# *Fighting for Recognition: Identity, Masculinity, and the Act of Violence in Professional Wrestling* by R. Tyson Smith. United States: Duke University Press, 2014

**by Morgan Daniels, Queen Mary, University of London & Arcadia University, London Center**

1 R. Tyson Smith plays a dangerous game. This is because his new ethnography, Fighting for Recognition, takes in not one but two subjects which wreak havoc with participant observation: the world of professional wrestling and, broadly and hesitantly speaking, 'working class life'. That in documenting the latter one runs the risk of homogenising 'lived experience' – of being patronising – is evidenced not just in the great boom in reality television programmes since the 1990s, which rather demand such homogenisation for ultimate gawping benefit, but also, for example, the very well-intentioned Mass-Observation movement, Tom Harrisson's strange anthropology of the British everyday, meaning pubs and dirty jokes and football pools. Wrestling, meanwhile, almost dares the observer to have a go at lifting the lid on its dirty secrets, to blow apart, finally, the sheer, audacious artifice of it all, safe in the knowledge that those dirty secrets have always been perfectly open at the same time. (The second autobiography by Mick Foley, once one of the foremost stars of mainstream, televised grappling, is entitled Foley is Good: And the Real World is Faker than Wrestling.) How can the writer or anthropologist or documentary filmmaker ever hope to do justice to a dupe so knowing, to a camp so high? One might as well write an exposé of pantomime.

2 A dangerous game, indeed! Fighting for Recognition, based upon two years of research at Rage, an independent wrestling outfit stationed in a suburb of New York City, could quite easily have said nothing new and done so offensively. But I want to say that, for the most part, Smith is successful. For one thing, he dismisses wrestling's "fakery" as basically unimportant, noting that wonder at popular storytelling, which is what we are dealing with, really, "distracts from other important meanings" immanent in sports entertainment. A "richer understanding of professional wrestling's representation", reckons Smith, "goes beyond form and content to consider effect: What, if anything, makes the story resonate? How does it transport you out of everyday life?" (2-3) More interesting than fakery is the interest in fakery, in that desire by the uninitiated to ask whether you know that wrestling is a ruse. And more interesting than that, for Smith, is the question of why, therefore, young men – nearly always men – bother: Why risk injury (or worse) and, because of the perceived fakery, ridicule in an insular world offering up so little in terms of obvious or immediate recognition? What type of identity-seeking is this?

3 It is this nearly always men that is important here, the 'point', if you will, of Fighting for Recognition, which frames pro wrestling as a means "of expressing, of working through, puzzles and paradoxes of contemporary manhood" (152). Central to Smith's argument is that in order to do masculinity – that is, to perform "caricatures of working-class masculinity" (94) – wrestlers must

“unlearn the rugged, individualistic habitus they have spent their lives being groomed into” (96). Intimacy is key. “When the intent to defeat or harm is removed,” he writes, “rolling around on a mat with other half-dressed men is a very tenuous exercise for men who pride themselves on their adherence to heterosexual ideals” (113). In wrestling, Smith insists, homophobia and homoeroticism quite readily comingle.

4 Not just ‘gay’, is wrestling, but apparently effete, too: this masculinity-doing also demands leg shaving, the applying of makeup and regular sessions at tanning salons. What is more (and I think this is perhaps Smith’s most useful contribution), the emotional labour of – shall we say – pretending to fight is insistent upon softness and caring in order to work properly. Pro wrestling is empathic stuff: protection (of one’s opponent) and trust (in one’s opponent) are the watchwords, with lightness of touch the method for achieving the spectacle of hardness. “The primary physical technique for wrestling”, we learn, “is the development of a loose and light body. When both performers are malleable, pliable, and relaxed, moving as a synchronized couple is easier” (71). Even a wrestler’s handshake ends up oh-so-gentle. The additional twist, of course, is that nothing is manlier than being able to take pain. A hugely complicated type of identity-seeking, then, is the answer to my question: indie wrestling provides a (pretty secret) space for figuring out male bodily worth, something, the argument goes, provided increasingly less and less by paid work. “Western masculinity has never been untroubled” asserts Smith, following Tim Edwards's lead in declaring it as crisis, not in one (147).

5 I agree. Yet I must express a concern. There is another tension, another contradiction running right through Fighting for Recognition, namely one between two quite different books: the text itself, i.e. the fairly 'straight' ethnography of a suburban independent wrestling promotion, and the text-that-might-have-been, hinted at in the author's appendix explaining method. “Despite no longer being a big fan of [pro wrestling]”, Smith writes,

I could appreciate the appeal of being a wrestler. During my undergraduate years I took some drama classes and performed a large-scale production. I wholeheartedly endorse combining theater, physicality, and playfulness, things, I am afraid, that many men do not (unless intoxicated, of course). I still have the occasional fantasy of getting in the ring in front of a crowd. I know the character I would adopt (“the Mad Professor”), and I have thought of several promo lines, too (“I will school you!”). (161)

6 In the end Smith did not participate at any Rage event in a wrestling capacity, fearing, more than reasonably, severe injury. This is not my issue: I do not consider it imperative to take a metal chair to the head in order to write successfully about wrestling. That fantasy, however, is what gets me, that sporadic dream of being a wrestler, wherein I intuit important ramifications for writing per se. What I will try to say about writing per se is that it is implicated in any discussion of hegemonic masculinity in or as crisis.

7 Take another work of manly sporting ethnography, Loïc Wacquant's Body & Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer (2004). Here is a book which embraces the seduction of its subject: in fact,

says Wacquant, “boxing ‘makes sense’ as soon as one takes pains to get close enough to grasp it with one’s body”. (Note that Smith's fears for his body, which I again stress were well-placed, prevented fuller participant observation. Once more, wrestling resists documentation.) The author's chosen means of making sense of boxing's making sense was through mixing “sociological analysis, ethnographic description, and literary evocation”, an experiment in writing that sees the last third of the book given over to a novella (7). The intention behind blurring the usually-segregated, Wacquant explains, was to allow the reader "to better grasp pugilistic things ‘in the concrete, as they are’ and to see boxers in motion” (8). This is in quite some contrast to Fighting for Recognition, which is straightforward (I feel too straightforward) ethnography: a chapter dedicated to ‘profiles’ of the Rage subjects leads to a further four thematic chapters, each ending with neat closing ‘summaries’. The author is not absent from the text – far from it: there is a photo over halfway into the text featuring Smith and the aforementioned Mick Foley backstage at a Rage show – but the author-cum-would-be-wrestler, the author with wild fantasies about performing, is nowhere to be seen. The effect is that very little of wrestling’s appeal is truly conveyed, and the cast and crew of Rage are rendered somewhat data-like. We do not see wrestlers “in motion”. Fighting for Recognition is just not very fun.

8 To do justice to boxing in writing, meanwhile, it is clear that Wacquant had to put in quite the performance. He grasped boxing with his body and, in attempting to relay that grasping on the page – how desperate does grasping sound? – collapsed ‘standard’ academic practice. This is why I ask: Where is the performance in Fighting for Recognition? It sounds like a trifling question, a concern merely with the cosmetic, but observe that Smith makes the connection himself between hegemonic masculinity and the politics of style, noting both the need for theatre and playfulness and also their being things, along with physicality, seldom combined by “many men”. (Of course there is a connection: as obvious as what I am saying is, being male affords one great privileges, and so does being a writer.) It is surely not overdoing it to say that writing eschewing performance runs a risk of reproducing that which it criticises.

9 But from where do these stylistic differences spring? In Body & Soul, Wacquant lets us in on a fieldnote expressing his unbridled joy in “simply participating”, such that the job of observing was now “secondary”. He continues: “I’m at the point where I’d gladly give up my studies and my research and all the rest to be able to stay here and box, to remain ‘one of the boys’.” Those studies, the “tutti frutti of academe”, had become “totally devoid of meaning and downright depressing, so dreary and dead” (4). In other words, the academically-reckless approach of Body & Soul is informed by the rather spectacular collapsing of Wacquant’s identity as a writer, researcher, whatever.

10 Smith has a different experience. He admits that, despite initial reservations, he came to embrace being known at Rage as “the book writer” because it gave him “a stable identity”, and it is this identity and its stableness which is my real concern. Fighting for Recognition, attitude-wise, is defined not by seduction but by practical problems (i.e. avoiding both the humdrum question of “fakery” and romanticising the less privileged, plus the physical risks entailed in a too-involved type of participant

observation), and by an aloofness, an outsiderness, something reaffirmed in the text by the uncomfortably frequent references to his studying for a PhD or being an academic (the "Mad Professor"? Really?), my point being that this is a response to the aforementioned traps built into writing ethnography of indie wrestling. I cannot blame Smith for slinking back into his writer's shell. Quite the opposite. Yet if western masculinity is crisis then so is writing, I want to say, aware of how glib I sound, but equally aware that such awareness might possibly mean I am on to something.

**Works Cited**

**Tyson Smith, R.** *Fighting for Recognition: Identity, Masculinity, and the Act of Violence in Professional Wrestling.* Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2014.

**Wacquant, L.** *Body & Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.