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How I Put Off Writing Papers: Pro Wrestling, Poetry, Fathers and Sons

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This essay offers an autoethnographic account of the author's relationship with his father, as told by way of an inquiry into the ethical underpinnings of professional wrestling. Mirroring certain aspects of Stacy Holman Jones' exploration of autoethnography and torch-singing and combining original poetry with commentary on the writing craft, the paper makes an argument on behalf of the collaborative nature of both writing and wrestling. It is ultimately a somewhat sideways reflection on the latent potential—and urgency—for reconciliation.

This is how I put off writing papers: I search for professional wrestling matches on YouTube and write poems about them. What makes the poem is whatever comes to mind while watching. More often than not, what comes to mind is whatever I know about performers' biographies. What I know most about wrestling is when and how my favorite wrestlers died. Just now I was watching Big Van Vader square off against the British Bulldog Davey Boy Smith in a match from 1993. Vader died of congestive heart failure in 2018. Smith of a heart attack in 2002. I was fourteen in ninety-three. I remember watching this match then and thinking that Vader resembled my English teacher. I watched the match today and wondered if the British Bull Dog's braids—like the ones white American tourists sport when they come back from places like the place where I was born—constitute cultural appropriation. I was born in Puerto Rico. This is also where I'm writing from.

The paper I'm putting off is a consideration of the ethical and political potentialities of professional wrestling. The gist of it, which is all I've managed to get down on another word file, is this: Professional athletes have means, on their own, to show off their skills and prove their mastery. The same applies to stage actors, who can always wow us with a monologue. Pro wrestlers need each other. Performers have to coordinate, execute moves in tandem, tell a story, engage the

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audience, communicate. These things cannot be executed by oneself. Wrestling, whatever it is, is done together.

My first encounter with autoethnography was in a Sociology graduate seminar in 2003. We were reading "The Way We Were, Are, and Might Be: Torch Singing as Autoethnography" by Stacy Holman Jones, collected in Bochner and Ellis' *Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature, and Aesthetics*. This is a quote from the article that I now find underlined, circled and that I also scribbled a star next to:

> Their performance (in writing or on stage) is a conscious act of being in love with another and staying true to that love in our representations. The torch singer and the autoethnographer invite audiences into this love. As performers, we ask our listeners to live in our—and their own—desire for the other, even when this desire may seem destructive and painful and politically impotent. (2002, 52)

My initial plan for this quote was to substitute care for love and wrestler for torch singer. Destruction and pain and political impotence would be left undisturbed. But, in truth, I was looking for a shortcut, a way to put off writing *this* paper even as I'm writing it. Graduate students (and established scholars) often quote other people's work because—let's be honest—quotes take up space on the page, increase the word count. And, often, all you have is the gist of an idea that could make for a fine paper, *if you develop it*. But what if it's not so much about further conceptual development and more about *togetherness*? What I mean to say is that I quote other people's work in my own for the same reason I watch pro wrestling videos whilst writing poems, because writing, whatever it is, is done together.

Professional wrestling, as a cultural and commercial product, is typically located somewhere between sport and theatrical performance (Mazer, 1998). While the uninitiated might harp on the fact that in-ring action is faked or fixed, die-hard fans and engaged critics offer more nimble, complex and provocative takes on the particularities of the form (Smith, 2014). I would like to position myself amongst the latter and declare myself a fan, as well, of others' critical readings of wrestling's queer and often conflicting array of representations pertaining to masculinities (Smith 2014), embodiment (Chow 2017), race and nation (Souther 2007), sexuality (Bradbury 2017) and violence (Smith 2014). That wrestling, as a commercially mainstream though kitschy and thus marginal cultural product, is presented in a superficial manner, does not mean it lacks complexity nor that it demands to be consumed in the manner in which it is packaged. As with all creative forms, it often escapes its merchandising, and can be, depending on the will of onlookers, considered in drastically different contexts, and to radically diverse ends. This is particularly true of pro wrestling, as Ashley Souther points out, insomuch as the enjoyment of the performance depends on audiences' willingness to suspend their disbelief. Souther (2007) writes:

> …the very mechanism that allows an audience to believe that a man can be beaten so as to be unable to move while his opponent climbs the ring ropes to deliver a diving elbow—yet minutes later musters the inner strength to mount a stirring comeback (suspension of disbelief)—could also be used to believe what, in the current social context, would seem equally impossible: reconciliation of enemies, respect between rivals, and a new broader sense of community. (273)

The paper is listed as a work in progress in my CV. Its working title is "In-Ring Work as Political Work: Ethics, Care and Anarchic Performance in Professional Wrestling." My plan was to submit it to the *Journal of Popular Culture*, as a response to a 2016 article by Gino Canella, entitled "Occupy Raw: Pro Wrestling Fans, Carnivalesque, and the Commercialization of Social Movements." The gist of Canella's argument is that the WWE co-opted the discourse, imagery and meaning of the Occupy movement to sell a corporate product, thus trivializing complex social and political processes. Well, of course it did! My argument is that that's not the only thing that wrestling does and can do. Allow me to develop it further: Too often, even well intended critics, look toward wrestling—and look for—whatever social malaise worries us at any given time. Our gaze is *loaded*. We look for that "terrible thing" that pro wrestling creates, reflects and/or fosters, instead of looking, like Souther, for whatever it is that wrestling might make possible. Something that, perhaps, is not readily available in our social reality, and which the medium delivers is no small way. I'm thinking, in this case, of forgiveness.

I'm hoping to write enough poems for a chapbook, tentatively titled *Falls count anywhere*. Given the brutality of the form, and the high number of wrestlers who have died way too early from heart attacks or overdoses or by their own hand, death and dying are salient themes. Then there's the matter of fathers and sons. Wrestling is a legacy business. Some of today's star performers are the sons, daughters and/or grandchildren of past luminaries. I'm a father to an eighteen-month old boy, and my father and I have not been on speaking terms for the past 26 years. I'm 41 now. The age at which wrestlers, inexplicably, continue performing or the age at which they're already no longer with us. My son has not met his grandad. He's 81 now and, as far as I know, was never much of a fan. I can't seem to remember how I first got into pro wrestling. And while I haven't forgotten the reasons why my father and I do not speak to each other, I often wonder about the possibility of forgiveness between us.

That was me "adding a bit of the personal to the article" so as to give my writing "an autoethnographic tag" (Allen, 2020, 13). *This* is the tone my professor in that soc seminar from 2003 often criticized and urged me to abandon. Autoethnography, she insisted, requires practitioners to be sincere. More than sincere, vulnerable. Sarcasm, she scribbled on the margins of a writing assignment, was a

defense mechanism. Even worse than a defense mechanism, it was bad research practice. She suggested I reread the Holman Jones piece (hence the underlining and the circling and the star) and engage the spirit of torch singing in my writing. More than the spirit, the principle. Here's Holman Jones again:

> This is what thinking about torch singing as autoethnography (and autoethnography as torch singing) teaches me: Create a highly charged atmosphere and heightened emotional state with and for my audience. Then use this energy to understand and critique my own relationships, as well as the place of these relationships in larger social structures and histories. (53-54)

This is what thinking about pro wrestling as autoethnography (and autoethnography as pro wrestling) teaches me: one often avoids dealing with personal demons, because such encounters are devoid of rules, boundaries, guiding principles. Encounters with the self, once undertaken, seem everlasting, a type of perpetual free fall. I think it helps to be able to watch struggles play out between clashing yet careful bodies in a wrestling ring. Yes, I'm partly referencing here the traditional wrestling trope of the good guy/underdog versus the dastardly heel and his cronies. But it's more complex than that. I want to say that wrestling offers boundaries. Or, more precisely, the performance of life-sustaining principles that allow for bodies and selves to summon danger yet practice collaborative protection. Contrary to legit sports, where rules are put in place to control aggression and prevent the harm that could be done to competitors, harm prevention is a constitutive element of pro wrestling. Matches are simply not possible without the trust performers place on one another, the affirmative acts of care upon which in-ring action depends. No move can be executed without collaboration or without active concern for and from competitors. A performer, in his movement, can only summon as much danger as his opponent is willing to take on. Moreover, it is impossible to completely hide this collaboration from audiences.

Consider, for example, the final segment of the 20 December 2019 edition of All Elite Wrestling's *Dynamite* broadcast on TNT, which was met with controversy on Twitter. The show ended with a brawl between veteran performer and second-generation star Dustin Rhodes and members of the heel faction, The Dark Order. During said brawl, one of the masked villains was pummeling Rhodes with punches on the mat. The controversy arose because the punches were not even grazing Rhodes' head. The unidentified performer was thus heavily criticized and ridiculed by fans and peers alike. Even by Rhodes himself, who tweeted: "It's almost 2020, and I am embarrassed at what I just saw in the great business that I still protect to this day. Please learn how to punch. Or, better yet, come to my class that I hold weekly and I will teach you" (Middleton, 2019). But then, Arick Cannon, a veteran performer tweeted out what was later exposed as a fake apology to Rhodes. Cannon wrote: "You guys…It was me. @dustinrhodes is a legend, one of my all-time favorites, he was already bleeding, and I was just trying to take

care of him." Rhodes, in response, erased his original, critical tweet and posted the following: "I deleted that tweet because he has come forward. Thanks. Work on your frickin punches. There always going to be those out there that try to bring others down. When you see people exposing our business, call em out." That the apology was a fake doesn't concern me. What matters are the terms for the apology and how these were validated and accepted by Rhodes. The terms are responsibility, care, and protection of the other, even if it comes at the expense of the performance.

In 2003, autoethnography, for me, was an opportunity to write about my father and call it research. Reading over my writing assignments from that fateful grad seminar, a self-righteous desire for vengeance made vulnerability impossible. I wrote about us carelessly, driven more by a desire to *speak my truth* than to engage a writing practice in service of, and in search for, sincerity. As such, no matter the epoch or event, my portrayal of my father and of my feelings toward him were fixed. The stories I thus told were simple anecdotes, attached to a personal agenda rather than to the larger social dynamics and structures which autoethnography is supposed to engage and explain (Adams and Holman Jones, 2014). I was unwilling, you could say, to stop pleading my case. I kept on writing as a son, and therefore, could not envision an audience beyond my memory of him. Back to Holman Jones:

> As an ethnographer, I am not the people I work with and write about, even when I am writing about myself. Nor is the actor the character she performs. Nor is the torch singer the woman she sings about. And the woman (or man) in the audience? She is not the woman in the song or the character on stage or the 'subject' of ethnography. Why? Because the stories of torch and autoethnography are incomplete. They are partial, fragmented performances of subjectivity (Abu-Lughod 1993:9). And yet because these stories move from and in and through *real* bodies, their performance can move us in *our* bodies, hearts and minds (Pobryn, 1993: 71). (51-52)

Pro wrestling moves fans with its storylines, which are rife with turns (a good guy turns heel, and vice versa), returns (performers come back to competition after a hiatus, often due to injury) and resets (performers reappear with a new character gimmick). In this regard, wrestling as spectacle showcases, and fans celebrate, second chances. Furthermore, when one considers that storylines, in order to believed, require that fans *forget* certain aspects of a wrestler's past—not the least of which is a particular performer's penchant for betraying audiences' trust—what the form offers is a sui generis social setting where people can be effectively separated from their past actions and their consequences. This, I would posit, is one of the principal paradoxes at the center of the form: while seemingly predicated on vengeance (the loser always pledges to get back at the victor), it is actually forgiveness that makes wrestling possible. If not, it would be impossible

for wrestlers to *return* from acts of betrayal or greed or cowardice and be allowed back into fans' good graces.

If I were to think of my father as a wrestler, I would have to say that he's portrayed the same character for decades. But, deep down, I know that's not true. I just haven't noticed—or, really, haven't been there—to notice the turns he's taken over the years. For all I know, he might very well comport himself like a true babyface with my brothers and sister, and their respective children. I keep on harping on the same bitter memories—and painful storylines between us—because those are the only ones I have. Or the ones that stick out whenever I look back at our time together. And so, lately, I've been dreaming up scenarios for a return to the ring. Maybe this time, I come running out—surprise—from the locker room, and just as he's about to get pummeled by a pack of rivals, I help fend them off. Or maybe, he arrives—unannounced—my old nemesis, but in radically different garb, with a new name and gimmick, and while so many things strike me—and everybody else—as painfully familiar, the new gimmick and name, keep our painful past at bay, as if it never happened, and thus allow us to embark on a long-lasting, mutually beneficial partnership. I want to say that this is wrestling's gift: Every maneuver performed has a counter, but more importantly every hold applied, however torturous, must be released. Otherwise, like *real* fights, matches would run the risk of always ending with somebody on the mat unable to continue. Or, like *real life*, they likely would end up with two people reaching a breaking point, past which *togetherness* is no longer possible for them. Wrestling, whatever it is, is done together. Wrestling, whatever it does (for the benefit of those watching), continues.

Following Holman Jones in writing about my relationship with my father now, I am no longer my father's son. I am writing as a wrestler who enters the ring, with the task of performing within the confines of an agreed upon storyline. Or, to keep it closer to the real, I am writing as a poet, who, in order to summon his internal demons, deems it necessary to turn introspection into a YouTube search for wrestling videos, with the pretense of writing poems about the action on screen when, in truth, what he's doing is looking for any detail in or around the match, to drag out whatever memory of the relationship with his father is presently gnawing at him. This, for example, is the poem I wrote earlier this morning:

> *The Young Bucks & Kenny Omega vs PAC & Rey Fénix & Pentagon Jr.*
> *[AEW, 1/2/20]*
>
> Pentagon Jr.'s catchphrase is zero miedo (zero fear). I try to apply it to my
> everyday life and feel like it's okay to lie to yourself from time to time.
> Omega's my favorite, though. He was once notorious for wrestling a nine-
> year-old girl. My son turns two this year. I wonder how old Omega was

> when he first stepped into the ring. I had just turned fourteen when I threatened my dad with a baseball bat to get him to leave.
>
> He showed zero fear.[1]

Where I'm writing from now, under state ordered lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic is still frequented by tourists, who find Puerto Rican beaches soothing in times of global crisis. They post selfies in their favorite swimsuits, pictures of the sun setting, of their loved ones sipping craft beers. It's difficult to pinpoint exactly what they're appropriating here, as none that I have seen are sporting braids in their—mostly blond—heads. One presumes the locals that support themselves by fulfilling this service are all indoors. I turned to auto-ethnography in grad school mostly out of this fear of appropriation. I figured if I just dedicate myself to researching and writing about me, I would never be in danger of appropriating others' experiences. The catch is, of course, that there's no such thing as writing about the self. In this particular instance, for example, I'm concerned about what I'm *doing* to my father and mine's relationship. He, after all, is getting no say in this. Nor do the wrestlers I turn to in order to provoke a turn towards myself. Maybe there's no such thing as autoethnography. Maybe there's no such thing as *auto-* anything. Maybe there is only and always *togetherness*, whether we are aware of it or not. Pro wrestling, I think, makes you more aware of, and ultimately grateful for, this condition. This is former WWE superstar Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, as quoted in Thomas Hackett's *Slaphappy: Pride, Prejudice and Professional Wrestling* (2006, 167), recollecting the aftermath to his losing the World Championship to Stone Cold Steve Austin at Wrestlemania:

> The door flew open and in walked Steve Austin. He tossed the belt—*his belt, now*—onto the couch. I jumped to my feet and met him in the center of the room, and we hugged for a good ten seconds. It was a strong hug, a real fucking brotherly embrace reflecting a tacit understanding that we had just shared something remarkable.
>
> "Thank you," Steve said.
> "Thank *you*. It was my pleasure.
>
> As we released our hug, we both fell into the couch, completely spent.

That matches are staged does not mean that pro wrestling is not competitive. Wrestlers vie for attention, money, fame, TV time, influence within the promotion. The difference is that this competitive spirit has to be channeled through the

[1] This poem was first published in *FreeRay Poetry* issue #20, in slightly different form, under the title "A Primer on Being Son to a Father."

'working with' that is the basis of the form (Rebollo Gil, 2018). This is also what makes pro wrestling distinct in American culture on a larger scale: Individual aspirations can only be realized though collaboration, trust, inter-personal bonds. In this sense, pro wrestling is able, to an extent, to release the personal from individualist thought and action. As it pertains to me, I remember reading and writing for that seminar in 2003, completely convinced that it was something I was doing for myself, by myself. I was under the impression that bitter feelings and the ability to write about them allowed you to claim ownership of shared experiences. But autoethnography, like wrestling, is not about owning anything—what is a world title worth if matches are fixed? What does knowledge mean if you can't fact check feelings? Rather, autoethnography, like wrestling, is about the expenditure; about emptying yourself out in pursuit of whatever *this* is. This is Holman Jones closing out her piece:

> I type these last words and save the file. I have been and remain done and undone by my subjectivity and the ways my subjectivity touches and blurs with and hinges on the subjectivities of others. I leave my office and return to the living room. I watch the last scene of the film again. I see Katie spy Hubbell across a busy New York street. I watch Hubbell return to his fiancée and Katie return to her work. I hear Barbara sing. I let my husband see me cry. (54)

I would be remiss if I didn't pause here to consider the disturbing, often tragic, part of wrestling's gift to us. From Google's stock answer to the question What happened to Big Van Vader?: "Vader was diagnosed with congestive heart failure in November 2016 and given just two years to live but kept on wrestling." Wrestling's lure, from a practitioner's standpoint, is hard to explain. I mean, beside the whole "seems like a good way to get famous be macho make money and beat people up." Even a cursory glance at the travel schedule, the average pay (Cowley 2014), the physical, emotional toll on performers and those closest to them (Hackett 2006), and its precarious standing in mainstream culture (Mazer, 1998), would easily lead one to find these explanations lacking. In truth, most wrestlers (current and retired), when asked, say they do *it* for the fans. Whatever it is that they do, which critics often locate somewhere between sport and theatrical performance, but which exceeds the guiding principles of each. The point of pro wrestling is not to win, neither is it to portray or provoke. The point of pro wrestling is to give: performers give their bodies (and their trust) to each other and give audiences the opportunity to witness the expenditure of energy that such a curious decision demands. We call it entertainment, because we do not yet have a proper name for it. Fans, however, often chant thank you at the end.

The words I've been putting off writing here, but that, in truth, summoned this paper into being are "Gracias, viejo" [Thank you, old man]. Since your grandson was born, I've been thinking so much about you and me. Or, more precisely,

about you *with* me. Before Lucas, I used to think that our time together was so short. But as I've spent days with this beautiful, growing boy, I've felt closer to you than I had in twenty-plus years. It's not that I'm reminded of anything in particular. In truth, I don't remember us doing all that many things together. It's more an effect of finally finding myself in a position where I can speculate with confidence as to how certain experiences germane to parenthood may have been felt by you. I want to say that this is the equivalent of you showing up in the ring before me, with a different name, gimmick and attire, but still seeming so darn familiar, that it just makes sense that we become allies in the next storyline. We still have time, old man, for a new storyline. That, for me, is worth more than any title:

> *Cody Rhodes vs. Ricochet*
> *[WCPW Lights Out, 1/20/17]*
>
> Rhodes has the word 'dream' tattooed on his chest. It's a tribute to his dead father, The American Dream Dusty Rhodes. Cody calls himself The American Nightmare. A sign of vengeance against Dusty, maybe. If the father were alive, he would challenge the son to a match for the stuff dreams are made of. If Cody emerged victorious, he would win the world title of having lost him.

Is *this* enough for the autoethnographic tag? Today is day fifty-nine under lockdown. I found the call for papers for this journal on day ten, while Lucas was busy with his finger paints. My original plan was to write about my father, my son and me. But I promised myself I would get the pro wrestling paper out of the way first. Instead, I searched for matches on YouTube and wrote poems about them. Then I got to thinking that the best storylines in wrestling are the ones where performers reference, through their words and actions, aspects of their respective biographies; especially those parts where performers have had real-life problems with each other. It makes the wrestling more intense somehow. It also allows one to marvel at how bad feelings or even real-life conflict and pain cannot impede the acts of protection, care and cooperation that make in-ring performance possible. I want to say the same applies to sociological research: the best research is that which derives from or is tied up with, or somehow summons, certain aspects of the social scientist's biography. It's not about "adding a bit of the personal to the article," but about the impossibility of subtracting the personal from the analysis, so that whatever insight I may offer here on pro wrestling, for example, is graphed on to my rendering of my father's and mine's relationship. Not because I decided to make it personal, but because the personal is what made my thinking and writing about wrestling possible.

Today is day sixty-two under lockdown. My plan is to edit this piece while Lucas plays with a set of stackable boxes with numbers and animals on the sides.

I had let the paper rest over the past three days and gave myself the opportunity to finish the poetry chapbook. The plan is to try my luck at a few contests. I also managed to get my dad's cell phone number. This is what I texted him: "Saludos, viejo, te escribe Guillermo, solo para decirte que deseo que te encuentres bien y en salud y en paz durante el encierro" [Hey, old man, it's Guillermo, this is just to say that I hope you're well and healthy and in peace during the lockdown.]. He answered.

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