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Citation:

WOOD, Rachel and LITHERLAND, Benjamin (2017). Critical feminist hope: the encounter of neoliberalism and popular feminism in WWE 24: Women's Evolution. *Feminist Media Studies*, 18 (5), 905-922. [Article]

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Critical feminist hope: the encounter of neoliberalism and popular feminism in *WWE 24: women's evolution*

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Biographical Notes

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Scholarship has pointed to contemporary feminism's popularity and cultural "luminosity" (Rosalind Gill, 2016). While this research has highlighted the limitations of feminist politics in a context of neoliberal individualism (Catherine Rottenberg, 2014; Angela McRobbie, 2015; Gill and Shani Orgad, 2015), this paper seeks to ask what possibilities for critiques and transformation of gender inequalities might be enabled by feminism's visibility in neoliberalism. Using a framework of critical feminist hope, we highlight that capitalism's embrace of feminism inarguably limits its political scope, but it may also open up opportunities for new forms of representation. To illustrate this, the paper analyses *WWE 24: Women's Evolution*, a "brandcasting" documentary (Jennifer Gillan, 2014) made to mark the re-brand of the sport entertainment promotion's women's division in 2016. While never naming it directly, the documentary draws heavily upon the signifiers of popular feminism. Although this mobilisation is often highly limited, a critically hopeful feminist reading allows us to move beyond dismissing this text as an example of feminism's "co-optation" by neoliberalism. We highlight the documentary's scathing critique of past failings in the representation and treatment of women performers, and, more importantly, the way feminism is used to make the case for corporate re-structure and change.

Keywords: neoliberalism; popular feminism; postfeminism; WWE; women in sport

A popular version of feminism has gained unprecedented levels of visibility in media cultures over recent years (Jessalynn Keller and Jessica Ringrose, 2015; Rosalind Gill, 2016). From celebrity culture to sport, politics, news media and fashion, "feminist" has emerged as a desirable – and profitable – label and identity in ways that would have been almost unthinkable in a "postfeminist" era characterised by the disavowal of feminist politics (Angela McRobbie, 2009). This version of feminism has been identified as highly problematic by a range of critics, with Catherine Rottenberg suggesting that "neoliberal feminism" serves to recast questions of gender equality "in

personal, individualized terms,” obscuring any political critique of social, cultural and economic forces and structures (2014, 422). This article addresses the debate about “neoliberal feminism” by consciously taking a different, more hopeful, perspective – seeking to locate what new popular feminisms in the media make possible in terms of structural, political critique and change, alongside what they preclude. We propose a new framework for reading these media texts, that of critical feminist hope, arguing that this enables a more nuanced analysis of the ways in which neoliberal rationalities interact, fuse, and conflict with popular feminist ideas.

In order to illustrate the potential for a critical hopeful feminist reading, we explore a text that hails from a media sub-field hitherto unexplored within critiques of popular feminism.ⁱ World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), the world’s leading sports entertainment promotion, is perhaps most recognisable by its macho “hard bodied” heroes (Susan Jeffords, 1994) and its perceived male dominated fan base.ⁱⁱ Indeed, the WWE has a long history of problematic representations of women, from “bra and panties” wrestling matches to “masculine soap opera” style storylines (Henry Jenkins, 1997). However, the documentary we examine here, *WWE 24: Women’s Evolution* (2016), is a corporate “brandcasting” (Jennifer Gillan, 2014) text in which the brand’s own history is critically re-assessed as exploitative, unsatisfactory, and harmful to female performers and fans. Produced to document and promote the rebranding of the WWE women’s division in 2016, the hour-long programme narrates the supposed dawn of a new era in women’s professional wrestling in which “women can do anything.” To frame this transformation, the documentary draws upon popular feminism, interspersing wrestling clips with images of female celebrities and public figures including Beyoncé, Michelle Obama and Malala Yousafzai. That this framework is used in a text from the

male dominated sub-field of sports entertainment attests to the continually extending reach of popular feminism.

WWE 24: Women's Evolution evidences many of the restrictions of “neoliberal feminism,” presenting a highly individualistic vision of female self-belief and ambition. Yet, this paper contends that this particular text, which, we suggest below, may not be entirely unique in recent popular culture, also does something more with the version of feminism it presents. Through drawing out those moments in which a re-evaluation of the corporate structure and culture is fused with an individualistic rationality, we argue for reading media texts differently using a paradigm of critical feminist hope. This allows feminist media scholars to recognise moments of possibility that can arise from the encounter of popular feminism and neoliberalism.

Neoliberalised feminism

Feminism's current visibility and cultural currency would simply have been unimaginable until very recently. This is clear from Angela McRobbie's assertions in *The Aftermath of Feminism* in 2009, where she argues that popular culture of the 1990s and 2000s evidenced an “undoing and dismantling” of feminism as something “no longer needed” that “young women can do without” (8). Such an undoing was achieved by the taking into account of notionally feminist values such as “choice” and “empowerment,” while at the same time aligning them with neoliberal rationalities so as to reconfigure such notions as wholly individual, apolitical endeavours. Media texts with a “postfeminist sensibility” (Gill, 2007) located agency in the “sexy” female body, found “empowerment” in making the right consumer purchases (Rachel Wood, 2017), and emphasised women's right to “choose” often strikingly conventional heteronormative relationships and lifestyles (Diane Negra, 2009).

By contrast, as Gill has argued, it now “seems as if everything is a feminist issue. Feminism has a new luminosity in popular culture” (2016, 614). Gill demonstrates the visibility of feminism, from politics and celebrity culture, to lifestyle and news media, but concludes that, more often than not, feminism acts as a “cheer word,” used to signify the vague “celebration” of women in a way that is unlikely to pose “any kind of challenge to existing social relations” (2016, 619). As Gill suggests, it would indeed be premature for media scholars to think that we have “moved on” from the conceptual relevance of postfeminism. Instead, we must continue to bear these theorisations in mind when scrutinising self-proclaimed “feminist” media texts. Critiques of postfeminism and contemporary popular feminism both benefit from theorisations that note the role of neoliberalism. More than just free market economics, neoliberalism is a “rationality” that powerfully shapes understandings of the subject’s relationship to society so that individuals are understood as wholly responsible for their own self-governance, success or failure (Wendy Brown, 2003). For Gill, postfeminism positioned young women as the ideal subjects of neoliberalism (2007).

As recent critiques show, contemporary popular feminism continues to evidence strong connections to neoliberal rationalities. Mary Evans (2015), for example, critiques the “entrepreneurial” emphasis of a feminism no longer securely located in the collective politics of structural change. Similarly, Rottenberg suggests that the neoliberal feminist subject is turned inward, required to monitor and manage her own quest for success to such a degree that this version of feminism is “divested of any orientation toward the common good” (2014, 428). Elsewhere, Jessalynn Keller and Jessica Ringrose (2015) state that, while gender inequalities are acknowledged in neoliberal feminism, the social, cultural, and economic structures that perpetuate such inequalities are overlooked in favour of individualised accounts and solutions. Finally,

Christine Williams (2014) contends neoliberal feminism is an appropriation, commodification, and co-optation of feminist politics, and Catia Gregoratti (2016) calls for resistance to the alignment of feminism with corporatized market values.

McRobbie (2015), however, hints at the possibilities of a new popular feminism alongside its many restrictions, arguing that feminism retains the potential to be a discursive “explosion” within contemporary capitalism. Elisabeth Prugl (2015) makes a more sustained case along these lines, contending that scholars should not present a fixed picture of a hopelessly co-opted “neoliberal feminism,” but should instead attend to the dynamic, ongoing and often contradictory “neoliberalisation” of feminism, exploring what is lost in such a process, but also what might be gained. Prugl cautions that the potential for nostalgic longing for a socialist feminist structural analysis might overlook the fact that global structures have themselves changed in ways that might call for new forms of political critique and organisation. A dismissal, she concludes, of the “indeterminate encounter of feminism and neoliberalism” might miss the potential for such a feminism to speak to and challenge contemporary inequalities (2015, 616).

Prugl’s perspective has significant potential to widen debate around the meeting of neoliberalism and feminism in popular culture. This does not mean that we should cease critiquing the limitations of the ways feminism now becomes visible, from its white, middle class, hetero and cis centrism, to the way it fails to challenge many of the real harms and abuses perpetuated by gender inequality, to the effects of its inextricable connections to consumer capitalism. It would be foolish, however, to dismiss this cultural shift altogether as “co-optation” or “appropriation.” Feminism is not endlessly flexible, meaning all things to all people, but nor is it a fixed set of agreed upon principles to which every person, text or movement that labels itself feminist must adhere to be approved. We argue that feminist scholarship should be alert to the

possibilities enabled, as well as those disabled, by the rapidly developing and often messy tangle of meanings that arise from feminism's processual neoliberalisation in popular culture. Understanding popular feminism and neoliberalism as shifting poles in an ongoing "encounter" (Prugl, 2015) allows for a recognition that both sets of logics (co)exist on shifting ground. Neoliberalism is itself context specific and not the unitary rationality it might appear (Sean Phelan, 2015), particularly in an era of resurgent nationalist politics.

Our current cultural moment bears further consideration of the range of *opportunities* that might be offered by a renewed mobilisation of feminism. In short, what does the identification of feminism enable that simply would not have been possible in a culture of postfeminist "undoing" and disavowal? Feminism's cultural "luminosity" calls for a nuanced analysis, open to potential as well as restriction, recognising that the revived popular relevance of feminism has the potential to signify much more than co-optation. This uneven process has the capacity to excite as well as disappoint feminist scholars of popular culture.

Shifting ground

This paper has been conceived and written over a period of political instability and change. Our analysis centres on a text that, in many ways, now seems emblematic of a time before Donald Trump's presidency.ⁱⁱⁱ First made available for streaming on the WWE Network in August 2016, *WWE 24: Women's Evolution* features Hillary Clinton in more than one montage of inspirational "fighting" women. Clinton's election defeat was a blow to feelings of hope for many, with her concession speech striving to assure "all the little girls who are watching this" that they must "never doubt that you are valuable and powerful, and deserving of every chance... to pursue and achieve your own dreams" (Clinton, 2016). The position of critical feminist hope argued for in this

paper may, with good reason, be seen as difficult, even foolhardy, to maintain now and in coming years.

Feminism, popular or otherwise, has inarguably faced a major blow from a presidential election that raised the profile of “alt-right” positions of white supremacy and legitimated a man who exudes “unapologetic sexism” (McRobbie, 2016, online). Indeed, some of the rhetoric surrounding Trump’s presidential campaign and win can in part be traced back to an aggressive backlash against the renewed popularity of feminism in media culture. The discourses that emerged through “gamergate” (see Carly A. Kocurek, 2015, 189–192; Bethan Jones, forthcoming) and online objections from men’s rights activists to the prominent casting of women and people of colour in recent Hollywood films (Alexis de Coning, 2016) have notable overlaps with “alt-right” narratives and Trump’s political platform: a resistance to the perceived censoriousness of “political correctness;” an intensification of misogyny and racism alongside denials and dismissals of these positions; and a belief that white masculinity is somehow “under attack” from all sides and must be vigorously defended.

As ideas and icons related to feminism have gained unprecedented levels of popularity, so “anti-feminism,” particularly online, has become ever more acrimonious and far reaching (Emma Alice Jane, 2014; McRobbie, 2016). This suggests that commercial texts that make claims to popular feminism, such as the one examined in this paper, are important sites of analysis given their influential role in popular culture, online discourse, and the political sphere. As we note in the final part of this paper, critical feminist hope is a position that must be carefully managed lest it slip into complacency or coercive positivity. Yet we contend that finding hope and possibility in popular feminist texts, even if they are limited by a neoliberal framework, is crucial to

locating an accessible language that might be harnessed in resisting misogyny and white male supremacy.

“They wanted us to have catfights:” women in sports entertainment

Before turning to the structural and representational changes narrated by the *WWE 24* documentary, we first need to analyse how women have historically been positioned in contemporary American professional wrestling.^{iv} Women’s wrestling in WWE has almost always been positioned as secondary to the men’s division, with fewer female stars, and fewer and shorter women’s matches (Carrie Dunn, 2015). More than this, however, the presentation of women’s wrestling reflects wider cultural shifts in postfeminist popular culture of the last twenty years. Though demonstrating impressive athletic feats, women wrestlers have been represented as sexy bodies first and foremost (Gill, 2007). It remains difficult to trace WWE histories without utilising the corporate language and periodisation adopted by the company, especially because shifts in the presentation of women often enforced market and brand repositioning and attempts to cater to different audience segments. Broadly speaking, however, between approximately 1996 and 2001, or the “Attitude Era” – a term that rebranded family friendly oriented wrestling of the 1980s to fit with a 1990s, confrontational and “edgy” zeitgeist – we can point towards two types of representation that typified programming.

Firstly, the “Attitude Era” used aggressive sexual representations of women akin to that in the turn of the century culture of macho “ironic sexism,” familiar from men’s magazines and other related media (Bethan Benwell, 2004; Peter Jackson *et al*, 2001). The appearance of these women was homogenous, with most being “petite, large-breasted women with long flowing blonde hair who dress in extremely provocative clothing” (Dawn Heineken, 2004, 185). Television commentary from Jerry “the King” Lawler involved frequent exclamations of “puppies!” when female performers revealed

their bikini or bra-clad breasts. Characters like Sunny and Debra rarely wrestled, and often accompanied men to the ring (as girlfriends, wives or “managers”). Many narratives were constructed around male wrestlers defending the “honour” of the women. When performing in their own matches, these were often contests that were built around gimmicks that foregrounded sexy bodies, including a range of bikini contests, wet t-shirt contests, mud wrestling and other similar themes.

It was in this period that the term “Diva,” signifying an empowered, forthright, yet still sexy form of femininity, became the branded description of female wrestlers in the WWE (then named WWF). The promotional use and representation of Divas can be connected to wider trends for feminine women in the popular culture of this period to actively “choose” to present their bodies as sexually appealing commodities (Janice Winship, 2000). “Divas” appeared scantily clad in in-house promotional materials, like the bikini issues of the *WWF Magazine*, or home video releases like *WWF Divas: Postcard from the Caribbean* (WWF Home Video, 2000) or *WWF Divas in Hedonism* (WWF Home Video, 2001). As such, women were regularly used to target the core demographic of 16-24-year-old males, often appearing as cover-stars for men’s magazines like *Playboy*.

Secondly, a complementary, and sometimes competing, form of representation was the musclemethod or competitive sportswoman. Though less notable in much of the WWE’s output at that time, women still wrestled in standard wrestling matches, with their strength emphasised alongside their sexiness. This again can be tied to the wider trend for representations of physically strong, fighting postfeminist heroines like *Tank Girl* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (see Sherrie A. Inness, 2004). Wrestler Chyna is perhaps the best example of this phenomena, with Heineken (2004) suggesting her trajectory through WWE reflected wider changes in postfeminist popular culture; Chyna

began as a “tough” character with a look and costume not dissimilar to *Xena: Warrior Princess*, but was eventually folded into the more normative ‘sexy’ model preferred in sports entertainment at the time. By the early-2000s, however, sexy “tough girl” wrestlers, like Trish Stratus, Jazz, Lita, Victoria, and Molly Holly, all benefitted from wider recruiting strategies, better training, longer matches, and more emphasis placed on “competition.” This shift in representation culminated on the 6th December 2004, when Trish Stratus and Lita were booked for a high profile main-event match on WWE’s flagship cable show, *Raw*.

The emphasis on women competitors was short-lived, however. Between 2003 and 2007, the WWE ran *Diva Search*, a talent show style competition used to recruit women wrestlers. Borrowing from talent shows that were then still at their peak (Su Holmes, 2004), the show’s central conceit was that it could transform models into “divas” via a series of weekly skits, including pie eating contests, “diva dodgeball,” and a competition to seduce a male wrestler. In the dedicated professional wrestling news and gossip websites, this change of approach has often been attributed to John Laurinaitis replacing Jim Ross as head of Talent Relations for the company in April 2004, with the revamped and more prominent *Diva Search* beginning in July 2004 (see, for example, Ryan Clark, 2006). While there may indeed be some truth to that, clarifying such claims is a task replete with difficulties, and WWE’s “official” retelling of this history, as we will see shortly, refuses to name individuals. While perhaps not as aggressively sexual as some of the content in the late-1990s, women were still defined primarily by the display of sexy bodies, and contests were often gimmicky – such as in pillow fight or wet “n” wild matches.

In 2008, the new diva belt – a pink and silver butterfly belt – pointed again to how women’s wrestling reflected wider trends in postfeminist media and consumer

culture, in this case the predilection for “fun, feminine” pink and “cute” imagery in the 2000s (Fiona Attwood, 2005). This also represented another shift in WWE positioning, moving to PG rated television, in part to combat changes in demographics and in part to support former President and CEO of WWE Linda McMahon’s ill-fated run for congress in 2009. While women continued to be valued primarily for sexiness, bikini contests were less frequent and co-promoted work with *Playboy* stopped entirely. The branding was arguably confused at this time, presenting sexualised content likely too tame to appeal to the 16-24 male demographic, but at the same time making little effort to appeal to young female viewers that might have been found among a PG audience. Perhaps because of this, women’s matches became even shorter in duration and were predominantly used as a “filler or break” between the main business of men’s matches (Dunn, 2015, 13)

“It was not easy being a woman in that period:” retelling history

It is a version of the above history that is reinterpreted and retold in the episode *WWE 24: Women’s Evolution*. *WWE24* is a series that borrows the codes and conventions of documentary, allowing audiences to see the “backstage,” and apparently more “real” characters outside of the scripted wrestling performances (Dan Ward, 2012). Few media companies have so publicly and frequently mobilised their own managerial and production histories within the texts that they produce, although these histories are often highly selective in their retelling, reflecting professional wrestling’s wider ludic pleasures that are produced by a blurring of fiction and reality, with audiences left to try and untangle the two (Sharon Mazer 2005). The programme is an example of what Gillan (2014) calls “brandcasting:” a text that blurs the line between brand promotion and entertainment. The WWE is engaged in a continual project of its own mythologisation and history making, and the *WWE 24* documentary series, like other

WWE paratexts, promises another, more authentic version of mediated “reality” (Benjamin Litherland, 2014).

As might be expected, the constant telling and retelling of its own history frequently involves the repositioning, repackaging, privileging and, in some cases, erasure of the various elements of the corporation’s past. This is further complicated by the fact that the McMahon family – including Chairman Vince McMahon, his wife Linda, son Shane, daughter Stephanie, and her husband and semi-retired wrestler Triple H – who own the corporation and manage programming, have been and continue to be central to storylines and events within WWE’s fictional universe. *WWE 24: Women’s Evolution* is an example of this selective history making,^v featuring Stephanie McMahon and Triple H as talking heads, with the lines between their positions as producers and fictional characters difficult to untangle. This documentary, however, is particularly interesting for the way in which it mobilises a version of neoliberalised feminism to present a sometimes scathing critique of WWE’s past management of women’s wrestling, and to justify a current era of transformation.

Referring to the 1990s “attitude era,” Stephanie McMahon, WWE Chief Brand Officer, provides commentary to a montage of images of women having their clothes ripped off or participating in a series of novelty matches. She states that “it was not easy being a woman in that period,” and that the sexiness of women stars was frequently “exploited.” Trish Stratus explains that the women’s matches were often a ‘sideshow’ and recalls being given explicit direction from producers to “have catfights” instead of fighting “like guys.” Referring to the “Diva” rebrand, Trish states that “the women’s segments were not wrestling segments, they were just this fluffy diva segment that was requiring them to look great.” Wrestler Natalya “Nattie” Neidhart complains of the shortening of Diva matches to an average 3 or 4 minutes, significantly shorter than the

average 10 minute plus male match. The documentary makes clear that such restrictions persisted until very recently, with a group of current female wrestlers shown nodding in agreement with Mark Carrano, VP of Talent Relations, when he recalls that “three years ago we had a Diva match cancelled [at the last minute] and it sucked, you guys know what it felt like.”

Throughout the documentary, then, there is acknowledgement that the WWE has for the last twenty years consistently made booking, programming, presentation and employment decisions that have stifled the potential of women’s wrestling. The clear message is that women wrestlers were at least “underutilised” and at worst “exploited.” In the words of wrestler and current Executive Vice President (Talent, Live Events and Creative) Triple H, “there was a way to position [women] better.” Perhaps more importantly, feelings of disappointment and frustration at these production decisions, from WWE executives and fans, but particularly from female wrestlers themselves, are presented as well founded. The damage inflicted on the emotional wellbeing and career trajectories of female wrestlers is given space and legitimacy, with Brie Bella reflecting that “you’d be blown away by how many [women wrestlers] would be crying in the locker room, just because they won’t have been given a chance.” Women wrestlers are represented here as talented athletes and performers, whose talent was stifled, held back, or forced into a frustrating and exploitative mould of “sexiness.”

The documentary marks a clear moment of departure, signifying the WWE’s desire to acknowledge and distance themselves from the failures of the past. They achieve this by signalling the start of a new, more “enlightened” era of “equality,” in which women’s wrestling is valued in a manner more comparable to that of men. This reorganisation takes the form not only of replacing the Diva belt with a Women’s Championship belt and branding women wrestlers as “superstars” (like men) instead of

“Divas,” but hiring more female wrestlers, including those who are valued for qualities other than “sexiness,” booking women for headline matches and centring them in promotional material and images, producing women’s matches that have a similar performance style and duration to that of men, and (allegedly) paying women wrestlers more. This transformation is represented in the documentary in two interconnected ways; firstly, as a response to a “grassroots” movement that grew organically until it could not be ignored, led by emerging new female talent and wrestling fans on social media; and secondly, as part of a wider cultural and social change symbolised by (unnamed) neoliberalised feminism.

#givedivasachance: transforming women’s wrestling

The documentary presents a narrative of grassroots “revolution,” where change was led by new talent and calls for improvements from fans. Women’s wrestling on NXT, a smaller WWE developmental promotion that has cultivated its own separate sub-brand programming and tours, is described as “trailblazing a path,” focusing on new performers. Bayley, an NXT and now WWE wrestler, is presented as an entirely different kind of performer: according to Triple H she is “contrary to every diva conversation that had been had probably in the past ten years.” Nattie explains that “not all of us can look like models, Bayley’s real,” an observation that hardly reflects Bayley’s almost entirely conventional slim, feminine, attractive appearance. What it suggests instead is Bayley’s different presentation to the “sexiness” of the Diva mould, with an exuberant character not primarily defined by sex appeal, emphasised by her colourful costumes and the inflatable dancing mascots accompanying her entrances. Importantly, Bayley’s appeal to female fans, particularly young girls, is demonstrated in the documentary through images of her meeting fans accompanied by comments from Nattie that “little girls can go, ‘I wanna be like that,’” and Triple H that ‘she worked

hard, she believed in herself, and did it, and if that's not inspirational to young girls what is?"

As the latter quote suggests, the documentary proposes that one reason for the change in women's wrestling was the self-belief, determination and talent of emerging performers, like Bayley, who "proved" to the company that they could perform matches, storylines and characters that would captivate audiences. Fans are represented as another source of grassroots calls for change. In line with WWE's continued engagement with its own Twitter trends and hashtags (Litherland, 2014), the documentary positions the hashtag "#givedivasachance" as a crucial moment for the corporation. Numerous fan tweets using the hashtag are shown, concluding with a tweet from Chairman of WWE Vince McMahon responding that "we hear you." The emphasis on the hashtag as symbolic of grassroots support for women's wrestling is important given that several popular feminist cultural "moments" in recent years have been made visible through widespread hashtag use and resultant media coverage.^{vi} At the same time, however, framing the re-branding of women's wrestling as a response to fan's demands also neutralises the critique, making it a case of WWE's good business sense rather than one of their moral and political responsibility for gender equality in representation.

This push for change is contextualised in the documentary within a wider narrative of socio-cultural transformation. The documentary opens with a fascinating montage, set to the song "What Glass Ceiling?" by Sofia Snow. In it, clips of women's wrestling matches are interspersed with captioned images of female personalities from the worlds of sport, politics and entertainment: Ronda Rousey (UFC competitor), Danica Patrick (stock car racing driver), Jennifer Lawrence, Malala Yousafzai, Angelina Jolie in her UNHCR role, Oprah Winfrey, Ellen DeGeneres, Taylor Swift, and

Beyonce. Similarly, a later, shorter montage is accompanied by voiceover from ESPN's Michelle Beadle explaining that, "it's an interesting time across the board, women are fighting everywhere, whether it be politically, in the sports industry, in Hollywood." Here we see images of first ladies including Nancy Reagan, Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama; Emma Watson accompanied by the caption "fighting gender inequality;" Venus and Serena Williams; and the US women's national soccer team with a caption referring to their fight for equal pay.

Despite this catalogue of "powerful" women, the documentary never explicitly names either "sexism" or "feminism." The exhaustive lexicon of female public figures and celebrities who appear on screen, however, lends the documentary a "grammar" of neoliberalised feminism. That these images and captions can be used to mobilise neoliberalised feminism without ever naming it attests to the new "luminosity" of feminism in celebrity and popular culture (Gill, 2016). By the same token, WWE's deliberate choice to use signifiers of feminism while avoiding the word itself points to the fact that, although feminism may be fashionable in many areas of popular culture, it is still too risky to be named outright by a company with legions of male fans (Kocurek, 2015; Jones, forthcoming). In a recent interview, wrestler Nikki Bella went as far as to refer to feminism euphemistically as the "Women Empowerment Movement" (Channel 4, 2017).

This nervousness to name feminism may well speak to the WWE's awareness of the embattled, often misogynistic, response to what is perceived as feminism in other related "geek" fan cultures such as gaming, action/science fiction film, and comic books, the audience for which are likely to overlap with WWE. The potential for aggressive backlash and resistance to named "feminism" is carefully avoided even as a range of values central to feminism powerfully shape the narrative and imagery of the

documentary. Popular feminism is all but named without being directly named – to the extent, we contend, that this narrative would be hard to miss for audiences – suggesting an awareness that feminist messages may be seen more favourably than the word itself. Perhaps more concerning, however, is WWE’s failure to name “sexism” as the driving force behind previous failures in the corporation’s representation and promotion of women’s wrestling. Given that sexism is commonly framed within popular feminist texts as an “an individual rather than structural or systemic issue” (Gill, 2016, 616), the refusal to name it here represents a further level of disavowal, and one that raises serious questions about the reach and implications of WWE’s critique of its own past.

“I’ve never thought for one second that I couldn’t be whatever I wanted to be:” corporate feminist ambition

There are many reasons to be sceptical about the WWE’s narrative of gender equality and transformation in *WWE 24: Women’s Evolution*. Not least, we might question the degree to which change has actually been achieved, even in the documentary’s own terms. Since the documentary aired, the WWE has made slow yet consistent advances in its representation of women’s wrestling, including the first main event women’s match at a pay-per-view show (*WWE Hell in a Cell*, 2016). At the same time, there are still fewer women’s wrestling matches and WWE performers compared to men. As Mary G. McDonald argues, gestures towards “gender justice” can be used as a branding exercise by a sports corporation, while “proving minimal disruptions to the masculine hegemony” (2000, 41).

More than that, however, it is crucial to interrogate the nature of the version of (unnamed) neoliberalised feminism that is mobilised here. In many respects, this is reminiscent of the corporate feminism of Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In* (2013). Sandberg believes that “internal barriers” to gender equality, such as self-doubt and lack of

assertiveness, are easier and in some ways more important to overcome than external ones. Thus, the primary goal of the neoliberalised feminist subject is ever more effective self-regulation, working on her confidence and ambition, and managing an effective balance of home and work (McRobbie, 2015). *Lean In* feminism is deeply informed by a market rationality that recasts structural issues around gender inequality “in personal, individualized terms” (Rottenberg, 2014, 422).

In the documentary, this form of feminism is exemplified by the representation of Stephanie McMahon, who is described by wrestler Trish as “a mom [and] a businesswoman, in charge in a male dominated world.” Stephanie is represented as the epitome of the woman who has managed to successfully “have it all,” signifying success, control and perfection on both economic and domestic levels (McRobbie, 2015). Stephanie herself states that “I’ve never thought for one second that I couldn’t be whatever I wanted to be. There was nobody that was going to stand in my way, certainly not because of my gender.” Her success is attributed to her self-belief and her refusal to hold herself back due to her gender, reflecting Sandberg’s image of female success in *Lean In*.

Indeed, the ideal girl or woman who believes in herself and won’t be held back is a recurring trope throughout *WWE 24: Women’s Evolution*. This not only includes WWE executives and wrestlers like Stephanie McMahon or Bayley, but the female wrestling fans that can now look up to them and others. Triple H describes the rebranded women’s division as ‘something that if you had a little girl, or were a young woman, that you could look at and say ‘man, I wanna do that’ or ‘that inspires me to do more, because women can do anything.’” Clips from interviews with WWE fans are shown praising the “empowering” women’s matches for making them feel “confident,” and enthusing that WWE fans can raise their kids “in a world where they know girl,

boy, whatever, they have a chance to do whatever they want to do, no matter where life puts you, you have an opportunity to break through, do great things.” Here, sexism is represented as something that can be overcome through self-belief, “individual hard work and changing attitudes” (Gill, 2016, 624). As Gill and Orgad contend (2015), the “confidence imperative” is a central trope of corporate feminist discourse, where girls and women are incited to take up individualised strategies to improve their self-belief, neutralising feminism’s potential threat to the structures and cultures of corporations and economic systems.

Along with overcoming “internal barriers” by believing in oneself, the documentary also espouses the principle, again found in *Lean In*, that gender equality is desirable because it is profitable. As part of the montage of celebrity women described above, the caption “gender equality a boost to US economy” appears over images of Oprah Winfrey and Ellen DeGeneres. Indeed, the WWE’s aim to inspire and empower a generation of young female fans should be understood first and foremost as an attempt to secure a new market who will be loyal consumers of WWE content and merchandise, and can be framed within the corporation’s wider project of consumer and market diversification.^{vii} The documentary acknowledges that greater gender equality is good for business, but in so doing implicitly suggests that the equal treatment of women is contingent on economic viability, a privilege that could be revoked if women’s wrestling doesn’t fulfil hopes for profitability. Male wrestler Big E supports equal pay “if [women wrestlers are] bringing revenue, if the fans are in to it,” and wrestler Naomi cautions that “we asked for it, and now we’re getting it, and we have to deliver.” This last statement over-emphasises the potential of women to “deliver” forms of commercial success that the documentary elsewhere portrays as questions of organisational transformation.

Stephanie McMahon, and, to a slightly lesser extent, her husband, Triple H, are, at least in the documentary, the “faces” of a new era of gender equality. They are represented as the voice of changes that “we” (the WWE) have made, showing them to be the new socially conscious generation of a successful family business. Their championing of gender equality works to signal not only their modern sensibility but also their savvy commercial strategy. While the WWE does critique its own failings in the management of women’s wrestling, these failings, as is often the case with broadcasting histories, remain “grammatically unattributed” (Matt Hills, 2015, 7). The problematic management of the past remains faceless, with culpability falling on the shoulders of the corporation at large. This generalisation of organisational sexism leaves questions unanswered regarding the decisions of managers, including Stephanie and Triple H themselves, and corporate cultures that allowed failures in the management of women’s wrestling to persist for so long.

“We’ve fostered an environment where women can do anything:” fusing neoliberalism and feminism

As the quote above from Triple H suggests, the documentary fuses an organisational critique of gender inequality – suggesting a corporation needs to transform its “environment” to enable change – with a familiar individualistic narrative of self-made opportunity frequently present in texts with a postfeminist (or corporate feminist) sensibility. More than simply listing contextual factors that shaped women’s wrestling in the past, the WWE’s re-assessment of its own management allows for the admission of an overarching *culture of habit* in which women were routinely undervalued, exploited and badly represented. Here, inequality and sexism are seen to result from a management structure defined and organised in ways that are ultimately judged by the documentary as disappointing and damaging for wrestlers and fans, but not as

politically or morally unjustifiable. While this identification and criticism of a culture of habit stops short of the kind of structural and political critique feminist critics might call for, the grammar of neoliberalised feminism upon which WWE draws does enable something more than a purely individualised and apolitical critique of its own past (one that may have arisen in an era of popular culture defined by postfeminist sensibilities). The documentary does make the important acknowledgement that women's achievement is predicated on the structuring of an organisational culture of habit which actively fosters and supports opportunities.

The encounter of neoliberalism and feminism leads to points of conflict and contradiction that the documentary attempts to fuse. "Exploitative" management practices are acknowledged, but these failings remain faceless and unattributed; organisations must change to enable women to achieve, but they will only recognise the need for this as long as women prove their capacity to achieve; gender inequality is harmful, disappointing, and unfair, but equality is conditional upon profitability; companies should remove barriers and create supportive environments that allow positive female role models to emerge, but those role models will demonstrate to girl audiences that they can overcome *any* barrier if they only dream big enough. These contradictions almost seem impossible to align, but the documentary for the most part naturalises them into a coherent history and narrative, using "inspirational" montages to ideologically paper over any potential cracks.

Although the documentary evidences many of the characteristics of a postfeminist sensibility, the contradictions that emerge through the precarious blending of neoliberalism and feminism make it markedly different. As McRobbie argued of postfeminism, girls and women could claim a notional form of "equality" – in education, the workplace, relationships, and so on – if, and only if, a collective feminist

politics was disavowed (2009). Many contemporary critics might contend that neoliberalised feminism is much the same (Rottenberg, 2014; Gregoratti, 2016), with the only difference being that feminism is now mobilised as a fairly empty “cheer word” (in this case not even explicitly named) to signify the “celebration” of female success (Gill, 2016). However, by focusing on the encounter of neoliberalism and feminism as a conflicted and contradictory process (Prugl, 2015), this analysis has presented a more nuanced, even potentially hopeful, picture of what contemporary popular feminism can do.

Critically hopeful

It is conceivable, of course, to argue that attending to the possibilities of neoliberalised feminism is to become complacent about its not insignificant limitations and harms. Gregoratti argues that feminist scholars have been disappointingly silent on ways to resist corporate feminism, and asks: “has a preoccupation in demystifying the contradictions (or, for some, ambiguities) of this new feminism precluded an engagement with questions of resistance?” (2016, 923). Far from suggesting complacency or intellectual insularity, however, we argue that attending to the ambiguities and contradictions of neoliberalised feminism should be absolutely central to contemporary feminist politics.

Feminism can be characterised as a “politics of hope” (Rebecca Coleman and Debra Ferreday, 2010, 313), making possible a “vision of social change” (hooks, 2000, 43). Despite this, as Coleman and Ferreday argue, feminist scholarship can present a fairly hopeless portrayal of feminism in a state of crisis or failure in an era of postfeminist repudiation (2010), and now in a period of neoliberal co-optation. Yet feelings of frustration and failure need not preclude hopefulness. Hope facilitates actions that aim towards specific forms of social transformation, but it also acts as a

source of motivation in the present, granting drive and energy to resist inequalities, and fight for change (Coleman and Ferreday, 2010). Rebecca Solnit (2016, online) has called for hope in defiance of the political shifts we discussed at the opening of this paper, stating that hope is “not a sunny everything-is-getting-better narrative, though it may be a counter to the everything-is-getting-worse one. You could call it an account of complexities and uncertainties, with openings.” As this suggests, taking a position of hope need not lead to complacency, provided it energises a *critical* hopeful approach that does not only attend uncritically to the positive. Importantly for our argument here, hope can shape, and be produced, by the critical process of “reading differently:” “where feminist hoping is linked to the definition of Utopia not as the final attainment of a complete and perfected state, but as a wilful and processual struggle” (2010, 319-20).

This framework is even more crucial given that, in the years since Coleman and Ferreday’s (2010) special issue on feminist hope, feminism has become increasingly less reviled, repudiated and denied, and instead has gained an unpresented visibility in media and public culture. This paper has made a deliberate choice to read a neoliberalised feminist text differently, through a critical, hopeful feminist framework. While acknowledging the many serious limitations of WWE’s version of neoliberalised feminism, this analysis elects to emphasise moments of possibility and hope in the text. This is not so radical given that the difference is primarily one of emphasis. Keller and Ringrose, for example, acknowledge some possibilities and positives of celebrity feminism, but overall their argument emphasises points of critique (2015). In contrast, this paper suggests that, where possible, emphasising hope and opportunity in neoliberalised feminism might do more to energise and advance a feminist politics that speaks to contemporary concerns. By refusing to draw conclusions that emphasise

feminism's hopeless co-optation, which can serve to "shut down" what might be hopeful about these kinds of texts, researchers might attend to what feminism makes possible in contemporary media culture.

For scholars in feminist media studies, critical feminist hope might mean looking more closely at structural changes in media industries that deliberately address gender inequalities, for example the decision to appoint women directors to every episode of Marvel's *Jessica Jones* second Netflix series. Women in film, sport (Heineken, 2016) and other fields are drawing on popular feminist ideas in order to draw audiences' attention to sexist and racist structures and inequalities in their industries. Shifts in representation are also key here, such as through the recent centralisation of female heroines, including women with disabilities and women of colour, in male dominated genres such as action and science fiction blockbuster films and comic books. Perhaps most importantly, scholarship must attend to what the visibility of feminism might make possible for media audiences.

Audiences are particularly important here given the mobilisation of the girl in texts with a similar sensibility to *WWE 24: Women's Evolution*. This figure, made visible in the documentary through the image of the girl WWE fan, can look up to neoliberalised feminist role models, dream big, and "be anything" – or so we are told. This figure raises questions around the self-work and anxiety involved in an individualistic neoliberal project of the self. Presumably, any failure of the girl in this framework will mean that she failed to dream big enough and work hard enough, or faltered in her self-belief and confidence (Gill and Orgad, 2015). And yet, at least in the documentary analysed here, the achievements of girls and women are *only* imagined as possible within an organisation that has made changes that open pathways and provide support for such achievements to happen. Reading audiences hopefully, then, raises

questions surrounding the hopeful (Louisa Ellen Stein, 2015), and critical, pleasures fans might take in a text of this type. More importantly, we might ask whether girls engaging with these kinds of texts may be enabled to take up a popular and accessible language through which to articulate criticism of, and resistance to, gender inequalities, sexist institution and structures, and social injustice. In so doing, we must not overstate the ability of media representations to trickle down (or up) and alter structural inequalities (Evans, 2015), nor must we place even more of a burden on the figure of the girl as a symbol of productivity and possibility (McRobbie, 2009). Yet the experiences of children and young women forming gendered or even feminist identities in such a media climate, including but not limited to those responding to WWE's rebranding of women's wrestling, certainly bear further research.

Conclusion

Critical feminist hope is, we argue, a productive and relevant framework for reading the encounter of feminism and neoliberalism in contemporary popular culture. At the same time, it is a position that must be managed carefully. First, this paper wishes to avoid dissuading or denying the validity of angry or pessimistic responses to neoliberalised feminism from feminist scholars. An argument for a critically hopeful approach must not become a coercive call to simply be happy or grateful for the concessions to feminism made in neoliberalism. Feminism might well be imagined as a politics of hope, but it is also a politics of unhappiness, as feminists "disturb the very fantasy that happiness can be found in certain places" (Sara Ahmed, 2010, 582). Indeed, contemporary popular feminism is replete with highly problematic attempts to make feminism friendly, non-disruptive, and "happy," as, for example, in the UN "#HeforShe" campaign represented by Emma Watson (an image of whom is featured in the WWE documentary) (Gill and Orgad, 2016). Although critical hopefulness can be a

useful approach to reading particular moments and texts in popular feminism, now more than ever we must not shy away from taking up the positions of “feminist killjoy” or “spoilsport” when it is called for (Ahmed, 2010).

Second, by speaking hopefully we must not foreclose critique of neoliberal rationalities and modes of governance by positioning them as unproblematic vehicles for equality. We can see this in the difficulties of launching much needed critiques of the way cherished neoliberal principles such as “choice” (Virginia Braun, 2009) or “confidence” (Gill and Orgad, 2015) are cemented in neoliberalised feminism. Who, after all, would want to be “against” determined female role models inspiring girls to become confident athletes and performers? When principles cherished in neoliberalism become fused with purportedly feminist values they become an “obvious ‘good,’” almost beyond reproach (Gill and Orgad, 2015). At the same time, this analysis has demonstrated that the invoking of feminism in contemporary media may not always involve such neat alignments, and in fact may be used to frame organisational critique and change alongside individualistic narratives. It was undoubtedly the case in the 1990s and 2000s that a postfeminist sensibility allowed young women to be addressed as neoliberalism’s “ideal subjects” (Gill, 2007). What we have endeavoured to illustrate, however, is that the encounter of neoliberalism and feminism can perhaps manifest in ways that are less “ideal,” leading to moments of opportunity for feminist politics.

Discussing the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Stuart Hall wrote that feminism was “the thief in the night, it broke in; interrupted, made an unseemly noise, seized the time, crapped on the table of cultural studies” (Hall, 1992, cited in Charlotte Brunsdon, 1996). An often compromised and problematic iteration of feminism has gained a historically unprecedented level of commercial value, popularity and cultural visibility not by “breaking in” but through deliberate embrace and

invitation. As scholarship to date has shown, this “invitation” has worked effectively to neutralise, individualise, and make safe a feminist politics of social critique (Rottenberg, 2014; Gill, 2016). And yet, while it is often the case that a collective feminist politics is left out in the encounter of feminism and neoliberalism, we must avoid foreclosing the possibility that elements of feminism that challenge cultures of habit, and even social structures, might be “let in” at the same time, with unpredictable results. The popular cultural embrace of feminism *is* significant, even where it appears to be only a celebratory “cheer word” (Gill, 2016), or is unnamed and instead represented by a lexicon of inspirational “fighting” women. Feminism remains potentially disruptive, it retains properties of interruption and noise-making, or, as McRobbie argues, feminism can still be a “discursive explosion” in contemporary capitalism (2015). When feminism is let in, it can become challenging to leave out those ideas that may come to confront neoliberal forms of inequality.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Matt Hills and Rosalind Gill for providing feedback on a draft of this paper, and Rob Arcangeli for his comments from the perspective of a wrestling fan.

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ⁱ Such articles have tended to focus on texts from more straightforwardly feminine media fields, such as women’s magazines (Gill, 2016), body confidence advertising campaigns aimed at women (Gill and Orgad, 2015) or the advice book for women in the (corporate) workplace *Lean In* (Williams, 2014; Rottenberg, 2014).

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- ii This is not to say that girls and women do not watch wrestling. For an examination of the historical importance of women wrestling fans see Chad Dell *The Revenge of Hatpin Mary: Women, Professional Wrestling and Fan Culture*, (New York, 2006). For an analysis of how contemporary female fans can subvert texts, see in Catherine Salmon and Susan Clerc, “‘Ladies Love Wrestling, Too: Female Wrestling Fans Online’ in Nicholas Sammond (ed.), *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*, (Durham, 2005).
- iii Whilst the narrative of the documentary seems poised for Hillary Clinton’s success, the WWE itself has significant connections to Donald Trump. Trump appeared as a WWE character in 2007 and 2009 (Kelly, 2016). After his election win Linda McMahon, former CEO and President of the WWE, was announced by Trump as leader of the Small Business Administration, having been one of Trump’s biggest financial supporters, donating approximately \$6m (Martin et al, 2016).
- iv For simplicity in our analysis, we will limit our discussions of women in professional wrestling to WWE. There are a variety of women’s professional wrestlers, in North American independent promotions, and other national contexts, where women’s roles are different and worthy of analysis in their own right.
- v Most notably, female wrestlers Chyna and AJ Lee, both well-known and regarded among fans, are almost entirely absent from the documentary due to the WWE’s desire to distance themselves from those performers (Chyna appeared in pornography and died of a drug and alcohol overdose; AJ Lee’s husband CM Punk’s WWE contract termination was acrimonious).
- vi For further exploration of ‘hashtag feminism’ see *Feminist Media Studies* Commentary and Criticism edited by Portwood-Stacer and Berridge (2014).
- vii For example, the WWE has targeted international markets including the UK, Japan, China and India through strategies such as local live events and hiring wrestlers from these countries. WWE Network subscription is key to this strategy, as the corporation aims to offer a holistic streaming service in the Netflix model.