

The Ballad of the Real American: A Call for Cultural Critique of Pro-Wrestling Storylines

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Pro-wrestling storytellers have historically traded in the ritualistic dramatization of cultural concerns and anxieties to charge ongoing storylines and feuds with resonance and significance. Yet storytelling steeped in politics, morality, and mythology is constitutive, not merely reflective, of social reality. As Sam Migliore argues: “To view wrestling as simply entertainment [...] is to ignore the power of ritual and metaphor to transform a performance into a potent political statement” (82). By incorporating real-world conflicts and current events into characters and the conflicts that bind them, pro-wrestling storytellers frame the salient issues surrounding those conflicts in specific ways, providing implicit (and frequently explicit) instructions for audience members on how to orient to attending phenomena.

Despite pro wrestling’s marginalized status in the cultural marketplace, scholars have long recognized that mythical and political storytelling remain central to wrestling’s capacity to entice fans to tune in week after week. Sixty years ago, Roland Barthes famously observed that “What wrestling is above all meant to portray is a purely moral concept: that of justice” (19). Even those stories that don’t explicitly rip headlines from the day’s front pages routinely present audiences with “complexly plotted, ongoing narratives of professional ambition, personal suffering, friendship and alliance, betrayal and reversal of fortune” (Jenkins III 34).

In this way, pro-wrestling storytelling functions as what Kenneth Burke calls “equipment for living,” “proverbs writ large” (*Literary Form* 296) that “size up situations in various ways and in keeping with correspondingly various attitudes” (304). Relying on archetypal polarity—nefarious heels who breach social norms antagonizing virtuous faces who must test personal and social limits to cleanse their universe of wrongdoing—pro wrestling serves as explicit equipment for living in ways few forms of popular entertainment have.

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Given pro wrestling's grand, frequently problematic history of servicing dominant hegemonic ideals (e.g., rugged masculinity, violence and aggression, American exceptionalism, fear and mistrust of cultural outsiders), the industry's unique brand of political storytelling necessitates continued vigilance from scholars and critics. Historically, scholars have primarily addressed the project of critiquing feuds and storylines at the macro level of broad trends in pro-wrestling storytelling. Less scholarly attention has been spent critiquing pro-wrestling storytelling at the micro level of individual characters and storylines as they unfold on an episodic basis. This essay advocates for increased scholarly attention to the individual storylines that fans encounter on a weekly basis, thereby supplementing a realm of pro-wrestling scholarship in need of further development.

American Ideology in Professional Wrestling

To date, considerable professional wrestling scholarship approaches pro wrestling primarily through a macro lens: condensing weeks or months of storyline development to demystify recurring tropes and storytelling techniques while drawing connections across eras and organizations. Jeffrey J. Mondak conducts fantasy theme analysis to explore how wrestling interpellates audiences into a shared economy of political and cultural values. Vaughn May employs a "status politics" framework to expose the conservative ideology that motivates both faces and heels. Danielle Soulliere analyzes pro-wrestling speech for its reification of dominant hegemonic masculine ideals of aggression, competition, and emotional stoicism.

Ron Tamborini et al. apply a media effects lens to codify the prevalence of verbal aggression in wrestling broadcasts. Brendan Maguire and John F. Wozniak examine the WWF's employment of racial and ethnic stereotyping and stereotyping's phenomenological impact on individuals' sense of social order. Gerald Craven and Richard Moseley approach the dramatic beats¹ of a wrestling

¹ Another small yet vital body of wrestling scholarship (e.g., De Garis; Mazer; Smith) approaches the embodied doing of wrestling at the independent level through dramaturgical or performance lenses, thereby casting light on the embodied techniques that empower wrestlers to tell their stories in the ring.

match from a dramaturgical perspective. The eras and methodologies change, but the project of drawing connections between pro-wrestling storylines and culture and ideology remains essential to the study of pro wrestling.

A smaller yet significant contingent of scholars approach wrestling's production of ideology at the micro level of specific characters, storylines, and feuds. Through the lens of Daniel Bryan's "Yes Movement," Gino Canella utilizes Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque to critique WWE's commodification of populist political movements. Kathleen S. Lowney uses the Right to Censor stable as a case study to critique WWF's response to criticism from the Parents Television Council. Wilson Koh considers wrestling's blending of reality and unreality in the "worked shoots" of Bryan and CM Punk to interrogate issues of postmodernity and mediated authenticity. Migliore and Sina Rahmani each explore geopolitical conflict between the United States and the Middle East through Hulk Hogan's feuds with Iraqi turncoat Sgt. Slaughter and Iranian arch villain The Iron Sheik, respectively.

By considering ways in which pro-wrestling storylines symbolically articulate social attitudes and anxieties on a week-to-week basis, we can better understand how professional wrestling, through featured characters, rhetoric, and symbolism, "communicate using clusters of key terms which anchor symbolic structures of association and dissociation necessary for social life" (Brummett 161). Furthermore, close scholarly readings of pro-wrestling storylines as they unfold episodically reveals opportunities for divergent interpretation. The following interpretation of storylines involving WWE's Jack Swagger from 2013 to 2014 demonstrates how narrative and ideology converge on a weekly basis.

The Real American

In February 2013, Jack Swagger returned to WWE television after a seven-month absence. An all-American amateur wrestler at the University of Oklahoma and a former World Heavyweight Champion, ECW Champion, and United States Champion, Swagger drifted down the card and out of the WWE Universe in the summer of 2012 after an extended losing streak. An arrogant jock heel since his debut on WWE television, Swagger remained a heel upon return, but was not the same All-American American.

Swagger was repackaged as the nationalistic, xenophobic Real American. Accompanied by new manager Zeb Colter (a repackaged “Dirty” Dutch Mantel,² his character’s surname an apparent nod to right-wing provocateur Ann Coulter), the duo established their heel credentials by drawing heavily on the anti-immigrant rhetoric and faux-militaristic iconography of the far-right Tea Party movement. With Colter, the strident articulate mouthpiece, and Swagger the intense, grimacing muscle, the duo approached the ring to the sound of militaristic horns and snare rolls, described by David Shoemaker as “sound[ing] like it was lifted from a Fox News show” (295). The image of a Gadsden Flag loomed on the TitanTron and was even propped in the ring on occasion. He and Colter placed their hands over their hearts and pledged “We, the people!” before and after Colter’s vitriolic diatribes against “illegals”:

The state of our union is pathetic, but real Americans are not to blame. The blame lies solely on the shoulders of the millions and millions of people living in this country illegally. Those people live in our country, but they don’t have any qualms about taking our medical care, taking our jobs, our educations, and our freedom. [...] Real Americans need to stand up and say “no more.” And that’s what Jack Swagger is prepared to do (“RAW 1030”).

Swagger rechristened his ankle lock submission the Patriot Act, later renamed the Patriot Lock.

Swagger and Colter were quickly programmed into a high-profile feud with World Heavyweight Champion Alberto Del Rio, a Mexican national and reformed aristocratic Foreign Menace. Colter slandered Del Rio as “a man who only came into this country to reap the rewards of our motherland” and equated Swagger’s quest to dethrone Del Rio to “reclaiming America” (“Raw 1030”). As the feud escalated in the build to their championship match at *WrestleMania*

² Colter is apparently intended to be an evolved version of Mantel’s character Uncle Zebekiah, who managed Justin “Hawk” Bradshaw (later John Bradshaw Layfield aka “JBL”) and the Blu Brothers in the mid-1990s. This connection appears to be confirmed in a February 2013 tweet from JBL: “Zeb ... is one of the best talkers in the biz and he and Swagger will be a great team. Glad he’s back!” (Layfield).

XXIX, Swagger (kayfabe) broke the ankle of Ricardo Rodriguez, Del Rio's personal ring announcer, with the Patriot Lock. Del Rio defeated Swagger cleanly at *WrestleMania*, but the next night on *Raw*, Swagger sufficiently weakened Del Rio's ankle in a losing effort, allowing Dolph Ziggler to take Del Rio's championship by cashing in his "Money in the Bank" contract. Steadily fading from the World Heavyweight Championship scene but unwavering in ideology, Swagger and Colter moved to the midcard and formed an alliance with Swiss heel Antonio Cesaro, whom Colter embraced as "one of the good ones" due to supposedly immigrating through legal channels ("The Good Ones").

One need not be fluent in the intricacies of professional wrestling storytelling to recognize that the feud between Swagger and Del Rio was WWE's attempt to capitalize on the unending controversy surrounding immigration in the U.S., most caustically the ongoing debate over documented and undocumented immigration from the U.S.-Mexico border. Lest there be any doubt this was a purposeful incantation of U. S. immigration exigency, WWE publicly acknowledged its intentions: "To create compelling and relevant content for our audience, it is important to incorporate current events into our storylines" (qtd. in Caldwell).

Outsiders and newcomers to the world of pro wrestling can be excused for finding distaste in WWE's exploitation of this incendiary political debate, the geopolitical consequences of which include political enmity and families and communities torn asunder. But wrestling fans—inclined to find the exploitation of racist xenophobia to build a midcard feud in poor taste—may struggle to muster antipathy given the familiarity of the storyline. Nationalism and racism recur as storyline tropes for WWE³ and other major wrestling organizations dating as far back as historic turn-of-the-century bouts between Frank A. Gotch and "Russian Lion" George Hackenschmidt, whose rivalry served as "a symbol of masculinity and nationalism" in a period characterized by "fears of physical and moral degeneration associated with modernity" (Lindaman 780). Nor was Swagger versus Del Rio the first time WWE paired a resurgent Mexican face with a loathsome xenophobic heel draping himself in stars and stripes. In 2004, barroom brawler-turned-nefarious businessman John Bradshaw Layfield (JBL) established

³ This ignoble history stretches back before WWE changed its name from World Wrestling Federation (WWF) in 2002 and back further still to its pre-1980s existence as the World Wide Wrestling Federation (WWWF).

his antagonistic bona fides in a segment in which he hunted “illegal immigrants” attempting to cross the U.S.-Mexico border in the night (“*SmackDown* 242”), which fed into a violent feud with popular WWE champion “Latino Heat” Eddie Guerrero.

It is tempting to adopt a cynical stance toward such politically charged pro wrestling storytelling, a fact upon which WWE relies with its refrain of “We’re entertainers telling stories.” WWE is indeed in the business of entertaining its customers through dramatic, episodic storytelling. There is also the pro wrestling truism that to manufacture a product that fans will embrace, the featured combatants must generate relevant and interesting conflict that motivates them to fight one another week after week. The scripted conflict between Del Rio and Swagger was reasonably successful in its objective to “communicate the histories of the combatants and legitimize or delegitimize each individual’s position in relation to the other” (Mazer, “Doggie Doggie World” 97), which in turn helped WWE “build an event that would provoke a passionate response in a committed repeat audience” (104). Within the parameters of WWE’s narrative universe, the story arc rendered comprehensible characters who otherwise lacked significant history and raised the dramatic stakes for their rivalry when both combatants had already held the championship.

By reading the Swagger-Del Rio feud through a lens of ideological criticism, pro wrestling scholars can recognize and communicate how wrestlers, storylines, and feuds capture the cultural zeitgeist and reflect audiences’ realities in constructive and informative ways.

The Ideologies of Swagger-Del Rio

The trajectory of the Swagger-Del Rio feud illustrates the value of performing ideological criticism within pro-wrestling storytelling. It is a salient example of a high-profile narrative that deserves a close scholarly reading not only for its potent ideological content but also for potential polyvalent close textual readings.

Cultural studies scholars Stuart Hall and John Fiske contend that audiences have agency in interpreting mediated texts, including the capacity for critically minded readers to interpret texts in ways unintended by textual producers. This decoding process is undertaken by fans and scholars alike. Critics should not make the mistake of viewing professional wrestling’s moral landscape as

predictable and pre-determined as its match outcomes. Scholarly interpretations that contextualize in-ring drama with the political and mythological undercurrents reveal how pro-wrestling morality becomes “imbued with essential contradictions within and between the fiction of the play and the fact of the business” (Mazer, *Professional Wrestling* 153).

For example, viewers’ interpretation of the equipment for living constructed within the Swagger-Del Rio storyline will be influenced by their relationship with the history of race and pro wrestling in the U.S. For those weary of professional wrestling’s decades of problematic indulgence in “exaggerated morality play fervently manipulating the prejudices of its audience as quickly as it could perceive them” (Henricks 178), this apparent inversion of pro-nationalist politics may seem effervescently cosmopolitan compared to the historic status quo of White American Heroes vanquishing Foreign Others.

Though Swagger and Colter’s crusade against Del Rio in many ways repackages the aforementioned Guerrero-JBL feud of 2004, the two storylines differ in one key distinction: WWE vindicated JBL and presented the racist heel as the better man. After damning Guerrero’s wrestling-royalty family as descended from illegal immigrants (“*SmackDown* 245”) and tormenting Guerrero’s mother into suffering a (kayfabe) heart attack in front of his family at a house show (“*SmackDown* 246”), JBL scored a victory over Guerrero by disqualification at *Judgment Day*, then two months later at *The Great American Bash* fulfilled his promise to “take America back” by dethroning Guerrero in a memorably gory Texas bull rope match. JBL went on to hold the WWE Championship for 280 days, one of the longer reigns in modern WWE history. Though JBL’s title reign was characterized by cheating and improbable escapes, it is pertinent to this discussion that JBL received only ephemeral comeuppance from Guerrero and was never made to pay for the racism he performed in their feud. If pro wrestling “is above all a quantitative sequence of compensations” for foul play (Barthes 20), JBL’s ultimate superiority over Guerrero reasonably infers WWE’s storytellers felt JBL has nothing to pay for his attitudes and actions.

In contrast, Del Rio proved himself the better man by making Swagger tap out cleanly at *WrestleMania XXIX*, punishing Swagger and proving he and Colter’s claims of white nationalist superiority to be false. Though Swagger gained a measure of revenge by weakening Del Rio and contributing to his loss to Ziggler, Del Rio quickly regained the championship from Ziggler, reaffirming his excellence. Given WWE’s past narrative affirmations of anti-Latino nationalism,

one may interpret the moral dynamics of the Swagger-Del Rio feud as comparatively progressive in context of wrestling's pervasive history of nationalism as the province of the American Hero, dating back to Gotch, enduring through the days of Jim Londos and patriotic Americans Slaughter and Hogan, and still manifest in today's patriotically correct John Cena-Rusev feuds.

Despite its reputation for retrograde attitudes toward race and immigration, pro wrestling also boasts moments of empowering rhetoric. Encouraging audiences to support Del Rio, the proud Mexican national (and a morally rehabilitated Foreign Menace), over a red, white, and blue nationalist can be read as participating in wrestling's narrative capacity to "deliver a positive social message of peace and justice [...] with great impact and gusto" (Souther 269). By encouraging audience members to boo Swagger and Colter's racist vitriol, WWE positions its audience in a stance of tolerance and respect for Del Rio the hardworking, resilient achiever. Just as the character of South African apartheidist Colonel DeBeers was once reviled by white audience members who otherwise were not ready to align against white dominance in other arenas of life, the punishment of Swagger and Colter's toxic morality participates in a subversive tradition of heels whose vile bigotry makes it easy for audiences to dip their toes in cosmopolitan waters.

Conversely, a critical reading suggests the Swagger-Del Rio storyline functions oppositionally to the progressive statement on xenophobia it purports on the narrative surface. Arguably, portraying Swagger and Colter as pure villains is neither progressive nor palpably divergent from wrestling's traditional masculine, conservative hegemony. For beneath the storyline's post-racial façade lies a neoliberal cultural clash in which Del Rio generically (and judging by fan indifference, somewhat blandly) embodies what May describes as the babyface's "traditional moral universe centered on hard work, achievement motivation, [and] self-control" (82). Following this line of interpretation, Del Rio's generic smiling heroism functions as his true distinguishing factor versus Swagger and Colter's puritanical antagonism, the latter of which will always be framed as heelish even when the content of their message holds degrees of merit (Lowney). In the reliably conservative universe of pro wrestling, identity politics are subordinate to the fact that "fans still cheer the loudest for those who work hard, have simple tastes, fight their enemies head on, and who do not give into the temptation of celebrity and self-indulgence" (May 92). More than embodying any meaningful appeal to cosmopolitanism or post-racial transcendence of xenophobia, Swagger

and Colter are rendered immoral not because they are racist, but because they take shortcuts, indulge in malice toward their foes (as opposed to the spirit of competition or righteous vengeance) and target faces rather than heels. In the case of Rodriguez, targeting weak, noncompetitive faces makes them bullies, to boot.

Though pro wrestling has the potential to tell stories of peace and tolerance, U.S. wrestling frequently fails to do so. U.S. wrestling fans are encouraged to cheer for their favorites even when they dabble in bigoted rhetoric. It was not the reviled heel Hollywood Hogan but classic red-and-yellow babyface Hogan who called heel WWF champion Yokozuna “the Jap” at *WrestleMania IX*. Cena was nearly a decade into his run as smiling face of WWE when he attempted to mobilize homophobia to emasculate The Rock—“Don't go racing to Witch Mountain, Rock, cause your mountain is Brokeback” (“RAW 926”)—and The Miz and Alex Riley—“They're going to buy one of those tandem bikes and ride to Bed, Bath and Beyond to buy some duvets. [...] Tonight I'm going to train you on how to be a man” (“Raw 927”).

Furthermore, the oppositional reader (Hall) may also note that WWE's situating the locus of racism within a single pair of loathsome villains diverts attention away from systemic racism and xenophobia. Rahmani persuasively argued this point through analysis of the Iron Sheik's symbolic significance during the U.S.'s coming to grips with the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Sheik, Rahmani argues, “emerged as an extremely useful character through which Americans reassert[ed] their perceived cultural and political dominance” (87) by his defeat at the hands of American hero Hogan. “Call a man a villain,” Burke observed, “and you have the choice of either attacking or cringing” (*Attitudes Toward History* 3). By portraying Sheik as an archetypal depiction of irredeemable Evil, the WWF “alleviat[ed] Americans from any culpability in the deterioration of the relations” between the U.S. and Iran (Rahmani 97). Similarly, by localizing racism in two perfectly evil heels in Swagger and Colter, WWE defused the possibility of audience members confronting their shared culpability in systemic racism by containing it externally at the level of only the most cartoonishly racist of deeds and words. Such quarantine and diffusion “normalizes latent racist attitudes and presents a very sectarian social stance as neutral or natural” (Souther 274). Superficially inverting the stereotypes scripted to act out an inherently racist drama does not radically invert its ideology.

In terms of sudden, shocking character swerves, the second act of Swagger's moral (d)evolution was the antithesis of an RKO out of nowhere. On June 30,

2014 (“*Raw* 1101”), Rusev, “the Bulgarian Brute,” undefeated Russian sympathizer and throwback to the classic scary Foreign Menaces of territory wrestling’s past, stalked the ring as his valet Lana mocked the audience’s “USA! USA!” chants. Lana ridiculed Americans as weak losers clinging to participation trophies and anointed Vladimir Putin as the “greatest leader in the world” as the crowd booed. “Who will be America’s next failure to compete against Rusev?” Lana asks mockingly. Rusev paces the ring and eyes the top of the ramp.

The familiar sound of militaristic horns and snare fill the arena as Swagger, wearing a singlet with the coiled rattlesnake of the Gadsden Flag, enters, accompanied by Colter. In terms of appearance and demeanor, little has changed from Swagger’s heelish feud against Del Rio, with one exception: Swagger was now wearing his blond hair in the Hitler Youth high-and-tight style favored by young white nationalists such as Richard Spencer. Despite this upping the ante of white nationalist iconography, for the first time Swagger was turning face. “There’s a real American for you,” swoons color commentator JBL.

Colter tells Lana to “shut the hell up” while lauding the First Amendment: “You know, Natasha, you and Boris over there, we couldn’t come to your country and say the pack of lies you say here because your country would not allow it. But yet you can do it here because you’ve taken advantage of our freedoms.” Pivoting from politics to wrestling just as he had one year earlier, Colter follows this casual racism and misreading of the First Amendment with suggesting he has the counter to the unstoppable Rusev Crush: “I think a Real American can stop it. I think Jack Swagger can stop it.”

Colter urges “every Real American” in the arena to rise, “put your hand over your heart, and in a loud, clear voice say along with us, “We the people!” The crowd abides and chants “USA! USA!” followed by “Let’s go Swagger! Let’s go Swagger!” “A lot of patriots here,” JBL says. “I never thought I’d agree with everything Zeb Colter said here tonight,” Cole bellows. Without changing a thing, WWE’s deliberate efforts to lead its audience to pledge allegiance to Tea Party politics was complete.

Conclusion

One of the enduring clichés surrounding discourses on pro wrestling relates to how wrestling is or is not a “real” sport. Professional wrestling fans are acutely

aware of how pro wrestling converges and diverges with unscripted athletic completion and have rolled their eyes more than enough in their lifetimes for that list to be rehashed here.⁴ Yet there is room to conclude this essay with an additional incongruence between professional sports and pro wrestling: while both share a common capacity for reproduction and reinforcement of cultural values through portrayals of dramatic competition, professional sports scholarship enjoys a distinct home within the academy. Pro-wrestling scholarship, on the other hand, has been spread across disciplines and has yet to be recognized as a unique field of study.

Critical, cultural, and rhetorical approaches to studying pro sports have come into vogue in the past twenty years, with the September 11, 2001 attacks and swell of conservative action that followed seeming to serve as the catalyst for the increasingly pervasive melding of sports with conservative and neoliberal politics. The scholarship of Michael Butterworth, for example, is exemplary in its demonstration of the intersections of professional sports and race and whiteness (“Race in ‘the Race’”); nationality (“Purifying the Body Politic”); purity and innocence (“Fox Sports”); citizenship (“The Athlete as Citizen”); militarism (Butterworth and Moskal); and suppression of democratic discourse (“Ritual”). This approach to sports scholarship helped establish sports studies as a legitimate scholarly field, and today sports-centric journals such as the *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, *Journal of Sports Media*, *Sport in Society*, and *International Journal of Sport Communication* thrive.

Pro wrestling, though immensely popular, does not possess the same cultural currency as baseball, football, or the Olympics. Yet pro wrestling has one storytelling advantage that professional sports lack: pro-wrestling storytellers control the outcome of their storylines from conception through performance. In MLB and the NFL, varying degrees of cheaters win championships (see Alex Rodriguez and Tom Brady). Sometimes white athletes and black athletes unite in protest of police violence against Black bodies. Sometimes Pat Tillman is killed by friendly fire.

Yet pro-wrestling fans are consistently presented with what Barthes deemed “the popular and age-old image of the perfect intelligibility of reality,” wherein:

⁴ See Atkinson for a non-patronizing exploration of the topic.

What is portrayed by wrestling is therefore an ideal understanding of things; it is the euphoria of [humans] raised for a while above the constitutive ambiguity of everyday situations and placed before the panoramic view of a univocal Nature, in which signs at last correspond to causes, without obstacle, without evasion, without contradiction (23).

With hours of purposefully constructed—often problematically rendered—equipment for living served up to wrestling fans fifty-two weeks per year, and thousands of hours of archives available on demand on the WWE Network, there has never been more justification or opportunity for a vigorous, organized scholarly commitment to studying professional wrestling.

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