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WWE: Redefining Working-Class Womanhood through Commodified Feminism

Janice M. Sikon

Wright State University

## **Introduction**

World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) is the largest professional wrestling promotion in the world (Bajaj & Banerjee, 2016). Their programs air in 20 languages in over 180 countries, and in the United States approximately 11 million people watch their programs each week (“FAQ,” n.d.). These programs include six hours of televised weekly events and 16 annual pay-per-view events (“WWE Reports,” 2017). In the first quarter of 2017 the company grossed \$188.4 million (“WWE Reports,” 2017). They have close ties with the current presidential administration, as Small Business Administrator Linda McMahon was the CEO of the company from 1980 to 2009 (Reuters, 2009) and President Trump has made several appearances on WWE programming in the past (“Donald Trump,” n.d.).

As of 2013, 81% of WWE’s audience had an annual household income of less than \$50,000 (Miller & Washington, 2014). It can therefore be argued that WWE has a large cultural influence, especially for poor and working-class people. Its consistent popularity with this demographic suggests the working class supports the company because WWE’s content aligns with working-class values and the product evolves with its audience. Since there has been strong academic interest in America’s working class since the 2016 election, especially the white working class (Bobo, 2017; Morgan & Lee, 2017; Clark, 2017; Walley, 2017; Lamont, Park, & Ayala-Hurtado, 2017), WWE and their product are relevant to contemporary socioeconomic research. My research addresses two central questions. How does WWE and influence working-class beliefs about gender and gender roles? And how do WWE’s products and business practices reflect the value society places on different ideas and identities?

My analysis will be a discourse analysis using a materialist feminist perspective. Materialist feminism takes the stance that women's oppression stems from a lack of economic opportunities that is connected to the social devaluation of women (Jackson, 2001). I will compare the roles of women and men in the WWE product, such as: being a wrestler versus a valet; the gendered hierarchy among wrestlers (based on factors such as how long matches are and what order they are placed in the show); and the gender balance of power behind the scenes, such as the creative staff. Because money and access to public space are intimately connected to power, I will investigate how the choices WWE makes in their programming and business practices indicate who they deem worthy of investment. Do other factors in addition to gender determine where a character or performer is in the product's hierarchy? For example, while women as a group are given a lower status than men, do women of color fare better than men of color when compared to white performers of the same gender?

A materialist perspective will also allow for an analysis of the WWE as a business and how its capitalist interests lead it to exploit women in a myriad of ways now and in the past. With a focus on the "Women's Revolution" currently going on in the company, I will examine how feminist rhetoric is being used against women to preserve existing power structures. The company uses language of women's empowerment to push their token efforts at equality, while the overall place of women in the company hierarchy remains unchanged. The efforts are designed to placate fans demanding better treatment of the women while still barring them from many opportunities the men have. I will also argue that while the women's empowerment marketing strategy is intended to improve the company's image and gain female viewership, it still caters to the male gaze (Gibson & Wolske, 2011).

Analyzing the identities and viewpoints represented and how characters expressing those identities and beliefs are treated will reveal the espoused ideals of those running WWE and the audience. Because of the carefully scripted nature of professional wrestling, characters designated as “good” are designed to embody certain characteristics and those designated as “bad” exhibit others. Then there is a third group, those characteristics which are not represented because the creators and audience find them either irrelevant and unimportant or unspeakable and taboo.

### **Literature Review**

WWE’s audience is traditionally heterosexual and male-dominated. Because the company caters to that market, women’s characters are constructed through the male gaze. The theory behind the male gaze originated in film criticism, positing that mainstream Hollywood films were filmed in the perspective of a male viewer and thus women were treated as objects rather than subjects (Gibson & Wolske, 2011). More specifically, it refers to the objectification of women on screen to fit the fantasy of a “typical” heterosexual man, such as focusing camera shots on sexualized body parts like the breasts or legs to emphasize a woman’s desirability and minimize her agency (Gervais, Holland, & Dodd, 2013). Media plays a significant role in the development of gender roles and social expectations and reinforces the values being pushed by other institutions (Kimmel, 2017), so women often accept the male gaze as natural and may try to conform to it (Wright, Arroyo, & Bae, 2015; Ponterotto, 2016). Several theorists and creators have done work to subvert this gaze. For example, bell hooks wrote of Black female spectatorship challenging both white filmmakers’ depictions of Blackness and the male gaze in both “mainstream” and “Black” films (1992). She also highlights the lack of racial awareness in contemporary feminist film criticism and how that mirrors the erasure of Black women in film.

Other scholars have written about works that centralize (white) women's perspectives, like *Thelma & Louise* where the focus of the movie is the friendship between two women and their lives (Cooper, 2000). Female sexuality is also an important part of film representation, as it is normally presented through the male gaze. Yet films like *Thelma & Louise* and *Blue Valentine* emphasize women's perspectives and pleasure in a realistic manner rather than a male fantasy (Cooper, 2000; Gibson & Wolske, 2011). These movies being controversial is evidence of the normalization of the male gaze in media, such as the discrepancy between *Blue Valentine*'s NC-17 rating given for the same act as *Black Swan*, which received the less strict R rating but also utilizes the male gaze (Gibson & Wolske, 2011).

## **Methodology**

I will be discussing women's performances in-ring as well as their place in story lines and backstage segments. Based on the audience's demographics, I will argue that women's representation is supposed to model the working-class man's ideal female archetype. The portrayal of men in WWE will be used as a point of comparison.

I will use Stuart Hall's theory of encoding and decoding (Hall, 1993) to explain how WWE disseminates their ideals through their product, how the fans receive that message, and how WWE takes fan's reactions and incorporates them into their product to increase profits. Hall's theory, applied to the Women's Revolution, connects the creative representation with business practices. The company encodes its ideals into its product, and the audience decodes the messages using their perspectives. This means that WWE can attempt to relay a message, but fans' worldviews may conflict, or fans decode the message differently. WWE then modifies its messages and policies to accommodate their audience. Conversely, fans whose worldview aligns with the company's will use these encoded messages to reinforce their beliefs. Fans who

negotiate their own ideals with the messages encoded in WWE's product may also resign themselves to accepting the messages, at least within the space of professional wrestling, without attempting to change representations they deem objectionable.

For the methodology, I will be performing a discourse analysis. This treats the product as a continuing, evolving conversation rather than a finished item. Lazar (2016) states that discourse “constitutes, and is constituted by, social situations, institutions and structures” and “contributes to the reproduction and maintenance of the social order, also in the sense of resisting and transforming that order” (p.11). Unlike other textual analyses, I will not be limited to the dialogue, as discourse analysis acknowledges “a multimodal dimension. Together with language, other semiotic modalities (such as visual images, layouts, gestures and sounds) are analyzed, making for an enriching and insightful analysis” (Lazar, 2016, p.5). I will not be analyzing only modern releases, but I will also be looking back at WWE's past product, going back to the beginning of the most recent incarnation of the women's division in 1998. This is because previous women's divisions were short-lived and have little bearing on the evolution of the modern division, but key events and figures from the earlier eras are referenced when relevant. The circumstances that culminated in the 1998 revival are also key to the establishment of most of the tropes and attitudes associated with women's wrestling in WWE and are separate from the circumstances previous women's divisions were under.

## **Analysis**

### Early Years

#### *Separating Divas from Superstars*

Diva, when not referring to opera, can be defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “a usually glamorous and successful female performer or personality” or by the Oxford English Dictionary as “a self-important person who is temperamental and difficult to please (typically used of a woman).” While the terms “Superstar” and “Diva” both connote the entertainment side of sports entertainment (WWE’s term to differentiate professional wrestling from legitimate sports competition), “Diva” does so more extremely and also carries a negative, gendered implication. Even the more neutral Merriam-Webster definition describes a woman who is focused on appearances and material goods. Oxford’s definition is relevant when decoding the characterization of women according to WWE’s philosophy, as many of the women prior to the Women’s Revolution were written to be catty, materialistic, and manipulative. The Divas moniker and everything attached to it separated the women from the men and let the audience know that the two genders were not on the same level in the company.

The Diva image was carefully cultivated through WWE’s hiring practices as well. The term originated in the mid-1990s, during the company’s Attitude Era that was characterized by graphic violence, graphic language, and graphic sexuality under a TV-14 rating. During this time, the few women on WWE (then the World Wrestling Federation, WWF) were not wrestling in the ring but were instead managers or valets that accompanied male wrestlers (often their real-life partners) to the ring. They would occasionally have roles interfering in matches on behalf of their men and participating in the story segments. But their role in the company was to look sexually attractive to the audience and act as a prize to be won by the male competitors. Ironically, the popularity of one of these valets, Sable, would relaunch the company’s women’s division (Bixenspan, 2017). Trying to capitalize on the success of Sable and other models in the company, WWE launched a televised contest called *Diva Search* where women would compete



in competitions unrelated to wrestling to garner fan votes and a contract. This led to the women's division remaining homogenous for over a decade, since most of the women had the same body type and wrestling experience and were not allowed the time to develop different characters. This reinforced the idea that the women were not as interesting as the men since there was little variation among them. Other women were hired to flesh out the division, including a few trained athletes (Mueller, 2016), but they still had to face sexual objectification. The most obvious example of this is the bra and panties match, where the first woman to strip her opponent down to her underwear was the winner.

A few women did not fit the archetype and thus stood out among their peers. However, they were often brought in as foils to the more traditionally feminine women on the roster and were usually used to boost the popularity of the model types. Chyna and Jacqueline, for example, were both muscular athletes who debuted as bodyguards—rather than valets or managers—for male wrestlers. These women were far more likely to face male competitors and win men's titles. This demonstrated a greater respect for their athletic ability compared to those who were more feminine. However, they were often chided for being too masculine and their heterosexuality was questioned, enforcing the idea of what “real” women looked like and how they behaved as well as perpetuating stigma and stereotypes against queer women. So, there was a win-lose situation for women in the WWE: there were the feminine, attractive women who were rewarded for following traditional gender roles but were not respected as athletes; then there were the masculine women who were respected as athletes but were not treated as real women due to their failure to adhere to traditional gender roles.

### *Characterization*

Professional wrestling is typically known for its over-the-top characters. In order to emphasize the “sports” aspect, the stories are simple and the characters are usually flat. Many are based on tropes, such as the working-class hero or the evil foreigner. Many performers also use gimmicks to garner crowd reactions, such as having a catchphrase, unique ring gear, or an enticing entrance. Women did not often have such distinct characters. Since the emphasis was placed on appearance, many of these women looked similar and acted similarly in accordance with the male fantasies catered to by the company. There were a few women who stood out, such as Chyna, Lita, and Trish Stratus. Chyna is best remembered for her athletic prowess against her male peers. The popularity of Lita and Stratus created a short period where women’s status increased in the company and they were treated as a rating draw. But even these women still emulated popular archetypes: Chyna was masculine, respectable but not desirable; Lita was known for her tattoos and punk rock aesthetic as the “alternative” girl who rejected traditional femininity; and Stratus was the classic girl-next-door. These, along with the sex symbol archetype, were essentially the only characters that female performers were given. Some women could be seen as mixtures of these tropes, like “The Glamazon” Beth Phoenix who was admired for her strength but was also forced to rely on her sexuality to defeat men. However, there was a distinct lack of variety when compared to the men: there was no equivalent of the Undertaker, Mick Foley, or Goldust in the women’s division, some of the era’s most memorable characters.

For women of color, the homogenization of the women’s division may have worked in their favor as they were rarely given the racialized gimmicks of their male peers. Just as there were no unique gimmick characters, there were also no blatant stereotypes like the Mexicools, a Latino tag team who rode to the ring on lawnmowers; no Cryme Tyme, a Black tag team who are shown robbing stores and beating police officers; no Jimmy Wang Yang, an “Asian redneck.”

Since race is downplayed in the women's division, women of color are more on par with their white counterparts. For example, 19 women of color have held the top women's prize out of 47 champions ("Raw Women's Championship," n.d.; "SmackDown Women's Championship," n.d.; "Divas Championship," n.d.; "Women's Championship," n.d.), while only 10 men of color have held the WWE Championship out of 50 champions ("WWE Championship, n.d.). So, they outnumber their male counterparts, and this is only exacerbated when considering the difference in the number of men and women on the rosters.

Most of the women are vocal about their heritage outside of the ring. For example, the Bella Twins discuss their Mexican-Italian roots often in interviews (Diaz, 2017), and Mickie James incorporated her Powhatan ancestry into her character when she returned to WWE in 2016 (Rueter, 2017). But for those women that could be perceived as white, WWE downplays or erases their ethnic backgrounds onscreen. This happens mostly to Latina wrestlers because they tend to have lighter skin and fewer racialized characteristics. An example would be the names that WWE gives the Superstars, either changing or dropping names that would hint at their ethnicity. Stephanie and Brianna Garcia became Nikki and Brie Bella, Pamela Martinez became Bayley, and Melina Perez became simply Melina. Additionally, those that are more obviously racialized do face some stereotypical gimmicks. Examples include Alicia Fox as the angry Black woman; AJ Lee as a crazy, man-hungry Latina; and Naomi, a Black woman, uses a signature move called the "Rearview" where she attacks opponents with her buttocks, promoting the fetishization of Black women's bodies. This reinforces the message that wrestling is created for men, that it is constructed to satisfy their gaze, and women do not belong in these spaces. As bell hooks (1992) states, many women of color try to avoid thinking critically about the implications of the images on screen in order to enjoy the show. Others take the oppositional gaze, refusing to

accept the male gaze or identify with the stereotypical portrayals onscreen (hooks, 1992), becoming the fans who critically dissect representation and demand better from the company.

Most of the characterization of women came from stereotypes and gender roles that the executives encoded in story lines. Professional wrestling, as simulated combat, is inherently a masculine activity in the minds of most, directly at odds with the idea of women as nurturing caregivers (O'Sullivan, 2016). A common theme in professional wrestling is men asserting their masculinity, often through violence. But another tactic is to verbally emasculate the opponent, asserting that he is not "man enough." This discourse constructs the image that wrestling is for men because being feminine or womanly makes one a bad wrestler (Soulliere, 2006). The working-class worldview that professional wrestling is associated with also believes that women's place is outside of the public sphere, where they support men in their pursuits (O'Sullivan, 2016). This can be used to explain the roles for women in the story lines in this part of the company's history. An example would be Drew McIntyre saving Kelly Kelly from LayCool; a feud between three women ultimately served to showcase McIntyre's protective nature (Barrett & Levin, 2014). A bet between Nikki and Brie Bella over who could seduce Daniel Bryan made a man the focus of a feud between women (Barret & Levin, 2014). Even the boss's daughter, Stephanie McMahon, was used as a pawn in a feud between Vince McMahon, the Undertaker, and Stone Cold Steve Austin when the Undertaker kidnapped her and attempted to force her into marriage before she was rescued by Austin (Wortman, 2012).

Most of the women in the Divas era were put in romantic story lines with men. Women who were shown to be athletes on par with men were rarely put in romantic storylines, and if they were it was usually with a less masculine man and played for laughs. Encoded was the message that they were not real women; they were too masculine to be desirable for the working-

class man. But for the rest of the women, these stories reinforced their role as secondary to the men. It was not uncommon for women to feud over a man or for women to be prizes for men's matches. Women romantically linked to men in stories would often stay ringside and interfere with her man's matches, but if she was a wrestler the man would not escort her to the ring for her matches or act on her behalf (even in the TV-14 era where intergender wrestling was allowed). The encoded message is that women are supposed to support men, but men don't need to support women. The romance angles also rely on several tropes that typically portray the women negatively: they are damsels in distress who need protection by men; they accept poor treatment from their partners; they are manipulative femme fatales; they are gold diggers leeching off of successful men; or they are spiteful women fixated on getting vengeance on former lovers (Barrett & Levin, 2015). Men decode these tropes to inform how they should act in romantic relationships and how they should expect women to act. They need to protect "good" women, and even if they treat a good woman badly she will stay by their side. But "bad" women, particularly those who are more sexually aggressive, will use them for money and power, emasculating them.

When the company still maintained a TV-14 rating, there were a couple women who were shown as dominant and held their own against the men in the ring, earning men's championships. Chyna was the first in the company when she became Intercontinental Champion in 1999 and again in 2000 ("Intercontinental Championship," n.d.). Her first reign lasted nearly two months, while the second lasted only eight days ("Intercontinental Championship," n.d.). In 2000, a woman known only as "the Godfather's Ho" won the Hardcore Championship ("Hardcore Championship," n.d.). She was part of an entourage of unnamed women (the "Ho Train") who would escort the Godfather, a Black pimp caricature, to the ring. The Hardcore

Championship would be won by Mighty Molly, Trish Stratus, and Terri Runnels at various points in 2002, but none of them held the title for longer than five minutes (“Hardcore Championship,” n.d.). Then, in 2004, Jacqueline won the Cruiserweight Championship, but her reign lasted only 10 days (“Cruiserweight Championship,” n.d.). When men get title reigns of several months and Women’s Champions have reigns that last for months, it is notable that the only women to have held men’s championships lost them quickly, unable to defend them. Chyna was the only one to have a successful title defense, during her first Intercontinental Championship reign, but lost it at her second defense (“Intercontinental Championship,” n.d.). This implies that the women’s victories were flukes rather than a testament to their skill, and that they were not really on the level of the men. So, it calls into question how much the company valued the women who won these titles compared to the men.

True intergender wrestling has not happened since the company went for a PG rating in 2007 when the company went for a more family-friendly image. This was partially motivated by the 2007 double-murder-suicide when wrestler Chris Benoit murdered his wife and son before killing himself. Many mainstream media outlets speculated that the excessive violence and blatant misogyny on WWE programming at the time encouraged Benoit’s behavior (Dasgupta, 2016). Sponsors did not respond favorably to intergender violence in the past, with Mattel including a clause in their contract with WWE that men will not hit women. Also, since WWE is a business, they want to net the widest customer base possible, meaning that they cannot alienate viewers in the U.S and abroad that oppose intergender fighting (Dasgupta, 2016). So, this is one aspect that is controversial when discussing how to proceed with the Women’s Revolution. At least one study has correlated professional wrestling viewing with dating violence among teenage boys and girls (Durant, Champion, & Wolfson, 2006), and there are ethical issues with

glorifying violence against women. While one can argue that the matches are scripted and it is “just entertainment,” media is not produced in a vacuum, and some viewers may decode intergender matches as justification for abuse. On the other hand, what better way to prove that the female Superstars are just as capable as the men than by portraying the women as legitimate competitors with men? In a medium where all contests are pre-determined and smaller men regularly defeat larger ones, it would not be a difficult concept to introduce women defeating or at least holding their own against men. Plus, women regularly slap men or otherwise attack them and the men never fight back (Barrett & Levin, 2015), which could be interpreted as women not being a serious threat for the man to address as well as encouraging men to accept abuse from female partners.

### *Fan Involvement*

The role of fans in WWE is complex. Since the company’s main product is live entertainment, the reactions and investment of fans is important to the success of the business. For example, several wrestlers have been released from their contracts or repackaged as different characters if they did not garner the desired reaction from audiences. Story lines have been scrapped as well when the audience did not get invested. However, since WWE purchased rival company World Championship Wrestling (WCW) in 2001, they have had a virtual monopoly on the industry. Therefore, a large portion of their casual fans have nowhere else to watch wrestling if they do not like WWE’s product. So, the company does not have the same incentive to listen to fans as they did when competing with WCW (Canella, 2016). But a large part of WWE’s marketing is giving fans the illusion of influence, particularly in smaller matters. This was used a lot in the marketing of Divas in the earlier eras. For example, at the *Taboo Tuesday* and *Cyber Sunday* pay-per-views, fans were able to vote on match stipulations. The men had options like

steel cage match or submission match, while the women were given stipulations like lingerie pillow fight or evening gown match and whether they would wear lingerie or cheerleader uniforms (“Taboo Tuesday,” 2005). Thus, fans were taught to think of women’s matches as less serious and more for sexual fantasy fulfillment (these matches were called “Fulfill Your Fantasy” matches). Even if the fans wanted to have matches where the women were taken seriously, they had to work within the confines of what WWE presented to them. Thus, the message is encoded with the values of the powerful (Hall, 1993).

### Women’s Revolution

#### *How the Revolution Came About*

For years, the men were the main draw of the company and the women were side characters. The audience accepted that. WWE sold a narrative to their audience about women’s place in wrestling, in athletics, and in entertainment which the audience accepted this as the natural order. Using Hall’s (1993) explanation, the company drew from the creators’ ideas and the social and political context of the day and encoded these in its product. Then, the audience decoded the performances in line with their own experiences, provided feedback to the company, and the company adjusted accordingly within the boundaries of its corporate values. The dominant narrative presented women as less important than the men because, for a myriad of reasons, the women were made to appear less interesting and less capable. This message was reinforced because chairman Vince McMahon believed that fans did not want to see women perform similarly to the men (Eck, 2017). Since they could profit from the male Superstars without investing in their female talent or innovating their programming, the company had no incentive to change its views and give women opportunities to showcase their athleticism or charisma beyond being accessories to men’s stories. They were given very little time on



television to promote their characters and were punished for outperforming the men (Glencross, 2011). Several pay-per-views did not include any women's matches, and there have been years where there were no female wrestlers at all. Eventually, the audience noticed women's diminishing role and a social media campaign demanded better treatment. Fans started #GiveDivasAChance on Twitter in February of 2015 after a women's match lasted less than 30 seconds (Wiggins, 2015). This also coincided with a resurgence of feminism in mainstream society and greater opportunities for women in sports, such as the success of the United States' women's national soccer team in the World Cup and the rise of Ronda Rousey's mixed martial arts career and pop culture presence. As the audience's attitudes towards female athletes shifted, they wanted to see that reflected in their chosen entertainment, professional wrestling. The audience had been exposed to women being treated as serious athletes and witnessed their capability. Rousey, being in a fighting sport that has some crossover with WWE, was an important example that showed audiences that women could fight at the same level as men. This is supported by the fact that WWE had Rousey make an appearance at *WrestleMania 31* and signed her in 2018. She debuted in January at the *Royal Rumble* pay-per-view and had her first match in April at *WrestleMania 34*. Even WWE's own developmental program, NXT, was drawing positive attention from fans through its use of female performers, who were being given longer match times and independent story lines that showcased their abilities. WWE saw this demand and minimally adjusted their programming in order to prevent the loss of upset viewers and to capitalize on a market that previously went unnoticed, an example of the audience acting as both consumer and producer (Hall, 1993).

### *Positive Changes*

The Women's Revolution has allowed women to showcase their talents more often than in the past. Importantly, their matches have gotten longer. For instance, the longest women's pay-per-view match in 2013 was 11 minutes long, and it was a 7-on-7 tag match, leaving little opportunity for any individual to showcase her talents. The longest women's singles pay-per-view match that year was under 10 minutes (Knight, 2014). Contrast that with 2017, where the longest women's pay-per-view match was over 18 minutes (Benigno, 2017), the longest women's singles match on a pay-per-view was nearly 17 minutes, and few of the matches lasted under 10 minutes (Wortman, 2017). A brand extension (some Superstars are only on *Raw* and some are only on *SmackDown*) led to the creation of a second women's title and prevents the same women from dominating the time on both programs. There is usually at least one women's match per episode, if not more, compared to the episodes before #GiveDivasAChance where it was not unusual for there to be no women's matches or segments. The women are now called "Superstars" just like their male counterparts, when prior to 2016 they were referred to as "Divas." The Divas division became the women's division, and the Divas Championship became the Women's Championship with a belt that resembles the most prestigious men's championship, the WWE Championship. The previous Divas belt was much different from the men's belts, appearing much more juvenile as the logo was a cartoonish, sparkling pink butterfly.

Women have been given many opportunities to showcase their skills. In 2016, Charlotte Flair and Sasha Banks had the first-ever women's Hell in a Cell match, a cage match that was deemed dangerous, hence why only men competed prior. This was also the first time a women's match was the main event of a pay-per-view. Also in 2016, Flair and Banks held the main event spot on *Monday Night Raw*, the third time women had done so in the then-23-year history of the show, and the first time since 2004 (Dilbert, 2016). Women have since closed both main roster

shows several times, signifying that fans want to stay to watch them and management believes they can draw crowds. Several other “gimmick” matches were then opened up to women, like the Elimination Chamber in 2018, or at least done for the first time in several years after the division’s reputation had faltered, such as a tables match in 2016. Another historic moment came in 2018 when women had their first Royal Rumble match at the pay-per-view of the same name and held the main event slot. The *Royal Rumble* is one of WWE’s “big four” pay-per-views, the ones with the most history and prestige behind them. The winner of the match is guaranteed a title opportunity at *WrestleMania* and signifies the value the company places on a performer.

While narratives are still weaker for women than for the men, women are now much more likely to have their own stories rather than being side characters in men’s. Romantic story lines are not as common as they used to be, promoting the independence of the women and allowing them to be relevant without being attached to a man. Sometimes relationships are incorporated, as most of the female wrestlers are in relationships with current or former male wrestlers. However, while most women of the previous generations accompanied their partners to the ring as managers and valets even if they were wrestlers themselves, this is becoming a rarity. The women are allowed to develop separately from their partners.

#### *What Remains to be Changed*

Women are underrepresented in all areas backstage: the two main roster shows have never had a woman on full-time commentary or as a referee, and the creative team has no female writers (WWE, 2013). The developmental brand, *NXT*, has had a female commentator and now has a female referee and the company employed one female referee in the 1980s before *Monday Night Raw* and *SmackDown Live* were created (Tanos, 2017). However, *NXT* is only available on the company’s subscription channel while the main roster shows are on cable television, so there

is a much smaller audience. The spacing between the two referees—over 30 years—highlights the lack of representation for women in the product.

While the matches have gotten better, longer, and more frequent, and women are receiving opportunities to take part in matches they were previously barred from, the story lines still lag behind the men's. Professional wrestling is not known for its complex characters or nuanced storylines; many follow simple good versus evil formulas, proving who is the better athlete, or betrayals among friends. However, the writing for women is often insultingly stereotypical and petty. Examples from the past year include: Raw Women's Champion Alexa Bliss mocking challenger Mickie James for being too old (at 38, James is younger than many men on the roster); Alexa Bliss and Mickie James teaming up to berate Bliss's former best friend, plus-sized Nia Jax; and Natalya attacking her friend Nikki Bella because Bella's family received a spin-off to *Total Divas*, a reality show they both star in. This feeds into the stereotype that women are catty and jealous and cannot wait to stab each other in the back. Men may betray each other, but there is normally narrative build-up that gets the audience emotionally invested in the relationships, in turn getting them invested in the matches. When women are not getting demeaning story lines, they often receive no real build-up to their matches at all, making it difficult for the audience to immerse themselves in the story. This leads to less crowd involvement which translates to the company believing audiences do not care about women's wrestling. Also, it is rare for the women to be involved in stories that do not revolve around the title, meaning that only a couple of women get featured for the length of the feud, which can be months. There are several men who do not appear on television with regularity, but there are often feuds and stories that do not revolve around the title. Plus, the presence of more men's titles means that more men are guaranteed to have story lines and screen time. Even Superstar

Becky Lynch has stated the need for better storytelling (Ghosh, 2017), as when there are no more gimmick matches for women to participate in, the lack of fans' emotional investment will lead the division back into obscurity, "proving" the idea that women's wrestling is not as important as men's.

Another behind-the-scenes issue that must be addressed is the company's treatment of aging women. Right now, Tamina is the oldest full-time women on the roster at 40 years old, but she has a minimal role in the division. Compare this with the men, where top stars like John Cena, A.J. Styles, and Brock Lesnar are the same age or older. There are also several other men that are frequently featured on weekly programming, such as the 50-year-old Kane, 48-year-old Shane McMahon, and 43-year-old Matt Hardy (Schwartz, 2017). The men's ages are rarely brought up on television, but at 38 years old, Mickie James was mocked weekly on television for being too old to wrestle. This is an improvement from years past where most women were released from contract or retired around 30 years old, but there is still a noticeable difference in how women and men are treated as they get older. Encoded in this practice is the message that women's usefulness has an expiration date. When considering the fact that women often wrestle less and perform fewer high-risk maneuvers, decreasing the likelihood of early retirement due to injury, the discrepancy grows.

A few women retire in order to start families, but others wish to return after giving birth. However, WWE makes this difficult. Currently, only two of the women on the roster full-time are mothers: Tamina and Mickie James. Tamina was a mother before she wrestled for WWE, but Mickie James is the first woman to wrestle full-time after giving birth. Part of this can be contributed to the grueling travel schedule of wrestlers, especially since many of the women are partnered with fellow Superstars, making childcare difficult. But mothers rarely come back even

part-time. One exception would be the 2018 Women's Royal Rumble match where several legends returned for the night, including mothers Michelle McCool, Brie Bella, Beth Phoenix, and Trish Stratus (Normandin, 2018). Allowing for women to have part-time status, like Brock Lesnar, Chris Jericho, or the Undertaker, would make the company much more mother-friendly and could allow women to establish longer careers and create the lasting legacies that men have.

Women are still outnumbered 4:1 on the two main roster shows, *Monday Night Raw* and *SmackDown Live*, and their share of screen time is often even smaller. There are only two women's titles across the two main roster shows compared to seven for the men, two of which are tag team titles, with a ratio of two female champions to the nine male champions. This means that women are less likely to receive the perks that champions get, such as more screen time, merchandise, and money. The company had tag team titles for the women in the 1980s, but they were retired. Seeing fan support, the company has hinted that they are considering the idea, but no official statement has been made (Marie, 2018). The introduction of new titles would give the division more legitimacy when being compared to the men's. It would also present the opportunity for more women to be on television and would require more than one women's story line to happen at a time, eliminating many of the character and narrative issues.

Next, I describe the efforts on WWE's behalf that were efforts made at rectifying existing inequalities between their male and female Superstars but included problematic elements. These examples highlight how the company sabotaged their own efforts at showcasing the women's division, intentional or not. They also show how WWE is still resistant to treating their female talent equally. They also demonstrate the company valuing money above moral responsibility and favoring higher-paying corporate sponsors over fans.

One such example of this was at 2017's *Money in the Bank* pay-per-view. A major advertising point for the event was the first-ever women's match of the same name. The Money in the Bank ladder match traditionally involved five or six men competing for a briefcase that allowed the holder to challenge for the WWE Championship, the men's highest prize, at a time of his choosing over the next calendar year. Women had never been given their own match because it was seen as too violent for them. So, letting the women have this match was evidence that WWE was seeing the women more as legitimate athletes on par with the men rather than being fragile and needing protection from the more dangerous aspects of the business. It was also another accolade women could earn, making the division more competitive and providing opportunity for story lines and character building that would draw attention to the division. However, despite the effort WWE put into advertising the match and emphasizing its historical nature, it was executed poorly. At the end of the match, Becky Lynch was knocked off the ladder by male wrestler James Ellsworth who proceeded to climb the ladder and retrieve the women's briefcase. He then tossed it down to Carmella, the woman he escorted to the ring, who was sitting at the base of the ladder. After fan backlash, the match was redone on an episode of *SmackDown Live* resulting in Carmella winning the briefcase without the help of her valet.

Considering the scripted nature of professional wrestling, the company planned on this outcome. Many fans believe that the ending was a publicity stunt to get social media attention and draw viewers for the weekly cable program through the rematch. Since WWE is first and foremost an entertainment business, this is a plausible scenario. It is also true that several men have won matches and titles through the interference of valets; in fact, it is a common trope for villains. However, even if the misogyny was not intentionally encoded, the outcome landed a huge blow to the credibility the company had built in the past two years of its Women's

Revolution. The event was greater than a match, a symbol of women's growing status in the company. To prevent a woman from victoriously climbing the ladder and grabbing the briefcase as the men did was decoded as a lack of respect for the performers and fans. Or at least, the respect did not outweigh the allure of a marketing ploy. Also, the meaning many viewers decoded from Ellsworth's interference was symbolic. A man did not only distract opponents or interfere in the match on Carmella's behalf, but he was the one to win the match for her. This implies that none of the women were able to stand up to the man on equal footing, and that none of them could retrieve the briefcase on her own, that women cannot do the same things men can. Ellsworth's portrayal as someone who is not sufficiently masculine enough to be a successful male wrestler also feeds into the message that the women were even less competent. His whole partnership with Carmella was a twist on the traditional female valet for a male Superstar. But this was less effective since it was not a really masculine Superstar that escorted her to the ring, reinforcing the idea that "real men" would not debase themselves as to be the sidekick to a woman (Barrett & Levin, 2014). So, the imagery of Ellsworth literally standing above the women and dropping the briefcase to a seated Carmella cements the image of the subordination of women in the industry.

Another instance where WWE did not thoroughly think out their actions at best and maliciously ignored the problematic implications of their actions at worst came this year. For the past four years at *WrestleMania*, the company's biggest show of the year, the men have competed in the Andre the Giant Memorial Battle Royal. This allows more of the men to participate in the show, gaining exposure and compensation. The winner gets an even bigger boost in exposure, getting more televised matches and story lines, which can ultimately lead to more merchandise and title opportunities. WWE announced in March that the women would



have an equivalent match at *WrestleMania 34*, which is another step forward for gender equality in the industry. The problem many had with the announcement was the name: The Fabulous Moolah Memorial Battle Royal. This was in honor of the late female wrestler, the Fabulous Moolah, who did have a substantial impact on the trajectory of women's wrestling. However, many argue that her influence was more negative than positive, and WWE was doing a disservice to their female performers by honoring a problematic figure.

Moolah did indeed dominate women's wrestling in the United States for decades, shaping the style of women's wrestling and training a number of the women in WWE's original women's division in the 1980s (Bixenspan, 2017). But many of her former students and their families have alleged that Moolah would steal money from them and force her students to perform sexual favors for promoters in order to be booked or paid for matches. So soon after the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements against sexual assault and harassment in entertainment, the decision to honor Moolah is at best tone deaf and ignorant and at worst purposely sends the message that WWE places company loyalty over survivors.

Moolah's style of wrestling was also inferior to many of her contemporaries. The level of athleticism in men's and women's matches was similar before her style became the norm, focusing on hair-pulling and catfights, diminishing the drawing power of women's wrestling (Bixenspan, 2017). But due to her connections in the business she could sabotage the careers of women who outperformed her or became more popular (Bixenspan, 2018). Her interference is most blatant in what is termed the "Original Screwjob," when Vince McMahon was trying to push then-WWF Women's Champion Wendi Richter out of the company when she demanded higher pay. Wendi Richter was a popular performer whose onscreen partnership with popstar Cyndi Lauper helped make the company a mainstream, national program, but she was not paid

the same as the men in her position. Moolah faced Richter in a title match without alerting Richter to the plan, and the referee awarded the title to Moolah. McMahon's plan was successful, as Richter left the company after being blindsided (Gullo, 2011).

The company's corporate focus was on display once again when they disabled comments on the video announcing the match when fans responded negatively to the revisionist history of Moolah's life. Someone notified Snickers, the sponsor of *WrestleMania 34*, and their parent company expressed disappointment and concern, implying that they may pull their sponsorship. This is what made WWE change the name to the *WrestleMania Women's Battle Royal* (Burkholder, 2018). The original decision to honor the Fabulous Moolah is an example of WWE's commodified feminism acting as an advertising ploy: honoring someone who held back the development of women's wrestling and allegedly exploited dozens of women financially and sexually, under the guise that she was a well-known historical figure. This also shows the power that profit has over WWE's product and that it is the sole motivator to modify their message. Since fans were invested in the events culminating at *WrestleMania 34*, the company did not budge since it was highly unlikely that massive numbers of fans would skip the biggest professional wrestling event of the year over the controversy. But when the sponsors who have more money and less attachment to the product threatened to back out, WWE felt compelled to reverse their position to preserve their public image and make their product attractive to advertisers.

### *Is the Revolution Legitimate?*

WWE is a business, first and foremost. Therefore, the main goal of the company is to support whatever will generate the most profit and avoid anything too radical that may alienate the consumer base. So, WWE is not going to do anything that is truly revolutionary or challenges

the worldview of their audience. This is a reactionary rather than proactive approach to feminism and gender equality, since they are improving the status of women in their company, but only as far as they are expected to by shifting social norms.

Some evidence supporting WWE's commodification of social movements has been well documented. For example, the Nation of Domination in the 1990s was an all-Black, pro-Black faction meant to parody the Black Panthers and the Nation of Islam (Bartlett, 2014). The group was consistently portrayed as villains and did not earn any of the company's prestigious titles, sending the message that being unapologetically Black was a bad thing that would result in defeat. Another was a co-optation of the Occupy Wall Street movement, Occupy Raw and the Yes! Movement, which was about underdog Daniel Bryan standing up to the corporate bosses preventing him from reaching his full potential (Canella, 2016). This really resembled the Occupy movement in name only, making a widespread network of resistance about the power of one man. Plus, for Bryan to be in such a prominent position in WWE programming meant that he was succeeding in the corporate structure of WWE in addition to connecting with fans. Additionally, Bryan's popularity drew in merchandising money, ironically lining the pockets of a near monopoly using the language of a social movement fighting against income inequality and corporate exploitation (Canella, 2016). Even more recently in 2017, former WWE Champion, Indo-Canadian Jinder Mahal, would lecture the audience about the racism and xenophobia he faced. Since he was an "evil foreigner," this was spun as Mahal inventing a racist audience to cover his inadequacies. The "U-S-A" chants he faces regularly in American crowds (but not abroad) say otherwise. A disdain for progressiveness and pluralism has been encoded in WWE's products from the beginning, and since fans have accepted these tropes as part of the medium, they willingly reinforce the structures that reproduce inequality in the platform.

Another reason to be skeptical of the legitimacy of the Women's Revolution is that progress is rarely linear. Vince McMahon's objections to women wrestling "like men" have been documented and will not likely be changed (Eck, 2017). If feminism does not remain popular, if there is a bad story line that makes fans lose interest in the women, if the company needs to cut costs, or if the company can no longer capitalize on "first-time-ever" matches, it is possible for the company to treat the division as inferior once again. The company's modern family-oriented business model and society's overall evolution make it unlikely that some of the most degrading aspects of women's wrestling will make a comeback, but it is possible to treat women as second-class performers once again. When WWE needed to save money, the women's division was cut entirely on two different occasions (once in 1990 and again in 1995). It is also worth noting the accomplishments of women in the early 2000s before the company returned to women's roles as eye candy: regularly having 10-minute matches on weekly programs, participating in cage matches, and being the main event of the weekly show. Less than a decade later, most fans believed women doing those things would be unthinkable since they were now in 2-minute matches and acted more as brand ambassadors to celebrity guests than athletes (Yo, 2011). Considering Vince McMahon's personal beliefs, it is also unlikely that his pursuit of gender equality is altruistically motivated. The whole McMahon family have been involved with the Republican party, with Linda McMahon running for U. S. Senate as a Republican. While this does not necessarily equal sexism, the Republican party is rarely associated with progressive gender policies. Plus, the close association with President Trump in particular and his brand of anti-political correctness is in line with WWE's past of purposely causing controversy through offensive characters and story lines (Leland, 2000).

## **Conclusions**

I have demonstrated that WWE is a dominant cultural force aimed at heterosexual, working-class, white men. Therefore, everything is portrayed through their gaze, and women are constructed to be the ideal working-class male fantasy. WWE encoded these gender expectations in their product by showing women to be hypersexual and open to male advances, frail and in need of protection, or self-sacrificing and willing to put themselves in harm's way to advance their man's ambitions. However, the discourse is constantly evolving, as WWE's product is treated as one continuous story. Using not only the dialogue, but also the physical representations and the show structure, I was able to demonstrate how this story is representative of the society it was created in and how it adapts to that society's evolution. Now, women are treated more like independent athletes than as catalysts for men's achievements or fodder for the male gaze. But there is still much work to be done to give the women's division the same depth and respect as the men's division. Accounting for the overall superficial nature of the changes, comparing the women's division to earlier eras, and noting the politics of the McMahon family, I have proven that most of the changes are motivated by profit rather than social consciousness.

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