddenly it was over as Gimic landed with a crash on the sandwich of barbed wire and humanity. The incredible racket made by the substructure of that old Texan ring was met with that very distinct noise that wrestlers call a pop—an eruption of noise from the audience registering both disbelief and some imagined empathy with the body being punished. The question of belief was now something less than an afterthought, and that cognitive dissonance that would require explanation via social analysis had been totally absorbed by the magic of the performance.

Dr. Gimic headed backstage. Mr. X extricated himself with the help of some of his cronies and headed back through the entrance himself. I also decided to head backstage. I met Mr. X in the hall as he headed back to the green room. His colleagues gave him a wide berth, and a few of them asked if he was Okay. He was unresponsive, and seemed to be looking far off into the distance with tiny pupils. I followed him into the green room and watched as he quickly changed from being out-of-it to highly energetic, talking rapidly about the match as the EMT went over his body looking for punctures. I was surprised at how little damage had been done—he needed only two bandages for very minor puncture wounds. Dr. Gimic lounged in one of the couches, his puffy, pink alien head rolled back, and his goggles on his forehead.

Adrenaline, Crowd, and Pain

From this vignette, I move to the results of the interviews I carried out at the Florida Wrestleplex in the spring of 2003. As described in the methods section of this paper, I saw my research in this fieldwork context as an opportunity to learn something of the quality of the experience of wrestling from wrestlers themselves, and specifically to test for the presence of localized appreciations or definitions of any anomalous states of consciousness that might exist in professional wrestling. After a brief description of the field site, patterns in the interview transcripts are used as conceptual frameworks to facilitate our own learning about wrestling. Finally, the lessons taken from this exercise in reading interview transcripts will be examined in light of some of the theoretical considerations outlined in the literature review. Specifically I will argue that the hypothesis that wrestling indexes dominant mythology explains only a limited amount of the variation in behavior observed at wrestling shows today. Therefore I presume to update the literature on the subject by proposing an explanation of wrestling's place in American society that accounts for sameness as well as difference; the mimetic as well as the mythological.

The Florida Wrestleplex was hidden on the northern edge of St. Petersburg, Florida, in a warehouse space just off of 35th street,--a major, six-lane road lined with chain restaurants, car dealerships and the occasional trailer court. This account of the place is in the past tense because, sadly, IPW is now defunct. The Wrestleplex served two purposes. It was the home venue of the IPW, a wrestling promotion that was putting on an average of two shows per-month during my observations in 2003. The IPW wrestlers ran a wrestling school, and class was held in the ring at the Wrestleplex. The warehouse housing the “ ‘Plex” was really just a giant metal shed. On the front there were two giant roll-up garage doors, and on the end by the street, one relatively minute

door for human use. Immediately inside this door is a small lobby— approximately 200 sq. ft, with a low ceiling and a ticket counter immediately on the right. The experience of passing through the pedestrian doorway was slightly disorienting because the close quarters of the lobby contrast so strongly with the impressive size of the windowless warehouse as it is seen from the parking lot. Past the ticket counter was a hallway that led past the office, restroom, and concessions stand. The hallway opened out into the largest room, which housed the ring.

The inside of the arena was painted all in black—the ceiling and the walls. There were no windows, just two emergency exits, which were kept open with large fans near them during shows, although the ‘Plex was perpetually hot in the summer, and like an oven during shows. The room was probably about 1000 square feet in area. At the center stood the ring, easily 15 feet-square on its own. Rows of metal chairs and, on one wall, some bench-seat bleachers were packed in on all sides of the ring. The ceiling, two stories above, supported an array of spotlights focused on the ring. During the shows, these would drench the ring and the performers in a vertical “light without shadow [that] generates an emotion without reserve.” (Barthes 1972:15) The ring was connected by a wooden walkway, called the *ramp*, to a huge steel door in one wall of the arena. The door was split in the middle like an elevator door, and surrounded by multicolored lights and strobes. A large “IPW” logo hung above the door. This door is the *entrance*, through which wrestlers enter the arena during shows. The room on the other side of the entrance served as the backstage/locker room, as well as housing an impressive array of weightlifting equipment, audiovisual equipment, and tools. In the center were some couches gathered around a television set. To one side, a wide control panel was connected to various video and lighting equipment in the main arena.

In addition to my four key informant interviews, I conducted seven interviews backstage at the Wrestleplex in the hours before shows, following the format outlined in the methods chapter. As can be imagined, the show constitutes the primary event in the social cycle of a wrestling federation. At the Wrestleplex, wrestlers arrived throughout the day towing wheeled suitcases filled with their costumes, props and other personal belongings. Many of the significant others of wrestlers were along for the day. An extended family atmosphere quickly developed as people who see each other only while traveling the pro-wrestling circuit chatted, discuss the show and made last minute plans. Inside, people would tend to hang around the ring—often a ring crew would be hurriedly tightening the screws and bolts, tying down the canvass and the ring apron. Wrestlers would go over their matches verbally, or even practice them in the ring one last time. People made runs to fast food establishments; some hangers on might even have had a few beers.

It was in this atmosphere that I wandered, and collected (i.e. audio-recorded) most of the interviews that I will now discuss. First I will discuss the responses elicited by my description of Dre’s description of wrestling “trance.” I will begin by stating that at no point in any interview did I ever use the word “adrenaline.” Six of the wrestlers whom I confronted with the story of Dre’s table spot and his use of the word “trance,” (interview topic number 4), used the word adrenaline in their response. (Another interviewee uses

the same language without hearing the Dre story. The remaining two exceptions are discussed below.) I have no doubt that the process of wrestling stimulates the endocrine system of the wrestler's body in multiple and relatively intense ways. Furthermore, it seems highly likely that an adrenaline response accounts for a large amount of the shift in consciousness that wrestlers experience while performing. However, here we are not concerned with the bio-scientific accuracy of the wrestlers' model of how wrestling consciousness arises. Rather, the pervasiveness of this usage of the term by respondents, indicates that this term is part of a robust emic model. Scanning the interview streams above and below instances of this term "adrenaline" shows that in most cases that the term is used, it is connected to ideas about the role of the "crowd," and to an explanation of the anomalous physical sensations involved in wrestling. To demonstrate how this concept-sequence was articulated in the interview context I will provide quotes from several interviews. (Please note that in the interview excerpts that follow, I have not polished the many grammatical errors that are found in the spoken English of the vast majority of people in order to keep the concepts deployed by the wrestlers as fresh as possible, and show exactly what my interview prompts elicited. Transcribed interview text can have the effect of making the speaker seem much less articulate and intelligent than is actually the case—this is an unfortunate side effect of this particular method of presenting data. I assure the reader that all of the individuals I interviewed were remarkably bright and thoughtful, and also note that the informal tone of the conversations was intentionally cultivated by the interviewer.)

One of my informants wrestles as Mark Zout. His name is a play on words derived from wrestling jargon. Rather than simply standing opposed to the word smart, the word mark can sometimes refer to anyone who is a huge wrestling fan. To mark out for a certain wrestler is to express great enthusiasm for them. Each time that Mark Zout comes to the ring, he portrays a different famous wrestler—Hulk Hogan, or Macho Man Randy Savage, for example. By wrestling as someone who is imitating ultra-popular wrestlers, his wrestling alter ego marks out. His gimmick is quite unique in this regard, and is an example of the type of creativity that his generation of wrestlers is bringing to the genre. I asked him about wrestling trance in the following exchange:

McBride: One time I was interviewing a wrestler back in Illinois ... he was like "You know, when I went through that table, it felt so good." He was like "It just felt great ... you know, when we're in the ring, it's kind of like a trance we go into." ... Do you think a lot of guys feel like that? --that they would use that word, that idea to describe being in the ring?

Mark Zout: I don't know necessarily that I would say *trance*. You go into like a altered, a altered state where you're, the adrenaline's going so much, the crowd's goin', you're out there to perform, and I think some of the stuff that we do as wrestlers, [pause] like normal people wouldn't, wouldn't be able to do. Like half the stuff that these guys will do, they wouldn't do in practice because there's nobody around. There's no reason for them to do it. But they do it when there's a crowd around, it just gets your blood pumping in a different way, and it's almost indescribable the rush you get. Um, I mean, I guess *trance* would be a good descriptive for that. You really don't feel it—I bet he felt it the next day; Uh, on the way home; took some aspirin or whatnot—if not anything stronger. But I'm sure he felt it the next day. It depends on how well the match is going. Like if you're havin' a really shitty match—I don't know if I can say that.

McBride: Oh, yeah.

Mark Zout: Okay. If you're havin' a really shitty match and you're gonna do something like that, and the crowd's not really paying attention, it's gonna hurt more than if you're havin' a great match and the crowd's totally into it, and they're watching every move you make. You're not gonna feel it then because as soon as you hit that table, you're gonna hear 'em go "Ooh!" Or, they're gonna cheer because you're the bad guy and you went through a table. So it just depends. I believe that it didn't hurt him at the time.

Here the concept sequence takes the following form: First we learn that the *adrenaline* is "going." The crowd also, is "goin'." This motion of the crowd and of the adrenaline are associated with the anomalous experience of wrestling consciousness—an "altered state," if not a trance. The sequence is remarkably robust across each of the transcripts. These are some other responses to the Dre story:

Billy Fives: Oh, I mean, yeah, when you're in the ring and the crowd pops and uh, they're likin' what your doin' and you're clickin' with the guy you're in the ring with and stuff, yeah sure, man, I mean, you know, you're—it's an adrenaline rush, that's what a good hobby's about. You know, if you're doing something and you're lovin' it, it's gonna get the adrenaline pumpin' no question about it, so yeah, sure, you get excited in the ring, something clicks, you're excited about it, something happens that wasn't supposed to happen, you screw up or something, you get kind of down about it, but whatever, you know, just shake it off and there's probably two to three matches next week where you can just improve on it.

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McBride: ...And he said that it's like a trance he goes into when he's in the ring. Do you think a lot of guys feel that way?

Agent Steele: Yeah, a lot of guys do, especially when they're startin' out. Um, first—maybe first year, two years, if you're in the ring, a lot of times, you're *in* a trance. And you've got this big adrenaline rush. And, it's almost—at least to me, it was almost like a real fight.

McBride: Mm hm.

Agent Steele: You felt like you were in a real fight. Your adrenaline is goin', people are yellin' at you—either for you or against you, (you know, the people being the crowd,) it felt like a real fight and I guess that's, that's the trance you go into. It's like uh—what's that—fight or flight? Is that what they call it? Fight or flight- when your adrenaline pumps in? That's what I felt. That's what I hear a lot of guys feel, first couple years out. Once you get past that stage though, you still feel the high, but you're more controlled. You're more—you're *in* control of your mind, you *know* what you're doin', you're not so *anxious*, you can lead a better match. Good pace, not blow yourself up (get tired).

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McBride: Um here's another question I ask everybody. I was interviewing a wrestler up in Illinois who I watched get thrown off of a stage through a table and we were talking about it and the guy ...said 'you know when I hit the table it just felt great it felt so good' you know, and I was like well that's really interesting, cause it looks like it would be kind of painful. So I asked him about it and said yeah, you know, when we're in the ring it's like a trance that we go into—

Mikey Tenderfoot: When uh—in wrestling, when you hit a zone, it's one of the most amazing experiences you can ever have. Cause when you hit that zone, no matter how much pain you go through it's the best thing in your life. Like for example, if I do a dive and I might not get all of it or they might not catch me all the way and I still, you know, hit kind of hard, I've got so much adrenaline going from the dive itself and from everything else going on: the crowd, you know, just, just being out there, that it—it just doesn't even matter, because you just love what you're doing. I mean, I can understand where he's coming from with that.

McBride: Yeah uh and almost everybody asked that question they immediately mention yeah—cause the crowd's there so I mean do you think that like when you're in practice, it's not the same you know?

Mikey Tenderfoot: In practice it's definitely harder, because you don't have the crowd to kind of gauge where you should go with the match and how they're feeling and you really feed off the crowd in a match. So in practice it's very hard but if you get very good in practice, then when you get out there the crowd getting into it will just make it even that much better so it's very important to be good in practice consistently.

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McBride: ... he said 'yeah you know, sometimes we're in the ring and it's like a trance we go into. And I mean, do you think a lot of guys feel like that that there's a trance—

Rod Steele: Well

McBride: sensation involved in being in the ring?

Rod Steele: You – absolutely I mean you get a uh, you go out there and I don't –all that 'in the zone,' –all that [is] fuckin' played out. That's junk. But you go out there and you get that initial wave of excitement and then you're out there just doin' the stuff and generally speaking you're adrenaline's pumping too much you really don't feel anything, in that, you—what's the rush is the payoff at the end of it. You go through a table— When you're planning your match, you know, we're sitting down and we're talking about what we want to do in the match, and say 'What do we want to get the crowd to do?' ... You get to a point where something big like that's happening –you go through the stage or you go through a table or whatever, you should be building to a point where the crowd's like this, [he sits forward] its waiting, it's waiting, it's waiting, and if you've done it right, and you feel that you're doing it right, you get that –it's, you get the feeling that okay, the crowd's into what we're doin', everything's clicking right. It's, I mean it's just like anything—you have on nights, you have off nights. But when you're *on* and you're *really* on and the crowd's feeling it, you do a big spot –we did Rage in the Cage, or not Rage in the Cage, excuse me we did Independent Armageddon where Mike Shane powerbombed me, um, off the top rope outside through a table. He took the brunt of that thing, I mean, he protected me the whole way. But as soon as we went through it and the whole place was just like oh my god, that, no matter, regardless of how much pain you're in, no matter, (if you even are in pain because, you know what, nine times out of ten, you're not) you just— you can't you can't shake it. You know... we're, obviously we're a weird bunch of people.

In these transcripts, what I would like to point out is that they all relate the crowd and the adrenaline to the anomalous experience, the existence of which, they are more or less willing to confirm.

The Natural Kenny King was not an IPW wrestler, but he was on hand for a single booking and consented to be interviewed. He was trained by WWE personnel on that company's recent reality-TV show called *Tough Enough 2*. The show followed a group of aspiring wrestlers through a crash-course wrestling school. He doesn't use the word adrenaline in the context of discussing his own experiences, but he does use a drug-based metaphor alongside the predictable mention of the crowd's affirming role:

McBride: ...And so I'm asking everybody if they think that's something that a lot of guys feel—that they feel like there's a trance.

The Natural Kenny King: I believe so. Um, my trainer, Al Snow, told me one thing that I'll never ever forget. He said, you know you'll never be able to explain to anybody or even yourself why you have to do this. I mean, we'll wake up some times, I'll wake up sometimes beat up as hell, you know, feeling like crap the next morning, but, if I had a great match, say 'Wow, it was all worth it.' You know, in the ring, it's—it's almost like because you can forget about anything that's going on in your life. You know, you'll forget about anything. You can have the worst day in the world, you step in that ring you can forget about that, and that's all you're focused on is the show. And it's all that—what it is. And whatever it takes to make the show—we're, we're crowd junkies. (laughs)

McBride: You're what?

The Natural Kenny King: Crowd junkies. We are definitely, we're-- that's the word that somebody used and I forgot. But we're basically the world's biggest approval seekers, because whatever it takes to get the crowd to go 'wow,' that's what we're gonna do. That's why if you get thrown 20 feet off a stage into a table, if the crowd blows up, your back could be split in two, but damn, that's great. And because you know that somebody appreciate—it's a, this is an art form to me, and I know that somebody's definitely appreciating what you do.

The interviewees often characterize the adrenaline response as at least partially triggered as a direct physical effect of the wrestling moves. For example, Rod Steele described being powerbombed off the top rope, through a table, and says that “regardless of how much pain you're in...(if you even are in pain because, you know what, nine times out of ten, you're not) you just—you can't, you can't shake it.” When discussing this aspect of the induction of anomalous wrestling consciousness, the wrestlers would often mention an injury that they sustained, or a spot that went awry during the show, for example in Mikey Tenderfoot's quote above. These mishaps are mentioned not only because they often make great stories, but also because these crises are often successfully dealt with particularly because of the “fight or flight” response. Consider the following, which was said by Naphtali in the context of a key informant interview after I asked him about pain in pro-wrestling:

Naphtali: Right, yeah, any time you take a bump, your body feels it, your body registers it. Your body gives—*pain* is your body's way of saying 'something's not right here.' But yeah, There's pain that you can live through, there's pain that you [quietly] can't. There's pain that you *have* to live through. Uh, if you're in a match and you get hurt. You have two choices. Stop it, or keep going. Keep going, you might injure it more, or hey, it might just be a Charlie horse. You tell the guy 'slow down', you know, 'I'm hurt'. ... you break an ankle, you break an arm, it's obviously going to stop. Actually I've known people, Mikey Tenderfoot broke his ankle in a match kept goin'. You know, stuff

like that, that just amazes me how your body will keep goin'. Your adrenaline while in the ring, is, is, that right there is amazing.

McBride: What do you mean?

Naphtali: You don't [laughs] you don't feel crap when you're in the ring. You don't. Your body takes it, keeps going. I mean, right now, I have like a cracked rib or a bruised rib or something. Saturday night I felt *great* after my match. I was goin' home, you know [raises voice] 'hey I feel great—blah blah blah!' [pauses, settles] I woke up in the morning and I thought I had been shot.

McBride: Yeah

Naphtali: -laughs- So you don't feel nothing while you're in the ring. It's the next day that you're reeally gonna feel it. Cause, your adrenaline is goin man: there's, there's a crowd out there, you know, you're pumped up, you're pumped up— When you wake up there's no crowd. And your body has finally registered: 'Hey, there's something wrong.'

Again, we see that the mechanics of wrestling bringing about the experience that wrestlers refer to with the term adrenaline. But the crowd provides another force that can get the blood flowing “in a different way,” as Mark Zout puts it. Agent Steele notes that having people rooting for or against him arouses in him the feeling that wrestling is almost like a real fight, and triggers basic defense mechanisms. The auditory pathway of this interaction between the performers and the crowd is clearly shown by Billy Fives' mention of the when “the crowd pops,” or by Kenny King's statement that “if the crowd blows up, your back could be split in two, but damn, that's great.” To learn something more of how the crowd influences wrestlers' in-ring experiences, let us look at the other response to the Dre story that did not reference adrenaline, and the only response that disagreed with the usage of the term “trance,” besides Mark Zout's. This is a quote from my interview with a wrestler called Comic Book Guy Anderson:

I wouldn't say it's a trance, it's more—well for me, it's just being out in front of—even if it's twenty people, I mean it's just a rush to make these people fall into your reality, ...if you can draw them into your mesh and make them believe what you're doing. Because, just because the business has been so exposed lately, and the way the Fed [WWE] has been doing—like in the late nineties when they decided to do a lot of the exposure and a lot of the TV programs – you've got Tough Enough and things like that. A lot of people *think* they know what's goin on but if you can make these people believe what you're doing, that to me that's the best feeling—me commin' in and you got people like “oh my gosh man that looked so good, how did—I mean you looked like he killed you on that. Are you okay?” You know? ...you did something really well to make them say “Hey man, did he hurt himself on that? Is he alright?”

It's not that things don't hurt, 'cause things do hurt. But to draw them into believing in the sport is—it's not really a trance I don't think, I myself, it's it's more a rush than a trance I guess, it's just being out in front of people putting “it” on the line with guys that you know and are comfortable, or even if you don't know 'em, what ever, just going out an putting on a hell of a match is what I try to do when you're out there. It—your character flows through you. You know, you start, especially if you believe in your gimmick, and you have a personality that can be goes through your gimmick and you actually go out there and pull the people in and they believe, and the more you believe in it, that makes the people believe, so I think it's more of just getting into character and just believing in what you're doing.

Unlike the more *physiological* adrenaline/drug/bloodflow narrative that we find in the transcripts, here is an explanation of the more *mental* pathway to the ideal wrestling experience, a pathway that is explicitly tied to the question of belief. Naphtali described an example of how this other process worked in a match he had against another FUW wrestler called Sedrick Strong. At the end of the match Sedrick had pinned Naphtali and the Ref had completed the three-count, thus,

...he apparently won the title, but with the Referee's back turned, I doused myself in baby powder, the Referee saw it, [apparently tricked into thinking that Sedrick had thrown the powder in an attempt to blind Naphtali, the Ref] restarted the match, uh and I ended up rolling up Sedrick for the one-two-three, the crowd absolutely hated it, which means, I absolutely loved it. When the Referee went "one-two-three," and they all thought he won, and I watched the crowd, everyone jumpin' out of their seats *screamin'*— and then, [he pauses, then raises voice] when I *screwed the fans over*, it was beautiful. There's a term in the wrestling business called a Mark. It's actually a carnie word. It gets used way too much. Now the term comes to mean 'wrestling fan.' If you say "Oh, you know, I'm just a mark." Or "Hey, there are marks coming." But the term is a carnie word that means 'someone who is easily fooled.' You know when you're walking by at the fair, and the guy with two teeth says "Hey, you! Why don't you come over here, throw this bottle over here in the thingy, you win this you win this big giant teddy bear, an' you know, look your old lady there she wants—she wants this teddy bear she wants you to win this damned thing." And then ... you end up spending ten bucks cause the damned ball won't go in the basket, and he's all "here look, it's so easy!" And he does it, and you've tried, and you start cussin' out the damn teddy bear—you're a Mark.

McBride: Yeah.

Naphtali: So when I—when all those fans screamed "yea yea yea," and I brought them all back down to earth, [pause] I made marks out of every, single, one of them. And that, my friend, is what wrestling is all about. Even the ones that think they're smart to the business—there are some that are friends with the wrestlers. There are some that are friends with me. And it fooled them too. So I pride myself in that. In just making Marks out of every single one of them. That was, it was great, because it was it goes back to the old way of tricking the fans. 'Cause now everyone knows: 'Hey, oh it's fake.'—well I don't think—it's not *fake*, it's pre-determined, you know, everyone knows who's gonna win, blah blah blah— these guys are really friends; you know they go out afterwards and go eat—shoot, the fans go and eat with us, and we're "Hey, how ya doin'?" And they all know it's an act. But when you can pull them into it, when you can pull them in, and then shut the door right on their face and say "get out of here," that's when you know you're doin' your job, and that's why I'm here.

Here, as in CBGA's comments, we see the question of belief explicitly tied to the experience and thus, the practice of professional wrestling. Naphtali, a Heel if ever there was one, reported experiencing elevated affect and physical endurance in this match, but this explanation of manipulating people's minds was reported as his personal highlight for that match. His elaborate baby-powder spot calls to mind the "cynicism" of the authors of tabloid magazine content who try to out-do one another by creating ever more outlandish headlines that will still be believed by their readership. (Bird 2003:172) The Natural Kenny King expressed similar ideas:

Natural Kenny King: So workin' the crowd is my favorite part of it because really we've got the ability and the power to manipulate peoples' feelings. You know, ...the first time

I came out here I was a Face, a big Face ... and then you know I came out and basically I disrespected ... and within an instant it went from "Yea Kenny!" to "Oh, my God, you suck!" That's complete psychological manipulation. Going from one minute you're the greatest thing in the world, to we hate you, we hate your guts, we want to see you dead. Who else really has the power to do that?

McBride: How do you do that? How do you read the crowd? How do you get 'em to turn.

Natural Kenny King: It just depends on the guy I feel like being that night. ...the crowd definitely feeds off of how you—the vibes that you're putting out.

McBride: Putting out with—

Natural Kenny King: —with facial expressions, uh, your body work, crowd interaction, how you interact with the other wrestler in the ring, ah, there's definitely a certain way that a bad guy would wrestle, as different than a good guy would wrestle, and that's definitely the good thing about this business ... because you can be whoever the hell you want to be.

To summarize what we can take from these transcript excerpts: wrestlers were able to construct narratives relating the experience that Dre describes as "like a trance" to key aspects of their environment: wrestling technique, and the crowd. Under the heading of wrestling technique, we can note that the intensity of the moves is a factor, and the teamwork involved in protecting one-another in the ring presents another mitigating or amplifying dynamic. Specifically, the high-flying, or off-the-rope moves, or moves that end with big spots, evoke adrenaline simply in being anticipated by the performer. The other key aspect of experiencing being a wrestler is that moment in which a wrestler senses that s/he is interacting with the unified subjectivity of the crowd. (One writer who has explored, through participatory observation, the sensation of participating in the unification of an aggregate of individuals into a singular crowd is Bill Buford (1990), who describes the intoxicating and even mildly addictive feeling of joining a riot of soccer fans.) This sense that the wrestling spectators have cohered into a crowd occurs as the audience members either ratify or denounce the moral (or immoral) character portrayed by the wrestler. In this way the wrestling ritual constructs difference, and organizes it along a synchronic, Face vs. Heel axis. Also, this manipulation of the mind of the crowd is organized diachronically, as wrestlers enact a series of reversals of fortune, building to a spectacular ending in which audience members experience a cathartic shock of ironic and synesthetic release. Wrestlers take the anomalous ability to withstand pain as indicative of the fact that, on a basic level, the adrenaline is going; the crowd is going. Narratives of injury and pain are deployed in the interview transcripts as stories of how this basically altered state of being facilitates completion of feats in matches that often seem beyond human ability.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's warning that "the enlightenment recognizes as being and occurrence only what can be apprehended in unity: its ideal is the system from which all and everything follows" is well taken (1997:171). That is, here I have avoided replacing the words of the wrestlers with terminology created in response to reading transcripts. Much confusion could arise if wrestling consciousness was portrayed as a thing-in-itself. If at any point I refer to a specific wrestling consciousness, it should be understood as a conceptual tool of the social scientist interested in wrestling rather

than as a phenomenon that wrestlers consider to be a key part of their environment. Indeed, the only occasion in which I ever noticed a wrestler speak directly of these issues of shifting consciousness (without being prompted by an ethnographic interview question) was the instance, years ago, when Dre related his impressions on the subject to me. However, I think that this only makes more striking the uniformity of the pattern of relationship between adrenaline, crowd and anomalous experience.

Wrestling Fans: Multiple Audiences

As mentioned in the Methods Chapter, this thesis is not primarily about the audience of professional wrestling. However, I will now discuss this audience as it is experienced by the wrestlers I have observed and interviewed. This discussion will begin with a narrative of some of the events that I witnessed at the FUW show that was performed on May 6th, 2000. My hope is that this narrative will explain how the wrestling audience (in its manifestation as crowd at a live show) does much of the psychological work that allows wrestlers to give seemingly super-human performances. Then, I will apply some work on the concept of the media audience by Bird (2003) to the Smart fan phenomenon, with the aim of illuminating how this new sub-group of fans has impacted and been impacted by the tradition of Professional Wrestling.

Marks

Before looking at how these results might help answer broad questions about media audience members such as wrestling fans, we must consider the wrestling audience as it manifests itself at the live show. As we have seen in these interview excerpts, the wrestler/crowd dynamic is, for the wrestlers, one of the most compelling aspects of the wrestlers' performance experience. It is the crowd's unified ratification (or rejection) of the performance that allows wrestlers to endure the burden of the wrestling performance, and, perhaps, experience exhilaration and wrestling trance. One experience that has led me to see this process of crowd unification as an organic, rather than ideology-driven phenomenon occurred as I reviewed a video tape of the FUW show of May 6th, 2000 at the National Guard Armory in Bloomington, Illinois—the show that concluded with the Dre-Zero table spot discussed in the interviews.

That was the first show for which FUW charged admission. At the Armory that night, most of the wrestlers were amazed and not a little pleased with themselves for putting on a “real” show. Most of the matches featured a combination of the holds, submissions, quick reversals and body slams that are put together in typical televised professional matches—although the skill level of the FUW wrestlers varied widely. The main differences between the FUW and WWF matches was that, generally the FUW matches featured a larger number of these moves—more action—than typical WWF matches of similar length, for reasons discussed in Chapter 1. Furthermore, someone went through a table in nearly every match at the Armory show. Nearly two thirds of the way through the night, however, the show took a dramatic turn during a match between Zero and the Hardcore Badass. (That show was a tournament, so Zero appeared several times, ultimately winning a trophy—the “prestigious” Golden Afro, as well as an

oversized check for five dollars.) The match escalated slowly through a long series of highly scripted, but well executed submission holds and reversals, and the audience members, the many of whom (friends and relatives of the wrestlers) had probably never been to any wrestling shows whatsoever—let alone an indy show— responded with intermittent clapping, cheering and jeering, and long stretches of near-silence. However, when Zero pulled a brown paper bag full of little gold thumbtacks from under the ring apron, and dumped them all over surface of the mat, the crowd’s gasps demonstrated an immediately heightened level of attention. Zero prepared to slam HCBA onto the tacks, but in an amazing turn of events, HCBA reversed the move and it was Zero’s back that came down to the mat. Again, HCBA lifted his good friend and dropped him on his back on the tacks. And then a third time Zero was lifted, his back glittering with tacks, before HCBA slammed him down again, finally betraying some hesitation to the viewer who closely studies his facial expression on the tape.

Watching the tape recently, I noticed that the camera captured, from behind, the family sitting in the first row at ringside: a mother, two boys around 11 and 13, and a little girl, who looks to be about six years old. During most of the show, the boys have been talking excitedly and pointing at the ring—likely debating whether and in what way the action was “fake.” Mother ate popcorn and laughed at much of the show, and the little girl climbed around on the seats—now looking at the ring, now vying for her mother’s attention. When the tacks came out, the boys went to the edges of their seats, and as Zero came down the first time, Mother and the boys jumped back, Mother covered her mouth and bounced slightly, laughing. This synesthetic jump—*feeling* what is actually only seen and heard—is a common response among wrestling spectators. It seems to be a performance, more or less a reflex action, of empathy with the body of the punished wrestler. As Zero was lifted the second and third times, the boys sat in amazement, exchanging glances with each other. What grabbed my attention as I watched the tape was the response of the little girl. When Zero crashed to the ring the first time, she stopped and stood petrified. After the second crash, she turned and grabbed her mother’s arm. Her face, visible for a second on the tape, shows the pure panic of a child who is seriously confused and frightened. Mother, noticing the girl’s response quickly shook her head back and forth, extended her hand toward the girl and waved it up and down in a brush-off gesture. The message was apparently “No, no. It’s nothing. It’s just fun.” Just then, Zero was crashing back down to the mat exactly as before, and, as if a switch had been flipped in the girl’s mind, she jumped in synesthetic union with the rest of the crowd, covered her face and jumped up and down. After noticing the girl’s initial response, my first thought was, “Oh, shit—we psychologically scarred this child for life.” But within a second, the girl had resolved the question of belief quite perfectly, and was again enjoying the show immensely, jumping, screaming and laughing.

I recall that that night, I followed Zero to the locker room and, as he paced around, moving his gym bag here and there, stopping and talking to everyone, never waiting for a reply, we tried to get him to stand still so that we could get the tacks out of his back and get some hydrogen peroxide on him. This happened eventually, but only after we yielded to Zero’s insistence and took several photos with the tacks still in place.

The role of the Mark in the unfolding of the wrestling show seems clear from the interview texts and my observations of shows. Hardcore spots like the one just described are obvious examples of the negotiation of reality that goes on between performers and audience members at wrestling shows. It should be noted that thumbtack spots would never be practiced or rehearsed with actual tacks. To withstand (better: *to use*) that sort of sensation requires the presence of the credulous audience. This is what he meant when Mark Zout said to me "... half the stuff that these guys will do, they wouldn't do in practice because there's nobody around. There's no reason for them to do it. But they do it when there's a crowd around, it just gets your blood pumping in a different way, and it's almost indescribable the rush you get."

To extend my analysis, I will attempt to relate how this pattern of performance (shocking bodily performance, believing crowd, anomalous experience) might be looked for in the total body of ethnographic literature, and what sorts of general social themes might arise from observed cases of similar traditional performances. Specifically I want to discuss the example of Michael Taussig's (1999) meta-ethnography of ritual complexes in village-level societies in which men are initiated into secret societies that serve certain vengeful and deadly spirits. Taussig focuses especially on the "Big Hut" rituals of the Tierra del Fuegian groups known as the Selk'nam and the Yamana, amongst whom, according to late 19th and early 20th century ethnographic accounts,

every few years for months or more, initiated men [entered a ceremonial hut outside the village, and] adorned great masks and painted their naked bodies with red, white and black, so as to *represent* (or should I say *become*) certain spirits, while the women and children in an on-an-off fashion served as witnesses of such spiritual performance when it emerged from the Hut, the women threatened with death if they intimated by whatsoever means that these were not spirits but performing men—their kinsmen, at that. [Taussig 1999:102]

Taussig has dual concerns in this study. On one hand, he wants to explore the role of the public secret in social life, and on the other he critiques the first wave ethnographies of these situations with regard to the ways that Western and presumably rationalist writers were forced to come to terms with the fact that the women and children in these villages must certainly have known that the performance of their kinsmen was a "deception." Taussig quotes the report of Martin Gusinde (1961), an ethnographer and Catholic priest, as saying "It must be admitted that probably all the women actually recognize their own husbands in their roles as individual spirits, but nevertheless their faith in these spirits is unshakeable. A European observer can hardly explain how their knowledge and their faith can be reconciled." (1999:106) The incredulous tone of this analysis, as well as the analyst's drive to account for the cognitive dissonance that the "European" expects to find amongst the subjects of analysis are paralleled by the tone and methods of analysis of Freedman (1983), Stone (1971), or any analyst of wrestling who's desire to explain is primarily justified by the logical disconnection implied by the question of belief. Taussig's meta-analysis reveals that this cognitive dissonance is actually experienced first by the "European," who, through transference, projects it onto the subjects of analysis. Interviewed wrestling fans often fail to help clarify the "puzzle" that stems from complex belief within wrestling fandom, when, as is common, they forcefully deny that wrestling is *fake*, or make statements like "a lot of it may be false, sure, but at some point it gets

pretty hot and heavy and he sure as hell wouldn't want to be in there." (Friedman 1983:79)

Taussig's (1999) analysis is highly complex. Of the role of the public secret, he asks: "...what if the truth is not so much a secret as a *public* secret, as is the case with most important social knowledge, *knowing what not to know?*" (1999:2) Taussig wants to account for the function of the public secret in the maintenance of social order, but also, how this is practically achieved in society through patently absurd public assertions of very specific, locally constructed dissimulations. For example the Big Hut ritual is simultaneously based on an absurd assertion (that these are not men, but spirits) which supposedly masks the fact that the whole ritual complex is a deception. However noting that the absurdity is performed spectacularly, Taussig concludes that it the Big Hut ritual is really "revelation of the secret that does justice to it," in the visible performance of the men-as-spirits. (1999:162) Thus Taussig's analysis, captures the complexity of the relationship between men, women and spirits without shattering under the pressure of cognitive dissonance.

As a point of comparison, Taussig describes Kenneth Read's (1965, 1986) ethnography of the Gahuku-Gama, among whom Read observed a religious complex in which the universe was believed to be animated by an all-pervasive force that was embodied mysteriously in the sound of some sacred flutes, which could be heard throughout the community at certain times, although it was taboo for women to look at the flutes. Curiously, when the men played the flutes, they never really tried to conceal themselves; rather they played the sacred music in full sight of women (who were at work in the fields) while merely carrying branches in front of themselves as a "trivial subterfuge," and furthermore, when they were finished playing and had returned to the special hut of the men's society, they were "almost drunk with excitement," and unable to stop talking. (Read 1965:116-117)

In a pleasing congruence with Stoller's (1997) epistemological concerns, Taussig highlights the role that Read credited to sonic impressions in the functioning of the Gahuku-Gama flute-playing rituals. In one male initiation ritual, the men separate themselves, and dance and ululate until they enter what Read calls an "ecstatic communication with an invisible force," while in the distance the women cry out in mourning for the sons who are to be initiated, since they will be tortured by the spirit. (Taussig 1999:206-211) "[R]ising above it all, came the cries of the flute, which I heard at close quarters for the first time, a sound like great wings beating at the ear drums, throbbing and flapping in the hollow portions of the skull." (Read 1965:126-127) In order to proceed further, let us consider some of the immediate effects of what might be called (following Mauss) the techniques of the body associated with these Gahuku-Gama traditions, by looking at Taussig's image of the performance, (which is extrapolated from Read's work.)

Yet this ecstasy is mere prelude to the most fantastic and fantastically violent bodily displays and auto-mutilations carried out by the men down by the river. And again it is sound that animates and directs the entire stage: As the men careened down the hillside from all points of the compass... standing in the brightly lit shallows of the river

ostentatiously displaying their genitals and masturbating in front of hordes of other brilliantly painted and feathered men, the sacred flutes crying. One by one, the men stepped forward with rolls of razor-sharp leaves...the man plunging this vicious instrument up his nose so as to tear at the mucus membrane and force blood to flow, the watching men ululating while the man himself was so distraught with pain that, strong as he was, his knees were trembling and it seemed as though his legs would buckle under him. It was this act that the male initiates had then to succumb to for the first time in their lives, following which they were forced to swallow large canes doubled over into a long, narrow, U shape. [Taussig 1999:211-212]

The ritual proceeds:

Leaning forward from the waist, he placed the rounded section in his mouth, straightened, tilted his head, extended the line of his neck, and, fed it into his stomach. My throat contracted and my stomach heaved, compelling me to look away. When I turned to him again most of the cane had disappeared, only two small sections, the open ends of the U, protruding from the corners of his mouth.

I have no idea how long he held this grotesque stance, his straining abdomen racked with involuntary shudders. Already sickened by the display, I stiffened with shock as he raised his hands, grasped the ends of the cane and sawed it rapidly up and down, drawing it almost free of his mouth at the peak of every upward stroke. The fervor of the crowd mounted to a clamorous pitch, breaking in wave upon wave of pulsing cries, the final surge matching my own relief when he dropped the cane, bent from the waist, and vomited into the river. [Read 1965:133-134]

In the work of Marcel Mauss (1992) already discussed, that author described a descriptive ethnology of techniques of the body. The purpose of this intellectual system is to account for and organize the variation in technique and habitus that one observes across cultures. The main flaw that I find in his argument is a conceptualization of the primitive that stems not just from outdated politics, but from a failure to re-calibrate this ethnology to allow for another difference that exists within the analytical exchange—signaled by the shock of otherness—which is the “variation” between the expectations of the “European” observer and the behavior of the different other. This shock is experienced by Gusinde as consternation at faith in obvious deception. It is experienced as nausea by Read. In any case, the shock is bound to disrupt the smooth operation of the type of transcendent logical system Mauss proposes. In order to compensate in analysis for this shock, more is needed than the cultivation of cultural relativism, for the difference between observer and observed must be separated from the difference between traditions. Complexity is certainly introduced by the fact that these traditions of the Tierra del Fuegians and the Gahuku-Gama function primarily to construct (synchronically) the differences between men and women as well as (diachronically) between various phases of life such as pre- and post- initiation states; states of ecstasy, states of entry into ecstasy.

I support the spirit of curiosity that lies behind Mauss’s project. Following the empiricist arguments of James (1985), and Stoller’s (1997) discussion of Jean Rouch’s motives for filming the Hauka spirit ceremonies, I agree with the justifications for learning about “other” practices—conceived of as alternative epistemologies deserving of their own place in the history of science. What is important to see here is while formulations of how to account for observed practical differences among social groups

are easily suggested by this literature, it is somewhat more difficult to imagine a framework for accounting for *sameness*. Is it possible that the shock of otherness could co-exist in anthropology with the shock of recognition? Consider the presence of the singular “crowd,” in the initiation ritual of the Tierra del Fuegians. Their role is to simultaneously know and not know the “public secret” that this is a simulation, but also the true action of spirits (Taussig 1999:216). Isn’t their stance just the same as that of the wrestling fan, who side-steps the question of belief by emphatically defending the legitimacy of the fight, while also explicitly acknowledging that there is a certain amount of hokum in the performance. The meaning of both rituals is locally experienced not as blind faith, or ignorance, but as an orchestrated shifting between knowing and not-knowing; between seeing your friends and relatives acting, and seeing the passion of moral entities alive and fully present. Is not the importance of this orchestration made clear in Read’s remarks about how “The fervor of the crowd mounted to a clamorous pitch, breaking in wave upon wave of pulsing cries, the final surge matching my own relief when he dropped the cane, bent from the waist, and vomited into the river.” (1965:133-134), as well as in Naphtali’s description of the triumphant moment when he “screwed the fans over,” simultaneously ruining the night of two hundred IPW fans? Is it possible to speculate about similarities between the experiences of an initiate of the Tillaberi spirit possession troupe who flings himself to the ground dozens of times in a ceremony, and the state of mind brought about in a wrestler who takes twenty bumps in a single, ten-minute match? What can be made of the fact that in each of these two experiences, the performer behaves as if he was a “fictional” personality—and moreover, a personality of supremely clear moral orientation, authority and power? Claims about causality will never be appropriate here in the absence of control groups and experimental methods. Even analytical considerations based on circumscribed notions like wrestling culture, or wrestling consciousness will betray a systematic form that is merely the reflection of the enlightenment project recognizing itself in its object (Horkheimer & Adorno 1997). However, these questions carry such an unexpected power that I feel compelled to pose them here.

Some of these similarities across traditional practical experiences might lead to hypothesized biological processes, for example, we may speculate that due to factors of human biology, throwing one’s self to the ground repeatedly may trigger or modify biochemical pathways in such a fashion as may be experienced by individuals as trance. If such a hypothesis seems pedantic or mundane, I can only point to the thousands of books and articles that model consciousness with analysis of purely neuro-biological data, and ask, where is an explanation of how consciousness really works; where is a valid explanation that is itself less complex than the problem of consciousness? Neither will be found, certainly none that contain any true connection to the meaning of conscious experience, as do the various studies of physical practices analogous to pro-wrestling that I have reviewed. Thus we are left with Stoller’s (1997) concept of sensuous scholarship, which, as I hope to have illustrated in this analysis does indeed offer us with a surprising wealth of sameness that begs for comparative study. Such an approach to the anthropological study of experience requires the patience of the reader, since long narrative accounts from literature and from interview transcripts are needed. Why is this? Because since the various traditions must be understood as sets of meanings

held in specific relations to one another, narratives must be analyzed to find out these locally determined relationships.

Smarts

I will now present what I take as another example of sameness between professional wrestling and some other techniques of the body as I discuss something of how Smart wrestling fans have effected a sea change in professional wrestling. Smart fandom was described to me by the smart fans I know as fundamentally being an acknowledgement that wrestling is scripted, and to some extent choreographed. For Smarts, this is different than saying that wrestling is “fake,” since fake could be taken to mean painless, which would not only be false, but would unfairly diminish the sacrifices made by professional wrestlers for the sake of “the business.” But, as I have implied several times already, even those fans who are most definitely Marks do in fact contain in their minds something of the complexity of the wrestling performance. Indeed, according to my analysis it is the spectators’ communal performance of shuttling between doubt and belief that provides wrestlers with the ability to bear the burden of the wrestling performance. Thus, I have come to understand that beyond this simple re-evaluation of the ontological status of the combat, Smart fandom is essentially an aesthetic stance. I learned to watch wrestling by watching RAW with self-proclaimed Smarts, who of course were also small-time wrestlers themselves. Thus, the WWF (now WWE) shows were usually the targets of many groans and complaints. I am reminded of Bird’s (2003) discussion of a class of soap opera fans who could also be thought of as *smart*. That is, these soap fans, while watching *One Life to Live* religiously, used their comments on internet discussion boards mainly to discuss what the writers and producers were doing *wrong* with the show. This may help to explain the almost compulsive degree to which Smarts collect tapes from independent and overseas wrestling federations. And, as their other emic label—*Internet Fans*— suggests, many of these Smarts investigated alternative forms of the genre and posted their own critiques of Wrestling shows on various sites and message boards. As Bird argued regarding soap fans, “technology has allowed the soap genre, as well as the episodic drama genre, to escape the ephemeral fate that long hampered fans’ ability to develop a more mature aesthetic appreciation.” (2003:133) Using the framework described in this quotation we may begin to find the key to several riddles about the current structure of the world of wrestling.

First of all, we may see why the phenomenon of backyard wrestling federations seemed to arise all at once across the entire country. Although the trend was probably impossible to track quantitatively, its prevalence is seemingly attested to by the fact that backyard wrestling began to appear as a news story in the late 1990s, and then was periodically recycled as terrorizing news program filler in the predictable form of the “story” about television entertainers ruining the lives of impressionable young members of the American bourgeoisie. Also, in 2000, an internet search for “backyard wrestling federation” would find not only hundreds of websites authored by the young people participating in these groups, but even directory sites with links to hundreds more. So we can begin to see how the internet set the stage for the intense growth of Smart fandom and backyard wrestling. Secondly, we can see how the emergence of hardcore wrestling,

and the resurgence of old-school styles may have emerged from this aesthetic evolution. Smart fans never apologize for their fandom, so it would be incorrect to say that smart fandom makes it acceptable for people who grew up with Saturday morning wrestling TV shows to continue to enjoy what is seen by many as an inherently immature form. But it certainly is the case that Smart fandom allows a wrestling fans to move from simply enjoying wrestling to understanding the reasoning behind the determination of what makes for good wrestling and what makes for bad wrestling. Hardcore wrestling and old-school wrestling are really just following these rules through to logical, (if occasionally extreme) conclusions.

According to the Smarts' standards of good wrestling, as explained to me by members of the FUW, it is a general rule that if a worker (wrestler) is "generous," he will step up to the plate and take as much of the punishment entailed by the match as possible. This is especially the case for the wrestler who is being "put over." If a wrestler's career is going to benefit because of the outcome of the match, his ethical obligations are fairly clear: make the action look good, but protect the other workers in the ring as much as possible. Of course, the task of the "jobber," or "enhancement guy" is to make the big stars look like a great fighters. The best enhancement guys are the ones who sacrifice not only their bodies, but even any pretense trying to achieve stardom within their own careers. Marks, of course, are assumed not to know the term "jobber" or to appreciate jobbers in any way, since they will (by definition) focus their cheering on the star being put over. Smarts, on the other hand know and respect the jobbers—a favorite of the Smarts is Al Snow, who briefly led a faction of WWF wrestlers, clearly designed to entertain the Smart fan contingent, known as the Job Squad. The gimmick of the Job Squad was that they were no-names who always lost. Foley's (1999) book *Have a Nice Day: a Tale of Blood and Sweatsocks* is the source from which the FUW wrestlers drew their understanding of this ethic of generous wrestling. There is no short quote from that book that I can provide here to explain the ethical system of wrestling, since Foley, in a master stroke of (probably unintentional) autoethnography, conveys the function of that system entirely through stories from his own career. Considering the overlap between the universe of Smarts and the universe of backyard wrestlers, the intimate knowledge of the inner workings of the wrestling "ritual" likely led fans to value the hardcore and the old-school styles.

Also, for the smart fans, the best wrestling matches are the ones in which both wrestlers go to lengths to bear the burden of the performance. Thus, according to this aesthetic, the Foley v. Funk exploding ring match described in Chapter One was considered by Stu and his friends to be one of the "greatest matches of all time," and Foley and Funk, who each suffered what anyone would consider serious injuries during the match, are both considered to be genuine heroes by Smart fans. So we can see how the hardcore idiom within wrestling is the expression of the refinement of what I above referred to as the physiological pathway to wrestling consciousness and peak wrestling experience. The realness of the spectacle runs away with the pageantry, as real weapons cause real injury, doubtlessly releasing the "adrenaline" discussed in the interviews above.

On the other hand, the old-school style of wrestling, also relatively highly valued among Smart fans, is an expression of the refinement (or perhaps preservation) of what I above referred to as the mental pathway to wrestling consciousness, and peak wrestling experience. In this type of wrestling, the action almost never involves any off-the-turnstile, or high-flying moves, and never the explicit use of weapons that characterizes hardcore match. Rather, the performers who specialize in old-school styles enact various holds, escapes, submission moves and reversals. There are probably hundreds of submission moves, each of which has several names. To win with a submission move means that you put the opponent in such (mimed) pain by (miming) stretching and bending the opponent's body that he or she "taps out," slapping the mat to signal surrender. The literature on the history of wrestling is rife with commentary about the fact that these mimed submission matches and even the legit wrestling matches from which they are derived can/could quickly bore an audience—a fact usually used to explain why wrestling has evolved into such a contrived spectacle. What is much more interesting than this speculation is the fact that submission-style wrestling, while in fact the oldest style of pro-wrestling, remains extremely popular, especially among the devoted Smarts. The reason for the sustained popularity of this 19th century form of entertainment is difficult to account for in the technical language of social analysis, and so I will position myself as a fan in order to discuss one of the most amazing performances I have ever witnessed in any genre: the Chris Benoit v. Steven Regal match that took place at the 2000 Brian Pillman Memorial Show, which I attended with three FUW wrestlers: Disco Stu, Dre and the Convict.

The "Pillman Show," as it is called by the Smarts who make up the vast majority of its spectators, is an annual wrestling show hosted by the Heartland Wrestling Association of Cincinnati. The card at this show always features a mix of stars from the national promotions, as well as an assortment of the biggest names in indy wrestling. The show is an amazing fan phenomenon of itself, since it is known as a show that brings in Smart fans from all over the country. At one point in the 2000 show, Kevin Nash, then with the WCW, cut a promo on the "damned internet fans" who spoiled the surprises in storylines and who were generally impossible to please. The crowd loved it, and booed him.

The Benoit vs. Regal match was definitely the standout moment of the entire evening. Chris Benoit, a Canadian, (Canada has a famous tradition of submission-style pro-wrestling,) worked for the WWF and was considered by most Smarts to be the best submission wrestler in a major promotion. Steven Regal is English and usually plays a Heel, working on the assumption that for U.S. wrestling fans, the English accent signifies elitism and condescension—good aspects for any Heel character. One reason that this particular match was invested with a special emotional intensity was the fact (well known to all of the crowd, Smarts that they were) that Regal had recently been through a career crisis after long stints with both WCW and the WWF. In fact, he had recently been released from drug rehabilitation, then hired and then quickly fired by WCW, which by all accounts was plagued by bad management and financial problems. When he appeared at the Pillman show, his career was probably at its lowest point. In an online review of the 2000 Pillman Show, which breaks down each match, a fan calling himself Mike I.

described the Benoit vs. Regal match, which featured no barbed wire, no blading, no ladders in the ring, and no table spots:

- Chris Benoit defeated Steve Regal with the Crippler Crossface (non-title)

To keep it short, this is the best match I have ever seen live, and one of the best I have ever seen period. Steve Regal looks really good, muscular, and he's lost about fifty pounds. Mat wrestling started it with Benoit holding onto a wristlock for about five minutes with Regal trying everything to break it. Eventually it's reversed and Benoit tries everything else. Somewhere in here there was a double headbutt spot which causes Regal to bleed hardway [i.e., no blading] ... only to be further aggravated by a super stiff Benoit enziguri. Then they fight over pins. Both Regal and Benoit are drawing insane face heat [the crowd is cheering them both as Faces], both names are chanted, both are as intense as I have ever seen them. When Benoit went up the first time for the headbutt the room was a little upset over the possibility that the match might end. The crowd popped when Regal put Benoit in a surfboard submission, popped again when he hooks the head for a modified Dragon sleeper, and pops again when Benoit escapes with a stiff elbow. Everything in this match worked. Benoit even hit my favorite move, the dragon suplex. Benoit eventually lands the Crossface and Regal instantly taps.

Match of the Year Candidate. Absolutely breath taking. The crowd was counting falls and helping the ref with the double KO spots. After the match, Benoit tells Regal that he's been gone a long time but the boys and the fans are ready to welcome him back. Even Benoit's post match promo was excellent. There's a reason why so many people think of Benoit as the best in the ring and he showed it tonight, but Regal was every bit as good. [2000]

From my spot in the stands, I could tell that the match was something really special. The crowd chants were never more unified or emotional during the show, than during that match. The two wrestlers seemed to have a vice grip on the crowd, and I almost felt the arena pitching like the deck of a ship as people moved up and down in their seats in response to the rising and falling of the action in the ring. I certainly didn't recognize the "dragon sleeper" when it was performed, nor was I familiar with Regal's story until Stu filled me in that evening. So I can only imagine how the Smarts viewed the match, which was breathtaking even for myself—someone who has never watched a wrestling show outside of the context of doing research. Although pro-wrestling and sincerity might seem incompatible, the final promo from Benoit was obviously heartfelt. Soon after the show, Regal was back on the WWF payroll, and my Smart friends were sure that his performance at the Pillman show, and his being embraced by the fans there, probably turned his career around. By cooperating with Regal to create a great match, and thus helping Regal's career, Benoit, who was (and is) a big name in McMahon's promotion, was exemplifying the ideal of the generous wrestler.

In Chapter Two, it was suggested that the emergence, in the 1980s, of the wrestling-as-violent-cartoon aesthetic was triggered by a shift in the scale of wrestling production that allowed a tiny number of powerful promoters to transcend the regional level of organization described by Stone (1971). This shift corresponded to the introduction of nation-wide cable television networks. Similarly, the quick spread of the internet into American homes of the 1990s enabled the development of Smart wrestling fandom, and the quick spread of backyard wrestling. We can see in the hardcore and old-

school styles something of what these fan activities and aesthetics consisted of. But none of this speaks directly to the (perhaps un-answerable) question: why did Smart fandom and backyard wrestling come into being. But it is interesting to note that these developments were more or less concurrent with the decision on the part of the leadership of the WWF, to publicly admit that professional wrestling was not a true, competitive sport. This act of revelation allowed the organization to avoid various regulations that were costing the federation taxes, and to avoid certain legislation that was meant to curb the spread of the hardcore style. Michael Taussig (1999) points to several instances, reported in the ethnographic record, in which the secrets and deceptions that support ritual complexes are exposed, and the complexes seem to be on the verge of collapse. Taussig references Gregory Bateson's (1936) *Naven*, an ethnography of the Sepic River region, which describes the collapse of a local ceremonial system caused by a woman accidentally catching sight of a model of a sacred flute.

She was seen by an older man who scolded her and reported back to the men's house. The men stormed out and collected all the small boys together, ...and showed them everything, including the most sacred of all, the *wagan* gongs. The exposure took the form of a *public enactment of the whole initiation cycle*, albeit abbreviated, and this was regarded as the final utter shame and destruction of the cult. Yet these "terminations" of ritual life through exposure of the secret are described by Bateson as *merely temporary*, and from what he says it seems they may even be cyclical. (Taussig 1999: 217-218)

After the workings of the rituals were exposed, and sacred objects were taken from their hiding places in the men's houses, these objects were even given to the women to keep.

I am certain that is this the limit of the practical scope of this analysis, so I will close this section by speculating that the extreme forms of wrestling that have appeared in suburban backyards across the United States, and the hardcore style that has revolutionized the independent wrestling scene in the past decade, may be responses to the revelation of pro-wrestling's secret that was made inevitable by novel information media. These forms can be understood as systemic responses to the WWE's "exposure" of the business, which was mentioned above by Comic Book Guy Anderson. They amount to an exposure, a "*public enactment*" of the secrets of wrestling: blading, once truly secret, become transformed into the barbed wire, and thumbtack spots; fans know intimate details of the personal and professional lives of internationally-famous wrestlers. The tradition of training dissolves as the un-initiated take up the technology and techniques of the ritual complex. In the end, the business is stronger than ever, and Vince McMahon remains at the top of the industry.

And, in a final note of comparison between Pro Wrestling and other spiritually-themed bodily techniques, I will break academic convention and report an interesting negative result of my research project. Each of the structured interviews that I carried out included a probe for what d'Aquili and Newberg (2001) have called Absolute Unitary Being (AUB). This term refers to a state of mind, or state of being that might well be called mystical because its two specific attributes are an awareness of the unity of all reality and a deep sense of the experience of AUB as a life-changing, or transformative,

experience. Jones (2003) has presented research on ultrarunners that strongly indicates that such an experience is common amongst that group. Ultrarunners are people who run for extended periods, distances even beyond the 26 miles that qualify a run as a marathon. These individuals apparently run until they begin to experience unity with the universe and sometimes report auditory and visual hallucinations or other spiritual transformations. To see if such a state might exist in wrestling, I asked the interview respondents if they ever had an experience in wrestling that changed their lives. Based on the responses, I am reasonably confident that AUB is not a component of wrestling trance, or even particularly common in wrestling in general. Two of the respondents were actually confused by the question, and either asked for me to repeat it, or needed a long pause to consider an answer. Several respondents responded with a “not-really,” and those who did respond discussed the friends and personal connections that they have made in the business, such as earning the respect of trainers, or respected co-workers or just learning life lessons about setting goals and achieving them through hard work. One wrestler mentioned that it was “cool” to be approached by young children seeking autographs. Thus we need to be careful to state that the wrestling consciousness is not in the strict sense mystical, and, furthermore, that while wrestling likely has strong socially integrative effects in the local context, any personal integration experienced by a given wrestler through the practice of wrestling is predominantly an effect of his or her own highly personal attitudes and pre-dispositions. I report this negative result simply because current understanding of the cultural and physiological processes at play in this field of research are in so many ways incomplete.

In Wrestling’s Defense

Wrestling has been critiqued vigorously by media watchdogs ranging from the conservative Parents’ Television Council to the media scholar Sut Jhally, who focuses on analyses of race, class, and gender variables. The PTC and Vince McMahon’s WWE have been involved in litigation several times, and the group recently settled a lawsuit filed by the WWE in response to claims made by the group that children were committing violent acts after watching WWE television programming. The group eventually posted an apology on its website (Farhi 2002). The following is an excerpt from the July 9, 2002 edition of the Washington Post:

Among other cases, the PTC helped publicize the "wrestling defense" of a 12-year-old Florida boy, Lionel Tate, who was on trial for murder. Lionel's attorney, Jim Lewis, claimed the boy had killed a 6-year-old playmate in 1999 after watching wrestling on TV and mimicking a move known as the "Stone Cold Stunner." In fact, Lionel was watching cartoons before the crime. His new lawyers have acknowledged that the "wrestling defense" was "bogus," [PTC founder and President L. Brent] Bozell said in his statement yesterday. Lionel eventually became one of the youngest defendants convicted of first-degree murder and was sentenced to life without parole. [Farhi 2002:C01]

Alarmist, conservative critics of pro-wrestling who favor censorship are often easy to dismiss, especially when their complaints against wrestling promotions turn out to be “bogus.” However, the commentaries of Sut Jhally, based as they are in generally accepted feminist, and critical frameworks, are less easy to dismiss. Especially when

media outlets reporting on their own interviews with Jhally feature such risible commentary as:

Wrestling's target audience, however, can't reach the distance necessary to view wrestling with a critical eye. "The audience, young boys especially, think it's real," Jhally says. And that's where the danger comes in. There have been numerous cases of backyard wrestling where kids have thrown down other kids, causing serious injury or even death. [Souza 2002]

Note that this excerpt is taken from an article in the *August 2002* edition of *NE Film*, an online magazine dedicated to independent film and video. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, the main problem with this type of criticism of wrestling is that the authors (I mean Souza and Jhally) remain willfully ignorant about non-mainstream manifestations of wrestling. This excerpt alone contains three absurd statements: first, wrestling fans "can't" coherently critique wrestling, apparently due to some inherent mental defect; second, "young boys" "think it's real;" and, third, there have been backyard wrestling-related deaths. I hate to belabor the point, but I cannot understand how someone so supposedly media-savvy as Jhally has missed the copious amounts of elaborate criticism of wrestling that has been posted by Internet Fans. I will never argue with Jhally if he states that Vince McMahon's show contains a bevy of images and themes that are disrespectful and ultimately harmful to women. Furthermore, many Smarts that I have met have openly argued that the WWE is a racist organization, since the African-American wrestlers employed there never seem to get the big "push." That is, they tend to be mid-carders never given a shot at the heavyweight title, a point somewhat inarticulately raised by Jhally (Souza 2002). But the WWE is not the beginning and end of wrestling in this country, and by contributing to this myth, Jhally only undermines the already relatively weak status of the more creative and variable worlds of indy and backyard wrestling.

Smarts and indy wrestlers are keenly aware of the activities of the PTC, although I'm not sure that Jhally's work is widely known in the wrestling scene. So I asked each of my informants to defend wrestling, and to respond specifically to the charges that wrestling is harmful to women, gays and children. I was answered with a variety of arguments that betrayed some previous consideration of the issue, indicating that this was an issue of some salience amongst those interviewed. Before I present those arguments here, I will note that these interview texts were not analyzed as thoroughly as the responses to question #4. Rather than hunting for patterns and presenting relatively raw transcriptions to point them out, I have polished the grammar somewhat, and assembled the wrestlers' responses so that they may be presented to the reader more or less directly, since the responses are interesting and insightful in their own right (i.e., they have no latent content of interest, and no relational concept structures that shed light on research questions.)

One defense of wrestling is that it the troublesome thematic elements that it often features—gay characters, extremely violent interpersonal conflicts—are merely reflections of the larger society.

Mark Zout: Oh, it's portrayed as violent and stuff, but society in general is violent. Some of the story lines I don't agree with. Like when Vince McMahon had the necrophiliac angle, but they were wanting to mimic society, and we unfortunately, as a

society, we have sick bastards that do stuff like that. So I think the more it reflects society, the more people can relate to it, and they get to more of a demographic instead of just that target 18 to 45 year-old male. Unfortunately, when they try to do something for everybody, you can't make everybody happy all the time.

This argument can seem like a cop-out at first. Just because there is violence against women, for example, does that mean that wrestling promotions can represent it freely, or without comment? I doubt that many wrestlers would agree to that. But what Mark Zout says that is more important for the understanding of wrestling and the reception of its various images is that wrestling is always inherently about the society in which it is situated. Wrestling's villains are made up out of the characteristics and traits that are most morally reprehensible in social life. Necrophilia, for example, is reprehensible, whereas characters like Darth Vader, or the Wicked Witch of the West are not, since they do not exist. Necrophilia exists. This is itself an amazingly compelling and undeniably true point. In a wrestling angle, the positive or negative valuation of necrophilia is determined by the members of the audience. This dynamic helps explain why the Chicagoland fans came to like Dr. Gimic so much. There are no poetry-reciting, child-molesting aliens. His absurdity was what turned him into a face. Furthermore, the fact that he claimed to be an alien forced the LWF audience to confront the question of belief in such a direct and intense way that he exemplified the rather postmodern character of much of the content of recent indy and backyard wrestling. Rod Steele developed these ideas somewhat in his discussion of how gay wrestling characters are typically integrated into wrestling shows and storylines in indy feds. "Typically when there is a comedic gay character, the gay character gets over on the pig-headed stereotype. It relies on a classic good guy over bad format. It's a very classic confrontation—it's just got a very negative connotation. It's just not something that people like [to think about]." Certainly, it is not *always* the case that the gay characters in wrestling come off as heroes fighting bigoted Heels, but the fact that this angle is actually fairly common is at least worth considering.

Mark Zout also tackled the thorny issue of children being exposed to wrestling:

You can't blame wrestling for what it is, because, actually, most wrestling is targeted towards men 18 to 45 years old. But kids have always liked it. Cause kids like ninja movies, kids like anything that's violent. But it's up to the parents to decide *which* wrestling you're gonna let your kids see. You know, if there's a first blood match, you know somebody's gonna bleed. If you don't want your kid seeing that, walk 'em out to the concession stand, get 'em a hot dog, shelter them from that. If you let them see it and they mimic it, you're not teaching your kids enough. You gotta teach 'em what's right and what's wrong. And if that's saying "hey, wrestling's fake" when they're five years old, then that's that. If it's lettin' 'em believe it's real, but keeping an eye on them, making sure they're not doing anything, then that's a different thing.

One need not feel highly invested in right-wing rhetoric about the supposed conflict between family values and media messages to see that Zout's invocation of parental responsibility is not merely common sense, but is actually well reasoned. Mark Zout's key point here is that there are different varieties of wrestling that are appropriate for different age groups. Consider the fact that one IPW wrestler used to run a "Christian Wrestling Federation," borrowing some of the less-experienced the IPW performers for

his shows. Although I never saw it, I can't imagine that it could have been too offensive. Zout continues:

I see a lot of families around here, I see a lot of kids in the audience. And every one of them I see is having a good time. There's one kid, he comes all the time, he sleeps during half the matches, but just cause he's out late and he's probably not used to bein' up that late, but every time he's awake, he's having a good time. And the family he comes with—he comes with his mom and aunts and grandma and there's a big group of 'em. And so they get out, and they pay ten bucks and you yell and get your frustrations out, from the work week that's done, and I don't see any better entertainment than that, you know? And that's a good stress reliever. You just gotta monitor it a little better.

Mikey Tenderfoot's response to the criticisms of wrestling that I outlined for him was that people "take wrestling way too literally."

People get over sensitive to things they might not like...the PTC is all over the place, and they're so overbearing that it's ridiculous. you do one thing and they might take it fifty different ways. To me, wrestling at it's best is an art form. So it's kind of—it's a mix of sports and other types of entertainment. Like stage acting, dancing, or any type of Olympic sport like skating or anything like that—when its done right it's beautiful. And if you think of it as anything other than an art form, you already have blinded yourself from the real truth that is wrestling, in my opinion.

An argument that the PTC is overbearing could be supported by the fact that before the settlement of the lawsuit mentioned above, members of the group were pressuring companies that advertised on McMahon's show to stop supporting the program, alleging that it was causing the deaths of children, as well as pressuring companies that they felt *might someday consider* advertising with the WWE (Farhi 2002). In any case, the idea that people take wrestling too literally means that they do not see it as art. Gimmicks that might be interpreted a variety of ways are interpreted as offensive by people pre-disposed to dislike wrestling.

Another line of reasoning related to the supposedly common view that wrestling is inherently deceptive because of its complex ontological status, or because of its low class associations.

Mark Zout: ...movies don't get a bad rap because everybody knows they're movies. Everybody says 'Oh, wrestling's fake.' Wrestling's not fake, but it's not real. It's quasi-real. But I think wrestling gets a bad rap because of what it is. And it's the same as a movie or a TV show that gets the good attention, but because it's pro rasslin, or wrestling, or whatever, it gets a bad rap, because it's traditionally been portrayed as like a redneck kind of beer-swillin', drinkin' beer, fightin' in the bar kind of thing. I personally don't believe that theory on it, but everybody's got their own opinion.

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Rod Steele: The business as a whole gets a bad rap because ... they consider it [to be] carnies and charlatans. But there are people who are just trying to do good business. You try to do things the right way. We're doing everything in our power to make sure we have all our permits, and our licenses, and the fire marshal squared away, and we've had people try to shut us down—and you know what, we're a legitimate business here.

All we are is an entertainment company. We're just a entertainment company that runs stunt shows. A stunt show would be the same thing as us.

Comic Book Guy Anderson responded to my question of what he had to say in defense of wrestling by tying together many of the themes just discussed with what I have described as the ethical system of pro wrestling—an ethical system that places high value on the sacrifices made by wrestlers who bear an incredible physical burden simply so that the form can continue to exist:

Well, ever since I first started, the respect I have had for these guys in this locker room—in any locker room, is so immense. That people will go through this and put their bodies and lives on the line every weekend—maybe three and four times a week—to do this in front of people, to give them some sort of entertainment, is just an astounding testament to their character because this is actually probably one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. I've played high school sports; I went to college, and this is probably literally one of the hardest things I've had to do. Just the training that's involved and the mental aspects of it—I mean, these guys are all smart people. And I think a lot of people bash wrestling because they think these guys are dumb. They think that just because a winner is pre-determined, these guys don't go out and bust their ass. And in general, everybody who wrestles works so hard to make people out there have a good time at the matches—whether it's here, in the Fed [the WWE], or wherever, these guys work extremely hard, and I think for people to knock wrestling as not being legit because they think everything is fake, when in actuality a lot of the slams and everything hurt, [is unfair.]

CBGA was one of the IPW students who worked the hardest in training at the Plex, and is related to the storied Anderson family that has produced several famous wrestlers. So it makes sense that his response to this question was centered around wrestling's cardinal values of respect for the business, respect for the workers, and respect for the physical demands of the form. This respect for the difficulty of professional wrestling, and training as a wrestler was brought up by many of the wrestlers, who encouraged me to encourage any readers interested in wrestling to find a local school and “try it” for themselves—especially before passing judgment on the tradition.

Rod Steel, on the other hand, who perfectly enacts a histrionic, perpetually enraged Heel gimmick, appropriately gave a more light-hearted but quite insightful argument about why wrestling's detractors are all wrong. To fully capture the flavor of this interview passage, I recommend reading it out loud as fast as possible, in a voice that is equal parts Rick Flair and the Father from the movie *A Christmas Story*:

Rod Steele: I was watching the HBO show *Real Sports* with Brian Gumbell, who mind you, never played any sports in his entire life, he was just a sports caster. Which—that frikkin' fries my bacon more than anything else. If you're gonna sit there and bad mouth somethin', at least *do* it. You can bash me if you can get in the ring and do it better. Well, they pulled McMahon in—they were talking about the Louie Spiccolis, the Rick Rudes—Henning, you know, they always talk about these guys who OD.... But nobody's here goin' “Here, take these [drugs], you have to take them.” And they talk about these people and how “the business made them do it.” The business didn't make you do it! They were burying McMahon. And whether I like McMahon or not is a totally different story. But you can't blame McMahon for steroid use. You can't blame McMahon for people taking all these drugs, you can't blame the business for their deaths. Not only that, look at every other industry! You've got a thousand wrestlers, independent, professional, what have you, that right now are incredible wrestlers. There's probably

about two thousand wrestlers, but there's probably about a thousand that are incredible. I'll even do you one better and say five hundred. Well how many baseball players are there?

LM: Probably a lot more.

Rod Steele: Right. Well, how many of them were all getting cracked up and they were all bumpin' out on coke and this and that and, [even in] the minor leagues and nobody says anything! They're all doin' steroids, not *all* of them of course, but a lot of football players [do it too.] Take it the other direction, you talk about rock stars—you mean to tell me there aren't people all frikkin zooted up and crashin' their vettes in to peoples' houses? That's not happening? Elvis and Natalie Wood and John Belushi, and Kurt Cobain, granted, he didn't OD but—

LM: Right.

Rod Steele: You see what I'm getting at here. Don't sit there and go well, in the last number of years, all these wrestlers died and it's because of the business. For every wrestler that has overdosed—you can ask in high school, I can think of every year that somebody either OD'd or was killed or something like that....

LM: Mm hm. You know another criticism of the business is that it's anti- gay or it's anti women, like a lot of the bits, like think about Gold Dust, or like any of the stuff off McMahon's show.

Rod Steele: Look at professional golf. World renowned how incredible [i.e. respected] golf is. First of all, I don't like golf. I worked at a golf country club. I don't like the elitist mentality, I don't like the people who play golf, ninety percent of them feel that they're much better than the entire world. Mind you, ninety percent of 'em have frikkin' beer bellies, couldn't jump higher than a hamburger—I denounce anybody that calls a golfer an athlete. I'm beggin'—you can put that! I totally denounce anybody who calls a golfer an athlete. When tiger woods won athlete of the year—no, he's not an athlete. It's a game. You're competing against a ball. But that's neither here nor there. But my point is, there was a commercial on circa '97 where it was Tiger Woods. And the thing he said was 'there are some golf courses I just can learned to play on,' or 'I can just play on.' That's nineteen ninety-seven, bro. 'Cause he's black? And everyone's like "well, that's okay." Annika Sorenstam, she just wanted to play with, isn't it...

LM: I don't remember, I know who you're talking about.

Rod Steele: The chick who wanted to play – the best LPGA player, she wanted to play with the men, She's not *competing* it's not physical. There's no physicalness about this. It's clubspeed, because you don't have to swing the club hard to hit it far. It's all physics. So the athleticism part—first of all, a golf swing is not natural, it's so bad for your back it's disgusting, but that's, again, neither here nor there. I'll sit and bury golf all day long, I totally denounce it. Please! Anyway. Well, the men at the country club I worked in wouldn't let women in the nineteenth hole. This is a golf course. Right here, Saint Petersburg, or actually it was in East Lake, they wouldn't let women in their nineteenth hole. And when they did, they created such a big stink about it. So you mean to tell me that these same people, these Republicans and Democrats and all these elitist snobs and the Parent Teacher Council, these cats who sit there and they poo poo this and say "Well, cause I don't like it, it must be bad." When things they enjoy: golf, cricket, that are the elitist sports are totally saying 'we can't have blacks in here!' That's crazy! That's like what's his name, Fuzzy Zoeller talking about how there'll be fried chicken and watermelons a the next Masters and all he got was a slap on the wrist? But you're gonna say because Golddust is an androgynous character it's bashing gays? Tell me where it

actually bashed gays. Typically when there is a comedic gay character, the gay character gets over on the pig-headed stereotype. It goes on a classic good guy over bad. It's a very classic confrontation. Again, it's just got a very negative connotation. It's just not something that people like. [The critics] just felt cheated when they found out it was fake and people haven't gotten over that. In my opinion, they're just like "Oh okay. It's a joke."

Even though this began as an ethnographic interview and ended up with Rod Steele cutting a promo on golf, I think the insights are valid. Wrestling is made up of the best and worst parts of American culture, mixed in such a way that it is never more or less pathological or noble than that culture. This is one key to the understanding the art of wrestling and what makes it so popular. Its problems are society's problems. Thus, judgments finding wrestling to be a force for the bad in society are open to charges of unfairness and exceptionalism.

Conclusion

The centerpiece of this thesis is the analysis of the patterned responses of wrestlers to Dre's offhand observation that professional wrestlers experience a unique feeling during performances—a feeling that is "like a trance we go into." I find the pattern to be striking in its continuous use of bio-scientific terms such as "adrenaline," and other metaphors based on blood flow or drug addiction. These effects are felt once the crowd's subjectivity is unified and manipulated—once the performers have made Marks out of all of the spectators. The more intense physical stimulations found in the form, such as hardcore spots, high-flying moves, and even miscues can drive this process by contributing to the unification and psychic manipulation of the crowd, and by the more immediate physiological effects of pain and anticipation. The ultimate effect of this ritual is that wrestlers are able to bear the burden of the performance, a feat that is often seen as somehow beyond normal human ability.

Besides the semi-structured interviews, the other method derived from ethnography that was used in the research was the establishment of observation as an interactional context. In fact this context is widely dispersed in space in time, as seen by the fact that the narratives and observations generated by this observation span three years, and represent work at field sites in the Chicago area, the Twin Cities of Central Illinois, St. Petersburg and Cincinnati. Thus the larger context of this research is the total social network that binds wrestlers promoter and fans—be they big names or weekend warriors, Marks or Internet Fans. That the consciousness alteration of initiates to certain types of tightly organized social groups is recruited to social projects ranging from entertainment, to mystical insight, to social protest is clear from the ethnographic record. That professional wrestling federations fit within this specific type of group is what I am suggesting. While the world of wrestling as it exists today certainly contains many examples of complex and creative fan responses (e.g. backyard wrestling) to mass media products (e.g. the WWE), a fully anthropological understanding of what wrestling is, and why people do it requires a consideration of wrestling as it is performed in a variety of venues, and its shocking similarities to rituals involving possession trance.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

The first time I watched a live wrestling show, I was accompanied by a group of undergraduate anthropology majors. Two of the group were close personal friends of several of the performers—the wrestlers who had created a wrestling promotion from scratch, “in their back yard.” Two of us, myself and my friend Rhet, were new to the art form. But, I’m fairly sure that we all agreed that whatever had been going on in that building was what anthropology was about. If one believed, as I did at the time, that culture was something that was essentially analogous to an organism, then one noticed at once that the crowd was a unity, formed quite naturally, and functioning as a system of systems, as information was processed in a drawn out flow of interactions between the ring and the audience. And, extending this understanding, the core of the whole happening was the ring. It was itself another interaction—a highly symbolic interaction at that. More mundane analyses of the gender roles and class status of the participants were doubtlessly also attempted, but I was left wanting to know “why?” Why the violence, why the fake identities of the performers, and why was it that this violent and fake performance was so effective in arraying the psyche of the masses around itself like a magnetic field? Essentially, this project was born at that show, as an attempt to account for my own shock at the otherness of wrestling.

Better questions quickly arose: This was not an isolated phenomenon, so why did it spread like it did? Why were the performers so young? How did they know how to do this? I don’t pretend to have definitively answered any of these queries, but I do now have an understanding of how wrestling works, and what it means to participate in wrestling on a more direct level.

After the off-hand “trance” conversation I had with Dre, I decided to use the idea that wrestling was something of a revitalization movement triggered by the ideological chaos being bred by the imperial economy, broadcast by media outlets, and realized by the quasi-fascist police and school administrators who worked so hard to enforce our conformity to the cynical processes of American culture. Even though it is difficult for them to maintain financial solvency, wrestling federations are highly productive groups. Before the 1980s supply and demand were balanced by the regional promoters. At that time it was perhaps best understood as the pageant of modernist capitalism that Freedman (1983) described: wrestlers as symbols with extremely unambiguous meanings enacted a narrative that, although carnivalesque, merely re-enforced the realities of capitalism’s social inequities. But the wrestling of the 1990s had obviously been revolutionized. Referents were highly obscure: they were either in-jokes or references for the enjoyment of Smarts, or, as in the cases of hardcore and revitalized old-school wrestling, forceful re-assertions of the non-referential, aesthetic aspects of this display of the passion of the body. Modern life is about sense made and goals achieved. Wrestling has always been a tradition that shuttled in and out of modernity, since it shuttled back and forth between making sense and the inversion of sense; it is the enactment of goal orientation, but the true goal of wrestling, as has always been known to its fans, was the attainment of a certain consciousness—an attainment that required the service of the initiates, the performance of the wrestling federation as troupe of spirit-mediums. Thus, I have

focused on wrestlers and wrestling technique. I have tried to explore that force that realizes culture in that cultural formation called the pro-wrestling show.

Just as other physical practices have been studied as ethnographic cases, resulting in cultural models supported by observations, interviews and participation, I approached wrestling from the same analytical perspective. This study includes reports of semi-structured interviews and participant observation, carried out at the Florida Wrestleplex in St. Petersburg, Florida as well as the information that I collected in Illinois. Participant observation at the Wrestleplex led to a record of the context with reference to which the interviews can be understood. Interviews were transcribed and coded. Interview analysis yielded two results. The testimony of members of wrestling culture included many qualitative evaluations of wrestling experience that provide a valid pathway to understanding that experience. Also, the coding of interviews helped to highlight the connections through which wrestlers come to an understanding of the functionality of the cultural phenomenon of interest to me. The model of wrestling experience forwarded by this study shows how these connections shape wrestling as a ritual technology, thus answering some of the questions that are loudly posed by wrestling's very existence.

I applied anthropologically derived interview techniques and an analysis of wrestling experience based on local wrestlers' conceptualizations of experience to the question of how the wrestling show functions. I believe that this thesis has established that wrestlers do experience something of this force that realizes culture, and that it comes immediately from the bodily effects of the technique. The big spots and the anticipation of those spots transports wrestlers to a space where their gimmick can flow out of them to the crowd, and interact with their moral sensibilities. The wrestler's gimmick—his secret, his lie, and the spirit he channels—is something so explosive that it transports the willing audience members into the crowd-consciousness described by Buford (1990) who discussed rioting soccer hooligans. The gimmick is so powerfully other (that is, shockingly and violently not part of everyday reality—witness the protection of its sacredness within the code of Kayfabe) that it provides even the Marks with the rhetorical space to explain that wrestling can't be fake, even though some of the punches are clearly pulled. And this physicality, especially in the case of the more *experienced* wrestler, (note the testimony of Agent Steele,) is complemented by a second pathway to wrestling consciousness. As Comic Book Guy Anderson explained this second pathway, "It's just a rush to make these people fall into your reality, or ... draw them into your mesh and make them believe what you're doing." More general to wrestling, historically and across its various contemporary sub-genres, is the fact that once the mind of the fans has been unified into a crowd and complexified into a hybrid belief/non-belief, then the rush of psychic control is experienced by the performers.

In my review of the framework of Mauss's descriptive ethnology of habitus, I proposed that his work can be rehabilitated for use within a more relativistic anthropology by asserting that the less educated and thus more brutish society is in fact a myth of scientific sociology—a hypothetical. This lets us keep his understanding of technique as learned, allows us to see wrestling not as a *part of* American culture but as *culture itself*, alive in the world. Furthermore, for Mauss consciousness was, at one level,

the essence of the interaction between the bio-physical realm of reality and the social order. I have concluded that phenomena of consciousness found in the world of wrestling correspond to this three-part structure. On the bio-physical side we have the physical intensity of wrestling technique. On the sociological side, we find wrestlers navigating the “mesh” of negotiated reality in interaction with the crowd. The real-time experience of these structures is what gives rise to wrestling “trance.”

Given that many of wrestling’s critics have tried to look at wrestling as a narrative phenomenon that sells itself as rebellion while merely reinforcing the will to dominate certain minorities and foreign races, I need to respond to these criticisms in a spirit that preserves their insights about the function (technically speaking) of carnival in the society of a powerful nation state. In this task, the context of the analysis must always be consciously brought to mind. As I write, America suffers under the regime of the second Bush presidency. I single out Mr. Bush, but in reality, of course, he is simply the head of a regime comprised of the “Republicans and Democrats” represented so well as golfers by Rod Steele in his conversation with me. What interests me particularly in Bush is that our president has responded publicly to the developments of September 11, 2001 with neither reasonableness, nor dialogue. Rather, he has favored the bald-faced assertion of the absurd: “weapons of mass destruction;” “axis of evil;” “freedom is on the march.” If wrestling’s critics and analysts were perfectly correct, we would have expected the Bush line to emphasize stereotypes of the villain enemy—as in the case of more traditional geopolitical heels such as the Reds. The Iron Sheik should have been expecting a call.

Certainly, some of this stereotyping has been accomplished by Bush’s rhetoric, given the incredible saliency of the term/image *terrorist*. However, domestic anti-hate crime outcries that followed the attacks of 2001 forced Bush to publicly state that not every American who wears a turban or veil or hails from the middle east is a bloodthirsty killer. (The kindness of this gesture was likely lost on the scores of Muslim men rounded up and detained without charge during the domestic operations of Bush’s various crusades.) My point is that rather than taking explicitly rational steps towards the persecution of the international criminal organizations responsible for the attacks of 2001, Bush presented the American people with an argument for waging a war with the nation of Iraq that became more obviously false with the passing of each of the last weeks *before* the offensive on that country was initiated.

Then, in a death blow against the humanistic spirit that underlies the cherished American value of liberty, our government has violated the human rights of untold numbers of prisoners of war, and the passion of the body appeared on our television screens as neither a staged spectacle (like wrestling) nor as fictional entertainment (such as *Pulp Fiction*) but as senseless torture. This was torture with no apparent purpose, no frame of reference, and no justice. At Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, at the U.S. military installation at Guantanamo Bay, and at other unknown locations, the U.S. government has staged for us a theater of cruelty at which the shock of the spectator is not a pathway to a valorized consciousness via the dissolution of logical structures, but a dissolution of logical structures that has two effects: First, it reveals the public secret of the Bush agenda; and, second, it strengthens the social power of that secret. The secret revealed—

the thing that all educated Americans already understood—was that the beginning and end of Bush’s design for the world order is based on a negation of the value of human life, and a radical acceptance of racist hatred. The secret is strengthened because, the average person simply cannot integrate this knowledge into daily reality, and, therefore complexifies their own consciousness with conflicting ideas of how some of what is going on over there is bad...but we must support the troops. That innocent men have been tortured and killed; that guilty men are not being brought to justice in the civilized tradition of fair and open trials—these become new public secrets. They are the things that we all know and (depending on the thoughtfulness of our characters) bear on our consciences with shame.

Academic critics have occasionally portrayed wrestling inaccurately, but their concerns were typically ethical, since they were alert to the possibility that carnival and spectacle can strengthen rather than de-stabilize unsavory political regimes. Wrestling is a popular American pastime that has a history just as storied and honored as baseball, football or basketball. But considering that it is older than all three, and considering the small number of American pastimes popular at the dawn of the century just-ended that still maintain the popularity that pro-wrestling enjoys, it seems that the American tradition most similar to wrestling is not any sport, but Jazz. And yet, the image of wrestling is held under the centralized control of self-styled media moguls like Vince McMahon, while Jazz is considered a cherished national heritage, preserved by public broadcasters and departments of music in colleges and high schools, and defended by goodwill ambassadors like Winton Marsalis. Thus I have decided to forward some potential defenses of a tradition taken seriously by huge numbers of people without access to academic modes of criticism such as masters theses or academic journals. And, in the process, I have located a more anthropologically complete model of the carnival phenomenon that is wrestling. And within that model, which is drawn from ethnographic observations and interviews (conceived of as interactional context, of course,) I have located a process of sense-making and inversion of sense that manipulates not only themes from the mythology of late capitalism, but much more fundamental categories of real and fake. I think that there is a serious possibility that because of the historical context of my work, these categories are the ones represented in this thesis as the stuff of power—not the less ambiguous categories of honesty and hard work that structured the wrestling shows of Simco, Ontario (Freedman: 1983) and the modern world of the cold war. Which brings us back to George W. Bush.

The cold war, which at least made sense according to the official arguments, has been definitively replaced by a new cycle of battles in the war-eternal that Bush wants to see manifested on Earth. This new battle cycle, which does not make sense, and which is a lie more blatant and therefore more powerful, is known of as the War on Terror—an absurdity that silences the mind in an ocean of emptiness and hopelessness. It is not my intention to attempt to pass off political commentary as academic analysis. But, as the ideological tone of virtually all criticism of wrestling indicates, professional wrestling is intimately related to the social forces that we experience as power. I believe that professional wrestlers might have something to teach us regarding the sociological effects of the forceful, public assertion of the absurd.

Today's pro-wrestling, unlike Bush's absurd pseudo-rhetoric, is an absurdity that gives life to the aggregate of spectators, gives them a voice, and gives them an awareness that there are forces in social life larger than any one of us. These are all ideas that directly threaten today's political establishments. If "teens," (one of the few remaining social categories that it is okay to demonize, condescend to, and mock) can create from whole cloth the intersubjectivity of the wrestling idiom in their own backyards—grabbing control of the real-time unfolding of culture—then what else might be possible if even a marginal amount of political awareness and education were to replace the dissipation and hopelessness that are powerfully established in the lives of young people by the everyday reality that society is based on a complex set of dissimulations that no one seems willing to challenge?.

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