Being Good at Playing Bad: Performance of the Heel in Professional Wrestling

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This dissertation titled

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Abstract

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Being Good at Playing Bad: Performance of the Heel in Professional Wrestling

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In this dissertation, I explored professional wrestling as a staple of popular culture, and questioned a phenomenon that is a driving force behind the industry. Specifically, I studied the role of the “bad guy” in professional wrestling, also referred to as the ”Heel.” After attending 12 live professional wrestling events and 20 in-depth qualitative interviews with professional wrestlers, this dissertation uses the lens of performance ethnography and theories of performance and identity to study the transactional nature of the performance of the Heel and audience feedback. This dissertation also explores how the performance is conducted physically as well as verbally.

Two major findings emerged from the course of this research. The first major finding shows that the type of character that each participant plays directly influences their verbal and nonverbal Heel behaviors, and each of these behaviors are done for a specific reaction from the audience. The second major finding illustrates that the connection between the performer and Heel performance derives from the creation of that character, vulnerability associated with Heel performance, and how Heel performance can result in catharsis.
Dedication

For everyone who has ever taken a bump for my entertainment.
Acknowledgments

I am lucky to have had such support throughout the process of completing this dissertation. I’d first like to thank and acknowledge my advisor for the entirety of my time at Ohio University, Dr. Christie Beck, for telling me to study what I loved. This project would not have been possible without her advice, guidance, and ever-present supportive smile. The rest of my committee has been invaluable. To Dr. Bates, I appreciate your open door, the constant unscheduled meetings that you submitted to over the last four years, and the model of collegiality you have provided. To Dr. Chawla, you quite simply and sincerely helped me find my voice as a scholar, and for that I can never thank you enough. Your encouragement has done more for my confidence as a writer than any mentor I’ve ever had. To Dr. Ciekawy, your encouragement and support from such an early stage in this research is more appreciated than I could express, and I hope to offer the same support to students outside of Communication Studies as you have offered to me.

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gray skies have hovered for too long, and for being simply irreplaceable. To Kristen, every phone call and text telling me to keep going came at just the right time, as expected. To Brea, thank you for always knowing what I needed even when I didn’t. To Jen and Lynnette, thank you for supporting in spirit and on every trek through New York on my way to or from a wrestling event. Tony and Dave, thank you making me laugh when I don’t want to, and even when I shouldn’t. To Ryan and Matt, thank you for keeping wrestling fun even when it threatened not to be. To Sean and Kerry, who helped keep me sane during the hardest times, thank you.

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Field Note
Binghamton, NY – Xcite Wrestling – 6/10/2016

I’m seated four rows from ringside, and oversized fans on either side of me are squeezing my shoulders. I’m doing my best to make myself as small as possible, yet keep my eyes trained on the action in front of me. I’m hunched forward to relieve some of the pressure from being sandwiched but carefully not encroaching on those in the third row. It’s a tight fit on all sides, the feet of folding chairs screech against the cement floor as each attendee tries to create more personal space in American Legion Post #80. This is where Xcite Wrestling is holding their latest independent professional wrestling event. The concession stand is open, and the line is long. The smell of nachos lingers all around me. No beer is being sold as this is an all ages event, but that hasn’t stopped a large group from drinking in the parking lot before the doors opened. The couple that is seated next to me for the duration of the show was pre-gaming, and every expelled breath that wafts my way carries a hint of Natty Light. I’ve been in this same position many times before, each time the venue changing slightly. An American Legion Post, a high school gymnasium, a converted rock club, and even an abandoned bingo hall have all housed a wrestling ring with folded chairs angled toward it.

I can’t think back to an age where I wasn’t watching professional wrestling regularly. My brother John was a fan, and being five years older, he rarely relinquished the remote control. There were regular verbal and physical disputes over what to watch during the week, but there was always agreement when it came to weekends. We would
spend Saturday and Sunday mornings in front of the television waiting for the hour of wrestling that would come on after cartoons. I would mimic his reactions to wrestling matches and outcomes before I was old enough to understand the stories being told. When I began to follow more closely, I would root against whoever my brother rooted for, a small sibling rebellion in the midst of common fandom. I would whine when I would hear an announcer recite a depressing phrase that led to the last set of commercials before closing credits; “promotional consideration paid for by the following.” My concentration would sharpen when ticket sale dates would be announced with corresponding venues, hoping to hear Buffalo, NY listed among the upcoming stops. The rest of the extended family knew about my obsession, making every birthday and Christmas gift an easy solution. Anything having to do with wrestling, and I’d be happy. One side of my shared bedroom was adorned with pictures cut from wrestling magazines and littered with action figures positioned in various wrestling holds.

I wrestled with older cousins, using couch cushions on the floor to create a makeshift-wrestling mat. I’d explain how the wrestlers did each of their moves and make them act it out. Sometimes, I was the one delivering the crushing elbow to their midsection just like “Macho Man” Randy Savage did, but, for the majority of the time, I was on the receiving end of these maneuvers. I got hurt more than a few times, but I could hide it well. I knew that, if I limped past my parents because of a particularly painful figure four leglock, I could say goodbye to any wrestling in the house, familial or televised. That was a risk I couldn’t take. I snuck wrestling magazines to school to show classmates, in hopes that one of them would share my enthusiasm. At the very least, I
hoped that I could peak someone’s interest, so I could have someone to talk about wrestling with throughout the entire school day. Some of my classmates recognized Hulk Hogan, Andre the Giant, and “Rowdy” Roddy Piper, but I’d see their interest fade as I started to explain the week-to-week episodic storylines that each of them were involved in. That sense of shared fandom was one that I craved throughout the day, and it’s ironic that I use those memories to distract myself from my cramped surroundings. I’m surrounded by those who share my fandom of professional wrestling, but I’m not speaking to any of them. Our acceptance of discomfort through attendance is proof positive of our shared interests, and words aren’t necessary. The lights start to flicker; the squeaks of chairs harmonize as everyone turns in the same direction toward the ring, and a nattily dressed ring announcer steps through the ropes with a microphone in his hand to reveal the opening match of the evening. Our common orientation toward the empty wrestling ring prepares us for engagement. The show is about to start.
The industry of professional wrestling has proven to be a part of popular culture across generations, regardless of the ways in which it was presented. Whether it was a stalwart attraction at carnivals in the early 1900s, broadcast on all major networks during the popularization of television in the 1950s, or drawing crowds of close to 100,000 spectators in a single event in 2015, professional wrestling has established itself as an indelible part of popular culture.

The world of professional wrestling is character driven, with pre-determined outcomes and planned storylines to draw reactions from the live audience (Shoemaker, 2013). The roles played by performers are dynamic and complex, and each wrestler accepts the responsibility to safely work in concert with another performer, all while being attentive and responsive to audience feedback. The two traditional roles that will be
played are the role of the protagonist, or good guy, referred to in wrestling parlance as the “babyface” or “Face,” and the antagonist, or bad guy, referred to traditionally as the “Heel.” The role of the Heel is a longstanding tradition, dating back to the first days of choreographed matches and predetermined outcomes. Roland Barthes’ (1972) examination of the world of professional wrestling in *Mythologies* explained the connection of these characters with the audience, “What the public wants is the image of passion, not passion itself. There is no more a problem of truth in wrestling than in theatre. In both, what is expected is the intelligible representation of moral situations which are usually private” (p. 18). The performance of the roles of hero and villain must be maintained to engage the audience fully, and the greater a connection that a performer can have with an audience, then the more involved and entertained those watching will be.

As a child watching professional wrestling, I could never understand why I was more excited when villains would appear on the television screen as opposed to the flag-waving, good-looking, smiling heroes. I was always intrigued by “Mr. Perfect” Curt Hennig, Ravishing Rick Rude, Ric Flair, “Rowdy” Roddy Piper, and Arn Anderson. They were the bad guys, week after week. I hated them and always wanted them to lose. They’d have long matches in the middle of the show, battling with a crowd favorite, and invariably winning. The use of a foreign object, an eye poke, or the illegal pulling of the tights while pinning an opponent were all common tactics among them. They competed devoid of sportsmanship, and cheating to win at all costs was the norm. They were good at their jobs. I rooted against them with more zeal than I rooted for anyone else. I can
watch now as a critical fan, a smart fan, and an educated fan. The performance is as subtle as it is oversized. The combination of facial expression, crowd interaction, and athleticism were all ways to enhance storytelling. It could be condensed to a match for a few minutes or drawn out for months during extended feuds with other performers. Heels strive to draw a reaction from the crowd, to be hated, and my excitement seeing them was borne from that. I wanted to see them lose, no matter who was across the ring. I wanted the opportunity to speak with them. I wanted to ask how they were able to bring that out of a child while doing the same for adults in the front row.

**Professional Wrestling Performance and Stage**

The performance of professional wrestling requires components that are constants regardless of the relative size of the show. The requirements include the ring as a stage, a hidden backstage, an entranceway, the performers in myriad roles, and audience.

A wrestling ring is similar to a boxing ring in shape, but the size can vary. Typically, a wrestling ring is 20 feet long by 20 feet wide square, with a steel frame supporting a wooden elevated stage that raises performers three feet from the ground. That wooden stage is covered with a layer of foam padding, no thicker than one-inch, and then covered by a heavy canvas. The corners of the square stage are marked with steel posts, which provide support, and also serve as anchors for ring ropes. The ring ropes are three parallel steel cables wrapped in gaffer tape, which surround the entire ring, and are connected at each corner post with turnbuckles. Those turnbuckles are covered with padding to protect the performers who come in contact with them. The skirting around
the ring is typically emblazoned with the logo of the wrestling promotion hosting the event.

Prior to entering the wrestling ring, the wrestlers must come to the event while in character. They do so through an entranceway that is typically adorned with black stage curtains. As each wrestler is introduced prior to the match, s/he will emerge from this entranceway, while specially selected entrance music is played over a sound system. The entranceway leads down a dedicated aisle lined on either side by fans, separated from the performers by steel guardrails. That barrier extends from the entranceway around the entire wrestling ring, keeping fans approximately 6-10 feet from the actual ring itself.
Performers making their entrance either enter the ring directly or circle the perimeter of the ring, interactive with audience members seated ringside.

![Image](image.jpg)

*Figure 3. 2CW Ring, Barricade, Entrance. (Granelli, 2015b)*

Live professional wrestling requires a defined backstage area separate from the ring. This area separated from the spectators is where performers can ready their characters in terms of performance and appearance. In this backstage area, event promoters make decisions about the outcomes of matches, and subsequently performers working in the ring together will use this area to discuss how to work together to produce the most entertaining match for the audience. This backstage area must remain hidden from the audience as to maintain the aura of realism and pure competition on which professional wrestling is based.
The promoter of the event determines roles that each performer plays in the backstage area prior to the match, in service of the story that will be told in the ring. At the very least, three performers participate in each wrestling match, the two wrestlers and a referee. Each performer’s role, either Heel or Face, defines behavior throughout the match. While the event promoter assigns these roles prior to the match, their performance begins the instant that the audience sees the performer. The role that the performer is playing dictates the entrance through the curtains, appearance, gait to the wrestling ring, and interaction with fans prior to entering the ring. When the Face emerges through the entranceway, fans are typically greeted with a smile and a high-energy jog along the barrier that surrounds the ring. Fans seated ringside typically respond by holding out their hands for a high-five as the Face passes by. Conversely, when the Heel appears in the entranceway, his visage could be twisted into a scowl, eyeing the fans surrounding the ring with disdain. Any interaction with the fans works to draw a negative response, also known as “heat” in professional wrestling terms.

The third performer in the ring is the referee, who serves as the rule of order in the ring. The referee’s main responsibility in the eyes of the audience is to count a pinfall, which would signal the end of the match. When one wrestler pins the others’ shoulders to the mat, the referee drops to the canvas and slaps the mat to begin counting the pinfall. If the referee’s hand slaps the mat on the third count, the match is over. The referee can also stop the match due to a submission, when one wrestler gives up or taps out, due to a painful hold that their opponent has them trapped in. While the referee serves a utilitarian purpose to the end of the match, during the match, the referee becomes integral to
assisting both the Face and Heel play their respective roles. The referee can be perceived by the audiences as responsible for enforcing the rules of behavior that have been set by the professional wrestling promotion. Those rules could include no closed fist punches, no eye gouging, no low blows, and when your opponent reaches the ropes, that necessitates a clean break. The referee’s performance impacts the interplay with the Heel most, as this character traditionally breaks these rules to gain an advantage over his opponent. This malfeasance is apparent to the gathered audience, but artfully hidden from the eyes of the referee. This combination adds to the level of heat the Heel can build with the audience.

While I have used the structure of a single one-on-one match most thus far, many different types of match permutations and stipulations exist. Tag-team wrestling is more complex, and it involves two teams of two wrestlers apiece. In this instance, one partner must stand on the ring apron just outside the ropes until he is tagged into the match by his partner. The same roles are typically enacted, where one team plays the role of Face and the other Heel. Stipulations could be added to a match to change the rules, such as a no-disqualification match, where there are no holds barred. A popular match in smaller venues is a falls count anywhere match; opponents can pin each other anywhere in the building, instead of just inside the ring. Regardless of the match type or stipulation, the roles of Heel and Face must be performed well to engage the gathered audience.

This dissertation takes both the stage of professional wrestling and the wrestlers within as rich areas to study the intersection between performance and identity through the lens of performance ethnography. The performance of the Heel in professional
wrestling serves as the focal point for this dissertation, and builds upon prior research done in the field to better understand the ways in which performance is created, conducted, and related to each performers individual identity.

**Preview of Chapters**

Chapter Two reviews the literature relevant to this research in four different areas; professional wrestling research, tracing the evolution of the Heel as a character archetype in professional wrestling, professional wrestling as a context for research using performance studies, and studies of fandom in professional wrestling. Chapter Two concludes by identifying research questions centered on the transactional nature between extemporaneous performance and audience feedback.

Chapter Three outlines and provides a rationale for my methodology of performance ethnography for exploring the performance of the Heel character in professional wrestling and describe my processes for data collection and analysis.

Chapter Four explores the verbal and nonverbal behaviors that make up the performance of a Heel, and how those behaviors are directed at eliciting a response from the audience.

Chapter Five discusses how the creation of a Heel character is influenced by each performer’s personality, how the performance imbues a unique vulnerability on each wrestler, and the how performing as a Heel can function as catharsis.

Chapter Six summarizes the research by re-addressing my research questions, identifies limitations, and suggests directions for future research.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

FIELD NOTE

Binghamton NY – Xcite Wrestling School – 6/10/2016

“im right by the legion, you around?”

“parked just about a half block down the street”

I drove 10 hours to wait. Sitting in my car down the street from American Legion Post #80 in Binghamton, NY, the engine is still running to keep air conditioning at full blast. Half of the sweat running down my neck is from heat, the other half from nerves. I’m not opposed to getting to wrestling shows early, but this was the first time I’ve ever been six hours early. I’ve already texted Marc Hauss that I’m at the venue, about 15 minutes ahead of the time we planned to meet. He’s not responding. I’ve been told that I shouldn’t just walk into the building unaccompanied, that he’ll walk me in, but he’s not responding. 1:10, 1:15, 1:20, 1:25, still sitting, still waiting, still sweating. I clutch my phone tightly in my hand waiting for the sign to head toward the building and be allowed entry. Each minute that flips upward on my radio display multiplies my anxiety that my backstage perspective Marc has promised is slipping away. Should I have confirmed what time I was arriving? Is this my fault? Maybe I should just stand by the back door and someone will take pity on, wait, there it is!

“oh wow sorry man I was in the ring! Come to the red door and sleazy will let you in”

Where’s the red door? What’s a sleazy? Even after waiting for 20 minutes, I’m completely unprepared. All at once, I’m out of the car and walking, so quickly I have to
go back to retrieve my phone, which was the most important part of my life a moment ago. The half-block is eaten up in moments, and I’m instantly rewarded with a heavy red door with blackout curtains obscuring the window panel. I have to take a moment, take a few breaths before walking into a different world, maybe psyche myself up with an internal pep talk that each of these moving parts will work together into a coherent experience. Halfway through my first inhale the door flies open, and I now know what a sleazy is.

“Are you Marc’s friend? The teacher? He’s waiting for you in the ring.”

Sleazy is holding the door for me, as wide as he is tall, leaning on a cane. Exchanging a handshake and thanks with Sleazy, I slide through the door sideways. The ring is all I can see. It fills up the entire frame of sight, and each piece seems larger and more present than it’s ever been. Marc is in the ring on all fours, two others in the same position opposite him. Marc’s instruct them to lean on their right elbow, while putting their legs in a runners stance. In one smooth motion, Marc pushes off of his bent leg and somersaults into a standing position, where he turns 180 degrees with fists raised in a fighting stance. One trainee mimics Marc’s motion with less grace but the same end result, while the other’s somersault loses momentum halfway through, spilling him to the side. As Marc circles to help him up, he catches a glimpse of me just a few feet inside the door, and motions me toward the ring.

“I’ll hold your shoes.”

Sleazy is behind me with his hands out, and I’m not sure why he wants to hold my sneakers. Then I realize what Marc was saying as he was calling me forward. He was
asking me to get in the ring. I’m putting it all together now; you don’t wear sneakers in a wrestling ring, especially if you’ve just come from outside. I wasn’t expecting to get in the ring today; I just wanted to hang out backstage before the show, interview some of the wrestlers that I’ve made contact with, and observe their behavior during the show. I’m not ready to step foot in a ring, I’m not mentally prepared for this turn of events, yet this is happening. My shoes slip off, and Sleazy asks for my watch, phone, bag, and everything in my pockets. I hand him everything wordlessly and start to panic all over again. There aren’t any steps that lead up to the ring, so I hop up to the ring apron, using my knee as a fulcrum while I pull myself upright. The only thing that’s separating me from stepping in the wrestling ring are the ropes. I know the etiquette of getting in and out of the ring even though I’ve never done it. It’s only acceptable to climb through the top and second rope. Bending down and sliding through the middle and bottom rope is cause for mockery, as that is how female valets traditionally enter the ring. I already feel out of place and like I don’t belong; I want to minimize any other differences between the actual wrestlers and myself. If I look like I belong, maybe they won’t be able to hear the screaming insecurity.

“Hop in man! Good to see you!”

No more stalling, time to put into motion what I’ve heard but never tried. Remembering the smooth motions that Marc just displayed, I know what I have to do. Raise, swing, bend, stand, raise, swing, stand. As I stand on the apron, my back straightens, and I raise my right leg 90 degrees, and I swing it through the top and middle rope. As I lower my right leg looking for the canvas, I bend at the waist to bring my torso
through the top and middle rope. I know what the next step is. I’m supposed to stand on my right leg and repeat the process with the left. However, I’m realizing now that the person who gave me the directions on how to properly enter a ring is roughly a foot taller than me, and he would not experience the trouble I’m having now. My right leg doesn’t reach the canvas. Although my leg and torso are in the ring, I’m hung up with the middle rope embedded in my crotch. I’m suspended in the air for what seems like an eternity, and might as well have been. I can feel Marc, Sleazy, the trainees, and every wrestler who’s ever entered the ring correctly judging me. I lean more to the right, sacrificing any sense of symmetry for stable footing, and finally feel a toe touch the ring mat. That contact is enough to trust my balance, and, in one motion, I drag my left leg through the rope. Instinctively I turn my back to those in the ring, needing an adjustment before I can fully face my embarrassment. I turn back to Marc, who’s ready to acknowledge and dismiss my mortification. He approaches me quickly with arms out, and I’m welcomed with a standard bro-hug.

“Ropes here are way too high man, I’ve been bitching about it for years. Sorry I didn’t have my phone on, training the newbies. What’s this paper about?”

**Literature Review**

In this chapter, I intend to outline the foundational literature that led to this study. I identify prior research in professional wrestling, the evolution of the Heel in professional wrestling, performance in professional wrestling, and fandom in professional wrestling. This literature establishes professional wrestling as a fruitful site for study and identifies prior connections between professional wrestling and performance studies, and
it informs the chosen methodology for this research. Through an accounting of past literature on the subject of professional wrestling, I situate this dissertation as a useful addition to the scholarship in the subject area.

**Professional Wrestling Research**

While professional wrestling has been a focus of scholarly research in the past, the research has largely been explanatory in nature, situating this form of entertainment among popular culture, sport, and performance. Barthes (1972) explained the interplay between performer and audience and defined the roles played by in-ring performers as functioning to entice crowds. Barthes argued that there must be a perceived injustice done by one of the performers through cheating or foul play to then draw the crowd in, hoping for that injustice to be addressed properly and the violator of the rules to be punished.

In her examination of the world of professional wrestling, Mazer (1998) contended “For the fans, not only are the stories that are told to them in the ongoing professional wrestling narratives drawn from life, life itself can be read through the structures and understandings that professional wrestling provides” (p. 4). Mazer’s research most closely mirrors this dissertation. While embedded in Gleason’s Gym for months observing the “Unpredictable Johnny Rodz School of Professional Wrestling” and engaging in-depth interviews with the trainers and students of the school, Mazer researched the performance of professional wrestling from a backstage perspective. Mazer emphasized the difference between performer and character, and the blurring of the lines between the two becomes a “data point” that is prevalent throughout her work. Mazer’s work provides the terminology that both wrestlers and wrestling fans use to
describe the roles of protagonist and antagonist. Through interviews with professional wrestlers who help outline the backstage glossary of terms that are used to describe the predetermined characters played by professional wrestlers, she referred to the protagonist as the “Babyface” and the antagonist as the “Heel” (p. 11).

Laurence deGaris (1999), a former wrestler turned scholar, identified the challenges that Mazer faced as an ethnographer in a closely guarded industry and questioned the metaphors that Mazer chose in her writing. deGaris was a wrestler who was present at Gleason’s Gym for the duration of Mazer’s research and served as one of her interview participants. deGaris recounted scenes from Mazer’s book that were staged by the wrestlers at the school, as well as instances during interviews when he “flat out lied to her” in order to maintain an illusion about the protected world of professional wrestling. While endorsing much of what Mazer found during her time as a researcher, deGaris also questioned some of her findings. deGaris’ contestation of Mazer’s work was based in her positionality as an outsider and non-fan of professional wrestling who wasn’t aware of the ways performers manage their in-ring characters even while outside the ring. Building from the experiences of Mazer and deGaris, this dissertation uses in-depth interviews to explore the relationship between performer and character. Whereas Mazer did not account for the embodied nature of character during the interview process and her observation, I focus on both roles with knowledge of their co-existence.

deGaris’ (2005) later research also focused on placing the action of professional wrestling in the industry of professional wrestling, separating out the physical work of the performers in the ring through storytelling with the largesse of the company in terms of
television production, merchandising, and marketability of the product. Smith’s (2008b) work on professional wrestling results from years of ethnographic research in the industry. Smith explored the presentation of the body in the ring. Based on participant observation at a wrestling training school and qualitative interviews that mirror Mazer’s approach, Smith outlined emotional labor as jointly engaged in with the audience in order to build a connection, whether it be positive or negative. Smith (2008a) also depicted how the performers use their bodies to display pain in a believable manner to audiences as a means of storytelling, while avoiding injury. Smith’s research primarily traces the motivations that compel performers to become professional wrestlers, comparing their journey to his own, the projection of masculinity and homoeroticism, and the bodily pain associated with the craft. Expanding upon the work of Mazer, deGaris, and Smith, I explore the performance of specific roles within professional wrestling and the relationship of that performance on each individual participant.

Extending from a content analysis of wrestling programs from 1983-2000, Atkinson (2002) argued that the popularity of professional wrestling is based in the presentation of struggle between performers as violent, sporting, and exciting. Maguire (2005) performed a qualitative analysis on the WWE’s flagship show during one of professional wrestling’s highpoints in terms of television ratings, 1998-2001. Maguire found that common themes of excitement, intrigue, and political incorrectness are the core of the show. Maguire argued that the sociological influences of community breakdown, social disenchantment, and political correctness are the reasons for the above themes being marketable to a wide audience. Sammond (2005) used content analysis to
examine the criticisms levied against the presentation of professional wrestling during the same time period as Maguire. The charges against professional wrestling centered on the perception that the television program produced would have a negative influence on children. Sammond observed how the changing industry of professional wrestling developed an older and more mature audience, and misconceptions on the intended audience were the cause for the criticism. Following Sammond’s observations, we can see that, from the time period Maguire’s analysis focused on wrestling audiences to the time period studied by Sammond, wrestling fans have developed different sensibilities. In this dissertation, I address how the role of the Heel has modified to meet the needs of a changing audience.

MacFarlane’s (2012) examination of storytelling in the ring during a professional wrestling match identifies the steps of the physical presentation of narrative for a viewing audience. Through a lens of poetics, MacFarlane noted the dramatic turns in performance that draw the audience into the narrative that is taking place in the ring, but stops short of examining storylines than span long periods of time or have out-of-ring components to them. Longer term storylines in WWE programming comprise the focus of research for Barrett and Levin (2014), who used a grounded theory approach to examine fifty-two episodes of WWE Monday Night Raw, in order to see how romantic relationships were represented in professional wrestling. Barrett and Levin found multiple heterosexual romance narratives, no homosexual romance narratives, and a common theme of reinforcing traditional gender types, with some exceptions to those traditional types still representing a hegemonic masculinity or femininity, but a behavior (such a the retaliation
of a woman scorned) is played to extremes. From the foundation of this research, I consider the ways in which the Heel character embodies or deviates from traditional roles and how these roles are ultimately communicated to a gathered audience.

Shoemaker (2013) traced a litany of important figures throughout the wrestling industry, providing context to each era’s defining performers, arguing that, without a bad guy in the ring, the story of the match holds much less of a chance of creating a connection with the crowd. Shoemaker identified the importance of giving the audience a performance that they can react to by creating the illusion of an injustice done by the Heel which must be addressed by the Face. The ability of the audience to follow the story of injustice, while simultaneously accepting that what they are watching is pre-determined, suggests an ability to be entertained by the effective presentation of characters and less with the specific roles they are playing. Mueller and Sutherland’s (2010) analysis of the presentation of heroes and villains in competitive sports show comparative motivations for those audiences as well. Mueller and Sutherland asserted:

The conflict of humans as experienced through relationships is easily and logically framed within the context of sport, where athletes can readily adapt to the roles of heroes and villains. Accordingly, fans are thus attracted to the familiarity of that type of storyline and can easily relate to the classic argument of good in an epic battle with evil, or the weak versus the strong. (p. 21)

This research served as a frame of reference and basis for understanding the history of the industry and informed my ability to observe each participant portraying the role of Heel as a member of the audience.
Tracing The Evolution of The Heel

The importance of the Heel in professional wrestling is rooted in the ability to draw a reaction from the audience and create a desire to see an injustice rectified. As Barthes (1972) stated when explaining the roles played by performers in professional wrestling, “but what wrestling is above all meant to portray is a purely moral concept: that of justice. The idea of ‘paying’ is essential to wrestling, and the crowd’s ‘Give it to him’ means above all else ‘make him pay’” (p. 21). As Oliver and Johnson (2007) stated when articulating the role of the Heel, “they have to keep the business in the black by inducing fans to come back week after week to see justice in action – a sort of psychological ploy that for years served as wrestling’s underpinning” (p. 5).

When tracing the role of the Heel through the scripted performance of professional wrestling as it still exists today, one influential figure illustrated the ability to influence large audiences and, in turn, the entire wrestling industry through a compelling performance. The career of Gorgeous George, formerly known as George Wagner, was predicated on his ability to antagonize audiences. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Gorgeous George traveled the country as a professional wrestling attraction, and putting into practice a spectacle meant to draw the ire of crowds. As explained by Capouya (2008), the transformation from George Wagner to Gorgeous George began when Gorgeous George dyed his hair blonde. On his entrance to the ring, he began to wear elegant robes and demanded that he be introduced as "The Human Orchid." He used entrance music, refusing to walk to the ring without the sounds of “Pomp and Circumstance.” George was followed by his valet, a man he referred to as “Jeffries,” and
a purple spotlight. Jeffries carried a silver mirror pointed at George while spreading rose petals at George’s feet. While George removed his robe, Jeffries sprayed the ring with disinfectant before he would start wrestling. Capouya explained the George’s intended impact on crowds:

He made a spectacle of himself when that word was still a term of disapproval. The strutting showman shouted “Look at me!” with his whole being, issuing an irresistible invitation to share in his self-infatuation—or to condemn him for it…He was an avatar of conspicuous consumption well before that term became cliché, spending and showing off wildly in a country just coming out of wartime rationing. (p. 7)

Gorgeous George’s impact on popular culture was emboldened by the presence of professional wrestling on television. While drawing large live crowds, in arenas Gorgeous George was also serving as a driving force for professional wrestling’s viability on television. *Entertainment Weekly* named George’s first appearance on television on Nov. 11, 1947 as one of The 100 Greatest Moments in Television, ranked at forty-fifth on the list. In describing the event, Tucker (1999) wrote:

Who knew a bottle of peroxide and a trunk full of attitude would change pro wrestling — and TV — history? When the former George Wagner transformed himself into the girly-man fans loved to hate (he walked a path of rose petals to the ring), “he became,” says Mike Tenay, cohost of TNT’s *WCW Monday Nitro*, ”the sport’s first crossover personality.” By the late ’40s, wrestling (one of the few spectator sports unsophisticated cameras could successfully capture) was
often a nightly TV event, and flamboyant George was like programming manna from heaven. (p. 1)

Having traced the popularity of televised professional wrestling, David Shoemaker (2013) stated, “By the early 50s, Thursday and Saturday night pro-wrestling were two of the top shows on DuMont and a certified national phenomenon...guys like despicable pretty boy Gorgeous George were among the biggest sports stars in the nation” (p. 40).

Shoemaker also noted:

It perhaps goes without saying, but Gorgeous George was the first crossover superstar of pro wrestling, and a case can be made that he was the first true crossover superstar of an sport in America. He wasn’t just a television wrestling phenomenon; he was a television phenomenon. (p. 51)

One of Gorgeous George’s biggest fans was a young Muhammad Ali, who credited George’s ability to draw crowds as influencing his own style of promotion. Capouya (2008) quoted Ali:

When he got to the ring, everyone booed, oh, everybody just boooed him. I looked around and I saw everybody was mad. I was mad! I saw 15,000 people coming to see this man get beat, and his talking did it. And I said, “This is a gooood idea.” (p. 246)

Inside the ring, George engaged in the same style tactics of the other Heels of his era, as he cheated in any way that he could to gain an advantage over the opponent, drawing heat from the audience with each rule-breaking act. The genius of Gorgeous George was the sustainability of a character that could be universally loathed and made
the audience desirous of punishment over an extended period of time. His opulence toyed with the anxiety of a country emerging from the Great Depression. His effeminate nature challenged gender roles, and his performance in the ring showed a blatant disrespect for the rules of professional wrestling. If the goal of the heel is, as Oliver and Johnson (2007) stated, to keep the industry viable by enticing fans to continually tune in to hopefully see that character receive their long awaited comeuppance, then Gorgeous George set the standard that has been followed for decades.

Figure 4. Gorgeous George (cagesideseats.com, 2014)

Morton and O’Brien (1985) explored storylines between a protagonist and antagonist that are based in nationalism, showing how the feud between performers
Hacksaw Jim Duggan and Yokozuna resulted in the audience delighting in the excessive patriotism of the ring hero. Mondak (1989) considered the characters that drove conflict between perceived good and evil during wrestling’s popularity in the 1930s, 1950s, and 1980s. Mondak identified the use of a patriotic American protagonist and an evil foreign antagonist as present in each of those eras, and attributes nationalism to the success of the wrestling industry. Campbell (1996) looked at the relationship between the performers and the audience, using material published by wrestling promotions for fans as reinforcement of the characters played in the ring, whether they are the patriotic protagonist or the foreign antagonist. Campbell found that the “bad guy” must continually win to remain relevant and to keep the audience desirous of their punishment. Rickard (1999) traced the popularity of professional wrestling in Australia, identifying the transition from a competitive sport to a predetermined performance as reliant on the portrayal of the protagonist and antagonist to the audience. Rickard showed that the engagement of the audience in a morality play of good versus evil was necessary for the sport to evolve to a mix of sport and performance.

The importance of the Heel in the industry of professional wrestling has been discussed by Oliver and Johnson (2007), using exemplars throughout the history of professional wrestling dating back to the turn of the century. As Oliver and Johnson stated, “they have to keep the business in the black by inducing fans to come back week after week to see justice in action – a sort of psychological ploy that for years served as wrestling’s underpinning” (p. 5).
Oliver and Johnson’s (2007) expansive accounting of Heels throughout the course of professional wrestling history established categories such as egoists, monsters, connivers, tough guys, and foreigners, all aiming to serve the same function that Gorgeous George did. Through interviews with journalists, performers, and historians of professional wrestling, Oliver and Johnson identified important figures playing the role of the Heel and asserted that, by exploiting the morality play that professional wrestling presents itself as, the good cannot exist without evil, and the effective performance of evil will drive audiences to support the next protagonist that steps through the curtain, regardless of who they are.

Research on the role of the Heel has identified those who have shaped effective performance of the role and provided a basis for current performance. This scholarship has contributed to a working knowledge of the industry from the perspective of professional wrestlers as well as audience members. Building on the foundation of this research, I collected first-hand accounts from professional wrestlers articulating the machinations of being a Heel and how that performance impacts each of them, expanding the scope of research to include the process and perspective of those who embody the role of the Heel.

**Performance and Professional Wrestling**

The examination of professional wrestling in prior research from a theatre and performance studies perspective has provided an expansion of the academic lens that is focused on the industry. Chow, Laine, and Warden (2017) explored how to situate professional wrestling within theater and performance studies:
Professional wrestling’s refusal to accept easy demarcation extends and augments the ideas of liminality so intrinsic to performance studies as a discipline…despite the fact that wrestling is so clearly theatre, there is also something in it that is more than theatre; that goes beyond the purely representational, demonstrating the impossibility of a pure theatricality. (p. 4)

Chow et al. identified the audience as an importance figure in the study of professional wrestling, as they function as an active audience that is “particularly adept at not only parsing the theatrical aspects from performance, but perhaps more interestingly, are very capable at holding then in mind at the same time” (p. 4). Ezell (2017) also examined the role of the audience in professional wrestling as necessary to understanding the portrayal of characters. Ezell posited that the tailoring of a professional wrestler’s performance to a specific audience was changing in an era of televised professional wrestling, as the focus shifts from engaging only live audiences to now attempting to entertain both live and television audiences (p. 14).

Building from this exploration of audience interaction in professional wrestling, Di Benedetto (2017) envisions the relationship between the performers and audience as an exercise in play through call and response. Di Benedetto stated that “the event sets the scene for active playful engagement for the purposes of generating visceral responses to the action in the ring and beyond as well as inviting active participation by the attendants” (p. 26). The co-created nature of the performance of professional wrestling is central to the portrayal of characters that can garner a reaction from audiences. Relying
on prior research of the interaction between professional wrestlers and audiences, this dissertation extends the exploration of that relationship from both perspectives.

Hadley (2017) illustrated one aspect of performance in professional wrestling, identifying some ways pain is portrayed to audiences. Hadley builds from his own experience as a “performer, teacher, promoter, writer, and television producer” to provide background and insight into the ways in which pain is communicated to both live and television audiences (p. 154). Through participant observation and interview, Hadley identified the performance of real and simulated pain in professional wrestling as dependent on audience connection. The identification of this singular aspect of professional wrestling as a site for explanation informs the depth of focus for this dissertation.

**Fandom and Professional Wrestling**

My position as a fan of professional wrestling, while simultaneously examining the performances within it, is educated by prior research into fandom. The label “fan” may bring to mind compulsive behaviors, attitudes and habits (such as collecting action figures and costumes), embodying fictional characters and/or inhabiting fictional universes. Jenkins (2002) reminded readers that the word itself – “fan” – stems from the Latin “‘fanaticus’… which quickly assumed the negative connotation ‘of persons inspired by orgiastic rites and enthusiastic frenzy’” (p. 12). Jenkins emphasized the importance of fan cultures as an area of study, as they represent unique readers of popular culture texts.

Cavicchi’s (1998) study of Bruce Springsteen fans focused on description of fans attending live concerts, and ultimately identified fandom as a continual process of
identity management. Cavicchi’s contribution identified the dynamic performance of fandom while the label of fan remains static. Hills (2002) discussed an approach to fandom that references the performative nature of the label, asserting, “I want to suggest that fandom is not simply a ‘thing’ that can be picked over analytically. It is also always performative; by which I mean that it is an identity which is (dis-)claimed, and which performs cultural work” (p. x). Hills’ approach identified the tension between fan and researcher, and outlined how academic work on popular culture text can be ultimately informed by fan perspective, and the perceived split between the two identities could prove problematic. Being aware of and negotiating those simultaneous identities allowed me the to share a similar role complexity with my participants in this dissertation.

Identifying as a fan and researcher simultaneously as a benefit to my potential reading of text is informed further by Sandvoss’ (2005) arguments about processes of self-reflection in fandom. Sandvoss explored the intertwined nature of presented and ideal self, and developed a model of fandom based on self-reflection between and fan and object of fandom. In this way, the fan text can be seen as a mirror through which the fan’s recognition and readings are molded. The identification of the influence of that mirror on self-presentation is one that, when recognized, can be another point of inquiry. As Gray Sandvoss, and Harrington (2007) explained, “the field of fan studies has become increasingly diverse in conceptual, theoretical, and methodological terms, and has broadened the scope of its inquiry on both ends of the spectrum between self and society” (p. 8).
The work of McBride and Bird (2007) combined the world of professional wrestling with fandom, with a focus on “backyard wrestling” federations in early 2000. McBride and Bird categorized professional wrestling fans as “smarts” and “marks,” or those who are aware of the scripted nature of professional wrestling and those who are not. McBride and Bird stated that “a mass-mediated cultural phenomenon such as wrestling is sustained by the interaction of physical, productive practices within the context of a socially learned aesthetic” (p. 176). The study of fandom and world of professional wrestling functions here to differentiate and categorize types of fans. I examine the co-dependent relationship between the fan and the performer when constructing the performance of a Heel character in my dissertation.

Throughout this chapter, I have outlined the scholarly research in the area of professional wrestling, work that has traced the development of the Heel throughout history, professional wrestling scholarship through a performance lens, and studies into the fan’s relationship to professional wrestling. Professional wrestling is a rich site for scholarly research, as prior literature indicates. This dissertation moves to trace what has been proven to be an important role in the industry of professional wrestling, the role of the Heel. As I will detail later, I explore the transactional nature between the extemporaneous performance and audience feedback, as well as how the performance is conducted physically as well as verbally, guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How is the role of the Heel performed in professional wrestling?

RQ1b: Does playing the role of Heel differ from the role of Babyface in professional wrestling? If so, how?
RQ2: Do the personal identities of the performers and the requirements of playing the role of Heel impact each other? If so, how?

RQ3: Does audience response impact the performance of the role of Heel in professional wrestling? If so, how?

The research questions above drove the choice of methodology, collection, and analysis of data. As I proceed in answering these questions, Chapter Three describes performance ethnography as an appropriate method of study in professional wrestling, articulates the specifics of data collection, and explains the process of data analysis. A discussion of my positionality as a fan of professional wrestling also contributes to an understanding of the field and my role as a researcher within it.
Chapter 3: Methods

Field Note

Location redacted – Professional wrestling training academy – Summer 2016

The ring feels harder than it should. When I think of the foam and a slight spring with each step taken inside the squared circle, I get excited, like the surface is made for play. As I’m feeling it now, it’s for work, and it’s much less forgiving. I’m standing in the corner with arms propped up on the top ropes, back resting against the turnbuckle, awaiting instructions. My trainer has told me that I’m only going to take one or two bumps, and I can run the ropes if I want. He would have me do more, but their printer is out of ink. Without any extra copies of the standard liability release form all new trainees need to sign, I’ve agreed to not identify what ring I’m standing in or who my trainer is.

“Bend at the knees like you’re doing a squat, get as low as you would if you were sitting in an invisible chair, and grab a hold of the middle rope.”

An audible pop comes from my left knee as I bend into position, a not-so-subtle reminder that I’m far too brittle to consider this a future career path. I hope no one else heard, the last thing I need is a reason to stop what little training I’m about to receive. I reach for the middle rope, but I’m too far away. I take a couple awkward duck walk steps forward and curl my fingers around the duct-tape coated steel cables. I can feel a single stray thread poking through and pressing into my palm, short of breaking the skin. If I was anywhere else in the world, I’d yelp and check the damage, but, for now, I can just hope I won’t have to hold on for long. I’m settled into my stance, seated in the air, steadied on the middle rope, and waiting for my next instruction.
“Ok, now tuck your chin to your chest as hard as you can and keep it there. Don’t take your chin from your chest or you’ll hit your head. You’re going to throw yourself onto your back as flat as you can. Lean way back while holding onto the rope, and when you’re ready, let go. Don’t land on your ass, don’t land on your head, don’t put your hands back to brace your fall, land on your back. Think of it like you’re doing a trust fall, and the mat will catch you.”

That was too much information with this thread poking into my palm. Tuck my chin, that sounded the most important, and fall back. What’s an acceptable amount of time to wait? Five seconds, I shouldn’t wait longer than that. My arms are stretched out, all of my weight pulling the cable slightly out of place, and I’m ready to hit the mat. With my chin pinned hard to my chest, I release my grip on the middle rope and fall directly onto my posterior. My back or head never contact the mat as I end up in a seated position. I’ve never seen a wrestler fall to their behind, so I’m fairly certain that I’ve done a lot wrong. If my past experience watching wrestling wasn’t enough to inform me that I need a little more work in taking a bump, the laughter of my trainer and the wrestlers surrounding the ring support my assumption.

“Ok, heh heh heh, that definitely isn’t what you’re supposed to do, heh heh heh. You just let yourself fall, you have to make yourself fall. Think about it like you’re trying to land as flat on your back as possible into a pool, trying to make a big splash. Also your hands went out like you were trying to catch yourself, if you do that again you might break your wrists. Try it again, chin tucked, throw yourself on your back.”
Scrambling back into position, I’m avoiding the offending thread on the ropes this time. That must have been what screwed me up. Trying to remember each of the instructions a little more clearly, I’m again in squat position with my arms outstretched and chin tucked tight to my chest. No time for a countdown in my head, just do it right. I let go of the rope and fall backward, throwing my body to the mat. I hit high on my back, across the shoulder blades first, and feel my chin separate from my chest upon impact. The sound is jarring, the plywood boards under the ring clapping together and springs groaning. It’s a sound I’ve heard a hundred times while watching matches from hundreds of feet away, but with my ears so close to the mat it rips through my consciousness. My head contacts the mat next, scrambling the pain sensation intended for my back. My butt hits next, and the center of my back last as I come to rest on the mat. The area that was supposed to take the brunt of the collision took the least, with my shoulders taking what felt like 90% of the force. Pain shoots from my shoulders to the tips of my fingers, and there’s a distinct buzz in my head, which I’m assuming is a combination of instant adrenaline and panic.

“Whoa! You good bro? You went diagonal instead of down, that’s why you hit at an angle, you ok?”

I affirm that I’m fine, figuring that the pain and ringing are par for the course when taking an incorrect bump. As I hop to my feet, I can tell that I’m a little out of sorts, the lingering feeling was more that I expected. The reverberation through the rest of my limbs is a strange, slow sensation, like a slow wave tripping each of my nerve endings. I notice that I have goosebumps. Nothing hurts anymore. The pain was quick and gone, but
the shock is still there. My trainer tells me it’s probably a good idea to stop for the day, and, if I want to try again when the show is over tonight, the ring will still be setup. I just want one more shot to get it right, because if I have to wait until after the show my anxiety will take over, coming up with an excuse to skip it. One more time, I’ll do it, let me just check one correct bump off my list.

There are a few more wrestlers around the ring now, and one who I’ve already interviewed flips his chin upward to get my attention. I’ve known him for some time now, and a friendly face in the midst of my embarrassment is a welcome sight. He gives me a last second tip, saying I should think about it like I should imagine I’m an image that is rotated 90 degrees. Not a fall, just a rotation, flat straight back while seated becomes a flat straight back on the ground. Occupy the same space, don’t fly backward, just down. Of all the instructions I’ve received, this one makes the most sense to me. Gripping the rope again, tucking my chin, seated position, flat back, rotate the image. I throw myself straight down, my back slapping the mat inches from where my feet had been planted. My chin stays tucked to my chest, my head only feels a whoosh of air displaced from my flat back hitting the canvas. The initial sound is different, a heavy thud against the mat, but the plywood boards respond just as before. A loud clattering that is just as ear-splitting, but much more satisfying. My jaw must have been a bit open because my teeth clash together in a loud clack that I hope is only audible in my head. The pain isn’t nearly as intense, but the impact is more jarring. The whole of my back connects with the mat with such force, I lose my breath and let out a cough. I stay flat for a second waiting for my breathing to return, but the momentary lapse causes a bit of
panicked motion. My eyes water as I quickly roll to the side and try to stand, but my trainer has one hand on my shoulder keeping me prone.

“Knocked the wind out of yourself? Happens all the time when you start, it goes away after the first year or so. Great bump though, good sound and snap! Try to slap your hands down to the mat next time, that’ll add some more sound to it. Want to try it again? Or run the ropes a couple times?”

Still waiting for the ability to breathe to return, I shake my head in a quick no, I’m done for today. I get a quick thumbs-up from my impromptu trainer, then squeak out a thanks for the tip that allowed me to execute my first successful flat back bump.

“No problem, man. Now do it about thirty more times in ten minutes and try to tell a story in the middle of it.”

Methods

In this chapter, I outline my methodology for exploring the performance of the Heel character in professional wrestling. I provide a rationale for performance ethnography as a lens of study and articulate grounding for the method in professional wrestling. I describe my processes for data collection, including how my positionality as a fan of professional wrestling influenced the study. I then explain the analysis of data and preview the thematic chapters that represent my findings.

Performance Ethnography and Professional Wrestling

Professional wrestling controls the backstage of storylines, presentation of characters, and, ultimately, the outcomes of matches. However, the audience that is
attracted to the same battle of good versus evil in sport is drawn to the committed performance of that battle in professional wrestling.

Using performance as a lens to view and present findings of my dissertation, this project builds from prior inquiry and application of performance ethnography. Conquergood (1985) stated that, “good performative ethnographers must continuously play the oppositions between identity and difference. Their stance toward this heuristically rich paradox of fieldwork (and performance is both/and, yes/but, instead of either/or)” (p. 9). Conquergood informs the intersection of my fandom in professional wrestling and positionality as a researcher. My role as a fan was invaluable in building rapport with my participants. The first conversation points in each of the interviews focused on fandom of professional wrestling and allowed my participants and me to have moments of shared understanding. These moments focused on exposure to professional wrestling, continuing fandom throughout adolescence and into adulthood, and expanded into each participants decision to become a professional wrestler. I found it necessary to trace the journey from fan to wrestler in each interview to gain a better understanding of my participants, and also as an opportunity to share with my participants my journey from fan to researcher.

Schechner’s (1988a) research supports the use of performance studies in this dissertation, “the subjects of performance studies are both what is performance and the performative- and the myriad contact points and overlaps, tensions and loose spots, separating and connecting these two categories” (p. 362). In addition, Schechner (2002) later eyed professional wrestling as a site to study performance, positing, “American
professional wrestling is a noisy sport for ‘outlaws’ where each wrestler flaunts his own raucous and carefully constructed identity” (p. 37). While Schechner’s categorization of professional wrestling as a “noisy sport” is understandable, my dual role as a fan and researcher allowed my to turn down the volume on some of the noise and focus specifically on aspects of performance that I saw as pivotal. Familiarity with the world of professional wrestling was necessary to recognize and separate the quotidian from extraordinary. Furthermore, Goffman’s (1989) approach to fieldwork influences my own:

> It’s one of getting data, it seems to me, by subjecting yourself, your own body and your own personality, and your own social situation, to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals,… so that you are close to them while they are responding what life does to them. (p. 125)

The experience of being embedded with my participants as they performed the role of Heel in professional wrestling and conducting in-depth interviews fits with the performance paradigm. The voices of my participants are represented heavily in my analysis to best convey the depth of conversation and introspection that each wrestler engaged in throughout interviews. As explained by Conquergood (1991), the performance paradigm “insists on face-to-face encounters instead of abstractions and reductions. It situates ethnographers with the delicately negotiated and fragile ‘face-work’ that is part of the intricate and nuanced dramaturgy of everyday life” (187).

Conquergood (2002) explained:

> Performance studies is uniquely suited for the challenge of braiding together disparate and stratified ways of knowing. We can think through performance
along three crisscrossing lines of activity and analysis. We can think of performance (1) as a work of imagination, as an object of study; (2) as a pragmatics of inquiry (both as model and method), as an optic and operation of research; (3) as a tactics of intervention, an alternative space of struggle. (p. 152)

Denzin (2003) articulated that performance studies seeks an “interpretive social science that is simultaneously autoethnographic, vulnerable, performative, and critical” (p. 105). Denzin argued that “viewing culture as a complex performative process, it seeks to understand how people enact and construct meaning in their daily lives. This is a return to narrative as a political act, a social science that has learned how to use the reflexive, dialogic interview” (p. 105). Madison and Hamera (2006) outlined the myriad dimensions of performance and stated that “the politics, theory, pedagogy, literature, and ethnography of performance are distinct sites of inquiry; however the ways they naturally and inherently intersect with each other becomes a rich montage of meanings, questions, and claims” (p. xxiv). Hamera (2006) situated performance ethnography within qualitative research by noting that “the view of cultural poesis (and cultural poets) that performance studies offers to scholars in the human sciences is predicated on the kind of dialogic exchanges between multiple texts, conversations, and perspectives often labeled ‘triangulation’ in qualitative research” (p. 62).

Employing performance ethnography as a method of inquiry and expression fits well with my desire for a multi-modal communication of findings and my positionality as a researcher. Jones (2006) argued that “performance ethnography embraces the muddiness of multiple perspectives, idiosyncrasy, and competing truths, and pushes
everyone present into an immediate confrontation with our beliefs and behavior” (p. 344).
The potential to understand performative expression as well as produce scholarship that
includes performance comprises a foundational reason for my use of performance
ethnography as a method of inquiry.

Data Collection

As a fan of professional wrestling, my residency in Athens, Ohio has been a
hindrance on my ability to attend live shows. Prior to moving to Athens, I lived in Central
New York State, where every weekend I was within two hours of a live wrestling show,
populated with performers that I had watched for years. Southeast Ohio does host live
professional wrestling events, but they are too few and far between to collect sufficient
data. During my time in Central New York, teaching at both the State University of New
York at Oswego and Syracuse University, my fandom of professional wrestling was
common knowledge with my students. A steady stream of students routinely approached
me during office hours to talk about professional wrestling, and our shared interest led to
the creation of a campus organization through SUNY Oswego, the Professional Wrestling
Club. What began as an organization of students that would watch professional wrestling
together and organize travel to local shows became an integral first step to this research.
Through that student organization, I developed close bonds with three students who
wanted to make the transition from fan to performer. Over the past decade, I have
followed the careers of each of these former students and kept in contact with them as
they progressed in the industry.
As this study advanced from the initial stages, it became clear that data collection would hinge on two necessary conditions – the ability to attend live professional wrestling events as a participant observer and the ability to conduct in-depth interviews with professional wrestlers who have performed the role of Heel. My connections with students-turned-wrestlers became paramount, as each of those performers expressed interest in serving as informants and assisting me in gaining accessibility to more professional wrestlers. Kevin Graham, Marc Hauss, and VsK each were invaluable in their efforts to connect me with different circles of professional wrestlers, allowing access to arenas before and after live shows and serving as participants in this study. In the world of professional wrestling where the divide between fan and performer is imbued with a layer of suspension of disbelief, these performers allowed me to move beyond that divide and access their reality.

With the privilege of this access granted by such helpful informants, I took advantage of the opportunity provided by their cooperation, regardless of the distance needed to travel. After obtaining IRB approval in March of 2015, I created a network of willing interview participants with assistance from my informants and planned travel to attend live events. With an eye ahead to the summer of 2016, I developed a plan that would allow for the most efficient use of time and travel, while also attending live professional wrestling events in order to familiarize myself with the venues and neighborhoods that would become the site for my field work, and become a familiar face amongst the population that I would be working with throughout data collection. Throughout the year, when able, I attended shows hosted by Xcite Wrestling, EVOLVE,
Ring of Honor, and Absolute Intense Wrestling in order to gain a working knowledge of timing and organization of these events. These promotions ultimately became sites of research in data collection as well.

As the companies that I familiarized myself with began to plan their event schedules in the spring of 2016, I created a travel plan for my field experience. Taking into account location and time of travel in the five months between June and October of 2016, I attended 13 live professional wrestling events in Ohio, New York, and Massachusetts. A complete listing of those events with dates, locations, and miles traveled from the prior site of research can be found in Appendix A.

As an attendee of each of these shows, even when provided early entry and backstage access due to connections made through informants, I purchased a ticket to ensure that the access provided by my informants could not be misconstrued. I traveled primarily by car, and only one pair of shows (September 10 and 11) required a flight. The venues that became the sites for my field work presented different challenges, which became apparent in data analysis.

Stepping into a sparsely populated arena hours before showtime or remaining long after the show had ended and seeing rows of unused chairs and an empty wrestling ring dominating the center of the space was initially overwhelming. Reflexivity as a qualitative researcher served me to be acutely aware of my relationship to the spaces I inhabited, and provided an understanding as to how that relationship affected my interactions. As stated by Lindlof and Taylor (2011), reflexivity allows researchers to “get our bearings in a world of diverse, shifting, and often contentious meanings…the
enactment of reflexivity provides us with better data” (p. 72). The feeling of being backstage and out of place was one that persisted throughout data collection, and is addressed in analysis. The same image of an empty wrestling ring and that feeling of uneasiness became commonplace, and was a constant that actually could be relied on, whether that empty ring was in Queens, Cleveland, or Columbus. The sameness of that image was the calming ritual that made each excursion into the field feel replicable, even if they were hundreds of miles apart.

Another aspect of reflexivity that influenced my research was my lifelong fandom of professional wrestling. Being familiar with the history of the industry and having a shared fandom with each of my participants was an entry point into many conversations. That shared understanding led to a rapport with participants that was invaluable in mining the roots of character and performance. Taking that into consideration, this dissertation heavily favors participant responses that expanded my understanding of their roles in professional wrestling. Instead of these experiences reifying what I’ve already seen as a fan, I’ve focused greatly on the building blocks of performance that are typically hidden from professional wrestling fans.

Total time in the field exceeded 110 hours, and I recorded field notes throughout using a variety of methods. Using the Notes app on my phone, I took scratched notes during each show and transitioned them to long form field notes on a weekly basis. These scratch notes became invaluable in noting the emotional climate of the experience, as each entry served as a window back into each show. Noting sights and sounds of performance specifics, the surroundings, and fan behaviors were necessary to capture the
The travel to each of these shows provided valuable reflection time on each experience. Using the Voice Recorder app, I dictated my experience, anxieties, expectations, and reflections, dependent on the timing of the recording. At the conclusion of each trip, I listened back to those recordings and crafted long form field notes. Invariably, these recordings enabled me to connect specific stimuli with a past experience, whether it was a memory from my childhood as a fan or a connection from a prior show.

A long form field note precedes each chapter in this dissertation in an effort to situate the reader within my varied experiences throughout data collection. I was afforded many different perspectives throughout data collection: in and out of the ring, in the audience and backstage in locker rooms, and interacting with performers while they were in and out of character. These long form field notes are windows into each of these perspectives, and provide representative examples of the field notes that are the basis of this dissertation.

After I solidified my travel plan to attend each show, I began reaching out to wrestlers who would be performing at each show in an effort to schedule in-depth interviews. Observing each company’s advertised card of matches that would populate the show, I used Twitter and email to contact wrestlers scheduled to appear on the show. Explaining the project and referencing a shared connection in each informant, I requested an in-depth interview addressing specifically the performance of the Heel in professional wrestling. I sent a total of 114 emails and I received 31 responses. Of those responses, I scheduled 24 interviews. Seven individuals declined an interview for contractual reasons,
which I agreed to not divulge. I prioritized face-to-face interviews, due to travel restrictions and changing schedules of each performer, I also used Skype interviews. Of the scheduled interviews, I completed 20 qualitative in-depth interviews by the close of data collection. Fifteen of those interviews were conducted face-to-face, and five were conducted via Skype. The remaining four participants could not meet or speak with me by the close of data collection due to schedule changes and limitations on the participants’ availability. I did not conduct any interviews without prior scheduling and explanation of the project in an effort avoid ambushing any participants without sufficient knowledge of the project. The list of interview participants, dates, and locations of each interview can be found in Appendix B.

I conducted interviews with wrestlers after obtaining informed consent and using an IRB approved semi-structured protocol which addressed their introduction to professional wrestling, the process of becoming a professional wrestler, the performance of the Heel, and how playing that role has changed over the course of their career. The length of time for each interview averaged 41 minutes. We performed interviews in spaces of convenience for the wrestler to ensure minimal intrusion into their schedules, such as backstage at arenas in locker rooms, in empty arenas ringside prior to and after shows, in cars traveling from one venue to the next, and in one case, a parking lot behind a bar. I audio recorded each interview, and the total interview time was 820 minutes. I printed a unique interview protocol for each interviewee and used it for scratch notes during the interview, starring questions that had sparked extended conversation and noting follow up questions that did not appear on the protocol. I transcribed each
interview in the months following data collection, yielding 259 pages of single space interview transcripts.

**Data Analysis**

Using thematic analysis, I read interview transcripts and field notes and listened to audio interview recordings and audio field notes until I was familiar with the data. The ability to listen to interviews and audio field notes repeatedly became invaluable, as my natural inclination toward listening to podcasts on a daily basis was satiated by the collected data. After those numerous passes through the data, I generated an initial coding scheme identifying terms and scenarios that appeared repeatedly. The two major themes that emerged are represented in the two analysis chapters, with sub themes labeled within. The stories contained within the interview data and field notes have been cleaned of verbal fillers. My voice is represented in field notes leading each chapter in italics, as well as in the connective tissue that weaves the experiences of my participants. The interview transcripts presented to illustrate themes are meant to give voice to my participants, and to have the reader experience their stories and perspectives just as I did, enraptured in the conversations that illuminated the performance of the Heel in professional wrestling.

In Chapter Four, I introduce the first thematic finding, identifying the verbal and nonverbal behaviors that make up the performance of a Heel, and showing how those behaviors are directed at eliciting a response from the audience.
Chapter 4: The Tools of an Effective Heel

Field Note

Syracuse, NY – Pre-show Xcite Wrestling – 6/10/16

Marc and I are running a little late, we arrive much too close to the opening bell. Marc insisted it was fine. He wouldn’t be wrestling until the middle of the show. The promoter knows he has a day job and wouldn’t be able to arrive the requisite two hours before the start of the show.

“There are other guys give me shit for showing up late on the Friday shows, I realized the worst thing I could do is show up in my work clothes. I always throw on a t-shirt and shorts before going into the locker room. The last time I came in khakis and a polo, everyone called me Mr. Hauss and asked if my new character was an accountant. The majority of these guys are doing this to avoid real jobs as much as possible, but I actually like my day job. Hopefully, I’ll get signed somewhere like TNA (Total Nonstop Action Wrestling), WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment), or ROH (Ring of Honor) in the next couple years so I can quit that day job, but for now it’s paying the bills.”

Our entry into the locker room went as smoothly as it could have, as I found the best course of action to fit in would be to follow behind Marc and introduce myself to everyone and tell them why I was there. An older wrestler named Colin Delaney joked, “You’re following Marc around? Why? You want to see what it’s like to be injured all the time?” Marc is recovering from a serious knee injury, a torn MCL and ACL. It’s not a subject he liked talking about, and actively avoided. He’d been cleared to return to wrestling the week prior to this show, and the rest of the performers seemed to enjoy
giving him a good natured ribbing about how they’ll expect him to be half as good in the ring as he used to be. The ribbing was taken well by Marc, but he told me he didn’t want to talk before his match and he was getting a little nervous. To give him his space, I decided to watch the show from the crowd, which also gave me a good vantage point to see how Marc performed his character. Tonight, Marc is playing the “American Villain,” a ruthless, entitled, pompous character focused on winning back the championship title he feels is owed to him, after losing it due to his most recent injury.

Now an hour into the show, I’m taking notes on the previous match and the strains of “This is My House” cut through the din of the crowd. I look up knowing this means that Marc will be making his entrance shortly. Emerging from an exit door covered by a pair of black curtains, Hauss wears a sleeveless white t-shirt with the “American Villain” logo across it, long black wrestling tights with the name “Hauss” printed on the back, and black boots. His head bobs slightly as he struts confidently to the ring, hair moussed into a fauxhawk, looking very little like the man I have come to know. He’s sneering at the fans on either side of him with outstretched hands looking for a high five. He’s become the “American Villain,” and he’s about to do his best to make everyone in attendance hate him as much as possible.

Chapter Overview

My participants know how to make me hate them. They’ve told me, some with a knowing smile that they’ll shortly see my reaction. I’ve seen it happen from my front row seat. A few hours after I interviewed him, I watched VsK make his entrance at Victory Pro Wrestling in Centerreach, NY. I’ve known the man behind the character for years,
and our discussion earlier in the day included long digressions into WWF programming throughout the 1990s, wrestling related podcasts that we both listen to, and the ways to tell a new significant other the degree to which professional wrestling influences our lives. In the moment he walked to the ring wearing a denim vest without a shirt underneath, long tights emblazoned with VsK, and wrestling boots, the prior relationship we had was set aside in service of the performance. I looked up and smiled, simultaneously typing notes about audience reaction into my phone while VsK slowly made his way down the aisle toward the ring. VsK surveyed the fans along each railing that separated audience from performer, and swatted away their boos and thumbs pointed downward with a dismissive wave of the back of his hand. With a microphone in hand, VsK was just about to tell the crowd how they didn’t deserve to see him wrestle tonight, but before that he and I made eye contact. I didn’t say a word or move a muscle, unsure whether to boo the Heel or applaud for my friend. The moment of indecision was short-lived, as VsK looked directly at me and yelled “Shutup!” into the microphone, even though I hadn’t said anything. There was no indecision at that point, as I cupped my hands around my mouth and began to boo heartily.

The ways in which each performer enact their Heel persona change, but consistent underpinnings motivate each of them. As I detail in this chapter, the type of character that each participant plays directly influences their verbal and nonverbal Heel behaviors. Each interviewee also shared behaviors designed to get heat with the audience, drawing a reaction from live crowds that enrapture them in the story being told during a wrestling match. Many performers referenced how these behaviors can function as a ripple effect.
Some of the most important actions not intended for the entire audience, but for a small pocket of fans and then building on the heat spreading throughout the audience.

**Heel Performance**

Heel performance relies on the context in which it takes place. Professional wrestling could be defined as a space for what Singer (1959) described as cultural performance. Singer defined cultural performances as ones with a “limited time span, a beginning and an end, an organized program of activity, a set of performers, an audience, and a place and occasion” (p. xiii). The complexity of Heel performance in professional wrestling uncovers the interplay between cultural performance, social performance, and social drama as articulated by Turner (1982). As Turner explained, social performances are part of quotidian life, they consist of the expected interactions of day-to-day experience. Social drama is where there is a violation of expected social performance, and some consequence or resolution is anticipated for that violation (Turner, 1982). Heel performance is dependent on an understanding of the norms of social performance, and an ability to violate those norms through cultural performance with the intention of creating social drama within the audience. Professional wrestling presents a stage that encourages audience interaction, and the interactions between performers and audience members can play on norms of social performance in the context of a cultural performance. Heel performance takes shape through character and action, and both work in concert to establish a persona that is understandable to the audience in an attempt to create professional wrestling’s version of social drama, previously defined as “heat”. My
respondents shared the subtleties of performance that generate that type of audience response.

I’m Better Than All of You – Cocky Heels

The Heels that separate themselves from the audience by creating a cocky persona are well represented in my participants. Ethan Page has been wrestling for the past 11 years, and he looks the part of the homecoming king, quarterback, and student body president. With a well-manicured beard and hair impeccably in place, Page presents himself as inherently better than the audience. His ring name reflects his Heel persona, as he announced as “All Ego” Ethan Page. His character believes that he is better than everyone else, and, even if that cockiness is nothing but an ego out of control, Page is well aware that the audience will react to that performance. Prior to an afternoon show in Queens, NY, Page sat in the front row of folded chairs next to me, while his co-workers rehearsed planned moves in the ring just to our right. When discussing his character, Page stated:

The whole point is that I’m better than the people who paid to see me, and I’m going to carry myself like that. It’s absolutely cockiness, but my character doesn’t see it as cockiness, it’s ego, which I guess has a more positive connotation to it? It’s basically how a jerk would justify being a jerk, by calling it their ego as opposed to acknowledging that they’re overly cocky. I used to stop when people were taking pictures of me during my entrance and say “Wait, get my good side, ah nevermind, all I have is good sides.” All I had to do was let them know as I walked to the ring that there was something that separated me from them that
really didn’t have anything to do with wrestling, it was all in my head. I believe I’m better than all of you, so I am. Thinking like that is going to influence every move I make, especially just as I’m walking out of the curtain. (Page, personal communication, 16 July 2016)

A few hours later, Page slowly sauntered to the ring, towel wrapped around his neck and chin in the air, making sure to fix his hair before a fan snapped a picture during his entrance, then turning away at the last second to ruin the photo. As part of our conversation, Page discussed other performers playing the role of Heel and similarity with his cocky character based in ego and the character of Ethan Carter III.

I waited behind Tequila Jaxx nightclub in Mentor, OH, and while standing next to a dumpster I surveyed the area around me. This parking lot served as a makeshift dressing room, as approximately thirty wrestlers were milling around in various states of undress. I stood as far away from the gaggle as possible and waited for my interview with Ethan Carter III that had been confirmed in email earlier in the day, but the interview is being delayed as Carter talks about the match he’s going to have later in the evening with his opponent. I tried to keep my eyes downcast as much as possible, as I felt very out of place in my khakis and button down shirt while everyone around me was clad in spandex. After twenty minutes of awkward shuffling and texting no one in particular, Carter finished talking about his match and deftly hopped over a pile of discarded wood and old carpet adjacent to the dumpster, landing at my side. He asked, “So where can we do this? Behind that fence? I mean, we’re in a parking lot, it’s not like there’s too much privacy.” After agreeing to the area just beyond a sagging fence, Carter apologized for not having a
more suitable place to conduct the interview. Carter offered as an explanation, “There’s
only one dressing room at this place and the girls are using it, so that’s why we’re all
standing in a parking lot half naked. I had to change in my car. Glamorous world of
wrestling” Behind the barrier fence seemed appropriate and private enough, and there I
got to know more about the portrayal of a cocky Heel.

Affable and approachable, Ethan Carter III, also known as EC3, is a 15-year
veteran of professional wrestling. He described his character as “one part male model,
one part entitled socialite, and all douche” (Carter III, personal communication, 16 June
2017). When coming up with the character and deciding on how it should be presented to
the audience, EC3 revealed his thought process:

You know how you have clothes that are seemingly nice but just kind of
obnoxious? I know that you can put together a white shirt and a pink jacket with
some fucking light blue pants, it’s a nice outfit, it looks good, but fuck that guy
wearing it, you know what I mean? It came from inside and character
motivations, I’ve been reading Bret Easton Ellis books like “Glamorama,” the
male model book which is like, EC3 was not really a male model but he is as daft
and idiotic sometimes or completely blinded to realities of like true human nature
and what is really taking place. It’s all about presenting an obsession with myself
as opposed to wrestling or giving a shit about the audience, that pisses them off.
Same thing with like Patrick Bateman and the book American Psycho like just his
attention to detail of every little outfit and weird things, it is just that fucking
concern with the brand and the image he is portraying and then like everything
else is secondary. Real easy to hate that guy. (Carter III, personal communication, 16 June 2017)

In the ring he punctuated a successful advantage over his opponent with arms outstretched, eyes closed, and chin to the ceiling as if he was welcoming what should be cheers from the audience. When those cheers did not come, EC3’s face twisted into a scowl and shouted “You people have no idea how good I am!” EC3 then looked down at his own physique and brushed imaginary dirt from his abdominal muscles. I can see how EC3 can effectively play the role of a cocky Heel who is infatuated with his appearance, as he has a bodybuilder physique and striking good looks. However, the cocky character is not limited to those who have won the genetic lottery. At Xcite Pro Wrestling in central New York state, I was introduced to Cloudy, a professional wrestler with 10 years experience. Cloudy stands five foot five inches tall and weighs a little more than a 150 pounds. Also playing a Heel, Cloudy walked through the curtain with arms outstretched and a smirk on his face, before he paused to scan the audience’s reaction. Arms still outstretched but now with an added flourish of his hands flapping, Cloudy seemed to be attempting to pull in more reactions from the audience. Chest puffed out, Cloudy looked at a man in the front row giving him a very pronounced thumbs down gesture, and said in a calm tone, “Sit down, old man.” Cloudy spoke with me after the show about playing the role of a cocky Heel, and his process when he comes through the curtain to make an entrance:

So, usually the music hits, your mind kind of gets into it and you go out there and kind of give them a once over, you kind of exude who you want them to see. I
realize nobody really likes cocky people so that’s a good mindset I’ve found, you go out there and you’re just like I’m better than all of these people. Yeah, you know who you are when you go out there and what elicits a reaction or at least you think you do and as long as you have the mentality in your head and if you have it in your head the people will get it. I’ve never done any real acting but I imagine that’s what it is, if you can visualize it in your head and just get into it, it just kind of is there, you become that person. It should be you in a way, so maybe that’s how you want to walk all the time but don’t want people to think that you’re an asshole, you know, people who have a swagger and you just see them and you’re like, that guy is a douche. I don’t know why I hate that guy but, and that guy in his mind and I don’t know, I think he wants people to hate him a little bit. He wouldn’t walk like that if he didn’t want to elicit some sort of reaction. As a heel, some people are going to like you because that kind of people can connect with that, oh that guys a dick? Fuck, I’m a dick. But, you should try to elicit hate from people because that’s what your job is. (Cloudy, personal communication, 10 June 2016)

Marc Hauss performed a few matches later on the same show as Cloudy. Hauss, a former student of mine, has over a decade of experience in the ring. Hauss has been through an evolution of characters, the majority of which have all been Heels for the preponderance of their existence. Hauss invented a character early on in his wrestling career that wore a white tear-away suit with the words “Every Ladies Dream” emblazoned on the back. When Hauss explained how he performed that character to me, he referenced how his
performance depended on understanding the difference between cockiness and confidence. Hauss shared:

To be a really good heel you've got to have guys that can go in and get the reaction without begging for it, because if you show the crowd that you need that reaction they’re going to shut down. You just have to get it, and for me, being cocky was a surefire way to get them to react. I mean, for me Every Ladies Dream had to be cocky, the chin up, the strut, the winking at girls and shit. You can be cocky and that's real easy to understand especially for crowd of people while you’re wrestling. Basically, you come out like I’m better than all of you, but then when the match starts, you get your ass kicked a little in the beginning, so now the crowd sees that all of your cockiness was bullshit. If you're a Face, you can't be cocky. Now all of a sudden, you have to confident and that needs to be believed in. You need to be confident as a Face or whatever or be humble about it. You have to almost be at the point of that the reason you're succeeding is because all the fans belief in you helped you succeed, but when you’re a Heel, you’re mad that the audience doesn’t believe in you, and you’re legit pissed at them for it.

(Hauss, personal communication, 10 June 2016)

The line between a character who is cocky and one who is aloof is a fine one, but the differences in performance are rooted in how the character interacts with the audience and during the match itself. The goal of both characters is to play on the audience’s expectation of behaviors. Schechner’s (1985) definition of performance as “restored behavior” is applicable with these character archetypes, as the behaviors of the cocky
Heel must be understood by the audience, and support the type of character that is being performed (p. 33). Whereas the cocky Heel concentrates on the audience’s perception of themselves, an aloof Heel presents him/herself as not taking the crowd, the opponent, or the event seriously. The audience has paid to see wrestling, and this type of character is not fully invested in giving them that.

I Couldn’t Care Less – Lack of Influence as a Heel Strategy

Another of my former students is VsK, an 11-year veteran of professional wrestling and a lifelong fan. VsK is based primarily in the New York/New Jersey area, but in the past year has seen his popularity in professional wrestling steadily increase to the point where he’s traveling up to 12 hours in a car every weekend to perform on shows out of state. VsK credits this increase in work to a comfort with the character he has created, and an ability to engage the audience without acknowledging them. Seated across my former student in a sweltering vestibule in VFW Post 4972 on Long Island hours before his third show of the weekend, VsK noted:

Like last night I knew I was a heel, I got there and I knew I was a heel, I was like, okay this is what heel VsK does. I’m just straight up asshole off the curtain, like break the curtain and it just mean-mugging everybody and I’m better than you. So, like when I walk to the ring I just kind of ignore everybody and fuck you.

(VsK, personal communication, 16 September 2016)

After 13 years of experience, Mr. Sozio knows how to play the unaffected and detached Heel. He has developed the character of a ruthless Italian mafia boss while working for promotions all over the country. With a fedora pulled down low and a pair of
pinstripe pants with suspenders, Mr. Sozio slowly sauntered to the ring, without acknowledging the audience around him. Every few steps, Mr. Sozio peered up from underneath the bill of his hat and surveyed the crowd, then pulled the hat down even further over his eyes. Mr. Sozio confided that his experience playing the Heel depends on behaviors that have proven to work:

You have a lot of stock, generic go-to heel behaviors and mannerisms, facials, body language that you typically do to let people know right off the bat that you’re the bad guy. So, there’s a way you can tell people that you’re bad without saying a word. You can raise your chin a little bit higher and it’s just that simple. You can puff out your chest a little bit, you can stand like you’re some arrogant jerk, it’s how you position your legs if you have one leg up or something and you’re standing like some aristocrat or something, as long as you’re basically showing the crowd that nothing they do is going to change who you are. I don’t care about your reactions, but like, of course I do, you know? The goal for me is for them to notice, but not let their reactions affect me at all. So like, I could be making them boo as hard as possible or swear at me or even throw stuff in some cases, but treating it like complete silence. (Sozio, personal communication, 10 June, 2016)

Mr. Sozio’s entrance was all the crowd needed to know that he was the Heel, and the simple act of ignoring the audience proved effective. Another Heel, RJ City, referenced the need to play with the audience’s need to engage and ultimately resist it. City is a Toronto-based wrestler whose decade long career has taken him all over the world. City
embraces what he described as “the sensibilities and taste of someone a few generations
removed” (personal communication, 28 June 2016). Effortlessly eloquent, City weaved in
references to Jack Benny, Jerry Lewis, Bea Arthur, and Frank Sinatra when describing
the influences onto his character, citing their abilities to control an audience with a look
or speech cadence. City acknowledged that the main thrust of his Heel character is his
refusal to be influenced by the crowd, and he described how that refusal results in heat:

I’ve come to see it as fascinating honestly, to not approach the audience to try and
draw them to you because that pretty much goes against any other performance.
Here they're paying to see you and you're the attraction, and if you come at them
like you want their approval it's like you're begging for their reaction. So, I come
out there, I do nothing, I don't wear anything fancy. I come out, and I have one
thumb in my tights, and I have a smug face on, and I don't look at a single person,
I look straight at the ring, and I just come out, put on the smug face and stop. I
take two steps, and I just stop. The entrance is painfully slow. I walk to the ring, I
don't look at anyone, and I walk up to the ring and I stop, and then I get up on the
apron and stop, and I wipe my feet and I get in the ring and then I stop, I don't do
anything, but My God, it works. It took a while to realize the science behind it,
basically making these people watch me. The other thing is if you don't give them
your attention it only makes someone want it more. So, generally speaking, if
you're engaging enough, they'll get louder if you ignore them. So, that is certainly
crowd-play in a sense but it's not direct, and that's how you would antagonize
people. If you ever try to call someone down the street and they're not responding
to you, you yell their name louder. It's pretty simple when you think about it, but yeah it's very effective. (City, personal communication, 28 June, 2016)

Johnny Gargano echoed City’s perspective on audience engagement. Gargano has been wrestling for 12 years, and has competed all over the world at the highest levels. Known by his peers as a technically unparalleled performer who rarely makes any mistakes, Gargano is one of the fastest-rising wrestlers in the industry. Gargano and I shared our love of the history of professional wrestling, referencing the same past wrestlers as our favorites as children, and how our appreciation of them changed as we learned more about the industry. Between two shows in one day, Gargano spoke with me about his approach to playing a Heel character. When asked to describe his behavior as a Heel, Gargano stated:

As a Heel, you kind of don’t want to pander to the fans. You don’t want them to leave happy with what you’re doing and you obviously want to not give them what they want, so yeah, you don’t want to give them anything to cheer for. You want to give them a reason to desire something but then at the same time show you don’t care about giving it to them. It’s like a little kid when they want a toy and you take it away from them. It’s kind of like that mindset. (Gargano, personal communication, 17 July 2016)

The process of sensing what the crowd wants from each performer, having the ability to deprive the crowd of what they want and then knowing what kind of reaction that gets involves a formula that my interviewees articulated. Gargano’s longtime friend and fellow wrestler, Tomasso Ciampa, also acknowledged that same progression. Weeks after
conducting interviews with both Gargano and Ciampa, Ciampa served as the best man in Gargano’s wedding. After Ciampa’s match in Melrose, Massachusetts, he spoke with me while bags of ice were strapped to his right shoulder and left knee. After apologizing for the continued rattle of shifting ice cubes, Ciampa explained:

Well, conventionally as the heel your goal is to make the crowd want something and then take it away from them. That’s like step one, wrestling 101 of being a heel. That’s why I always like to say it’s more like, it’s not as much cheating or fighting in a fair manner during the match as much as it is taking away something the crowd wants. Because if you take away something from somebody that they want to see happen they will boo it and that’s essentially that’s where you’re going to get their investment from. (Ciampa, personal communication, 17 July 2016)

Ciampa could not recall a specific go-to behavior that he has used as a Heel consistently, but he did make sure that Johnny Gargano had shared a story with me about one of his tactics once used to get heat. Ciampa asked me, “Did Johnny tell you about the Dots? He better have.” He was referencing a story that Gargano had told me earlier that same day, about a tried and true strategy that had proven effective.

**Tricks of the Heel Trade**

Each performer shared specific planned actions that are intended to get heat with audiences. Heat, as defined earlier, is a negative response from fans. Turner (1982) identified social drama in performance through four phases: breach, crisis, redressive action, and resolution. Heat in professional wrestling is equated with social drama, and
each of the specific behaviors that performers engage in are in service of the breach or crisis phases of social drama. Turner (1982) defined breach as “an overt non-conformity and breaking away by an individual or group of individuals from a shared system of social relations” (p. 38). My participants shared behaviors intent on disrupting social relations in service of gaining heat with the audience. When Tomasso Ciampa asked me if Johnny Gargano had told me about the Dots, I smiled and nodded, knowing exactly what he was referring to. When I asked Gargano earlier that day if he had things that he would do as a Heel that stood out, he took a deep breath, shook his head, and said:

I don’t swear and I’m a really nice person but sometimes I shock myself at how easy I can do evil things. One time at a show a little boy had a box of Dots (candy) and I grabbed his Dots, and I poured them out onto the floor. There’s a picture of me doing that online, but I felt bad about that just because I wasted all those Dots, but the kid was being mean, so he deserved it. I felt bad, but I can’t tell you how many times after that I’ve looked for a kid in the front row with candy or popcorn or something, because that’s a surefire way I’m going to make a whole bunch of people mad. (Gargano, personal communication, 17 July 2016)

Ethan Page flashed a smile and laughed when asked to share his most commonly used Heel behaviors when walking to the ring before the match. One eyebrow raised slightly as he leaned forward toward me, almost like I was being let in on a secret. Page stated:

I'll flip a guy’s hat off his head or stop and turn and stare at a kid and I’ll make a kid cry, no problem, just by staring at them. And that’s if you can do that,
everyone is looking at you, and they then look at that little kid's face and he’s like
definitely afraid, bam, instant, this guy is an asshole. How can he do that to a
little kid, you know what I mean? (E. Page, personal communication, 16 July,
2016)

Less than two hours later, I’m seated in the front row as Page walked out of the entrance
curtain on the way to the ring prior to a match. He stopped just to the right of me and
looked down at a child in attendance with his father, no more than 10 years old. Page
took an extra second to make eye contact with me just prior to reaching over the
barricade and flipping the child’s New York Mets cap off his head. The child scrambled
to retrieve his cap off the floor while his father lustily booed and hurled profanities
toward Page. I joined in on the booing and giving thumbs down, although I admittedly
suppressed a smile. After the show, Page called me over to the table where he was selling
t-shirts at $20 apiece, and asked if I enjoyed what he did. When I told him now I felt
somewhat responsible for how much that child now hated him, Page responded, “it got
them pissed off like I said though didn’t it? Works every time.” Page also emphasized
that the timing of his behaviors was also important to gain heat, the intended negative
reaction, with the audience:

It’s all about timing too, like, it’s, like, that guy that tells a joke when you’re out
at a restaurant, but he doesn’t wait for everyone to stop talking, right? So, you’re
just like, oh, did you hear my joke when no one's listening, they’re busy. When
you catch everyone’s attention, you wait for that perfect moment, that essentially
whether you’re good or a bad guy is getting that reaction that you want, you could

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be the best bad guy ever, but if you have terrible timing you’re not going to get that out of the crowd. I think I’ve definitely figured out how to do that. (E. Page, personal communication, 17 July, 2016)

The diminutive Cloudy quickly pointed out that he used to rely on what he referred to as cheap heat, the kinds of behaviors that anyone can do to make the crowd react, but they don’t necessarily relate to your character. Cloudy shared some of those behaviors but also contextualized why they’re ultimately cheap:

> Just calling somebody stupid is a really easy way if nothing else is working, just make fun of people. Nobody likes to get made fun of. You find the person who you know that’s going to be really upset if I rag on him about whatever is most obvious. You know, fat people hate being called fat. Old people don’t like really being called old. There are very easy things that you can pick out to get over the fact that they’re not supposed to like you by making them not like you. It’s cheap heat because anyone can do it really, it’s like hack material that stand up comedians would use. It’ll get a laugh but it doesn’t mean you’re good at what you’re doing. (Cloudy, personal communication, 10 June 2016)

Kevin “The Man” Graham is another former student of mine, and has been honing his craft for close to ten years. His character exudes confidence, the inspiration of which comes from going to bars and seeing that “douchebag frat guy hitting on any girl that’s breathing” (Graham, personal communication, 8 June 2016). Graham wears a pair of mirrored Aviator sunglasses, an unbuttoned oxford long sleeve shirt, long silver and black tights and wrestling boots. During his entrance, his lips were pursed, and his chin
was angled upward. He pulled the sunglasses down to acknowledge a female in the front row, and mouthed “call me” before winking and walking away. He did that repeatedly to women in the front row, regardless of age or who might be accompanying them. Hours before that show, Graham and I spoke in the company boardroom that he has reserved after the end of a long workday for us to chat. In that time, he shared his strategies for getting heat:

But like, I basically just have to be that guy that the fans are immediately going to hate. I come out growling at people, making faces at people, giving people dirty looks, charging the guardrails and stuff, pulling down my sunglasses, and winking at guy’s girlfriends or wives. If you go to a town where no one knows who you are, the moment you walk out of the curtain you have to establish who you are. Without that, it’s going to take them so much longer to get behind you, whether it’s in a good way or a bad way. Right from the get go, I come out like here’s who I am, recognize that fact, and hate me from here on out. (Graham, personal communication, 8 June 2016)

RJ City’s performance of the aloof Heel is accentuated by one of his favorite ruses that he has played on audiences many times. He shared with me that he requests time prior to the match from the promoter of the show to speak on the microphone to the audience, always with the promise that they will be more engaged with the upcoming match when he’s finished. Through a chuckle, City said:

I get the microphone and say ‘There's a lot of lovely ladies here tonight!’” Then I find a girl attractive enough that hitting on her would be somewhat plausible. I get
out of the ring, sit next to her and say, “What's your name darling?” But before she responds I take the microphone back quickly, pull a disgusted face, and say “Oh I'm sorry, you actually look much better from up there.” Then I run back into the ring. I never smile or anything either, I don’t want them to know I’m doing it to make people laugh. I just keep the disgusted face on, and every few minutes I’ll turn back to her, cringe, and mouth “I’m sorry, it’s bad” again. (City, personal communication, 28 June 2016)

City has more “go-to” tricks that directly relate to his character. He designs to get a reaction from the audience but also emphasize the crowd’s inability to affect him. Regardless of the crowd’s reactions, City’s character remains constant, no matter how at odds with the presented simulation of a physical contest that behavior might seem. City shared with me:

When I get in the ring and I sit on the top rope, I cross my legs at the knee. Why? I don't know why it happens, it's just because I was paying tribute to my favorites, and I’m a huge Jack Benny fan. I thought it would be funny to sit on the top rope before the match starts, above everyone else so they can see me obviously, and then I did the whole Jack Benny pose and then put on my hand to my face. That's another guy who's so, so non-aggressive, that's fun, it's so much fun. The best part is the more casual I am, and the more nonplussed I seem about the entire situation, the angrier it makes everyone else. I’m supposed to be there for a fight, and here I am daintily sitting on the top rope holding my face in my hand like I’d rather be anywhere else. (City, personal communication, 28 June 2016)
VsK confided a much more aggressive stock behavior that has proven to be effective in drawing heat from the crowd. I confirmed that he worked out this behavior with his opponent ahead of time when hearing what VsK typically does in the ring. He assured me that it’s been allowed by all of his fellow performers. As VsK leaned back in his chair and balanced himself against the adjacent wall, he took off his New York Islanders cap and scratched at his forehead before flopping the hat onto the table, hesitating before disclosing:

Like I’m thinking okay, I’m probably going to spit on someone, that’s what I do. Not on fans dude, wait, that’s not what I meant, I mean the guy I’m wrestling. Yeah it’s gross, but really it’s not; we’re in there together for ten, fifteen, twenty minutes and sweating all over each other, no one cares about a little spit. But like, someone spits on you in real life, and there’s no bigger disrespect than that. So basically, we go back and forth when we start the match, circle each other for a while and maybe talk a little trash, and I hit a move and he hits a move, like we’re even in the skill department. Then we face off after that, and he sticks out his hand like to shake mine, like as a show of respect or whatever, like they do in boxing before a round. So, of course, I don’t shake it, I spit in his face. Crowd flips out every time, then I attack while the guy is still registering that I spit in his face, and we do the same progression. Break away, I spit on him again. So since I’m an asshole, I’m this cocky guy and then like I’m really tough and then I start getting out-wrestled, so of course my reaction is to be the biggest piece of shit I
can be, which is spitting on him. (VsK, personal communication, 16 September 2016)

Over the course of three separate shows in two days, I watched VsK follow this exact progression of events with three different opponents. The crowd reacts to each expectorant just as heartily as the last, a combination of anger and disgust. Seated in the fifth row of a Victory Pro Wrestling event in Centerreach, NY, I heard a child exclaim to her father, “Daddy did he just spit on him?” The father replied, “Yes he did because he’s not a nice man.”

Ripple Effect

While some of the behaviors are broad enough for the entire audience to see at once, many of my participants shared how some of their most effective strategies result from a ripple effect of reaction that spreads through the crowd. As an amalgamation of cultural performance and social performance, behaviors are not always intended for the entire audience at once. Heel performers take the physical stage and arrangement of audience into account when utilizing the behaviors illustrated prior. Without the benefit of clear sightlines for fans on all four sides of the ring to see clearly, wrestlers playing the Heel engage different pockets of fans all around the ring, knowing that a negative reaction from a pocket of fans may be more visible to the rest of the audience than the specific behavior.

Kai Katana’s Heel character is scary. The combination of a white mask streaked in red covered his face and clipped staccato steps as he came through the entranceway, he appears to be an image on a film that is skipping frames. Long black hair flowed from the
back of the mask, and his limbs moved in and out of rhythm with each other, which proved unnerving to watch. Katana played a Heel in a wrestling promotion called Create-A-Pro Wrestling on Long Island, NY, while less than ten miles away and twenty-four hours earlier, I observed Katana play a Face in Victory Pro Wrestling. Katana spoke with me after both shows about some of the ways he ensures that his Heel character’s behaviors can create heat with the entire crowd. Katana stated:

Yeah, if you can pick that one person, like a kid, get a kid riled up and everyone gets riled up with the kid. You don’t have to mess with them, just mess with the one kid so everyone can see it. You can actually feel the hate moving through the crowd. It’s the beauty of being a Heel is knowing when the crowd really hates you. Once you know the crowd really hates you, that’s when you know, I fucking got them and I can do anything. So, you got them, then I can go right back at the Face, he immediately takes advantage in the match crowd goes nuts, just like I wanted them to. They love that shit. I love that shit. (Katana, personal communication 11 September 2016)

As articulated earlier, Ethan Page also utilizes behaviors with the goal of starting a ripple effect throughout the crowd. Following up on his go-to behavior of flipping a hat off a child’s head in the front row, Page contended:

Oh yeah, it starts with that kid. Like, I said, like they look at me, you know, like what the hell is he doing, why didn’t he stop, and then they look at that kid and that kid is like really awkward, then the boos come from all angles. Then the dad usually gets annoyed because he’s like what the hell are you doing with my kid,
and that hits with a whole other section of the audience, so it spreads even further, so it’s great. (Page, personal communication, 16 July 2016)

Kevin “The Man” Graham also emphasized the importance of a reaction starting with one small section of the audience and then expanding. While explaining how he might change the presentation of his character depending on the makeup of the crowd, Graham replied:

If I’m wrestling in front of 1500 people or 15 people I don’t change anything I do as a character. I always know by their reaction if I’m doing well. If they’re booing me, if I got people yelling at me, if I got people flipping me off… I’m always like ‘Come at me bro, come at me!’ I’ll pick out the oldest guy in the crowd and pick a fight with him, and if he stands up and starts waving his cane at me, which happens more than I’d like to admit, you know, you might not get everyone in the crowd, but if you can pick out a handful of people throughout the match and get them into it, then that’s generally how I know something’s working. Especially the kid thing, if I get a kid to cower and cry because I just growled at him, then I definitely pissed off his Mom and Dad, and anyone who seems me go after a kid or an old guy gets fired up. It’s definitely a ripple effect, I just have to pick out these little pockets of people in the front that I can target, and then hopefully it stretches into the whole crowd. If the people came to see wrestling, the best thing I can do is take that away from them. When the match starts, I’ll refuse to engage, I won’t even lock up with the guy, I’ll roll out of the ring and fix my hair for a few minutes. I’ll do that a few times, but I’ll always roll out to a different side of
the ring every time, so I get a whole new set of people involved. That always gets the first few rows riled up and then it spreads a little further back every time I run away. (Graham, personal communication, 8 June 2016)

Graham works consistently with a tag team partner, Brute Van Slyke. While Graham is just over six feet tall and close to two hundred pounds, his tag team partner makes him look undersized in comparison. Brute Van Slyke is six inches taller than Graham and outweighs him by a hundred and fifty pounds. A mountain of a man with a shaved head and pronounced jaw, Van Slyke’s presence is intimidating. When Van Slyke emerged through the entranceway, there was an audible collective reaction from the audience. His sheer size is enough to draw that initial reaction, but his work as a Heel relies on using that size to intimidate the crowd. Standing close to fans in the front row whose eyes are level with his chest, Van Slyke looks down on fans one by one, laughing at them and making a slow trek around the ring. His demeanor throughout our interview was reserved and polite, even as he asked if I’d mind waiting an extra minute to start the interview so he could find an additional folding chair to support his massive frame. Two folding chairs had been set up facing each other, but Van Slyke found a third folding chair and placed it side by side with another, doubling the width of his seating area. A 10-year veteran of professional wrestling, Van Slyke has performed all over the world but quickly acknowledges that he could not just rely on his size to get heat with the audience. Van Slyke also referenced the importance of creating a ripple effect throughout the audience. Van Slyke explained:
So I’m usually yelling at people, and I have to seek out the ones that will yell back. Those interactions are the ones that let me know if I’m going to get a good reaction from the crowd. So I have to keep finding reasons outside of my entrance to get at people. If the crowd doesn’t know me than it’s actually easier, because some little kid will hold out his hand and he’s happy to see a wrestler and want a high five, and I just stare through him and snarl for as long as it takes to break him (laughs) I feel bad because I’m this huge guy and this kid was brave enough to reach out his hand, but hey, I got to find the kid who is happy to see me, if I can get that kid upset, a lot of people follow through on it. And then the kid, his dad, then his mom and then people beside him, they’re all sucked in. It’s not basic David and Goliath stuff, it’s that to be a heel I have to find a way to cheat and hide it from the referee, but still make it visible to the audience. You know I’m a heel because I’m constantly cheating, I’m doing things in the ring that look really vicious, it has to look like I’m really trying to hurt my opponent rather than just wrestle him. So the actual moves and the mentality of, ‘I’m going poke this guy in the eye, when the ref’s not looking I’m going to kick him below the belt,’ that sort of stuff. I need to make you hate me, however I can. I know it works when I can see parents and kids both booing me or giving me the finger with the same level of hatred. Another thing I do is when I’m outside the ring with the guy I’m fighting, I’ll bite the guy in the forehead and then when I’m done, I’ll just shoot a loogie like straight up in the air afterwards. It looks like I just took a bite out of him, it gets reaction every time. They’re like, oh that’s awful, it’s gross, that’s
disgusting, you’re awful, but then I know I got that side taken care of (laughs).

(Van Slyke, personal communication, 8 June 2016)

One of the most accomplished and well-known wrestlers I spoke with about playing the Heel was Colt Cabana, a Chicago-based wrestler who has traveled the world honing his craft over the last twenty years. A podcast host and easy conversationalist, Cabana expressed intrigue in this research, and he made time in a very busy schedule to speak about his experiences as a professional wrestler. In the one available day home in Chicago that Cabana had sandwiched between flights from Los Angeles and then to Germany, we spoke over Skype about his experience as a Heel and one incident he believed represented how a single reaction can spread through the crowd. Cabana explained:

So my character at this festival is a cop, and I’m doing this at a music festival where you can pretty much guarantee there are drugs and drinking and law breaking everywhere, so instantly I’m hated. But there’s this great picture from that first music festival I ever did as Officer Colt Cabana, and it’s this little four-year-old girl like flipping me off on her dad’s shoulders, have you seen that? I have to find it and send it to you. It’s crazy. But that moment, I could have just let it go, but I actually had to react from the ring in a big way. Like I had to act hurt and offended, because that made the rest of the crowd look at this little girl giving me the finger. So I played it up and kept going back to her, but I’d turn to a different side of the crowd every time and point at her, like, “Can you believe this?” I mean, I knew what I was doing, I was using this little girl’s middle finger
as a way to get myself heat with the whole crowd, and thank God she was on her dad’s shoulders so everyone could see, and she helped because she kept it up for an obscenely long time. That was awesome. (Cabana, personal communication, 15 June 2016)

Conclusion

The ways in which each of these performers portray the Heel were varied and similar. Striving to get heat from the audience they have found a persona and behaviors that work best for them. Schechner (1988b) defined performance as “ritualized behavior conditioned/permeated by play” (p. 93). With professional wrestling as the context for ritualized behaviors, each of the verbal and nonverbal performance choices made by each of the performers show a consistency in patterns of engagement with the crowd. Through that engagement, wrestlers acquire an intimate knowledge of what fans come to see and then deprive them of that, in service of social drama as defined by Turner (1982). The effective performance of a Heel character in professional wrestling is a clear extension of social drama and the behaviors intend on creating of a breach and crisis in the relationship between the performer and the audience.

Every layer of the performance must serve the character as well as the audience because the relationship is inherently interdependent. From my observations and interviews, the production and consumption of heat in the audience is the driving force behind each aspect of performance that has been shared.

Next, I consider the formation of a character, and the relationship of that character to the personality of the performer. Through observation and participant responses, we
come to understand the exploring the origination of each character, the tensions between their identity and performance and how playing the role of Heel functions as catharsis.
Chapter 5: Performance and Performer Connection

Field Note


I’ve been trying to interview Drew Gulak for months. He’s an accomplished professional wrestler, with experience as the head trainer at two of the most prolific wrestling schools in the country. I’m dying for the chance to hear him talk about his hard-nosed no nonsense Heel character, whose every movement in the ring looks like it’s designed to cause the maximum amount of pain, and also how he’s able to translate that performance for those just learning the craft. He’s been near the top of my list of targets since I’ve started the project, and this is the last chance I have.

It’s been a long day. Two shows back to back in the same auditorium in Melrose, Massachusetts. The early show went from 2:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m., and the latest show has gone from 7:00 p.m. to 11:30 p.m. It’s approaching midnight and the wrestlers are still behind merchandise tables, selling t-shirts to the few fans left milling around. Drew Gulak is alone at a table, and he makes eye contact with me. He knows that I was in Queens, NY last night, where he wrestled in a particularly hard-hitting match. We spoke shorty afterward, and he mentioned how he had very little interest in doing the interview we had scheduled and would much rather get a few hours of sleep. Drew also knew that I drove to Melrose from Queens early this morning to be there at the same time as the wrestlers. I knew what I was attempting to do. I wanted them to see that I was dedicated, that I was willing to run the same miles and schedule that each of them did, if only for a weekend. It must have worked, because Drew waved me over.
Consent form signed. Audio recorder on. Secondary recorder on. Protocol in hand. Before the first question leaves my mouth, Drew’s hand raises in front of me, and I instinctively stop. Drew looks directly up at me for a moment, then leans into my handheld audio recorder, close enough that when listening back the audio is peppered with the sounds of audible exhaling. In a droll monotone, Drew begins to speak:

I saw your email. I know what your paper is about. Here, I’ll make it easy. So, the Heel is typically a bad guy. Babyface is typically a good guy in a story archetype, which is presented as a product that we are selling to a fan base disguised as a professional wrestling competition and the atmosphere or environment around it. The heel typically exhibits personality traits that the audience wants to relate to in a way that they do not want to associate with or the babyface, which is easier to explain, exhibits traits in a way that the audience would like to see themselves as in a psychological stand point. (pause) I have a degree in Behavioral Science, so you understand where I’m coming from.

I enjoy all aspects of professional wrestling. I do not prefer one performance to the other. The physical basics of being a professional wrestler have to do with acting and safety more than anything. The stage that we perform on for a paying audience is inside of a squared ring with suspension ropes and it’s made of wood and metal and padding and ropes that are very dangerous. So, if you don’t know how to utilize that you can get really messed up. We are actors. It’s all acting. If anyone says otherwise they are delusional and they probably need help. So, we are acting and we are—our role is that we are fighting as
wrestlers professionally so everything becomes a stage performance so that stage performance is, how does a wrestler compete, from body language to strategy as far as attacking someone and trying to win while protecting themselves.

As a trainer, I’ll teach them the proper way to elicit those emotions from an audience and that varies because you can wrestle in front of different audiences all over the world as well as performing through camera which is again, through audiences and markets throughout the world. We’re basically training you to act as a fighter. So, I’m looking for them to act in a way that creates tension in the audience that the audience does not wish to see them win. (Gulak, personal communication, 17 July 2016)

I’m legitimately shaken by his monologue and also my lack of control in the situation. In all of the time that I’ve been conducting these interviews, hanging out with wrestlers, they’ve been some of the nicest people I’ve ever dealt with. This does not feel like one of those times. This is a direct challenge to subvert the interview and answer any questions before I got the chance to ask them, and I wasn’t ready for it. That is written on my face and enunciated through my lack of words as I stammered and stuttered looking for what detail I wanted to follow up on. While attempting to put an understandable question together, Drew’s hand raises again, and he leans back into the recorder.

“See, I’m being a Heel.” (Gulak, personal communication, 17 July 2016)

Chapter Overview

The ways in which each performer portrays the Heel are not random. Their characters have not been assigned, and each wrestler doesn’t have a script on their
character’s motivations. Mapping the connection between the performer and the character is invaluable in understanding not only where that character emanates from, but also the ways in which playing that character can affect the individual. Less than a half hour after concluding an interview with a wrestler who described the qualities of his Heel performance as “the worst parts of me, without a filter,” I heard a commotion in an adjacent room. Wrestlers around me were called into the room to separate two individuals who were fighting. As the combatants were pulled from the room, I recognized that one of them was whom I had just concluded an interview with. As insults were shouted across the room, my recent interviewee was wild eyed and thrashing in the arms of no less than four wrestlers holding him back. The argument was based on how my interviewee hadn’t been present while the wrestling ring was being disassembled and being removed from the building, and was called lazy for shirking what was perceived as one of his responsibilities. The reason he wasn’t available to help tear down the ring was because he was speaking with me. I watched as my interviewee scratched and clawed at the arms holding him back, shouting threats and demanding to be let go. I saw traces of the character I had seen perform earlier, who stomped to the ring and made fans seated in the front row cower at his intensity. During our interview this wrestler remarked how his intensity was central to his character, and he felt a need to create an aura of electricity throughout the audience when he appeared in order to create a feeling of unpredictability. The words unhinged, psycho, and crazed dotted the explanation of his character, and each time those terms were used, I noted the general calm and control of my interviewee in that moment. There was an obvious contradiction with the soft-spoken and respectful
interviewee and the character I had watched earlier, and he explained how each of those qualities were ones that he could access at any time. Cooler heads prevailed during this physical confrontation, as each wrestler was removed from the room and given time to calm down. Each refused a handshake and decided it best to stay separated for the rest of the night. I received a message from the interviewee the next day, asking if I would not use his name if I referred to that incident. I agreed, which is why the above is without an identifier. The incident was illustrative of the thin line that separates the character from the individual, as well as how an evaluation of personality traits contributes to performing the Heel. This chapter explores how the connection between the performer and performance comes from the performer creating that Heel character. While the development of the character is rooted in the identity of the performer, that development is complicated by emotional and physical vulnerability due to an immediate and intense audience response. Finally, this chapter will address how performing the role of Heel functions as catharsis for the participants.

Connection Between Performer and Performance

As previously discussed, the specific actions that each participant identified as Heel behaviors are intended to gain heat with the audience, but those behaviors must be consistent with the character that each participant is embodying. Schechner (1988b) discussed the dichotomy of the performer and performance:

When, in western theater, we speak of an actor “portraying a role,” using a metaphor from painting where the artist studies a subject and produces an image of that subject, we slide away from the main fact of theatrical performance: that
the “portrayal” is a transformation of the performer’s body/mind—the “canvas” or “material” is the performer. (p. 167-168)

Professional wrestling is a site where the identity of the performer has a direct impact on the body of the performance. The double identity that is present in each of these performers is heightened due to the process through which each performer created their character. The genesis of the Heel character that each performer plays emerged as a consistent topic in each participant’s interview.

Hecht’s (1993) communication theory of identity offers a perspective on the direct relationship between a performer’s identity and Heel performance. The four frames of identity that Hecht identified are personal, enacted, relational, and communal. Through self-analysis, creation of a character, performance of that character, and audience interaction, these frames are applicable to Heel performance.

Goffman (1959) identified two extremes, sincere and cynical, when considering a performer’s belief in the impression of reality that is being portrayed. Goffman stated:

At one extreme, one finds that the performer can be fully taken in by his own act; he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality…at the other extreme, we find that the performer may not be taken in at all by his own routine…coupled with this, the performer may be moved to guide the conviction of his audience only as a means to other ends, having no ultimate concern in the conception that they have of him or of the situation. When the individual has no belief in his own act and no ultimate concern with the beliefs of the audience, we may call him cynical, reserving the term “sincere” for
individuals who believe in the impression fostered by their own performance. (p. 17)

Goffman’s sincere and cynical classifications illustrate an important component in the creation of a Heel character. Through those responses and my own observations, I have found that each participant is well aware that, by creating a Heel character that extends from their personality in everyday life, they are best suited to perform that role effectively.

A consistent phrase that emerged throughout interview responses referred to each individual’s personality, but “with the volume turned up.” This relates directly to the personal frame, the first frame of identity in Hecht’s (1993) communication theory of identity. Hecht posited:

Identity is a characteristic of the individual stored as self-cognitions, feelings about self, and/or a spiritual sense of self-being. As a characteristic of the individual, identity has been known as self-concept or self-image and provides an understanding of how individuals define themselves in general as well as particular situations. (p. 79)

The second frame in Hecht’s (1993) communication theory of identity is the enactment frame, where “identities are enacted in social interaction through communication and may be defined by those messages” (p. 79). Combining the personal frame with the enactment frame show the two steps identified by interviewees as necessary in successfully performing as a Heel. As responses show, two components needed to be a Heel are the ability to find aspects of one’s own personality through introspection that
can be sincerely performed and identifying verbal and nonverbal strategies to enact that performance for the audience.

**Heel Informed by Identity**

Ethan Page shared that it was “first piece of advice someone ever gave me was, the best way you could be a Heel is be your worst self with the volume turned way up” (personal communication, 16 July 2016). Page referenced that piece of advice again later in our interview when explaining the genesis of his “All Ego” Ethan Page persona:

I just brought to all the companies I work for the same character, it's yourself with the volume turned up. So, being a bad guy is fun for me. It just comes very naturally to me as well though, so I don’t know. I get to do things I can never do in my real life, like, I’m married and I love my wife, I’m a faithful guy. I have dogs. I love my family. There’s no divorce or anything like that, so like I am a good-natured dude. But still, there’s parts of me who feel like I deserve more exposure and deserve more recognition than I’m getting from the entire professional wrestling world, and I get to channel that into All Ego. (Page, personal communication, 16 July 2016)

Instead of the character needing to be the whole of one’s personality, it can be aspects of one’s personality that are amplified in service of the performance. Ethan Carter III was quick to explain how even though he doesn’t identify with the qualities of being an entitled male model, he knew he needed to find some part of his own personality that would exist in this character. Carter III stated:
I’m glad that people appreciate the work we put in now to building a character. The thing about wrestling is we act, but we are not actors, because if we were actors we would be having stunt men do the shit and getting paid a lot more money. A truly good wrestling character has to come from inside you and has to be an extension of yourself. I’m not a model or anything obviously, but yeah there’s a part of me that takes pride in being the center of attention, for completely different reasons but yeah, that’s still there. So that’s the thing I focused on, the wanting everyone to see what I’m doing and appreciate it, me personally its because I’m really good at what I do, which is wrestling, but the model feels like he’s really good at what he does, which is being hot? I don’t know whatever it is, but it’s that common ground of wanting to be acknowledged and recognized for what I’m really fucking good at. So that’s the common thing that was easy for me to do as EC3. (Carter III, personal communication, 17 June 2016)

For my participants, the decision of what part of their personality to accentuate in an attempt to be disliked by the crowd was an easy one. VsK shared with me how becoming a Heel meant infusing his performance with aspects of his personality that were already well known by his friends and co-workers. VsK explained:

The fans need to be invested; they have to be invested in hating me, so I have to figure out, how would I hate me? I thought that was going to be a real problem, seriously, like figuring out how to get people to hate me. Yeah, it wasn’t a problem at all (laughs). I never get tired of it. I love being the asshole VsK. It’s so easy for me, so easy to be an asshole. I mean, I like to think that I’m a nice guy.
None of my friends seem to think that though, even my wife says that I’m an asshole to a lot of people. Seriously, ask anyone here, and they’ll tell you I am the second biggest piece of shit only to one other person that’s here tonight, and I’m not going to say who, but yeah everyone knows I’m a real sarcastic asshole. I mean you must know it by now, right? So real life, guess what, I’m that guy. That makes VsK really easy for me. (VsK, personal communication, 10 September 2016)

Cloudy shared a similar realization during our conversation, that his cocky Heel character was developed over a period of time where he became more comfortable being himself in front of audiences. Cloudy’s short stature was something that children in the audience related to into his late twenties, so to counteract their initial connection with the physical presentation of his character, Cloudy relied on part of his personality that came naturally to obtain heat with audiences of all ages:

Lately, I’ve been a heel probably 90% of the time. For the past six or seven years maybe, it’s exclusively what I’ve done. I realized that who I kind of am in real life is a Heel, so I just kind of brought that to the ring. And I mean, it’s weird to say that because, I am kind of a dickhead. I’ll be perfectly honest with you. But I’m not the degree of a dickhead I am when I’m in the ring, but like, I know where it comes from. I get to act out the things that I pretty much already do, just in a more magnified way, you know? I’ve been a heel for so long that I feel like I have become accustomed to it and so, and like I said, I think that’s in my nature, to the point where I haven’t been a Face for a long time, I’ll get asked if I want to be the
Heel or the Face with a new guy that I’m working with, and at this point if I have a choice I’m always choosing Heel. It’s definitely fun to be liked but just, I don’t know, my personality makes it easier to be hated, and in this world being hated is not a bad thing. (Cloudy, personal communication, 10 June 2016)

Matt Cross has competed all over the world over the past 17 years. Cross has been featured on television and headlined wrestling shows in the United States, Europe, Japan, and Mexico. Cross is roughly the same height as Cloudy, but he carries an extra thirty pounds of pure muscle. Cross spoke at length about the origination of his character and how a point of pride in his lifestyle became fodder for heat with audiences. Cross recalled:

I remember when I started, I was just in high school and I was just an angry straight edge kid, so I wanted my ring name to be 18th Amendment. I was really into being straight edge, and at that time it meant that you were also very outward about it and wanted other people to know that. I was an angry kid who was straight edge, and that’s what became my persona. I ended up not going with that name, but being straight edge was the most important part. I was using it as a way to show people I was better than them, like I don’t need drugs and alcohol but you all do, and that’s how I felt in real life. It was easy to make people mad when you put that real life morality out there. (Cross, personal communication, 18 October 2016)

Cross employed his personal decision to remain alcohol and drug free as an aspect of his character, and, in the beginning of his career, it was the defining trait of his performance.
As the character developed, Cross decided to integrate more for the audience to dislike. When deciding what to highlight that could be disliked by the crowd, Cross went back to the way that he has chosen to live his life for inspiration. The dedication that has sculpted his physical presence is apparent upon first sight of Cross, and he asserted:

If I’m a heel then I am going to highlight the fact that I eat six healthy meals a day every two and half hours, and they’re timed out and measured. I’m going to talk about how most people don’t do that, simply because they don’t have the discipline or the willpower or the goals and dreams that I have to do it. They know they couldn’t get in shape like me. They wish they could and they can’t. They are angry with me because I have the dedication and discipline they wish they could have. Then I build off it, saying how testosterone is pumping through me and spilling out of my face, and you can naturally know I’m cooler than you, and you can physically see it in what I look like. Just standing there is looking like this is getting under people’s skin, all I have to do is point it out and talk about it. (Cross, personal communication, 18 October 2016)

While Cross tapped aspects of his real life and accentuated them, Marc Hauss found that he needed to tap into his identity only after a failed attempt at creating a Heel character. Attempting to live up to a persona that had been thrust upon him, Hauss explained how his inability to connect with the Heel character led to a poor performance:

In college at Oswego, my friends all said I was like the ultimate big man on campus, or at least, they thought I acted like it at the time. Maybe it was because I had more friends outside of our little group or I was doing other stuff on campus,
I don’t know. They just saw me as this campus lothario for some reason, and that wasn’t true at all, I was a complete introvert with most people. But after I started wrestling, I was just this generic dude in tights and had no character, so I was like, screw it, I’m kind of comfortable with this because as a joke it’s in college so I’m just going to go with it. So, I was like, I’m going to be Every Ladies’ Dream, this real overly sexual character, like basically the guy who gets all the girls. But, I wasn’t being true to myself. When you’re wrestling and you get to that point where it becomes a part of you, that’s when it gets easy. I know that now. But back then, it wasn’t a part of me so I was putting on this fake character and I didn’t believe it. I didn’t believe the Heel that I was. I was just being some douchebag that was like oh, I’m going to see what I can do to get people to go boo and I didn’t truly believe it. I could rely on the cheap stuff to get a quick reaction, but it wasn’t sustainable because I didn’t buy into the character. (Hauss, personal communication, 11 June 2016)

Hauss acknowledged the lack of belief in his own performance, and his evaluation that the performance suffered because of that disconnect between Hauss’ true personality and the Every Ladies Dream character he was trying to portray. Hauss’ close friend and fellow performer Jackson Smart explained that he had many conversations with Hauss during the performance of Every Ladies’ Dream, and the two focused primarily on why the character wasn’t connecting with audiences. Jackson Smart serves as Hauss’ manager in terms of the wrestling storylines, accompanying Hauss to the ring and remaining ringside throughout his matches. Smart typically dons white pants, a blue oxford button
down shirt with a white bow tie, and white suspenders. Smart sometimes wrestles, as part of a tag team with Hauss, but the thrust of his Heel character is cowardice and an aversion to any physicality. Sitting down and speaking with Smart and Hauss together showed the elaboration and labor both dedicated to fixing the performance of Hauss’ Heel character, and what type of character would be more true to Hauss’ personality, and how could that character generate heat with audiences. Smart explained his advice to Hauss when it came to developing a new character:

        Psychologically, if you really want to get into it with Marc, just talk to him about wrestling. Sooner or later you’ll get it out of him that he’s upset about the opportunities he hasn’t gotten in wrestling. I mean, Heel characters should feel like they’re upset at something, so why not take that real feeling and use it. Be a guy that’s mad at everyone else because they’ve gotten opportunities for titles, or to make more money, or they’re in the main event when you really deserve it. I mean, I know Marc, and it’s not like he’d be complaining about that loudly, but know him well enough and you learn that he’s not necessarily that upset about the opportunities that he hasn’t gotten but it still kind of bugs him. He’s aware, and it bugs him. So basically just amp it up and goes crazy with it. (Smart, personal communication, 11 June 2016)

Following this realization, Hauss transitioned his character into one that played off of his frustration with not achieving more opportunities in professional wrestling. When asked to describe his current Heel character, Hauss stood and took a step back from the table. With wide eyes and a raised volume, Hauss articulated the mindset of his character the
same way he would in the center of the ring to a gathered audience, referred to as a “promo” in professional wrestling:

My name is Marc Hauss. I am the guy that goes to your town, wrestles your best guy, beats the piss out of him, tears your ring down, then goes to the next town, you know why? This is my house. That ring is my house, and I know regardless of whether I have a contract or not, on TV or not, I am better than you. You can’t get me out of my house, so come in here, do your best, I will throw you out like the trash that you are, and I’ll be in here standing tall. Bring him on. It doesn’t matter who you are. Veteran, rookie, on-TV, off-TV, legend, starting up, doesn’t matter. Come to my house, my house for a reason, I’ll work you, I’ll wrestle you, and I’ll embarrass you, I’ll do it better than the guy in the main event and the guy in the opening match, and that’s real. Cut. (Hauss, personal communication, 11 June 2016)

The difference between the two characters that Hauss played is apparent. Using Goffman’s (1959) dichotomy of sincerity and cynicism, the latest character that Hauss is performing has a much more direct relationship to his identity and past experience, allowing for a sincere performance. The Every Ladies Dream character left Hauss without belief in his own performance, and the cloud of cynicism was directly related to the effectiveness of that character.

Bobby Fish also referenced how finding parts of one’s personality that contribute to a good Heel character and focusing on them were essential to a good performance. Fish has been performing for over 15 years, and professional wrestling has taken him all
over the world. Honing his craft in Japan for years, Fish learned how to control an
audience through physical action, as the language barrier prevented him from verbally
sparring with many of those in attendance. When returning to wrestle in the United
States, Fish acknowledged that he had more work to do in order to develop a character
that could connect with audiences. Fish pointed out how the realization to accentuate
parts of his personality that were already present and fold them into his Heel character
did not come until years into his career, and, afterward, he noted a change in how he was
received by audiences:

There’s good parts of my personality and there’s not so good parts. And I think I
show them both with no filter, and now I know that’s something fans can see.
That’s part of what helps fans get into my work. In the beginning, I wasn’t
comfortable being the same guy I am in the dressing room in front of people, for
years, I wasn’t able to bridge that gap. A friend of mine told me one time, he
goes, the guy that I see in the locker room bullshitting with the boys and making
people laugh, that’s the guy I need to see out there. That light bulb was finally
going off. It just so happens that that guy from the locker room is probably the
most sarcastic fucker you could ever encounter, and I always felt like I was
pushing that to the side when I went out there, like I couldn’t do sarcasm in front
of a crowd. But it was really easy for the audience to read when I started trying it,
probably because it’s my natural self and I’m a pro at it (laughs) but then it was
pretty easy to become a heel. All of a sudden I wasn’t doing anything outside of
my comfort zone, I literally felt like I’m just being me like I’m sarcastic. I grew
up in a home with a father who was just sarcastic beyond sarcasm, I mean so dry. I think just, you know, it rubbed off on me like you’d expect it to and if there is one thing that I am its fucking sarcastic. And so that one little thing made it really easy to be to be a heel at that time, and I can’t believe how long it took for me to figure that out. (Fish, personal communication, 11 July 2016)

Fish was not the only participant who acknowledged having another person in the industry identify what traits they should imbue their in-ring character with. RJ City also shared experiences of making his eccentric preferences in popular culture part of his character:

That's how I started with my character, because I listen to a lot of old Sinatra music, so I was singing in the back and some of the guys were like, "You should do this in the ring.” So, it comes from a real place, I didn't have to do too much to research this character per se, because it's what I normally would do or say. It also comes from this is another obscure reference that I apologize for. Have you ever seen SCTV? There's a character on it called Bobby Bittman, and he's a comedian, it is a parody of Jerry Lewis. But basically the idea is that he'll say things as a comedian, but the next second say “in all seriousness” and then he’ll speak about very serious subjects, and then go right back into the shtick. It's very childish and simple but that was a thing that I felt was naturally in me to do, to play with the audience and their attention like that, and also something that no one was doing in wrestling at all. It's a fun character to do, really fun to be, I think it's
not obnoxious but just ignorant, that's the best way I can describe it. (City, personal communication, 28 June 2016)

Johnny Gargano also shared City’s acknowledgement of popular culture as an influence. One of the many digressions in the conversation I had with Gargano referenced movies and television shows we both enjoyed. Gargano tied one of those shows into our conversation when explaining how he decided on his performance as a Heel character.

Gargano identified himself as “a really nice guy,” and he needed to find a way to understand why a character could behave in a way that would make people dislike him. Gargano drew on a shared favorite television show for inspiration:

I took a lot of things that I like from pop-culture. One of my favorite Heels was the Governor on The Walking Dead. I think I understood where he was coming from more than most people who watched the show because I’ve had that same mindset as a Heel. I’m cheating and doing what might look like bad things, but look at the reason why I’m doing it. I took that kind of the Governor when he—if you watch any of The Walking Dead at all, that was his whole demeanor was you thought he’s such a good guy on the outside to certain people but he’s really a horrible person, but, whenever he does terrible things, they’re for the greater good of the people he cares about. So even though I’m a Heel, I have to feel one-hundred percent justified in your actions. One-hundred percent. I think you have to believe everything you’re doing. You don’t think you’re a bad guy, you’re a good guy and you’re doing what’s best for the world, basically. But I think that
really makes the best evil villain. (Gargano, personal communication, 17 July 2016)

One of the most interesting responses that I received from a respondent about the creation of their Heel character and where they drew inspiration was from Gregory Iron. Iron was born with cerebral palsy, which most severely affects his right arm. His right arm is noticeably smaller than his left, and he has a limited range of motion with his right arm and right hand. Iron has been a professional wrestler since 2006, starting in the Cleveland area and now wrestling all over the country, and by his estimation, had played the role of Face for the first half of his career. Iron spoke to me via Skype about how he first wanted to present himself to audiences as he entered the industry:

I remember thinking, if I made it to being a wrestler, I would put a handicap symbol right on my ass. I figured if nobody knew anything about me or if the announcer didn’t announce me properly, the crowd would remember they guy with the handicap symbol on his ass and kind of want to know more about his story. So, that was the only thing I really knew about my character that I was going to for lack of a better term I was going to exploit my disability. I was going to put that handicap symbol on my gear. I don’t know, I wanted the handicap symbol to be, I wanted to redefine what it meant, I guess. I didn’t want it to be a sign of weakness or I get the closest parking spot or whatever the case may be. I want this to be empowering. I wanted to kind of change the idea of what the handicap symbol exactly represented. I didn’t want it to be something that people
are ashamed of. I wanted people to recognize that there’s this part of me I can’t change and I’m proud of it. (Iron, personal communication, 24 August 2016)

While Iron’s story of personal struggle to become a professional wrestler and development of his character were enrapturing, I was perplexed at how this character could ever be booed by the audience. Iron noted:

I found that it was very hard for me to be a Heel without giving the crowd a backstory so that was something that I didn’t pick up on right away, it was a subconscious thing this doesn’t feel right. Because people didn’t want to boo me because it’s such a natural underdog story. It’s like, how could you boo the disabled guy, right? (Iron, personal communication, 24 August 2016)

As I observed his performances, I marveled at Iron’s ability to generate heat with the audience, using his disability as a focal point. While Iron may have been a Face for the first half of his career, the second half of his career he has worked primarily as a Heel, and Iron credits his ability to get heat with the audience to a realization he had about his own personality:

I felt like I knew how to be a bad guy because I think I’m naturally a funny guy, I’m a natural smartass, I know how to get on people’s nerves in real life. I was always really aware of people walking on eggshells around me so I’d get out ahead of it by being a smartass and a jerk. I talk more shit about my friends than anyone else, and, if they ever said something back, I could always pull the disability card (laughs) I’ve always had a chip on my shoulder I guess, so combine the chip with a natural ability to cut people down, and it was so easy to
piss people off. I felt like I could at least on the microphone be a bad guy. (Iron, personal communication, 24 August 2016)

Iron engages the audience by acknowledging how he’s overcome the odds and become successful. At first glance, this strategy would inspire audience support, but the way that he frames his success in relation to the audience separates him from them. Iron explained:

We’ll do this thing where I turn to the crowd and call them jealous because I’m successful and I was able to get out of Cleveland. Basically I’m better than all of you because I’m not stuck in this shitty, shitty town. I’m actually making a name for myself, you guys look at me like I have a disability but it’s all of you with a disability. You’re fat. You’re cross-eyed. You look stupid. You’re unemployed. Those are real disabilities. Look at me, I’m in better shape than you are, and you have two working arms, so how am I the disabled one? (Iron, personal communication, 24 August 2016)

Iron’s strategies to get heat with the audience are fascinating, and from observation, effective. At an Absolute Intense Wrestling event in Cleveland, Iron’s time with a microphone in his hand speaking to the audience prior to a match is nearly drowned out with boos. Seated in the front row, I watched Iron control the audience simply by bringing the microphone to his mouth to speak, cueing the crowd to boo louder, and then taking the microphone away from his mouth without saying a word. This interaction went on for a few minutes, and Iron looked at me from the ring and mouthed, “See? Easy.”
Emotional Vulnerability

Iron’s experiences rang as so intensely personal, where he employed such a visible and present part of his identity as part of the performance. Many of my participants acknowledged how the blurring of their visible and present selves with the character performance was unique to professional wrestling. Using Hecht’s (1993) communication theory of identity, the third frame applicable to identity is the relational frame. Hecht defined how the relational frame functions, “identity is mutually constructed in social interaction. In this construction identity emerges in relationships and becomes a property of the relationship because it is jointly negotiated” (p. 79). The fourth frame is the communal frame, defined as “something held by a group of people, which, in turn, bonds the group together. The frame locates the identity in the group not the individual or the interaction” (p 80). In the case of Heel performance, social interaction and the interdependence of the community are necessary for the formation and development of the character. Without the desired feedback from the audience, the performer is unaware of the effectiveness of the performance. While the feedback is necessary, the immediacy and intensity of the feedback that informs the character does not come without risk to the performer. The risk associated with Heel performance exists during and after the performance, showing that the relationship with the audience is as impactful as it is interdependent. As my research attests, the performance of the Heel in professional wrestling presents a risk through vulnerability.

Kevin Graham spoke with me at length about how he learned early in his career that his character was the one that the audience was booing, and, by accomplishing that,
he was doing the job he set out to do. However, even in service of that goal, Graham shared occasional hurt feelings:

I think I was only a couple months in where I started yelling back and forth with some guys in the front row. One of them said my tattoo was shitty, and I’m not going to lie, that hurt. He’s absolutely right; it is shitty, and I just don’t have the money to get it fixed yet. But when he said that I was legitimately upset and I remember staying away from trash talk with the crowd for a few weeks. I seriously got my feelings hurt. It’s so dumb because I guess that’s what I’m trying to do to them. (Graham, personal communication, 8 June 2016)

Cloudy shared a similar perspective, but gave more context to both the situation and how a single insult from a fan over a decade ago still stays with him. Cloudy leaned back in a folding chair, and in more clipped speech than the rest of our interview, shared:

People come to wrestling because it’s interactive. That’s what they want to do. Once again, being a short guy, everybody picks on me for being short, so they’re going to start on me, I have plenty of comebacks for that. I joke along with them, and then they’re usually like, oh this guy is cool he can take a joke. They should get it if you’re doing your job right they should get it. Most of the time, it’s not that bad. There have definitely been a couple times (pause) I’ll share one story and then that’ll be perfect. So, I started wrestling when I was really young, and here I am in front of a lot of big crowds when I was really young and I had a terrible complexion, I had acne for a while. So here I am, I’m a Heel on this show in like 2005, and I went out there just trying to be myself and just one guy, it only
took one person, it’s not like the crowd chanted it, he just says “Nice fucking acne,” and I was crushed. That really, that really, (pause) the fact that it stuck with me this long, that it’s still there because people say fucking terrible shit about me all the time but that was what got me. The truth hurts. It really does. Generally, I’m pretty good, and I can take a joke; it definitely doesn’t haunt my soul but, yeah, that one got me. (Cloudy, personal communication, 10 June 2016)

Complexion compliments also have an affect on Gregory Iron, whose demeanor and language took a turn when describing how some fans point out blemishes, Iron stated: Through my teenage years and still to this day I always had really bad acne. So occasion I would get a breakout and it’s gross, but there’s nothing I can do about it. I’ll see this big zit and in the mirror, and I’ll think to myself yeah, it doesn’t look that bad and then I show up somewhere and then they’re will be a guy who says “Oh man look at that disgusting zit on your forehead, why don’t you pop that?” I think to myself, oh, you fucking bastard. How dare you actually point that out to me? You’re a real cocksucker. I immediately put that mindset into being a bad guy, you shouldn’t want to boo me because I’m disabled but here's what I’m going to do, I’m going to point out any flaw that you have I’m going to point it out just like this asshole who pointed out my zit. (Iron, personal communication, 24 August 2016)

When further discussing how that one comment enraged Iron, it led to his underlying philosophy on what it means to be a Heel, and ultimately the type of heat he wants to create with the audience. Iron continued:
I’m not going to be afraid to make fun of people because if you’re going to be a jerk then I’m going to be a bigger jerk, and that’s what a jerk would do, so I’m going to give you no choice but to want to kill me. I don’t want you to like me. I want you to want to stab me in the parking lot when I leave the building. I feel like if I can make someone believe in 2016 that I’m that much of an asshole and then they want to beat my ass in the parking lot or come into the ring and try to fight me, I’m doing a good job because not a lot of guys can get that heat with two working arms, and I’m doing it being 5’4”, having cerebral palsy, and only one good arm. You’re damned if you do and damned if you don’t because if you come in the ring and you beat up a handicap guy, congratulations you beat up a handicap guy. But then, if you come in the ring and get beat up by a handicap guy, sucks to be you cause now you’ve got to go home and tell your friends you got beat up by a handicap guy. You’re fucked either way. When I keep that mindset and that goal, I try to pull genuine emotions out of people and I feel like it works. (Iron, personal communication, 24 August 2016)

Iron shared with me that, regardless of his goals as a Heel, he’s never been approached in a parking lot after a show or had a fan try to attack him. That was not the case with the other wrestlers I spoke with, as their collected experiences illustrated another type of vulnerability.

**Physical Vulnerability**

Another component of the vulnerability of their role is the accessibility that the audience has to them, whether it physically close to them during matches, or after shows
have ended, but the heat generated with some of the audience hasn’t dissipated. Ethan Page told a story where he found himself in danger after the show had ended:

We were in somewhere in Ohio, and I was in a group called IHOP, the International House of Pain, and it was all people from Canada. We had people chase us from the ring to our car. We had to leave, and take a long circuitous route to the hotel because they were following us, that’s how mad they were. Some of the guys in the car were all pumped up like it was awesome that we got them that pissed off, but I hate it. I hate it because I know this is fake. Like, I don’t want my life to ever be in danger or else I would have been a UFC fighter. So, like, it’s all a show for me, like, I want people to realize, like, you’re paying for a ticket to be entertained. If you want to be part of the show that’s great; if I can convince you that I’m that bad of a guy that’s great, don’t chase me around like you’re going to punch me in the face. (Page, personal communication, 17 June 2016)

Page wasn’t the only wrestler to share stories of being physically confronted by fans. Sean Carr has been wrestling for eight years, primarily in the New York State area, and is seeing an increase in his popularity in the industry in the last few years since playing the role of Heel more often. Carr credits his performances as a Heel for this growth in recognition, as promoters see him as a more well rounded professional wrestler. Tall and handsome, Carr’s Heel character is based in his technical ability in the ring, touting his ability to out-wrestle anyone in the building. When asked about his
experiences as a Heel and how he knows that an audience is responding well, Carr shared a story with me about a time that he was attacked by an audience member:

   Here we go, it's a little story. So, there is this kid, he’s 13. That was confirmed by the way, 13. That’s important. Old enough to know right from wrong. So, I was like, ‘You suck kid,’ just trying to get heat with the front row. He punches me in the face. I was stunned. I was stunned. I look to the right, and I'm assuming it's his father, and he's laughing. At this point, I'm expecting security or somebody to come, but, nothing. So, I was like, "Hey kid. Not cool." Well, he punches me again. At this point I'm pissed, and his father is just literally cheering him on. He winds up for numbers three. I can't really move anywhere. The guardrail is right up against the ring. I'm stuck on a rock and a hard place. He winds up for number three, and I just, I don't violently shove him. I don't push him down. Out of self-defense, I just lightly put him in his seat. I didn't force him down in any way. I didn't hurt him. I said, ‘Cool out.’ Well now his father gets in my face, had to be 6’5”, 230lbs and huge. Great. (Carr, personal communication, 10 June 2016)

   At this point in our conversation, my mouth hung agape as other wrestlers in the locker room gathered around to hear the story again, as Carr confirmed to me that the story of this incident had been told and re-told many times since it happened. Carr continued:

   I get the heck out of there and go to the back, like, I ran away from that kid’s father, and it’s fine because I’m a Heel right? I can be a coward. I think it's funny. So, anyway, we get to the back, I'm just saying thanks to all the guys for the match because again it was a great match, it was fun, all those guys are my
friends. We’re the last match of the night, and we’re packing up our stuff, and someone peeks outside and sees there are all these fans around our cars. I see the kid, the dad, and all these people are waiting outside for us. They don't know which one my car is, but they want to fight us. So what we did is have this other kid take my keys and get my car, the people don’t care about him, they want me, so he gets in my car and pulls it around to the other side of the building. We walk out, no one on that side, we get in the car. We could have left, but I decided to Heel it up a little more. Instead of leaving I hang out of the back window and have the kid drive next to the parking lot, I say, ‘Hey, dumb asses! You ain't fighting me tonight,’ and we peel out, middle fingers in the air. That company has called me to go back and work for them again, but I turned them down. I don’t really want to get my ass kicked. (Carr, personal communication, 10 June 2016)

At the end of Carr’s story, Brute Van Slyke tapped me on the shoulder and told me to come see him when I was done interviewing Carr. Van Slyke said, “there’s a story I have to tell you now that I heard that one.” Carr laughed and said, “I think Brute’s might beat mine; no one ever came to find me at work.” Later that night after the matches had ended, I spoke with Brute as he was wiping the sweat from his bald head, having just concluded the main event less than a half hour earlier. Before starting his story, Van Slyke remarked how he never thought he’d have a story like this to tell just from professional wrestling. The story he shared with me left me stunned:

There’s this kid in the front row who’s being real obnoxious like, all day, just trying to get someone to notice him. My match is over; I’m leaving, he puts his
hands on me. I shoved the kid to get him back, and I’m big, so I kind of launch
the kid on his ass. Now he’s embarrassed and tried to hop in the guard rail to
come after me and security held him back. This is a Saturday; next day is Sunday,
I’m working in a different town, then Monday comes along, and I go to work, I’m
in the warehouse at Wal-Mart. The kid tracked me down at work. He came in to
my work to fight me. I don’t know how he found out where I worked, probably
someone we knew in common on Facebook or something, but he drove 25 miles
from Whitesboro to Oneida to come and fight me. Now he’s walking around
Wal-Mart looking for me. He’s asking my co-workers where I am, telling them
he’s a fan and wants to say hi. Then some people tell me they heard him on the
phone with his girlfriend, telling her to get bail money because he’s going to kick
my ass. So I’m not going to hide, I come out of the back and walk up to him,
‘I’m like, you need help with something?’ He starts swearing at me, causing a
scene, my managers are escorting him out of the store. We called the cops; he
started swearing at the cops, gets arrested, gets hauled off to jail. An hour later,
his mom shows up looking for me, saying I got her son arrested. They’re all
banned from the store for life, and I don’t even work there anymore (laughs)!
(Van Slyke, personal communication, 10 June 2016)

I had spoken with Cloudy also earlier in the day, and upon hearing Brute’s story,
Cloudy quickly remarked, “I was in the ring and a guy in the crowd threw his chair at me,
one of the craziest things I’ve ever seen. I wasn’t brave, I got the hell out of there.” Colt
Cabana also shared with me a story of when being an effective Heel meant losing a tooth:
They’re booing and they’re mad, and I’m happy because that’s the reaction I’m trying to get. I wasn’t happy when I got pelted in the lip with a quarter, because I lost a tooth. You imagine like anybody else in show business, if that happens I bet the show is over and they’d just leave, right? Nope, not us, because as performers and as professional wrestlers, that’s what we are going for, so we just kind o have to deal with it. That’s what I’m going for as a bad guy you know and yes so even though I lost a tooth, I definitely felt satisfaction. (Cabana, personal communication, 18 June 2016)

Instead of focusing on one fan, or one pocket of fans, Marc Hauss took the tactic of insulting an entire arena’s hometown prior to a match. The resulting heat from the audience extended well beyond the conclusion of the match. Through a smile, Hauss said:

I was up in Cortland, NY and talked about how the audience seemed to be having a race between teeth and brain cells to see which they could lose quicker. I just kept commenting on how they were all missing teeth and how they're all third generation-inbred scum, and during the match it was nuclear level heat. After the show, I was one of the last people at the arena. The promoter comes up to me and says was like, you might not want to leave, there's fifteen people out here waiting for you, one guy has a tire iron. I had to be escorted to my car by security and like five other guys. It felt awesome. Well, shitty and awesome. I ruined their night probably, but that just means I did my job well. (Hauss, personal communication, 11 June 2016)
The unique vulnerability of performing as a Heel includes a level of danger that could result in either emotional or physical harm, as my participants have outlined. The performances are informed by the vulnerability to the same degree that the performers are affected by it. Using Hecht’s (1993) relational and communal frames of identity, we can see that for this performance to truly resonate with audiences and bring about the desired response, it must be honed through the feedback of the audience. That feedback, while necessary, can be hurtful to each performer. I better understand the challenges that the wrestlers face in their attempts to engage the audience, and of that same level of interest to me is how this performance makes each individual feel. A common theme amongst my participants is that playing the role of heel functions as catharsis.

**Heel Work as Catharsis**

Each of the wrestlers acknowledged that they accept their responsibility to engage the crowd in service of a story being told, which entails the unique style of performance that has been outlined above. While most might see the responsibility of making a large audience hate them as much as possible as draining, a consistent benefit that these performers identify is how playing the Heel functions as a cathartic release. These performers expressed a value in having a venue and opportunity to do and say what isn’t socially acceptable.

Dan Barry is a wrestler with 16 years of experience, and he has also served as a trainer for students looking to enter the world of professional wrestling. Barry is a well-respected trainer and exceptional performer in the ring, and speaks with the easy cadence and style of a veteran lecturer. While speaking with him, Barry acknowledged that he is
closer to the end of his wrestling career than the beginning, and spoke about wide ranging experiences in the industry. Barry carved time out of his day to speak with me at his office, where he opined about what benefits he gets from still wrestling on the weekends, sandwiched between busy weeks at his full-time job:

There’s phrasing I’m going to use here that makes perfect sense to a wrestlers and it will not make sense to anyone else who hears this is above all, there is nothing better than “showing ass” to kids. What that means is, no, not pulling your pants down, no, what that means is, you’re willing to look like an idiot. You act like you know it all; you act like you’re the shit, and then you screw up and get your ass kicked, or trip and fall. It’s like slapstick comedy I guess, but, in wrestling, we call it “showing ass”, making yourself look stupid. So you are showing ass, kids love that, they will laugh at you for the rest of the show, even after your match is over, if they see you in that back of the room at your merchandise table they’ll point and laugh at you, they will tell you “You suck”, then you can yell back at that them, “You shut up, you suck!” There is a playfulness of children, even if they know wrestling’s not real, even they know it’s a show, they’d be like “Oh, this guys is an idiot,” and they’ll laugh. My favorite thing to do is go to run the ropes and then trip, then try to get up and do it again and trip and fall out of the ring, then trip getting back into the ring. I look stupid as hell, but kids are laughing, and it feels amazing. Where else can I do that? (Barry, personal communication, 11 September 2016)
In trying to describe the feeling of freedom that comes with being a Heel, Matt Cross tried to relate it directly to me. Cross was aware that I was a graduate teaching associate while conducting research and asked about the classes that I was teaching. Cross explained what it would be like in my profession to have the same level of liberty:

I bet you can’t go into the class room and just yell anything in the world and then kick over the trashcan, call one of your students a stupid idiot, throw a desk. You’d be done, fired. You can one hundred percent do that every week in wrestling, and you just you do it. Now I don’t know if that’s something you want to do, but I know that throughout my day I get those feelings, that I just need to be able to release the frustrations. In wrestling, we can do literally what we want, always every week. It’s like a gift. I wrestled Cody Rhodes last week, and we just decided in the middle of our match to break a table that was in the gym. He just picked me up and put me through it. We didn’t ask anyone, we just did it. It felt great! (Cross, personal communication, 18 October 2016)

Another longtime veteran of professional wrestling, Colt Cabana acknowledged that, as a Heel, he’s afforded the opportunity to say what he wouldn’t usually be able to say:

It’s just like anything I have ever wanted to say to get off my chest, I can do it. I don’t have any hatred for my opponent or anyone in the crowd of anything, but I get annoyed throughout my day like anyone else. I travel so much so there’s going to be annoyances right there, and just like if I ever like, get to that point where I’m just so frustrated, being a Heel is a great way to blow off steam. When I’m my usual self I’m a Face, and I’m not really allowed to bitch or complain or
anything. Nor should I, but you know when you, when I’m a Heel, I get that opportunity sometimes that feels good to do that dance with the audience and also have it be part of the show. (Cabana, personal communication, 18 June 2016)

The setting of the show offers the opportunity to engage in behaviors that wouldn’t be acceptable elsewhere, as has been elaborated earlier, but certain situations stand out as specifically unique to the world of wrestling. RJ City described one such situation:

I wrestled a guy in Buffalo last week, and it was his first match ever. Now, his mom was in the audience, and she was so drunk, so drunk and she was hooting and hollering and cheering for her son. Well then I get the advantage, and then I’m beating down on him while she had her hands over her eyes. She’s yelling at me to stop. The second she started talking, I thought, "Well I guess this is it, this whole match is going to be directed at her now.” You should feel bad but you don't, like really, you really want to do this? So now I'm just hitting him harder, literally beating this kid up in front of his drunk mother in the front row, and I’m thinking in my head, she deserves this for coming here. I’m barely touching him, but it looks great. I know wrestling is crazy enough, as it is, but who would actually pay to watch this? How crazy do you have to be to come to this show and then watch this kid get beat up in front of his mother, and like it this much? (City, personal communication, 28 June 2016)

While situations like these are few and far between, just the act of playing the Heel on a regular basis gives wrestlers like Kai Katana and Bobby Fish a feeling of control over
audience members, and both identified that feeling as something that drives them to continue wrestling. Katana said:

It feels really good to be a Heel. I feel like a freaking man when they’re booing the shit out of me, and it’s addicting. I think it’s the whole masculine bravado feeling you get. It’s such an alpha male environment and everyone wants to be the alpha male and what better alpha male than being a Heel. You’re the guy that no one likes. I’m the guy that will steal your girlfriend when you’re not looking. I’m the guy that’ll beat up your dad if he talks smack and you can’t do anything about it I’m Kai Katana. I’ll steal your girl and kick your ass at the same time. I like that. (Katana, personal communication, 11 September 2016)

Bobby Fish shared that the control he holds over an entire crowd through his actions is something that he can’t experience anywhere else in his life:

I don’t like saying it like this, but you know, it’s a little bit of a turn on for me to be in control of a room. If somebody were to ask me for steps one through five on how to do that, I wouldn’t be able to give you one, because it’s like second nature to me now. I don’t know what it is but I know that when I’m in it, it’s nerve wracking because it could go good, it could go bad, and then there’s all these little nuances throughout where like it starts to go bad and then you get it back and then it starts to go good but then it takes a turn. Oh, I fucking love it. I love being in that control, sometimes even when it doesn’t go how I planned, it’s still amazing. (Fish, personal communication, 11 July 2016)
While some of my respondents identified how playing the Heel allowed them to say or do what they couldn’t usually do, or experience feelings that elude them in everyday situations, they also found that the performance of the Heel permits them to channel past emotions and experiences. Ethan Page acknowledged how his experiences being bullied as a child growing up have a direct impact on his performance of the Heel:

I was, like, always the bud of the joke with all of my friends, so forever. Like, I used to have a mole on my chest, so everyone said I had a third nipple. I always have, like, a target on my back because, like I never wanted for anything in my life, so I’m the first person that you’re going to pick on because everyone is jealous of it. I got a car when I turned 16 or my shoes are new every year for school. So, I’m always going to be the guy that got picked on because they hated the rich kid, you know what I mean. So, that is the stuff that I'm, like, people have been doing that to me my whole life. So, I can easily do that to people. I’ve been, like, taking it in and I’ve wanted to just lash out on people forever, so it's super easy. This gives you an opportunity to do it, and I take full advantage of it (laughs). (Page, personal communication, 16 July 2016)

Gregory Iron explained how positioning the crowd as a surrogate for his father helped inform his mindset as a Heel, and how seeing his father in an audience that he’s attempting to draw heat from both drove his performance and served as catharsis:

My dad was so easy to piss off, and I would just thrive on it because he’s so dumb, he likes to drink his beer. He likes to smoke pot. He’s like, the complete opposite of everything I am. He’s just not a smart guy. He’s stupid. I just look at
a lot of the crowd like they’re my Dad, and I just say to myself boy, you guys are really dumb. I couldn’t tell him that, but I can tell them, and it feels good. (Iron, personal communication, 24 August 2016)

Marc Hauss had undergone a number of personal traumas in the months prior to our interview, and he acknowledged how the opportunities to play the Heel afforded him by professional wrestling have helped him cope. Hauss lauded having professional wrestling as an outlet when going through trials and tribulations:

Being a Heel lately, (pause) I’ve gone through so much shit personally over the past couple of years, and the only therapy I have is to go out there and to be something that I can’t be Monday through Friday. I can’t be this psychotic deranged broken down man but I can do that in the ring, and people will take that as art. Monday through Friday I can’t go into work and go, thanks for calling, go fuck yourself. I can’t do it. Here, I can go out there and say welcome to the show, go fuck yourself. Like, it’s beyond therapeutic. It’s euphoric. I mean, tonight, tonight will be crazy. Oh, I have a lot on my mind. I’ve had a lot going on in the past couple of weeks and tonight, tonight I get to go out and beat up a friend of mine, and he’s going to do the same to me. I’ve been looking forward to working with him and seeing the reactions of the crowd when I’m getting really brutal. He’s okay with it and a lot of the guys back here know exactly what’s been going on in my life the past few weeks and have all been supportive and know that this is my release. To let it all go. To not have to be me for a little while. (Hauss, personal communication, 11 June 2016)
Conclusion

The intrinsic connection between the performer and performance is complicated, and the layers to that connection that have been explored in this chapter inform the mutual influence between performer and performance. The creation of the Heel character deriving from personality traits of each performer identifies an authenticity necessary to portray a Heel that draw heat with an audience. Also a complication to that performance is the unique physical and emotional vulnerability that is embedded in playing a Heel, and offering oneself up to an audience in service of the event carries risks. A benefit of engaging in this behavior, while risky, is the prospect of a cathartic release through performance. Both the setting and the intricacies of the performance provide each wrestler with the chance to work through impulses that derive from a number of sources.

In Chapter Six, I consider the theoretical implications in performance ethnography, limitations of this study, and opportunities for future research in the field of professional wrestling.
Chapter 6: Conclusion and Discussion

Field Note

“Hey! Dissertation guy!”

It’s the last show of a 1200 mile round trip by car, and I was startled by my new moniker as I walked into Our Lady of Mt. Carmel in Cleveland, Ohio. I’m well versed in the building by this point, I know I need to get there at least an hour early if I’m going to secure a decent seat. The last few times I’ve been to this Catholic school gymnasium I’ve had to seek out John Thorne, the co-owner and promoter of Absolute Intense Wrestling, and have him lead me to the locker room to meet up with my interviewee. Today is not as complicated. I’m just here for observation, no interviews, and I’m a little relieved. I’m tired. I’m sore from my car seat and from uncomfortable folding chairs for hours on end over the past week. The stairs leading into the gym are oddly deep and spaced, they take an extra inch of stretch to solidly center your feet. I’ve tripped up these stairs twice before, but today is smooth sailing.

As I crossed the threshold into the gym I hear the above exclamation and my head snaps to attention. I see “All Ego” Ethan Page folding t-shirts behind a merchandise table. I’ve interviewed Page formally a few days ago, but we’ve both been at each of the last four shows in the past six days. Each time we’ve seen each other, Page has had another comment on my dissertation, the tenor of which changes depending on the audience within earshot. In Queens, NY, after completing our interview, Page tapped a fellow wrestler walking past and said “We do this shit for a couple hundred bucks and he’s going to be a doctor because of it, we’re in the wrong business.” The next day in Melrose,
MA, Page pulled me aside and asked if our interview went ok, and if I needed anything else I could let him know. As I walked away from him, fans approached to buy a t-shirt and Page said just loud enough for me to hear “At least you’ll pay me for a t-shirt, this guy wanted an entire interview and wouldn’t give me a thing. Doesn’t he know All Ego’s time is money?”

Now that I’ve been beckoned by my new name, I walked over to Page and shook his hand, and he asked “Who are you here to interview? Need a hand finding anyone?” After I tell Page I’m only there to observe, I throw in a jab, telling him that I’ll be paying close attention to his performance tonight. He laughed and said “I don’t know what the hell I’m going to do tonight, I can barely move. I’ve been in the car for hours.” I want to tell him about my aching back and cracking knee, but I’ve seen Page take at least 50 bumps over the past few days, and I’m not going to put my pain on par with his.

As Page took another stack of shirts from a hard shell suitcase to fold for his merchandise table, he asked “So how’s the paper coming? How much do you have done?” When I started to explain my timeline and how long it would be before pages were being churned out, Page backed away from his table, and loud enough for Gregory Iron and Johnny Gargano to hear, said “You’re not going to be done with this for a year? How slow do you work? I would have finished it by now!”

I smiled, shook my head, and said under my breath, “good heel work.”

**Conclusion**

This dissertation has afforded me the chance to experience a lifelong passion in a way that I never thought possible and uncover the driving forces that enraptured my
attention for so many years as a fan. In articulating the findings of my research, I have been all at once surprised, overjoyed, interested, and eager for the future of this lens of focus on professional wrestling. I greatly appreciated the opportunity and ability to tackle a site of study using performance ethnography that Schechner (2002) previously identified as rich for possibility. Addressing my research questions through the prism of performance ethnography and supplementing observations with rich interview data, I am privileged to share the intricacies of Heel performance and the impact that performance has on the wrestlers who portray it. I will also identify some limitations of this project, which ultimately inform the future directions of this research.

**Addressing Research Questions**

As reference, Research Question 1 and Research Question 1b read as follows:

RQ1: How is the role of the Heel performed in professional wrestling?

RQ1b: Does playing the role of Heel differ from the role of Babyface in professional wrestling? If so, how?

The taxonomy of Heel behaviors that have been articulated in Chapter Four address the above research questions, specifically in terms of the verbal and nonverbal performance of the Heel. The combination of observation and interview responses illustrate how the type of the Heel character that is chosen by the performer directly relates to their chosen behaviors, so the first step in understanding what a Heel does is rooted in knowledge of the character. Whether it be the chin angled upward or smirk of a cocky Heel, or the unaffected stare and slow gait of an aloof Heel, the initial presentation of the character the audience functions to immediately inform the viewers of the role being played. The
extension of cultural performance, social performance, and social drama as articulated by Turner (1982) to the world of professional wrestling is valuable, as the performances that are crafted to create social drama are populated by behaviors of the Heel.

The specific tricks of the trade that I observed and each performer shared that shape the presentation of the Heel character address the above research questions as well. By identifying specific “go-to” behaviors as a Heel that are different from behaviors as a Face, the quoted participants marked the change in performance necessary to portray a Heel. To directly address the research question, playing the role of Heel does differ from playing the role of Face, and the behaviors that mark the difference are rooted in crowd involvement. The need to develop an understanding and be intimately aware of what the crowd wants, and ultimately keeping it from them is the researched, observed, stated and restated intention of the Heel. The stories shared of tried-and-true methods of gaining heat with audiences speak to a marked that distinct change in character presentation between Face and Heel, and the observation of those behaviors in action speak to their efficacy. Using Schechner’s (2002) definition of performance as a basis for these actions, Turner (1982) identification of social drama in performance through four phases: breach, crisis, redressive action, and resolution is applicable to Heel performance. The identification of these specific behaviors and the ability to categorize them as breaches in service of creating heat with audiences is an extension of Turner’s findings in a context they have not been illustrated in prior.

These findings illustrate how playing the Heel has evolved since Oliver and Johnson’s (2007) categorization of Heels throughout wrestling history as egoists,
monsters, connivers, tough guys, and foreigners. Those categories served to define an era of professional wrestling when fans were not attuned to the intricacies of performance and the roles each character embodies. Current professional wrestling fans are more aware that wrestling is predetermined and that each match is a performance. Oliver and Johnson’s archetypes functioned with past audiences, but the majority of their research is focused on an era before widespread acceptance of wrestling as a performance. Today’s professional wrestling fans come to events with knowledge of past performance of the Heel, and rehashing the same Heel tropes aren’t as widely accepted as in years past. The role of the Heel remains the same, to deny the audience something that they are craving while simultaneously drawing a negative reaction, but based on my observation, fans have begun to require more nuance to performance than simply the basic tropes identified by Oliver and Johnson. The specific behaviors outlined by my participants do not rely on a singular trope, they reveal layered performance that is tailored to a specific audience on an event-by-event basis.

RQ2: Do the personal identities of the performers and the requirements of playing the role of Heel impact each other? If so, how?

As stated earlier, each layer of performance of Heel is rooted in both the performer’s understanding of their character’s identity as well as the audience’s understanding of that character’s identity, as they are interdependent. I found that playing the role of the Heel a unique level of introspection for each of the performers, as they learn that part of playing a Heel well entails finding aspects of their personality that can be accentuated in order to get heat with audiences. The effect on the identity of the
performers is the acknowledgement and engagement of traits that have a traditionally negative connotation in quotidian life, but in service of this performance are invaluable. Participants identified the authenticity of the performance as directly related to the quality of the performance. The blurred lines between performance and identity in the context of professional wrestling allow for the combination of performance with Goffman’s (1959) definitions of sincerity in presentation, and including Hecht’s (1993) communication theory of identity. As stated earlier, responses show two components needed to be a Heel are the ability to find aspects of one’s own personality through introspection that can be sincerely performed and identifying verbal and nonverbal strategies to enact that performance for the audience. Through an extension of Hecht’s four frames of identity, we see how the creation and performance of a Heel character is applicable in each frame, and the role that the audience plays in influencing identity.

The effect on identity is most apparent in the blurring of the lines between performer and performance, as respondents identified the vulnerability inherent to portraying a Heel. I see those responses as directly applicable to this research question. The immediate audience evaluation of not only the performance but also the performer was identified by a significant number of participants as having an impact on them emotionally. Participants also acknowledged the potential of physical harm as a result of the performance as having an affect.

The feeling of catharsis that performers explained as a result of the performance directly relates to this question as well. The ability to couch behaviors that wouldn’t be traditionally socially acceptable in performance was identified by participants as a
personal benefit of playing a Heel. The ability to have an outlet that simultaneously contributed to the performance of the Heel as well as served each individual personally speaks to the connection between the performance and performer.

RQ3: Does audience response impact the performance of the role of Heel in professional wrestling? If so, how?

The use of the term “heat” by my participants categorized the importance of audience response, as each behavior directed at the audience was afforded an immediate response. Participants acknowledged the need to be aware of the audience’s desires and then deprive them of that in service of performance. Participants shared that behaviors that garnered the most consistent audience response were the ones that would ultimately become staples of their Heel performance, showing that there was a direct connection between audience response and performance. The story that is being told throughout a wrestling match is one intended for an audience, and the immediate and continued feedback from the audience informs the performers on whether the story is being understood. This goal in Heel performance combines the relational frame of Hecht (1993) communication theory of identity with Turner’s (1982) concept of social drama in performance. The interdependent relationship of the audience informs the identity of the Heel performer, while simultaneously the breaches created through that performance generate heat with the audience.

The way that performers I spoke with referenced the ripple effect of heat throughout an audience also shows a direct connection between audience response and performance. Here the context of professional wrestling expands Singer’s (1959) and
Turner’s (1982) concepts of social and cultural performance. As stated prior, the creation of social drama functioning to build heat within the audience is a necessary component of Heel performance. Responses indicated the ability to perform for pockets of the audience, with the intention that heat will spread throughout the entire crowd. By using the ripple effect of heat throughout the audience, wrestlers are aware of the efficacy of their localized performance, and aware of what parts of the gathered crowd still require attention. As the Heel’s ultimate goal is to build heat throughout the audience, the fervor and location of audience response to each individual behavior is a signal to the performer of audience involvement.

**Limitations**

While I was very pleased with the responses from professional wrestlers to my requests for interviews, I was unable to secure interviews with any female wrestlers. All of my participants are male, and I believe this research would have benefitted from the additional perspective of female wrestlers playing the role of Heel. Women’s wrestling has experienced a metamorphosis in recent years, driven by an influx of talented women wrestlers with national television exposure (Barnett, 2017). I am interested to continue this line of research with female wrestlers and extend my findings to include their experiences.

Due to scheduling restrictions, I was unable to match each interviewee’s responses with an observation of their live performance. With additional time to collect data and resources to travel, each participants interview responses would be compared
with their performance, and allow for multiple viewings of each participants’ performance.

**Directions for Future Research**

This dissertation has opened up many avenues for future research into the performance of the Heel in professional wrestling. As my observation occurred in smaller venues with attendees never exceeding one thousand, I would like to expand my observation to include performances intended at larger audiences. I am interested to see if the scope of the audience impacts the behaviors inherent to Heel performance. I also would like to consider performances that are being broadcast to a television audience. I believe the ability to moderate performance that can be read by a live audience as well as be captured by a camera and understood by a television audience is different than only a performance aimed at a live audience, and see a rich area of study in those differences.

Building from the archetypes identified by Oliver and Johnson (2007), I would like to examine how the performance of the Heel has evolved and is not as reliant on marking cultural difference as in years past. Whereas Oliver and Johnson posit the role of the foreigner in the history of professional wrestling as a traditional Heel archetype through race or nationality, my observations show that there is more required of the performance than identifying the character as a cultural other for today’s audiences. By showing the flexibility of characters such as Kai Katana, whose performance dictates his positionality as a Heel or a Face, professional wrestlers make conscious choices that do not rely on their race as an indicator of whether they are cheered or booed by audiences.
My participants continually reference the relationship with the audience, which suggests a parasocial relationship. I believe a continuation of this study extended to both television performance and social media performance would benefit the body of research on parasocial interaction. Horton and Wohl (1956) define parasocial interaction as the “seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer” (p. 215). Horton and Wohl identify parasocial interaction between spectator and performer as “one-sided, nondialectical, controlled by the performer, and not susceptible of mutual development” (p. 215). Professional wrestling problematizes that classification of interaction, because of the influence of audience feedback on the performance of the Heel. As stated by Horton and Wohl:

What we have said so far forcibly recalls the theatre as an ambiguous meeting ground on which real people play out the roles of fictional characters. For a brief interval, the fictional takes precedence over the actual, as the actor becomes identified with the fictional role in the magic of the theatre. This glamorous confusion of identities is temporary: the worlds of fact and fiction meet only for the moment. And the actor, when he takes his bows at the end of the performance, crosses back over the threshold into the matter-of-fact world. (p 215-216)

As my participants explained, the colliding worlds of fact and fiction are blurred in professional wrestling. In the past year, some of the participants of this dissertation have moved from smaller promotions working to smaller crowds to large national promotions and can be seen on television weekly. I see the opportunity to speak with them about what is different and what has remained the same about their performance
with an expanded audience and the additional responsibility of performing for television as an exciting area to explore.

I believe that a beneficial extension of this research would lead into the study of theater and performance, as some of my participants referenced the similarities and differences between their performance and stage acting as well as improvisational performance. By examining both character creation and the relationship between performance and performer, theater could provide an additional stage to explore as well as find commonalities with those actors and professional wrestlers.

I would like to explore the performance of characters in social media, as it relates to the intertwined nature of identity and performance. I believe that examining the opportunity and responsibility of performing a Heel character on social media would yield interesting results, and would expand on the taxonomy of Heel behaviors to include mediated behaviors as well. The difference between performing as a Heel character in service of a storyline and performing as one’s self on social media, specifically Twitter, is an additional line of questioning that I would like to explore with participants I have already built relationships with, as well as those who were unable to participate due to scheduling conflicts.
References


### Appendix A: Live Professional Wrestling Events Attended

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<th>Organization</th>
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<td>6/17/16</td>
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<td>EVOLVE</td>
<td>Queens, NY</td>
<td>7/16/16</td>
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<td>Beyond Wrestling</td>
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## Appendix B: List of Participants

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<td>Kevin Graham</td>
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<td>Brute Van Slyke</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr. Sozio</td>
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<td>Binghamton, NY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloudy</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Hybrid” Shawn Carr</td>
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<td>Marc Hauss</td>
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<td>Bobby Fish</td>
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<td>Ethan Page</td>
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<td>Drew Gulak</td>
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<td>Gregory Iron</td>
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<td>Dan Barry</td>
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<td>Matt Cross</td>
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