

GIRLS SHOULDN'T BEHAVE LIKE THAT: EXPLOITATION OF WOMEN'S EMOTION
IN PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING

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ABSTRACT

WWE has always been known to have problematic representation for women. Recently, they have attempted to make a change. In 2016, WWE finally retired the outdated “Diva’s Division” and made strides toward a more woman-inclusive program – achieving some success with their “women’s (r)evolution.” Although they market themselves as an “inclusive” company, WWE fails to consider what their audience wants – more positive representation for women. Though their fanbase is constantly disappointed with WWE’s sexism, they still tune in. The major thing that keeps people watching is the bonding that comes from being disappointed and angered - and doing so together. I examine the evolution of WWE’s programming since April 2016 to demonstrate that the anger of their audience is purposely cultivated to maintain interest – a practice that is not acceptable given that the company is reinforcing problematic stereotypes about women with storylines that produce and involve anger.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my mom and my grandma Ann, who both showed me how to be a strong woman through many years of struggle. I love you both.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
DEDICATION.....	v
INTRODUCTION.....	1
BACKGROUND.....	4
ANALYSIS OF WOMEN’S STORYLINES.....	9
CONCLUSION.....	42
WORKS CITED.....	44

INTRODUCTION

Wrestling has been part of the public sphere for quite literally hundreds of years. Ancient Romans and Greeks wrestled in stadiums not all that different from the arenas that professional wrestlers compete in today. Roland Barthes wrote about the spectacle of wrestling back in 1972, saying that “the public is completely uninterested in knowing whether the contest is rigged or not... it abandons itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle, which is to abolish all motives and consequences: what matters is not what it thinks but what it sees” (15). Wrestling is meant to seem real just as much as any superhero show attempts realism, when in actuality it is scripted and performed. Wrestling asks us to suspend our disbelief – to believe that what we are seeing is a representation of real fighting. The difference between superhero shows and wrestling is that we, of course, know that superpowers are not real. We are supposed to believe that wrestling is real, and the actors are really their characters. As scholars Broderick Chow and Eero Laine write, “*everyone* in the wrestling event is ‘keeping kayfabe’, cheering and booing as *if* the bouts were sportive rather than theatrical” (46). Kayfabe is “the performance of staged and ‘faked’ events as actual and spontaneous” (Chow & Laine 46). This concept, kayfabe, depends on everyone in the wrestling viewership pretending – or really believing – that the storylines and personalities of the wrestlers are real.

Because of kayfabe, there are real consequences to the way wrestling presents their actors because the way the wrestlers are portrayed on the show spills into their real lives and their viewer’s lives every single day. An article by Chris Flynn addresses times where wrestlers have made audience members cry, and when the real-life relationships between wrestlers were hurt by keeping kayfabe (“Top 15 Times Kayfabe Resulted In Real-Life Consequences”). Wrestlers are also frequently recognized by their character names rather than their actual names, and their

social media accounts carry on feuds and opinions of their characters. Professional, televised wrestling as we know it today takes kayfabe to an extreme when they impact audience members' and wrestler's lives, and sometimes these actions spread problematic messages to viewers and allow for prejudicial attitudes based on gender or race to be accepted among their audiences. In an interview with an anonymous professional wrestler, the wrestler revealed that "The original idea was that punters [people who enjoy sports] would be more inclined to buy tickets and emotionally invest in the wrestlers if they thought the competition [the wrestling] was real" (KrackerJak). Wrestling companies, like World Wrestling Entertainment, inc. (WWE), strive for creating an illusion that people will believe so that people are compelled to buy tickets like they would for any other sporting event. But that means that if their audience is willing to believe their plots, many of which are women-hating, they are more inclined to accept the problematic stereotypes about women, too.

Professional wrestling promotes storylines that exhibit prejudice against women quite often. Sexism is "prejudice or discrimination based on sex or gender, especially against women and girls" (Masequesmay). Sexism is based on the idea that women are somehow "less than" men, and implies that "feminine" traits are inferior to masculinity. Similarly, misogyny is "the extreme form of sexist ideology... the hatred of women" (Masequesmay). Misogyny takes place when people (typically men) insult or degrade women just for *existing* as women. Throughout its history, WWE has exhibited both sexism and misogyny in its stories with women. As critic Jasmine Mooloo explains,

for many years, women held the spotlight, but for degrading sexist and misogynist reasons. They would either be depicted as valets for the men or as sexualized wrestlers subjected to 'bra and panty' matches which entailed of them wrestling in

their undergarments for entertainment... although these ‘bra and panty matches are no longer [acceptable], women still get humiliated on WWE television (“WWE: Using Racism and Sexism for Profit”).

Mooloo discusses an example where wrestler Eve Torres is depicted as insensitive for denying another wrestler’s sexual advances (“WWE: Using Racism and Sexism for Profit”). This is not the only example of sexism and misogyny in WWE – this is just the start of it. WWE’s audience has experienced these sexist storylines for many, many years. Throughout the years, WWE’s sexist and misogynistic storylines have perpetuated stereotypes about women that could be impacting the self-esteem of women watching the shows. Their sexist storylines often send the message to women who watch the shows that they are only valuable as objects for entertainment purposes.

In this thesis, I analyze the way that Vince McMahon, Owner and CEO of WWE, and his team utilize sexist and misogynistic storylines to make women viewers angry, and how the utilization of sexism contributes to the capital of the company. I look more deeply into the popularity and stories of wrestlers Becky Lynch and Alexa Bliss, and how their portrayals contribute to the problematic, sexist messages that WWE is using for capital gain. Additionally, I examine how the audience responds to storylines on a grand scale (based on live audience reaction) compared to how feminist viewers write about the shows online. In connection with those responses, I analyze the difference between the negative response from feminists and the positive general response of the live audience. My research reveals that the purposeful cultivation of anger in viewers of WWE reinforces problematic stereotypes about women in the fanbase, which in turn reinforces those stereotypes in society as a whole, ultimately making a more prejudiced society and negating any progress that they claim to make.

BACKGROUND

World Wrestling Entertainment, inc. (WWE), founded originally by Jess McMahon in 1952 as the Capitol Wrestling Corporation, is an organization dedicated to entertaining the public through professional wrestling. The company produces two main roster shows, *Raw* and *Smackdown*. The shows that WWE produces have been known for their sexism via “bra and panty matches” and limited screen time for women (Lavalle; Mooloo). Recently, the WWE attempted to make a change. In April 2016, WWE finally retired the outdated and sexist “Divas Division” and made strides toward a more women-inclusive program – achieving some success with their “women’s (r)evolution,” a company-wide push for women’s wrestling. The #GiveDivasAChance hashtag, a trending topic on Twitter, led to this renaming of the women’s division. As *Slam!Sports* author Kari Williams says, “From feminist-driven outcries of support to sarcastic mockery, the #GiveDivasAChance hashtag thrust WWE’s use of the Divas division to Twittersverse infamy” (“Independent Wrestlers Respond to #GiveDivasAChance”). The #GiveDivasAChance hashtag was a shining moment in WWE history. This hashtag, spurred by a tag-team match between Emma, Paige, and the Bella twins that lasted less than a minute, got fans around the world talking about how unfairly the women in WWE were treated (Williams).

The hashtag #GiveDivasAChance brought about the change to a more progressive era and the “women’s (r)evolution” in the WWE, starting with changing the “Divas Division” to the “Women’s Division.” Changing the title of the division was meant to bring attention to the women in wrestling and showcase that they are not just “divas,” they are deserving of a division title that showcases the fact that they are women. This was a huge change for the company, considering their largely conservative fanbase. In fact, after this change to the women’s division, the amount of women watching the shows changed. An article from fightful.com about the

demographics of WWE in 2017 notes that “Men are way down and women are up a fairly significant percentage... it’s part of a consistent pattern over the past year in WWE ratings where men have declined greatly over the year while women have stayed the same or even gained” (Thurston). This change happened in the year after the switch from “Diva’s Division” to “Women’s Division.” WWE’s women viewership continues to grow, and many of those women are young (Thurston). The viewership wasn’t the only thing that changed, though. According to author Rachel Miller, the new and improved “Women’s Division” brought with it positive changes like women being appreciated for more than just their looks and being allowed to have gimmicks like the men do (“9 Things That Have Changed”). It also proved to WWE fans that they *do* have some sort of influence on the content that they see on WWE’s shows. Fans saw the impact that they could have, and it suggested to viewers that the way the fans react is important to the producers of the shows.

However, WWE’s change to the “Women’s Division” didn’t change much about the sexist elements of the shows according to some people – like liberal wrestling fan Christy. In the article “Sexism in the WWE is Still a Real Problem,” fan and critic Christy (last name not available), who runs the Twitter account @wrestlingsexism, says “Though it’s better than it’s been in the past, the women generally don’t have as much variation as the men do... As to why that is? I believe the lack of female input matters. The lack of female writers. The fact that a couple of men have the final say” (Broome-Jones). In 2019, the first woman to be a main contributor to the WWE Creative Writing Team was added to the roster (Satin). According to an article about the addition, Dana Warrior joined the creative team to “offer an additional female perspective” (Satin). Warrior’s addition to the creative team gives hope to the WWE universe, but it still has not done a lot to counteract the less-than-ideal male perspectives of the rest of the

creative team. Despite the fact that women are not a big part of the decision-making in their storylines, WWE still claims to be inclusive: on the WWE community website, their first link on their top menu is “inclusion” and that is only the beginning of their publicity about inclusion. Fans are demanding more input from women, and Christy of @wrestlingsexism is only one of the fans who is frustrated by this lack of women in the writing room. The lack of input from women seems to lead to a lack of sensitivity toward women’s issues in the script writing, because there are few women present to speak up for women’s issues during the writing process. Even with more women becoming involved with the writing process, the script still seems to lack the focus on women’s issues that fans seem to want to see. The frustration felt by these fans is amplified by the stories of Alexa Bliss and Becky Lynch, wrestlers whose stories continue to present as sexist because of the way their characters are written.

It seems likely that WWE uses the anger sparked by sexist messages to keep viewers watching. If the audience is not angry with the antagonists, there would be no point to watching. Not many people watch shows to see a conflict-free happy family of four go about their everyday lives. In the same vein, Brian Massumi, a pioneer of affect theory, discusses the idea of emotional intensity in *Parables for the Virtual*, which connects to the idea of using emotional turmoil. His concept of affect can, in a few ways, clarify the idea that emotional intensity is something that WWE utilizes and that anger is part of their use of emotional intensity. Much of the anger that WWE cultivates is created because the writers know that if their audience is emotionally invested, whether they are “positive” or “negative” emotions, they will be more likely to continue to watch. Massumi’s idea of affect essentially argues that the more intense a feeling is, the more fulfilled you feel from that emotion.

According to Massumi, “intensity is qualifiable as an emotional state,” meaning that intensity itself is an emotion (26). In addition, he discusses an experiment in which children watched different versions of one video. When the children watched these videos, “the ‘sad’ scenes were rated the *most pleasant*; the sadder the better” (Massumi 23). Massumi argues that the “primacy of the affective is marked by a gap between *content* and *effect*” (24). His argument depends on this idea that people have an automatic reaction to certain kinds of images and even words, but these automatic reactions are indescribable through language. This reaction manifests as a feeling of intensity. However, the intensity can be positive or negative. Much of the way that the WWE cultivates viewership is based on developing feelings of intensity, where the more intense the feeling, the more the audience is going to respond. The whole WWE franchise relies on the emotions of their crowd and the appearance of anger in their wrestlers. The entirety of the professional wrestling world, whether that is WWE or independent wrestling organizations, relies on the real joy and anger of the people that come to their events and fill the stands of arenas around the world.

WWE takes emotional manipulation to a new level, though. Owner and CEO Vince McMahon creates storylines that make audiences hate their “heels” (antagonists), because that is what heels are there to do. If the audience hates the heels, they spend more money on merchandise and tickets to support the “faces” (protagonists). But Vince McMahon’s creative control seems to mean that many storylines will continue to be sexist, racist, homophobic, ableist, or unacceptable in other ways (like wrestlers taking jabs at their opponents’ families) because these storylines generate hatred and intensity of the audience to make more money. The more intense a person’s feelings, the more invested they are in the shows, which ultimately makes them more likely they are to spend money. Most specifically, I believe that the writers of

WWE construct sexist stories because these stories are certain to make people angry. Like Twitter user @WrestlingEliti1 states, “I don’t really feel the need to pile on additional criticism, anger, or hate to Nia Jax at this point. Is she reckless, negligent and unsafe in the ring? god yeah. But we’re dealing with the WWE here, it’s like talking to a wall, they just don’t care” (@WrestlingEliti1)! This user is expressing their anger about the stories that happen within WWE, specifically one of Nia Jax’s storylines, arguing that WWE doesn’t care about their audience and the anger they feel.

A lot of the stories that the WWE writes involve fat-shaming, slut-shaming, ageism, and other sorts of intentional misogyny that are very problematic to many viewers of WWE. Women’s anger in general is not inherently a bad thing – the feminists viewing the shows and the wrestlers participating in these storylines have a right to be angry, and a right to express that anger when the storylines are petty and hurtful to women. However, the way that many members of the creative team of WWE use anger is unacceptable because they are intentionally spreading problematic messages about women while they cultivate anger in the viewers. The writers encourage a kind of anger that dismantles the progress our society has made towards real equality for women. As I will demonstrate, sexist storylines encourage viewers to have sexist ideologies.

ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S STORYLINES

Through WWE's stories, particularly of Alexa Bliss and Becky Lynch but also among other wrestlers, we see the impact that women's anger can have both as a plot point and as a reaction to those plot points. Bliss is a popular wrestler who has been part of WWE's various programs since 2013. She is also well-known for being a heel, or antagonist, of the shows that WWE produces. She has a reputation for being "catty" and mean. Becky Lynch has been both a "face," or protagonist, as well as a heel during her time signed to WWE. Both women have participated in a wide variety of storylines in their career, as each of WWE's shows air weekly throughout the entire year with no breaks. Both women have been shown expressing anger and have caused anger in the viewers with their storylines as well. While women's anger can be incredibly powerful and even revolutionary, it is not always presented or performed that way. In these stories that WWE portrays in both *Raw* and *Smackdown*, there are many stereotypical portrayals of "bitchy" or "mean" women who express their anger inappropriately or resort to aggressive anger. These stories are designed to excite the audience, because the audience wants to see fights. They are also likely designed to anger the audience, because most of the "bitchy" women are heels, whose characters are designed to frustrate the crowd. According to scholar Jon Ezell, "successful heels [take] pride in their ability to work a crowd to the boiling point" (13). Ezell argues that heels want to bring the crowd to the peak of anger (or other emotions) in order to convince the audience of their villainy. Heels are meant to be the villains, and villains typically make people angry. However, WWE is using these storylines and this anger in inappropriate, sexist ways. That is not to say that the women wrestling are wrong for expressing anger – the issue lies in where the anger of the viewers is directed.

Society frequently demeans and invalidates women and their emotions. Often, we are told to view women's anger as a problematic thing. The book *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women's Anger* by Soraya Chemaly reveals much about the repression of women's anger in connection with the societal ideal that anger makes women "bitches." Chemaly argues that "women's anger is usually disparaged in virtually all arenas, except those in which anger *confirms* gender-role stereotypes about women as nurturers and reproductive agents... if, however, she transgresses, and is angry in what is thought of as a men's arena... she is almost always penalized in some way" (Chemaly xviii) . In this case, mothers or teachers can be angry in a socially acceptable way in specific circumstances. However, she adds,

women ... frequently [see] our anger as incompatible with our primary designated roles as caretakers. Even the incipient suggestion of anger – in themselves or in other women – makes some women profoundly uncomfortable. In an effort to not seem angry, we ruminate. We go out of our way to look "rational" and "calm." We minimize our anger, calling it frustration, impatience, exasperation, or irritation, words that don't convey the intrinsic social and public demand that *anger* does (Chemaly xviii).

Chemaly, along with other scholars, demonstrate that women are being told that being angry means being a "bitch," or some other variation of problematic stereotypes. Anger in women makes the public uncomfortable, sometimes even making other women uncomfortable. So often women are told to push the anger down and to suppress that anger instead of expressing it like they may want or need to. Instead of being told to use anger in a productive way, women are told not to be angry at all.

In WWE, that is different. Women are meant to fight each other, therefore they are meant to express anger. However, in their quest for affective intensity, the writers of WWE use anger in a way that may evoke a negative reaction from the audience. In affect theorist Massumi's *Parables for the Virtual*, he notes that "affect is central to an understanding of our information- and image-based late capitalist culture" (27). To Massumi, intensity is affect and vice-versa. His thought here is that people use affect/intensity to keep people investing in their art. Affect, or intensity, will be cultivated for capital gain. However, Massumi does not address the fact that intensity may be used in problematic ways to get the audience to keep watching – like utilizing sexism to create intensity. Then, instead of being angry at the people creating these storylines, the audience becomes angry at the people portraying the sexist stories. But, this doesn't mean anger is a bad thing.

In *Rage Becomes Her*, Chemaly turns the idea that women's anger is always problematic or unproductive on its head. She focuses on how to utilize women's anger in productive ways, and how women's anger can have revolutionary impact. She specifically addresses anger that leads to political action, explaining that,

In times of political tumult, women – regardless of political orientation – are given more social leeway to be angry, and they run with it. ... The Women's Christian Temperance Union, for example, founded in 1874, led the fight for Prohibition, largely as an attempt to stem domestic violence and poverty. It eventually, under the direction of Frances Willard, spread to agitate fair labor laws, prison reform, and women's suffrage (Chemaly 246).

In this case, women's anger about domestic violence and poverty lead to massive amounts of political upheaval. One might recall Rosa Parks' frustration and anger in regard to racism in

Alabama, too. Many women have started massive movements because of their unfair treatment and their anger towards that treatment. Chemaly also mentions movements formed by mothers of school-aged children, like the group Moms Demand Action that was formed after Sandy Hook by Shannon Watts (246-247). The anger of these women was formed for very different reasons throughout history, but these examples of anger show the impact that women's emotions can have throughout history.

In addition to Chemaly's book, Rebecca Traister in *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger* also argues that women's anger has power. One of Traister's primary examples of this is the Women's March that happened after Trump's inauguration. She states, "The Women's March on January 21, 2017 was the biggest one-day political protest in this country's [the USA's] history, and it was staged by angry women" (Traister 29). The time during and after the 2016 presidential election was the same approximate time that WWE had started their "women's revolution." After the 2016 election, many women politicians started expressing their anger in ways that changed the general public's view of them and helped push for women to become leaders. As Traister adds, "Anger was the broom that swept America's newly infuriated women into a new year, 2018, the year in which electoral opportunity provided a new channel for their furious drive" (40). Traister provides significant insight into how strong women's anger can be.

To summarize, these theorists identify differing types of anger and note that anger can be used and expressed in a variety of ways – but anger is often conflated with other behaviors that are not necessarily always associated with every type of anger. As Chemaly notes,

In women in particular, assertiveness, aggression, and anger are often considered one and the same. ... It is possible to be both assertive and aggressive without

anger. You can also be filled with anger yet have a peaceful demeanor.

Aggression is more hostile than assertion: the former suggestion less care for another's needs or perspectives, the latter being a clear display of need expressed within understood constraints and norms of behavior (19).

Based on Chemaly's differentiation between aggression, assertiveness, and anger, I have defined the kinds of anger that both Chemaly and Traister discuss. First, there is passive anger, which can be defined as anger that is repressed or disguised and can impact a person's mental health because of the lack of expression. Chemaly describes this kind of anger when she notes that "In an effort not to seem angry, we ruminate. We go out of our way to look 'rational' and 'calm.' We minimize our anger, calling it frustration, impatience, exasperation, or irritation, words that don't convey the intrinsic social and public demand that *anger* does" (xviii). A lot of women tend to experience passive anger because society tells them to repress or minimize their anger.

Second, there is aggressive or volatile anger, which is anger that seems to come out of nowhere and can be incredibly violent and destructive. This kind of anger is often physical, which is very common in wrestling. It can also be verbal, but typically if it is verbal it is petty and mostly consists of insults. Volatile anger usually allows for you to get over the anger more quickly, and after an outburst you might feel much better, but it can also push people away from you or can be physically destructive. Traister notes that around 1992 when more women were getting elected to the government, "these years sometimes included violent rage in response to racism... Angry protestors looted stores and set fires... the news media and local politicians were quick to describe these events as riots" (4). She notes that congresswoman Maxine Waters warned these people away from this kind of expression of anger because it was endangering their lives, something that volatile anger often does (4-5). Traister also notes that Trump's rallies often

exhibited this kind of anger too, as she says “Trump himself encouraged angry violence in his crowds” (16). This kind of anger is typically not productive in the long-term, and can cause problems with people around you.

Lastly, there is assertive anger, which is constructive anger that is used for productive, positive change. This type of anger is what Chemaly and Traister focus primarily on, as it is the most productive and helpful of the forms of anger. Assertive anger is usually political in nature, based on injustice or inequality for an individual or a whole minority group. Traister notes that “political anger ... can be a communicative tool, a call to action, engagement, and collaboration between ideological compatriots” (xxvii). She is speaking specifically about anger about injustice, and the power that being assertive can have in the political realm. This political, or assertive, anger is all about using your voice to make a change. Assertive anger is typically verbal in nature, and involves honest conversation about the anger a person is experiencing. Passive, volatile/aggressive, and assertive/political angers are the three primary types of anger that emerge from Traister and Chemaly’s work, and they will be referred to throughout the rest of this thesis.

In WWE, rather than directing anger at the people who write the show, many women viewing the shows are angry with the characters. Expressing anger is not something to be ashamed of, and, as Chemaly and Traister argue, it can be productive when using assertive anger. However, taking it out on other women who have no real choice in their storylines is not useful to change the sexism of WWE. Instead, fans, critics, and wrestlers alike should be focusing their assertive anger on those who *are* in charge of the storylines – the producers, writers, and other executives of WWE. If anger is still passive and/or volatile and directed towards the women who are wrestling, nothing changes. Women continue to be powerless on the show. A lot of the

women that wrestle for the WWE seem to have less power to stand up for themselves than the men in the company do. As Traister writes, “to get angry and challenge the authority of ... men meant jeopardizing not just an individual job in an individual office; rather it risked far broader harm within whole professions where men hold sway” (170). Here, Traister is referring to challenging male politicians during Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign. However, the same holds true for many professions, including wrestling for WWE. Because the women of WWE cannot challenge these men – the producers and executives of WWE like Vince McMahon, Shane McMahon, and Triple H – without risking their jobs and the jobs of other women, the viewers of WWE who are angry at these sexist storylines must stand up for the actors outside of the WWE and use assertive anger to make a change.

It can be hard to use our anger in productive ways, though. Often, we are told that our anger is unacceptable. Chemaly argues that “when we [women] are taught that our anger is undesirable, selfish, powerless, and ugly, we learn that *we* are undesirable, selfish, powerless, and ugly” (25). This argument specifically plays into the way that WWE positions their women wrestlers and how the viewers will react to the wrestlers, which can impact the way that a person reacts to the content that they are seeing. When one watches wrestling, they experience intensity, the concept that Massumi connected with affect. Massumi argues that “the strength or duration of an image’s effect is not logically connected to the content in any straightforward way. This is not to say that there is no connection and no logic” (24). Here, he is saying that the way a person reacts to an image/video does not necessarily have to be connected to the content of the video. What he means is that someone could experience a high level of intensity/excitement about a wrestling storyline even if they do not agree with the messages.. Even if the wrestlers are portrayed as mean, selfish, undesirable, or ugly, the viewers will still feel excited about it.

Wrestling often uses storylines that make women feel that their anger is undesirable or ugly. This is present in a storyline with wrestlers Alexa Bliss and Nia Jax.

In early 2018, Bliss' storyline was developed with fellow wrestler Jax. Jax, a plus-sized woman, is an "easy target" for fat-shaming – a form of bullying that is used to show women that they are, as Chemaly says "undesirable" and "ugly." In the beginning of Bliss and Jax's storyline, they called each other "best friends" and laughed about feuding with other wrestlers. In the January 8, 2018 episode of *Raw*, Bliss looks at Jax and says "you're strong, you're beautiful, you're smart... you're my best friend. The irresistible force. You can literally do anything," adding "you're my favorite!" In contrast to Chemaly's observation about anger being viewed as mean or selfish, Bliss tries to build Jax's confidence with compliments that tell her she's not undesirable, powerless, or ugly. The writers likely use this moment as a storytelling tactic to set Jax up for the negativity she will endure – but at the time, the audience does not know this. It is a plot device used to make it even more shocking and frustrating when Bliss turns on Jax.

All of the niceties change within the next couple of months, when we arrive at the March 12 episode. The scene shows Bliss chatting with another wrestler, talking about how Bliss had said terrible things about Jax recently, including that she was a disappointment to her entire family. Bliss, on talking about walking through the airport with Jax, says "it's like watching fricking Shrek lumber through TSA" ("Nia Jax Vows"). She adds, "I have Nia in the palm of my hand... she's just as dumb as she is big" ("Nia Jax Vows"). Bliss' verbal attack of Jax is an example of horizontal hostility constructed by the writers for a reaction, whereby "members of marginalized groups police each other's behavior and/or appearance. Horizontal hostility happens when a member of a marginalized group identifies with the values of the dominant groups" (Launius & Hassel). In this case, Bliss is outwardly expressing the idea that women

should be small, not large. She shames and casts judgment on Jax's appearance, which further oppresses Jax and brings down other women – especially those who may not have society's "ideal" body type.

Jax, watching all of Bliss' conversation happen from inside the ring, does not take this well and gets violently angry. This too is an act; however, the audience is meant to believe that Jax is justified in her anger – her "best friend" just said some nasty things about her, and it makes sense to be angry about that. Even though this is a script that has been written for her, we are supposed to see Jax's rage as spontaneous – a result of Bliss' insults. They were supposed to be friends and were not supposed to be fighting at all, and now all of a sudden Jax is some kind of uncontrollable monster. In an article entitled "The Fight for Gender Equality Inside the WWE Ring," Aaron Taube argues that,

female wrestlers are presented as so emotionally volatile that their true intentions are inscrutable. Characters are good one week and evil the next, with no explanation beyond a commentator acknowledging that 'women naturally hate each other.' Former WWE creative team member Kevin Eck has written that he was instructed that there were to be no baby faces [another term for protagonist, not different from 'faces'] or heels in the Divas division. Rather, 'it was strongly implied that the Divas are all just a bunch of catty chicks, most of whom are mentally unstable' (Taube).

Even the writers of the WWE seem unsure of how to write women's anger in a productive way – they are just writing "catty" women who use their anger violently. During the clip with Jax, the audience is supposed to see her as a raging monster. Taube explains in his article on equality in WWE that the women in wrestling are typically written to be "volatile." Jax's reaction is

volatile, too. Instead of dealing with her anger in an assertive, productive way, her anger appears uncontrolled. Rather than more calmly confronting Bliss and finding a way to settle things without destruction, she seems to destroy everything in her path. While we are supposed to see the anger as justified – and it is good to see women able to express their anger – we also see this outburst as an expression of aggressive, volatile anger. She is seen backstage on March 12 ripping wardrobes off of hangers, tearing a suitcase in half, and throwing other suitcases at the wall. It is reminiscent of a young child’s temper tantrum, making it seem childish. It is reinforcing the idea that women’s rage is irrational – that it is not good to be angry, because you are “crazy,” “wild,” or a monster if you are angry.

In the moment that Nia Jax bursts with rage, the audience cheers just as loud for her as they do for male wrestlers as she charges backstage to confront Bliss. It is clear here that the audience is on Jax’s side – but the reaction from the live audience seems to suggest that they are on her side because they are excited about the prospect of a fight. Every time there is the potential for a fight, the audience will cheer – because that is what they are there for. The writers seemed to cultivate this moment knowing that the audience would cheer for a violent outburst like this. In an interview with Chemaly, Julia Hardy – British journalist and vlogger – noted that “‘If you don’t challenge things, all you have done is passed it on to the next woman to deal with’” (Chemaly 180). Women in WWE who act as though their angry outbursts are real leave the problem of the volatile woman for other woman wrestlers to deal with later on. It also leaves viewers with the impression that women are easily goaded and will easily snap.

Jax and Bliss’s storyline reinforces the idea that women’s expression of rage is inappropriate, irrational, and aggressive. As Chemaly notes, “‘If there is one thing that unites women across differences, it is the suggestion that we are ‘crazy’ for saying what we know to be

true. If we display anger, we are even ‘crazier’” (196). People think that women are “crazy” or irrational just for displaying anger, and the way that Jax expressed volatile anger takes that idea to a new level because of the aggression shown. With Jax, the backstage video shown on March 12 demonstrates that she does not care about the safety of the interviewer that is the room she storms into. Many times, this is the case with women’s storylines in WWE. Women are portrayed as aggressive because they are angry, rather than aggressive and angry as two separate things. Men’s anger is taken seriously, with wrestlers like Braun Strowman taking pride in his role as an angry and violent character. Strowman even proudly calls himself the “Monster Among Men.” His anger is seemingly not regarded as childish, while women’s anger typically is seen as childish because their anger is portrayed as irrational and petty.

Part of the reason women wrestler’s anger may not be respected is because the storylines they are given involve petty topics. Fat-shaming is not exactly a refined form of insult. If women’s anger in the WWE was assertive and directed at topics that started a real conversation about inequality, or women like Jax who are being bullied in their storylines could direct their anger at the people who are writing these stories for them, it may become more productive. Traister notes that “The ability to feel the anger and convey it to others is itself the transformative experience for many women. Women’s anger spurs creativity and drives innovation in politics and social change, and it always has” (209). She argues that being able to connect with other women who are also angry becomes a catalyst for political change.

Jax’s portrayal of anger is especially counterproductive because, as Chemaly notes, “it is important to note how deeply female denigration can shape the lives and emotions of children and adults who do not conform to traditional gender expectations. The vast majority of childhood bullying stems from variations of gender policing, in the form of homophobia, transphobia, and

sexist harassment” (13). Chemaly describes how denigration leads to bullying, which can leave psychological scars on children that carry through to adulthood. This is particularly relevant in the March 12 episode of WWE and Bliss’ interaction with Jax in that episode, but it comes into play with pretty much every interaction that Bliss has with other women. These problematic messages about women may impact the younger audiences of wrestling greatly. Chemaly continues, “It’s a cruel trick we play on girls, exposing them to these realities [of misogyny] at the same time that we exert the most social pressure on them to ignore and hide the anger they provoke” (13). Society puts pressure on young girls to push down their anger, telling them it is not okay. Wrestling gives young girls an opportunity to see that women’s anger is valid and can be expressed in public. Yet, the WWE misses this opportunity.

Not only do problematic messages about women’s anger in wrestling impact young people, but there are real stakes in it for the wrestlers involved. When they are told by writers to respond violently to insults, it sends problematic message about the apparent volatile nature of women’s anger. It suggests that women’s anger is only valid when it is aggressive in nature, and that a calmer approach to things is not an option. As mentioned previously, one of the primary kinds of anger used to get an audience response in WWE is volatile anger, which in a wrestling ring is meant to demonstrate toughness of these women. In a wrestling ring, there are different expectations that are harder to navigate if you are a woman, because men are “naturally” aggressive and violent so no one bats an eyelash when they resort to violence. Scholar Kate Millett notes that “the male tends to have aggression reinforced in his behavior ... The same process of reinforcement is evident in producing the chief ‘feminine’ virtue of passivity” (62). Women are often taught and expected to be passive, therefore their participation in WWE and their use of violence has confused the gender roles of the wrestling ring. Men, on the other hand,

are in their “natural habitat,” per say, in the wrestling ring. This means that women are forced to navigate unfair expectations of their anger, while still being expected to express themselves on-screen.

Many times throughout Bliss’ feuds, her scenes end with her being hit, kicked, or worse by other women wrestlers. Despite the fact that she rarely really fights back and instead runs away, she still wins matches due to disqualifications of the violent women who come after her. She still ends up on top because she maintains her championship and fanbase, but impressionable young people are seeing the wrestlers brutally attacking other people. Neither the viewers nor the wrestlers stand up to the real bullies, the producers and other executives that have control over these storylines. Instead, there is a passive anger among most of the viewers when these kinds of storylines happen. While it may be the point of wrestling to fight one another, fighting does not show the consequences of stereotyping women as “crazy” and violent in the wrestling ring. It is not helpful to women to show anger as only a violent thing, especially when so many people, like the previously mentioned Chemaly and Traister, have shown that anger can be powerful in positive ways without violence – making change in avenues (like politics) that didn’t see change without assertive anger. Other feuds have happened without the low-blow fat-shaming, age-shaming, and racism. It is possible to do the show without it, and to cultivate anger other ways.

The writers are using these plots specifically for shock value, when men’s wrestling rarely ever resorts to this kind of degradation. In fact, women are often being degraded in men’s storylines as well. As critic April Lavalle notes, “It’s not as overt as it was during the Attitude Era [an earlier iteration of the women’s division], but women are still used as props for male talent” (“When Women Are Always the Heel”). Women are the butt of the joke for men’s storylines much of the time, especially in storylines when the wrestlers are married or dating

each other. In this instance, sexism is used as shock value instead of coming up with more compelling plots that don't involve sexism. The sexist plots start to take a hold of the audience, and it is the shock from that sexism that gets people riled up and angry about wrestling. As author Jane Kilby argues, "it is because television promises us the experience of shock in the comfort of our own homes that catastrophe can exact a constant hold over the viewer" (112). The catastrophe, here, is the degradation of women and pitting women against each other. The writers use these plots with women, and while they might use problematic plotlines with men too (for example, involving family in their insults or making jabs at a wrestler's fight with cancer), the plots that men have rarely reinforce problematic stereotypes about men. If they do, it is that a man is not "masculine enough," which can be seen recently in storylines with Becky Lynch and Seth Rollins, to be discussed later in this thesis. Storylines about masculinity can be problematic, too, and contribute to the reinforcing of gender stereotypes, as well. But these plots are not nearly as frequent or overwhelming as the sexism within the women's division.

As Chemaly's arguments clarify, demeaning women and invalidating their emotions is wrong, and doing so to evoke an audience response is exploitative. Demeaning women for fun impacts the way that young viewers may view women and women's emotions in the future. WWE's childish portrayal of rage with Nia Jax may have psychological impacts on Jax herself, and on viewers. As Millett writes, "As the history of patriarchal culture and the representations of herself [the woman] within all levels of its cultural media, past and present, have a devastating effect upon her self-image, she is customarily deprived of any but the most trivial sources of dignity or self-respect" (86). Millett's argument is that women's self-images are damaged by media, and WWE continues this cycle of damage with their messages about how angry women are rageful, childish monsters.

Women are often demeaned solely because of their status in our society. Millett continues by saying:

Temperament... involves the formation of human personality along stereotypes lines of sex category ('masculine' and 'feminine'), based on the needs and values of the dominant group and dictated by what its members cherish in themselves and find convenient in subordinates: aggression, intelligence, force, and efficacy in the male; passivity, ignorance, docility, 'virtue,' and ineffectuality in the female (57).

In Millett's view, women are expected to be more meek and modest than men, and men are expected to be more aggressive and forceful. In WWE, that changes – women are allowed to be and expected to be aggressive, as well. However, women are still expected to be weaker and more passive than men. This is shown not only in their storylines, but in how much screen time women get on a weekly basis on WWE's shows. Women in wrestling do not occupy nearly as much time on the shows as men do. In fact, in WWE's show with the longest run-time – *Raw* – women only get a small portion of the two-hour show. On January 1, 2018, women got approximately ten to fifteen minutes, and most of that time was spent on Alexa Bliss. Only one women's match occurred during that whole episode – and this is fairly typical on a weekly basis, even nearly two years into the "women's (r)evolution." This lack of time means that the women have way less representation than men, and as we have seen, much of the representation is problematic. The expectation of women to be weaker than men is why women's self-images are so impacted by WWE. In WWE, women are allowed to see themselves as angry. But if they do, they also are typically expected to portray their anger as childish and inappropriate – and it seems that even Bliss herself (not her character) was upset by the storyline she had with Nia Jax.

Sometime after the storyline with Jax, Bliss “broke kayfabe” (meaning she spoke as herself rather than as her character) in an interview about her time at WWE. As she said in this *Inquisitr* interview,

My biggest insult was probably with Nia. We had the body-shaming storyline, and that was very rough because we are both very passionate about body positivity, but we had to make the storyline mean something because that is a real issue in the world. It hurt me calling her ‘Shrek going through the airport,’ and stuff like that, because she’s my best friend (Lee).

This storyline was surprising, especially with WWE’s recent declaration that they were going to be more progressive. Bliss’ interview explained more fully the issues with the storyline, which for some fans, like Tumblr user youcantreignonmyparade, made the storyline much more anger-inducing. With practically no long-term consequences (as the audience still watches and supports WWE), Bliss’ actions, while she’s in character, promote sexist storylines and do nothing to show the company that the audience does not want to see these plots anymore. But her actions outside of the show and her character seem to suggest that these wrestlers are not always heard by the writing team of WWE.

Millett’s *Sexual Politics* deals with women’s constructed powerlessness, as well. Millett notes that,

a disinterested examination of our system of sexual relationship must point out that the situation between the sexes now, and throughout history, is a case of that phenomenon Max Weber defined as *herrschaft*, a relationship of dominance and subordination. What goes largely unexamined, often even unacknowledged... is the birthright priority whereby males rule females (55).

If men rule, or are dominant as Millett suggests, women are rendered dependent and forced to be subordinate. The fact that women are told by society from the moment they are born that they are lesser than men is cause for more anger about injustice. That is why, when Becky “the Man” Lynch started dating and then got engaged to fellow superstar Seth Rollins in real life, WWE decided to push their romance on screen and force the gender stereotypes even further – specifically that women need to be “feminine” and men need to be “masculine” based on the definitions of the WWE writer’s room.

In the June 24, 2019 episode of *Raw*, the sexism based on “masculine” and “feminine” stereotypes is blatant. Superstars Baron Corbin and Lacey Evans enter the arena and attack Rollins and Lynch, but Rollins and Lynch easily take down Corbin and Evans. After Corbin recovers, he grabs the mic and says “she saved you again. You know what Seth? You need to take that title, put it on her shoulder, walk down that ramp, get in your car, go to the airport, fly on a plane, go home, put on an apron, and make a sandwich for the Man. ‘Cuz she’s handlin’ all your business” (“Rollins, Lynch, Corbin and Evans Get Extreme”). Lacey Evans then adds, “yeah, Becky, get your little girl on outta here. Unless you want me to get my hands on him again” (Rollins, Lynch, Corbin and Evans Get Extreme”). There are some extremely problematic connotations not only about how Rollins was too “feminine” or “gentle” to handle himself and how Lynch was “masculine” enough to save him, but it also implies that there is something wrong with role reversal like that in the first place. It suggests that men don’t want to be with independent women, or at least that they shouldn’t want to be with independent women. After this match, many people took to the comments section of the YouTube clip to express their dislike of Corbin. YouTube commenter It’s Mwah says, “Baron needs to shut up and leave WWE” (“Rollins, Lynch, Corbin and Evans Get Extreme”). Many others left similar comments

on the clip “Rollins, Lynch, Corbin and Evans Get Extreme.” If viewers didn’t dislike Corbin before, they sure did now.

In relation to this idea of masculinity in the ring, there are many perspectives on what is and is not acceptable in regards to gender expression. Well-known wrestling scholar Sharon Mazer argues that,

when it comes to the representation of gender, the underlying discourse of the professional wrestling event is essentially essentialist. While women who perform as wrestlers and managers train and perform as much as the men do, the presence of women in the wrestling performance is substantially different. Male wrestlers may be seen to reveal, in the display of their bodies and in their actions, their real manliness. Conversely, what women reveal in their bodily displays and performances is that no matter how closely their actions converge on those of men, they are not and can never be men (5).

Within wrestling and WWE, as Mazer suggests, no matter what women do, even in a time where Becky Lynch gets to call herself “the Man,” there is still a constant reminder in her plotlines that she is not a man and that she cannot be a man. She’s proud of her title “the Man,” and she has good reason to be proud of her position in WWE, but the shows constantly remind viewers that a woman cannot really be at the same level as men. Unfortunately for Lynch, that means that women are still being portrayed as weaker than men.

Similarly, Mazer argues “Whatever else is performed, what is presented, affirmed, and critiqued is nothing so much as the idea of masculinity itself. As such, the question of what it means to be a man in contemporary culture underlies the continuous display of manly and not-so-manly behavior in and out of the ring” (5). In WWE, women are being held to this standard of

masculinity inside the ring, but no matter what they do they cannot attain it. We are reminded that Becky Lynch cannot really be “the Man” because she cannot display masculinity in the way that society expects her to. Oddly, she is also expected to represent the women’s division as “feminine” and “sexy” and is not doing that either. It seems like she is performing under a double standard where she is supposed to be masculine *and* feminine, but cannot accomplish either to the full extent. The other women in WWE are experiencing this as well, but with Lynch’s nickname “the Man,” she is being held to even higher standards to be tough like the men are. The men are not expected to be feminine as well as masculine, so the title of “the Man” leads to even more sexism within her storylines.

The displays of masculinity within the shows WWE produces are reliant on what modern culture believes is “manly.” This is expressed in a very stereotypical manner in Baron Corbin’s quote about making Becky Lynch a sandwich mentioned previously, but it suggests that WWE is still focused on the gender binary despite their attempts at equality. In response, Lynch shakes her head in the background as Corbin speaks, showing she does not care for his comments. In this scenario, Seth Rollins is no longer accepted as “manly” because of his relationship with Lynch, and this is portrayed as a negative thing – something that can also negatively affect young people, but can additionally impact other women’s self-esteem if they are independent and strong like Lynch. If other women see these wrestlers – who are supposed to be strong – get degraded for their strength or other differences, it may make those women purposely portray themselves as weaker in order to “fit in” and not get shamed for the way that they are. It can contribute to more repression of strength or anger in women outside of the wrestling arena. It may impact men’s self-images, too, if they are in a relationship with women like Becky Lynch. Corbin’s words have the potential to damage the self-images of many people despite the

audience reaction, but the booing that he receives as a reaction during his speech gives hope that a majority of the people in the crowd believe he is in the wrong for what he said. However, the viewers are still misdirecting their anger. Corbin is also partaking in a scripted story, and is participating in sexist storylines because of the executives and writers that control his script. While viewers are right to be mad, it would be more productive to communicate directly with the creative team through letters or social media than to direct the anger at Corbin.

In another moment in the June 29, 2019 episode, Corbin adds that he picked Evans for a reason, ““Cuz she’s the only *real* woman we have around here,” pointing at Lynch as he says this (“Rollins, Lynch, Corbin and Evans Get Extreme”). His implication, here, is that there is a “right” and “wrong” way to be a woman and that Lynch’s womanhood is “wrong” somehow. His intonation (indicated by my italics) implies that Lynch is somehow not a “real” woman, like Evans is. Evans’ aesthetic is highly feminine – she typically wears dresses and a lot of make-up, as well as having her hair neatly done. Lynch’s is more gruff, more relaxed, and generally less fanciful. Corbin’s attempted insult is that Lynch is not as “girly” or “feminine” as Evans, which is not necessarily problematic – though he attempts to position it as such. Both women identify as women, but WWE positions them against each other in a sexist opposition between masculine and feminine to anger their audience. The implication that there is a “right” way to be a woman is cause for anger and frustration.

They get the reaction they want, as well, as the audience boos him when he says this. However, the boos don’t necessarily mean that there aren’t people there or at home watching that believe what Corbin when he says that Becky Lynch is not a *real* woman – or that there aren’t people who are hurt by the implication that if you are more masculine in presentation you aren’t a “real” woman. Based on YouTube comments on the clip, it seems like there are quite a few

fans that find Corbin's sexist comments funny ("Rollins, Lynch, Corbin and Evans Get Extreme"). However, the boos also do imply that a majority of the people in the crowd disagree with what he is saying. The clip with Lynch, Rollins, Corbin, and Evans shows intensity of emotion – that need to get the audience riled up.

Massumi notes that "the level of intensity is characterized by a crossing of semantic wires; on it, sad is pleasant" (24). What he means is that if the immediate affective response is strong, a person is likely to register it as a positive reaction. You might compare this to the adrenaline rush you get when there is a particularly scary scene in a horror movie. Though you are scared, the adrenaline is giving you pleasant feelings. In this instance, the insults that Corbin makes on June 29 are not pleasant, but because it gets the audience riled up it registers as exciting. These kinds of offensive comments are degrading and can really impact the people who watch, especially with shows that have huge followings like *Raw* and *Smackdown*. Showing proper ways to express anger or frustration is a particularly challenging area to navigate, and if people are not shown how to express anger in appropriate ways they resort to inappropriate behaviors – not unlike Baron Corbin does in this particular scene.

This particular storyline has gotten backlash from the WWE fanbase and their own wrestlers, sparking conversations about the inappropriate focus of storylines and about the sexist positioning of this relationship: Becky Lynch commented on the relationship plot in a *Sports Illustrated* article, stating that "in terms of [her] relationship being the freaking front and center, that's not what [she's] about. That's not what [she's] worked towards. That's not what [she] wanted" (Gartland). In this article, Lynch is angry about her relationship being the focus of her career rather than all of her successes in the ring. She is frustrated that people only care about her romantic relationship, because she worked so hard to get to the top of the WWE roster. Though

she has been diligent with her wrestling career, she still seems to have little to no say in her stories. Traister notes that, “rage might get them [women] fired, denied raises and promotions, [and] incur punishments and violence” (245). Even though all of these are possibilities, Lynch still expresses her anger to the public. And yet, her complaints have offered nothing in the way of change. She is powerless because the men who run the shows find nothing wrong with the way they are using the characters, seeing as they have continued to use similar plots even after complaints. They continued to use Lynch and Rollins’ romance as a plot point, and did not seem to feel the need to change the focus until it was convenient for them. In fact, another article even comments that “with Rollins’ and Lynch’s massive popularity with the fans WWE looked to capitalize” (Vespia). This suggests that while WWE intends to cultivate anger in their audience and are happy when the audience experiences powerful emotions, their wrestlers only matter when the company can capitalize on their success or when they help to produce anger. They continue to cultivate anger because it is something they can get attention from. Lynch’s nickname also negates the kinds of strength that women have that a lot of men don’t, like speed or agility. This is another way that WWE uses sexist plotlines, while still arguing that they are “progressive” or “inclusive.” They’ve put Becky Lynch in a position that is nearly impossible to be successful in because of the expectations put on her, making her work even harder than she would have to if she wasn’t dubbed “the Man.”

The fact that Becky Lynch and Alexa Bliss participate in the sexist storylines they were a part of even when expressing anger and frustration about them outside of the arena suggests that their anger has not done much to change anything fundamentally in WWE. These women are still pushed into storylines that reinforce stereotypes. The way that WWE portrays anger reinforces a “mean girl” attitude in women, but it is also important to note that these women are

expressing rage within the realm of a (mostly) controlled sport – which is healthier and more productive than volatile anger like punching random people in the street. However, these women are also being forced into horizontal hostility, being told to act out their anger towards their fellow wrestlers. So while the importance of expressing anger is apparent in WWE, it is portrayed in a way that may spread problematic messages about how to deal with anger or sexism.

These women not only don't get to act out ways to deal with sexism, their characters often forget about the sexism directed towards them. On the September 25, 2017 episode of *Raw*, Alexa Bliss targets and bullies Mickie James with much sarcasm and meanness. The scene ends in violence after Bliss says “you are an *old lady*” to James’ face – a clearly ageist statement. James, being only thirty-eight at the time of this feud, is discredited by Bliss for being older than many of the other women on the roster of WWE. Like critic April Lavalley says, “that means she’s nearing her expiration date for the WWE. Male superstars like John Cena, 40, Kane, 50, and Kurt Angle, 49, continue to compete without their ages ever being brought into question” (“When Women are Always the Heel”). While Mickie James is still perfectly capable of competing in the ring alongside her younger counterparts, she is subject to insults like “I don’t want you to break a hip” (“Alexa Bliss Pays”). The ageism that happens in this storyline is something that doesn’t typically happen to the male wrestlers, and if it does it isn’t until the man is in his 50s or older – not in their 30s. The comment about breaking a hip implies that she is fragile and weaker than the other wrestlers she may come up against. These problematic comments about her age also implies problematic things about James’ appearance – Bliss is making this comment because James is visibly older than many of the other women who wrestle for WWE. In western culture, being visibly older as a woman implies that you are not beautiful

or attractive. So this is a valid reason for the writers to make James respond with anger. This storyline is unfair, as it invalidates the accomplishments and capabilities of women who are in their 30s. It is reducing Mickie James, a woman who has made incredible strides for WWE's women's division throughout her career, down to her age and supposed "fragility." Then, as expected, the characters in this storyline express anger aggressively, which is ultimately not productive – but it gets the live WWE audience to react and participate in the spectacle that wrestling creates.

What's worse is that a year later, in October 2018, Mickie James is friends with Alexa Bliss and there are seemingly no hard feelings (or maybe even memory) of the hurtful things that were said. This might seem like a positive thing, but we also saw no apologies or making-up between Bliss and James before this, so it seems like James is now friends with someone who bullied her and *never* apologized for it. It also seems like Bliss did not change in this time, seeing as she continued with a very similar storyline with other women, too. James is sucked into a feud with Trish Stratus and Lita (wrestlers that are the same age as James) with an eerily similar plot. This time, Mickie James is the one to say that Trish Stratus and Lita have "not been in a WWE ring in a long, long, and I mean loooooooooong time" ("Alexa Bliss & Mickie James"). To see the women who were targets of these insulting comments and sexist storylines take part in plots not too different to what they experienced suggests that the writers believe these plots to be successful in creating anger and maintaining and attracting audiences. This plot shows that this anger that is expressed through meanness and sarcasm has no in-ring consequences either – women are encouraged to be angry in a nonconstructive, aggressive way, as long as they are furthering the plot. This suggests that the writers believe that if people didn't stop watching the

show and it sparked attention before, it seems appropriate to use the plot again to continue to generate passive or aggressive anger in the viewers and bring attention to their shows.

The way the stories of WWE's *Raw* and *Smackdown* are written seems to suggest that the writers of these shows are purposely making their audience passively and/or aggressively angry in order to gain media attention. It is the women in their audience, which according to Stephanie McMahon (daughter of Vince) makes up about 40% of their fanbase (Cotton), that are angered the most. Sharon Mazer admits that "on the surface, professional wrestling may be profoundly conservative, representing truth, justice, and the dream of the ideal American man" (6). This focus on the conservative is something that has not changed much in the last twenty-or-so years, at least at first glance. But Mazer also reveals that "because the promoters and performers are explicit in their salesmanship, because performance caters directly to the fans, and because the game is structured around their active participation *as* fans, the spectators are always visible and, at least superficially, empowered in the wrestling event" (6). Mazer is arguing that wrestling is the way that it is because of the fans: that the promoters, performers, writers, and executives care only about making money, and they make it clear that they are trying to make money. Because of this desire to make money, the wrestling executives need to listen to their audiences at least a little bit. In 1998, the majority of wrestling's audiences were men. Women, if in the crowd at wrestling events, may not have been heard at all. Their opinions may not have changed anything the promoters or performers did. However, in present-day, women audience members can be heard – but the writers of *Smackdown* and *Raw* seem to want the women in the audience to be mad so as to get the attention they need to keep the business going. In an industry like professional wrestling, any attention is good attention. Women's aggressive anger on screen brings attention in from other women, and sparks aggressive anger in those who participate in

social media. However, it also sparks some assertive anger, which is getting more people to talk about the sexism in WWE.

Blogs and social media posts are ways that many women in the WWE fanbase has taken to in order to get their voices heard. Twitter is one of the primary places that women express their anger about sexist storylines, and many of the fan reactions I have already written about come from Twitter. Twitter's ability to create "trends" on the site created a huge change with the #GiveDivasAChance hashtag. The ability to share ideas about the sexism in WWE allows for the anger to move from passive to assertive anger. It allows for women to be able to start conversations about inequality. Similarly, the wrestlers can get their voices heard in this way, too. The more people that are talking about WWE, the more these shows start trending on social media. However, as Traister states, "some of [the ideas angry women have] will transform the world, others will fail. But anger is moving women and their thinking on inequality forward, in ways that are both legal and tangible, and also imaginative and ideological" (214). Not all of the anger that women share online is going to change what the company says or does. What Traister is saying here is that if women persist in their anger and keep coming up with ideas for change, something will stick. That being said, if things about wrestling trend on social media – even if it is for bad reasons – it still brings attention to the WWE. Despite the ability to express opinions on social media, there has still been very little change to storylines in WWE. Even with the "women's (r)evolution," the changes are small.

Twitter user @SlaylerJ tweeted "we know wrestling is fake WWE is still a massive corporation built on a celebratory mix of racism & sexism that millions of kids watch," expressing what many fans have said previously. Here, she is arguing that WWE is very influential, but they still continuously spread racist and sexist messages through their stories

which can greatly impact the children who watch the show. The tweet continues with “so stay the fuck out my DMs b4 I try to huricanrana u through a table & accidentally break ur neck because my technique isn’t as GOOD AS NAOMIS” (@SlaylerJ). The Twitter user is telling people to stop private-messaging her about how the WWE isn’t as bad as she says it is, because she is aggressively angry that people don’t see how sexist and racist it is. Based on the capitalized words alone, you can tell this woman is angry. She’s expressing her anger towards WWE as a corporation and what she believes is “celebratory” sexism. She has a right to be angry, based on the sexist storylines that WWE promotes. However, since it is mostly insulting language and doesn’t really open up conversation, it is not as productive as it could be. It is a start to getting viewers to participate in assertive anger, though. When Bliss herself (as a character) talked about sexism in a storyline on *Raw*, one fan on Twitter @AnotherElle tweeted “Mean cowardly heel Alexa Bliss talking about sexist double standards is the most oldschool of WWE bullshit” (@AnotherElle). In this tweet, Elle is angry that WWE used one of their most sexist characters to talk about sexism on the show, yet WWE has done nothing to change the sexist things that Bliss has said. She has good reason to be angry, as many other outspoken women could have given the same message with more believability. Bliss has a clear history of being part of sexist storylines, so when she called out sexism it did not feel like it meant anything.

As Traister argues in the end of her book *Good and Mad*, “what you’re angry about now – injustice – will still exist, even if you yourself are not experiencing it, or are tempted to stop thinking about *how* you experience it, and how you contribute to it” (250). The injustice that is part of WWE still exists, even though they claim to be better now and have marketed their women’s division in more ways in recent years. However, many of the producers, executives,

and writers still do not acknowledge that they contribute to the issue. Every time someone brings up sexism in WWE, there is very little said or done about it. However, this is only if the sexism is directed at women. When there is “sexism” against men (and one could argue that is not possible), the company responds immediately and makes the show about masculinity again. An example of this from the company is evident in an article from the website *Kayfabe News*. The article, discussing WWE’s all-women’s pay-per-view *Evolution*, says

World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), responding to widespread criticism that its upcoming all-women Evolution pay-per-view unfairly excludes men, announced today that the event will indeed feature men as scantily clad managers and valets. ‘WWE is a progressive organization founded on the principles of equality and diversity,’ reads a statement issued by the company this morning. ‘That is why the Evolution pay-per-view will include male WWE superstars, who will prance coquettishly at ringside, slinkily enter the ring, and distract the referee with their taut, golden skin and pouty lips’ (“Amid Sexism Allegations”).

While they claim to be a progressive organization in their statement, they are clearly exhibiting extreme stereotypes and performances of women in their all-women’s pay-per-view. They are also trying to make it seem like legitimate accusations of sexism are absurd.

While the men at the *Evolution* pay-per-view were likely intended to produce laughter, this was frustrating for the audience who realized that these performances were extreme versions of problematic stereotypes about women. Luckily, though, many people in the audience continue to react negatively to not just this display of sexism, but many other displays as well. In a different circumstance, like a drag-show, there might be different implications with the feminizing of men. It might feel more like an expression of creativity. However, in an arena

where most of the audience is conservative, this allows for people to laugh at performances of femininity. Luckily, much of the time there is a negative audience response. These stereotypes promote sexism, and also take away from the fact that the *Evolution* pay-per-view was supposed to be all about women.

Additionally, as April Lavalley mentions, “women are still used as props for male talent (Alicia Fox was a ‘trophy’ two males fought over for a particular storyline, all while being portrayed as the ‘crazy’ girl).” Similarly, during the first-ever women’s Money in the Bank match on June 18, 2017, women wrestlers had a major milestone ruined for them. During a Money in the Bank match, the goal is to defeat other wrestlers by climbing to the top of a ladder and grabbing a briefcase that has a “contract” in it that is hung from the roof. The contract offers an exclusive opportunity to the winner of the Money in the Bank match to have a chance at the championship belt. During this particular match, “Carmella’s valet James Ellsworth climbed the [ladder] and grabbed the briefcase. The image of a wrestler seizing the briefcase after a hard-fought battle has always been iconic, so it was another slap in the face to fans who bought into the narrative of equality and acceptance the WWE was falsely toting in the weeks leading up to the match” (Lavalley). These examples of giving men the spotlight even when women are supposed to be equal in WWE now reinforce the assertive anger that was already present in the viewers previous to the “evolution.” In fact, Twitter account @WrestlingSexism is dedicated to showing the kinds of assertive anger that is still in the WWE fanbase due to the sexism remarks and storylines still being made. This account tweets about the sexism within wrestling, but they also primarily retweet other people’s takes on how men still hold the spotlight. For example, Twitter account @SmarmyBetch tweets “I’m officially putting it out into the universe: I want to do ringside commentary and/or ring announcing. We NEED more women involved in wrestling.

We NEED female faces.” People within the wrestling community realize this focus on men, and express it through the platforms they know – they are just not being heard. This anger is assertive – they are speaking their minds and sharing their honest thoughts about injustice with other like-minded people. However, because these fans are not a large portion of the fanbase, they often are not heard or not taken seriously. Many more people are not taking to Twitter, and instead are holding in passive anger.

There are many ways that WWE cultivates passive anger, as we have seen. But there are deeper and more pervasive reasons why they cultivate anger and how they use that anger. Vince McMahon and WWE in general would not be able to exploit women’s anger without an established ability to use their performers as a way to make money. Of course, Sharon Mazer’s *Sport and Spectacle* emphasizes the profit-making motivations. Broderick Chow’s article “Audience Affirmation and the Labour of Professional Wrestling” also identifies the monetary aspect of wrestling, and the political connection. This article emphasizes the need for audience approval in order to make more money. Chow directly addresses the use of story for profit, arguing that,

the labour that the wrestler is paid for is representational labour, that is, the presentation of a storyline. Representational labour produces value for the promoter because it is a fulfillment of the basic contract made with the customer/audience member. These narratives, more often than not, are threaded through with cultural stereotypes, racism, misogyny and nationalism – sensationalism of this sort helps to sell tickets and attract attention (positive or negative) (45).

Not only does Chow address the wrestler's economic value, he addresses how misogyny – a major factor contributing to women's rage – sells their merchandise. Though Chow is speaking specifically about the economic value of the wrestler's performances, his work easily connects to the idea of emotional labor of the viewers of WWE.

Chow's idea of audience affirmation also ties into WWE's capitalist approaches to their storylines and their interaction with audiences. As Chow argues,

applause stands in place for remuneration; a marker of the transaction between the two groups [audience and performers]. While in contemporary theater this type of audience affirmation is less common, in professional wrestling, which wears its commercial nature proudly, the relation of spectator affirmation to the economic transaction of the performance event is standard (46).

Chow references Mazer as well, and her argument that the contract between the audience and the promoter is a promise that fans will get their money's worth when they are at these events (46).

The arguments that Chow makes coincide with the idea that the reason a lot of WWE's storylines continue to be sexist is because the audience affirms the performances of the wrestlers, whether those performances are negative or positive. The audiences' cheering doesn't reflect whether or not they agree with the stories expressed, just that they appreciate and enjoy the performances put on in front of them. This ties back in to Massumi's concept of intensity, the idea that intensity of feeling matters more than what the feeling actually is when it comes to viewer response. As Massumi argues, sometimes scenes that stir up negative feelings are more pleasant because of the intensity of the feeling (23). Audiences, in this case, affirm the stories because they are experiencing intensity, which registers as pleasant. Audience affirmation, in Chow's

example, isn't simply deciding whether or not the performance is good or bad, though. The affirmation gives way to much more harmful stereotypes.

Many women who have written about wrestling online in blogs, forums, or online news sites argue what WWE critic Lavalley does, including that,

the WWE's obtuse sexism feels like a taunt, like a constant reminder that women are to be kept at an arm's length. It's a reinforcement of what so many women wrestling fans are told every day by shitty men on the internet: this is not for you. In a world that can be divided cleanly into two camps – faces and heels – sometimes it feels like there is no bigger heel than the WWE itself.

There is anger in these articles and posts over the fact that WWE does not care about sexism – in fact, they seem to rub the sexism in people's faces despite the reminders by their publicity team that they care about inclusion and equality. They would pay more attention to complaints, concerns, and general anger if it was impacting their annual income – but it isn't, at least not by any significant margin. With the fact that they are not being significantly financially impacted, it is hard for some to argue that what WWE is doing is somehow bad or wrong. It seems that many feminists are publicly voicing their issues and anger with WWE's sexism, but their concerns seem to be ignored by the people who control WWE's scripts. If nothing is changing drastically, but it is still making the company money, people might argue that if women don't like it or are angry about it then they just shouldn't watch it.

The argument that women just shouldn't watch WWE negates the seriousness of the messages WWE is spreading with their sexism, and it negates the anger women feel when watching the shows, too. It suggests that women should just ignore sexism, rather than do something about it. It suggests that women should push their anger down and ignore it, too.

Additionally, some people (young people particularly) sometimes do not have an option other than watching it. Their parents, guardians, or a variety of other people might have the shows playing on their televisions with no regard for the messages that it is sending to children. Some people may bring their children to the live events, exposing their children to misogynistic stereotypes without even thinking about it. WWE has the potential to make a large impact on people who watch it regularly, just like other television shows do, and this is why the way that WWE cultivates anger is so inappropriate.

However, the argument that people just shouldn't watch it also offers a way to utilize productive, assertive anger, too. If everyone stopped watching it and ignored the sexism, that may not work. But if people, specifically the feminists who are angry about these sexist storylines, boycott the shows and purposefully direct their assertive anger into not watching the shows, this could give the showrunners the push they need to change their sexist storylines. On its own, if people individually choose to stop watching the shows, they ignore sexism and misogyny. As a group, though, it could bring powerful change to the company and the wrestling industry as a whole. The fact that a larger boycott is not happening, though, is why this argument to "just not watch the show" remains problematic.

CONCLUSION

Much of women's anger is repressed due to societal standards and expectations. But in the wrestling ring, it is used in many different and very visible ways. While scholars like Chemaly feel anger is powerful and can frequently be hopeful, people like Traister feel that the patriarchy is afraid of women's anger and the way they use it. As we can identify in Mazer's work as well as Chow's, the audience in a wrestling arena is the customer of a franchise that does not care much for the implications of its actions. Audience reaction and the concept of affect/intensity suggests that WWE is cultivating women's anger specifically because they know it can garner audience involvement and make them money. They know that an audience's aggressive anger expressed through social media and other online platforms will generate conversation, and that with that conversation more people will pay attention. The cultivation of audience rage via bullying and inappropriate plot lines is not justifiable. However, the cultivation of that anger does generate attention for WWE. With this knowledge, WWE viewers – especially women viewers – need to stand up against the sexism that WWE spouting. Viewers need to use their resources to direct their assertive anger at the producers and writers who continuously use sexism as a plot device. WWE has used sexist plotlines for far too long, and the fact that they continue to spew sexism while marketing “progressive” stories is unacceptable. It is clear that anger can be powerful and can really make a change, and WWE viewers must use this anger in productive, assertive ways rather than aggressively or passively.

Unlike most scripted television shows, the audience is meant to see WWE as real. Consequentially, many young people watching the stereotyped and sexist/misogynistic stories in the show are greatly influenced by those ideologies. WWE's use of character anger would be acceptable – as most stories emotionally manipulate their audiences – if it weren't for the fact

that they promote problematic images of women that can seriously harm a person's self-image and view of women. Seeing women tear each other down in such petty and harmful ways can impact older viewers, too, especially if they identify with the wrestler who is part of the story.

Through this analysis, it is clear that WWE has a lot of work to do in order to reach the equality they claim to provide in their company. They have a long way to go to eliminate the awful and harmful stereotypes they currently promote, as well. While the company continues to make storylines with sexism, racism, and other kinds of discriminatory behaviors, we as an audience need to be more critical of what we are watching and use our anger to help make a change. Wherein other shows make it clear who the "villains" and "heroes" are, WWE does not do so. Because of this, we must be more diligent in spotting the problematic stereotypes and publicly voicing our anger assertively. As Chemaly and Traister as well as many other feminist scholars argue, women's anger is powerful. Instead of letting it fuel the company's profit margins, women viewers must voice their anger about the inequality louder than they have before. They have done it in the past and brought serious change to the WWE with #GiveDivasAChance – now is the time to stop being complicit in WWE's sexism and speak loudly about the issues that need to be fixed.

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