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## Wrestling with Competency and Everyday Literacies in School

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**Abstract:** In this essay, I detail the entanglements of three young Black boys – Million Dollar Man, DJ, and Francisco – and their interests in and experiences with WWE wrestling. Drawing on posthumanist philosophies that attend to the productive relationships between the human and more-than-human objects, I consider ethnographic data composed during a second-grade literacy workshop to describe the ways in which the boys’ talk, play, embodiments, drawing, and writing created new ways for them to demonstrate competencies in school. A rhizoanalysis of field notes, audio and video recordings, and artifactual documentation demonstrates the overlapping and diverging traditional and indeterminate literacies that emerged for the boys during their play, embodiments, and teaching. I argue that broadening definitions of what counts as literacy and attention to intimate and affective literacies, often in relationship with popular culture, comprise more equitable and just considerations of whose lives and experiences matter and what becomings emerge for children in school.

**Keywords:** affect, embodiment, ethnography, pop culture



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**I**t is time for the literacy workshop in Mrs. L's second grade classroom when DJ and Million Dollar Man grab their backpacks and guide me into the hallway. We huddle together next to their comic as the boys remove figurines of WWE superstars from their bags.

*"That's The Rock. Triple H. That's the new Triple H. Cody Rhodes." Million Dollar Man names the wrestlers as he tosses each figurine onto the floor. As quickly as the plastic hits the tile, DJ picks up each wrestler and rubs his fingers over the hard material, turning the figurines over in his hands. Meanwhile, I ask the boys questions: Are you supposed to have these at school? Are you allowed to play with them here? Do you ever take them out of your backpacks?*

*The answers to all of these questions is no, but my presence as a researcher has given the boys permission to play with these figurines that normally stay hidden away and to demonstrate their favorite wrestling moves with them, particularly the RKO (the finishing move of wrestler, Randy Orton). Million Dollar Man holds The Rock and Triple H and begins to offer instructions before interrupting himself.*

*"You do it best, DJ," he says, handing the wrestlers to his friend. As soon as DJ has a grip on the two wrestlers, Million Dollar Man gently places his right hand on DJ's thigh. He reaches over with his left hand and helps DJ position Triple H's arm around The Rock's head (see Figure 1). It is an intimate moment between friends, wrestlers, and researcher as the boys demonstrate their expertise in their everyday literacies.*



Figure 1. Million Dollar Man and DJ.

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

DJ, Million Dollar Man, and later their friend, Francisco<sup>2</sup>, spent hours teaching me about the World Wrestling Enterprise (WWE). They maneuvered their wrestling figurines to reenact and perfect wrestling moves and to make up new ones. They practiced wrestling moves in the hallway and reassured me when I worried that they might hurt one another. They patiently explained the nuances of professional wrestling culture and, for a couple of hours each week over the course of five weeks, shared their expertise about a topic that adults expected them to keep tucked away in their backpacks. This paper examines the ways in which these young boys' bodies and WWE wrestling objects came into relationship with one another, creating new modes of existence for the human and more-than-human as the boys' encounters with their everyday literacies permeated the striated space of school.

In this paper, I contemplate the ways in which DJ, Million Dollar Man, and Francisco's intra-actions with the wrestling television program, collaboratively drawn comics, action figures, and other compositions

<sup>1</sup> We acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that we can use when referring to individuals in our writing. Throughout this article we use pronouns to refer to individuals that correspond with the pronouns that they use to refer to themselves.

<sup>2</sup> All of the students' pseudonyms in this manuscript were self-selected by the students. The teacher's name is also a pseudonym.

created new opportunities for the boys to be[come] in school. As Delpit (1992) suggested, the chasm between out of school and in school cultures often leads to teachers “[misreading] students’ aptitudes, intent, or abilities,” (p. 238) thereby further marginalizing their interests and experiences as irrelevant or inconsequential. I consider the implications for turning a gaze toward the relationships between the human and more-than-human in early childhood literacy practices as a means to move past familiar and often marginalizing representations of young children – particularly young Black children – in classrooms. In doing so, I engage in a posthuman inquiry that attends to the oft-disparaged entanglements of children and the more-than-human popular culture materials that emerge in school.

### Literature Review

Before situating this work within the field of posthumanist and affective literacies studies, I take a critical pause to reflect on how the boys’ encounters with WWE (e.g., wrestling with one another and “playing” with wrestling figurines in the hallway) might be considered problematic by dominant representations of childhood and, particularly, representations of Black boyhoods. The Black male body is often conflated with violent images that are highlighted, as Monroe (2005) described, by “both media and scholarly portrayals of Black life” (p. 46). These images essentialize Black lives as belonging to cultures of “violence, drugs, anti-authoritarianism, and other social deficiencies” and result in the disciplining of Black bodies in school that manifests in removing Black boys from the mainstream classroom, denying them recess and access to special class events, and referring them to school administrators or school resource officers for redirection (Ferguson, 2001). Noguero (2003) elaborated on the myriad of ways Black males are identified as being behavior problems and suffer

consequences that include severe punishment and exclusion, including exclusion from “educational opportunities that might otherwise support and encourage them” (p. 436). He wrote, “...consistently, schools that serve Black males fail to nurture, support, or protect them.”

The policing of Black boys’ bodies in schools emerges from what Collins (2009) described as “racism as a system of power” (p. 54), which functions to stigmatize and marginalize them through institutional structures, organizational practices, ideas and ideologies, and in interpersonal relationships and communities. This marginalization and policing of the Black body manifests in a disproportionate number of Black students, including Black preschoolers, being suspended or expelled from school (Milner, 2013). Though Black children represent 18% of preschool enrollment, they represent 48% of preschool suspensions. White children represent 43% of enrollment and 26% of suspensions. Moreover, “Black students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than white students” (US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014).

In addition to assumptions about Black boys and violence and the bodily discipline that emerges from those assumptions, Black boys are so often viewed through a deficit lens in school (Brown & Brown, 2012; Ferguson, 2001; James, 2012; Milner, 2013; Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2003). That is, teachers, administrators, and often other students see only what Black boys are perceived to be lacking, rather than the diverse talents and competencies that the boys bring to school.

As Genishi and Dyson (2009) explained, “children who vary from what is considered the ‘norm’ in language use – from that of the dominant societal group – may be viewed as having problems that

need to be fixed, not as potentially adroit speakers with the capacity to adapt to new situations” (p. 20). The denial of Black students’ linguistic and literate competencies contributes to the disproportionate placement of African American students in special education classes. Blanchett (2006) wrote that though Black students “account for only 14.8% of the general population of 6-to-21-year-old students, they make up 20% of the special education population across all disabilities” (p. 24). Expectations for *what counts* in school is determined by those who are in positions of power, and the majority of school administrators, teachers, and curriculum developers are white and middle-class. Thus, *what counts* in school is “set forth by a culturally specific bloc” (Monroe, 2005, p. 47; see also Brown & Brown, 2012) that often excludes African American students, their families, and their cultures. In these and many other ways, including an explicit exclusion of Black boys’ out-of-school interests (like WWE wrestling) in the classroom, some teachers fail to validate, legitimize, and honor the children’s languages, lived experiences, and ways of being in the world.

And so, it is no small thing that DJ, Million Dollar Man, and Francisco spent hours talking, playing with, and embodying seemingly violent images of wrestling culture in and out of school. (Though, as I describe below, the boys’ engagements with WWE were about much more than the wrestling itself and to reduce WWE to a simple narrative of violence misses the point.). As Black boys, they were potentially subjected to the racist structures of schooling that saw them as violent and incompetent; their encounters with wrestling could have exacerbated those assumptions.

In the next section, I describe Mrs. L’s classroom, where this inquiry unfolded, and the ways in which the teacher organized for literacy instruction as I outline the ethnographic research methods employed in this study.

## Method

### Classroom Ethnography

The vignettes highlighted in this paper are part of a larger ethnography in Mrs. L’s second grade class that considered the relationships between the classroom teacher, students, and things during the literacy workshop (Cresswell, 2013; Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Heath & Street, 2008; LeBlanc, 2017). From September through early May, I spent approximately five hours per week in Mrs. L’s classroom during the time she had allocated for literacy instruction. I was particularly interested in the ways in which the children appropriated popular culture texts in their classroom reading, writing, and play and how their interactions in relation to

popular culture provided opportunities for new identities to emerge – both in the sense of becoming with popular culture and becoming readers and writers.

Mrs. L. recognized the social nature of language and literacy development (Dyson, 2003; Paley, 1998) and employed a workshop model (Calkins, 2003) that fostered opportunities for the children to talk and make choices about the topics they read and wrote about and the materials they used to do so. Often, those choices were connected to the children’s encounters with popular culture, as characters from cartoons and players on professional sports teams

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were included in their storytelling and writing. Each workshop began with a short mini-lesson highlighting a reading or writing strategy, followed by a brief time to practice as a whole group. Then, as children engaged with texts independently or with partners, Mrs. L. conferred with individual children or led small group guided reading. It was during this independent practice time that Million Dollar Man, DJ, Francisco, and I engaged in the WWE inquiry.

Throughout the study, I drew on Dyson (1997, 2003) and Wohlwend's (2011) research in early childhood and elementary classrooms, in which they studied how children engage in literacies through play, talk, reading, writing, and creating. Similar to their methods for data collection, I sat with the children while they read individually and in small groups and when they worked together on their writing. I inquired about certain decisions, for example, in terms of their book choice and writing topics. I answered questions about spelling and listened to the children share drafts of their stories, comics, poems, and picture books. My video camera was usually set up to record in one corner of the classroom, though I took it into the hallway when the boys and I engaged in our inquiry about WWE. I also carried a notebook to jot field notes, a digital camera, and a small audio recorder or my iPhone as I moved alongside the children so that I could re/listen to tone and dialogue alongside the video recordings.

Toward the end of the study, Million Dollar Man, DJ, and Francisco dedicated much of their classroom reading and writing to objects and ideas associated with the WWE. The starting point for this strand of the project began with a comic composed collaboratively by the boys in the literacy workshop, though they had long engaged with the literacies of WWE out of school and in school, albeit away from the gaze of the teacher and other adults. Conversations about their comic quickly became

reenactments and reinventions of WWE wrestling moves in the hallway, poetry writing, doodling, photo shoot staging, and in our final session together, the construction of a wrestling ring using found materials and a tremendous amount of duct tape.

### **Researcher in the Wrestling Ring**

My interest in children's encounters with popular culture in the context of literacy learning in classrooms emerges from my own experiences as an elementary grades teacher. During my tenure teaching kindergarten, second, and third grade in a school not unlike the one where Mrs. L. taught, I recognized that images, storylines, song lyrics, and characters from popular film, television, and music emerged in children's play and compositions. Children embodied adventures from the computer game *Poptropica* in their recess play (Sherbine & Boldt, 2013) and wrote stories about wishing to meet Selena Gomez when stumbling upon a magic genie in a bottle. The playground often became a football field where college teams gathered for rematches of rival games.

Though I did not know the terminology then, I was interested in what Anne Dyson named a *permeable curriculum*, a space for "school-valued and home- and community-valued narratives [to] intermingle" (Ranker, 2006, p. 24). In order to support the children as they appropriated popular culture themes and ideas in their narratives, I spent weekends watching *High School Musical* and playing the video game *Poptropica* myself. I recognized that the children were much more engaged with and enthusiastic about the classroom when they were making connections to texts that mattered to them; I felt as though it was my responsibility to ensure there was space in the curriculum for those kinds of encounters.

This interest in children’s encounters with popular culture extends to my work as an educational researcher, but, as was the case when I was a classroom teacher, I often find myself at a loss because I lack the knowledge of popular culture texts that children bring with them to school. Thus, taking a position of inquiry alongside children as they teach me about things like WWE wrestling (and a cartoon called “Breadwinners,” which was also very popular in Mrs. L’s classroom at the time) comes very naturally to me, but also leaves me feeling a bit uncertain as I frequently have to admit to myself – and to the children who teach me – what I do not know.

It is, however, not only my position as a classroom ethnographer that informs the relationships emerging among children, popular culture, me and – in this particular study – in the assemblage of Black boys, WWE, literacies, and research tools. My whiteness and the histories and implications of my white body asking questions, encouraging the boys to participate in play that was not sanctioned in school, and recording their intra-actions raises ethical concerns that I continue to wrestle with. The same white supremacy that functions to stigmatize and marginalize Black bodies in the classroom has the potential to inflict damage in research relationships that are not oriented toward justice and equity (Dernikos, Ferguson, & Siegel, 2019). In other words, composing data alongside Million Dollar Man, DJ, and Francisco and *thinking* about new opportunities for them to be[come] in school is not enough; in this research with the boys and the ideas and concepts that they care about, there must be *action* as well. Dernikos et al. (2019) suggested that “acting with theories means sitting with the

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discomfort of knowing that at any given moment – days, weeks, months, years later – data might open up to you in a different way, a ways that perhaps you didn’t quite see before, something that might even disturb you” (p. 11).

It is this discomfort that makes thinking – and acting – with concepts like becoming, assemblage, thing power, and nomadic inquiry, (which I describe below), so compelling to me. These posthumanist concepts allow me to lean into uncertainty, to not draw easy conclusions, and spark more questions as I research and learn with and from children.

### Nomadic Inquiry

While this study was articulated as a classroom ethnography, in part to satisfy the Institutional Review Board and school administrators who welcomed me into the classroom, I conceptualized this inquiry alongside the children, materials, and classroom teacher as, in the parlance of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), nomadic. The nomad exists “in the intermezzo” (p. 380), that is, in the smooth space between predetermined points. Deleuze and Guattari explained that while a nomad is aware of points (e.g., case study methods and interview protocols), the points for the nomad are always part of a relay. While a nomadic researcher moves from point to point, from method to method, she does so only to engage with whatever consequence emerges in the trajectories between methods.

My movements in relation to the bodies, flows, and energies of the classroom were intentional; thinking with Deleuze and Guattari in qualitative research means that the inquiry itself was “philosophically informed” (St. Pierre, 2016, p. 28). That is, my

method(s) for inquiry involved moving with the life of the classroom, alongside the children, the materials, and their teacher, and becoming attuned to my own emergence as a researcher in relation to the assemblages of which I was one part. In this way, unexpected and, at times, subversive intra-actions with a teacher's chair (Sherbine, 2018), the removal of forbidden objects from backpacks in the name of research, and simply the element of choice embedded within the literacy workshop in Mrs. L's classroom meant that the children, their teacher, and I often took unplanned trajectories that enabled us to play, read, write, and research.

These trajectories are akin to what Deleuze and Guattari described as "lines of flight" within the study. Deleuze suggested that lines of flight are those which "do not amount to a path of a point, which break free from structure" (Deleuze & Parnet, 2007, p. 26) and allow for creative thought and action. As Stewart (2007) wrote, "[T]hings happen. The self moves to react, often pulling itself someplace it didn't exactly intend to go" (p. 79). Taking these lines of flight meant becoming attuned to, responsive to, and uncertain about the children's improvisations and experimentations with classroom materials, toys, and my recording equipment.

For example, on the first day of extensive encounters with the boys around WWE wrestling, they created lines of flight that opened up space to inquire further into their interests. At my request to discuss a comic they had drawn collaboratively during the writing workshop, the boys grabbed their backpacks and led me into the hallway. As described in the opening vignette, they stealthily pulled the WWE figurines from their hiding place and began to identify the wrestlers. Alongside the WWE comic that launched this improvised encounter, the boys began to use these banned more-than-human materials to teach me about and to come into

relationship with the intricacies of professional wrestling through their play. I elaborate on one of these lessons below. As I rewatch the video of our first encounter with the WWE comic and action figures over and over, I am struck by my responses to the boy's embodiments and their secret sharing of their figurines.

*Oh gosh, you're not going to hurt him are you?* I asked as Million Dollar Man wrapped his arms around DJ.

I lowered my voice [in panic] as I realized that my questions prompted the boys to engage in encounters with professional wrestling that were typically banned in school; encounters with bodies and objects that had the power to get the boys into trouble. (from my fieldnotes)

This uncertainty, and at times uneasiness, as a researcher, opened me up to the affective intensities of the research event, propelling the study further as desire fueled our nomadic inquiry in ways that neither I – nor the boys – anticipated at the start of our time together.

### **Rhizoanalysis**

As I consider the literacies and becomings that emerged in the dynamic encounters between the boys and WWE, I draw on Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) figuration of the rhizome and the corresponding process of rhizoanalysis, which "permits us to understand literacy performances in ways that more fully engage their affective intensities, the relationships they build, and the ways in which they create unpredictable movements of texts and identities" (Leander & Rowe, 2006, p. 41; see also Alvermann, 2000). Employing rhizoanalysis as a process for analyzing the lines of flight, embodied and affective encounters, and improvisations in Million Dollar Man, DJ, and

Francisco's intra-actions with WWE enables me to consider the vignettes that emerged from the data and to think beyond familiar representations of what constitutes a literacy event or a demonstration of competency in literacy. This does not mean eschewing the traditional notions of literacy practice that also manifested in these entanglements; rhizoanalysis allows for attending to the familiar representations of literacy while simultaneously attending to the new possibilities and potentials that emerge in relationships between bodies – human and more-than-human.

In what follows, I describe the theoretical concepts that informed both the study itself and the rhizoanalysis of the boys' intra-actions with WWE.

### Theoretical Framework

#### **Moving Away from Representation [with] the More-than-Human**

In order to move beyond pervasive and harmful representations of Black boys and their encounters with everyday literacies in school, I draw on the posthumanist turn in educational research and philosophy. This ethico-onto-epistemological perspective decenters, but does not discount, the human subject and attends to the complexities of the immanent encounters between bodies (human and more-than-human) in the entanglements of life in and out of school (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010; Kuby & Rucker, 2016; Davies, 2014; McClure, 2007; Olsson, 2009). Within these complexities, subjectivities and modes of existence are always becoming and in flux. That is, encounters between the human (the boys and me) and more-than-human (the wrestling figurines, the comics, the hallway, the camera and recording equipment, the writing notebooks and...and...and) constantly generate difference as the transmission of affect

between bodies produces change and newness (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; O'Sullivan, 2006).

As Kuby, Spector, and Thiel (2019) described, posthumanist perspectives are not the only ones that inform literacy research concerning materiality and embodiment. Sociocultural, New Literacy Studies, and feminist poststructuralism, to name a few, attend to the multitude of ways that readers and writers construct meaning in their encounters with bodies and materials. What sets posthumanist perspectives apart is that the focus of analysis is not on meaning-making alone. Rather, posthumanist perspectives are concerned with the multiple ways of being, knowing, and doing that emerge in the entanglements of everyday life; entanglements of the human and more-than-human.

In other words, posthumanism and its many synonyms including new materialisms (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012), agential realism (Barad, 2007), and vibrant materialism (Bennett, 2010) attend to considerations of how matter matters and, specifically, how WWE comics and figurines matter in the in-school and out-of-school lives of DJ, Francisco, and Million Dollar Man. Attending to the agency of materials and the potential for things to act on and transform bodies in their intra-actions is a particularly useful lens considering children's entanglements with popular culture as these texts, including but not limited to WWE wrestling, are often cast aside in schools – or expected to be hidden away in backpacks – in favor of canonical texts that not all children can relate to or find pleasure in.

I proceed here with some caution, however, because decentering Black boys in the literacy assemblages of which they are a part might be construed as yet another way in which their experiences and lives are pushed towards the margins. So, while matter certainly matters in this undertaking, the multitude

of ways in which the boys demonstrate their competence matters. Their creative embodiments of meaning-making and storytelling matter. The intimate moments they share with one another matter. The boys' lives matter.

After describing the specific posthumanist philosophical concepts that guide my inquiry about the ways Million Dollar Man, DJ, and Francisco demonstrated their literate identities, I share a vignette that highlights a research event in which the boys embodied their vast knowledge of WWE wrestling. Finally, I plug in the concepts in order to analyze and demonstrate the ways in which the boys were becoming competent - with one another and with WWE.

### **Becoming**

The Deleuzoguattarian philosophical concept of *becoming* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), creates opportunities to consider the ways in which the boys' and the more-than-human objects emerged in their intra-actions with one another. Becoming attends to the notion that we are always emerging as new and different in the ever-changing contexts, relationships, and encounters of which we are a part. This difference is not "difference" as in being set apart from something else; it is, rather, difference as its own thing or difference as an as of yet unexperienced way of being.

As Lenz Taguchi (2010) wrote, "we are all in a state and relationship of inter-dependence and inter-connection with each other as human or nonhuman performative agents" (p. 15). Our entangled and rhizomatic encounters with the human and more-than-human mean that identity is fluid and emergent. This conceptualization functions to dismantle what Deleuze and Parnet (2007) described as the "binary machine," (p. 26) which reifies representational thought by suggesting that

being, teaching, and learning entail *this* and *not that* or that there is a specific distinction between what counts, for example, as literacy and childhood and that which does not count. Conceptualizing the boys' processes as becomings attends to the AND: the unpredictable and ongoing process of doing and undoing, making and remaking ways of being in school that, in this study, did not always conform to school expectations.

### **Assemblage**

Understanding the boys' and the objects' comings together as productive assemblages creates space to map these processes as more than mere reproductions of the wrestling encounters they witnessed on television, but as creative improvisations with the [often unsanctioned] objects that they brought into the school space as they emerged as [non]compliant second grade boys, wrestlers, cartoonists, teachers, and researchers themselves in relationship with WWE (Ahmed, 2010; Davies, 2014; Leander & Boldt, 2012; Lenz Taguchi, 2010; Thiel, 2015). Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, Bennett (2010) described assemblages as productive "ad hoc groupings of diverse elements," (p. 23). Assemblages are an "open-ended collective" from which effects that are "emergent in that their ability to make something happen is distinct from the sum of the vital force of each materiality considered alone" (p. 24). In other words, assemblages are active, functioning groupings of human and more-than-human bodies with the capacity to invoke change and difference.

For Deleuze and Guattari (1977), everything - individuals, groups, and society - are assembled in encounters that are propelled by desire. Further, Deleuzoguattarian conceptualizations of desire challenge the psychoanalytic notion of desire which purports that desire is associated with a lack of something or someone. Instead, desire is understood

as ‘unconscious production of the real’ (Olsson, 2009, p. 55). Desire is a force that *just is*; it is a “social dimension...that has the capacity to form connections and amplify the power of bodies in their rhizomatic connection” (Fancy, 2010, p. 103). In this sense, desire is the force of becoming, which produces, at times, passionate literacy encounters between the heterogeneous particles of the assemblage. Jackson and Mazzei (2012) elaborated, “desire’s production is active, becoming, transformative. It produces out of a multiplicity of forces, which form the assemblage...desire circulates in ways that produce the unexpected” (p. 86). In this way, we do not come into existence outside of the human and more-than-human relationships of which we are a part, and the boundaries between ourselves and others are always blurred. For the purposes of this study, I attend to the materiality of the assemblages that were both produced by and propelled the boys’ intra-actions with their shared experiences and encounters with WWE.

### Affect

The affective turn in literacy studies (Ehret, 2018; Lenters, 2016; Leander & Boldt, 2013; Leander & Ehret, 2019; Thiel, 2015) attends to these transformative assemblages between bodies, human, and more-than-human, and, in doing so, broadens the definitions and scope of competency to account for the multitude of ways that readers and writers make meaning. Leander and Ehret (2019) wrote, “The purpose of the affective turn in literacy education is directly related to issues of equity, functioning as a critique of narrowly defined outcomes that have intensified educational inequities” (p. 3). In this way, considerations of

affect in relation to Million Dollar Man, DJ, and Francisco’s play alongside WWE wrestling attends to the ways in which their meaning-making and composition did not always take the form of “traditional” literacy, but were legitimate literacies nonetheless. Affect allows us to move beyond familiar representations of what it means to be a reader and writer in order to think more creatively about how children be[come] literate in school (Hargraves, 2019).

Ahmed (2010) described affect as “sticky” (p. 29); it is that which maintains the connection between bodies and materials in their intra-actions.

Importantly, affect includes not only the human and

**“...the affect that emerged in the WWE-boys-comics-figurines-research assemblage was inseparable from the notions and histories of capitalism and WWE [and] the expectations placed on Black boys in school...”**

more-than-human, but the entire assemblage. Ahmed elaborated, “to experience an object as being affective or sensation is to be directed not only toward an object, but to ‘whatever’ is around that object, which includes what is behind the object, the conditions of its arrival” (p. 33). In other words, the affect that emerged in the WWE-boys-comics-figurines-research assemblage was

inseparable from the notions and histories of capitalism and WWE, the expectations placed on Black boys in school, the structure of the literacy workshop itself, and the unfolding processes of qualitative inquiry. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) attended to the potential and entanglements of affect and the potential of affect to transform bodies - human and more-than-human:

We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, either to destroy that

body or to be destroyed by it, either to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful body. (p. 257)

Thinking with affect in relation to the boys' intra-actions with WWE involves considerations of the indeterminacy of the boys' bodies and experiences alongside the indeterminacy of the professional wrestling assemblages that emerged during our time together. This includes, for example, thinking about how the WWE-boys-comics-figurine-research assemblage emerged as an affective space producing DJ's competency as a composer and meaning-maker. I elaborate on this particular affective potential later in this paper.

### Thing Power

Jane Bennett's (2010) work with vibrant materialism and thing power informs my understanding of the more-than-human objects themselves as "affective bod[ies]" (p. 21) with the potential to change and be changed in the intra-actions with the boys, the histories and expectations of their classroom, their experiences with WWE, and in entanglements with a university researcher. In Bennett's conceptualization of *thing power*, objects and materials have "the curious ability...to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (p. 6). Jackson and Mazzei (2016) wrote that thing power is "entirely ontological, in that it acknowledges what things *do*: their capacities to affect, their interventions and their roles as active players" (p. 99). Applying thing power to the rhizoanalysis of the data from this study allows for an examination of the ways in which materials impact and change others - human and more-than-human.

Following a vignette detailing the boys-figurines-writing materials-researcher-video camera assemblage, I employ these theoretical concepts to

consider the myriad of ways the boys engaged with and experienced literacies together.

### "This is research, boy!"

DJ, Francisco, Million Dollar Man, and I sit in the hallway outside their second-grade classroom. World Wrestling Enterprise (WWE) figurines, a collaboratively composed comic, a library book about the muscular system, a writing folder, and pencils are strewn about them. "Now you get Rusev and grab Cena like this," DJ tells Million Dollar Man.

"Like right here?" asked Million Dollar Man.

"No, like you gotta grab him from behind like this. And then you gotta..." DJ drops the toy bearing slight resemblance to John Cena and jumps up with Million Dollar Man following close behind. After a quick look over his shoulder, DJ wraps his arms around Million Dollar Man. "It's like a Nelson, but not really," DJ explains.

"Oh, I got you," Million Dollar Man replies, his body incapable of too much movement as he stands in DJ's grasp. Francisco watches the instruction on proper wrestling technique unfold from his place on the floor. I sit next to him and adjust my grip on and the angle of my small digital camera; I wonder if I should stand up so that I can get a better frame of the boys' embodiment of the *not really a Nelson* or if that might draw more attention to what we are doing. It is then that I notice the school resource officer walking towards our small group. Slightly behind him walks a Black boy, who appears to be nine or ten years old and is clearly in the midst of some sort of punishment or consequence. They exchange inquisitive glances as they get closer to Million Dollar Man and DJ, who are still embracing one another awkwardly in the middle of the hallway.

"This is research, boy!" Million Dollar Man assures them as the pair walks past us. In the meantime,

Francisco reaches out for one of the two John Cenases with whom the boys are constructing this impassioned narrative about WWE wrestling. Glancing back at his library book and writing folder, Francisco slowly adds the following to his composition: *DoNot Try it at home.*

### **Embodying Competence in Traditional Literacies And...And...And**

To think – and act with – posthumanist concepts like intra-action, becoming, and thing power is not to ignore the ways in which the boys engaged with traditional or school literacy practices in their encounters with WWE. Engaging with posthumanism does, however, extend this analysis to consider the complex and generative processes through which the human and more-than-human experienced moments of difference, transformation, and most specific to the purposes of this study, recognition of a multiplicity of competencies. In the analysis that follows, I will first attend to the ways that the boys engaged in what might be recognized as more traditional or familiar definitions of literacy practice before considering the boys' encounters with WWE alongside posthumanist perspectives. I then turn my attention to more indeterminate or nonrepresentational literacies that emerged in the research.

### **WWE and School-Recognized Literacies**

As Million Dollar Man, DJ, and Francisco intra-acted with one another and the more-than human in our time thinking about WWE together, their competencies in traditional notions of literacy emerged. Alvermann et al. (2004) elaborated on the many connections between professional wrestling

and literacy practices that tend to be recognized and validated in school. For example, storylines emerge as characters/wrestlers interact over a period of time. As they engage with WWE, viewers, readers, and players use skills like comparing and contrasting, making connections, visualizing, story grammar, symbolism, and persona. In understanding these unfolding plots, Million Dollar Man, DJ, and Francisco articulated which components of WWE were real and which were fake or, as Million Dollar Man described, “just for TV.” They shared their interpretations of the dynamics between certain wrestlers and detailed biographical information that they learned by watching *WWE SmackDown*.

In the composition and description of their wrestling comic<sup>3</sup>, the boys attended to the meaning(s) constructed by visual representations of wrestlers, the wrestling ring and its component parts (e.g., ropes, trampoline below the mat, turnbuckle, rings and hooks). Further, Million Dollar Man and DJ described the intricacies of how those parts functioned in concert with one another, demonstrating a sophisticated knowledge of vocabulary specific to professional wrestling culture. Their comic detailed various wrestling moves, including body slams, head smashes with a chair, Nelsons, and RKOs performed by both professional wrestlers and the boys themselves. In one corner of their drawing was a sketch of the WWE announcer, positioned behind a table draped with a cloth bearing the WWE logo. The boys were enthusiastic about composing their detailed comic and about

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<sup>3</sup> I refer to this text as a comic throughout this paper because this is how Million Dollar Man, DJ, and Francisco described it and I want to honor their definitions of this collaborative text. Because the text did not contain

characteristics specific to comics, I suggest that the boys were blurring the distinctions between genres as they valued and enjoyed reading comics in the classroom.

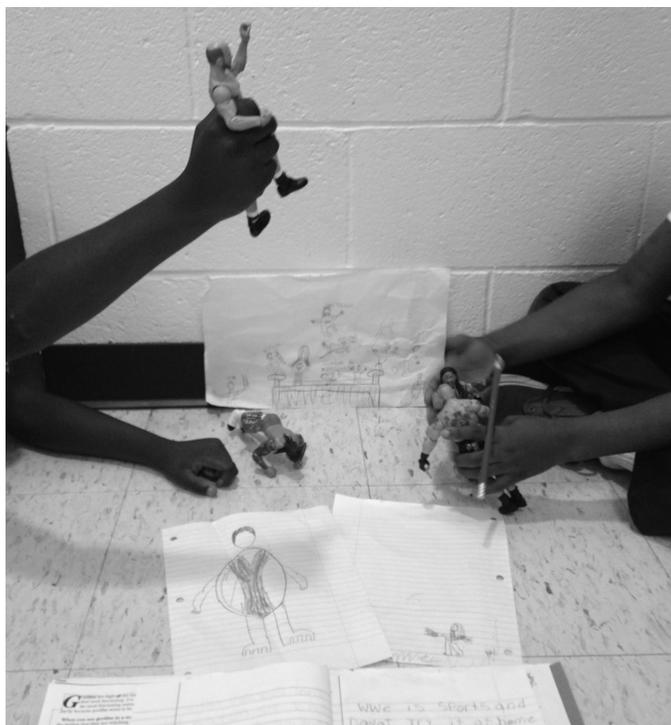


Figure 2. The boys' comic served as a backdrop to their playful literacy experiences.

sharing it and playing with it as it quickly became part of the ongoing and unpredictable wrestling narrative that unfolded during our time together.

For instance, the comic served as the backdrop and photo prop for the boys' play and storytelling (see Figure 2). Million Dollar Man and DJ discussed perspective and angles as they maneuvered the more-than-human figurines in ways that satisfied their desires for me to make certain photographs with my point-and-shoot camera. Francisco seemed to draw inspiration from his friends' embodiments of wrestling moves and storylines. His informational text in process took the shape of an advice column:

*WWE is sports and  
DoNot Try it at home  
also get hurt in wresleing But*

It is as though Francisco was writing the commentary that might accompany the professional

wrestling matches the boys watched on television. He appropriated the WWE announcers' discourse in order to convey his message in particular ways or genres (Dyson, 1997, 2003). In doing so, he positioned himself as an expert on WWE capable of writing with a particular audience in mind. This notion of expertise in traditional conceptions of literacies and, as I will elaborate below, in emergent, affective, and indeterminant literacies, was produced by the multiple and fluid assemblages that emerged as the boys played, wrote, and read WWE.

### WWE and Indeterminate Literacies

Considering the boys' encounters with WWE alongside Deleuze and Guattari in literacies studies requires that we turn our gaze toward the complexities of encounters between the human and more-than-human rather than limiting ourselves to the familiar characteristics of more traditional literacy (Cole & Masny, 2012). To think – and act – with Deleuze and Guattari about competence in literacy involves recognizing the boys' playful embodiments and compositions as they intra-acted with WWE as productive and affective meaning-making events that were at once indeterminate and ephemeral. So, while we can attend to the ways engaged in what might be recognized as more traditional notions of literacy, the boys' encounters with one another and with the more-than-human in their experimentations and play around WWE was much more than that. Their playful literacies were relational, affective, and dependent upon the bodies that comprised the assemblages that emerged in and out of school. Leander and Boldt (2013) elaborated on these kinds of literacies that are more about becoming in the moment with bodies and materials:

This nonrepresentational approach describes literacy activity not as projected toward some textual end point, but as living its life in the ongoing present, forming relations

and connections across signs, objects, and bodies in often unexpected ways. Such activity is saturated with affect and emotion; it creates and is fed by an ongoing series of affective intensities that are different from the rational control of meanings and form. (p. 26)

These affective intensities propelled the boys' movements and play as they engaged with stories, characters, and friendships that were deeply meaningful to them in the unfolding of the event. Their intra-actions with WWE created opportunities for the boys to comfort and reassure one another, like when Million Dollar Man gently placed his hand on DJ's thigh as I note in the opening vignette, urging him to share his expertise about wrestling moves. The boys' embodiments and lines of flight functioned in ways that let them control the narratives about wrestling and about themselves and to collaborate in teaching and research.

### Pleasure in Becoming-Together

While it is impossible to suggest that these kinds of intensities and opportunities did not exist for the boys outside of WWE, the "emotional saturation" of reading and writing texts determined by the classroom teacher paled in comparison to the boys' profound interest in and the pleasure they experienced with professional wrestling. In other words, the intra-actions amidst the human and more-than-human in the WWE assemblage produced an enjoyment around being-together and composing-together.

Further, the boys' play, questions, stories, movements, directions, and explanations in their encounters with WWE created new opportunities for them to perform literate identities. DJ, who was described by his teacher as a nonreader who, "probably need[ed] special education services," was

particularly engaged in the making aspect of the objects-driven project. For example, he was the one recognized as the expert in demonstrating different wrestling moves with the wrestling figurines, a feat that required a specialized kind of spatial awareness and coordination, different than that which was needed to demonstrate the moves on another person. At the conclusion of my time with the boys, it was DJ who suggested that we work together to build a wrestling ring. He contributed ideas to the list of materials that we would need to gather as Million Dollar Man wrote down what he said, including the suggestion that we could just buy a wrestling ring instead of making one ourselves (see Figure 3).

DJ's creative productions with WWE objects and narratives created space for him to emerge as competent and knowledgeable; a leader and facilitator in the WWE-objects assemblage. The boys' negotiations during the independent practice time of the literacy workshop afforded new ways of existence - new becomings - in relation to one another, in relation to the researcher, and in relation

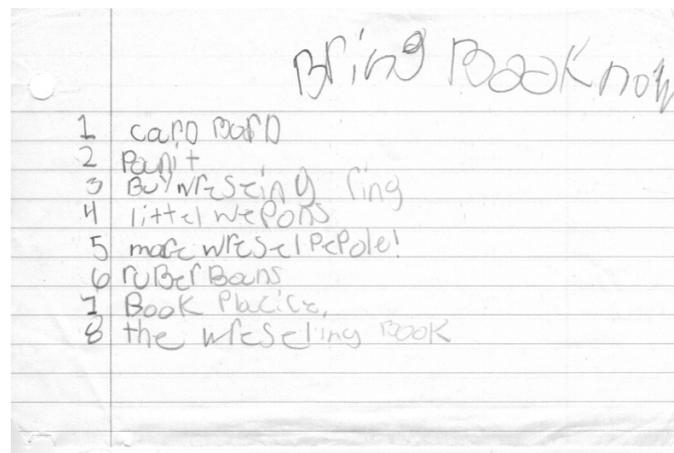


Figure 3. Million Dollar Man, DJ, and Francisco collaboratively composed a list of materials needed to build a wrestling ring.

to objects that carried the potential for them to transcend the familiar narratives of who young

children should or should be in school and how or how not they might engage with literacy and with one another.

In the parlance of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), Million Dollar Man, DJ, and Francisco were, in their relationships with the human and more-than-human, becoming different from one encounter to the next as they engaged with school, one another, and themselves in ways that they had not yet experienced. The boys were becoming-directors as they dictated one another's movements, the movements of the WWE figurines, and my involvement with recording devices. They were becoming-researchers as they studied the technical aspects of documentation and made suggestions for which camera angles would be most effective in sharing their emerging narratives. The comic-wrestling figure-boy assemblage produced opportunities for the boys to compose and perform wrestling storylines that, more often than not, fled the scripted "fake" wrestling on television, becoming something new through the boys' collaborative play and imagining.

### **Playing through Research with Things**

As they collectively intra-acted with WWE-inspired texts and materials, the boys emerged as competent meaning-makers and collaborators, among many other things. Wohlwend (2011) and others (Boldt, 2009; Dyson, 1997, 2003; Newkirk, 2006, 2007; Ranker, 2006; Sherbine & Boldt, 2013; Thiel, 2015) attended to the ways in which play and literacy are entangled as children appropriate storylines, themes, characterizations, and dialogue to compose and experiment with new possibilities for themselves and their peers. In many ways, their play with WWE in the research assemblage allowed the boys to experience the kind of physical contact and tough guy identities that would otherwise get them in trouble in school.

Million Dollar Man recognized this potential as he assured the resource officer and schoolmate that we were doing "research." In doing so, Million Dollar Man employed a savvy linguistic argument for why the boys' actions were justified. Boldt (2009) suggested that this play is important beyond the opportunities it affords in regard to literacy experiences and development. The boys' WWE play functioned as an opportunity "to work out the meanings of the child's experiences, feelings, wishes, desires, and needs...in a way that does not overwhelm the child with the enormity of social and material realities and demands" (p. 12). In other words, the boys' wrestling with one another in the hallway, manipulation of a comic to shape their stories, and intra-actions with their wrestling figurines all comprised a space for the boys to engage in meaning-making that was apart from the demands of school and the expectations of adults. Thus, the playful literacies that emerged in human and more-than-human WWE assemblages created opportunities for the boys to read, write, and construct meaning in their relationships with objects together on their own terms.

The competencies that emerged for the boys during their play with WWE relied on the thing power of the more-than-human objects in the research assemblage. It was a comic, drawn on a standard piece of copy paper, that had the affective potential to launch us into this ongoing study of professional wrestling. Stewart (2007) wrote that "matter can shimmer with undetermined potential and the weight of received meaning" (p. 23). The comic created the initial source of connection that brought the boys and me together to talk about their interest in and knowledge about WWE; the comic functioned to propel our comings together in the first place. Further, the comic-as-backdrop's intra-actions with the boys enabled them to direct me to tell their wrestling story in particular ways through

our documentation. It was not the boys' direction alone, but the entanglements with their own comic composition that produced the ongoing research event in which their competencies emerged and were recognized.

Likewise, the WWE figurines conveyed a tremendous force of thing power as they propelled the boys' play and storytelling both in and out of school. In their contact with the linoleum tile floor, the figurines produced a loud thud, marking the space where the boys' embodiments and play would unfold. The sound, the figurines, the comic, the recording devices, and our bodies territorialized a small area of the school's hallway as the space for playing, teaching, and learning about WWE; Million Dollar Man recognized it as such when he called to the school resource officer and the boy accompanying him. It is notable, too, that the thing power of the boys' backpacks functioned to set their playful literacies with WWE apart from the sanctioned classroom literacies that needed not be hidden away. In their removal from the hooks in the classroom (where they were expected to remain throughout the day), the backpacks and their hidden contents allowed for the subversive nature of the play in which the boys – and I – found great pleasure, meaning, and friendship.

### Intimate Literacies

In their wrestling with the more-than-human, the boys engaged with literacies in intimate ways. I conceptualize *intimate literacies* as those which involve nonsexual physical closeness. The physical encounter of the human and more-than-human involves an exchange of affect that – even for a moment – transforms the bodies in the assemblage. Colman's (2010) definition of Deleuzian affect is helpful with this conceptualization.

Affect is the change, or variation that occurs when bodies collide, or come into contact.... In its largest sense, affect is part of the Deleuzian project of trying-to-understand, and comprehend, and express all of the incredible, wonderful, tragic, painful, and destructive configurations of things and bodies as temporally mediated, continuous events. (p. 11)

Colman's description speaks to what others (Dutro, 2019; Hargraves, 2019; Lenters, 2019; Thiel, 2015) have suggested in terms of affect's connections to the body. Affect is inextricable from intimate literacies as it is what drove and was simultaneously produced by the boys' intimate encounters with each other and with WWE. It was the *something* (Ehret, 2018) that moved Million Dollar Man to offer the gentle touch of reassurance on DJ's thigh described in the opening vignette. It was the *something* that manifested in and propelled the boys' embraces as they wrapped their bodies around one another to practice and demonstrate wrestling moves. That *something* eluded any attempt to describe it or define it, rather, it was felt in the boys' bodies – and in my own. As Thiel (2015) wrote, these affective literacies are “leaky, seeping into our bodies and unfurling through our movements, perceptions, and reactions to other bodies” (p. 46). Intimate literacies were also enacted between the human and more-than-human, for instance, when the boys ran their fingers over the plastic bodies of the wrestling figurines and leaned over their comic, studying the visual narrative with their noses almost touching the paper.

In those moments of close proximity, the boys demonstrated their understandings of professional wrestling in ways that would not have been possible had they been physically further apart from one another or from the more-than-human materials in the assemblage. That is, mere words or pictures

failed to describe what Million Dollar Man meant by *not really a Nelson*; in order to show us what he intended, he *had* to physically put his arms around DJ. This embodiment was necessary for him to make and convey the meaning that he intended in that moment and, perhaps more importantly, for him to experience the pleasure of touch and friendship. Likewise, the kind of reassurance that visibly calmed DJ as he took on the responsibility of being the expert at wrestling-with-figurines could *only* emerge with Million Dollar Man's gentle hand on his thigh. Million Dollar Man's gesture of affirmation and encouragement, like the boys' impromptu hallway wrestling, was driven not by some literacy-based endgame, but by the potentials that flowed through the assemblage, connecting and entangling bodies and materials that acted upon one another in spontaneous and generative ways.

### Intimate Literacies and a Move Toward Justice

DJ's literacies were often intimate. He seemed to relish the moments he could wrestle with Million Dollar Man and teach me the intricacies of hand position and body angles. DJ took great pleasure in opportunities to intra-act with the WWE figurines from his backpack as he added important details to Million Dollar Man's characterizations of the wrestlers and elaborated on storylines as he turned the hard, plastic objects over in his hands. Indeed, the thing power of those WWE figurines functioned to establish DJ as an expert engineer of particular wrestling moves and afforded him the chance to share his knowledges with our small research group. Though a full analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, it is notable that one day prior to the start of our WWE inquiry, DJ read the entirety of *Green Eggs and Ham* aloud to me, but only after he spent time delicately "tucking" a stuffed toy cow from Chick-Fil A into the crook of my leg and telling it "good night." DJ's intimate encounters with things and

with others created multiple opportunities for him to engage in literacy on his own terms.

The closeness and touch from which intimate literacies emerge is often eschewed in schools as children are expected to keep their hands to themselves, to leave personal space for others, and to leave toys at home (or in backpacks). The disciplining of the body to demonstrate literacy in particular ways (Luke, 1992) invariably makes invisible the ways in which *something* emerges in children's play and meaning-making. What is not recognizable as literacy so rarely counts in early childhood and elementary classrooms and once again, the experiences of children who find pleasure in their affective entanglements with things as they play, read, compose, retell, and imagine are marginalized.

### Conclusions

In early childhood literacy, what counts is often limited to that which can be quantified and, as is often the case for young Black boys, remediated (Dyson, 2003; Ferguson, 2001; Rashid, 2009; Wilson, 2000). As I have suggested throughout this paper, Million Dollar Man, DJ, Francisco, and their passionate encounters with the more-than-human can teach us about how intra-actions with objects to which children feel connected and are interested in has the potential to cultivate new ways of recognizing competence and literate identities in school.

What might it take to create more just and equitable spaces for these kinds of indeterminate literacies to be recognized and valued? Perhaps through embracing the affective, intimate, and indeterminate literacies of children in school, we might also begin to recognize the multiple and complex ways of engaging, knowing, and being in relationship with the human and more-than-human. As teachers and

educational researchers become more attuned to the ways in which bodies and materials act upon one another in these close and physical encounters and appreciate the transformative potential of those encounters, we might cultivate kinder and more just teaching, learning, and research spaces that honor broader and entangled notions of literacies that are meaningful and relevant to children's lived experiences.

It seems, then, that one implication that emerges from this work is for teachers to embrace and create opportunities for children to play with things in the classroom and to be comfortable with the uncertainty in not knowing exactly what might be unfolding in those encounters. This is no small thing for teachers who are under increased pressures to maintain fidelity to standardized curricula that often includes very little about children's interests and lived experiences (Yoon & Templeton, 2019). But given the potential of becoming attuned to affective literacy encounters that broaden the legitimacy of what counts as reading, writing, composing, knowing, and being in the classroom, settling into this uncertainty could be engaging and productive for children whose literacies are otherwise marginalized.

Second, creating space for indeterminate literacies might also involve less intervention by teachers and educational researchers in children's play and literacy encounters. Adults have a tendency to hijack creative conversations and playful story-making in an effort to "educate" or help students "learn" (Hargraves, 2019). They ask the kinds of questions that demand a logical response, though children's literacy encounters are not always logical, but are playful, improvisational, and are dependent on their experiences *in the moment*, rather than based on some predetermined end point. Adults might assume, then, that literacy practices are always teleological – or that they should be. But to consider

encounters between bodies and texts and the more-than-human means attending to the ways in which affect acts and transforms and increases the capacity to act or be acted upon (Massumi, 1987) in the encounter itself.

Further, inquiry alongside children and teachers in classrooms as they engage in a myriad of affective literacy experiences seems necessary. One limitation of this study is that my research with DJ, Million Dollar Man, and Francisco unfolded in the hallway just outside Mrs. L's classroom. Thus, the boys' literacies still emerged in marginalized spaces in school. It seems necessary for educational researchers to devote time listening and experiencing literacies that matter to children and to support teachers as they engage a permeable curriculum that fosters these connections between children and popular culture *in the classroom*.

Finally, I continue to grapple with my relationship with DJ, Million Dollar Man, Francisco, Mrs. L., and the other children in the classroom where this study unfolded. At the end of the academic year, I accepted a new academic appointment, moved to a new community, and took my data with me. It is not lost on me that in my departure, I failed to collaborate with Mrs. L. in thinking about how the boys' literacy experiences materialized in our time together and how she could create opportunities for them to engage with and share their interests and expertise in the classroom. In order for educational research to have an impact in classrooms, researchers must stick around. We should ask questions alongside teachers and students. We should listen more. We should be there. Through sustained relationships that create a dialogue between the university about what is unfolding in the lives of teachers and students in the classroom, we might begin to see the definitions of *who* and *what* counts in school broadened in ways that are more inclusive, more ethical, and more just.

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