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The geographies of wrestling: A review.

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically analyses debates surrounding the spatial scale of the ‘body’, with a specific focus on professional wrestling and the wrestler’s body. It addresses the ‘corporeal turn’ within sport literature, followed by an examination of how geographical thinking is crucial to an understanding of sports spaces, including the body as a space. This paper provides an insight into how wrestlers’ bodies interact and manipulate the space around them, creating a ‘spectacle of excess’, as well as how fighting roles and the professional wrestler’s body is determined by ideologies of race, gender and sexuality. In conclusion, this paper argues that to fully understand wrestling one needs to attend to socio-spatial relations and complex embodiments of cultural power.

Keywords *Geographies of sport, Body, Wrestling, Spectacle, Gender*

1.0 SPORT AND THE BODY

In the past twenty years there has been an increasing focus on the sub-discipline of ‘sport’ from a variety of academic disciplines, for example sociology (Henricks, 1974), philosophy (Barthes, 1991) and geography (Bale, 1993; 1994; 2000). Horne et al. (2013:105) discuss how there has been a specific interest in sport from a sociological view point that focuses on “[s]port as a field of enquiry in which enflashed bodies are central, and has contributed to what has been called ‘the corporeal turn’ in social theory.” The ‘corporeal turn’ acknowledges that the body is increasingly becoming a focus for academic research, and as a result there has been a significant change from essentialised notions of the body being that of

‘material nature’, to the recognition of the body as being a social construction (Horne et al., 2013).

The study of the body is fundamental to the study of sport. As Horne et al. acknowledge: “Sports are organised and classified by what people do with their bodies” (Horne et al., 2013:105). Sport organisations set regulations that determine which bodies are allowed to compete and how bodies should respond to spatial rules (Bale, 2000), and also intervene to regulate the body in terms of controlling doping and setting pathways for the development of athletes (Horne et al., 2013). Yet, as Jenkins (2007:106) points out there are social determinants at work beyond the scope of formal regulatory intervention that conspire to shape the sporting body through ingrained cultural practices

and the lived daily experiences of the embodied self. Several other authors also have revealed the impacts of dominant cultural values of body shape and size alongside gendered criteria in the formation and celebration of sporting bodies (Lemish, 1998; Bale, 2000; van Ingen, 2003; Horne et al., 2013).

Geography is a crucial discipline to acknowledge when looking at bodies in sport and how the body is inscribed within various spatial scales and environments. Bale and Philo (1998) discuss how historians and sociologists of sport have tended to view the world as one-dimensional; failing to take in to account the nature of spatial interaction. van Ingen (2003:212) agrees, promoting the use of geography by stating that “sport sociology would greatly benefit from an engagement with postmodern spatial theory.” These are arguments recently taken forward by Andrews (2016) who argues for a revised approach to sport geography where the qualitative distinctiveness of the performing and sensuous body comes to the fore. This is a position that challenges the orthodoxy of space, place and territoriality in accounts of sport provided by geographers such as Bale (1993; 1994; 2000) through its insistence on capturing the emotions, thrills, movement and rhythms of sport; qualities which help explain the wonder and passion of sport for its participants and fans. Nevertheless, the relationship between the body, space and society has remained a persistent area for scholarship, enabling geographers, in the words of van Ingen (2003) “to unpack the heterogeneity of gender, sexuality, race and other relations that characterise sport spaces” (van Ingen, 2003:212). This suggests that geographical thinking is key to a critical analysis of sport and the sporting body.

By placing the body at the centre of the inquiry, geographical thinking can be used to explore spatial interactions and relationships during sporting activities. Butler (1990) calls for an engagement with the anatomical body, taking into account the body as not just shaping experiences but also acknowledging the materiality and diversity of bodies (Horne et al., 2013). Similarly, Eichberg (1998) emphasises that the body does not stop at the surface of the skin, but interacts with the space surrounding it.

As this short review paper will show, the limits of the professional wrestling fight overflows from the wrestlers’ bodies to interact with the space around them. As such, geographical thinking is essential in order to understand how professional wrestlers use their bodies within the spatial dimension of ‘the ring’ and the forms of cultural power projected beyond it.

2.0 PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING: BODIES, BICEPS AND THE ‘SPECTACLE OF EXCESS’

Professional wrestling can be defined as a spectacle of combat based around fictional characters and exaggerated (often pre-planned) body movements (Henricks, 1974; Barthes, 1991; Lemish, 1998; Jenkins, 2007). Jenkins (2007:75) depicts professional wrestling as a “curious hybrid of sports and theatre”, which allows for the spectacle of male physical prowess, alongside the exploration of the competitors’ emotional and moral life. An increasingly key aspect of professional wrestling is its media outlet (Sabo & Jansen, 1992; Raitz, 1995; Mazer, 1998; Jenkins, 2007). The media outlet is a space in which the wrestlers’ bodies are broadcasted in ways that often (re)affirm dominant ideologies surrounding sport bodies (Lemish, 1998). In particular, contributing to patriarchal hegemony through the depiction of ‘tough’ and excessively muscular men and vulnerable or flirtatious women. As Barthes (1991) writes, the public role of the wrestler is clear to the audience:

“What is portrayed by wrestling is therefore an ideal understanding of things; it is the euphoria of men raised for awhile above the constitutive ambiguity of everyday situations and placed before the panoramic view of univocal Nature, in which signs at last correspond to causes, without obstacle, without evasion, without contradiction” (Barthes, 1991:23).

Barthes (1991) depicts professional wrestling as a ‘spectacle of excess’ which is formed through a number of transient images of certain passions. Wrestling represents the cause and effect of the relationship between two bodies within the ring, and each body carries the form of its gestures to the furthest reach of their meaning (Barthes, 1991). In wrestling, defeat is not an outcome but it is a

duration and display of suffering and humiliation (Barthes, 1991). Unlike other televised sporting events, professional wrestling trades on a carnivalesque atmosphere of subversive pleasure and degradation (Fiske, 1987), in which forms of violence and brutality are permissible amongst the competitors, with the audience vigorously engaged too in verbal and physical expressions of support and excitement (Lemish, 1998).

Barthes (1991) argues that wrestling is a sport that gives the audience a spatially externalised 'image' of torture. The enactment of suffering in a hold which is 'reputedly' cruel, with the body contorted by an apparently unbearable affliction, is performed for the gaze of the public. For the audience, what matters is not what it thinks but what it sees; "[i]t is therefore in the body of the wrestler that we find the first key to the contest" (Barthes, 1991:15). The physique/appearance of the wrestlers' bodies dictates the role they play in fight narrative (Barthes, 1991), the bodies, and therefore their roles in the fight, are determined by intersections of gender, sexuality and race (van Ingen, 2003).

Within the space of sports arenas, such as the wrestling ring, meaningful group differences and categories are spatially (re)constructed (van Ingen, 2003; Knopp, 2007). Professional wrestling draws upon racial stereotypes, with characters such as 'Chief Jay Strongbow' and 'Abdullah the Butcher – the mad man from Sudan' (re)enforcing racial stereotypes onto these bodies. These constructions and inequalities are also visible through the gender division and inequalities present in professional wrestling, with men dominating the sport as the 'main event', whilst female wrestlers are often side-lined as 'warm up' acts; using everyday 'speech' to privilege men over women (Baker et al., 2004). From an essentialist perspective, these inequalities are based on biological determination of bodily differences (Horne et al., 2013). However, post-structuralist feminist Butler (1990) counteracts this by suggesting that gender is a repeated stylisation of the body within a rigid regulatory framework, which 'congeals' over time. A good example to illustrate this thought is Young's (2005) essay 'throwing like a girl', which shows how gendered embodiment is constructed through repeated practices and conventions which determine specific bodily 'competences'.

Sabo and Jansen (1992) discuss how increased feminist scholarship has led to more critical scrutiny into conventions of how gender is represented in sport. Professional wrestling is an example of a sport that uses and (re)enforces gender stereotypes. Female wrestlers who compete within the space of the wrestling ring and also appear outside the ring often draw upon gender stereotypes already in broader circulation to form their wrestling character (Jenkins, 2007). 'Sensational Sherri' could often be seen interfering with fights from outside of the ring, using her 'seductive charm' and weapons concealed in her purse to ensure her man's victory (Jenkins, 2007). In one 'RAW' competition, wrestler 'Trish Stratus' was forced by commentator 'Vince' to "strip and bark like a dog" (World Wrestling Entertainment, 2015a). These examples show how female wrestlers, or 'The Divas', often play over-sexualised roles and how, as Horne et al. (2013) suggest, women's bodies are objectified by male counterparts, the audience, and the media outlet in sport.

On the other hand, sports sociologists have highlighted the importance of also recognising how hegemonic masculinities in professional sports (re)produce steep hierarchies and stereotypes on the *male* body (Messner & Sabo, 1990; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinities have been defined as the valorised masculinity that is usually portrayed as unemotional, competitive, brawny, potentially violent and otherwise heterosexual (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The masculine embodiment of identity and behaviour can emerge through many contexts (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), including activities such as sport. This is also addressed by van Ingen (2003) and Sabo and Jansen (1992) who discuss how sport spaces enforce ideas of hegemonic masculinities, with the bodies within these spaces seen as exemplars of masculinity.

The possession of physical strength is directly linked to moral authority (Jenkins, 2007); this is especially true in professional wrestling as contact confrontational sports are a symbol of masculinity (Messner & Sabo, 1990; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) in which 'tough' male bodies win the battles (Sabo & Jansen, 1992; Lemish, 1998). The elite body in a sport activity

establishes a relation of distance and dominance over other mens' bodies (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005); professional wrestlers' bodies are often flaunted and put on a pedestal for the audience to judge (Mazer, 1998). 'The Rock' is an example of a wrestler who has gone on to become a 'global' fitness instructor with the tag line "discipline in the gym can breed success in life outside it" (World Wrestling Entertainment, 2015b). Barthes's (1991) classic study, 'The world of wrestling', understood this point well, signaling how professional wrestling targets the body as a site in which good and bad forms of citizenship can manifest and a moral order can be established.

This moral order is then represented through the symbolic cultural identities of a 'hero' and a 'villain' (Barthes, 1991; see also Henricks, 1974; Lemish, 1998). Those bodies that conform to the cultural notion of a 'normal' 'fit' body are often portrayed as the 'hero' whereas bodies that do not conform to the notion of the ideal body are often represented as the 'villain' (Barthes, 1991). The fabrication of the individual bodies of wrestlers reiterates the power operated by dominant ideologies (Foucault, 1977) and how sports events contribute to the (re)construction of patriarchal hegemony (Lemish, 1998), acting as a social 'disciplinary mechanism' (Bale, 2000).

3.0 CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this paper has highlighted the importance of critical spatial analysis to understanding the world of sport and the world of professional wrestling. The spatial scale of the body is vital to the production and preproduction of specific gendered and sexualised ideologies within the sport of professional wrestling, dictating behaviours and aesthetics both within the ring and in everyday life. Hargreaves and Vertinsky (2007:20) wrote that "it is clearly impossible to separate bodily experience from cultural meanings and it is the dialectic between the two that results in a shaping of the body by the social world and vice-versa". The wrestlers' body bears the hallmarks of this dialectic. The view from the ring is a visually arresting and dramaturgical display of the corporeal, and whilst we might cast doubt on the idea of wrestling as a 'sport' as opposed to a scripted drama, we cannot deny the unreconstructed appeal of strength, power and

violence to the whooping and hollering audiences it attracts. Outside the ring the wrestlers' body contributes to gendered and sexualised identities and is implicated in specific relations of power. Heroes and villains come and go but wrestling continues to inform social discourses on how we view men and women. Sport geography provides opportunities to interrogate the complexities and multi-dimensionality of the body and its location in different cultural and political fields. Wrestling is a sporting activity common to many national cultures and there is a need for critical inquiry into the sources of its cultural power alongside an understanding of its enduring appeal, however brutal or vulgar it may appear to outsiders.

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BIOGRAPHY

Imogen recently completed an undergraduate degree in BA (Hons) Human Geography in the School of Environment and Technology at the University of Brighton. Imogen's particular research interest includes gendered bodies within sport, which forms the basis of this review article. This review article is based upon an essay completed for module GY362 'Geographies of Sport and Leisure'.

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