

The Veiled Production of Debility in Professional Wrestling

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This paper examines the relationship between disability, debility, and World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) media texts such as “Don’t try this at home” public service announcements in order to interrogate the “early death” phenomenon that has pervaded the professional wrestling industry in recent decades. Through its production of images of disability, largely only through a paradigm of spectacular in-ring injury, WWE veils the ways in which such productions produce debility in its performers. Drawing from Jasbir Puar, debility addresses long-term and taken-for-granted wearing down of subjugated groups, a concept which, as seen in WWE, is tied to the expansion of corporate profits. WWE, in pursuit of greater profits, disappears its production of debility behind a veil of public relations messaging and limited disability representation that relies upon the reification of hypermasculinity and compulsory able-bodiedness in its performers.

Keywords: debility; disability; hypermasculinity; WWE

The rate of early death among WWE performers has far outpaced any professional sport (Morris). Although in-ring performances are designed to minimize the risk of overt injury and impairment, professional wrestlers notoriously suffer long-term bodily tolls. This wearing down of bodies—a “slow death” that accounts for “the debilitating ongoingness of structural inequality and suffering” (Puar, *The Right to Maim* 1)—is well-known among professional wrestling fans, so much so that popular sports blog *Deadspin* published a weekly “Dead Wrestler of the Week” column in the early 2010s (Shoemaker), chronicling professional wrestlers who have died early either directly, having died as a result of either a discrete in-ring injury, or through decades of wearing their bodies down in service of spectacle and corporate profit. Columns such as these mark not only that WWE has a problem with long-term debilitation of its performers but that discussions about this problem are largely taking place outside the company.

This issue of early death among professional wrestling is one of debility, which addresses forms of “injury and bodily exclusion that are endemic rather than epidemic or exceptional” (Puar, *The Right to Maim* xvii). Debility is “a collective or affective condition generated by institutional oppression” (Hsu 81), accounting for the shared bodily tolls of marginalized groups across time and space. By linking “the

discursive and rhetorical depictions of marginalized people and the material and embodied violence they experience” (De La Garza 95), debility is a crucial means through which we might recontextualize those whose bodies are routinely ground down and debilitated in the professional wrestling industry.

Disability studies provides numerous theoretical frameworks through which we might understand the bodily traumas suffered by professional wrestlers. The social model of disability places the disabling agent on one’s environment rather than one’s own body, defining disability as “the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation” (Oliver and Barnes 21). Impairment, in turn, refers to the experience of “lacking part or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ, or mechanism of the body” (Oliver and Barnes 21). Despite some marked improvements over past social conceptions of disability, disability theorists continue to update and challenge the social model. Essaya Nabbali, for example, notes that the social model does not substantively examine intersections of disability with other vectors of identity, drawing particular attention to the erasure and subjugation of “Mad” people even within disability studies circles. Further, Julie Mulvany suggests adopting a framework of embodiment when approaching impairment so as to not tacitly reduce one’s experience to an outside observer’s list of symptoms and to allow those with impairments to author their experiences.

Jasbir Puar expands the scope of the social model into a biopolitical project by examining how the disabling of entire populations can come to seem acceptable or even common sense. Debility, she explains, expands our understanding of disability economies as it addresses injury to populations that comes to be taken for granted (*The Right to Maim* xvii). Debility as a concept calls us to ask not only which populations of bodies can be impaired, maimed, or disabled for the service of the interests of state and/or capital, but also why the harm done to those populations is considered an acceptable, normal, or in some cases, even beneficial consequence of doing business.

Debility is thus no accident; in fact, it is “required for and constitutive of the expansion of profit” (Puar, *The Right to Maim* 76) for WWE executives. The production and maintenance of debility is a highly profitable enterprise, but corporations like WWE veil this process, leaving fans to account for this phenomenon through columns such as “Dead Wrestler of the Week.” Under a capitalist paradigm, debility becomes a “necessary supplement in an economy of injury that claims and promotes disability empowerment at the same time that it maintains the precarity of certain bodies and populations precisely through making them available for maiming” (Puar, *The Right to Maim* xvii). Thus, corporations like

WWE can carry out public relations projects that appear to empower people with disabilities and impairments while simultaneously producing debility in those who toil in professional wrestling performances. WWE provides a rich case study for the ways that disability and debility work symbiotically, as the excess profit generated by in-ring performances funds public relations initiatives that give the corporation a disability-friendly face while further masking the debilitating labor required of WWE's performers. To understand WWE's production and veiling of debility, I will examine three vectors: the company's public relations messaging, disparity in debilitation along lines of gender, and onscreen representation of disability.

WWE is not solely culpable in the industry's historical and continuing production of debility, but I focus on WWE in this paper as the majority of professional wrestling history in North America flows through WWE, from its monopolization of the territory system decades ago to its pop culture peak in the late 1990s to today. The industry is constantly in flux, with a new rival competitor in All Elite Wrestling teasing the eventual possibility of health insurance benefits for its performers and popular independent performers like David Starr openly calling for unionization among wrestlers, and moments such as these should provide robust opportunities for professional wrestling studies and disability studies to collaborate in the future.

As of 2019, WWE is a publicly traded corporation worth over \$3 billion (Giri), with programming that reaches over 650 million homes worldwide ("WWE Network Reaches"). The representations of injury, disability, and impairment produced by WWE, then, are of deep concern both for viewers of these media texts and for the well-being of the professional wrestlers in such media texts. Thus, I am interested in how WWE represents disability in its performances, and the resulting "economy of injury" serves its business interests at the expense of those who are taking on significant harm to their bodies in the ring. Chiefly, I will examine how WWE produces representations of disability as a means of veiling its production of debility by first turning to its public relations messaging.

Public Relations

Prior to every World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) home video, a 30-second public service announcement plays. Each video, which viewers are unable to skip or fast-forward through, follows a similar script. The public service announcement opens with short clips of some of WWE's professional wrestlers writhing in pain or being stretchered out of an arena, interspersed with flashing images of chest, arm, leg, and skull x-rays. While the clips play, the viewer hears audio clips of announcers showing concern over a move gone wrong, as well as

testimony from the injured wrestler onscreen detailing the specifics of his injury. The wrestlers featured are nearly always men, and the videos typically spotlight the injuries of the more popular “main event” wrestlers rather than lower-card wrestlers or women wrestlers, who have historically been made to occupy a position of titillating sideshow rather than respectable performers of a comparable level to the men who perform in the ring. Once several injuries have been shown, the clips fade out and a narrator reads aloud the notorious tagline that appears onscreen: “Don’t try this at home.”

Professional wrestling performances are scripted; that is, the in-ring performers follow a set routine of maneuvers, surreptitiously working in collaboration to tell a story to the audience while maintaining a façade of legitimate combat. Performers adhere to a code known as “kayfabe,” which is the “illusion of realness” (T. Smith 54) in such performances, and sometimes even beyond the performances themselves. In the 1980s, wrestlers Jim Duggan and the Iron Sheik were arrested while traveling together, which was doubly scandalous at the time because they were feuding in kayfabe and were thus breaking it by sharing a car (Coulson). Though performers still typically uphold the artifice during shows, WWE’s protection of kayfabe has shifted and waned in its so-called “Reality Era,” and modern audiences, aside from perhaps the very young, “know that they are not watching a ‘real’ sport” (Jones 278) but rather a scripted representation of sport.

WWE’s “Don’t try this at home” announcements are significant in that they explicitly break kayfabe within their own product, marking these acts as imperative for WWE’s corporate goals. One such “Don’t try this at home” announcement proclaims, “Yes, this is entertainment, but the hazards are real” (WWE, “Don’t Try This At Home”), marking that the performances are entertainment rather than sport and thus not “real.” As such, these announcements imply that in the course of professional wrestling performances, no significant bodily harm occurs. They suggest that bodily harm is not endemic; rather, it is a rare but dangerous aberration and thus not in need of further consideration by viewers or the performers themselves.

These announcements exclusively situate bodily harm in professional wrestling performances as “hazards,” carrying with it the connotation of an accident, an unfortunate but unavoidable facet of such performances. An accident functions “as an alibi for the constitutive relations of force necessary to bring about something, an event that is in retrospect deemed an accident” (Puar, *The Right to Maim* 64); it masks the other forms of violence inflicted upon the body, and truly accidental injury is merely one way in which these performances impact, reshape, and punish the bodies of professional wrestlers.

As a publicly traded corporation, WWE has a vested interest in appearing as if it operates ethically in spite of its reputation as “low brow culture” (Hill 179). The “Don’t try this at home” videos are one way WWE accomplishes this, breaking kayfabe to remind its audience that such performances carry with them great risk, which is also, perhaps more importantly, an attempt at inoculation against lawsuits when young fans inevitably injure one another while replicating wrestling maneuvers. Another way WWE shores up this ethical corporate face is by partnering with organizations that address disability and impairment directly (just usually not the disability and/or impairment generated directly as a result of WWE’s business practices). In addition to long-running partnerships with the Special Olympics and the Make-A-Wish Foundation, WWE partners with the Muscular Dystrophy Association and various charitable organizations serving military veterans with disabilities and/or impairments (“Concussion Legacy Foundation”; Raymond).

The one exception to WWE’s focus on disability produced outside itself is its partnership with the Concussion Legacy Foundation, founded to “solve the concussion crisis by advancing the study, treatment and prevention of the effects of brain trauma in athletes and other at-risk groups” (“Concussion Legacy Foundation”). It is typical of nonprofit organizations and corporations like WWE to “dedicate money and time to the future” while ignoring concerns of the present, operating on an ideology of cure rather than care (Clare 87). By investing in a nebulous future that has “solved the concussion crisis,” WWE can claim an ethic of care while providing no such care to the currently living and recently deceased performers who have been debilitated by concussions and related injuries. WWE can then hide its role in the long-term production of brain and neurological traumas, even those that likely played a role in Chris Benoit’s highly publicized double murder-suicide in 2007, under a veneer of magnanimously working toward a better future.

In addition to debility, it should be noted that wrestlers have died suddenly in service of spectacle. At the Over the Edge pay-per-view event in 1999, performer Owen Hart fell over 70 feet to his death while being lowered into the ring via a faulty harness. The cameras turned away before the pay-per-view audience at home saw Hart’s fall or the subsequent panic of medical personnel swarming the ring attempting to revive him, but the 16,000 fans in attendance watched it happen and most continued to watch as the show continued on as planned a matter of minutes later. Hart’s death, even though it took place in the ring, is, of course, not featured in any of WWE’s “Don’t try this at home” public service announcements.

Though performers do sometimes die during wrestling performances, debility accounts for a far greater share of early death. Former WWE Champion

Eddie Guerrero, an active weekly performer at the time of his death at age 38, was found dead the morning before a show in a hotel room in November 2005. According to the coroner, Guerrero died of “heart failure ... presumably because of the toll that years of steroids and painkillers and street drugs took on his heart and, not incidentally, because he never went to the doctor for help and because nobody intervened to take him to the doctor” (Shoemaker, “Dead Wrestler of the Week: Chris Benoit”). Though Guerrero’s heavy use of painkillers is easily linked to a debilitating career of being slammed to the ground dozens of times upwards of 300 nights per year as part of these wrestling performances, Guerrero is routinely memorialized as one of the most beloved wrestlers of all time. He is not only featured in *Deadspin*’s “Dead Wrestler of the Week” column but is also the subject of mournful documentaries produced by WWE, and wrestlers to this day pay direct homage in their in-ring work. Guerrero is (many fans would agree, rightly) positioned as “gone too soon,” whereas other wrestlers are simply gone, made to not only die, sometimes brutally, sometimes slowly, sometimes both, but also to disappear.

In 2007, less than two years after Guerrero’s death, his close friend and fellow former WWE champion Chris Benoit, also an active weekly performer at the time of his death at age 40, was found dead in his Atlanta home along with his wife and young son. Soon after, it was determined by investigators that Benoit killed his wife Nancy and son Daniel before hanging himself in his home gym (Shoemaker, “Dead Wrestler of the Week: Chris Benoit”). Benoit was scripted to win the ECW Championship at WWE’s Vengeance: Night of Champions pay-per-view event the night they found his body (“U.S. House of Representatives” 81), demonstrating that he was still performing at a level that did not evoke any suspicion. Yet, an autopsy revealed that Benoit’s brain, having received dozens of concussions and other traumas over his wrestling career of 20-plus years, was comparable to “the brain of an 85-year-old Alzheimer’s patient” (Shoemaker, “Dead Wrestler of the Week: Chris Benoit”). The specifics of Benoit’s motive (and thus his culpability, as some fans argue the degree to which Benoit was even lucid while committing the murders) are still a contentious topic of debate over ten years later, and at the core of the debate is the extent of his debilitation, as fans hold that “the very wrestling skills that made Benoit one of the most respected professional wrestlers contributed to his brutal demise” (Cherney and Lindemann).

A 2004 “Don’t try this at home” announcement features a clip of Chris Benoit wincing as he lies in the ring and grips his shoulder as his voiceover explains “I ruptured a disc which fragmented into my spinal column” (WWE, “Don’t Try This At Home”). Here, WWE folds his experience of an in-ring injury into a public service

announcement as a way of building the corporation's public relations, demonstrating the immediate hazards of the in-ring performances, and situating the primary risk of such performances within the realm of impairment rather than the ongoing "slow death" of debility. After the deaths of the Benoit family in 2007, Chris was immediately removed from all such announcements and all programming altogether. To date, the final mention of Benoit in any capacity came from a live address by WWE chairman Vince McMahon the week after the deaths of Benoit and his family, in which McMahon tells the audience that "the facts of this horrific tragedy are now apparent. Therefore, other than my comments, there will be no mention of Mr. Benoit's name" ("Vince McMahon Statement"), a promise of tacit erasure that has remained true.

Thus, Chris Benoit's in-ring body of work is now recorded solely in columns like "Dead Wrestler of the Week" rather than through any official channel in WWE, with the career of Nancy Benoit, herself a retired onscreen manager, erased through omission even further. That WWE would promote a discrete injury suffered by Chris Benoit as part of a public service announcement but remain entirely silent on Benoit's debility, the slow, built-up traumas sustained "as a normal consequence of laboring" (Puar, *The Right to Maim* xvi), reveals the ways in which debility works to produce laborers that are available for maiming through a framework of individualized disability empowerment (Puar, *The Right to Maim* xvii).

In 2016, a group of 53 professional wrestlers (with a few estates representing the now-deceased) filed a class-action lawsuit against WWE, claiming the corporation failed to prevent and/or address repeated brain and neurological traumas that allegedly left numerous plaintiffs with memory loss, depression, and other cognitive issues. Mostly consisting of former wrestlers over the age of 50, the injuries they sought recourse for were within the realm of debility, which WWE runs on and profits from but does not openly recognize. The lawsuit also refers to WWE classifying all professional wrestling performers as "independent contractors," which, in the words of the lawsuit, are "contracts of adhesion intended solely for the benefit of WWE and VKM [Vince McMahon]" (Paglino). As independent contractors, WWE performers are not legally considered employees despite those performers being precluded from working elsewhere, and as such WWE does not provide its performers with health insurance.

WWE does openly acknowledge that its performers are independent contractors rather than employees, using it as a cudgel against such criticisms. In 2010, WWE released a "Setting the Record Straight" statement that responded to various published criticisms of WWE, notably released while former WWE CEO Linda McMahon was running for a seat in the United States Senate and receiving

criticism for WWE's business practices. In the release, WWE claims that the corporation "covers 100 percent of all costs associated with any in-ring related injuries and rehabilitation." Thus, WWE will only provide care for injury and impairment that occurs during the performance of wrestling, exercising a "right to maim," or a "right expressive of sovereign power" (Puar, *The Right to Maim* xviii) that allows the maiming of subjugated bodies while maintaining a humanitarian image and profiting on the wearing down of the very bodies it purports to be helping. To better understand the ways that WWE masks its production of debility, I now turn to the ways WWE produces debility along lines of gender.

Gender

When WWE acknowledges disability and impairment, it has historically primarily focused on the men in such acknowledgements. Particularly in the hypermasculine world of sport and athletics, which I extend to the realm of professional wrestling despite its scripted quality, gender bias is compounded through intersections of disability (Haegele et al. 306). The construction of disability and gender is a continuing historical project, as "disability has been used to cast the form and functioning of female bodies as non-normative" (Garland-Thomson 7). Thus, disability and gender and both mutually constituted and deeply intertwined.

Feminist scholarship has called into question the Lacanian notion of the "flat mirror, which reflects women's bodies only as absence" (Inahara 48). The correlation of bodies as absent to professional wrestling is twofold: first, all disability, impairment, and even debility experienced by women is made to appear absent. Historically, WWE programming has been dominated by men's performances. Since 2015, however, WWE has made great strides in increasing the amount of television time and storyline opportunities given to women in the company, beginning with the "Women's Revolution" which led to an influx of women performers from NXT and the dropping of the "Divas" moniker in favor of the more equitable "Superstars." Further, WWE produced its first, and to date, only all-women's pay-per-view, WWE Evolution, in October 2018. WWE recently reinstated tag team championships for the women's division, as well, which had been absent since the 1980s, and for the first time in its 35-year history women headlined WrestleMania in 2019. Moments such as these are promising in terms of WWE's moves toward equitable promotion of women performers and a stark move away from depictions in the past few decades in which women were overtly sexualized in contrast to men, who were primarily presented as demonstrating "athletic prowess in a dangerous combat" (Mazer 106).

That said, the work WWE has in terms of gender equity writ large is compounded by the inequity of disability along lines of gender. WWE has indeed

created greater space for women to display their athletic prowess in the ring, but this broadening of opportunity for women largely stays within the realm of acute injury. For example, performers such as Becky Lynch and Shayna Baszler have recently utilized bloodshed, once a device exclusively utilized by men in the company, in their storylines, which unsettles the historical hypersexualization of women performers but nonetheless leaves intact the veiling of debility, likely even increasing said risk for women performers as they approach a comparable amount of bodily trauma in their performances.

Until the aforementioned Women's Revolution, women rarely if ever appeared in WWE's "Don't try this at home" public service announcements despite routinely experiencing broken bones, concussions, and slow wearing down of their bodies in comparable ways to the men who perform. This reinforces the ways that WWE has situated women's bodies as hypersexual, and in order to maintain that absent of disability, impairment, and/or debility, as is typical for mass media portrayals of sexuality for people with disabilities (Ellis 1). As the "assumption that disabled people cannot be sexual beings is a feature of disability oppression" (Hill 4), the ableist logic that has pervaded WWE media texts dictates that women cannot fulfill their hypersexual role if they have a disability, not only limiting the scope of women's sexuality but tacitly erasing the possibility of representing women with disabilities at all.

Professional wrestling is notorious as a hypermasculine spectacle, as "in the arena ... wrestlers play out assumptions of what real men are and do" (Mazer 116). The spectacular quality of these performances lay bare foundational elements of hypermasculinity such as promotion of bullying, homophobia, and control over women (Jhally). Even in training, professional wrestlers come to understand pain as "a testament to authenticity and realness" (R. Smith 141), flaunting limping, bleeding, and other indicators of pain as a means of legitimating their passion and sacrifice for the industry.

In producing cultural norms surrounding manhood and masculinity, these performances also produce meanings about womanhood, femininity, and disability, all subjugated by virtue of their distance from the hypermasculine athletic and violent ideal performed by the men in the ring. Despite attempts at marginalizing disability and erasing debility in certain bodies, a feminist disability studies approach reminds us that "disability, like gender and race, is everywhere, once we know how to look for it" (Garland-Thomson 28). This leads into the second correlation to professional wrestling: in such texts, disability writ large comes to be situated, similarly, as a lack or an absence. Under this paradigm, "the imaginary body is an able body" (Inahara 47), marking that even scripted, excessive spectacles

like professional wrestling reify able-normativity and reduce the imaginations of scriptwriters and audiences alike in ways that preclude full participation from performers with disabilities and/or impairments.

Compulsory Able-Bodiedness

To clarify how WWE reifies able-normativity, “the ableist notion that being abled is not merely default but ideal” (Brown 32) in its onscreen narratives, I turn to Zach Gowen’s brief stint as a professional wrestler in WWE. Gowen, signed as an independent contractor at age 20 in 2003, was the first mainstream “one-legged wrestler.” His left leg had been amputated, and though he made use of a prosthetic leg as he walked to the ring, he wrestled without the use of the prosthetic. At first, Gowen may seem to subvert what is otherwise a pervasive ideology in WWE, that of compulsory able-bodiedness, an insistence that “what is both moral and desirable in the neoliberal social contexts of late capitalism is necessarily heteronormative and nondisabled” (Erevelles 83). Upon reflection, however, it becomes evident that this representation of disability in professional wrestling ultimately reinforces old tropes of “overcoming tragedy and lack,” which in turn, actually work to “reconsolidate the able body” (Puar, *The Right to Maim* 84).

I turn to a specific performance as a way of encapsulating the way in which WWE positioned and utilized Gowen’s body: a 2003 episode of WWE’s televised *SmackDown!* program in which Gowen, in his hometown of Detroit, was forced (in storyline) to wrestle Brock Lesnar, a brutal villain at the time. Gowen was presented as a hometown hero as he made his entrance, with local fans cheering as his entrance music attested, “Nobody’s gonna stand in my way. I’m gonna do this my way!” In addition to Gowen’s “one-leggedness,” the ring announcers draw the audience’s attention to the absurd weight discrepancy between the two wrestlers: the 6-foot-3 Lesnar billed at 286 pounds versus Gowen, less than 6 feet tall and billed at 155 pounds, barely half of Lesnar’s weight. Through this sort of narrativizing, WWE produces Gowen along stereotypical lines, in which characters with disabilities “shore up the boundaries of normality and humanness,” conflating the hypermasculine abled body with centrality and normality” (Ellis 1) rather than transgressing conventional masculinity.

When the bell rings, the villainous Lesnar leaves the ring to go menace Gowen’s mother and grandmother, both of whom are seated in the front row of the audience. Gowen takes advantage by vaulting over the ring ropes and sending Lesnar crashing to the floor. Through this hypermasculine act of protecting the women in his family through violence, Gowen takes up crip nationalism (Puar, *The Right to Maim*), a “conditional, tentative form of citizenship” (70). In the realm of

professional wrestling, Gowen attains this temporary citizenship by demonstrating his ability to perform the same hypermasculine function as the nondisabled wrestlers. This conditional citizenship “produces privileged disabled bodies in distinction to various ‘others’” (Puar, “Prognosis Time” 165), functioning primarily to reinscribe and expand hypermasculinity rather than loosening its grip over professional wrestling storytelling.

Gowen’s protective leap onto Lesnar is the last offensive maneuver he performs as Lesnar quickly takes control and does not relent. He specifically targets some attacks on Gowen’s leg, at one point tossing him leg-first into a steel ring post to the disgust of the audience and the ring announcers. Soon after, Lesnar uses a steel chair to, in professional wrestling parlance, “bust Gowen open,” hitting him in the head, which in a matter of moments produces a stream of blood down Gowen’s face. Bloodshed, it should be noted, is yet another example of the ways that wrestlers are made to maim and be maimed as a “normal consequence of laboring,” (Puar, *The Right to Maim* xvi). Despite fan speculation as to hidden “ketchup packets” or other means of feigning bloodshed, the most common way that wrestlers feign it is by actually slicing open their skin (Shoemaker, “Dead Wrestler of the Week”). Using razor blades hidden in their boots, wristpads, or tights, wrestlers who seek to add bloodshed to a match will covertly cut their vessel-rich foreheads. Wrestlers will usually do so just above the hairline, to make the cut less obvious, but as a result of these practices, foreheads with deep divots as well as diseases transmitted through blood are routine testimonies of the bodies of retired wrestlers.

Back to Gowen, the match ends with him on a stretcher, face covered in blood. As medical personnel start to remove Gowen from the ringside area, Lesnar pushes past them and tips Gowen off the stretcher onto the floor, adding one last insult and injury to Gowen as the fans and announcers verbally protest. Here, a ring announcer makes clear function of the performed destruction of Gowen’s body, shouting, “I know I’m supposed to remain impartial, but damn it, I hope Brock Lesnar gets broken bones at SummerSlam on Sunday! I hope Brock Lesnar gets what is coming to him!” The spectacle of so brutally punishing Gowen’s body, then, was in service of selling that weekend’s SummerSlam pay-per-view event, revealing both the underlying capitalist logic of the beatdown as well as the use of Gowen’s body to further highlight Lesnar’s. In such performances, “the able body cannot solidify its own abilities in the absence of its binary Other” (Mitchell and Snyder 368), so when WWE does use people with disabilities, it does so to re-center the able body and shore up the entertainment potential of able bodies at the expense of those with disabilities. Though at first Gowen’s brief run as a heroic character in WWE may seem to subvert compulsory able-bodiedness in WWE, the trauma inflicted on

his body in service of the able body reveals that Gowen has only been subsumed into an ideology of compulsory able-bodiedness. Considering Gowen's positioning within a such an ideology as well as his quick unceremonious release from the company shortly after, Gowen's role as performer in WWE demonstrates how performers with disabilities are made to "serve as the yardstick that resurrects social difference only to hasten its instantaneous disappearance" (Erevelles 83).

The match with Lesnar was the narrative peak of Gowen's WWE career, as it is the moment his WWE career is most often remembered by. He soon faded from the spotlight and was released from the company a few months later. Like so many wrestlers, Gowen turned to alcohol and painkillers to cope with the long-term damage inflicted on his body. A few months after losing his job, Gowen "lived with his mother, scraping money together for pills" (Dilbert). Though Gowen eventually returned to the independent professional wrestling scene, his WWE career exemplifies how representation alone is insufficient for people with disabilities under a regime of compulsory able-bodiedness. By merely representing disability through Gowen without seeking restorative and proactive justice for those impacted by debility, WWE maintains an image of care while expanding the limits of the bodies it will exploit and debilitate. WWE deemed Gowen "available for injury" (Puar, *The Right to Maim* xvi), another body to be exploited and debilitated as means of building up the credibility of the able body rather than Gowen's, and thus requiring and reproducing debilitation.

Conclusion

WWE's production of debility and limited representation of disability exemplifies Jasbir Puar's central point that disability and debility are "necessary supplements" (*The Right to Maim* xvii) in order to maintain precarity for designated bodies such as those of WWE's performers. WWE performances rely on the production of debility, even as they attempt to mask its effects outside of kayfabe. Performers routinely suffer "the debilitating ongoingness of structural inequality and suffering" (Puar, *The Right to Maim* 1) as a result of both the punishing quality of the maneuvers they are expected to perform as well as the subsequent lack of redressive care such as health insurance or disability benefits upon release from the company. The necessity of outside columns such as "Dead Wrestler of the Week" demonstrates the extent to which WWE attempts to erase the impacts of debility even as it produces it. That professional wrestlers die young often enough for a long-running weekly column to proliferate indicates that such wrestlers as a population experience debilitation in the service of maximizing WWE's profits as a corporation.

Though representations of performers with disabilities are limited, it is worth noting that this is not equally true among all axes. Gowen is a rare example of a performer with a disability treated relatively seriously despite being folded into an ideology of compulsory able-bodiedness, which he accesses and assimilates into through hypermasculinity. WWE reproduces conventional gender roles in its performances, which has particularly bleak implications for women who have disabilities. As women wrestlers have been historically treated as “eye candy” or a titillating sideshow supplement to the athleticism of the men who perform, their (hyper)sexuality is paramount, and disability oppression dictates that women with disabilities rarely are allowed to access normative sexualities in media representations (Hill 4). Gowen’s masculinity allowed him to forego the perceived need to be presented as sexualized and sexually available, but such an option was not available for women with similar disabilities. Though WWE situated Gowen’s performances in deeply problematic ways, producing narratives that strengthen the able body at the expense of the disabled body, a woman performing Gowen’s role would likely never even have the chance to create such narratives, as a woman wrestling with a disability would have been fully illegible within the hypermasculine and able-normative context of WWE. That said, WWE’s representations of women have markedly improved in recent years, so that illegibility may fade with time if it has not already.

In all, WWE limits its representation of onscreen disability and impairment to moments in which such bodies can be used to reinforce a compulsory able-bodiedness. Further, WWE imposes debility onto its performers, denying healthcare while demanding performances that, considering the “Dead Wrestler of the Week” column, demonstrably lead to slow death. The sole means through which WWE overtly represents disability and impairment is through its “Don’t try this at home” public service announcements, which again limit the scope of disability and impairment to the realm of the accidental (Puar, *The Right to Maim* 64).

Debility also has a legitimating function in professional wrestling. Though debilitating injury that occurs during a show is highly disruptive in the moment, such instances work to blur the lines between reality and fakery, which “likely benefits the business of pro wrestling since spectators always experience a potential for real violence” (R. Smith 138). This expectation of “real violence,” compounded by a hypermasculine culture that valorizes pain, facilitates the continued production and veiling of debility in the industry.

Thus, WWE utilizes debility and disability in tandem to produce a friendly corporate image while harvesting profits from the debilitation of their performers’ bodies. For example, utilizing injuries suffered by Chris Benoit in public service

announcements but scrubbing them once the grim extent of his debilitation became impossible to ignore, WWE demonstrates the ability to control not only the extent to which the bodies of its professional wrestlers are debilitated but also which kinds of bodily harm are even acknowledged. Remembering that “the biopolitical distribution between disability as an exceptional accident or misfortune, and the proliferation of debilitation ... is largely maintained through disability rights frameworks (Puar, *The Right to Maim* 66), WWE positions itself as an advocate for cure and prevention of accidents that occur during wrestling performances while eschewing care for those debilitated over time by the very same performances. In doing so, WWE exemplifies the symbiotic relationship between limited disability representation and the relentless production of debility, with disability representations masking the myriad ways in which WWE debilitates its performers.

By recontextualizing professional wrestlers as a population of exploited workers who face debilitation and early death at significant rates, fans, scholars, and industry professionals alike may continue to work toward improved working conditions for these workers. The professional wrestling industry is ever-shifting, and though efforts toward better working conditions through unionization have been squashed in decades past (Shoemaker, “Dead Wrestler of the Week”), similar efforts are once again growing, with wrestling organizations like We the Independent seeking to “inform independent artists of their working rights” and “implement best practice for the conditions and working environment for independent contractors” (“What Are WE?”). By collaborating in this time of industry flux, professional wrestling studies and disability studies researchers can jointly account for the unique bodily traumas in the professional wrestling industry, chart out paths for better conditions within the industry, and work toward unveiling the production of debility on a wider scale.

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