Redneck Rebel, The Governor, and The Syrian Sheik: Small Town Wrestling in the Poor White South

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On a sultry late-August afternoon in upstate South Carolina, a small crowd of approximately 200 has assembled in the sunbaked parking lot of a nondescript strip plaza just off the Interstate highway to watch the professional wrestlers of a local wrestling organization bodyslam and superkick each other in a six-match card. The show culminates with a main event between the beloved Confederate-battle-flag-festooned hero "Redneck Rebel" and his despised foe Johnny Danger. Nearly everyone in the crowd is white; they belong to the southern demographic historians sometimes call "poor white southerners" (see Flynt), but which others more commonly deride as "white trash," "trailer trash," or "redneck." A festive, communal atmosphere accompanies the mayhem in the ring: children have their faces painted at a small booth; volunteers grill hot dogs for the crowd; local firemen hand out fire safety literature; and a local preacher delivers an evangelistic sermon-and-altar call from the center of the wrestling ring immediately before the main event.

Over the years, I have attended numerous local live wrestling shows like this one in towns and small communities across North and South Carolina. The venues are usually small and plain; the wrestlers are almost always locals with varying degrees of wrestling talent; and the crowd is almost entirely composed of a single social class: poor whites. This small-town world of professional wrestling thrives throughout the South. If we follow Harold Hinds' definition of popular culture as "those aspects of culture…which are widely spread…and/or consumed by significant numbers of people" ("Sine Qua Non"), then small town wrestling is, without a doubt, a form of poor white southern popular culture.[1]

[1] Hinds further defines popular culture as something that has trans-regional appeal (Hinds, *How to Make* 376–77)—a delineation more difficult to square with my argument in this paper since I intend to focus on a single region, the South. I also recognize that there are other useful ways

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As widespread as local, live wrestling is within its own cultural milieu, it flies under the radar of the American mainstream: you will not find these wrestling shows on television; they are not covered often in the major news outlets; and, unless you happen to see a makeshift sign by the side of the road, you will be hard pressed to find advertisements for the live shows. Nor will you hear much discussion of this thriving form of poor white southern culture in academic literature. Only two articles in the journal *Southern Cultures* explicitly focus on small town wrestling in the South: a 2005 photographic essay of local wrestling around Nashville (Shay); and a 1997 article about the southern influence on big time professional wrestling—an article that, despite its many insightful observations, problematically conflates the local live wrestling that thrives among the South's poor whites with the high profile stage of the World Wrestling Federation (now Entertainment) and the now-defunct World Championship Wrestling (Kyriakoudes and Coclanis).[2]

The disjunction between the prevalence of this form of what might be called "white trash" popular culture and its almost complete absence in both mass media outlets and in the academic literature forms the backbone of my argument in this paper. It is not simply that a form of popular culture—small town wrestling in the South—begs for scholarly analysis; it is, rather, that in virtually all mainstream circles, there is a failure to even identify this form of professional wrestling as popular culture, per se. Moreover, this failure to "see" poor white southern culture and to engage it on its own cultural terms fits a much broader pattern exhibited throughout American history of the marginalization and lack of engagement with the white underclass.

In what follows, I will attempt to show how a thoughtful consideration of the role and function professional wrestling in the South would represent a serious engagement with this oft-marginalized community on its own cultural terms. The first step in this analysis is simply to "see" what is there—namely, to describe the prevalence of small-town professional wrestling throughout the region. This

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that scholars have defined "popular culture" (see Storey 5–14), including one, discussed below, that distinguishes popular from folk culture.

[2] The southern historians Pete Daniel (224) and Wayne Flynt (115) also make passing references to this form of professional wrestling in poor white southern culture.

description will then form the basis for some observations about fruitful future lines of academic inquiry on the role and function of professional wrestling in the South.[3]

Southern Indie Wrestling

The variety of small-town professional wrestling under consideration in this paper is more properly called “independent” or “indie” wrestling, and it has similarities to and differences from the much better-known world of mainstream wrestling represented mainly by the WWE. Both mainstream and indie wrestling share certain distinctive features that one expects of the professional wrestling genre: scripted faux-fights between in-character performers; stylized wrestling moves and sequences that form a kind of wrestling vernacular (e.g. bodyslam, suplex, clothesline, piledriver, and so forth); and dramatic storylines featuring a high degree of interaction between the wrestlers and the crowd. Where mainstream and indie wrestling diverge is in the scale of the respective productions, the relative skill level of the wrestlers, and the size of the audience reached.

On the one side is mainstream wrestling, the product of a billion-dollar corporate entity that employs a large stable of the most physically gifted in-ring performers. Mainstream wrestling reaches a mass global audience through a combination of weekly televised wrestling programming, a relentless touring schedule of live shows in major sporting venues around the globe, and an online subscription-based streaming service (“Key Performance Indicators”). At the opposite end of the spectrum are most of the indie wrestling organizations that

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[3] I want to acknowledge here the imperfect and incomplete nature of the analysis presented below. I am basing my observations on over a decade of work on small-town southern wrestling—attending numerous shows from a variety of promotions throughout the Carolinas (mostly); copious formal interviews and casual conversations with wrestlers, promoters, and fans; and hours upon hours mainly on YouTube and Facebook learning about wrestling promotions throughout the region. I approach this topic as a scholar, a fan, and an insider, having functioned briefly as a promoter, booker, and wrestler myself. Though my analysis is incomplete and may, at times, lack the nuance that could be provided in a longer piece, it is written to address a deficit of substantive scholarship in this area, and to hopefully provide suggestions for future work on this topic.

operate exclusively at the local level, each one running periodic live shows to small crowds in the single town, village, or small region in which the organization is located. The local indies feature mainly local wrestlers with varying degrees of experience and talent, and generally neither wrestlers nor indie promotions are known very far outside their home geographic areas. What these promotions lack in scale, however, they make up for in quantity: hundreds of these small, local, independently operated wrestling organizations exist scattered throughout North America.

In between mainstream wrestling and local indie wrestling are what might be described as high-level indies—that is, promotions that are a clear step up from the local indies, with a larger geographic footprint and fan base, with a far greater online presence, and with rosters of talented wresters often culled from the local indies (e.g., EVOLVE, Pro Wrestling Guerilla, Shimmer Woman Athletes, Combat Zone Wrestling, PROGRESS, *Lucha Underground*). At the highest level are certain indie promotions that verge on the mainstream in terms of their visibility, fan base, and global reach (e.g., *Impact Wrestling*, Ring of Honor, New Japan Pro-Wrestling).

The focus of this paper is not on mainstream or high-level indie wrestling, but on the southern local indies, which are abundant in the region—though, in the absence of any systematic studies of local indies, it is impossible to specify with any degree of precision how many actually exist. Anecdotal evidence from both scholarly and popular sources, however, suggests that local indie wrestling occupies a distinctive cultural niche in the region, and that the abundance of local indie promotions forms a distinguishing cultural feature of the South (see, e.g., The Carpetbagger; Daniel; Flynt; Kyriakoudes and Coclanis; Shay). The local indie wrestling activity near my home in Charlotte, NC illustrates this point: by my count, within a roughly two-hour drive from my home, eighteen local indie wrestling promotions currently host periodic wrestling shows (e.g., American Pro Wrestling, Carolina Wrestling Showcase, Exodus Wrestling Alliance, Eastern Wrestling Federation, New Life Wrestling, New Millennial Championship Wrestling, Palmetto Championship Wrestling, Trans-South Wrestling, WrestleForce, UltraWrestle, Xtreme World Wrestling, etc.).

While local indie promotions might be abundant in the region, they are not equally distributed throughout all sectors of southern society. Overall, local indie wrestling in the South is predominantly, though not exclusively, a feature of poor white culture. Southern indie shows tend to be held in lower-income

neighborhoods in small, unassuming venues that are functionally adequate but often in need of minor repair (e.g., National Guard Armories, Boys and Girls Clubs, school or church gymnasiums). Show infrastructure tends to be minimal and makeshift: homemade signs indicating ticket prices; entrance fees collected by volunteers who sit behind collapsible tables; an older wrestling ring with a faded canvas; and an aging sound system. The crowds tend to be overwhelmingly white and tend to display socioeconomic markers typically associated with lower-income communities: everything from higher rates of obesity and poor oral health, to a higher percentage of cigarette smokers, to well-worn and faded clothes, and late model vehicles in the parking lot.

Class divisions in society, however, turn on much more than economic factors, like income levels and relative wealth, or on labor or consumption levels. As Tracy Thompson argues, while wealth clearly "has something to do with class distinction," in actuality class "is a complex mixture of accent…family education, church affiliation and attendance, personal morals, manners, and prison record" (191). Sean McCloud, relying of the work of Pierre Bourdieu, reminds us that class is also about "how we move our bodies, how we use them, and what we put on and into them. […] [Class] reveals itself in our most ingrained habits of mind and body" (2). Social class, moreover, pertains to the boundaries we draw between ourselves and others, and to social practices that are "embodied in our collective practices, our shared activities, and our social institutions" (2).

This fuller understanding of class as a set of embodied and enacted social practices, rather than merely a description of economic indicators, opens an array of possibilities for the examination of professional wrestling as a distinctive form of popular culture among the South's poor whites. For as scholars have long argued—as far back as Roland Barthes' seminal 1957 essay—professional wrestling is a mode of performative storytelling in which wrestlers enact personae and perform in dramas that "conform to the image which the public has of the great legendary themes of its mythology" (31). Similarly, Henry Jenkins III, writing about the 1990s-era WWF, analyzes wrestling as a form of male melodrama that enacts the myths, values, and everyday experiences of blue collar crowds.

More relevant to the analysis of southern indie wrestling, in a recent New York Times "op-doc," the South Carolina-based indie wrestler "Cauliflower" Brown argues that wrestling ought to be appreciated not as a "fake sport" but "as a form of storytelling" that enacts the struggles and hardships of the crowds

gathered around the ring: low paying jobs; being swindled by faceless bureaucracies; being made to feel small, powerless, and worthless (Grant).While he does not specifically invoke class categories, Brown names some of the everyday realities of poor white southerners that he and the other wrestlers enact in the ring as dramas of oppression, marginalization, and cathartic resistance.

The Folklore of Southern Indie Wrestling

One potentially fruitful line of scholarly inquiry that follows from "Cauliflower" Brown's argument is to examine southern indie wrestling as a form southern folklore. Peter Narváez and Martin Laba define folklore as "performance which is transmitted and communicated by the sensory media of living, small group encounters" leading to "a high degree of performer-audience interaction" (311), which perfectly describes the standard small-town southern indie wrestling show. Popular culture, by contrast, "refers…to cultural events which are transmitted by technological media and communicated in mass societal contexts" (311)—a definition that readily applies to mainstream professional wrestling. For Narváez and Laba, folk culture and popular culture exist on a continuum whereby a cultural element might shift from one pole to the other. This insight into the relationship between folk and popular culture provides a fresh angle to examine professional wrestling's historical development from the so-called "Territory Era" (1930s to 1980s, approximately) to the present.[4] Briefly, during the early decades of the Territory Era, wrestling was a predominantly folk culture that, by mid-century, slowly began to shift toward the popular culture end of the continuum. By the close of the 1980s, as the old wrestling territories increasingly gave way to a single mass media wrestling juggernaut, the WWF/E, wrestling had primarily become a form of popular culture. In this analysis, indie wrestling, which emerged in response to wrestling's transition to the realm of popular culture, represented the intentional effort to keep the old folk form of professional wrestling alive.

Though scholars such as Scott Beekman (73–145) and David Shoemaker (38–46) have examined the role of the mass media, particularly broadcast television, in

[4] For a fuller account of this history, see Beekman 51–145.

transforming professional wrestling from the fringes to the center of the mainstream entertainment industry (or in Narváez and Laba's conception, into the realm of popular culture), opportunities abound for studying the folk aspects of both Territory Era wrestling and current-day independent wrestling. One rich line of inquiry focuses specifically on the ways in which the actual folk performances, particularly the characters (or "gimmicks") the wrestlers embody, enact key class distinctions. For example, among all the southern indie shows that I have seen (mostly in the Carolinas, but also Georgia, Kentucky, and Tennessee), the most reviled heels almost always present themselves either as racial, ethnic, or, far less frequently, religious outsiders who pose a threat to the white community, or as classist superiors who superciliously flout their social privilege over the "white trash" crowd. The following are specific examples of both categories of heels; I have seen them all wrestle in various indie promotions in the Carolinas.

An example of the first heel category is "The Syrian Sheik." Dressing like an extra in *Lawrence of Arabia*, he is a copy of some of the Middle Eastern caricatures who have appeared in mainstream wrestling (e.g., The Sheik, The Iron Sheik, Mohammad Hassan, Ariya Daivari). The only main difference is that "The Syrian Sheik" carries an oversized Syrian flag to the ring and often speaks to the crowd about his national origins. The wrestler clearly is a symbol for one of the heated social and political issues for many in the crowd: the resettlement of Syrian refugees in the region, and the specter of Islamic encroachment on what is broadly thought of as Christian territory. Another example of the threatening outsider is "Supreme," an African-American wrestler who intentionally plays off the region's troubling racial history by embodying some of the predominant racial stereotypes about black men. "Supreme" is aggressive and angry, and blames his myriad economic and social problems on the "crackers" sitting around the ring.

An example of a classist heel is "The Governor," a wrestling manager who comes to the ring in a posh smoking jacket and with a pipe in his mouth. Through his effete mannerisms and speech patterns—and with the utter disdain he has for the assembled crowd—"The Governor" enacts the role of the unscrupulous elected official, whose unearned privilege oppresses and harms. Another example of the classist heel category is "Stud Stable," a team of loud-mouth, condescending wrestlers, led by a fast-talking Boss Hogg-looking manager who flings money around to buy up all the wrestling talent. "Stud Stable" expresses its disdain for the audience by specifically invoking the economic disparities that exist between them, the profligate wrestlers, and the poor white trash crowd.

Without fail, all the heel wrestlers, both the threatening outsiders and the classist sophisticates, express condescension over the crowd by playing off the most hackneyed and demeaning stereotypes of poor white southerners as nothing but white trash. For example, prior to all his matches, classist heel "American G.I." stands in the center of the ring with the microphone in hand and addresses the crowd with this opening line: "Listen here all you Dorito eating, beer drinking, food stamp cashing rednecks." He then goes on to castigate the fans for being lazy, jobless, Bible-thumpers. While "American G.I." directs his condescension generally at the entire crowd, others routinely direct their belittling mockery at specific fans that are singled out as prime examples of the poor white trash crowd: one with drab, ill-fitting clothes is humiliated for his presumed poverty; one who stumbles through an attempted jeer is humiliated as an uneducated imbecile. I once saw classist heel Chris "Thunder" Anderson focus his derision on a single mentally handicapped man in the front row; the wrestler repeatedly exited the ring during his match to go over to the fan and cruelly mimic his facial gestures and verbal utterances in an exaggerated and grotesque parody.

As Annalee Newitz and Matt Wray argue, white trash stereotypes have long been used to "solidify for the middle and upper classes a sense of cultural and intellectual superiority" (1); they are a way, as Tracy Thompson memorably phrases it, for others "to [tell] the world that even given the fifty-yard head start of being born with a white skin, the person in question had still never managed to amount to a hill of beans" (191–2). Such white trash stereotypes enable the heel wrestlers to position themselves as haughty outsiders who mischaracterize and misapprehend an entire community, and then demean this community based on the mischaracterization. This process not only represents the standard way poor white southerners have been represented throughout history; it is also a sure-fire way for a heel wrestler to catch heat from the crowd.

Yet the cultural outsider heel has a specific role to play within the story world of southern indie wrestling: as outsiders who demean and oppress, they function as foils to the babyface (good guy) wrestlers who stand as the proud and defiant members of the in-group, an insider status they signal primarily through their visual self-presentation. In contrast to the heels, who present themselves as culturally "strange," the most popular babyface wrestlers in virtually all the southern indie shows I have attended tend to present themselves in a remarkably similar manner: they are completely normal, completely average; they look just

like everyone else in the crowd. Their wrestling attire, for example, often resembles the clothes most of the fans wear, i.e. plain and lacking the showiness and ostentation of the heels—commonly a well-worn t-shirt, and basic wrestling trunks and boots. Babyfaces usually have facial hair and tattoos on their arms, as do many of the men in the crowd. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, it is extremely common for babyface wrestlers to display the Confederate battle flag either on their hats, t-shirts, or trunks, or by carrying the flag to the ring ("Redneck Rebel," whom I described at the start of this paper, not only displays the flag in all these ways, he also has the flag tattooed on his chest). Many fans display this symbol too, and it is also common for the flag to hang on the wall of the wrestling venue. In fact, more than any other signifier, the Confederate battle flag functions as a marker of the in-group. In many ways, it operates as the Durkheimian totem of this particular community: it is the community's collective sense of itself projected onto a material symbol, which the community then venerates as a kind of sacred power (Durkheim).

As defenders of this community and representatives of this sacred power, the babyface wrestlers project a rugged, rough-around-the-edges, confident demeanor. When they speak, they are the voice of the people, expressing with conviction their community's pride, determination, and wild refusal to submit to the belittling condescension of the heels. The fans respond with wild enthusiasm; everyone roots for babyfaces to give the heels a good old-fashioned whupping.

The image of in-group identity that emerges in such beloved babyface wrestlers is a kind of populist, unfettered independence. They are the personification of the historian Jack Temple Kirby's countercultural poor white: rugged and rebellious, prizing above all else the right to self-determination, self-sufficiency, and independence. According to Kirby, this image of the countercultural poor white traces back to the Antebellum period and the tension created when "anticapitalist" poor whites clung to their traditional patterns of existence in the face increasingly powerful industrialists whose pro-market business interests were furthered by governmental policies (33–56). Forced into the southern frontier regions, these countercultural communities maintained their traditional patterns as long as they could, but by the mid-20th century the only remaining pockets of such self-sustaining white communities were in the Appalachian highlands and in the Ozarks. The rest had been drawn into the labor market out of sheer necessity, forming a large class of economically stressed laborers who had lost "the white dream of independence through modest material

requirements and resourceful versatility" (48). Nevertheless, claims Kirby, "the dream lives on particularly among the contemporary rural poor, and among men called 'rednecks,' who may live in the country, the working-class suburbs, or the sprawling new cities themselves" (48).

While some scholars have traced this theme of countercultural independence in other characteristic parts of "redneck" culture such as country music, NASCAR, and hunting (Daniel; Ownby, "Manhood, Memory"; Ownby, *Subduing Satan*; Rybacki and Rybacki), opportunity abounds for a fuller treatment than I have just sketched of the themes of self-determination, self-sufficiency, and independence in southern indie wrestling, and for how these themes connect to the lived experiences of poor white folk from the middle of the 20th century to the present.

Violence in Southern Professional Wrestling

The previous suggestions for future scholarly study focus on the folk storytelling aspects of southern indie wrestling, connecting the themes that emerge therein to the broader historical and cultural context of the poor white South. A final suggested line of inquiry contextualizes southern indie wrestling against a related cultural backdrop, namely the historical penchant in the South for violence and violent forms of entertainment (Daniel 50–71).

Though much violence associated with the South historically revolved around issues of race (e.g. slavery, whitecapping, lynching, race riots, and so forth), other kinds of non- (or not obviously-) race-based violence were characteristic of the region throughout its history, such as violent confrontations between neighbors and friends or violent forms of leisure and entertainment like cock fighting, hunting, and the early days of stock car racing (Daniel 172–93; Ownby, *Subduing Satan* 21–37). Particularly relevant for modern indie wrestling is the extremely popular form of bloody and brutal hand-to-hand grappling, known as "gouging" or "rough-and-tumble," that was extremely popular in the southern frontier regions in the 18th and 19th centuries, so much so that it developed into one of the region's first spectator sports (Kyriakoudes and Coclanis 277).

The goal of gouging was not simply to best one's opponent, but to maim him by plucking out an eye, for example, or biting off an ear. Elliot Gorn traces the origin of gouging to the combination of harsh economic conditions and deep

kinship ties that prevailed in the southern backcountry. In these places, "[t]he touchstone of masculinity was unflinching toughness, not chivalry, duty, or piety. Violent sports … were appropriate for men whose lives were hard, whose futures were unpredictable, and whose opportunities were limited" (36). In the 19th century, rough-and-tumble evolved into the less violent, but still quite brutal "catch-as-catch-can" wrestling, which, itself was one of the historical predecessors of modern day professional wrestling (Beekman 6, 20, 35–50; Hewitt).

Traces of the brutality of the southern frontier's "rough-and-tumble" survive in the distinctly southern form of professional wrestling, colloquially known as southern-style "rasslin'," that developed in the last half of the 20th century. A so-called "stiff" style, southern rasslin' tends toward the gritty realism of an actual brawl with lots of punches, kicks, and bloodied foreheads—and very few aerial maneuvers, which take away from the "realism" of the match (Shoemaker 45–6). Much more work needs to be done to understand wrestling as a violent form of poor white southern entertainment against this broader cultural penchant for violence in southern culture throughout its history, and then to understand how the violence of rasslin' intersects with the class distinctions discussed above.

Conclusion

My argument is for scholars to pay serious attention to southern indie wrestling as an important form of popular culture among the region's poor whites. The current lack of scholarship on this specific topic parallels a much broader pattern within the academic literature on the South, namely the relative dearth of scholarly studies on the culture and history of poor white southerners in general. As John Hayes convincingly argues, the narrative of the southern history and culture that dominated academic circles since the 1960s is the story of race: of white domination and entrenched power structures and black resistance to the status quo ("Hard, Hard Religion"; "Recovering"). So much scholarly analysis of the South has focused, understandably, on race that issues of class have been severely under examined. Aside from scholars like Robert Coles, Jack Temple Kirby, Wayne Flynt, and now a newer generation of scholars (Hartigan; Hayes, *Hard, Hard Religion*; Isenberg; Wray), precious few have told the story of class divisions in the South, or of poor white southern culture and history. This relative gap in

scholarly literature is why Isenberg could quite reasonably subtitle her recently published history of poor whites in America a "400 Year *Untold* History" (emphasis mine).

From this broader perspective on scholarship on the South, the inattention to southern indie professional wrestling simply mirrors this relative inattention in scholarly literature to the history and culture of poor white southerners. Giving serious attention to one of the distinctive forms of popular culture among the South's poor whites is to encounter that particular demographic on its own terms, rather than filtered through the distorted "white trash" (or similar) caricatures that have circulated throughout much of the nation's history. In so doing, one discovers southern small-town wrestling functions as an important form of southern folk culture wherein the region's poor whites express many of the important markers of in-group distinction through their performances of the everyday realities of this oft-neglected social class.

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