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## Professional wrestling as culturally embedded spectacles in five core countries: the USA, Canada, Great Britain, Mexico and Japan

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# *Professional wrestling as culturally embedded spectacles in five core countries: the USA, Canada, Great Britain, Mexico and Japan*

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## Introduction

- 1 This paper addresses a succession of complicated issues surrounding the cross-cultural popularity of professional wrestling. While boasting fans in several countries from across the globe, today, professional wrestling maintains a lasting presence in five territories - USA, Canada, United Kingdom, Japan and Mexico. 'Culturally embedded spectacle' is the unique conceptual framework developed for this paper to explain the longevity of professional wrestling in these five locations and includes the following factors: a continuous history of professional wrestling, national television exposure during the Old School era highlighting larger-than-life characters playing the face, an extensive group of independent professional wrestling federations and commemorative cultural experiences for young and old fans.
- 2 Granted, there may be other aspects not included here. However, locating professional wrestling within the conceptual framework of culturally embedded spectacles is my personal effort to understand professional wrestling as a unique global phenomenon.

## Professional Wrestling as a Culturally Embedded Spectacle

- 3 During the summer months of 2012 (July, August and September), the WWE held 70 live events in the USA/Canada region and seven internationally and were viewed by 450,000 fans (WWE. 2012. Corporate.) The year previously, the WWE produced 80 live events internationally reaching almost 500,000 fans with an average ticket price of US\$68.74. In North America (USA and Canada), 241 live events attracted 1,500,000 fans with an average ticket price of US\$42.11. Total revenues from live events for 2011 was US\$104.7 million (2011,WWE annual Report, pg 4).
- 4 While the WWE is certainly the mainstay of global professional wrestling, professional wrestling as a 'spectacle of excess' (Barthes: 1957; 2005) has nestled in five major countries that, taken together, are a force in their own right which are home to hundreds of independent professional wrestling federations. The five major territories are the United States of America, Canada, Great Britain, Japan and Mexico. This is not meant to suggest that professional wrestling has disappeared either in Europe or elsewhere in the world. On the contrary, professional wrestling continues to make itself felt in countries as remote as Bolivia, home of the fighting Cholitas<sup>1</sup>. What I am proposing, however, is a core group of countries where professional wrestling remains a distinctive culturally embedded spectacle.

## Professional Wrestling as Culturally Embedded Spectacles in Five Countries

- 5 My empirical examination of professional wrestling as a global cultural phenomenon reveals a core group of five countries or territories. My analysis of the vitality of professional wrestling in these five countries makes use of a conceptual framework I refer to as a 'culturally embedded spectacle'. I single out the following characteristics that distinguish these countries from the rest of the globe.
- 6 First is the vibrant history and evolution of professional wrestling in these five territories. Second is the importance of national televised exposure during the important post World War II decades often referred to as the 'Old School' period. What we see today displayed as televised events of WWE is recent. However, efforts continue by Vince McMahon, Jr and the WWE to attract new audiences in various other countries.
- 7 In addition to the varied yet coterminous history of professional wrestling among the core territories as theatric spectacle and the significance of national television exposure during the Old School era is the expansion of numerous independent professional wrestling federations inside the five major countries. In many ways, these federations continue to serve as farm teams from which the larger federations such as the WWE poach new talent. Finally, the five core countries commemorate their specific professional wrestling history through celebrating past heroes of the 'squared circle', merchandising cultural artifacts and hosting special events.

## An Abridged History of Professional Wrestling in the Five Core Countries

- 8 Professional wrestling owes much of its development to what is known as free style wrestling in Europe. That being said, while the European roots (including the UK) of professional wrestling are critical, we can not neglect the complex interaction between European free style wrestling with indigenous forms of wrestling among the Native Amerindians in the USA, Canada and Mexico and Sumo wrestling and mixed martial arts in Japan. In North America, for example, Woodland Native Americans such as the Iroquois, Mohawks and Susquehanna used wrestling as a way of settling personal disputes. The French settlers, indentured labourers and slaves learned wrestling when they chose to live with Amerindians to escape their captors or to start a new life (Vennum: 1994).
- 9 The historical roots of modern professional wrestling in the five core countries are a complicated narrative. Commonly known as 'catch-as-catch-can', the early wrestling contests in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century normally included side bets or gambling. Most historians of professional wrestling look to Great Britain as the cradle of catch wrestling while Germany and France receive honourable mention.

## European Roots of Professional Wrestling

- 10 The ancestry of many 20th century professional wrestling holds, for example, are lodged in the historical development of free style or Olympic wrestling in Great Britain. Several counties such as Cumberland and Westmoreland in the north of England and Scotland could count their own approach to wrestling. Wrestlers would lock hands behind their opponent's back and then try to throw one another to the ground without losing their grip. Cornish, Devonshire and Lancashire were the counties that had their own styles. Cornish wrestlers wore jackets and grabbed each other's sleeve and shoulders; then tried to back trip their opponent while Devonshire wrestlers began their matches in much the same manner as their Cornish namesakes but wore shin-guards and tried to kick one another. Lancashire wrestlers wore little more than underwear. They stood well apart with their knees bent and their arms and hands outstretched. Lancashire wrestling is considered one of the precursor styles to modern free style and professional wrestling. (Hewitt: 2005, see also Archer and Svinth: 2005)
- 11 France, Germany and the Low Countries encouraged similar styles of wrestling. The Breton style (Ar Gouren) in France was similar to Cornish wrestling. Dating from the 1830s and 1840s, southern France was home to *La Lutte Française*. Mostly practiced in saloons, wrestlers were restricted to applying holds only from the head to the waist. The contest ended when one of the wrestlers was able to pin his opponent's shoulder to the ground without attacking his legs, or using chokeholds, head-butts or joint locks. (Sayenga: 1994. See also, Archer and Svinth: 2001).
- 12 In Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands wrestling was associated with professional entertainers who wrestled bears and each other in travelling circuses. At Carnivals, young German men would wrestle for the honour of their guild or skilled trade (Steenput: 2000).

- 13 Ireland had its own style called 'collar and elbow'. The stance was similar to what became known as 'locking up' in twentieth century professional wrestling. 'Locking up' was meant to defend against your opponent's opening maneuver. Each wrestler was free to kick, punch or rush his adversary. Irish immigrants brought this brand of wrestling to both Canada and the northern United States during their Civil War before transforming into American free style wrestling associated with the Amateur Athletic Union (Wilson: 1959; see also Ken Pfrenger: n.d.).
- 14 The link between the evolution of free style wrestling with gambling, side bets, carnivals and entertainment in Europe and North America probably explains the branching to professional wrestling from its free style roots. Money became the name of the contest. Deception became the means to make more money. The catch-as-catch-can brand of wrestling replaced free style wrestling which became identified as submission wrestling. Wrestlers like George Hackenschmidt distinguished himself from other wrestling competitors with his version of the bear hug. However, by 1904 in Great Britain, Hackenschmidt had learned 'showmanship' from Tom Cannon and Charles Cochran in order to make money wrestling as a variety act during popular bodybuilding strongman contests. These 'talents' he brought with him to the USA the following year when he lost his first match against Frank Gotch (Lister: 2002).
- 15 The Spanish amateur wrestler, Javier Ochoa, has been credited with introducing wrestling into Mexico in the late nineteenth century (Maldonado: n.d.). However, the style of professional wrestling that was to become an integral part of Mexican popular culture began during the Mexican Revolution (1910-20) with two European businessmen, Giovanni Reselevich and Antonio Fournier. During the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they promoted Lucha Libre or 'free fights' in public forums between Luchadores that were notorious for their lack of rules and violence (Maldonado, n.d.; Lucha: 2009).
- 16 By the 1920s, professional wrestling had distinguished itself as a unique form of theatre and sport in the main core countries of North America, the United Kingdom and Mexico. The father of Mexican professional wrestling, Salvador Gonzalez, founded the Empresa Mexicana de Lucha Libre in Mexico City 1933. He had attended several professional wrestling matches in El Paso Texas while working there. He became fascinated by the colourful personalities of the wrestlers and what he witnessed as a 'spectacle of excess' (Barthes: 1957/2005) and decided to adapt his experiences with professional wrestling in Texas with the Mexican Lucha Libre brand.
- 17 The northeastern US, Ontario and Québec became a centre for professional wrestling when promoters 'Toots' Mondt, Ed 'Strangler' Lewis and his manager Billy Sandow (also known as the 'Gold Dust Trio') developed most of the features associated with professional wrestling today including a time limit to matches, more acrobatic moves such as the drop-kick and unlikely submission holds. Soon other promoters such as Jack Curley in New York and Paul Brower aligned themselves with Ivan Michailoff in Toronto and George Kennedy in Montreal and created the Trust in 1933 (Nevada: 2009).
- 18 In Great Britain, professional wrestling owes its start in the 1920s and 1930s as a 'promotional business' to US influences. Wrestlers from the US travelled to Europe and many European wrestlers ventured to the USA and Canada. However, the founding of the British Wrestling Association under the tutelage of Sir Athol Oakley and Henry Irslinger brought professional wrestling to Great Britain in a big way. Professional wrestling in Great Britain at this time was also known as 'All-in' wrestling in which no holds were

prohibited. Wrestlers such as Tommy Mann, the affable Jack Sherry, the 'College Boy' and 'Norman the Butcher' brought fans in by the thousands (Lister: 2002). According to Jack Lister (2002), many wrestlers before World War II were working 'twice a day [which] suggests that wrestling was at that point firmly established as purely business, albeit one where legitimate amateur credentials were part of the job requirement.' (n.p). Lister (2002) reported that London hosted up to 40 regular venues. The demand for professional wrestling increased and so did the gimmickry. Mud-filled rings, women wrestlers and styles that are more violent that used weapons and chairs became part of the performance ritual. The contests became so violent that London City Council banned professional wrestling in the late 1930s (Lister: 2002: n.d.).

- 19 The French Olympic wrestler turned professional wrestler, Henri DeGlane, was not only a star in France, Spain and Germany but travelled to Maple Leaf Gardens in Toronto, Madison Square Gardens in New York City, the Grand Opera House in Boston and the Olympic Auditorium in Los Angeles during the late 1920s and 1930s and wrestled against the likes of Wladek Zbyszko, Tony Felice and Gus Sonnenberg<sup>2</sup>. (Hornbaker: n.d).
- 20 One of the most popular wrestlers in North America and Europe before World War II was Jim Londos, 'The Golden Greek'. He was born in Greece but immigrated to the USA where he worked in carnivals and began training as a professional wrestler. He travelled throughout Europe and on his return to Greece in 1934, he defeated Russian champion Kola Kowriani before a reported 100,000 fans at Athens Olympic Stadium. On November 19, 1931, he was among the first notables to wrestle in the newly built Maple Leaf Gardens in Toronto attended by 15,800 people (Malnoske: 2009).

## The Post World War Two Period

- 21 Professional wrestling flourished in the post war period in the core territories. Canada and the USA saw the establishment of the *National Wrestling Alliance* (NWA) in 1948. Mexico is home to the world's oldest professional wrestling federation EMLL (Mexican Wrestling Enterprise, later to become CMLL or World Wrestling Council). EMLL developed a unique brand of Lucha Libre which integrated aspects of Aztec culture such as the now revered mask. In Aztec and Mayan cultures, masked warriors staged mock wrestling battles between good and evil gods (Coe: 1992, Coe and Miller: 2004).
- 22 Professional wrestling was revived in post war Great Britain with the establishment of a set of new rules to govern professional wrestling matches including seven weight divisions<sup>3</sup>. These rules were largely the creation of Norman Morrell, a successful pre-World War Two amateur and professional wrestler and three other notables: Admiral Lord Edward Mountevans, Maurice Webb, MP, and AB Campbell, a well-known radio broadcaster. These rules re-established the credibility of professional wrestling in the post war period by becoming known as the Admiral Lord Mountevans style of wrestling. When the newly created national organization named the *Joint Promotions* (1952-1988) adopted the Mountevans rules, professional wrestling in Great Britain was reborn. For example, in a 1963 card at the Royal Albert Hall, Prince Philip was the guest of honour. Much like the NWA in the USA, Joint Promotions divided Great Britain into three main territories: the South, the Midlands and the North including Scotland (Lister: 2002).
- 23 The 'Father' of professional wrestling in Japan, Rikidozan (his Sumo wrestler's ring name), signaled Japan's coming of age in 1951 with the creation of the Japanese Wrestling

Association. His popularity was based, in large part, on his consistently beating US wrestlers. Japan was still occupied by the USA and the Japanese public needed a 'hero' who made them appear strong. With Masahiko Kimura as his tag team partner, Rikidozan defeated the much larger American Sharpe brothers in November 1953. The contrast between the much heavier and taller Sharpe brothers who used dirty tricks and the smaller and nobler Japanese wrestlers resonated with Japanese audiences. His ultimate triumph for Japanese fans was his defeat of Lou Thesz in 1958 and won the NWA International Heavy Weight Championship (Chun: 2007: 63).

- 24 Most wrestling fans agree that the period from 1950 until the 1980s was the 'Golden Age' of professional wrestling (see Lister: 2002, Nevada: 2009, Schire: 2010). Larger than life personalities heralded professional wrestling's entrance into popular culture. Gorgeous George and Hulk Hogan in the USA, Eduard Carpentier and Bret Hart in Québec and Canada, Big Daddy in Great Britain, El Santo in Mexico and in Japan, after the untimely death of Rikidozan on December 8, 1963, new cultural personalities and styles emerged such as Giant Baba, Antonio Inoki, the Great Muta and Mitsuharu Misawa.
- 25 These professional wrestling stars were not confined to their own territories or countries. On the contrary, the NWA, for example, not only divided North America into its 'protected' territories, but also included Japan within its orbit of influence. Wrestlers ranging in stature from heavy weight champions Lou Thesz and Verne Gagne to the larger-than-life Sharpe Brothers travelled to Japan, while several Japanese stars such as Antonio Inoki and the Great Muta wrestled throughout the USA. In Great Britain, stars such as Mal Sanders, Lord Alfred Hayes, Dynamite Kid, William Regal and British Bulldog Davey Boy Smith wrestled throughout Europe, Japan and the USA. Throughout this period, Big Daddy remained a fan favourite in Great Britain.

## Second Tier Territories

- 26 The major seats of professional wrestling in Spain were Madrid and Barcelona. The origin of wrestling in Spain in the late 1920s owes much to its proximity to France. Beginning in the late 1940s, Spain featured world-class professional wrestlers from France, Belgium, the UK and the USA. Not long after, Spain was able to develop a crop of its own superstars such as Jose Tarres and Victorio Ochoa. By the latter part of the 1950s, this short-lived period led to the advent of 'catch a cuatro' or tag teams and masked wrestlers. By the late 1960s, with no national media exposure, professional wrestling in Spain lay dormant. Not until 1990, when a newly created TV station started to air WWF matches did interest in professional wrestling once again peak. However, the flame lasted for only 4 years (Maldonado: n.d.).
- 27 Germany was a latecomer to professional wrestling. Catch Wrestling Association (1973-2000) was founded by strongman Otto Wanz in 1973. The CWA targeted Germany and Austria but ran cards in South Africa. The federation engaged in talent-share agreements with NJPW and the AWA and not only attracted seasoned veterans and young talent from Japan, North America and Great Britain but provided opportunities to many German and European wrestlers. The Euro Catch Festival became the biggest event for CWA during the 1990s and was held twice a year: Graz, Austria in the summer and Bremen, Germany in the winter. Television exposure was sporadic on Eurosport. Today, Germany is home to several independent federations.



## European and North American Rules: Post World War II

- 28 In Great Britain and Spain, professional wrestling rules borrowed many pointers from boxing. Wrestlers would enter the ring with their seconds. He would wipe down and give water to the wrestlers during intermissions. There were 3-minute and 5-minute rounds and wrestlers were separated into weight categories such as lightweight, middleweight and heavy weight. Each category had from one to three belts: national title, European title and World title (European version). In order to win a match, European and North American rules were similar. A wrestler must execute his win in the ring area. He could win by a pin fall or pinning the opponent's shoulders on the mat, typically for three seconds, a submission count out (a 10 count, however, a belt holder normally did not lose his belt), disqualification or no contest (the time limit expires). British matches often require a 2 out of 3 fall advantage in order to win. Japan, however, allows a 20 count when a wrestler is outside the ring. Otherwise, Japanese and North American rules were similar. By the 2000s, the push for 'borderless' rules resulted in the adoption of North American (WWE) rules with matches taking normally 10-to-30 minute time limits. However, title matches could go longer.
- 29 In Mexico, winning a singles match follows the North American standard except that the count out is for 20 not 10 and submissions are counted as either waving hands or telling the referee he submits; the loser never 'taps out'. Singles matches are not popular. Yesterday and today, the most popular matches are 6 man tag team matches called 'trios matches' or Relevos Australianos (Australian tag matches). Each team appoints a captain. In order to win, two out of the three luchadores must be pinned or a pin-fall is executed against the captain of the team. Normally, there are two referees. There are also four-on-four matches called 'atomicos matctes'. Finally, tagging your partner is not necessary in any of the lucha libre team matches. If a luchadore falls out of the ring, his partner can immediately enter the ring (Levi: 2008).

## Media Exposure

- 30 The exposure of professional wrestling on television in the core countries began in the early 1950s<sup>4</sup>. The new medium and professional wrestling were a perfect match. The costs associated with producing televised matches were modest while the advertising revenues were normally left to the television channel to collect and keep. Besides, the televised matches helped promote the live events where the real money was generated. Promotions such as Georgia Championship Wrestling, the American Wrestling Alliance (AWA) and the National Wrestling Alliance all aired shows on local television channels. The same could be said in Canada where All Star Wrestling out of Vancouver, Toronto/Hamilton's Maple Leaf Wrestling and Montréal's Grand Prix Wrestling all aired shows on local channels.
- 31 In Great Britain, the newly created Independent Television station, ITV, began broadcasting professional wrestling matches on Saturday afternoons and in a mid week slot beginning in 1955. It was not until the mid 1960s with the launch of World of Sport that professional wrestling's popularity peaked. Mick McManus, Giant Haystacks, Big



Daddy, Steve Veidor, Dynamite Kid and Kando Nagasaki quickly became household names. The end of televised matches in 1988 did not mean the death of professional wrestling in Great Britain. It did mean the end of an era. No longer were fans interested in a wrestler like Big Daddy. British identity was replaced by 'WWF Tribute' shows and the push was on to recruit a new generation of wrestlers such as Dean Allmark, James Mason and Robbie Dynamite. There remain two dominant promotions in Great Britain: All Star and LDN Wrestling. However, the only national televised professional wrestling promotion is the 'New School' UK Wrestling on Sky 219 which began airing on February 2011 and is one of the most watched shows on this station.

- 32 Lee Thompson (1986) refers to the relationship between Rikidozan, professional wrestling, Japanese nationalism and the early years of television as 'symbiotic' (65). Masaki (1977), quoted by Lee Thompson, goes further and states 'it is an obvious fact that television and professional wrestling had an intimate relationship' (70). A major television broadcaster at this time, Nippon TV (NTV), had exclusive rights to air Rikidozan's Japanese Wrestling Association (JWA). Later, after Rikidozan's death, NTV and TV Asahi split professional wrestling matches between Giant Baba and Antonio Inoki, two of Rikidozan's better students.
- 33 During the mid to late 1950s, businesses from restaurants, coffee shops barber shops, public baths, beauty parlors and other businesses would purchase television sets for customers/clients to watch their favourite programs. Professional wrestling was the most popular reported; 'particularly when there was a broadcast of a professional wrestling match, every shop would be filled to capacity with customers watching television' (Thompson: 1986: 67). In addition to television, professional wrestling benefited from newspaper coverage. Mainichi Newspaper co-sponsored major bouts and created the Mainichi Cup which was awarded to winners of special series. Thompson (1986) notes that from the ten years beginning with the Sharpe brothers' tour in 1954 until the death of Rikidozan in 1963, the Mainichi newspaper had printed almost 650 articles and printed over 350 photographs on professional wrestling (71). As in the early years after the war in Great Britain, political support for professional wrestling came from the Governor of Tokyo and the Ministry of Welfare.
- 34 The content of the professional wrestling matches, especially those featuring Rikidozan, was eminently clear. Quoting from a study of the spectacular attraction of professional wrestling on Japanese television, Thompson writes: 'Rikidozan's karate chops, while cleaning up the foreign wrestlers, at the same time were effective in clearing up Japanese feelings of inferiority to foreigners' (73). Rikidozan was a larger-than-life wrestler because of his stamina, wrestling prowess and 'fighting spirit'. He commanded respect and gave to the Japanese a renewed sense of national pride. His death, however, did not mean the end of professional wrestling in Japan.
- 35 Created in 1972 by Antonio Inoki, New Japan Pro Wrestling (NJPW) was considered the leading promotion in Japan and one of the largest in the world. NJPW owed its stature, in large measure, to its TV program aired on TV Asahi. Until 1986, NJPW was a member of the NWA. Today, NJPW continues to work with various MMA and professional wrestling promotions from around the world including Total Nonstop Action, WWE, Ring of Honor (ROH) and WAR. NJPW's main event is called *January 4<sup>th</sup> at the Tokyo Dome*. All Japan Pro Wrestling (AJPW) is NJPW main competitor. AJPW airs its program on Gaora TV and recently announced (August 2012) a TV championship belt (Greenberg: 2000: 69-80).

- 36 In Mexico, CMLL or, World Wrestling Council, is based in Mexico City and began televised programming in the 1990s with Televisa. Today, CMLL events are televised on LATV in the USA, Telcelatino in Canada and, until 2008, The Wrestling Channel /The Fight Network (UK & Ireland) in the United Kingdom. Today, CMLL shows are available in the UK via BT Vision's download service. Before this, fan magazines were the sole source of information and exposure to Mexican *lucha libre*. National, and today international, exposure has meant a dramatic increase in popularity.
- 37 In Mexico, El Santo (translated as the Saint) quickly became a dominant cultural force in Mexico after his debut match in 1942. His career lasted over forty years. Instead of watching television programs in the 1950s and 1960s, Mexicans went to the cinema to see their stars. El Santo wrestled evil in his silver cape and silver mask by starring in over 50 films and appearing on numerous TV shows. David Meltzer writes 'he totally transcended wrestling. He was much bigger than just a wrestling star' (Molinero: n.d.)
- 38 Recent luchadores have had film careers of their own. SuperBarrio, ironically, never entered a professional wrestling ring; however, he shows up to support trade unions, community groups and anti-crime initiatives. In Mexico, today, 'Mucha Lucha' is a children's cartoon where everyone in the town is a luchador wearing masks and making spectacular wrestling moves. Currently, matches are televised every Friday night as Super Viernes ('Super Friday'). The content is strictly monitored. There is no blood and other than the annual cage match, there are no gimmicks such as TLCs. In 2008, CMLL established a working relationship with NJPW. Wrestlers from both promotions began touring between the two countries in championship matches (Greenberg: 2000).
- 39 Ted Turner is one of the first entrepreneurs to expose professional wrestling to a national audience in the USA. In 1971, he purchased a small Atlanta television station. However, his purchase constrained his access to capital for televised content. Turner offered a local wrestling promotion Georgia Championship Wrestling, which already aired shows on a local station, a regular time slot and better promotion on his station. Almost immediately, professional wrestling became the most popular program on Turner's station. In 1976, when Turner turned his small local television station into TBS, a Superstation, which broadcast across the USA via satellite, Georgia Championship Wrestling was viewed nationally and in 1989, the name was changed to World Championship Wrestling (McQuarrie: 2006: 232). According to Fiona McQuarrie, it is not "completely unreasonable to say that without professional wrestling, the Time Warner media conglomerate, Cable News Network (CNN) or TBS would not exist today" (2006: 232).
- 40 The 1990s witnessed the feud between the WCW and the WWF (WWE). Both promotions competed for viewership under the banner 'Monday Night Wars'. At the same time, Extreme Championship Wrestling attracted a small but intensely local fan base. In the end, Vince McMahon Jr. won the Monday Night Wars and consolidated his hold on professional wrestling in the USA and globally.
- 41 Media presence within territories and, recently, extending partnerships and media presence globally becomes necessary for the survival of professional wrestling cross-culturally. For Mexican *lucha libre*, merchandising products such as *lucha libre* masks, luchadores as icons such as the luchador advertising Canada's cell phone network Koodo, *lucha libre* AAA toys, and *Héroes del Ring* video games is another vehicle to maintain distinct status when competing with WWE. In Japan, there is the Zen-Nippon Pro wrestling series of video games, clothing, Anime toys and DVDs.

## Celebrating History

- 42 Each territory celebrates its history. In the USA, the Professional Wrestling Hall of Fame and Museum is located in Amsterdam, NY. In 2008, Niagara Falls, Canada opened the only WWE Pile Driver attraction featuring an indoor light show, a WWE retail store and a 200-foot Pile Driver drop amusement ride. Both Canada and the UK have created websites to celebrate past heroes of the mat. In Canada, it is the *Canadian Wrestling Hall of Fame* while in the UK it is *Wrestling Heritage: The Home of British Wrestling*. (<http://slam.canoe.ca/Slam/Wrestling/hallofame.html> and <http://www.wrestlingheritage.co.uk/>) Mexico's Lucha Libre Hall of Fame is located in Guadalajara, Mexico.
- 43 In addition, North American grapplers and their fans are invited to attend the annual Cauliflower Alley Club Convention held in Las Vegas, Nevada. The Cauliflower Alley Club was established in 1965 as a non-profit corporation. At the direction of Lou Thesz in 1997, the CAC Benevolent Fund was established to assist past wrestlers, managers and referees associated with professional wrestling. The CAC also boasts a Face Book page. Every second year, many Canadian wrestlers attend a special breakfast in Toronto as the Canadian contingent of the Cauliflower Alley Club.

## Discussion

- 44 The relative stability of professional wrestling as a cultural phenomenon in five core countries rests on what I refer to as 'culturally embedded spectacles'. In order to understand how professional wrestling continues to experience a strong presence in the five core countries, the paper took account of the complex relationship between history, mass media and cultural identity. While the historical roots of professional wrestling began with 'catch wrestling', each country could count a link with earlier forms of wrestling: Native Americans in Canada and the USA, Mesoamerican Indians with Mexico, Sumo in Japan and Celtic and Lancashire styles in Great Britain. In four of the five countries, association with carnivals, strong man shows and circuses contributed to making deception a significant part of the showmanship. Japan was a latecomer to professional wrestling and the bond between professional wrestling, television and Japanese cultural identity and nationalism in the immediate post war period was unique. Unlike any other country, national television broadcasts and Japanese cultural identity and nationalism cemented the contours of professional wrestling.
- 45 Each of the five countries celebrated larger-than-life personalities in the television era. Nationwide televised professional wrestling cards highlighted fan favourites. Hulk Hogan in the USA became a household name. 'Hulkamania' became synonymous with goodness. El Santo in Mexico fought evil wherever it lurked. Big Daddy was a wrestling icon in Great Britain. Rikidozan was a national hero. All were faces<sup>5</sup>. All were positive bigger-than-life characters.
- 46 Independent professional wrestling federations can be found in Canada, the USA, Great Britain, Mexico and to a lesser extent in Japan. There are a wide variety of professional wrestling styles that have found a home in particular independent federations; however, most advertise themselves as 'family friendly' in order to capture as wide an audience as possible. In addition, several independent federations across North America, Great Britain

and Continental Europe sponsor professional wrestling training schools which become talent pools for their live events.

- 47 Not all the core countries celebrate the heroes of the past by recognizing their contribution to professional wrestling today. However, enough do to allow fans from many countries to experience what it was like before what passes today as a typical corporate professional wrestling venue with the Jumbotron, pyrotechnics and piped in loud music.
- 48 This paper advanced the argument that professional wrestling today is not only the WWE. 'Culturally embedded spectacle' was a conceptual framework employed here to contribute to understanding the persistence of specific brands of professional wrestling in five countries around the globe.

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## NOTES

1. The fighting Cholitas are indigenous female professional wrestlers who enter the ring wearing multilayered skirts and bowler hats. They practice a variant of lucha libre and view themselves as combating the misogyny of traditional culture (Guillermoprieto: 2008).

2. Ken Viewer, a member of Wrestlingclassics.com, uploaded a streaming video of match highlights between Henri DeGlane and 'Leon' Hall. <http://www.legacyofwrestling.com/DeGlane.html>

3. The seven weight classifications were lightweight (154 pound limit), welterweight (165 pounds), middleweight (176 pounds), heavy middleweight (187 pounds), light heavyweight (198 pounds), mid heavyweight (209 pounds) and heavyweight (above 209 pounds). Each contest could have a round system in which each round could last between 10, 5 or 3 minutes. The winner of a singles match was determined by the best of three falls. (<http://www.woswrestling.com/mountevansrules>) Retrieved October 13, 2013.

4. Dalbir Schmy (2002), referencing David Hostede (1999), dates the first professional wrestling telecasts to the DuMont network's wrestling shows beginning on July 30, 1948. The major three networks – ABC, NBC and CBS – soon caught up by airing their own professional wrestling cards.

5. The face or babyface in North America, blue-eye in Great Britain and técnico in Mexico portrays a hero or the 'good guy' in the professional wrestling match. The face normally does not break the rules, follows instructions from those in authority and is polite and well mannered towards the fans.

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## RÉSUMÉS

Culturally embedded spectacle is a unique conceptual framework developed for this paper to explain the continuity of professional wrestling in five core countries or territories. The main factors are: a continuous history, national television exposure during the post World War II era, larger-than-life 'faces' during this timeframe, extensive independent federations and celebrating the past.

## INDEX

**Keywords** : culturally embedded, professional wrestling

**Mots-clés** : spectacle, catch, télévision

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