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PLEASE CITE THE PUBLISHED VERSION

<https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.2020.0006>

PUBLISHER

Johns Hopkins University Press

VERSION

AM (Accepted Manuscript)

PUBLISHER STATEMENT

This paper was accepted for publication in the journal *Modernism/Modernity* and the definitive published version is available at <https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.2020.0006>.

LICENCE

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REPOSITORY RECORD

Warden, Claire. 2020. "'queer Music-hall Sport': All-in Wrestling and Modernist Fakery". Loughborough University. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/11566914.v1>.

“Queer Music-Hall Sport”: “All-in” Wrestling and Modernist Fakery

Claire Warden

In 1932 a *Manchester Guardian* journalist spent the evening at the Victoria Palace theatre in London. The evening’s entertainment came in the form of a wrestling match between two strongmen of the music hall and a self-proclaimed “All-In” team consisting of a man named Frank Oakley alongside the mysterious “Black Devil”:¹

The challenges have been hanging in the air, and the hand-clapping at the first bouts was thin and calm. At times the laughter is worthy of an Aldwych farce. The introductory parade of big, hairy men of several nationalities, some heavily plastered, is impressive enough. The announcer assures us pleadingly that one wrestler had his nose smashed on Monday and another was seriously hurt.²

The journalist gave his piece the titillating title “All-In Wrestling: Queer Music-Hall Sport: A Bloodless Orgy” and concluded it by criticizing “all-in wrestling in its bloodless exaggeration” (“All-In Wrestling,” 4). His explanation, one of the earliest expositions of “All-In” wrestling, produces a confused picture. While the physicality of the wrestlers and the warnings of the announcer suggest a dangerous combat sport, the journalist’s reflections and tone undermine this reading, describing instead a sort of theatrical entertainment. His awkward portmanteau term “Music-Hall Sport” alludes to a liminal form that defies easy definition.

This article uses this review as a catalyst for the examination of “All-In” wrestling as a germane aspect of British modernist culture in an internationalist

context. But, more than this, it uses “All-In” to uncover a broader series of unpredictable borders between the fake and the real, the parodic and the authentic, the distasteful sham and the respectable “truth.” In his introduction to the co-edited collection *Incredible Modernism: Literature, Trust and Deception*, John Attridge claims cultural modernism is “characterized by a concern with the question of trust, and especially with how trust, like ‘human character,’ might be said to have changed, and even to have entered a period of crisis.”³ In a modernist world defined by unknowns, distrust and even fakery, “All-In” wrestling stands as a unique, liminal form contributing to and reflecting this broader modernist context.

Precarity of Authenticity and the History of Modernist Wrestling

Matt Houlbrook’s book *Prince of Tricksters: The Incredible True Story of Netley Lucas, Gentleman Crook* uses the story of a single historical figure to make much broader definitional claims about modernism. Lucas, confidence trickster and fabricator, is emblematic, Houlbrook suggests, of far-reaching anxieties in a modernist society in which “[c]onfidence and authenticity were increasingly prominent yet precarious values.”⁴ Houlbrook points here to a profound modernist paradox. On the one hand, the rise of modern media alongside the increasing theatricality of the twentieth century meant “new or more pressing conflicts emerged around who or what could be properly known” (Houlbrook, *Prince of Tricksters*, 4). On the other, photography and scientific advancement seemed to provide a greater sense of accurate mimeticism or factuality than ever before. Émile Zola, one of the founders of artistic naturalism, for example, predicted a future for theatre with a “public enthusiastically in favor of the truth” rather than the conventional trappings of the stage.⁵ This troubling emergence of the fake appeared in multiple ways in a global

artistic context: Attridge, for example, sees it in the questioning of authorial sincerity which witnessed a “stirring up of the volatile borderland between fact and fiction” (“Introduction,” 13). Leonard Diepeveen, considering Chicago’s International Exhibition of Modern Art (1913), invents the term “mock modernism” to describe the parodies and hoaxes of modernist art.⁶ Neil Bartlett, reflecting on the case of Oscar Wilde, understands his 1895 arrest through notions of forgery.⁷ Modernism, for all its scientific progress and earnest search for artistic truth, seems to be largely defined by misunderstanding, instability and travesty: “How could the ‘authentic’ be identified amid such flux?” asks Houlbrook; as his analysis goes on to demonstrate, such a question is seemingly unresolvable in the modern world (*Prince of Tricksters*, 4).

“All-In” wrestling, I suggest, can be actively read through this modernist precarity of authenticity. Wrestling’s long history goes back to the ancient Greeks, of course. Writing in 1894, Walter Pater acknowledged the Hellenic origins of wrestling where matches represented a sporting celebration of muscularity and *gymnasia* in periods of peace.⁸ In 1890, the Secretary of the Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling Society Walter Armstrong claimed “without doubt, wrestling, beyond almost any other exercise, gives strength and firmness, combined with quickness and pliability to the limbs, vigour to the body, coolness and discrimination to the head, and elasticity to the temper, the whole forming an energetic combination of the greatest power to be found in man.”⁹ It is an impression artistically rendered three years earlier by Eadweard Muybridge who used images of wrestlers in his seminal book of photography *The Human Figure in Motion* (originally published in 1887).¹⁰

Appreciation of this wrestling culture reappears regularly, and arrestingly, in the paintings, drawings and sculptures of French artist Henri Gaudier-Brzeska. Gaudier-Brzeska moved to London in 1911 and, by winter 1912, had found his way to

the London Wrestling Club. He admired the wrestlers in a letter to his wife Sophie Brzeska:

They have reached such a state of perfection that one can take the other by the foot and, without exaggeration, can whirl him five times round and round himself, and then let go so that the other flies off like a ball and falls on his head—but he is up in a moment and back again more ferocious than ever to the fight. [I] thought he would be smashed to bits.¹¹

Sarah Victoria Turner suggests a variety of readings of Gaudier-Brzeska's wrestling images: as erotic celebrations of manliness, as comedic reinventions of combat or as deeply embedded in issues of nationalism. Ultimately, however, she concludes that Gaudier-Brzeska looked to wrestling as “a way to bring together stillness and movement, rhythm and strength, aesthetics and violence” (Turner, “A ‘Knot of Violent Living,’” 96). Like British artists such as Wyndham Lewis and Christopher Nevinson, Gaudier-Brzeska used wrestling (and other combat sports) as a methodological approach. Turner's description of the “violence and force of his technique as he pummelled his materials into submission” is an example of what Kasia Boddy calls “pugilist aesthetics,” a defining technique of many modernist makers.¹²

Two comments in Armstrong's book, however, point to other emerging wrestling forms. “The Lancashire style of wrestling,” he noted, “is, without doubt, the roughest and most uncultivated of the three recognized English systems, as it includes catching hold of the legs, wrestling on the ground, and other objectionable methods of attack and defence” (Armstrong, *Wrestling*, 29). Armstrong identified and criticized more violent, lawless wrestling styles. In addition, he acknowledged the need to counteract another new form of wrestling:

Through the equivocal conduct of many of the professional wrestlers, the old institution had at last . . . begun to wake up to the knowledge that the wrestling contests by the brawny heroes of the north, as they were called, were often the hollowest of shams. (xiii)

Armstrong's comment is directed towards a burgeoning style of wrestling, one of stereotyped characters, dubious conduct, a "hollowest of shams": this was "all-in" professional wrestling. In his famous essay "The World of Wrestling" in *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes described it thus:

The virtue of all-in wrestling is that it is the spectacle of excess . . . wrestling is a sum of spectacles, of which no single one is a function: each moment imposes the total knowledge of a passion which rises erect and along, without ever extending to the crowning moment of a result.¹³

While Barthes's suppositions now feel a touch heavy-handed, and have been significantly countered, reshaped and reimagined in recent professional wrestling scholarship, his foundational work is key to understanding this form.¹⁴ Ultimately this new form of wrestling was less about who won and lost in a competitive sense than the process of performing the intelligible spectacle.

Such performed wrestling actually has a long history in Britain. In September 1890 famed strongman and exercise advocate Eugen Sandow appeared at the Royal Music Hall in London.¹⁵ There to greet him was Karl Westphal, a German weightlifter known as "Goliath." Sandow described the event:

I had an engagement at that time at the Royal Music Hall, and a performance was arranged in which Goliath had to surprise me, lumbering after me across the stage, and trying to hold me in his grip. We wrestled together, and it was his business to make himself the victor . . . we fired the cannon and the whole

display was brought to a conclusion by placing my arm through a leathern belt which girt his waist, and carrying him at arm's length off the stage.¹⁶

There is no doubting the strength and talent of these men, but, reading between the lines, it was clear that this was, in Sandow's words, a "performance," not a competition in any sporting sense. Such spectacles appeared regularly, thanks to music hall promoters and can be seen as part of a broader interest in muscular, dexterous bodies as entertainment at circuses and fairs.¹⁷ Charles B. Cochran, theatre impresario and later producer of Noel Coward's works, was particularly important in the promotion of wrestling as a form of entertainment, bringing the impressive Estonian George Hackenschmidt to London in 1908 to star on the variety stage. Hackenschmidt prided himself on understanding the science of wrestling and cultivated (and encouraged other potential wrestlers to cultivate) impressive all-round strength and stamina as well as developing an educated understanding of holds and throws. His 1909 book *Complete Science of Wrestling* illustrates Hackenschmidt's approach. Interestingly, it is written explicitly for a British audience; he begins it with a description of up-standing wrestling, for example, because "it is the department in which British wrestlers are least practiced."¹⁸ Cochran, upon meeting him in Paris, remembered him as "easily the sturdiest and most graceful specimen of perfect manhood I have ever seen."¹⁹

Hackenschmidt's presence illustrates the transnational character of performed wrestling. This article focuses on Britain not only because a distinctive style developed there but also because this style responded to localized tensions, anxieties and identities. "Britain in the 1920s and 1930s was not unique," confirms Houlbrook, "but confronted a crisis of confidence that was particularly marked, or at least marked in particular ways" (*Prince of Tricksters*, 5). Postwar trauma, the gradual weakening

of the Empire and disturbances in centuries-old class structures fed crises of confidence in British culture in this period. But British wrestling existed in a transnational web of professional wrestling cultures. Benjamin Litherland goes so far as to say that British performed wrestling was an “American cultural text” sold to British audiences during a time when American foods, sports and culture were becoming particularly popular (“The Field and the Stage,” 128).²⁰ This acknowledgement of American influence on the development of British wrestling (and indeed on professional wrestling around the world from Mexico to Japan) also challenges the oft-held view that American sport with its football gridirons, basketball courts and baseball diamonds remained somewhat removed from the international sporting world in the early twentieth century.²¹ Performed wrestling clearly contributed to, borrowing the title of Genevieve Abrahame’s 2012 book, the “Americanizing [of] Britain.”²²

This type of wrestling also navigated its way across the old Empire; as John Griffiths illustrates, New Zealand and Australia both had their own unique though transnationally intertwined versions.²³ The arrival of wrestling travelers in Britain such as Hackenschmidt, but also American Frank Gotch, Polish Stanislaus Zbyszko, Canadian Earl McCready (and others) added to this sense of internationalism. (More dubious interludes also contributed to this internationalism, such as a mud wrestling match in Blackfriars Ring which was deemed to be wrestling in the “Indian style” or a villainous “baddie” “Ali Baba taking out his mat and praying to ‘Allah’”).²⁴ Exploring these connections, Griffiths challenges the notion of a “global homogenous wrestling culture” confirming Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker’s general statement in *Geographies of Modernism* that transnational processes and interactions “never flow together into some homogeneous totality” (Griffiths, “All the World’s a Stage,” 39).²⁵

There was also a decidedly regional element here, in terms of location of bouts and styles of practice. While performed wrestling was popular with London working-class audiences, it received particular support in the industrialized North, in cities such as Manchester where bouts were held regularly at Belle Vue stadium. While, like American professional wrestling, British performed wrestling appeared in music halls and circuses, the latter was also influenced by “English regional codes, such as those which originated in Cumberland, Westmoreland [sic], Lancashire and Cornwall” (Griffiths, “All the World’s a Stage,” 48), which demanded an athletic, aggressive style rather than the more showy spectacle of American wrestling. Despite Armstrong’s unequivocal rejection of “hollowest of shams,” he maintained “the northern school is, in our opinion, the proper one to graduate in” (*Wrestling*, xiv).²⁶

After Hackenschmidt left London, performed wrestling died away in Britain. It reappeared in the late 1920s as “All-In” wrestling.²⁷ It was so called, according to one of its founders, Sir Atholl Oakley, “because the new style included all the holds”; it was, to intentionally use performance parlance, a sporting *Gesamtkunstwerk* (*Blue Blood*, 21).²⁸ This new form of wrestling launched in December 1930 with simultaneous bouts in London (Olympia) and Manchester (Belle Vue), and began to attract crowds across the country. John Lister confirms the successful emergence of “All-In”:

Business was going great for a while, with the best part of forty regular venues in London alone, and crowds of up to 14,000. Indeed, if you choose to believe Oakley’s recollection, two million people watched a four match show as part of the celebrations when the Graf Zeppelin airship visited Heathrow Airport. It is perhaps worth bearing in mind that Oakley also claimed to have performed

what we now know as a headscissor takedown on an opponent that stood over nine feet tall. (“A History of British Wrestling,” 224)

There are two important things to note in Lister’s description; firstly, “All-In” wrestling did become extremely popular and, secondly, the form was embroiled in debates about its authenticity and legitimacy—note Oakley’s outlandish proclamations about the size of his opponent and the number of spectators. Oakley, like Netley Lucas, represents a recurring figure of modernist culture and art: the trickster.²⁹ Houlbrook describes this deceiver: “[M]oving across a postwar landscape often characterized as rootless, the chameleon-like trickster was an unnerving reminder that no one was necessarily what he or she seemed” (*Prince of Tricksters*, 7). Oakley thus embodies the broader enquiry of this article. The difficulty of defining “All-In” wrestling—is it sport or performance? Fake or real? Something to be dismissed as overblown spectacle or taken seriously as a threat to society?—is most evident in the series of legal and political challenges I explore below. These cases and debates illustrate the liminal identity of “All-In” wrestling, and situate this form in broader modernist arguments about fakery and authenticity.

“Did you like the performance?” “All-In” Wrestling’s “Fakery”

In 1936 a series of actions under the Lord’s Day Observance Act (1781) were taken against promoters, venue owners and the *Evening Standard* (which advertised wrestling events) in London. Two names recur in these cases: Mr. Gerald Gardiner, lawyer, and Captain C. C. Lewis, solicitor. They represented clients who witnessed “All-In” wrestling events and were shocked by the content. Representing Mr. Francis Kelly (who claimed £300 under the act), Gardiner asked his client, “Did you like the performance?” Kelly replied, “No. At the end of the first bout I began to doubt

whether it was a sport at all; at the end of the second bout I was sure it was not.”³⁰

Like the *Manchester Guardian* journalist before him, Kelly began to doubt the authenticity of “All-In” as a sport.

Harold Segel confirms “modernism truly became the great age of sport” and Bernard Vere pronounces that “sport was one of the most distinctive ways in which the modernity of the twentieth century was produced.”³¹ Despite this, Stephen Connor suggests, sport is often strangely absent from modernist histories—“Why a room of one’s own and never, as it seems, a gym of one’s own?” he asks. Examples of the intertwining of modernism and sport are numerous and diverse: strongmen Sandow and Bernarr Macfadden’s “modernist physicality,” the re-establishment of the Olympic Games in 1896, mass gymnastics or calisthenics (in schools, universities or as part of newly established groups such as the Boy Scouts), the foundation of multiple organizations or professional leagues, the importance of sport as a challenge to prevailing narratives about race (Jesse Owens at the 1936 Munich Olympics) or gender (suffragette activists’ ju-jitsu training) (Segel, *Modernism and the Physical*, 4). Thus in one sense “All-In” matches can certainly be understood as sporting events, in that they can be read as part of a growing modernist interest in sporting physical culture. “All-In,” says Snape, “was presented as a sport and was understood as such by spectators” (“All-In Wrestling,” 1426). Litherland pushes this further and says that to claim professional wrestling is not a sport is to unhelpfully solidify what sport is: “it risks taking sport, and for that matter theatre, to be an unchanging, natural phenomenon” (“The Field and the Stage,” 13).

However, I suggest, it was also *not* a sport or, rather, more accurately (in the words of Heather Levi) it “represents sport in the mode of melodrama” (“Sport and Melodrama,” 57). “All-In” never quite shed the fetters of the music hall or variety

performance. Years after Cochran's wrestling shows, he turned to the "legitimate stage" but, nevertheless concluded "my fights and wrestling bouts have been the utmost value in relation to my artistic efforts . . . although I have not tried them so hard, I believe my old wrestling fans would endure a performance of 'Oedipus Rex' or 'The Cenci' if they thought that by that means they would be doing me a good turn" (*I Had Almost Forgotten*, 43). In fact, as Barthes reveals, its theatricality is a key part of wrestling's identity: "What the public wants is the image of passion, not passion itself. There is no more a problem of truth in wrestling than in the theatre" ("The World of Wrestling," 18). This reading of wrestling means that complaining about the fixed fakery of professional wrestling is akin to bemoaning the fact that the actors in a play have rehearsed and that the finale is planned in advance.

Due to this deeply performative character, wrestling has always fallen afoul of what Jonas Barish describes as "antitheatrical prejudice." Whereas terms from music, visual art or literature are often laudatory or celebratory, theatrical terms—"melodramatic" or "stagey"—are, says Barish, emblematic of "the disapproval of theater . . . capable of persisting through so many transformations of culture, so many dislocations of time and place."³² Martin Puchner understands this impulse as particularly characteristic of modernism, even existing within modernist drama itself, with its dismissal of theatre history and its distrust of the actor.³³ The most telling type of modernist anti-theatricalism for my argument is, using Puchner and Alan Ackermann's description, the "paranoid image of the theatre, of a theatre that is at work everywhere, infiltrating and corrupting everything, and which therefore demands the greatest vigilance."³⁴ It was this corruptive theatricality that bothered Armstrong so much when he criticized performed wrestling as the "hollowest of shams"; he regarded this new form of wrestling as a perverse parody, shaming the

grand history of British amateur wrestling. Barthes's reflections on the "spectacle of excess," however, detaches performed wrestling from other combat sports and reattaches the form to the theatrical:

Extrapolated, fair wrestling could lead only to boxing or judo, whereas true wrestling derives its originality from all the excesses which make it a spectacle and not a sport . . . The rhythm of wrestling is quite different, for its natural meaning is that of rhetorical amplification: the emotional magniloquence, the repeated paroxysms, the exasperation of retorts can only find their natural outcome in the most baroque confusion. ("The World of Wrestling," 23)

Barthes confirms that the primary difference between boxing and wrestling is not that one is "real" and the other "fake," but, rather, that the former progresses towards an intelligible conclusion, whereas the latter is a series of intelligible symbols. It is, then, defined by the excessive rather than the competitive.

"All-In" may well have been performative spectacle, but it retained a high level of danger. In this it resembled other modernist sporting competitions. As Enda Duffy describes in *The Speed Handbook*, modernist sport was not without its dangers, whether that be speeding across Europe in a motor car pursuing the Gordon Bennett Cup (established in 1899) or throwing punches in a ring.³⁵ In fact the very *real* danger of "All-In" was one of the key reasons it attracted the disapproval of Parliament. In 1933 Mr. Clyde Wilson (Conservative Party Member of Parliament for Liverpool West Toxteth) brought a question to Home Secretary Sir James Gilmour in the House of Commons. Wilson's question related to an "All-In" wrestling event at Attercliffe Rink in Sheffield, in which one of the fighters was 28-year-old George Johnson, professionally known as "Strangler Johnson." According to reports, after the bout,

Johnson collapsed in the dressing room. He regained consciousness but collapsed again on his way to the railway station and died.³⁶ The inquest the following week made its way into the national newspapers. The jury claimed that “all-in wrestling is not a clean sport and ought to be prohibited”; the *Manchester Guardian* article describing the debate goes on,

Police Constable Ernest Clarke, who was on duty in the hall, described all-in wrestling as “savage and brutal,” and Detective Inspector Manifold declared it was a particularly degrading method of entertainment. Addressing the jury, the Coroner said that bills advertising the contests appeared to pander to the baser side of human nature and to attract people to come and see something which was rather cruel.³⁷

Wilson asked Gilmour “whether he [would] take steps to amend the law as to enable local licensing authorities to regulate and control this form of entertainment.”

Gilmour responded (with customary parliamentary obtuseness), “I have no information that similar contests are frequent and I am not at present in a position to say whether any amendment of the law is necessary.”³⁸ In 1937 there was another fatality: Michael Martin Flack in London. His mother’s statement provides an interesting commentary: “He was constantly getting hurt; you could not blame any one fight.”³⁹ It is one of the contrary characteristics of professional wrestling, even today—while matches are preplanned and partially scripted, while wrestlers are trying to put on an entertaining match for the fans rather than actually hurt their opponent, the frequency of in-ring injury and even death is remarkable.⁴⁰ While the police constable and the parliamentarian describe “All-In” as “entertainment,” its very real savagery caused tangible concern.

As well as physical danger, “All-In” wrestling also appeared to pose a spiritual danger, despite (or perhaps because of) its performative fakery. Returning to the case brought under the 1781 Lord’s Day Observance Act: lawyer Gardiner is recorded as describing the “All-In” event as “a disgusting spectacle to provide for members of the British public, men or women, particularly on a Sunday” (“All-In Wrestling on Sundays,” 4). Captain Lewis confirmed that “on one occasion I saw one of the contestants threatening to brain [the promoter Alf Allen] with a spittoon” (4). Apparently even worse, “he alleged that during a bout between an Italian woman and a masked woman the Italian was rendered unconscious by a neck hold and her opponent was awarded the verdict” (4). Lewis’s recollections are odd. He returned to Chelsea Palace four times to watch the wrestling as “it would be impossible, from one visit, to come to the conclusion that many of the bouts were ‘arranged’” (4). Yet, although he is clearly aware that “All-In” might be fixed, he seems entirely taken in by the threats to Allen and the unconsciousness of the Italian woman. Lewis seems unable to decide whether his best attack lay in accusing “All-In” of actual brutish violence or of fakery. Days later Gardiner and Lewis were involved in another case, representing Mr. Eric Edward Kitchener, again brought under the old religious law:

On the first date, [Kitchener] said, he saw kicking and biting by the wrestlers.

Two men rolled out of the ring and almost fell on a girl, aged nine or ten, who was in a front seat. Each wrestler tried to rub sawdust into the other’s eyes.⁴¹

In an interesting addendum in this latter case there is the suggestion that Kitchener was a fascist and that he brought the case because of the financial reward (which he had to promise not to give to any fascist group) rather than because of any deep religious conviction. The case clearly cast Kitchener in a poor light, so much so that Gardiner requested that “your lordship . . . make it clear that no allegation of

impropriety of any kind can be made against them [Kitchener and Lewis]” (“£200 for ‘Common Informer,’” 9). Whether any of these characters actually held strong religious views or not, the court proceedings were certainly brought for religious reasons, at least in the official legal narrative.

Other protests seem to have more convincing religious motives. In Blackburn in 1935, three religious societies wrote letters of condemnation after King George’s Hall was let for wrestling contests, referring to the form as “harmful” and “anti-Christian.”⁴² Despite wrestling’s Biblical origins (the Genesis wrestling “match” between Jacob and the Angel could be regarded as the first “worked” bout!) and the advent of muscular Christianity in the nineteenth century, these groups clearly identified something profoundly anti-Christian in this type of wrestling contest. In both these cases—Kitchener’s financially lucrative accusations couched in the language of religious objection and the more authentic religious concerns in Blackburn—it seems to have been expedient to focus on the violent brutality of “All-In” wrestling rather than its performative fakery. Indeed, as the infamous Parents Television Council’s challenge to the WWE in 1999 illustrates, the moral outrage about wrestling often rests on its “real” violence.⁴³

Due to its perceived brutality and challenge to civilized mores (this despite Oakley’s aristocratic roots), there were accusations that “All-In” attracted a coarse crowd and encouraged the uncivilized wrestlers to engage in violent savagery. This new form did not seem limited by the usual constraints of sporting rules. In March 1938, for example, “All-In” came under renewed judicial attack. Philip Meader, an “All-In” referee, brought legal proceedings after it was alleged that wrestler Carl Reginsky assaulted him after a match. Meader was awarded £150 in damages.⁴⁴ The Judge’s verdict contained the following statement:

Mr Reginsky said, and quite rightly I think, that the sport is conducted entirely without rules, really. They simply enter into what appears to me to be an animal contest . . . I dare say that if you poked your nose in a dressing-room after one of these contests you would often see a rough and tumble. They are not milk-and-water people; they are rough people. They say they are rough: indeed, if they did not say they were rough they would not get an engagement in this high-class entertainment.⁴⁵

While the Judge perceived “All-In” as a sport, he, like the *Manchester Guardian* journalist, imagined it as *rule-less* sport. In the perceived violence of “All-In,” one might imagine similarities with boxing; indeed Boddy’s contention that “while at the moment of triumph, the body may move beautifully, the sport itself is all about damaging (and making ugly) the body” could be understood to apply to the “All-In” wrestling ring too (*Boxing*, 20). But whereas boxing intentionally makes ugly the opponent’s body, in “All-In” wrestling this ugliness *should be* a fictionalized performance. While boxing authorities came under regulating bodies and received a degree of legitimation because of this (the Marquis of Queensbury’s rules were published in 1867), “All-In” wrestling’s rules, such as they were, seemed a performance device.⁴⁶ “Breaking the rules” was part of the game or, as Litherland suggests, “many of these rules were a tantalizing glimpse of what one could *expect* to see as part of the show” (“The Field and the Stage,” 130). “Below belt punching” and “strangling,” both outlawed in the governing rules of “All-In,” could be regularly observed in the ring. These moves, as Tom Harrisson and Charles Madge illustrate in *Britain by Mass-Observation*, were part of the skill set and performative character of the “dirty wrestler,”—in Barthes’s terminology, the “Bastard,” in contemporary parlance, the “heel” (“The World of Wrestling,” 17).⁴⁷ The journalist at the 1932

Victoria Palace event described “All-In” as “wrestling so to speak outside the rules.” This is not wholly accurate. The rules are vital to “All-In,” but as narrative devices rather than legitimating regulations.

The “roughness” that the judge points to here reveals a deep-seated class bias. In his comprehensive study of Mass-Observation’s holdings on wrestling, Robert Snape focuses particularly on the spectators. It is clearly not enough to simply say that wrestling appealed to working-class audiences. Responders to Mass-Observation’s survey about wrestling set up in the autumn of 1938 “held manual and mainly unskilled jobs such as storekeeper, laborer and foundry worker; several were unemployed. These occupations reflect the predominantly lower-working-class composition of the crowd.”⁴⁸ The form did not seem to appeal to the aspirational working class and, as this article illustrates (and the judge in the Meader case confirms), disgusted many in political or judicial authority.

The customary assumption is that the working-class spectators were duped, naïve mugs, deceived by tricksters such as Oakley, unaware that the rules were actually performative devices. But actually, Barthes notes, “this public knows very well the distinction between wrestling and boxing” (“The World of Wrestling,” 15). Barthes’s conclusion that the audience is in on the joke is substantiated by one of the very earliest newspaper descriptions of “All-In” wrestling in a 1931 copy of *The Times*:

The finish of the entertainment was comic. A gentleman got into the ring while a bout was in progress and stopped it. He had arranged at some expense a cabaret show, and a good one; and if this wrestling went on any longer—it was then about 11.30—the show would be ruined. The spectators were quite

good-humoured about it, which seems to prove that all-in wrestling is more of a joke and a spectacle than a serious business.⁴⁹

While such instances recur regularly in the paratexts surrounding “All-In” wrestling, promoters and wrestlers did often try to protect the form from accusations of fakery, particularly when accusers suggested a lack of effort on the part of the wrestlers.

Again, returning to Gardiner: “It seemed to him that some of the wrestlers were making a great pretence [sic] at trying. He [Kelly] came to the conclusion that it was a disgusting entertainment for England.”⁵⁰ Oakley counteracted these sorts of accusations thus:

Many British journalists, knowing nothing about wrestling technique, mistook this wearing-down process for not trying, which was just about as sensible as saying that a competitor in the mile is not trying because he does not run off from the start at full speed. (*Blue Blood*, 40)

This is an admirable attempt to maintain, in wrestling parlance, “kayfabe” (“maintaining a fictional storyline, of the illusion that professional wrestling is a genuine contest”).⁵¹ But accusations of phoniness endured and “All-In” remained outside a modernist sporting world where, as Connor says, “one must take the play seriously; that is, one must not *play at playing*.”⁵² Even when the audience played along, the “play at playing” that *The Times*’s correspondent noted in 1931 meant that “All-In” was never quite accepted as a sport. Take, for example, comments from the judge in the action taken against Reginsky:

“I don’t call all-in wrestling a sport” . . . He said he was accustomed to see the contestants described as “tigers,” “wolves,” and all sorts of things. “They apparently fight with terrific energy, get desperately hurt, then go off together in a railway train and do exactly the same thing in another town,” he said.⁵³

The suggestion here is that the animosity between the wrestlers was a performance conducted by caricatured “actors,” in an example of what Philip Auslander, following Laurence Grossberg, refers to as “authentic inauthenticity.”⁵⁴ Whether David Bowie or the Pet Shop Boys (the examples Auslander provides) or “All-In” wrestlers such as Oakley and Reginsky, “the performers in question were more concerned to create spectacular stage personae than images of authenticity” (*Liveness*, 89). Perhaps, in a sense, this isn’t so different from more acceptable sports—consider, for example, the multiple personae of boxing star Muhammed Ali or philosophical footballer Eric Cantona—but, in this case, it led the Judge to question the authenticity of “All-In.”

This is the peculiar paradox of all professional wrestling: it appears to be a fight between combatants but, in actuality, is a more akin to ballroom dancing than boxing, the protagonist and antagonist acting together to produce the (in Barthesian terms) intelligible spectacle. On the face of it, then, “All-In” wrestling seemed to challenge contemporaneous narratives of citizenship and sporting camaraderie, exemplified by innovations such as the founding of the Boy Scouts, which prepared boys for the “grand life” of the military, and the advent of group gymnastics in school Physical Education classes.⁵⁵ Segal describes the growth of calisthenic training thus: “Created in times of conflict and growing national self-realization, the gymnastics movement incorporated into the disciplined communal training of the body a keen sense of national purpose and paramilitary alertness” (*Body Ascendant*, 5). Both the Scouts and gymnastics focused on athleticism in a communal sense. By contrast, one regular attender of “All-In” confirmed “almost every wrestler is an individualist . . . each wrestler develops a style and many tricks and gestures that are essentially his own” (Harrisson and Madge, *Britain by Mass-Observation*, 132). But in reality, the performers in “All-In” (just like contemporary professional wrestling) actually

worked together to produce the spectacle of combat, even though it looked like a vicious, individualistic fight. This led to new accusations of fakery, accusations that one promoter of “All-In,” cited in the Mass Observation archive, tried hard to resist:

Quite naturally the men are good friends before and after the fight; it's just the same as in the war, you had to fight your enemy soldier, before you did fight him you had no grievance against him, and afterwards if you are captured you make good friends; but during the fight there is a real fight for life and death. And exactly he [sic] same happens with wrestling. (124)

This is an interesting, timely defense for this interwar period. Ultimately, it might look like the antagonists are doing battle but actually the communal choreography works in much the same way as, say, contact improvisation.⁵⁶

The close proximity of wrestling bodies enables a complex reading of “All-In” wrestling’s gender politics. Some audience members, for example, viewed “All-In” as upholding traditional notions of British masculinity; in the words of one 67-year-old respondent to the Mass Observation questions, the wrestlers represented a perceived bygone age “when men were men and not the namby pamby, simpering, artificial, hair curling variety that is most prevalent in the present days generation” (Harrison and Madge, *Britain by Mass-Observation*, 133). This might appear a rather odd statement for a form often regarded, in the words of Broderick Chow, as a “subversively queer practice, not (or not *only*) in its homoerotic content, but for the way it points to a bodily potentiality outside the temporal regulation of wage labour.”⁵⁷ The poster outside the Chelsea Palace that persuaded Captain Lewis to buy a ticket read “The sport all women adore: all-in wrestling,” suggesting a sexual attraction, the chance for women to see muscular athletes writhing in the ring (“All-In

Wrestling on Sundays,” 4). In its liminality, “All-In” managed to negotiate being both queer and stereotypically masculine at the same time.

This queer space offered the promise—and threat—of potentially progressive gender politics, drawing the concerned attention of governmental officials. In 1933 Colonel Ropner (Conservative Member of Parliament for Barkston Ash) brought William Wallis’s promotion of a planned women’s match between Miss Jennie McDonald and Miss Flo Ling in Hull to the attention of Gilmour (Home Secretary) as a cause for deep concern.⁵⁸ Perhaps coincidentally (though probably not), a month later “All-In” wrestling was banned from Hull Corporation Baths.⁵⁹ Not even Lady Astor’s intervention could change the minds of the parliamentarians:

Viscountess Astor (Plymouth, Sutton, U.)—Does not the right hon. Gentleman think that if women want to wrestle they have just as much right to wrestle as men? (Laughter).⁶⁰

Concerns seemed to oscillate between understanding “All-In” as an entertainment—or a “revolting display,” as Mr. Pike (MP for Attercliffe, Sheffield—incidentally the constituency where “Strangler Johnson” died) said during this debate—or a bona fide contest in which, as Mr. Thorne (Labor MP for Plaistow) described, with horror, “wrestling is a form of physical development” for women (“Women and ‘All-In’ Wrestling,” 7). Responding, Wallis said that “nothing offensive to public decency would occur. The women wrestlers would be suitably clothed and padded, and they would wear more clothing than women acrobats at music-halls.”⁶¹ Here the theatricality of “All-In” was used expediently, not to condemn fakery, but as a justification for including women wrestlers on the card. In 1938, whereas men’s “All-In” wrestling came under scrutiny from the London County Council, women’s wrestling was banned outright.⁶² Whether as spectators or participants, parliamentary

and council officials could not decide whether “All-In” posed a danger to British femininity because, as Fiona Skillen explains, “they feared that physical demands and strains would draw out masculine qualities both physically and mentally” or because it was a distasteful spectacle.⁶³

European Politics and “deceptive surfaces”

With the onset of World War II, and under the pressure of so many legal, moral and political challenges, “All-In” wrestling died away in Britain until 1952 and the establishment of Joint Promotions.⁶⁴ This was a coalition of local wrestling companies, akin to America’s National Wrestling Alliance. During the 1970s the Saturday evening television show *World of Sport* made stars of British wrestlers such as Big Daddy, Giant Haystacks and Adrian Street. However, it was eventually overtaken by the glitzier pyrotechnics of the American product, and *World of Sport* was canceled in 1985. Only recently has British professional wrestling once again emerged as a world leader.⁶⁵

But to leave it there is to neglect “All-In” as a significant motif for modernist anxieties around fakery and authenticity. In a House of Commons foreign policy debate of December 19, 1938, Mr. Reginald Sorensen (Labor Member of Parliament for Leyton West) described the political tensions of Europe:

Some years ago when I was stranded for some hours in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, not knowing what to do, I went through a small and grubby entrance and observed the process of a game called an all-in wrestling match. It was an amazing exhibition. There were two men throwing each other out of the ring and apparently jumping on each other’s stomachs. While I was wondering how it could happen in a civilised land, I could not also help thinking that it

resembled the state of Europe to-day. Both these men, no doubt, were thinking rationally of what they were doing; but, while reason was being used, in spite of that there was strife and the desire to subdue almost any cost [sic].⁶⁶

The Labor Minister and pacifist here used “All-In” wrestling as an analogy for an age. Since then, professional wrestling has often been used in such a way, no more so than in our current political climate of “fake news” and caricatured politicians.⁶⁷ Like Sorensen, I understand “All-In” wrestling as more than simply a peripheral pastime; rather, it exemplifies underlying tensions in modernist culture, namely between the real and the fake. Diepeveen goes as far as to claim “modernism was Barnumism,” attracting a remarkable amount of parodies and travesties (*Mock Modernism*, 4).⁶⁸ “All-In” wrestling is one of the many “deceptive surfaces” of modernism, playing with the constant tension between authentic and pretend (Houlbrook, *Prince of Tricksters*, 7). It is for this reason that it attracted the attention of the authorities and provides fruitfully emblematic motif for modernism.

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<BIO>

Notes

¹ The founder of “All-In” wrestling, as I go on to explain, was one Sir Atholl Oakley.

² “All-In Wrestling: Queer Music-Hall Sport: A Bloodless Orgy,” *Manchester Guardian*, March 10, 1932, 4.

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- ³ John Attridge, “Introduction: Modernism, Trust, and Deception,” in *Incredible Modernism: Literature, Trust and Deception*, ed. John Attridge and Rod Rosenquist (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 1–20, 2.
- ⁴ Matt Houlbrook, *Prince of Tricksters: The Incredible True Story of Netley Lucas, Gentleman Crook* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2016), 4. Thanks to Andrew Frayn for suggesting this book to me.
- ⁵ Émile Zola, “Naturalism on the Stage,” in *Playwrights on Playwriting: From Ibsen to Ionesco*, ed. Toby Cole (New York: Cooper Square Press), 5–14, 13.
- ⁶ See Leonard Diepeveen, *Mock Modernism: An Anthology of Parodies, Travesties, Frauds, 1910–1935* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2014).
- ⁷ See Neil Bartlett, *Who Was that Man?: A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1988), 163.
- ⁸ See Walter Pater, “The Age of Athletic Prizemen: A Chapter in Greek Art,” in *Greek Studies: A Series of Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1894), 286–319, 299. An early twentieth-century wrestling resurgence coincided with a broader turn towards classicism, exemplified by such modernist artistic contributions as the writings of the Cambridge Ritualists and classical-inspired *tableau vivant* to name but two. For more about this “classical modernism,” especially in a British context, see Edward Comentale, *Modernism, Cultural Production and the British Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
- ⁹ Walter Armstrong, *Wrestling* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1890), vii–viii.
- ¹⁰ See Eadward Muybridge, *The Human Figure in Motion* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1907). Wrestlers appear on pages 75, 215, 217 and 219 alongside images of other pugilist sports such as boxing and fencing.
- ¹¹ Letter from Henri Gaudier-Brzeska to Sophie Brzeska, December 3, 1912, cited in Sarah Victoria Turner, “A ‘Knot of Violent Living’: Henri Gaudier-Brzeska’s *Wrestlers*,” in *New Rhythms: Henri Gaudier-Brzeska: Art, Dance and Movement in London*, ed. Jennifer Powell (Cambridge: Kettle’s Yard, 2015), 90–8, 94.
- ¹² Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion, 2009), 240. Other modernist examples include the Vorticists. In his 1915 “The God of Sport and Blood,” Wyndham Lewis argued “Sport and blood are inseparable, or Sport without blood is anaemic. Sport and blood again are the rich manure all

our vitality battens on” (Wyndham Lewis, “The God of Sport and Blood,” *BLAST* 2 [July 1915]: 9–10). The Vorticists, Bernard Vere has recently suggested, regarded boxing as having a “certain frisson of outsider appeal,” a description that could just as readily be applied to wrestling (““BLAST SPORT”?” Vorticism, Sport and William Roberts’s *Boxers*,” *Modernism/modernity* 24, no. 2 (2017): 349–70, 352). Focusing on the influence of sporting promotional typescripts on the lettering of Vorticist publications, he argues that “[c]ontact sports were part of the extended milieu of Vorticism” (Vere, ““BLAST SPORT,”” 362). Lewis’s “drama” “Enemy of the Stars” (1914, revised 1932) furthers this thesis; Arghol and Hanp “*grapple and fight*,” their protracted brawl resembling a particularly violent, uncontrollable wrestling match (Wyndham Lewis, “Enemy of the Stars (1932),” in Wyndham Lewis, *Collected Poems and Plays*, ed. Alan Munton [New York: Routledge, 2003], 141–92, 179). In all these works one feels the effects of the “pummeling” that Turner uncovers in Gaudier-Brzeska’s practice.

¹³ Roland Barthes, “The World of Wrestling,” in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 15–25, 15–16. Barthes refers to *le catch*, a French form of professional wrestling. But in the 1972 English translation by Annette Lavers, this term is actually rendered as “all-in.”

¹⁴ See Sharon Mazer, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), *Steel Chair to the Head*, ed. Nicholas Sammond (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002) and Broderick Chow, Eero Laine and Claire Warden, *Performance and Professional Wrestling* (London: Routledge, 2016).

¹⁵ There is a history of wrestling on theatrical stages long before this. Prize-fighters appeared to great acclaim throughout the nineteenth century. For more information on pre-twentieth-century theatrical wrestling see Benjamin Litherland, “The Field and the Stage: Pugilism, Combat Performance and Professional Wrestling in England: 1700–1980” (PhD diss., University of Sussex, 2014), 55–88. Litherland’s new book *Wrestling in Britain: Sporting Entertainments, Celebrity and Audiences* (London: Routledge, 2018) builds on his PhD work.

¹⁶ Eugen Sandow, *Strength and How to Obtain It* (London: Gale and Polden, 1897), 104. This event is described in further detail by David Waller in *The Perfect Man: The Muscular Life and Times of Eugen Sandow, Victorian Strongman* (Brighton, UK: Victorian Secrets, 2011), 48–50.

¹⁷ For more about the history of bodies in the circus see Peta Tait, *Circus Bodies: Cultural Identity in Aerial Performance* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2005) and Helen Stoddart, *Rings of Desire: Circus History and Representation* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2000).

¹⁸ George Hackenschmidt, *Complete Science of Wrestling* (London: Health and Strength, 1909), 30.

Hackenschmidt's previous book *The Way to Live: Health and Physical Fitness* (London: Health and Strength, 1908) contained advice for anyone wishing to improve their level of fitness; strength and stamina were core physical virtues in this book too.

¹⁹ C. B. Cochran, *I Had Almost Forgotten* (London: Hutchinson, 1932), 34.

²⁰ There is not sufficient space in this article to discuss the history of wrestling in the United States. For more details see Scott Beekman's *Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling in America* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006).

²¹ It should also be noted that professional wrestling travelled from the United States to Mexico during the 1930s too. For more details see Heather Levi, "Sport and Melodrama: The Case of Mexican Professional Wrestling," *Social Text* 50 (1997): 57–68, 62. In addition, Matsuda Sorakichi, generally regarded as the first Japanese professional wrestler began his career in the United States before staging an exhibition fight with his friend Hamada Shōkichi in Toyko in 1887 (see nippon.com/en/features/h00082/). This is generally regarded as the beginning of Japanese professional wrestling; Japan remains one of the world's leaders in professional wrestling style. Interestingly, in D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* (which I mention below), Rupert Birkin shows Gerald Crich wrestling moves based on those he had learnt from a Japanese wrestler. Crich's comment that this must be jujitsu (a martial art form made famous in Britain by Sherlock Holmes and the suffragettes) illustrates that even before the professional era, Japanese wrestling styles made transnational journeys.

²² See Genevieve Abravanel, *Americanizing Britain: The Rise of Modernism in the Age of the Entertainment Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²³ See John Griffiths, "All the World's a Stage: Transnationalism and Adaptation in Professional Wrestling Style c. 1930–45," *Social History* 40, no. 1 (2015): 38–57.

²⁴ Sir Atholl Oakeley, *Blue Blood on the Mat: The All-In Wrestling Story* (Chichester: Summerdale, 1996), 126. Reflection from Mass Observation Archive cited in Litherland, "The Field and the Stage," 135.

²⁵ Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker, eds., *Geographies of Modernism: Literatures, Cultures, Spaces* (London: Routledge, 2005), 16.

²⁶ Modernism's historical preoccupation with center points has meant much regional modernist culture has been overlooked. More recently, scholars have remapped modernism, not only to consider

modernism as an international phenomenon, but also as intra-national. In the Introduction to their 2013 *Regional Modernisms*, Neal Alexander and James Moran aim for a “renewed sense of Anglophone modernism’s distinctively local and regional articulations, and the complex manner in which these are necessarily bound up with a shifting set of national and transnational horizons.” (Neal Alexander and James Moran, eds., *Regional Modernisms* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 4).

²⁷ John Lister, “A History of British Wrestling (*Pro Wrestling Press*, May 2002),” in *Slamthology: Collected Wrestling Writings 1991–2004* (Morrisville, NC: Lulu Press, 2013): 223–33, 223.

²⁸ His name is written in a variety of ways in the literature and documents I have read. For ease, I will refer to him as “Oakley,” which seems to be the most popular rendering, although the reprint of his book has his name as “Oakeley.” It is interesting to note that in the 1932 Victoria Palace bout with which I opened, a certain Frank Oakeley is one of the fighters. It seems too strong a coincidence to find two “Oakleys” involved in this early phase of “All-In.” It is tempting to think that Frank Oakeley might have been an alias for Sir Atholl. If so, it is interesting to note that he covered his aristocratic background for this Victoria Palace event, perhaps to enable a deeper connection with his predominantly working-class audience. This is a highly speculative conclusion.

²⁹ I acknowledge here the potential problem of using this term to discuss British culture, given its association with African and Indigenous American peoples. While the term “trickster” is a useful one to describe a boundary-crosser and deceiver such as Lucas (and, I suggest, Oakley), this is not intended as an act of colonial appropriation. Rather I envisage Oakley as a Puck-type character.

³⁰ “All-In Wrestling on Sundays,” *Manchester Guardian*, January 16, 1936, 4.

³¹ Stephen Connor, “Sporting Modernism,” paper presented at the University of Sussex, January 14, 2009), stevenconnor.com/sportingmodernism/sportingmodernism.pdf, 2; Harold B. Segel, *Body Ascedant: Modernism and the Physical Imperative* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 5; Bernard Vere, *Sport and Modernism in the Visual Arts in Europe, c. 1909–39* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2018), 4. With sincere thanks to Bernard Vere for sharing the final draft manuscript of this project with me.

³² Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 4.

³³ See Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality and Drama* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

³⁴ Martin Puchner and Alan Ackerman, eds., *Against Theatre: Creative Destructions on the Modernist Stage* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 13.

³⁵ See Enda Duffy, *The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 126.

³⁶ See *Manchester Guardian*, March 7, 1933, 7.

³⁷ “Sheffield,” *Manchester Guardian*, March 16, 1933, 3.

³⁸ “Wrestling Contest, Sheffield (Death),” *Hansard*, March 20, 1933, 45–46.

³⁹ “All-In Wrestler’s Death,” *Manchester Guardian*, December 29, 1937.

⁴⁰ Professional wrestling has been tainted by deaths throughout its history, either deaths caused directly in a wrestling incident (e.g. Owen Hart falling from the top of the arena on to the ring in 1999 in Kansas City) or attributed to the concussions or medication taken for injuries (e.g. Chris Benoit’s murder/suicide in 2007). More often, wrestlers are forced to retire early, or die young.

⁴¹ “£200 for ‘Common Informer,’” *Manchester Guardian*, January 18, 1936, 9.

⁴² “Wrestling in Blackburn Hall,” *Manchester Guardian*, October 4, 1935, 12.

⁴³ During the infamous “Attitude Era,” the Parents Television Council (PTC) launched a campaign against the WWE, claiming that wrestling encouraged violence in children. Interestingly for my argument in this article, the WWE challenged the PTC in court after the latter convinced a number of companies to withdraw their ads during *WWE Smackdown!*. The PTC, the WWE alleged, fabricated stories about professional wrestling in order to substantiate their claims. The judge in the case used the PTC’s clearly false testimony as a reason for finding in the WWE’s favor. (“Judge Rejects Parents Television Council Motion to Dismiss Lawsuit,” *Company News*, corporate.wwe.com, May 24, 2001, corporate.wwe.com/news/company-news/2001/05-24-2001). The judge’s acknowledgement that the business of wrestling had been harmed by fabrications is a marked change from the accusations usually leveled at, using the WWE’s self-proclaimed moniker, “sports entertainment.”

⁴⁴ This is a tricky case to verify. In professional wrestling legal proceedings are often part of the storyline (e.g. Jerry Lawler vs. Andy Kaufmann in 1982, a feud that led to Kaufmann threatening to sue Lawler after the latter smacked him in the face on *The David Letterman Show*. The feud made the front page of the *New York Times*. It is such an iconic moment because fans did not know whether it was true or part of wrestling fiction.). Oakley mentions Meader in *Blue Blood on the Mat* as, first, his “English Manager” (100) and then as a referee in the mud wrestling match (127). There is no

suggestion of a falling out here and Meader is clearly very much part of the “game.” One can only speculate as to the legitimacy or otherwise of this court case.

⁴⁵ “‘Mat-Mauler’ Who Was Annoyed,” *Manchester Guardian*, March 4, 1938, 3. Reginsky’s case has two notable codas. In 1936 Reginsky’s brother Nicholas Raczynski Moore was found guilty of forgery and was given a sentence of 21 months imprisonment with hard labour. Newspaper reports mentioned Reginsky, under the headline “Wrestler in ‘Scene’”: apparently “Raginsky [sic] exclaimed: ‘You can’t do that. He is not guilty. He has not done it. I won’t have it. It is not justice, I tell you.’ A woman who had given evidence in the case took Raginsky [sic] by the arm and persuaded him to leave the Court. He was still protesting when the doors closed behind him” (“Protest Against Sentence,” *The Times*, March 7, 1936, 4). There is an underlying sense of violence here, accentuated by his express identity as a wrestler. In May 1939 he was found bankrupt. Again, he was described first and foremost as a “professional wrestler” (“A Professional Wrestler’s Affairs,” *The Times*, May 17, 1939, 4).

⁴⁶ In fact the second of these rules specifically says “No wrestling or hugging allowed,” setting up boxing as the legitimate pugilist sport against the more anarchic wrestling (*History of Boxing*, British Boxing Board of Control, bbbofc.com/content/history-boxing).

⁴⁷ Tom Harrisson and Charles Madge, *Britain by Mass-Observation* (1939, rpt; London: Cresset, 1986), 115.

⁴⁸ Robert Snape, “All-in wrestling in Inter-War Britain: Science and Spectacle in Mass Observation’s ‘Worktown,’” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 30, no. 12 (2013): 1418–35, 1425.

⁴⁹ “Wrestling,” *The Times*, October 23, 1931, 6.

⁵⁰ “All-In Wrestling on Sundays,” *Manchester Guardian*, January 16, 1936, 4.

⁵¹ Nicholas Sammond, “Glossary,” in *Steel Chair to the Head*, 343.

⁵² Steven Connor, *A Philosophy of Sport* (London: Reaktion, 2011), 171.

⁵³ “Judge on ‘Wolves’ and ‘Tigers’ of All-In Wrestling: Kicking ‘a little discourteous,’” *Manchester Guardian*, March 3, 1938, 13.

⁵⁴ Philip Auslander, *Liveness* (London: Routledge, 1999), 90.

⁵⁵ Robert Baden-Powell, *Scouting for Boys: The Original 1908 Edition* (New York: Dover, 2007), 14.

For more see Robert H. Macdonald, *Sons of the Empire: The Frontier and the Boy Scout Movement, 1890–1918* (Toronto, ON: Toronto University Press, 1996).

⁵⁶ Broderick Chow provides a thorough unpacking of this argument in “Work and Shoot: Professional Wrestling and Embodied Politics,” *Drama Review* 58, no. 2 (2014): 72–86. In this article he sets up the cooperation and collaboration of professional wrestling as an embodiment of friendship against the competitive labor economy of the professional wrestling business (and capitalist work in general).

⁵⁷ Broderick Chow, “Muscle Memory: Re-enacting the *fin-de-siecle* Strongman in Pro Wrestling,” in *Performance and Professional Wrestling*, 143–53, 152, emphasis in original. Professional wrestling has been read as potentially homoerotic throughout its history. As Patrice A. Oppliger puts it in *Wrestling and Hypermasculinity* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015), “Nowhere in the sports world is homoeroticism implied more than in professional wrestling” (97). As Oppliger notes, wrestlers have played on this—Ricki Starr, Gorgeous George, tagteam Billy and Chuck—while, simultaneously, promoters have reasserted a sense of athletic masculinity by often making these sort of characters “heels” (that is, “baddies”). Certainly, in its most famous modernist literary incarnation, wrestling exhibited a particular “erotohistoriography,” as Chow describes; in D. H. Lawrence’s 1920 *Women in Love* Rupert Birkin and Gerald Crich search for a remedy for their boredom. They “struggle together” and then stop and “discussed methods, they practiced grips and throws, they become accustomed to each other, to each other’s rhythm, they got a kind of mutual physical understanding. And then again they had a real struggle. They seemed to drive their white flesh deeper and deeper against each other, as if they would break into a oneness.” This scene (deeply visceral and visual, as illustrated by the controversial 1969 film version of this novel in which Oliver Reed and Alan Bates wrestle naked in front of the fire) illustrates many of the defining themes of the novel; it enacts the homoerotic tension between Gerald and Rupert, a prevailing sense of listlessness broken only by violence, and the instability of modern masculinity. Despite the prevailing queerness of wrestling, exemplified by Lawrence here, one woman spectator pointed to “All-In” as a chance to see “*real* men” (Litherland, “The Field and the Stage,” 139).

⁵⁸ See “Questions in the Commons,” *Manchester Guardian*, March 31, 1933, 3

⁵⁹ See “All-in Wrestling Banned,” *Manchester Guardian*, April 8, 1933, 7.

⁶⁰ “Women and ‘All-In’ Wrestling,” *The Times*, March 31, 1933, 7; “Wrestling Exhibitions (Women),” *Hansard*, March 30, 1933, 1160–61.

⁶¹ “Women’s All-In Wrestling: Contest Stopped,” *Manchester Guardian*, March 28, 1933, 2. Once again the comparison made here is between “All-In” wrestling and theatrical entertainment rather than sport.

⁶² “No Wrestling by Women,” *Manchester Guardian*, December 5, 1938, 15.

⁶³ Fiona Skillen, *Women, Sport and Modernity in Interwar Britain* (Bern, Germany: Peter Lang, 2003), 190. While women were generally permitted to participate in certain sports—tennis or cycling, for instance—other sports remained unsuitable. This is not, however, to say that women did not participate in these more “masculine” sports. For further information on women’s football history, for example, see Jean Williams, *A Game for Rough Girls* (London: Routledge, 2003) and Jean Williams, “‘The Girls of the Period Playing Ball’: The Hidden History of Women’s Football, 1869–2015,” John Hughson, Kevin Moore, Ramón Spaaij, and Joseph Maguire, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Football Studies* (London: Routledge, 2017), 40–49. In her article “Lacing Up the Gloves: Women, Boxing and Modernity,” *Cultural and Social History* 9, no. 3 (2012): 369–90, Irene Gammel also makes a strong case for women’s participation in boxing during the modernist period, either as fighters (Vicki Baum, The Gordon Sisters), spectators (Djuna Barnes), or as admirers of boxing as an aesthetic allegory (Mina Loy).

⁶⁴ See Lister, “A History of British Wrestling,” 224.

⁶⁵ For more on contemporary British wrestling see Carrie Dunn, *Spandex, Screw Jobs and Cheap Pops* (Brighton, UK: Pitch, 2013).

⁶⁶ “Foreign Policy,” *Hansard*, December 19, 1938, 2565.

⁶⁷ Donald Trump’s wrestling background is well known and recent journalism has begun to recognize the importance of wrestling as a method for comprehending current US politics. See Oliver Lee Bateman’s “Wrestling, Politics, and the Violent Realities of 2016: Reconsidering Masculinity, Reality, and Performance Post-Trump,” *Pacific Standard*, December 22, 2016, psmag.com/news/wrestling-politics-and-the-violent-realities-of-2016, which includes contributions from the three editors of *Performance and Professional Wrestling*.

⁶⁸ In 1887 Barnum, “Prince of Humbug,” hired Ed Decker as a side attraction, offering significant money to any brave volunteer who could pin the Vermont wrestler. Unsurprisingly Barnum managed to harness the financial power of wrestling.