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THE WRESTLER AND HIS WORLD: Precarious Workers, Post-Truth Politics, and Inauthentic Activism

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Warfare, according to Loïc Wacquant (1998, 331), is one of the guiding metaphors of boxing: "The boxing vernacular is peppered with military terms such as 'ring generalship,' 'firing punches,' 'landing bombs,' and 'to outgun' one's opponent with 'heavy artillery.' This militaristic idiom is also prominently featured in the *noms de guerre* that fighters adopt . . . 'Rifleman,' 'Machine Gun,' and 'Minicannon.'"

In professional wrestling the equivalent role is played by labor. To be a good performer is to be a good "worker"; to wince in pretend pain is to "sell" the move; that move, if performed in such a way as to not actually hurt, is a "worked" move; the script that the wrestlers follow is also "a work"; to be a valued but second-string performer is to be a "jobber"; the most famed "foreign objects" used to nefarious ends during matches—tables, ladders, chairs—have clear resonances with blue-collar occupations (Jansen 2019, 19). Even the name "professional" wrestling, while defining a "style rather than the fact that its participants are paid for their performances" (Mazer 1998, 4), makes clear allusions to economic activity.

In the same way that boxing may tell us something about warfare, pro wrestling can, I suggest, bring into relief some aspects of labor. In particular, and through consideration of a nascent, bottom-up unionization drive in British pro

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wrestling, I here explore how wrestling speaks to labor at the intersection of the precarious gig economy and post-truth politics.

Part of a "maligned step-child of sport" (Beekman 2006, vii) that exists somewhere between sport and theater, wrestlers give the appearance of competing in a sporting contest while, in actuality, working with one another to tell a story and keep each other safe. The results are predetermined, the match course scripted and, in this sense at least, wrestling constitutes a sporting contest that has always-already been post-truth. Commentators in recent years have argued that these peculiar post-truth qualities bring wrestling into alignment with wider cultural discourse. A 2016 piece in the *New York Times*, for example, asked "is everything wrestling?" (Gordon 2016) and, as of 2020, more than thirty articles had been published examining the relationship between post-truth's figurehead Donald Trump and pro wrestling (Levi 2020, 15). These analyses often take as their starting point the fact that, as the academic and ex-professional wrestler Larry DeGaris (2020, 208) notes, "wrestling and modern-day politics share a defining characteristic: they're both bullshit and pretty much everyone knows it."

Given these shared post-truth qualities, many commentators take for granted that pro wrestling's esoteric yet extensive vocabulary, fine-tuned as it is toward discussions of bullshittery, has the capacity to facilitate insight into contemporary political crises (see Castleberry et al. 2018, 77; Day and Wedderburn 2022; Litherland, Phillips, and Warden 2021, 219–20). Others, however, note that Trump in particular has a long and storied association with professional wrestling (Levi 2020; Moon 2022), and many of these scholars argue that Trump explicitly draws on the tropes of professional wrestling when constructing his political persona (Hall, Goldstein, and Ingram 2016). Thus, just as Muhammad Ali recognized that money was to be made by taking the pro wrestling playbook and applying it to boxing (Beekman 2006, 87), Trump and others are assumed to have reached a similar conclusion with regard to politics.

Yet it is not simply this relationship to post-truth politics that makes professional wrestling particularly pertinent to our current moment. Professional wrestlers are in many ways archetypal members of the "precariat" (Standing 2011) for whom work is uncertain and unpredictable and who are widely argued to be a core labor force in the contemporary, globalized work environment (Kalleberg 2009). These "Uberized," precarious workers still represent a relatively small portion of the total workforce across OECD countries (Feher 2018, 174), but they have been widely argued to be both "dangerous"—in that they may be "prone to listen to ugly voices, and to use their votes and money to give those voices a

political platform of increasing influence" (Standing 2011, 1)—and, through both their labor and labor organizing activities, as offering potential insight into the trajectories of capitalism in the coming decades (Feher 2018, 207). Thus, and while the experience of precarious labor "shifts dramatically for workers in different class, cultural and geopolitical contexts" (Millar 2014, 48), a self-conscious "post-truth era" (Sismondo 2017) that is dependent on "specific forms of knowledge, skills, values, reflection and effort" (Mair 2017, 3) constitutes an important context for precarious work, and it is one ideally represented by pro wrestling.

In the following section, I show that professional wrestlers perform for low, insecure wages; short of regulation; and in a workspace marked by the absence of both the state and traditional trade unions. I subsequently detail an attempt at unionization by a group called Unite the Outsiders that proposes something akin to a "freeworkers' union" (Sandoval 2016) specifically oriented toward a precarious workforce living under neoliberalism. I show that while many professional wrestlers agree with Outsiders' diagnoses concerning their poor working conditions, there is a widespread skepticism regarding the motivations of a major figure in the movement who, these wrestlers argue, may simply be furthering his own career. I understand these wrestlers' skepticism as emerging at the intersection of the neoliberal "entrepreneurial self" (Foucault 2008) and the post-truth "zany" situation (Degani 2018) and conclude by suggesting, first, that the entanglement of post-truth performance and precarious employment typified in wrestling will likely become an increasingly common feature of the contemporary neoliberal workplace and, second, that wrestling affords particular insight for our understandings of labor organization under such conditions.

WRESTLING'S PRECARIAT

In a sports hall at the back of a community co-operative is Three Count.[1] Situated in the north of England, Three Count runs occasional wrestling shows but, primarily, exists as a training school for wannabe pro wrestlers. The close links between Three Count and two large, regional promoters—both of whom have working relationships with World Wrestling Entertainment, or the WWE, the largest wrestling company in the world—makes it a popular destination: over the course of 2019 something in the region of 120 pro wrestlers trained here, although the number in any given session usually ranges between 10 and 15. Young men are overrepresented among the trainees, but the cohort is far from monolithic. There are usually women present, and some trainees are well into their forties. Many of

these individuals are wrestling for the first time, but others have been performing on shows for decades.

Almost everyone tells me that they aspire to make a career in wrestling, with the imagined end point being a contract with the WWE.[2] The path to realizing that aspiration, however, is incredibly difficult. One of the most successful wrestlers to frequent Three Count, a twenty-four-year-old named Darren, offers a case in point. Darren consistently performs on four or five shows a week and, at one point in the spring of 2019, tells me that he has wrestled forty-eight matches in the previous twenty-six days—a schedule that involves repeatedly traversing the length and breadth of the British Isles. Darren is paid between £20 and £40 for each of these matches, a wage usually assumed to also cover "volunteering" for several hours setting up the venue. When, in the autumn, Darren starts coaching at Three Count on Sunday mornings, he often begins a session at 10 AM, having arrived back in the city just four or five hours earlier following a show on Saturday evening in some far-flung location. Similarly, Darren frequently ends training early (at noon, say, rather than 1 PM), and with a promise to make up the time later, because he needs to depart for a similarly distant show that night. Unsurprisingly, Darren is almost always sporting an injury of some sort: a twisted ankle, a sore back. Still, he tells me that he is happy for the work and the money: he is "living the dream," while most of the other wrestlers to whom I speak are paid less, work one or two shows a week at best, and consistently fear missing out altogether to young up-and-comers prepared to work for free.

On nights when he is not wrestling in front of a crowd, Darren attends wrestling training schools while keeping up a relentless gym schedule. He also tells me that he frequently turns up unannounced at events where he is not booked to perform with the goal of helping out, showing his face, and maybe even standing in when another wrestler is unexpectedly injured or absent. A university graduate in Theater and Performance Practice, Darren combines all of this with occasional bar work and a day a week caring for an elderly grandparent. I begin my fieldwork assuming that the ubiquitous look of the jobbing wrestler embodied in Darren—clutching a can of Monster energy drink in one hand and a travel-on wheelie suitcase in the other—is an affectation. I increasingly come to see it as denoting an attempt to navigate utter exhaustion.

It is widely argued that professional wrestling is by, for, and about working-class men (e.g., Jenkins 2005; Mazer 1998, 100; Smith 2014). But the imagined figure at the center of pro wrestling is usually understood as a member of the "old" working class (Standing 2011, 12–13): the manual laborer with a desire to

see their ungrateful boss receive their comeuppance (Sammond 2005; cf. Jansen 2019). Such a rendering, however, resolutely does not capture the experience of Darren—a young graduate who wrestles while also working across the care and service sectors and who has nothing like a singular boss. Instead, Darren, both in and out of wrestling, is a member of the precariat. Indeed, cultural workers like pro wrestlers make up a significant proportion of the precarious workforce in the UK. The mantra of the cultural sector—"do what you love"—makes these workers' lives "complex and contradictory, combining work satisfaction and relatively high levels of autonomy with job insecurity, low pay, anxiety and inequality" (Sandoval 2016, 51). The fact that Darren and his fellow wrestlers do what they love, however, does not mean that they are naïve to wrestling's problems, or the efforts being made to address them.

THE LEFTIST, WANNABE UNION MAN

Darren's experiences capture at least two of the recurring grumbles at Three Count. First, participants often describe the working conditions at wrestling shows as unacceptable. Wrestlers frequently report an absence of basic health-care provision, meaning they are essentially on their own in the event of a medical emergency. Some promoters reportedly also fail to make food and water available. Given that many wrestlers are at a venue for six or seven hours (and engaging in intense physical exercise) this is viewed as a problem. Second, wrestlers tend to agree that rates of pay are very low given the time and personal expense required to perform. The majority of wrestlers tell me that they receive about £20 a performance, although significantly lower "mates' rates" are often expected locally. (And most wrestlers only work locally—in part because promoters are reluctant to pay significant travel costs—rendering their "full price" fee more or less moot.) Even if wrestlers see £20 as fair within the economy of professional wrestling, they also recognize that, in "the real world," such a wage would be a disgrace.

Into this context stepped a wrestler and activist named Luke Night, the figurehead of a nascent union effort called Unite the Outsiders. Night, an American wrestler in his late twenties, railed against the WWE and its presence in Europe, simultaneously blasting employment conditions and chastizing wrestlers who signed contracts with the organization, accusing them of taking "blood money," particularly with regard to performances in Saudi Arabia. Focusing his attention on poorly paid independent promoters and wrestlers, Night combined an emergent, bottom-up approach to unionization with strategic alliances with long-time

stakeholders such as Equity, an established trade union for performers and creative practitioners, and the Industrial Workers of the World, a century-old labor union.

Just as interesting, to me at least, was the fact that Night's aforementioned pronouncements on labor and labor organization were not confined to the backstage world of wrestling, like Three Count. Instead, when Night performed, he foregrounded labor relations in the ring and as part of the show.

Understanding why Night's performance is interesting requires a three-paragraph detour into the vocabulary of pro wrestling. First, the binary distinction between a *work* and a *shoot*. A work is an activity (a match, a rivalry, a persona) that is scripted, performed, and exists exclusively within the world of wrestling. A shoot, by contrast, describes an activity that exists "for real" and outside of the performance. Thus, a wrestler may have a shoot name (Mark Calaway) and a worked name (The Undertaker). An interview might be a worked interview (told in character) or a shoot interview (like a "making-of" DVD extra that explains what's really going on). A wrestling move may be a work (where both wrestlers act as though the move hurts, although it doesn't) or it may be a shoot (someone really gets punched in the head).

Second, and stemming from this work/shoot distinction, is the concept of *kayfabe*. Kayfabe, simply put, is the wrestling community pretending that works are shoots: kayfabe is wrestling's denial that wrestling is fake. Kayfabe is The Undertaker acting as though no one called Mark Calaway exists. Kayfabe is scowling at your opponent from across the merch stand long after the end of a match. Kayfabe is limping out of the arena on crutches and taking two weeks to recover after being on the receiving end of a particularly brutal (if entirely fictitious) attack. (For more on kayfabe see Laine 2020; Moon 2022.)

Finally, there is the distinction between a *mark* and a *smart*. A fan is a mark if they mistake a work for a shoot, if they are duped into believing that kayfabe is for real. A smart, by contrast, understands a performance for what it is. Of course, very few people believe that a dead person known only as The Undertaker is one of the best wrestlers on the planet but, as Sharon Mazer (1998, 167) has noted, the "phantom of the real is at the heart of professional wrestling's appeal." Even for the overwhelming majority who know that wrestling is scripted, there is always the possibility that this *particular* wrestler really *is* injured, or that these two *particular* wrestlers really *do* hate each other.

Returning to the organizing efforts of Outsiders, while there have certainly been attempts to unionize professional wrestling in the past,[3] these efforts have rarely intruded on the work, the kayfabe product presented to audiences. What

makes Night notable, therefore, is that his efforts at unionization are central to his wrestling performance. His worked, kayfabe character is also a leftist union man, and he spends considerable time in the ring vocally speaking out against the WWE and employment conditions more generally. These critiques are then folded into longer, multipart story lines, with in-ring enemies mocking Night and his organizing efforts. As an example, I was present for one in-ring promo in which a previous opponent of Night's joked about taking a contract with the WWE before declaring that he could never be beaten by "some social-justice warrior, or some leftist, pseudo-intellectual, wannabe union man."

These story lines speak to the fact that wrestling's front stage (work) / backstage (shoot) dichotomy has exploded over the past decade, and we now have a new term to contend with: the "worked shoot." Worked shoots introduce elements that have historically been off limits for wrestling performance: the existence of other promotions, backstage politics, a recognition of the artifice of pro wrestling. Worked shoots have proven both revolutionary and so overwhelmingly popular that they have ushered in a new age of wrestling, known as the "reality era" for its blending of fiction (works) and reality (shoots) (Jeffries 2019, 7). Worked shoots are also argued to have put the final nail in the coffin of kayfabe—now widely declared dead (Herzog 2017)—for there is no longer any denying that the work of wrestling is fake.

Night's worked shoot—the railing against the WWE as an unaccountable corporate behemoth, newly arrived in Europe, crushing community and difference; the need for an emergent, bottom-up solidarity movement that foregrounds the rights of precariously employed workers abandoned by traditional labor organizations and exploited in the corporate sphere; a desire to connect exploitation in the workplace with the wider inequities of late-capitalism—clearly resonated with fans, seemingly perfectly calibrated for a post-Occupy generation, the Bernie Bros, and the Corbynistas who could likely be identified as members of the precariat and as progressive in a slightly diffuse way. Night was nominated for numerous end-of-year awards by the trade magazine the *Wrestling Observer*, despite working almost exclusively outside of North America and away from legacy television networks. A T-shirt supporting unionization, with *OUTSIDERS* stamped proudly across the front, was everywhere—surely among the year's best-sellers. Night constituted a more or less constant topic of conversation, both within Three Count and the wrestling community more generally.

As I spent time in and around pro wrestling, I was convinced by Night's diagnosis of the industry: salaries were unacceptably low and the lack of even the

most basic health and safety procedures in the workplace felt genuinely staggering. Furthermore, his attempt at founding a "freeworkers' union" or "freelancer collective" chimed with Marisol Sandoval's (2016, 55) calls for the formation of a solidarity movement able to "create an alternative that rejects both hierarchical control and alienated labor as well as (self-)exploitation and precarity"; a path described as "more promising—more realistic, as well as more desirable—than petitioning public or private institutions for more permanent employment contracts" (Feher 2018, 204).

And yet, by discussing unionization on stage, in a space normally associated with performance and falsity, Night's act did inevitably beg the question "is this union man *really* a union man or is this just a character?" Given the allegedly non-trivial links between pro wrestling, Donald Trump, and contemporary politics tout court, this seemed like a non-trivial question: if much precarious labor will be undertaken in contexts marked by conditions popularly understood as being post-truth, how do those conditions shape efforts at labor organization? I decided I needed to know: First, how did precariously employed pro wrestlers understand attempts at unionization within a post-truth landscape? Second, when you really got down to it, was the unionization effort a work or a shoot?

IT'S PROBABLY A SCAM TO SELL T-SHIRTS

Perhaps surprisingly given wrestling's reactionary reputation, the community at Three Count professed a largely progressive politics. Both Theresa May and Boris Johnson, the two British prime ministers in position during 2019, and the ruling Conservative Party, made for a relatively frequent focus of ire; there was a running joke that one wrestler—whose day job was a trade union organizer—was really a member of the Tory party; and it was universally agreed that any wrestler whose character voted for Brexit would need to be a heel, someone to be booed.

One might imagine, then, that these wrestlers would be receptive to Night's efforts at unionization. And yet, over and over again, a substantial proportion of the wrestlers at Three Count made it clear to me that they understood Night's attempt at labor organization as a story *about* work rather than a form *of* work. The *actual* work that Night was undertaking, I was told, was running a merchandising company.

"So, I think right now," one wrestler told me, "it's doing nothing but selling T-shirts for Luke Night. Like yeah, you see him all around and he's obviously a great wrestler, he's done a lot in wrestling, he's doing really well. . . . And to be

fair, if it all comes out with it being mostly a publicity stunt, then it's making a lot of money."

Another said that "My personal opinion is that it is probably a scam to sell T-shirts. There is literally nothing that Unite the Outsiders can do for someone . . . and I think the people that are talking about this union are very, very much aware of that. . . . At the end of the day, it's showbiz."

A third wrestler made it clear to me that Unite the Outsiders should be understood as a savvy bit of marketing: "He's just using his position at the moment to kind of play to that crowd. He's kind of going 'Ah, you know, this is a niche that I can tap into,' and that's what he's gonna do. I think he's just playing up to that, and I think anyone will play up to that given his position. I guarantee that he will probably get signed by somewhere in a few years and then that will just be a T-shirt that he's sitting on the shelf."

To be clear, this was not an unanimously held view. Some wrestlers were entirely supportive of Unite the Outsiders and did not question it at all; others were in broad agreement with the need for a union, but questioned the strategies and feasibility of the union drive; others professed no opinion at all.[4] Nonetheless, the view that Outsiders should be understood in the world of kayfabe, as a work, was widespread among pro wrestlers at Three Count.

I just want to take stock here. The three individuals quoted above are all precariously employed members of the wrestling community—two are actively earning money, albeit not much, the third is aspiring to—who want to make a career out of their practice. All also agree that workplace conditions for precariously employed wrestlers like themselves are in serious need of improvement. When an organization like Unite the Outsiders claims that it wants to improve working conditions—and is specifically interested in wrestlers *like them* who work for small organizations, in unsafe conditions and make a pittance—they conclude that what we are seeing is a work. Furthermore, these wrestlers don't begrudge Night this performance. One could easily imagine how theses wrestlers might be angry about Unite the Outsiders if it is imagined as a performance—is this not an attempt to capitalize on their own precarity? Is it not distracting from the possibility of other, genuine, attempts to instigate change? Yet instead, the general view is that it's making a lot of money, anyone would do it, it's showbiz.

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In *Wage-Labor and Capital*, Marx (1885, 7) writes that: "the laborer who for twelve hours, weaves, spins, bores, turns, builds, shovels, breaks stone, carries

loads, and so on — . . . [does] this represent the active expression of his life? On the contrary. Life begins for him exactly where this activity of his ceases—at his meals, on the pub-house bench, in his bed." For Michel Feher (2009, 23), this distinction between the subject-at-work and the subject-at-leisure maps onto the binary between the "negotiating subject and the negotiated commodity": the worker can negotiate over if and how work is undertaken, but there can be no negotiation over the inalienable rights of the "free labourer." Under this model, according to Feher (2009, 29), the worker is a "split being." In pro wrestling, this feature of capitalism reaches its logical end point: the wrestler's work name often literally differs from the one used away from the ring.

Under neoliberalism, however, a new subject position has emerged, primarily through the concept of human capital: "Human capital is me, as a set of skills and capabilities that is modified by all that affects me and all that I effect" (Feher 2009, 26). Human capital, as a key aspect of the transition from liberalism to neoliberalism, does away with the subject/commodity distinction integral to liberalism by constituting the subject as the commodity expected to sell themselves.

Within the precarious world of pro wrestling, the need for the wrestler to be such a "self-appreciating subject" (Feher 2009), an "entrepreneur of himself [*sic*]" (Foucault 2008, 226),[5] renders explicable the wrestlers' lack of upset toward Luke Night: he is assumed to be, like themselves, an entrepreneurial subject who takes his social milieu and uses it to increase his own human capital. (And seems to be good at doing it, apparently capturing something of a zeitgeist discontent among both wrestlers and fans about contemporary working conditions.) That Night has found this niche is simply to his credit.

But, of course, things are not so simple. The collapse in the distinction between work and worker has led not only to the formation of novel modes of subjectivity but also to a significant reformulation of "the real." It was previously understood that the work was kayfabe and could be safely bracketed off from reality; the worker, meanwhile, was shoot and part of life who, like Marx's free laborer, could step away. For these wrestlers, though, anything that happens to a worker is fair game for a work, but, as a consequence, there is the lingering suspicion that the worker themselves may be a work. Neither work nor worker are ever able to entirely escape the post-truth world of professional wrestling and, within this landscape, alleged attempts to alleviate precarity are fundamentally undermined by the impossibility of legitimacy. There is always the possibility that you might be a mark.

IT'S A CARNIE BUSINESS

If professional wrestling exists on the periphery, then Three Count sits on the periphery of the periphery: a second-tier promotion locally, it is a long way from London, and even further from the global hubs of wrestling in New York, Tokyo, and Mexico City. A few of the wrestlers at Three Count know Night personally, and another individual associated with Unite the Outsiders is a sometime attendee at the training school, but there is no particular reason to suppose access to the machinations of the nascent union movement here. It felt important to understand what wrestlers thought about Night, but I continued to have a lingering hope that I would find out what was actually going on.

Around Three Count were a number of invariably well-connected promoters and coaches who, I thought, might provide more insight. Two of the promoters to whom I spoke—both self-styled as old school and no-nonsense—proved dismissive: "You've got all these people talking about unionizing, all this, that, and the other . . . and it's absolutely ridiculous," said one; "I don't have a strong opinion on it. If anything, I just find it a little bit silly, but I don't really care for it either way," said another.

Others, though, were more forthcoming. Younger, new school, and invested in the national scene, a coach named Isaac expressed strong support for the idea of unionization while also detailing some fairly significant reservations about the approach taken by Outsiders. When I mentioned that some wrestlers to whom I'd spoken believed the movement to be a work, Isaac replied: "Yeah, it probably is. Because, when I keep saying, it's a carnie business, yeah, of course it's a carnie business. Why wouldn't you try and profit of this?. . . And again, the point is genuinely true, and I believe in it wholeheartedly, but there's always going to be those people who are going to see, like, 'oh, we can make some money out of this too.' So, I don't think it's a work, because I still think that the idea is right. Like, a lot of the guys who are doing it, they are personally doing it for the wrong reasons, even if the greater reason is right. . . . They're doing it for their own reasons, because I know Luke Night, his bookings have doubled."

A second coach, Dean, offered further elaboration, but no more certainty. A sometime attendee and guest coach at Three Count, Dean was involved in the running of a promotion that worked extensively with Night. As part of his role, Dean had some insight into the scriptwriting process, including scripts that involved discussions of unionization. Remarkably, he seemed every bit as uncertain about the status of Unite the Outsiders: "I have doubts about its legitimacy. . . . In ring, out ring, always question it. It's always been the way, because that is the

industry. The industry has always had a level of mystery around certain things, whether that be what you see on screen or what you see behind the curtain. . . . If tomorrow it turns out that it was legitimate and we have an improvement in terms of structure and professionalism, I'll be happy. I won't be shocked. But," he adds with a laugh, "if tomorrow turns round and it was all a big work, and it was just a money-making thing, I'd also not be shocked."

When I asked specifically about kayfabe story lines that have drawn on the unionization effort—story lines that, remember, Dean helped put together—he simply said: "From a story point of view, it's phenomenal. One of the greatest stories told in modern wrestling, especially European wrestling. Engaged the way through. But it blurs the lines, for legitimacy, I think that's the problem. . . . And again, this is the thing, from a story point of view, that is fucking brilliant. 'Cause that is so engaging and, like you said, kayfabe. Is it dead? No, it's alive and well."

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When Isaac says that wrestling is a "carnie business," it strikes me that he is simultaneously making a socio-historic and a conceptual point. Socio-historically, pro wrestling emerged from, and continues to be associated with, fairgrounds, carnivals, and sleights of hand (Litherland 2018, 27–28). Conceptually, Isaac seems to echo Mikhail Bakhtin (1984, 10–11) when he writes that the carnival was as a "second life," a "world inside out" that "celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions." When Bakhtin (1984, 24) describes carnivals as spaces organized around laughter, degradation, and the body, it is hard not to understand professional wrestling as a vestige of these "half-dead forms," an "enduring possibility" of sport organized around the stage rather than the field (Litherland 2018, 5, 22).

However, in the context of, first, neoliberal modes of subjectivity that diminish the possibility of a "split being" (Feher 2009) and, second, a parallel shift that requires performance to be marked by the self-conscious evocation of entrepreneurship and "reality," it is worth asking if wrestling can indeed still claim to be carnivalesque, to be celebrating a "*temporary* liberation from the prevailing truth and established order." In temporal contrast, Michael Degani (2018, 474; emphasis added) writes that "zany situations," which—like wrestling, often incorporate both violence and laughter—are about the "*permanent* entanglement of work and play wrought by capitalism's constant revolutionizing." Degani (2018, 481; emphasis original) argues that, while similarities with the carnival are clear,

decisive differences exist as well: "Where the metacommunicative frame of the carnivalesque is 'this is play,' the zany situation seems to ask, '*is* this play?'"

In his refusal to consider the carnival as a space of work Bakhtin oversimplifies, for the phrase "carnie business" reveals that, in wrestling at least, work and the carnival most be thought together (Stallybrass and White 1986, 30). Further, the wrestlers' apparent uncertainty over the status of labor organizing (*is* this play?) radically changes their response to it: even with agreement over the diagnosis offered by Unite the Outsiders there continues to be some skepticism, a belief that this might be carnie business, and an ever present worry that one may be a mark. Importantly, the coaches and promoters with greater insight into the workings of pro wrestling are no more certain as to whether Unite the Outsiders is a work, and they remind me to "always question it." There is no doubt that the permanent carnival can be thrilling, but the possibility of community organizing is offset by the need to continually ask "is this real?"

THE TOOTHPASTE CAN'T GO BACK IN THE TUBE

It was clear that I needed to speak to Luke Night. After several attempts to meet in person, we're eventually able to organize a Zoom call in mid-December 2019.

Night's shoot name is Elliott Barrett. When we speak, he is wearing a Bernie Sanders T-shirt, and we chat about the senator's prospects for procuring the democratic nomination for U.S. President. During our conversation, Barrett traces the formation of Unite the Outsiders back to 2017, when he started performing in the UK more regularly. He describes Outsiders as a "merchandising company that uses a portion of its proceeds to sponsor wrestlers into Equity, which is an entertainment trade union." Alongside offering a pathway to Equity, Barrett tells me that Outsiders wishes to introduce some standards of practice in the UK: the guaranteed provision of food and water, the presence of a qualified and competent medic, basic first aid training for attendees at training schools, the introduction of policies around both concussion and hard-core wrestling. Finally, and perhaps less tangibly, a goal is to ferment a sense of solidarity within the UK wrestling community. As noted above, this constitutes post–wage labor activism, aiming to "create moments of solidarity and collectivity that . . . challenge individualised work cultures" (Sandoval 2016, 56), and with demands that are less about "social protections attached to wage-earning jobs, which became the norm under the Fordist social compact," than "universal and unconditional guarantees" that "adapt risk-coverage mechanisms to their specific needs" (Feher 2018, 205).

Just over half an hour into the interview I muster the courage to tell Barrett that a decent number of people to whom I've spoken think that Outsiders is a work and that this is an attempt to earn himself more money rather than help or build the community. "What would you say to that?" I ask.

The question seems to take him by surprise, and he pauses often during his answer: "I would assume that they just don't know me personally whatsoever. They haven't been listening to what I've been saying, or they don't understand." Finishing with a laugh, he adds, "that's antithetical to what we're doing." In fact, says Barrett, Outsiders is probably costing him money, because "I give away most of my merch money that I didn't used have to give away. That was all mine."

Apparently thinking on the matter further, Barrett adds: "I think a lot of the skepticism might come from the fact that it's pro wrestling, and everyone's skeptical of everything in pro wrestling. And no one knows what's real and what's fake. And there's all these blurred lines all the time, so I'd assume that has something to do with it. Erm, but overall, I mean," he finishes with a further laugh, "I can just say that it's not."

"But you would say that if it was a work, though, wouldn't you?" I reply.

"Yeah. This is a real thing."

I mention to Barrett the event I attended where I heard him derided as a "leftist, pseudo-intellectual, wannabe union man." "It kind of bends my mind, a little bit," I say.

"I mean, again, because I'm so outspoken about it, it's impossible for someone not to want to bring it up in a promo, or as part of a story line. But it doesn't necessarily mean that that is entirely not true."

Attempting to express my confusion about all this, about how conversations with pro wrestlers, promoters, and community insiders of all stripes—all individuals meant to understand the game and its workings—have left me none the wiser about Outsiders, I say, "You know, I read and read and read about how kayfabe is dead . . . and then this is like, where, the interesting thing is these people, they don't know."

"I think at this point," replies Barrett, "it's just like manufacturing doubt. Right? And that is what it's all about, because, you know, the toothpaste can't go back in the tube. . . . And if you're questioning it, then that's kind of the best we can do at this point."

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While I'm confident that Night/Barrett would contest this positioning, his actions continue to be entangled with neoliberal modes of subjectivity and labor organization. While he overtly rejects the view that he is an entrepreneurial subject, actualizing human capital for his own ends, he can still be understood as enacting what Lilly Irani (2019) has called "entrepreneurial citizenship." According to Irani (2019, 7; emphasis original), the promise of entrepreneurial citizenship is "not only that one make's one own future but that one can generate progressive futures *for others* through organization, know-how, and resourcefulness." In his own telling, Night/Barrett's entrepreneurship—his character development, wrestling skills, merchandise design, commitment to Unite the Outsiders—is not only aimed at securing his own future but also that of his fellow workers, and, I would add, it is specifically oriented at doing such *within* a neoliberal environment marked by the absence of state intervention and a relative lack of interest from traditional labor unions in low-paid, precarious workers.

Regardless of our degree of optimism regarding the capacity of efforts like Unite the Outsiders to challenge neoliberalism from within, the problem, as elucidated by Irani, is that this positionality depends absolutely on authenticity (Irani 2019, chap. 7). But in an environment shot through and through with questions about what is real, many wrestlers simply do not believe Night/Barrett or view him as authentic—even when his diagnosis of contemporary working conditions aligns neatly with their own.

Indeed, what makes Night/Barrett so successful at accruing "self-appreciating capital" (Feher 2009) does not straightforwardly align with how supposedly real his performance is. A number of other wrestlers, including the trade union organizer who trained at Three Count, had strong shoot union backgrounds and much clearer real-world bona fides when it came to labor organization. Yet these wrestlers did not see their stock appreciate to any degree like Night/Barrett's. Instead, what singled out Night/Barrett was his ability to consistently blur the lines between work and worker, to turn himself into "one of the greatest stories told in modern wrestling," as Dean, the coach at Three Count, has it. The problem here, as Degani (2018, 475) says of others in zany situations, is that Night/Barrett's "freedom to play around was a role they were consigned to perform." And this suggestion that Night/Barrett can only ever be understood as a great story, a performed role, brings with it a host of unwelcome questions: Is this a work? Am I a mark? Thus, a perhaps unfortunate consequence of Night/Barrett's

entrepreneurial, self-appreciating, zany, and fully post-truth performance is that, in the eyes of his peers, it delegitimizes claims about his capacity to organize and change labor practices within the wrestling industry. Night/Barrett's story speaks to fans and wrestlers alike because it is so real and maps on to their experience of precarious work, but it is not quite real *enough* for them to act—unless that action means buying a T-shirt.

CONCLUSION

Didier Debaise and Isabelle Stengers, following William James, write that a primary motive in modernity is "the horror of being a dupe," "the awful risk of believing lies." This motive prompts a "real ontological question: what universe is being created through and with our mistrust" (Debaise and Stengers 2022, 4). In trying to understand the pervasive mistrust of the contemporary moment, many scholars and commentators have turned to pro wrestling, a space that has always-already been post-truth and where "nobody wants to be a mark, nobody wants to be *not* in on the joke" (Litherland, Phillips, and Warden 2021, 223; emphasis original). One suggestion within the existing literature is that it is the vocabulary of pro wrestling that is most useful: this metaphoric connection suggests that terminology from within wrestling (work/shoot, mark/smart, kayfabe) can be mapped onto apparently more important matters, such as mainstream politics. A second suggestion focuses not on metaphor, but emergence, suggesting that the kernel of Trump's character, for example, can be traced back to his involvement in pro wrestling.

Here, I have taken a different tack, suggesting that wrestling may have a synecdochical relationship with post-truth politics and may give some insight into conditions of precarity in a post-truth ecology. It is, of course, crucial to disentangle diverse "forms of precarious labor that hold very different relationships to a worker's experience of the everyday" (Millar 2014, 40) and to recognize that the situation wrestlers find themselves in is quite different to that experienced by the overwhelming majority of workers: the precariat continues to be a distinct minority; there can be few workplaces quite as zany as a wrestling ring. The importance of wrestling to analyses of labor organization, therefore, arises not so much from the site's typicality or obvious generalizability as it does from the fact that centering "relatively marginal and disempowered groups is not necessarily wrongheaded—especially when these groups seem to indicate where capitalism is heading" (Feher 2018, 207). If it is plausible to ask the question "is everything

wrestling?" (Gordon 2016), then it also seems plausible to ask if the questions that wrestlers face, questions of precarity and performance, also have a wider valence.

This is the context that frames my argument that Three Count is a space where the risk of being a dupe—of being a mark—is ever present, where folks must continuously ask "Is this real?" or "Is this play?" The wrestlers are, as Degani has it, "stuck," rarely able to settle on an answer as to what is a work and what is a shoot, whether they're being smart or, in fact, whether they're a mark. This situation is not so much carnivalesque as "a kind of parody of the utopian fair . . . it does not so much relieve or liberate a stuffy situation as whirl everything into a frenzied mixture of exuberance and exhaustion, pleasure and punishment" (Degani 2018, 481). This state of permanent questioning seems highly detrimental in the context of organizing precarious labor, for even when there is agreement over the diagnosis, the fear of being a dupe forestalls the possibility of change.

Dean, the coach and promoter at Three Count, did ultimately see a way out of this bind. First, there needed to be a separation between Luke Night the character and Elliott Barrett the person. Unblur the lines. Second, Night/Barrett could not run the show. Night/Barrett could wave the flag, bear the standard, but he could not ultimately head the union. In advocating for a return to the liberal division of the subject, and a hard split between work and worker, Dean here makes the eminently sensible suggestion to return to a way of being under which labor movements saw considerable success. The problem is that, by Dean's own admission, this separation of work and worker would come at a cost to the product: it was precisely the blurring of the lines that, "from a story point of view," made it so "fucking brilliant." It does indeed seem unlikely that you will be able to put the toothpaste back in the tube.

CODA 1

After finishing the interview, and musing on what it all might mean, I spend ten minutes organizing the academic detritus that accompanies such work: organizing some notes, transferring MP3s behind a firewall, filing away the participant consent forms. It is only when undertaking the final task that I realize that Elliott Barrett has signed the consent forms "Luke Night."

CODA 2

I concluded my fieldwork at Three Count at the end of 2019 and, within months, a radical change occurred. In June of 2020, #SpeakingOut began to trend on Twitter. Reproducing 2017's #MeToo in microcosm, the movement detailed

the emotional, physical, and sexual abuse suffered by (overwhelmingly, if not exclusively) women in the wrestling community. In response, an All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Professional Wrestling was formed, bringing professional wrestling in the UK under the surveillance of the state.

Elliott Barrett stood at the center of #SpeakingOut, with several women alleging sexual assault. Unite the Outsiders released a statement saying that the organization was no longer working with Barrett, but that statement was its final act. Neither Outsiders nor Barrett is even mentioned in the APPG's report,[6] their proposed freeworkers' union not so much rejected as forcibly forgotten. Barrett himself has been blackballed and has not wrestled since.

This is, of course, a depressingly familiar story about powerful men: in sport, in unions, in politics. It is a story so familiar that it should, and does, prompt significant reflection about my own ignorance of what was happening (O'Neill 2022). Why, though, did Barrett fall when others—including Donald Trump and WWE owner Vince McMahon—have, thus far, largely been able to ride out similar accusations?[7] Trump's positioning as a unitary post-truth subject was not undermined by allegations of sexual assault. For some, it is even conceivable that sexual assault increased his human capital: indeed, this constitutes the explicit argument of Feher (2018, 227) who argues that Trump "persuasively conveyed that under his administration, being or standing by a nationalist, gun-carrying white male would become a truly valuable asset." This was not so for Barrett, whose brand was incompatible with his behavior and whose capital was sufficiently devalued that he was rightly abandoned. Among all the wreckage, then, there is both something incredibly depressing about the fact that a crushing inability to act intersectionally killed any chance of improved working conditions and a shimmer of hope that under at least some circumstances it remains possible to hold some of those responsible to account.

ABSTRACT

In this article, I explore attempts to organize a precarious workforce in a setting that is always-already post-truth: professional wrestling. I focus in particular on a nascent, bottom-up unionization effort in the UK that foregrounds the rights of wrestlers who perform for low wages, in unsafe environments, and in the absence of both the state and traditional trade unions. I show that while many wrestlers agree with this movement's diagnosis of problematic working conditions, there is also widespread skepticism about activists' motivations, with many wrestlers suggesting that the organization may be telling a self-interested story about work, rather than engaging in a form of work. I argue that wrestlers' permanent questioning emerges at

the intersection of the self-appreciating, entrepreneurial subject and the post-truth, zany situation and conclude that wrestling affords insight into labor organization under employment conditions emblematic of a contemporary post-truth neoliberalism. [activism; carnivalesque; neoliberalism; post-truth; precarity; professional wrestling; trade unions; United Kingdom]

NOTES

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1. Pseudonymizing the names of all participants and organizations directly involved in this research was a condition for the ethical approval of this project. It was made clear to all participants that pseudonyms would not guarantee anonymity and all participants agreed to these terms.
2. In 2016, the United States–based WWE began to put on regular shows in the UK and, around the same time that I begin my fieldwork in January 2019, launched a UK-based brand called NXT-UK (Meltzer 2018) which resulted in the WWE signing around forty European (overwhelmingly British) wrestlers to three-year contracts, reportedly worth $50,000 a year (Meltzer 2017). Procuring such a contract was the stated goal of almost all attendees at Three Count and represented a clear and (fairly) realistic path to a reasonably well-remunerated career in professional wrestling. These links to the WWE provide the most overt link to a distinctly Trumpian post-truth politics, for Trump and Three Count are institutionally and discursively united by foundations provided by this institution: Trump has hosted two iterations of the WWE's Wrestlemania (pro wrestling's answer to the Super Bowl), appeared on the WWE more than a dozen times (Moon 2022, 47–48), and would ultimately be inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame in 2013 (Levi 2020, 16). Linda McMahon, the wife of WWE owner Vince McMahon, was appointed to Donald Trump's cabinet, and the McMahons emerged as the third-largest financial backers of Trump's 2016 presidential run (Moon 2022, 12).
3. In the UK, for example, there were attempts at unionization in the mid-twentieth century (Litherland 2018, 73–74) and, more recently, individual promotions have come to agreements with Equity, the performing arts union (Hemley 2019). In the United States, it has been widely reported (Jansen 2019, 13; Shoemaker 2014, 345–48) that Hulk Hogan tipped off his employers about a nascent unionization drive being led by Jesse "The Body" Ventura—a wrestler perhaps best known as a star in the Arnold Schwarzenegger vehicle *Predator* and as the governor of Minnesota. Another totally normal day in pro wrestling.
4. T-shirts, again, played an outsized role in the expression of these views: "I paid for a T-shirt."; "I'd feel uneasy wearing one, because who am I to say I'm an outsider when I've not got an offer not to be?"; "I have no idea what that movement was, I just saw the T-shirt."
5. For an analysis of the gendered nature of entrepreneurial discourses, see Murphy 2017.
6. The report was initially made available via the personal website of the APPG co-chair. At the time of writing, however, it is no longer available through that source. An archived version can be accessed at: https://web.archive.org/web/20210422162701/https://www.alexdaviesjones.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/833/2021/04/new-appg-wres_compressed.pdf
7. Since writing this article, a former WWE employee has accused Vince McMahon of sexual assault and sex trafficking and, as of writing, McMahon no longer sits on the board of the company (Draper 2024). Such events have not severed the links between

Donald Trump and the WWE, however: in July 2024, Hulk Hogan was invited to speak at the Republican National Convention where he was described by *New York Times* columnist Ezra Klein as giving "undoubtedly, the night's best speech. It was campy, and it was strange, and it was entertaining. But it understood that the root of Donald Trump's politics are as a showman, a reality television star, as a W.W.E. Hall of Famer" (Klein 2024).

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