

Feminist, Yet Not: Professional Wrestling and the Irreconcilability of the Feminine and the Feminist

Introduction

Women's professional wrestling remains an understudied subset of popular media, particularly in feminist media circles, despite its similarities to other forms of traditional women's media such as weepies, soap operas, and reality television. Catherine Salmon and Susan Clerc note, "the current metaphor for professional wrestling is 'a soap opera for men,' a phrase that denies space for female fans while co-opting a traditionally female-centered genre" (167). Each era of professional wrestling offers commentary on trends in feminism through the visibility and iconography of women wrestlers employed by World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE). As Sharon Mazer writes, "the microcosm of the squared circle reflects first the largely unseen conditions of the game and then the world outside" (71). In analyzing prominent women wrestlers during three distinct time periods within the WWE as case studies – Chyna, Trish and Lita, and the Total Divas – this paper explores the roles of women, past and present, within the company. The role of women in WWE has transformed considerably over the years, from the 90s "Attitude Era" which prominently featured women as ringside entertainment in bras and underwear to the current Women's (R)Evolution¹ in which women have longer and more frequent matches that focus on athleticism rather than sexuality. Regardless of manifestation, women in professional wrestling serve as signifiers of the tension, overlap, and the acceptably irreconcilable relationship between modes of feminism, the feminine, and popular culture.

1. The WWE use the words "evolution" and "revolution" interchangeably to describe the modifications made to the Women's Division after 2016. The stylized "(R)Evolution" combines both words used by the company.

Postfeminism, Popular Feminism, and In Between

I employ postfeminist discourse, as a contradictory "entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes," as well as popular feminism to analyze women's professional wrestling and its subsequent proliferation of reality television programs as a triad of stigmatization: women, wrestling, and reality television (Gill 149). While the precise definition of postfeminism remains debated amongst feminist scholars, several have identified stable characteristics that constitute what Rosalind Gill terms a "postfeminist sensibility" (148). Characteristics include a preoccupation with women's bodies and a prioritization of obtaining and maintaining a "heterosexy" body (Dobson 59), as well as a hyper-focus on individualism, choice, and agency (often pertaining to material consumption). In addition, "postfeminist sensibility" describes the active depoliticization and disavowal of structural forces that contribute to social, economic, and cultural disparities on the part of race, gender, class, ability, and sexuality (Gill 149). Popular feminism depends on visibility to circulate, and this visibility requires an accommodating, palatable, and non-disruptive form of feminism at the expense of calling for structural change beyond the individual (Banet-Weiser 11). In addition to being undistruptive, popular feminism actively maintains, promotes, and targets dominant social groups – "white, middle-class, cisgender, and heterosexual" (Banet-Weiser 13). Post and popular feminism also encompass various strands of feminist ideology, including but not limited to girlie feminism and neoliberal feminism, each of which I employ and define in the following sections.

While the WWE offers insight into complex, overlapping, and contradictory feminisms and sentiments towards women, it is not a progressive

company despite the recent changes it has made to several facets of its operation, namely its Women's Division. It can be argued that the WWE, valued at \$1.5 billion in 2016, is capitalizing on feminist trends seen across popular culture. In her reading of *Hustler Magazine*, Laura Kipnis writes,

there is no guarantee that counter-hegemonic or even specifically anti-bourgeois cultural forms are necessarily going to be progressive ... *Hustler* is against government, against authority, against the bourgeoisie, diffident on male power – but its anti-liberalism, anti-feminism, anti-communism, and anti-progressivism leave little space for envisioning any alternative kind of political organization. (388-89)

Popular feminist sentiments within the WWE remain vague and palatable; feminist-evoking expressions read like social platitudes, careful not to alienate or disrupt its highly masculinist tradition and long-assumed audience. The lore of the WWE and its treatment and rules for women wrestlers remain largely unwritten but have been confirmed by past and present affiliates of the company. Women of the WWE endure(d) public abuse both in and out of the ring from the company over personal matters such as weight gain, marriage, pregnancy, and any other behavior deemed unacceptable by the company. Such punishments included on-air slut-shaming, in-ring sex acts, and other forms of sexual humiliation. While the WWE no longer appears proudly anti-feminist, the brand of feminism it evokes is just that; a brand, based on the tired and now rendered meaningless notion of empowerment. Below I discuss three eras of women's wrestling to further demonstrate the shifting dynamics of feminism within the WWE and its relation to cultural trends at large.

Chyna: "Ninth Wonder of the World"

Joanie Laurer, known by her ring name, Chyna, first appeared in the WWE (then WWF – World Wrestling Federation) universe during a 1997 episode of WWF *Raw*. She quickly rose to prominence within the company and was billed as "The Ninth Wonder of the World" due to her physical stature and muscle mass. Chyna competed in matches from her debut until she was released by the WWE in 2001. Chyna is a particularly interesting figure because she occupied a space not often seen in WWE; a woman whose main occupation was not cheerleader or manager but

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a veritable opponent for the male Superstars (whom she often defeated). She is crudely characterized – alongside other women in the company – by Nicholas Sammond as "a delightful counterpoint to the powder-puff managers who parade T and A as they accompany their boys to the ring" (9). Throughout her time with the WWE, the character of Chyna operated in stark distinction to the hyper-feminine managers representative of women's roles in the company at the time. Dawn Heinecken writes,

Four of the most visible women in recent years – Sunny, Sable, Marlena, and Debra – are petite, large-breasted women with long flowing blonde hair who dress in extremely provocative clothing. Frequently designated as 'managers' or wives, these women take a subservient role to the men and often have a clearly sexual relationship with them. Female managers function as damsels in distress; for example, rivals attack each other's female managers in order to distract their opponents. In the world of the WWF, women have historically functioned as sexual spectacle. (185)

Chyna's presence and popularity in the WWF created parallel opportunities for progress and punishment. The departure she represented from the passive and sexualized women characters predominantly featured by the company prompted the need for the WWF to control and conform Chyna's body for her transgressions and disruption to the hyper-masculine WWF universe.

Chyna's recurring opponent, Jeff Jarret, whose character was well-known as a southern misogynist prone to verbally and physically abusing women wrestlers, audience members, and elderly women, challenged Chyna to the *Good Housekeeping Match* (1999) in which the wrestlers were given a series of props – all of which were household items such as a broom, an ironing board, and kitchen utensils. Jarrett taunted Chyna in promotional materials that aired preceding the match: "Chyna, you're going to get your rematch,

alright, but it's going to be the good housekeeping way. You will understand the role of a woman because I'm going to beat you with every household appliance known to woman" (WWE No Mercy). While Jarrett's violent misogyny went far beyond his confrontations with Chyna, the *Good Housekeeping Match* offers a visual culmination of this misogyny. The match featured Jarrett gleefully smacking Chyna in the head with a fish before throwing her into an ironing board, a physical commentary on the attempts made by the WWE to manage her unruly body, behavior, and power. Chyna is subject to sexualization, humiliation, and literal beatings with domestic objects while the announcers of the *Good Housekeeping Match* mock her apparent lack of domestic, motherly, and feminine characteristics and Jeff Jarrett attempts to subdue her body by breaking her strength with objects assigned to women and their social occupancy.



While the metaphor of the *Good Housekeeping Match* is ham-handed, its relevance in the greater lineage of women's tenure in the WWE suggests patterns of backlash, hatred, and heightened misogyny in tandem with the progress of women in the company. Sarah Banet-Weiser argues that as feminism increases in visibility and popularity, so does misogyny. She writes, "the relationship between popular feminism and popular misogyny is deeply entwined: popular feminism and popular misogyny battle it out on the contemporary cultural landscape, living side by side as warring, constantly moving contexts in an economy of visibility"

(2). Heinecken suggests that Chyna's time in the WWF can be marked through a series of attempts at softening her body and "implanting" her with traditional markers of femininity. After her incredibly successful appearance in *Playboy* and several cosmetic procedures, Chyna's body and by association, power, shrank within the WWE. Chyna, "once threatening the social hierarchy with her large and androgynous appearance," was incrementally standardized so that she no longer represented a threat to male wrestlers or the overall masculinity of the company, but instead became recuperated as properly feminized through the "overt sexualization and bodily normalization, particularly the shrinking of her muscular body" (Heinecken 198).

Trish and Lita: Attitude Era

As Chyna's time with the WWE ended, the "Attitude Era" ushered in more women competitors and more opportunities for complex negotiations of progress and regression within the company. Trish Stratus and Lita, now WWE hall-of-famers, debuted with the company in 2000 – Trish as a hyper-feminine manager and Lita as a thong-bearing tough girl. Trish and Lita, both eroticized during their tenure as Divas, fulfilled differing versions of femininity, sexuality, and power influenced by the postfeminist culture of the 2000s. Postfeminist sentiments are highly visible in the WWE during this time, particularly through the iconography and dichotomy provided by Trish and Lita and emphasized by the WWE's decision to position them as opposites and by extension, enemies.

The postfeminist figure of the New Woman, premised upon the contradictions between traditional performances and iconography of femininity and masculinity, captures the tensions of in-ring personas such as those of Trish and Lita during the "Attitude Era". Elena Levine uses Buffy Summers, the protagonist of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) to explore the figure of the New Woman and notes the "seeming contradiction between Buffy's petite, pretty body and her conventionally feminine interests in boys, clothes, and cheerleading and her conventionally masculine work as a physically powerful slayer of vampires, demons, and other hellish monsters" (169). Buffy, part of a lineage of strong women both fictional and real, is precariously balanced along the lines of power and feminine desirability. This same precarity is visible within the WWE as the women of the company, while recently given more opportunities to display their athleticism, are often tempered by the storylines of their wrestling counterparts, as well as by shorter matches than the men

and a hyper-feminine presentation in the ring, including long, flowing hair and full makeup. Trish, like Buffy, is a “pretty, petite blonde” with a “moniker that signifies feminine frivolity and an obsession with popularity” (Levine 178). Her career with the WWE began in 2000 not as an in-ring wrestler but as the on-screen love interest and manager to several male wrestlers. While Trish performs femininity in more traditional ways – such as blonde hair and high heels – Lita’s femininity is less traditional, but still intact. Levine notes that Buffy’s visible bra strap served as dichotomous play between embrace and eschewal of feminine conventions, “at once modest and immodest, conforming to patriarchal edicts and defying them, Buffy’s exposed bra straps can be read as emblematic of the third wave’s contradictory understanding of girlie style” (179). This contradiction can be similarly read in Lita’s presentation in the WWE. Though less overtly feminine than Trish and often dressed in baggy pants and boots, Lita displayed her femininity and eroticism through an exposed thong, similar to Buffy’s bra strap. The iconography during the “Attitude Era,” including the women’s division championship belt, bedazzled in pink and white, the cursive DIVA title emblazoned over a large pink butterfly, was representative of a postfeminist embrace of the traditionally feminine tempered by the masculine.

While Trish and Lita are among the most popular WWE Superstars, their time with the company in the early 2000s mirrors postfeminist and at times, anti-feminist cultural trends insofar as their opportunities, fame, and prestige within the company, as well as their achievements in the ring, were undermined by constant on-air sexual humiliation. During their time with the company, Trish and Lita competed in a “bra and panty” match in which each woman was tasked with removing the clothing of her opponent while wrestling (2000), Lita and then-husband Edge had simulated sex in-ring (2006), and Trish was ordered to strip to her underwear and bark like a dog by CEO Vince McMahon as the

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crowd and announcers cheered in excitement and anticipation of her increasingly exposed body (2000). Trish and Lita continue to participate in special events with the company and serve as cornerstones of women’s progress in the division. In 2018, they both partook in the first-ever Women’s Royal Rumble match, which featured 30 past and present Superstars. Lita entered the match wearing the #TimesUp logo on her gear with Chyna’s name written on her forearm. Lita’s homage to Chyna, who passed away in 2016, (and who has yet to be inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame) along with her representation of a highly popular feminist campaign, demonstrate a rare moment of collectivity and historicity as it pertains to feminism and its place within the WWE.

Women’s (R)Evolution: From Total Divas to Superstars

Several core events within different strata of WWE launched the women’s (R)Evolution in 2015. First was a 30-second Diva’s Division tag team match which prompted fans to create and circulate the hashtag #GiveDivasAChance. The hashtag was taken up by then-Divas Paige and AJ Lee on their respective social media pages; Lee also sent tweets to Stephanie McMahon, the Chief Brand Officer of the WWE and daughter of CEO Vince McMahon, stating “Your female wrestlers have record selling merchandise & have starred in the highest rated segment of the show several times, and yet they receive a fraction of the wages & screen time of the majority of the male roster” (@TheAJMendez). A subsequent match between Bayley and Sasha Banks, two high-profile women wrestlers in WWE’s NXT division,² lasted 30 minutes (compared to 30 seconds on the main

2. The NXT Division is a lower-tier, non main roster division of the WWE where upcoming talent wrestle on the path to the televised, main roster division. Several women of the WWE grew to prominence in NXT, given opportunities to demonstrate their athleticism rather than their sexuality, and are now main-roster talent.

roster). This, along with the corresponding hashtag, led to several other significant changes for the women talent of the WWE. As of 2018, women wrestlers have competed in several previously off-limits matches, in addition to dropping the Divas title in 2016 for the more equalizing title of Superstars, the name given to male wrestlers of the WWE. Additionally, on October 28, 2018, the WWE aired its first all-women pay-per-view match titled *Evolution*.

In addition to slow but seemingly progressive moves in the ring, the reality shows based on women of the WWE, *Total Divas* (2013-), *Total Bellas* (2016-) and *Miz & Mrs.* (2018-) have all been renewed for additional seasons on the E! Network and USA Network, respectively. While the programs privilege the traditionally feminine in their casting, they provide members of the women's division the opportunity to present themselves as complex and incoherent selves, something the WWE has always withheld. Professional wrestling organizations like the WWE operate as spectacle, relying on soap operatic conventions and melodramatic storylines rife with betrayal, villains, and sex. *Total Divas*, while certainly remaining in the tradition of spectacle in contemporary reality television, features women struggling with work, friendships, motherhood, relationships, injury, and body image simultaneously. As Stéphanie Genz notes in her analysis of *Bridget Jones' Diary*, the "diary format and a confessional tone ... provide the fiction an authentic female voice, bewildered by the contradictory demands and mixed messages of heterosexual romance and feminist emancipation" (101). This same confessional tone is adopted throughout *Total Divas* as the cast constantly oscillates between the progression of their careers, their romances, and themselves as wrestlers, wives, and women. The third episode of season one of *Total Divas*, titled "Planet Funk is Funked Up," features storylines that centre on the tension between relationships and career, as both established WWE Superstar, Trinity, and newcomer JoJo, fight with their significant others due to choices made to advance their careers rather than their relationships. While I hesitate to use Genz's (or, perhaps, Bridget Jones') characterization of the "postfeminist singleton" to describe the cast of *Total Divas*, due in large part to the high numbers of marriages and births shown across *Total Divas*, *Total Bellas*, and *Miz & Mrs.*, it is important to note that while many Superstars are married with children, the "effortless realization of a postfeminist nirvana where women can 'have it all,'" is not framed as utopic or effortless to achieve and maintain (Genz 103-104). Instead, as Genz's notes about *Bridget Jones*, "the postfeminist

singleton expresses the pains and pleasures of her problematic quest for balance in a world where personal and professional, feminist and feminine positions are mutually pervasive" (104). Reality television highlights this problematic quest and constant "[vacillation] between anxiety and determination" through its centric focus and intimate, confessional address to the domestic and its frequent incongruence with public careerism (Genz 103). Combined with professional wrestling, an arena where women have so long remained two-dimensional for the sake of heterosexual fantasy, WWE's women Superstars are warned against making known

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the very "conflicts between ... feminist values and [the] feminine body, between individual and collective achievement, between professional career and personal relationship," that the parallel reality programs give prominence and voice (Genz 98). However, it is equally important to note that while the pains and pleasures of successfully occupying both the domestic and public spheres feature prominently in the reality programs and related social media, the presentation of success and mastery of what Catherine Rottenberg describes as a "felicitous work-life balance" ultimately reigns despite hardships, missteps, and cultural forces (420).

It is clear that these reality programs, much like WWE, attempt to evolve in reflection of changing social and political climates. The programs are decidedly apolitical insofar as they, as noted by Rachel Wood and Benjamin Litherland, avoid aligning themselves explicitly



with feminism and instead opt for euphemistic, veiled language to discuss gender equity and “revolution/ evolution” among wrestlers. The early seasons of *Total Divas* feature stereotypical competition between girls, framed as catfights and interpersonal drama, which subsides as the seasons progress, evolving into a more supportive, collective atmosphere. Promotional materials for season eight, which debuted on the E! Network in September 2018, focus on sisterhood and empowerment and feature voice-over soundbites such as “The Women’s Division has broken so many barriers;” “This is just the beginning; the sky’s the limit;” “Here’s to finding myself; I’m ready to be this new empowered Nicole;” and “It’s a sisterhood, everyone roots each other on” (“The Total Divas Are All In”).

Women of the WWE, past and present, and the stars of its reality programming, utilize popular feminism buzzwords while never explicitly aligning themselves with feminism or even using the word. Two prominent figures in the women’s (R)Evolution and the stars of both *Total Divas* and *Total Bellas*, twins Bree and Nikki Bella, were interviewed by *Cosmopolitan Magazine* in October 2018 for a piece titled “How the Bella Twins Turned Your Fave Guilty-Pleasure Sport into a Feminist Empire”, yet the word “feminism” never appears in the article outside its use in the title, nor is it used by the women to describe their work within company. Theories of neoliberal feminism and girlie/girl power feminism allow for feminism to occupy mainstream spaces safely and to be performed through consumption and its relation to agency. Eva Chen uses the Spice Girls and the women of *Charlie’s Angels* as examples of girl power feminism, women who “[emphasize] ultra-feminine looks and a sexualized image as a means of empowerment” (441). Catherine Rottenberg describes neoliberal feminism as a disarticulation of liberal feminism in which the neoliberal feminist subject “disavows the social, cultural, and economic forces producing [gender] inequality” but who also “accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care”



(420). The women of *Total Divas* espouse girl power, slogan feminism but also hold themselves, instead of a global corporation like the WWE, accountable for their success within the company and maintaining balance in all aspects of their lives. Additionally, they often express fears of losing opportunities for the Women’s Division based on individual performances, personal decisions, and not living up to the new expectations of women in the company.

Conclusion

The WWE serves as a useful case study for tracking trends of feminism across decades of popular media as the company acts as a gauge for the social perceptions of women. The company’s motives for promoting gender equity at the present moment, particularly following the historical, highly visible, at times giddy misogyny of the company, are likely an attempt at monetizing the current uptake of popular feminism. While the feminism of the WWE remains flattened, decontextualized, and dehistoricized, it also remains visible and perhaps most importantly, salable. The popular feminism utilized by the WWE can be described as existing within what Banet-Weiser describes as an “economy of visibility,” in which “visibility becomes *the end* rather than a means to an end” (23, emphasis original). For the WWE and its players, the promotion of feminist-adjacent sentiments and expressions are, in and of themselves, enough. Postfeminist and popular feminist thought and media representations remain in need of constant critical attention as these representations reign across media platforms, including professional wrestling.

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Cast of *Total Divas*