Independent Professional Wrestling as Crucible for Research into Masculinity

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Excerpt from "For Most Men, an Extra Large Heart Means the Grave, but Most Men Aren't Terry Funk"

I said Well, how big are Ricky Steamboat's arms?
He said Oh, they're a lot bigger than yours, too.
I said Well—I want you to know something, neighbor:
I have an extra large. An extra large. Maybe not arms. Maybe not legs.
But I have an extra large.
What I have an extra large in is a heart
(Wrestling promotional patter from Terry Funk, delineated as a poem by Colette Arrand, You Have to Deal with Me Breathing, pg. 5)

The epigraph to this essay pushes the hypermasculinity of Terry Funk's wrestling promo tough talk into tension with the gentler emotions of poetry. Terry Funk is a long-time wrestler from the 1960s to the present who wrestled for WWF (World Wrestling Federation, later World Wrestling Entertainment or WWE). Funk achieved his greatest success in the mid-1980s when he feuded with Hulk Hogan and appeared in a tag-team match in *Wrestlemania 2*. He brandished a cowboy gimmick in the mid-80s, and later in his career became known for hardcore and death matches featuring blood, weapons, broken tables, and ladders both in Japan and in various smaller wrestling organizations in the United States. His promotions and interviews made him a long-time fan favorite.

Funk's promo text was delineated as poetry by Colette Arrand, a wrestling fan who is playing with the hypermasculine culture of wrestling in a series of small-print-run, photocopier quality zines called *You Have to Deal with Me Breathing*. In these zines, published through the Fear of a Ghost Planet press, Arrand takes the angry, intense speeches or "promos" delivered by wrestlers between matches on television and delineates them as poetry. These are the moments when

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wrestlers "build heat" and generate interest for a future match on television or live show.

Arrand's literary, openly emotional expression of her fandom is significant for this essay because it runs counter to the dominant narrative of wrestling fandom, in which fans wave signs that egg on and accelerate the masculine culture of the ring, hoping to be caught on camera for the national TV audience. Arrand is engaged in a small-scale, local fandom, selling her zines at coffee shops, music shops and alternative culture outlets—anywhere willing to display a photocopied expression of fandom for sale. Arrand may never be in the background on WWE's *Raw*, but in her hyperlocal expression of fandom, she may be an indication of a new, local wrestling fan culture. Local wrestling may be an expression of a new wrestling culture—a wrestling culture that works against hypermasculinity. Professional wrestling has long been recognized as a field of "hypermasculinity," in which the cardboard cutouts of professional wrestling characters enact extreme aggression and other stereotypes of masculine identity.[1] Corollary to wrestling's hypermasculinity has been an absence, if not hostility, to alternative masculinities in the national, mass-media form of pro wrestling. However, in local pro wrestling communities, more diverse norms for masculine identity can be found in the ring. For example, Minnesota is home to Terrance Griep, whose wrestling name is Tommy "Spider-Baby" Saturday. Griep claims the distinction of being the first openly gay professional wrestler inside and outside the ring.[2] Griep, who is a professional comic creator and freelance writer as well as wrestler, is not crusading for equality as he performs as Spider-Baby. In the context of the twin cities wrestling scene, he reflects the values of a community that has been open to LGBTQ identity for a long time.

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[1] We take "hypermasculinity" from Patrice A. Oppliger. Masculinity has been at the core of pro wrestling studies, including central essays from Douglas Battema and Philip Sewell, and Henry Jenkins III.

[2] Spider-Baby's claim is complicated; there have been gay wrestlers who have played straight characters and straight wrestlers who have played gay characters. Griep's claim is to being the first openly gay inside and outside the ring. As a regional wrestler Griep may not be the most prominent wrestler to make this claim. Matt Cage came out as gay in 2015 and is currently retired. Cage wrestled in slightly higher profile independent leagues and his news was mentioned in larger media outlets like the *New York Daily News* (Murphy) and *E! News* (Malec). Mike Parrow also made headlines recently when he came out (Moye).

By keeping our eyes on local, independent professional wrestling, we can see changes in the masculine culture of professional wrestling that are not visible at the national level. In this essay, we examine independent regional professional wrestling or indie wrestling (IW) and indie fan communities to assert that independent wrestling is a site for circulating alternative models for masculinity and gender. To do this, we proceed in three steps:

First, we survey the literature on professional wrestling, masculinity and gender, noting that most of it focuses on professional wrestling as a mass-media phenomenon (hereafter called "mass-media wrestling"). Therein, we see an opening for a novel contribution to the study of wrestling from the perspective of local circuits, with an eye toward the construction of masculinity within independent wrestling.

Second, methodologically, we look at independent wrestling promotions as overlapping periodic markets. We will use the tools of geography to map the venues of multiple independent wrestling promotions in Minneapolis and Saint Paul, Minnesota. We also examine the relationship between where independent wrestling events are held and the economic character of the locales.

Third, we use geographic analysis to map Griep's wrestling activities. Griep wrestles in a series of promotions within the Twin Cities (Minneapolis-Saint Paul) area, reaching across Minnesota and into Wisconsin. We chart the appearances he made (inside the ring and in character outside the ring) as a map of the presence of his reconstruction of wrestling masculinity. As Griep wrestles in new venues, he brings his transformative masculinity with him.

Griep works to move us away from the homophobic and violently masculinist norms of mass-media wrestling. Many more kinds of men can express themselves, both inside and outside the ring, in independent wrestling than in the national circuit. The study of independent wrestling is poised to make significant contributions to our understanding of professional wrestling as a cultural phenomenon.

Decline of Regional Professional Wrestling as Cultural Phenomenon

The development of mass-media wrestling has erased local wrestling from the consciousness of the public and often from the consciousness of scholars. Nationally televised wrestling began in 1949, when the DuMont network aired

Wrestling from the Marigold (the Marigold Arena in Chicago) nationally (Shoemaker 39). This was a kind of false start, though; the rise of basic cable television in the 1980s was the real beginning of the end of regional professional wrestling in popular consciousness. For example, Vince McMahon's WWF was televised on the USA cable network and syndicated across the country. By 1985's *WrestleMania*, the WWF began putting its competitors out of business, slowly killing the old territorial system and becoming, to the public and to scholars, the major league of professional wrestling.

Independent wrestling, however, fills a void left in the old territory circuits when the WWF created a national market. Promoters stage shows in armories; American Legion and VFW halls; commercial banquet halls; nightclubs and smaller music venues; community centers; or gymnasiums. During the warmer months rings may be set up outside on bar parking lots or at county fairs and festivals. Generally, independent wrestling can be found in any arena available for the right price for a promoter (Beard and Heppen, "Wrestling Ring").

Typically, independent wrestling attracts a class of professional wrestler who achieves only local fame, although "guests" from mass-media wrestling are often invited to wrestle, referee, and sign photos to boost attendance. Additionally, many former wrestlers with national profiles, after being let go from WWE, TNA, ROH, and other major televised/arena promoters, often wrestle the indie circuit where they serve as a top draw. For example, Cody Rhodes (son of Dusty Rhodes) appeared at South Saint Paul High School in October 2016 at a Twin Cities indie show to sign autographs, take pictures, and wrestle. Rhodes was one of WWE's top attractions from 2007 to 2016 and later asked for his release (for more, see Castleberry in this volume). Even older wrestlers who found fame in the old territories before WWE became prominent serve as attractions at local indie shows. These guests, who earn both appearance fees as well as fees from fans for signatures and photographs, often are the only wrestlers who can earn a living full-time in indie wrestling.

Because promoters offer low wages, most independent pro wrestlers support themselves primarily with income earned in non-wrestling-based employment. Some independent pro wrestlers also supplement their income at wrestling shows by selling autographed photographs, pictures with fans, and t-shirts at "gimmick tables" (Beard and Heppen, "Wrestling Ring"). Often the supplemental income from gimmick tables can supersede what they make wrestling.

For these reasons (i.e. intimate venue size, close to home, with a high level of wrestler-fan interaction) independent wrestling is not just "minor league wrestling," in which the wrestlers and fans watch something approximating the major leagues. Independent wrestling is a different beast, closer to the hearts and values of the audience it serves. As a result, independent wrestling can be a crucible for studying the values of performers and fans of professional wrestling with more nuance than most studies of the mass media phenomenon, a project we began in "The Dynamics of Identity in the Communities of Local Professional Wrestling" and are picking up in this essay.

While the national wrestling engine of the WWE has replaced most independent wrestling in the consciousness of the public, it has also erased indie wrestling from the agenda of much pro wrestling studies scholarship. For example, while much has been written about the ways that professional wrestling reflects national values and anxieties (e.g. Henricks), the focus has been on mass-media wrestling. Similarly, scholars have studied gender politics, xenophobia, and tensions over race and class (see Maguire and Wozniak; Campbell) in mass-media wrestling, but much less has been written about the vagabond experience of independent wrestling, which enacts local identities values and anxieties (See Hill; Smith) The relatively sparse literature creates our opening for a novel contribution to the study of the construction of gender from the perspective of independent wrestling.

Mapping Independent Wrestling: The Promotions

Our central methodology is Geographic Information Science (GIS) technology. GIS technology allows us to create maps of wrestling performances and to merge those maps with maps derived from census data to get a better picture of the wrestling world of the Twin Cities. We map the appearances of a single local pro wrestler over a two-year period; we map some of the most active wrestling promotions in the Minneapolis-Saint Paul (Twin Cities) area, and we overlay income data to enhance our picture of the overlapping periodic markets for independent wrestling in our community.

The promoters of pro wrestling in the Twin Cities area constitute multiple periodic markets. Periodic markets, as analyzed in geography (Veeck), are markets that appear for a limited time to serve a community, like a Saturday-only

farmer's market. Periodic markets exist when there is not enough demand for a permanent market, like a grocery store that is open 7 days a week. Independent wrestling, like a farmer's market, moves from location to location and has limited operating hours with periodic shows (weekly, monthly, or even annual shows, depending on the promoter's resources and the audience's desire). A VFW hall might host a pro wrestling show on one Saturday a month. Also like a farmer's market, the product at a wrestling show may vary each time it appears. Some wrestlers appear at every show and others appear selectively.

Periodic markets become viable when a threshold population is not present to support the market on a regular and continual basis. In the theory of central places, a threshold population is the number of people necessary before a particular good or service can be provided in an area or range (Christaller). The Twin Cities metro area fails to meet the threshold population for even weekly wrestling shows in a single venue, despite serving as home to approximately 3,000,000 people and having once been the central home of one of the major wrestling promotions in the years before the WWE monopoly, the American Wrestling Association. Regrettably for these fans, a vital culture of wrestling in the Twin Cities in the 1980s has not persisted into the 21st century.

Periodic markets reduce the distance that a buyer must travel to obtain goods and services. In our Minnesota example, shows are dispersed across more than a dozen venues from Western Wisconsin to Central Minnesota. The distance to commute to a show is minimized for at least some of the audience, some of the time. However, there are diehards, the core of the community of fans, who will travel across the distances from venue to venue, eagerly consuming all the wrestling that they can.

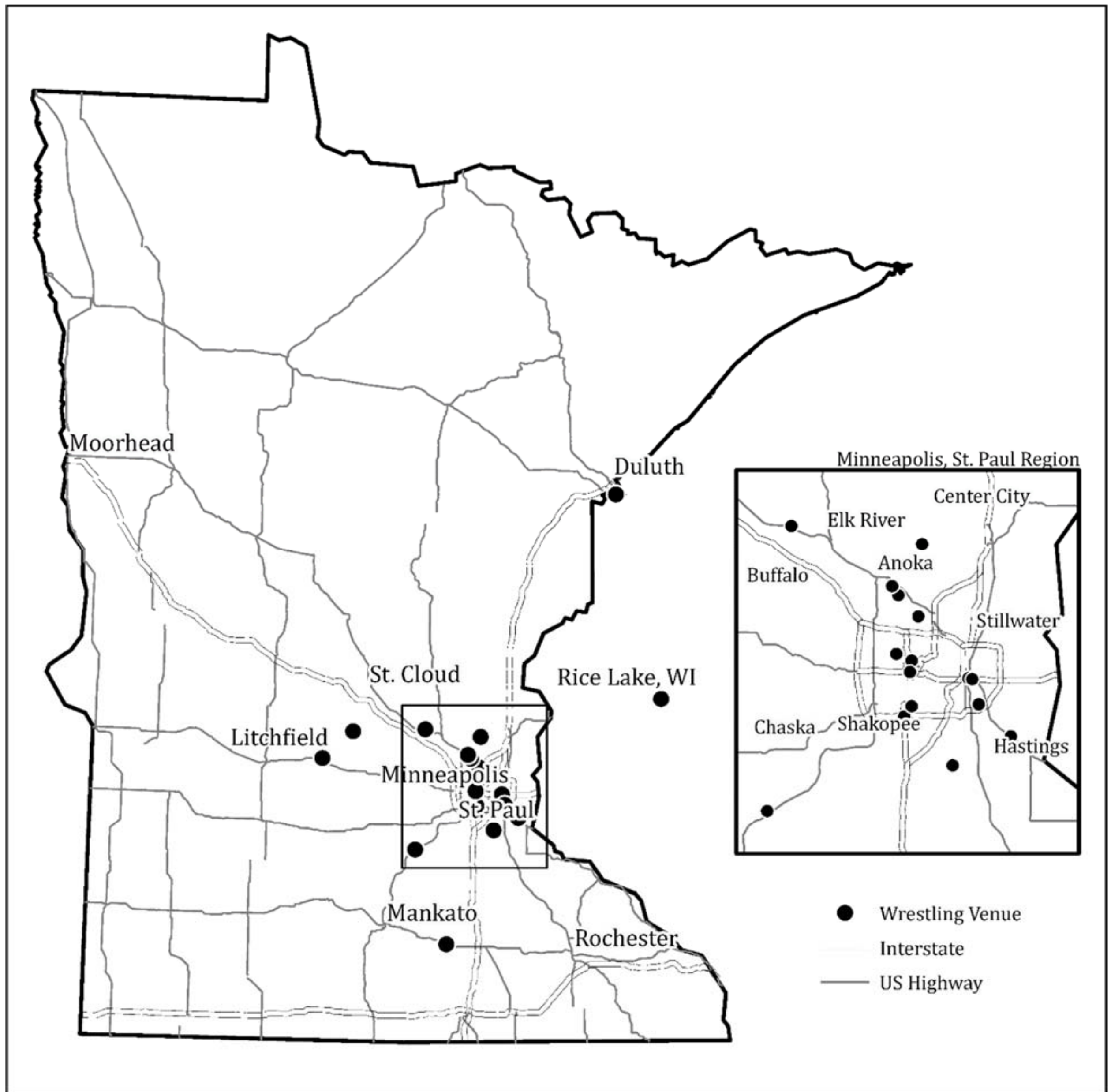
Periodic markets also serve social functions. In a study of periodic markets in rural China, Gregory Veeck found that, despite the growth of permanent vendors, periodic markets still held appeal for social functions. Villagers continued to patronize periodic markets because it gave them a chance to see friends and relatives and allow for continued social interaction with people (Veeck). As we began to discuss in our "Dynamics of Identity" essay examining local wrestling fandom online, local indie shows serve a social function for fans of the local wrestling community, becoming a social event as well as a spectacle.

To discuss independent wrestling in the Twin Cities area, we need to orient readers to the major promoters. Some promotions are significant for their longevity: Steel Domain Wrestling (SDW) of Lakeville, Minnesota started

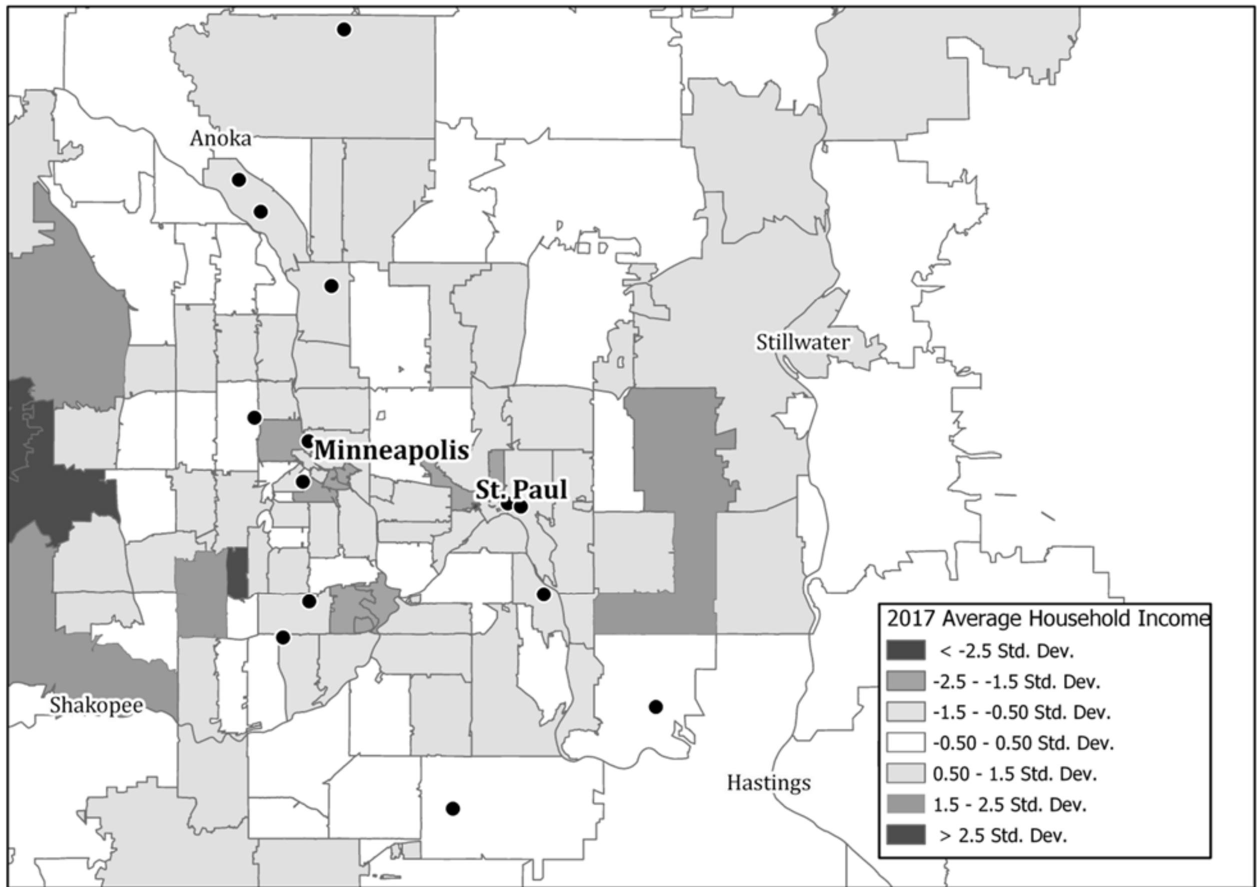
promoting professional wrestling in 1998 and claims to be the longest running pro wrestling promotion in Minnesota. Others have a different hook, like F1rst Wrestling, founded in 2007, which attracted media attention quickly by booking shows at First Avenue, the nightclub made famous in the movie *Purple Rain*. Heavy on Wrestling is the geographic outlier, programming two to four shows a year in venues two to three hours north of the Twin Cities but using primarily Twin Cities talent. Other promotions include American Wrestling Federation (AWF), Independent Wrestling International (IWI), Minnesota Independent Wrestling (MIW), Northern Lights Wrestling (NLW), Prime Time Wrestling (PTW), Pro Wrestling Battleground, and Revolution Wrestling Association (RWA), which also promotes shows in Iowa, just outside the range of this study.

Altogether, this appears to be a vibrant market, with at least ten formal promoters exhibiting in a two-year period. Map One shows the wide-spread geographic distribution of venues around the region. Map Two illustrates the relative income of the areas where these venues exist. As seen in Map Two, the venues for independent wrestling exist in relatively low-income neighborhoods (for the Twin Cities area, at least)—not the poorest neighborhoods, to be sure, but at or near the median income for the region of $66,000. This is relatively consonant with audience data for national wrestling TV shows, where half the WWE audience earned less than $50,000 per year in income, according to survey group Scarborough (Harrington).

In the aggregate, independent wrestling shows occur on average once a week within driving distance of the Twin Cities Metro. In some weeks, competing promotions will host events in the same week, typically geographically distant from each other and programmed on different days (e.g. a performance on Saturday in St. Paul promoted by IWI, a performance in Minneapolis promoted by F1rst on Sunday) to prevent head-to-head competition for the hardcore audience that will drive to multiple venues. (During holiday weeks, no events may be promoted.) Thus, as many wresting performances occur in a year within this Twin Cities periodic market as there are nationally televised performances of WWE's *Raw*. This is a deeply understudied area of professional wrestling studies, and analysis promises to reveal new dimensions of the culture of professional wrestling.



Map One: Location of venues within 200 miles of the Twin Cities area, with inset to see spatial distribution within the Twin Cities metro area more clearly.



Map Two: Income ranges of location of venues within 100 miles of the Twin Cities

Mapping Regional Professional Wrestling: Tommy "Spider-Baby" Saturday

GIS mapping of the Minnesota independent wrestling circuit lets us trace the visibility of individual wrestlers, too. A leading figure in the Twin Cities market is Terrance Griep. Dwight Hobbes featured Griep in the *TC Daily Planet,* where he calls Griep "an actor-athlete" who "rassles on the Midwest Pro Wrestling circuit as heel character, Tommy 'the SpiderBaby' Saturday." Hobbes praises Griep's celebrity in the gay community, noting that "The International Gay

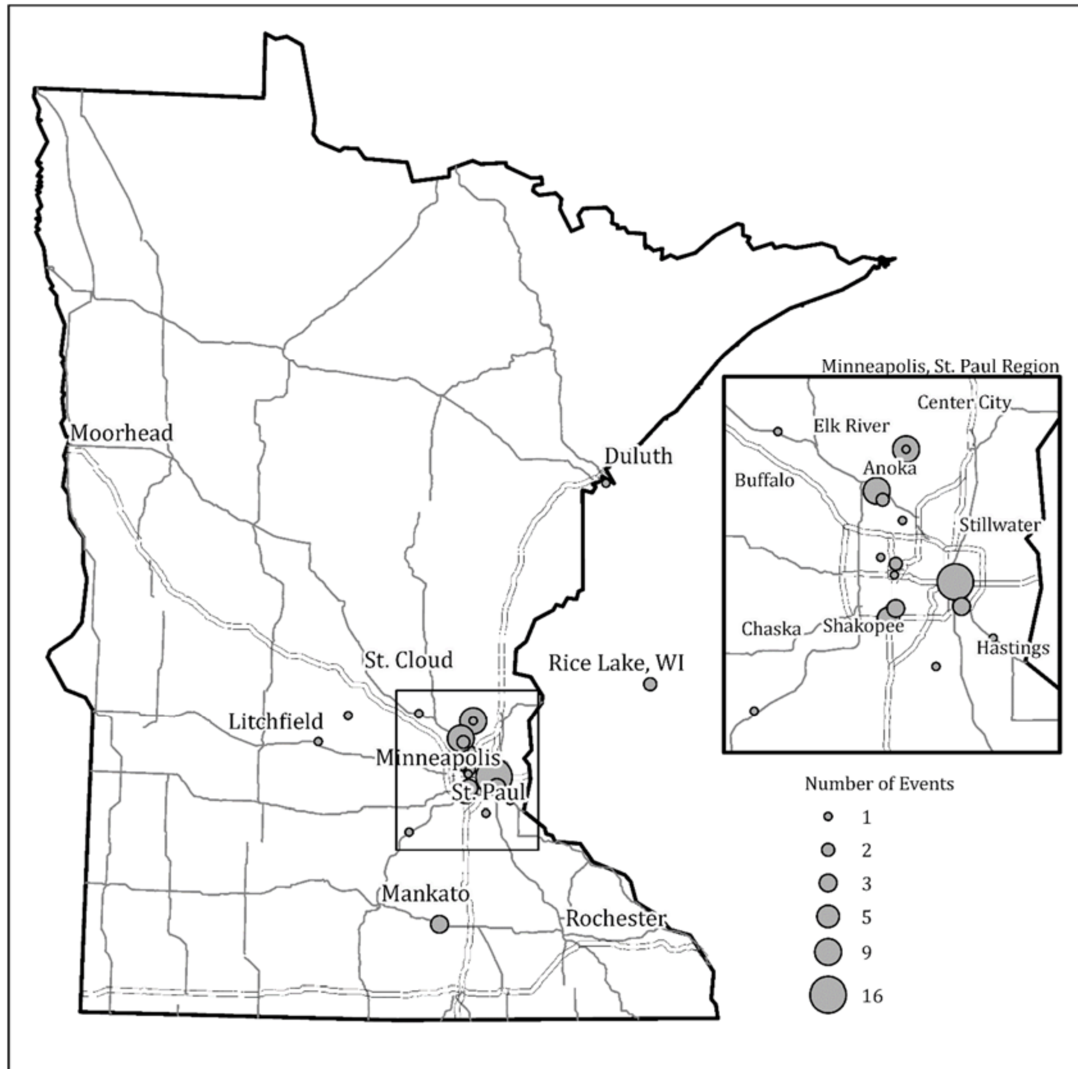
Outdoors Organization named Terrance one of the Nine Toughest Gay Guys in America."

Notably, Griep does not perform his homosexuality stereotypically in the ring; he is not an obviously gay caricature, in the way that homosexuality has been performed in the ring in the past. Early gay wrestlers have been closeted in their personal life, while straight wrestlers have played with gay stereotypes in their professional persona before as "heel" characters (or bad guys) whom the crowd generally cheers against. The late Gorgeous George and Adorable Adrian Adonis were two of the most famous examples, routinely booed not just for what they did in the ring, but in the ways that their presence in the ring challenged the norms for masculine identity that the heroic "face" wrestlers would restore when they pinned the heels to the mat.

Nonetheless, Griep is clear in his media persona and his stage presence that he is gay, without "flaming" or playing within stereotypes. Fans who perceive his homosexuality generally respond well. Griep explains: "Most people find 'out gay man' and 'pro wrestler' the most incongruent aspects of my person. I think everybody is a bundle of contradictions, but mine—if they really are contradictions—are swathed in spandex and big talk, so they stand out." (Hobbes) As Griep describes it, older generations of stereotypes of wrestlers were booed for who they were, as gay characters challenging the norms of masculinity. Today's fans recognize that he's a "heel" who happens to be gay, and so they boo what he does, not who he is.

We have attempted to assess the impact of Griep's work as a wrestler. As recorded by *PWTorch*, Griep (and his alter-ego, Spider-Baby) has been wrestling as openly out since November 2003, a premiere covered by *Out Magazine*. As Griep tells the *Twin Cities Daily Planet*, he wrestles anywhere from one to three times a week (Hobbes). Using GIS technology, we mapped the frequency of his performances within 200 miles of the Twin Cities over a two-year period (2015-2016). Map Three illustrates that Griep performs most often in the population centers of St. Paul and Minneapolis, because those population centers have the greatest demand and so the most frequent appearance of the periodic market. Yet Griep's character, with its performance of an alternative masculinity, has a far and frequent reach. We use graduated circles to the number of shows with Spider-Baby held at each location; the larger the circle, the more often Spider-Baby appeared at the venue in a two-year period. Map Three's inset shows us the

fourteen venues within the Twin Cities metro area; the larger map includes venues up to two hours away.



Map Three: Frequency of Performances of Tommy "Spider Baby" Saturday (Terrance Griep) within 200 miles of the Twin Cities

We can measure Griep's significance by the sheer number of his appearances, by the committed energy of his fans, and by the depth of his presence in other media. Griep performs on average nearly weekly in the Minnesota independent wrestling circuit, introducing his character to fans in the wilds of western

Wisconsin as well as the urban center. Fans love his work. One fan gave Griep a custom action figure representing his “Spider-Baby” alter ego (see Figure One).

Figure One: Action figure of Tommy “Spider-Baby” Griep (Figure and photo by Dale Pople, by permission of the subject).

Griep reaches out to his fans in other media, outside the ring. Spider-Baby is a recurring villain in a comic book, *The Champions*, published by Heroic Comics. The characters in the *Champions* comic book universe have been published more or less continuously since the 1980s. While they are by no means as popular as the characters we recognize in the Marvel and DC universes, they have a dedicated fan base, and Spider-Baby is one of their villains of note. As in the ring, the comic book character is a gay heel.

Further, Griep’s character maintains a presence online. In addition to his personal page, which includes photographs with his mother, always beaming with pride, as well as an email list for his dedicated fans, Griep uses his online presence to engage in activism. Griep has participated in the “It Gets Better” social media movement. Initiated in 2010 by author Dan Savage, “It Gets Better” is a series of testimonial videos designed to help gay youth move through suicidal

ideas by hearing the survival stories of elders. Griep's video has received more than five thousand views, a remarkable success for a man whose fanbase gets together in groups of a few dozen to a few hundred in VFW halls on weekends. A still from the video is reproduced in figure two below.

Figure Two: Still of Tommy Spider-Baby Saturday in his "It Gets Better" video, by permission of Terrance Griep.

We'd like to pause here to compare the Terry Funk epigraph that started this essay with this "It Gets Better" video. We opened this essay with the image of a pro wrestler staring his competition down, looking hard into the camera to tell the audience that he was bringing the heat into the ring. The televised promo video was a performance of antagonism and competition, promising pain for the audience's pleasure, as a genre. For more than fifty years, wrestlers made eye contact with a television camera to promise hypermasculine violence as a spectacle. When Collette Arrand turns Funk's language into poetry, she is reading the text against the grain.

Here, however, in the tiny Midwestern market of independent wrestling, a professional wrestler is telling a different kind of story into the YouTube camera. Here is a gay man talking about "something near and dear" to his heart: failing to live up to the expectations set by his families when he discovered he was gay. He talks about "bullying myself," turning the hypermasculinity of his culture against himself. The traditional wrestler glares into the camera, with "Mean" Gene Okerlund at his side, reveling in the culture of masculine bullying. Griep speaks from the heart about internalizing that culture and planning his own suicide to escape it.

As he worked out the time and the moment of his death, in a graveyard, he found the headstone of an eight-year-old boy. Spider-Baby contemplates all the things that he had experienced that that eight-year-old could not, and he turns from his plans for self-harm toward what he will be able to experience moving forward. What he experiences is success. He's a wrestler, so he engages in some tough talk about his championship matches and about the unlikeliness of any bully to even come near him now.

The difference between Funk's promo talk and Griep's turn in front of the camera is striking. Funk *enacts* a culture of hypermasculine violence. Griep *critiques* it. But unlike the authors of this essay, critiquing it from our armchairs, Griep critiques it from within. Moreover, in enacting that critique from within, he is cracking open what is possible for masculinity in professional wrestling. Pickup within the wrestling media (e.g. fan publications like *PWTorch*), within gay media (e.g. *Out Magazine*), within local media (e.g. *Twin Cities Daily Planet*) and beyond demonstrates that Griep is beginning to make change inside and outside the wrestling community.

Conclusion

The trajectory of professional wrestling research sees scholars keeping their eyes primarily on the mass-media wrestling. We see this fixation as problematic for two reasons. First, ratings on mass-media wrestling are dropping: as Alfred Konuwa notes, "WWE's viewership keeps falling with no bottom established," and potentially, with those ratings will decline mass-media wrestling's cultural significance. Research in the 1990s could speak to the significance of mass-media wrestling due to its popularity; those justifications will become more fragile as

ratings decline. Second, scholars with their eyes fixed on wrestling as a mass medium run the risk of missing what is unique and powerful about independent wrestling circuits. By focusing on the big budget, mass-medium, scholars run the risk of mistaking criticism of McDonald's for criticism of cuisine, of mistaking criticism of the new Star Wars movie for criticism of cinema, of mistaking criticism of the Hunger Games novels for criticism of literature. Independent wrestling is low-budget, with low-audience numbers, but potentially significant as a site of cultural work.

In this essay, we have established a theoretical frame for analyzing independent wrestling as periodic markets. An independent wrestling periodic market can be richly populated with competing promotions and dozens of events—as many events and performances of wrestling culture as are typically seen within a year's worth of national televised programming. We have mapped the spaces of those performances, noting their consonance with economic data for national wrestling fandom. The fans of independent wrestling come from the same economic strata that fans of national wrestling come from.

Looking deeper, then, into the Minneapolis-Saint Paul independent wrestling market, we traced the impact of one hard-working wrestler, performing across the periodic market on a nearly-weekly basis. Terrance Griep, wrestling as Tommy "Spider-Baby" Saturday, has performed a new kind of masculinity within the culture of professional wrestling. Judged by the frequency of his performances, he is welcomed within the independent wrestling community. Judged by fan creations like his action figure, by the success of his online and print media appearances, and by his pickup in both wrestling and other media, Griep is finding an audience for his critique of the culture of hypermasculinity of professional wrestling.

Considering other hyperlocal fan efforts, like Collette Arrand's poetry in *You Have to Deal with Me Breathing*, Griep is not alone in the work of transforming masculinity. Scholars should attend to cultural laborers in independent wrestling like these.

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