

Gorgeous Gold Peacocks: Exploring Masculinity in Professional Wrestling

by

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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Mark Harvey, Department of Sociology, and has been approved by all members of the supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts & Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Abstract

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This thesis is a historical comprehensive case study on masculinity that explores stereotypes of masculinity in professional wrestling. Working from theories about gender roles, hegemonic masculinity, misogyny (with its disdain for femininity) and heteronormativity, this study utilizes a content analysis of American professional wrestling to look at the gendered basis of how and why wrestling characters are created and how they are successful. Professional wrestlers historically have created characters based in American popular cultures and specifically American gender ideologies of masculinity that are based in hetero-patriarchal cultural ideals. By looking through the history of masculinity and gender stereotypes in professional wrestling, I uncover how contemporary wrestlers are reworking these stereotypes to create new characters with changing gender inflections based on global cultural ideals, rather than American culture, demonstrating the

influence global culture and the globalized wrestling community has on contemporary American wrestling.

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Introduction

Professional wrestling in North America, often called the masculine melodrama, is a pop culture phenomenon in the United States, with over 10 million viewers tuning in weekly to cable television programs, selling out arenas all over the country, and bringing in more than \$30 million in revenue each year. Each week, professional wrestling offers its viewers an escape from reality, as audiences are said to “live vicariously through the WW(E) characters like The Rock, Stone Cold Steve Austin”, John Cena, and many other superstars (Maguire 2005). Millions tune in weekly because of the excitement, intrigue, and political incorrectness, aspects that often mirror real life experiences. The professional wrestling product’s appeal is due to its mirroring of real life culture and society, while professional wrestling characters are overexaggerated representations of real life actors, creating a funhouse mirror of real life, allowing a viewer to see a larger-than-life, over-exaggerated version of an everyday person for the purpose of entertainment.

These over-exaggerated characters often become stereotypes that allow audiences to easily recognize what a character represents using verbal language, body language, clothing, music, and symbols. These stereotypes get placed into narratives using dichotomies that represent a good and an evil, with the wrestling ring as the location where justice must prevail in this morality play. The audience must know who they should cheer and who they should boo because, as legendary wrestling manager and producer Paul Heyman has said, “the audience is as much a part of the show as the show itself”

(WWE 2014). The audience needs to cheer on the good guy characters, which are called “face” characters, and they need to boo the bad guy characters, called the “heel” characters. The emotional investment of the audience is vital to a character’s success in wrestling (Smith 2008). The goal of professional wrestling is not to win the match, but to become popular, either positively or negatively, and to attain a strong emotional reaction from the audience. Thus, stereotypes are created and performed by the wrestlers that allow audiences to become emotionally invested in the “face” character, and to hate and detest the “heel” character.

This thesis is a historical comprehensive case study on masculinity and looks into stereotypes based on masculinity, starting in the early days of professional wrestling before the advent of the home television set. I work my way through each era of professional wrestling, encompassing a little over a decade each, looking at representations of masculinity and gender stereotypes in professional wrestling and uncovering why these stereotypes and representations were successful, meaning they caused audiences to become emotionally invested in the performance. First, I go through previous scholarship on professional wrestling that looked at similar themes. Next, I ground my thesis in theoretical framework on gender roles, masculinity, and heteronormativity, followed by theories on professional wrestling that include theories on different types of performances and different types of audiences. I also discuss the construction of professional wrestling and why it is a rich field site for scholarship on masculinity studies. After this, I go through five time periods and discuss masculinity representations in professional wrestling and explaining how each was constructed with the use of American sociopolitical culture. I start with the Pre-WWII and Post-War period, discussing the beginning of characters and the first case

study in Gorgeous George. I then move on to the 1970s and look into how stereotypes about masculinity and gender performance were changing and how this was reflected in the culture of the U.S. Next, I discuss masculinity in the 1980s and the Reagan era, bringing in Hulk Hogan and nationalism. After, I look at the Attitude Era and wrestler Goldust. The Attitude Era was the most successful time for professional wrestling and its masculinity representations are a big reason for this. I finish with a look at contemporary wrestling in the globalized era, that includes a look at the impacts of a global wrestling community, something not seen in previous periods, and its influence on U.S. culture, gender roles, and masculinity.

Literature Review

In this section, I go over the established literature on professional wrestling. I begin with literature discussing the audience, which establishes who the audience is, and why they tune in to the wrestling product. With these audience studies is a discussion on the types of fans that attend and invest time in professional wrestling. This section will end with cultural narratives that get written as wrestling storylines, and how this relates to American sociopolitical culture.

Part of the performer's job in professional wrestling is to create emotional investment in the character from the audience, as Tyson Smith observed in *Passion Work: The Joint Production of Emotional Labor in Professional Wrestling*. The emotional investment of the audience is vital to a character's success in wrestling. The goal of professional wrestling, Smith mentions, is not to win the match, but to become popular, either positively or negatively, and to attain a strong emotional reaction from the audience (Smith 2008). The audience must love you and want you to triumph in victory, or they must hate you and want you defeated and humiliated. If the audience does not care about a wrestler, they will not be successful. This emotional investment keeps wrestling fans coming back to the program as they begin to care about the success of the wrestlers.

Maguire, in *American Professional Wrestling: Evolution, Content, And Popular Appeal*, wants to understand why this emotional investment with the audience happens. Each week, professional wrestling offers its viewers an escape from reality, as audiences

are said to “live vicariously through the WW(E) characters like The Rock and Stone Cold Steve Austin” (quoted in Maguire 2005). Studying professional wrestling from a macro-sociological perspective, Maguire says that millions tune in weekly because of the excitement, intrigue, and political incorrectness, aspects that often mirror real life experiences (Maguire). Many scholars including Barret and Levin (2013, 2015), Maguire (2005), and Benton (2015) conclude that the professional wrestling product’s appeal is due to its mirroring of real life culture and society. However, many would also contend that professional wrestling characters are exaggerated representations of real life actors, creating a funhouse effect of real life. This allows a viewer to see a larger-than-life, over-exaggerated version of an everyday person.

In Spectacle of Excess: The Passion Work of Professional Wrestlers, Fans and Anti-Fans, Hill looks at the different types of viewers that tune in to witness this funhouse mirror effect, dividing up fans into different categories. Hill describes the active wrestling fan, known as “smart fans” that know the product, including the inner-workings of how characters and storylines are created. Variations of these smart fans that Hill discusses are the fan and the anti-fan. Hill quotes Gray’s work on fans and anti-fans, saying both “share similarities in that they are audiences who like or dislike a personality, content or artefact, keep up to date with news and social media about it and make time to express their positive and negative views”. These fans interact with the wrestling show as they “switch between negative and positive expressions in concert with the performances of heroes and villains in the ring” (Hill 2014). The audience is just as much in character as the wrestlers themselves. They know the storylines and understand the heel (bad guy) in the narrative is not a bad guy, just playing an evil character. They “mark out” as it’s called by, going to

the show and booing at the bad guy, hating him, and even throwing trash at them. However, as these are smart fans, who are studying the product and know about the production, they have an attitude where they “love to hate” the bad guy characters (Hill 2014). This is evident today with professional wrestlers like The Miz, who is one of the top heels in the WWE. While he is an obnoxious character who backstabs his friends and will do anything to ensure a victory, fans only hate and boo the character The Miz. Mike Mizanin, the performer behind the character, is one of the most respected wrestlers in WWE, earning praise from wrestling producers, fans, and writers alike for his work as a heel. He has been voted as not only The Most Hated Wrestler of the year by Pro Wrestling Illustrated but has also been rewarded with “most improved” awards for his hard work and dedication to his character, which is based on making people hate him. While fans and anti-fans will boo his character when he cheats to win or taunts the audience, he gets cheered and respect from fans as he wins title after title in the WWE. He is one of the most popular characters that is “loved to be hated” by the fans. By cheating against popular wrestlers, even going so far as to steal his opponents signature moves to use against them, he gets fans emotionally involved in his antics. The fans, in turn, cheer when his opponent gets the upper hand after the Miz attempts, and is unsuccessful at, cheating. The conclusion of this morality play of good vs. evil, with the audience emotionally invested, gives the display of the violence an entertaining appeal. This relays to the audience that, not only good should triumph over evil, but that evil also needs to get physically and violently beaten by good, to ensure a satisfying conclusion.

Professional wrestling is a pop culture success because viewers seek storylines, narratives, and characters that relate to them. As studies by Smith, Maguire, and Barret and

Levin have revealed, narratives in wrestling reflect or mirror real life narratives. These include characters based on working-class actors facing disputes with their employer, storylines featuring surprise pregnancy and love affairs, and narratives representing the national rivalries of the United States.

Additionally, the characters within this narrative are exaggerated versions of real life actors, like gods of ancient times. Therefore, it's appropriate to compare the relationship between professional wrestling and the viewer's sociopolitical culture. While what the viewer is seeing is often based on a real life narrative, that narrative is purposely exaggerated in order to entertain the audience with over-the-top personalities and personas. These personas allow fans to connect with the characters. Not only do they see themselves in the characters, but they see a bigger and more powerful version of themselves, allowing for a specific kind of entertainment only found in professional wrestling. This is vital to professional wrestling, because if the audience does not experience this funhouse mirror perspective in terms of a narrative, they may not understand, or worse, they may not care. Ethnographies by Smith, Benton, and Hill, respectively, on the professional wrestling audience have shown that the audience participating is a part of the show; the audience is both watching and performing. In his ethnographic study, Smith gets one of the local wrestlers, "Mickey", to discuss the emotional psychology involved in the professional wrestling production, saying "playing with people's emotions is what we do" (Smith 2008). Emotional psychology is utilized by the performers to make the audience care about the performers and the storylines. An example of this would be a wrestler cheating behind the referees back, or an illegal two-on-one situation, creating sympathy for the good guy who has the odds against him due to his opponent breaking the rules without consequence.

Smith determines that the success of a character and narrative is determined by achieving an emotional response, either positive or negative, from the audience. If you cannot get these reactions from the audience, you are not a successful wrestler. The audience's emotional investment is what drives professional wrestling storylines and narratives. Paul Heyman, wrestling booker, producer, and manager to wrestler and UFC star Brock Lesner summed up the importance of the audience in wrestling by saying "the audience is as much a part of the show as the show itself" (WWE 2014).

In studying how and why audiences get involved in professional wrestling, Hill noted that the live in-person audience wants to become fully embraced in the production, and the ways of doing so define what type of fan they are. The two known categories of fans, discussed by scholars and fans of wrestling, are smart fans and marks (Hill 2014). A smart fan, Hill says, is a fan who "thinks they know how professional wrestling works, gathering knowledge on the various schools of wrestling, acrobatics, and mixed martial arts and knowing the back stories to professional wrestling characters". A mark, on the other hand, describes the rest of the audience, "who can be manipulated to create an exciting match" (Hill 2014). These terms stem from the original days of wrestling, when it was part of the carnival at the turn of the 20th century and into World War II. Here, carnies and strongmen would put on grappling shows, often challenging the local town's tough guy. While some in the audience knew that the show was a "work" (a carnie term for staged or pre-planned), most in the audience thought these contests were legitimate and would bet their money on the carnie or the local.

In *'Yes! No! ... Maybe?': Reading the Real in Professional Wrestling's Unreality*, Jansen looks into the types of fans to see how they come together to enjoy the professional wrestling program. They tune in for storylines that

reflect real life narratives in a morality play of good vs. evil. Professional wrestling storylines, like the one's involving Hulk Hogan against the evil foreigner, are constructed in a simple, dualistic narrative, a public performance of power relations (Hill 2014), where there is a "good" character (called the 'face'), and a "bad" character (called the 'heel'). In the earlier days of televised professional wrestling in the 1950s, these characters would be called "cleanies" and "meanies" in local newspapers, as to help guide the audience to who they should root for and who they should boo (Capouya 2009). Professional wrestling is not just a television show, but as Jansen has noted, is a site for fan engagement, and is a space for working out sociocultural and sociopolitical ideals and desires (Jansen 2018). Professional wrestling is a morality play of good vs. evil, as Roland Barthes has noted, where "fans hope for a just resolution" to the problems presented (Smith 2008).

When establishing "good" and "evil" characters for these narratives, performers cannot simply state their intentions, rather, audiences must receive clues within these character's performances and narratives. The audiences need shared cultural knowledge to uncover these clues, as most are based on stereotypes of the characters the performers are portraying. In *Lamination as Slamination: Irwin R. Schyster and the Construction of Antisemitism in Professional Wrestling*, Benton discusses the shared cultural knowledge or frames needed for all audiences to understand the characters and narratives in the wrestling product. This is supported by Taylor in *You Can't See Me, " or Can You?: Unpacking John Cena's Performance of Whiteness in World Wrestling Entertainment*, looking at messages of nationalism and white supremacy in character and narratives in professional wrestling.

Benton, who explored the shared cultural knowledge necessary to interpret anti-Semitic messages constructed by the wrestler Irwin R. Schyster, concluded that the

characters cannot explicitly say why audiences should dislike them but need to provide clues that audiences can pick up through the understanding of a shared cultural knowledge (Benton 2015). This knowledge includes stereotypes that certain audiences will understand based on their own culture. While this can be used to push messages about patriotism and nationalism, as wrestling did with Hulk Hogan for over a decade, it can also be used to push negative messages using stereotypes, as is often the case with characters that represent the absent “other”. Another study, by Taylor, explored why audiences might relate to a character that pushes a specific, positive message about their own culture and ethnicity. Similar to how the 1940s and 1950s saw the use of ethnic characters to get the ethnic audience to cheer on certain wrestlers, John Cena, who Taylor analyzes, uses his white, patriotic views to reaffirm white supremacy in the United States (Taylor 2014). My thesis, also using culture as a basis for the construction of messages pushed by the performers, mimics the methodology of Benton and Taylor to discuss the cultural ideals of masculinity, and how they are performed in American professional wrestling.

Although this is not all of the available literature on professional wrestling, it is the most beneficial as it provides insight into audience and the cultural aspects that make up professional wrestling. The professional wrestler is only successful if they can make the audience emotionally invested in the performance. This happens when the audience sees storylines that reflect narratives and experiences in their own lives. This, along with characters that reflect the audience, helps audiences connect with the wrestling product. With the divide in the types of fans, the performers need to find common connections with fans, which have resulted in the use of culturally relevant narratives and storylines that reflect nationalism and patriotism. While the wrestling production has changed since its

early days in the carnival, the relationship between the types of fans and the performers has stayed the same.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding theories of gender, masculinity, and social constructionism is vital to explaining the hegemonic/subordinate masculine dichotomy in American professional wrestling and society. This section will introduce theories of gender and masculinity that are necessary before discussing masculinity in professional wrestling and popular culture.

Continuing to use the funhouse mirror analogy and adding theories on gender, sexuality, and masculinity reveal just why these distorted images of subordinate masculinity were successful in their goal of evoking hatred from the audience. Social constructionists argue that social constructs, such as gender and race hierarchies, class distinctions, and hegemonic masculinities, are not natural, but are determined by societal relations and enacted through societal actions, interactions, and knowledge. In the popular nature vs. nurture debate, social constructionism falls outside the frame. Social constructionists argue that men are masculine and women feminine only because that is how North American's have been socialized, and that these are not fixated, because they are not based in biology, but in culture. Gender is about power, and the biological differences are secondary, meaning that how one performs gender is not based upon their biology. One gender is above the other in a gender hierarchy not because our biology says that one is better than the other, but because our society dictates that one is better than the other, and gender differences within society are based upon hegemonic masculine men maintaining power over women and subordinate masculine men.

These sex categories are not just a matter of male vs. female, but also are seen when discussing one gender, here, men, and how different forms of masculinities are recognized. While these forms of masculinities are different depending on culture, time, and place, there is always a form of dominant masculinity that is present in patriarchal societies.

According to R.W. Connell, a hegemonic masculinity is a practice that justifies and legitimizes the power of men's dominant position within society (Connell 1995). These continuing practices create hierarchies of masculinity in society, where the dominant, hegemonic masculine man is at the top, and the feminine men, with a subordinate masculinity, are at the bottom. Hegemonic masculinity is enforced and policed through heteronormativity, a practice of socializing people to believe that patriarchal heterosexuality is the default, and anything outside of this category is seen as "abnormal" or "bad". Hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity are commonly linked to homophobia and misogyny, as all these beliefs reinforce the dominant position of the hegemonic masculine within a gender hierarchy, which "prizes masculinity by demonizing femininity" (Moritz 2006). Hegemonic, straight, masculine men are at the top, and all others including subordinate men, homosexual men, and women, are at the bottom. This hierarchy creates associations of subordinate masculinity with femininity, femaleness, and homosexuality, although these are not biologically linked at all. This also helps create categories of "good" masculinity and "bad" masculinity, a "good" gender and a "bad" gender that are socially based.

From this concept of a "good" and a "bad" masculinity, discussions about performing gender can be had. Scholars (Butler 1990) (West and Zimmerman 1987) have discussed gender as a set routine that must be performed, and this performance is based on

what society deems acceptable for the gender you identify as (or the gender you are perceived to be). West and Zimmerman argue that differences between sexes are characterized by behaviors (West and Zimmerman). These behaviors, according to West and Zimmerman, are a product of society. These behaviors are activities and performances that are typed as either masculine or feminine. We base these performances on codes and conventions that dictate how men or women are supposed to act in everyday activities. These performances, essentially, create sex categories. When people observe someone perceived to be masculine performing feminine behaviors and activities, people are conditioned to see individual as a social or sexual deviant. This causes people who lie outside the categories of “full” male and “full” female to feel they do not belong as a part of society. This can also cause hatred to those who fall outside of these categories, which has been seen too often in the forms of harassment, violence, assault, and even death. Butler discusses this within the heterosexual matrix, arguing that sex and gender are always seen together, even though sex is physical category and gender is a performance. Butler continues, saying that when sex and gender are seen together, deviancy is forbidden (Butler 1990).

Laws against sexual deviants, including cross-dressing, same sex activities, and even same gender co-habitation, were passed from state to state and were heavily policed in neighborhoods with immigrants and people of color. Therefore, these acts of sexual and social deviancy were easily linked to ideas of race, hegemonic masculinity, labor, and citizenship. Here were people of ‘color’, coming from other countries, not able to find work, and participating in these deviant activities, or at least being caught participating. To appear distinct from these people, the conception of a new hegemonic masculinity started

to form concerning what an American male needed to be like and act like. Heading into World War II, this was especially important in deciding who was able to fight and therefore die for their country. Would the United States want feminine men, who were not white, and therefore, not as tough and smart, as the “normal” white American male fighting for their country? Of course not, white American men thought. These ideas of the ideal American hegemonic male were solidified in the cartoons and pop culture of the time, which depicted Americans as strong, tough, patriotic, white, and most importantly, heterosexual, which was a new idea at the time. The Japanese, on the other hand, were depicted as yellow or an unnatural color, weak, unable to speak or function properly, along with being sneak and underhanded. These cartoons and piece of pop culture were all over America, in magazines and on movie screens. Basically, all the things that the hegemonic American male was not. This trick, of linking the foreign, the non-white, and the feminine with “bad” has been a pop culture staple in the United States since, being used by professional wrestling, Disney animations, Hollywood movies (the latter two of which may not even be set in the United States) and other forms of pop culture for the rest of the 20th century.

Within this new hegemonic masculine norm was the new concept of the heterosexual male. While opposite sex couples and heterosexuality, like homosexuality, have existed as long as modern humans have existed, the concept of heterosexuality as an identity was a modern one (Ambrosino 2017). This new identity was important as it distinguished the “normal” male to the “abnormal” or so-called gender inverted male. The new identity, which was coined in 1934, identified heterosexuality as manifestation of sexual passion for one of the opposite sex; normal sexuality. This created a “norm” for

sexual identity, making all other forms of sexuality “bad” or “unnatural”. Although this powerful new term only described a specific sexual desire from one individual to another, it turned into a much more powerful category that became linked to ideas of masculinity, sexuality, community, citizenship, labor, and health. This new category and others who would no longer fall under the umbrella of “heterosexual” would become second-class citizens within their own country, all because of how other, more “normalized” people would view these deviants (Canaday 2009). Sexual deviants, so-called gender/sexual inverts, and homosexuals were now considered a criminal class, and would be discriminated against in many forms of life. With these new links of sexual deviancy to masculinity, citizenship, and social deviancy, many men were scared to be deemed a sexual deviant or a homosexual for fear of reprisal which could be them losing their family, their careers, or even their lives.

These socially constructed categories were lifestyles and how individuals lived everyday lives. Many men were feminine, and they enjoyed it, with some even making a living from it. These men would be called sissies, pansies, dandies and fairies (Capo 2017), (Chauncey 1994), (Canaday 2009). While these words have fallen out of fashion, they were common terms used to describe male individuals who appeared to have feminine, or gender inverted qualities, and were used between the 1890s and into the 1970s and 80s. George Chauncey, in his book on gender and urban culture in New York City before 1940, described the fairy as an individual of an intermediate sex to others, one that might be described as a “female impersonator”, or “male inverts” (Chauncey 1994). Tabloid newspapers around the country published cartoons depicting fairies as “men who thought they were women” (Chauncey 1994: 46).

When people are socialized to believe that a “real” man is masculine, not to mention heterosexual, they are inclined to believe that a man who is not masculine is not a “real” man, and therefore, doesn’t deserve basic rights, respect, and privileges. A man has been associated with numerous privileges throughout American history, like the ability to vote, get a divorce, own land, be educated, defend the country, and so much more. Therefore, who is “more masculine” has always been an important debate. This was especially true following World War II, when certain G.I.’s were not given VA benefits that they were entitled to. This was due to accusations that they participated in homosexual activity or “non-masculine” activity such as cross-dressing or gender inversion. In popular culture, Sergeant Klinger on the TV show *M.A.S.H.* (1972) exemplified this with his cross-dressing in order to receive a Section 8 Discharge, claiming he was mentally unfit for combat. Although the concept of heterosexual and homosexual were fairly new, both being introduced in medical journals and then into the mainstream between 1900 and World War II, Americans were quickly being socialized into understand that there was only one “acceptable” and desirable version of a masculine male, and the other, was bad, unacceptable, and undesirable.

In conclusion, these theories of masculinity, gender, social constructionism, and the creation of the homosexual and heterosexual culture are important for the discussion of masculinity in American popular culture and professional wrestling. Sex categories go beyond male and female but create socially constructed hierarchies within male and within female, where masculinity is seen as “good” and “positive” while femininity and subordination is seen as “bad” and “negative”, especially when discussing men. While these theories are not necessary for audiences to understand professional wrestling

narratives and characters, they help in the analysis of wrestling, characters, and narratives by scholars.

Deconstruction of Pro Wrestling

This section will introduce theories involved in the study and creation of professional wrestling. These theories include the wrestling dichotomy of good vs. evil, and how race, ethnicity, masculinity, and nationalism has been used in this dichotomy to push socially constructed messages and themes. I also discuss the significance of professional wrestling in popular culture and why wrestling has been a major part of American popular culture for over a century. This section will also discuss theories of wrestling audiences, including the types of fans, how the audience is in character, and how the audience is vital to the professional wrestling production. I additionally discuss the theory of the Gorgeous Gold Peacock, a male character that is of subordinate or feminized masculinity but has been successful as a professional wrestler.

Good vs. Evil Narratives

The essential storyline in professional wrestling is most always good vs. evil in a morality play, where justice must prevail. Looking at narratives in professional wrestling, we find messages constructed by the performers and interpreted by the participating audiences. The audience in professional wrestling is a part of the show, almost as much as the show itself. They must cheer when they are needed to cheer, and they must boo when they are needed to boo. In order to do this, the active wrestling fan must have knowledge of characters and storylines, or they must be able to detect clues given out by the performer in their mannerisms, words, clothing, actions and symbols. These messages pull from

sociopolitical and cultural ideals about American masculinity, that the audience must be aware of, to convey negative messages about subordinate or non-hegemonic forms of masculinity. These subordinate masculinities are time, space, and place specific, meaning that the symbols of masculinity are not static, but fluid, and depend on the culture of a specific place and a specific time. Non-hegemonic forms of masculinity become characters in wrestling that represent the “bad” forms of masculinity. This understanding of “good” vs “bad” masculinity is shared cultural knowledge understood by the audience and the performers in professional wrestling. This allows the characters to make sense.

Professional wrestling narratives and storylines are created from the dichotomy of good vs. evil that often reflects the sociopolitical culture of the United States and its national rivalries (Capouya 2009). Historically, this has been used to create characters and narratives based on Jewish wrestling vs. Nazi wrestler, black wrestler vs. racist Southern wrestler, and the All-American wrestler vs. Evil Middle Eastern or Russian Communist Wrestler, depending on the time period the narrative took place in. In each instance, the evil character, called the “heel” is represented by a term called “the absent other”, meaning that none in the audience can connect with the “heel” wrestler, because they represent a stereotype that is not visible or represented within the audience.

These over-exaggerated characters often become stereotypes that allow audiences to easily recognize what a performer represents using verbal language, body language, clothing, music, and symbols. These stereotypes get placed into narratives using dichotomies that represent a good and an evil, with the wrestling ring as the location where justice must prevail in this masculine morality play. The audience must know who they should cheer and who they should boo because, as legendary wrestling manager and

producer Paul Heyman has said, “the audience is as much as part of the show as the show itself” (WWE 2014). The audience needs to cheer on the good guy characters, which are called “face” characters, and they need to boo and hate the bad guy character, called the “heel” characters.

Black Stereotypes in Professional Wrestling

Not all stereotypes were specifically negative, and black wrestler are a good example of this. Black wrestlers often played a role of sympathy or domination with audiences, particularly in the South. And while stereotypes were used, and they could be analyzed as having negative connotations about African Americans, the culture at the time did not accept these stereotypes as negative, because they were given to “face” characters, meaning the actions they took in the ring needed to be cheered by the audience. Black wrestlers like Junkyard Dog and Ron Simmons succeeded in the South due to the perception of race at the time in the South during the 1970s and 1980s. Ron Simmons is a former All-American linebacker from Florida State University and was the first defensive player to have his number retired by the school (Seminoles.com). When he became an active professional wrestler, he was already being cheered by the Southern crowd, who had seen him play college football. The crowd further cheered him on when other wrestlers would challenge his ability to transition from football to wrestling, a trick used on multiple wrestler’s that came from other sports. Simmons would eventually become the US’s first African American World Wrestling Champion. Junkyard Dog (known as JYD) gained popularity in the Alabama, Mississippi, and Georgia region, known as Mid-South Region. Here, Junkyard Dog’s storylines would often involve a heel wrestler invoking racist stereotypes to JYD, in which the crowd, understanding the storyline and playing along,

would denounce this racism against JYD, and watch him triumph as they cheered him on. JYD would walk to the ring and perform a dance for the crowd called his “jive”, while his signature move would be him crawling around on the floor like a dog and performing head-butts. While performing these stereotypically racist gestures, JYD would get cheered on by the local, white audience, even if he lost. The cheering crowd, in turn, would feel good about themselves for knowing they supported the black wrestler against the racist white wrestler.

This good vs. evil dichotomy that gets repeated in professional wrestling narratives must resonate with audiences, and thus, characters must have recognizable personas. As mentioned earlier, Hulk Hogan was an easily recognizable “face” character. With the American Flag covering his strong, masculine body and accompanying him to the ring, the U.S. audience could recognize that he was good and should be cheered. The wrestling production, and the performers themselves, must tap into a shared cultural knowledge that audiences must possess to make sense of the characters. This shared cultural knowledge could be as simple as “strong muscular American man is good”. It could also be based on the sociopolitical climate, with such an example being the numerous Nazi or Japanese characters appearing around WWII. These characters were prominent during and after WWII as a way for wrestling promoters and bookers (writers of the wrestling product) to signal to audiences that these characters were bad guys, and whoever would be challenging them should be cheered. These characters would pose in front of audiences and do Nazi salutes or wave the Japanese flag to give clues to audiences how they need to react. These types of messages were constructed in such unsubtle ways because fans did not have the capabilities to be as interactive with the product in the 20th century as they can be today.

Today, a few clicks online can tell you everything you want about a character, including their real name, birth location, family members, and even what college they attended. Characters from the 20th century like Mr. Fuji (evil Japanese martial artist) and Ivan Koloff (evil Soviet from the USSR) wouldn't be effective if audience members could turn on a computer and find out that Mr. Fuji was actually Hawaiian (not exactly a friend to Japan) and Ivan Koloff was actually a native of Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

Professional Wrestling in Popular Culture

Despite having wrestlers from all over the globe, professional wrestling in North America has been a homogenous product made for the same type of audiences with similar culture. In the United States, professional wrestling has been a pop culture phenomenon since the invention of the in-home television set. Today, professional wrestling reaches almost 10 million viewers who tune in weekly to cable television programs, selling out arenas all over the country, and brings in more than \$30 million in revenue each year (NYSE). The owner and CEO of the biggest company in North America, Vince McMahon of the WWE, is worth over \$3.5 billion, all from his professional wrestling empire.

Professional wrestling is not just an anomaly but has been a staple in American pop culture for over a century. Professional wrestling has crossed over into the main stream and vice-versa for decades, with many famous people, catchphrases, and ideas formed in professional wrestling becoming mainstream icons. The first wrestler discussed, Gorgeous George, influenced not only wrestlers who would compete long after his death, but pop culture icons throughout the century, having direct influence on boxer Muhammad Ali, entertainers such as James Brown, Bob Dylan, Little Richard, Prince, and Liberace (Capouya 2009). Bob Dylan stated in his book *The Chronicles: Volume One*, that meeting

Gorgeous George changed his life (Capouya 2009). James Brown stated in his memoir that Gorgeous Georges' antics helped to "create the James Brown you see on stage" (Capouya 2005).

Decades later, superstars Hulk Hogan, "Macho Man" Randy Savage, and Jesse "The Body" Ventura would enter the world of professional wrestling. While making millions of dollars in wrestling, all three would go on to make a name for themselves in mainstream popular culture. Hulk Hogan would become a movie and television star, starring in popular (and some bad) movies such as Rocky III (1982), No Holds Barred (1989), Mr. Nanny (1993), and Santa with Muscles (1996) (Reynolds 2014). Hogan has also hosted TV shows, including a reality show on VH1 called Hogan Knows Best, and the revival of American Gladiators (2008) on NBC in the 2008. This mainstream appeal of Hulk Hogan stems from his popularity and ratings draw in professional wrestling. Randy Savage and Jesse Ventura would also have success in the mainstream public, with Savage starring in commercials for and being the spokesperson for Slim Jim, a food product that got popularized with its commercials showing Savage performing a wrestling move or finding a way to hurt an individual who might be having a boring day. Savage would get the man (always a man) in the commercial to break out of his boring routine by shouting at him to "SNAP INTO A SLIM JIM", followed by his trademark "Oh Yeah!". Savage also had a small role as a professional wrestler in the Toby Maguire Spider Man movie (2002), and towards the end of his life, Savage would put out a rap album, showing just how versatile a professional wrestler can be outside the ring.

Jesse "The Body" Ventura, after starring in a few movies, including the original Predator film alongside Arnold Schwarzenegger and the straight-to-video movie Abraxas:

Guardians of the Universe (1990), left Hollywood and decided to run for political office. From 1991-1995, Ventura was mayor of Brooklyn Park, Minnesota, eventually becoming the State's 38th Governor in 1999 as a member of the Independence Party. Although he hasn't held political office since, he has flirted with a run for the Presidency as recently as November 2018, saying he would only run as a member of the Green Party.

While Hogan, Savage, and Ventura have had some mainstream success, the most successful professional wrestler to enter mainstream popular culture have been Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, who has starred in numerous TV shows, movies, hosted award shows, and has even appeared on Nickelodeon, the kids' network, to host its Kid's Choice Awards. The Rock's most successful venture into mainstream popular culture has been in Disney's Moana, where The Rock starred as Maui, the legendary shapeshifting demigod from Polynesian mythology. Not only was the Rock's voice used for the character, but The Rock's grandfather, famed wrestler "High Chief" Peter Maivia, was used as a model for Tui, the chief Moana's kingdom. Tui wears a red lavalava, the piece of clothing traditionally worn by Polynesian and other Oceanic people, in the same fashion, color, and style as High Chief Peter Maivia did, and Tui even had traditional Polynesian hand-made tattoos styled after Peter Maivia. Johnson, being of Polynesian and Samoan decent, helped with modeling for the movie, including that of Tui, and even the tattoos and war dance used by Maui in the movie. These tattoos and war dance were also made popular by contemporary professional wrestling tag team The Usos, who are also relatives of Johnson. The Rock is just the most modern incarnation of how professional wrestling influences pop culture. Without the success of The Rock in professional wrestling, his mainstream movie success, including his influence in the production of Moana, would never have happened.

Another way professional wrestling has gone mainstream in popular culture has been in forms of media and literature. Several former and current professional wrestlers have been named to the New York Times Bestsellers list including Chris Jericho, Mick Foley, Daniel Bryan, The Rock, John Cena, and AJ Lee. These books were written about the lives of the wrestlers themselves, demonstrating the mainstream appeal for stories about wrestling and wrestlers. John Cena and The Rock have turned into popular memes used on Twitter and other social media platforms. The Rock is featured in videogames that are not wrestling-themed, including the arcade game Rampage based on the movie of the same name, also starring the Rock. Together, these demonstrate the mainstream appeal of professional wrestling.

Audiences, fans, and anti-fans

The two known categories of fans, discussed by scholars and fans of wrestling, are smart fans and marks (Hill 2014). A smart fan, Hill says, is a fan who “thinks they know how professional wrestling works, gathering knowledge on the various schools of wrestling, acrobatics, and mixed martial arts and knowing the back stories to professional wrestling characters”. A mark, on the other hand, describes the rest of the audience, “who can be manipulated to create an exciting match” (Hill 2014). These terms stem from the original days of wrestling, when it was part of the carnival at the turn of the 20th century and into World War II. Here, carnies and strongmen would put on grappling shows, often challenging the local town’s tough guy. While some in the audience knew that the show was a “work” (a carnie term for staged or pre-planned), most in the audience thought these contests were legitimate and would bet their money on the carnie or the local. The trick here, one that continues into modern pro wrestling, is that the challenger, who would be

working for the carnival, was just an ‘ordinary’ individual. He would come so close to beating the carnie, but just could not do it. The men in the audience, who thought they had what it took to defeat the grappler based on the show that was performed, would pay money and challenge the carnie, only to come up short.

As a part of this “work” performance, the carnie and the first grappler to perform with the carnie had a routine that would make the holds look tough, but were soft grapples, which ensured none of the workers would get hurt. After this initial worked performance, the carnie would challenge audience members to a grappling match to further present the contest as a real contest. The carnie would use legitimate holds and submission moves on the audience members to ensure that the carnie always won and help protect the show. These audience members that would be separated from their money would be the marks, or target, of the con. This “work” became the basis of professional wrestling; can the underdog (the audience, or, later, the performer representing the audience) conquer the favorite? The definitions of the underdog and the favorite change over time, but the emotional involvement for the underdog conquering the favorite has always been vital to the success of a professional wrestling narrative.

Variations of these smart fans that Hill discusses are the fan and the anti-fan. Hill quotes Gray’s work on fans and anti-fans, saying both “share similarities in that they are audiences who like or dislike a personality, content or artefact, keep up to date with news and social media about it and make time to express their positive and negative views”. These fans interact with the wrestling show as they “switch between negative and positive expressions in concert with the performances of heroes and villains in the ring” (Hill 2014). The audience is just as much in character as the wrestlers themselves. They know the

storylines and understand the heel (bad guy) in the narrative is not a bad guy, just playing an evil character. They “mark out” as it’s called by, going to the show and booing at the bad guy, hating him, and even throwing trash at them. However, as these are smart fans, who are studying the product and know about the production, they have an attitude where they “love to hate” the bad guy characters (Hill 2014). This is evident today with professional wrestlers like The Miz, who is one of the top heels in the WWE. While he is an obnoxious character who backstabs his friends and will do anything to ensure a victory, fans only hate and boo the character The Miz. Mike Mizanin, the performer behind the character, is one of the most respected wrestlers in WWE, earning praise from wrestling producers, fans, and writers alike for his work as a heel. He has been voted as not only The Most Hated Wrestler of the year by Pro Wrestling Illustrated but has also been rewarded with “most improved” awards for his hard work and dedication to his character, which is based on making people hate him. While fans and anti-fans will boo his character when he cheats to win or taunts the audience, he gets cheered and respect from fans as he wins title after title in the WWE. He is one of the most popular characters that is “loved to be hated” by the fans. By cheating against popular wrestlers, even going so far as to steal his opponents signature moves to use against them, he gets fans emotionally involved in his antics. The fans, in turn, cheer when his opponent gets the upper hand after the Miz attempts, and is unsuccessful at, cheating. The conclusion of this morality play of good vs. evil, with the audience emotionally invested, gives the display of the violence an entertaining appeal. This relays to the audience that, not only good should triumph over evil, but that evil also needs to get physically and violently beaten by good, to ensure a satisfying conclusion.

Stereotypes of Social Deviants

Aside from these narratives of good vs. evil involving cultural or ethnic stereotypes based on nationalism and national rivalries, there are good vs. evil narratives based on masculinity, rather than ethnicity, that invoke negative stereotypes for audiences to understand in order to see the “heel” aspects of these characters. Here, the good “face” character is represented by a recognizable form of hegemonic masculinity that, although evolving over time throughout history based on the culture of the U.S., is always based on American ideals of masculinity and their cultural association with “good” and “positive”. The performer playing the evil “heel” character in this masculinity dichotomy is represented by a subordinate or feminized masculinity, associated with the “bad” or “negative”, according to socially constructed gender roles and sex categories. This representation of the “heel”, like the “face” representation, has also changed over time and reflects American cultures views and ideals on masculinity, femininity, gender roles, homosexuality, and sexual deviancy. This “heel” character gets represented by negative forms of masculinity, which signals to audience members to boo and hate the character, and this has been successful, but why?

Social and Sexual Deviants in American Culture

Social deviants work as successful heels in professional wrestling. The reasons for this, like the previously mentioned American hero vs. evil foreigner narrative, are based on shared cultural knowledge possessed by the audience based on the sociopolitical culture of the period. Social deviants in the past have included prisoners, inner-city gang members, and the sexually perverted. Not much needs to be said aloud to clue in the audience on how they should feel and react to a wrestler who competes in a prison uniform. These wrestlers

that convey quick messages about their character are important in wrestling because a performer might only have a few seconds to send messages to the audience. Although this is lazy, it is none the less successful.

Other social deviants include characters based on the feminine/subordinate man, and the homosexual man. The latter is tricky in professional wrestling, as only one tag team in WWE history has been called aloud “homosexual”, and it turned into a PR disaster. In 2005, the tag team of Billy and Chuck were “partners” who would team up together inside and outside the ring. Outside of the ring, the cameras would show the two buying each other matching headbands, helping one another stretch (with the camera set just perfectly to make it appear they are in a sexual position with each other), and giving each other special looks. Big news came to WWE and the LGBTQ community, when Billy, formerly known as Mr. Ass, was proposed to by Chuck, and announced the two were to be married live on television! Professional wrestling has a history of wrestler’s weddings, but this was a first. A wedding between two male wrestlers! The WWE marketing team took this television storyline and ran with it to major media outlets, and eventually got the word to GLAAD, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation. GLAAD praised the WWE and supported the event. GLAAD even gave Billy and Chuck a wedding gift live on the Today Show (Baer and Reynolds 2003). When the time for the ceremony came, WWE pulled the plug on the program, and Billy and Chuck announced that they were just joking, and they weren’t actually gay. GLAAD was furious, stating “the WWE lied to us months ago and when they promised that Billy and Chuck would come out and wed on the air” (Baer and Reynolds 2003: 157). In this instance, GLAAD played the “mark”, as they were conned by this performance.

Professional wrestling has used other characters representing forms of a subordinate masculinity to oppose a hegemonic masculine wrestler. American popular culture has long been aware of gender inverts, dandies, and pansies since the early 20th century, with the rise of sexology. Sexology was a distinct field by the start of the 20th century, and this field put sexual or gender inverts, homosexuals, and other types of “abnormal” individuals into the scope of the American public. Sexologists were also “in conversation with contemporary discussions of eugenics and ‘scientific racism’ (Capo 2017: 81), which attempted to link masculinity, physical attributes, and race in the name of science. Ideas that linked feminine men, gender inverts, and homosexuals into one category of “sexual deviant” were popular at the time, as evident by popular comic strips in magazines, newspapers, and even in the theater. Animated shorts such as *Flip the Frog* in *Soda Squirt* were popular prior to WWII, dropping dandy and fairy characters into mainstream American culture. A painting by artist Paul Cadmus titled “The Fleet’s In” show a Navy fleet enjoying the local community as they come into the port while on leave. While the shipmen are looking for a good time, an obvious dandy, signified by his hair and fashion, is looking at the shipmen to see if he can score a good time. These pieces of pop culture depicted male femininity as not only opposite that of a “regular man”, but as sexual deviants that can be harmful. In Disney, this tactic has been used in the films *Mulan* (1998) and *The Lion King* (1994). In *Mulan*, one of the antagonists in the movie is the feminine Chi Fu, an assistant to the Emperor who “epitomizes the vilification of asexual, effeminate, and homosexual men” (Dundes and Streiff 2016). In addition to this, the character and Disney also use symbolism to convey to the audience that this feminine character is naturally “bad”, as “he is devoid of masculinity, partly symbolized by his having only four

teeth, none of which are canines that symbolize masculinity” (Dundes and Streiff 2016). Scar, the main antagonist from *The Lion King*, has also been discussed by scholars as a feminine male bad guy. Scar “rules the underclass world, embodies evil, and is given stereotypical gay character trait. In this context, as Benschhoff and Griffin (2004) and Snyder and Chadha (2008) indicate, in the mind of the viewer, evil is associated with homosexuality” (Wormer and Juby 2016). Scar resembles "a cultivated, world-weary, gay man," according to author Mark Edmundson (Edmundson 1999). For Disney movies, scholars have uncovered that while the female heroines are becoming more masculine, male heroes are becoming more androgynous, proving that even with changing gender roles in our culture, femininity is still seen as a negative and masculinity is still seen as a positive, regardless of the character displaying these traits (England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek 2011).

Shared Cultural Knowledge

While the American population was seeing these depictions of homosexuals in entertainment, the media, in their schools, and now in the news, the association of homosexuals to fairies and dandies, with these links to a subordinate “unnatural” masculinity became “common sense” because they were part of the cultural map. The American public was being socialized, throughout most of the 20th century, to believe that homosexuals, feminine men, and non-hegemonic masculinity was a threat to their American life, and to their own safety. American popular culture was being flooded with imagery that associated homosexuals to flamboyant and feminine men, and these men to being dangerous; a shared cultural knowledge, or frame, where everyone “knew” that homosexuals were not only different, but dangerous. While this was not true as a fact, it

was true in the court of public opinion, which is where we base shared cultural knowledge. It's a knowledge that people in a similar culture all are aware of, a collective conscience. A depiction of a homosexual or a fairy can appear in a comic, or a movie, or on a TV show, and people with this shared cultural knowledge can recognize this image without any words, simply by understanding how a stereotypical homosexual or fairy dressed or acted.

This shared cultural knowledge then gets used by purveyors of entertainment, such as performers, showrunners, professional wrestlers, etc. to create masculinity hierarchies for its characters, allowing for a strong white man as the "good" by default, with anything but, as "the other", being bad by default. When this masculinity hierarchy gets repeated in different forms of media, it becomes more easily recognizable by the average viewer, and thus, the socialization that links homosexual to the feminine male to evil and dangerous continues.

Gorgeous Gold Peacocks

These easy-to-spot antagonists, the subordinate masculine men who oppose the hegemonic norm, are the focus of this thesis. Professional wrestling, the masculine melodrama, would have only a handful of these subordinate masculine male characters throughout the 20th and 21st century as it was not an easy character to perfect. These wrestlers successfully caused audiences around the United States to boo, hate, and throw trash at them, becoming successful heels in a business that relies on masculinity. These wrestlers would not try to win over audiences with their muscles, feats of strength, or with pretty women they have accompany them to the ring as other wrestlers did. These subordinate masculine wrestlers, the Gorgeous Gold Peacocks, relied on their feminine, subordinate masculinity, and the culture's ideas of masculinity linked to homosexuality, to

tap in an extreme hatred of sexual deviancy that has been in the sociopolitical culture of the United States since the turn of the 20th century. The Gorgeous Gold Peacocks were successful in the ring because they caused the audience to care as they tapped into what audiences already cared about, which is the ultimate goal of a professional wrestler. Whether the audience cheers or boos is all that matters, as long as they care, observed Smith, when exploring how wrestlers and audiences connect (Smith 2008). And the Gorgeous Gold Peacocks certainly caused audiences to care, as audiences would pay their money in hopes of seeing the Gorgeous Gold Peacocks get beaten, often time with violence and humiliation. The concept of the morality play in professional wrestling allows audiences to feel that this subordinate masculine male, as the natural “bad” character, deserves to be violated physically, in order to have a just conclusion. This thesis explores how and why the Gorgeous Gold Peacocks are successful, looking at the sociopolitical culture that created these associations of subordinate masculinity and social deviancy to the negative.

The Gorgeous Gold Peacocks have been a staple in the business throughout the history of North American professional wrestling, since the early days of televised wrestling and have lasted through today, with no telling what the future of the character holds. The character is successful due to the shared cultural frame of the audience that allows them to interpret the messages being sent out by the performers, messages with homophobic and patriarchal constructions. However, this is more akin to a funhouse mirror, as the images reflected within the professional wrestling product are exaggerated, for the purposes of entertainment, although loosely based on reality. The Gorgeous Gold Peacock will always be successful so long as it exists in a dichotomy of masculinities, a

hegemonic/dominant vs. a subordinate/feminine. Which masculinity will be the “good” vs. the opposing “evil” will ultimately be determined by the audience and the shared cultural knowledge it possess. With the shifting narratives involving masculinities, LGBTQ issues, and the modern globalized economy in popular culture today, the continuing evolution of the Gorgeous Gold Peacock is all but certain. This association would become a mainstay in American professional wrestling, with numerous wrestlers for decades using this shared cultural frame to create characters to get an emotional reaction from the audience. Performers would adopt this hierarchy for its characters and storylines, creating hyper-masculine, hegemonic male characters to dominate the subordinate, and weaker versions of masculinity. These wrestlers, who adopted the latter, of the subordinate masculine, would go on to become the most enduring and long-lasting names in the arena of professional wrestling and sports entertainment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this section discussed different theories for understanding how the professional wrestling product works, and why it is so appealing to audiences. The audience, which gets split into fans, and anti-fans, are all known as smart fans, who know the ins and outs of the product. They are in character and should react as necessary to stay in that character. The good vs. evil dichotomy that uses national rivalries to drum up interest in characters and storylines does not only use ethnicity and race, but masculinity to create good and evil characters. Good masculinity always plays the “face”, or good, character, and negative or feminized masculinity always plays the “heel”, or evil, character. These good and evil characters are based on socially constructed categories and stereotypes that allow audiences to pick up on clues on how they need to react to each character. This

evil, feminized male character with a subordinate masculinity I have dubbed the Gorgeous Gold Peacocks of professional wrestling. Not only do they play the subordinate masculine character in a masculinity morality play, but they were successful in their role; not because they won matches, but because they were successful in attaining a negative reaction from the audience, meaning they cared about the character, even if they loved to hate them.

Research Question

This section introduces my research question, which came after preliminary research but before I narrowed my scope. After the literature review, I looked at what others had written on professional wrestling and masculinity. I wanted to look at how masculinity changed in professional wrestling, and, as research continued, I noticed how it reflected American culture, which begged more questions. I eventually finalized my research question.

I sought to find out how masculinity has changed over time in the United States, and how does this change get represented in popular culture. While other students and scholars have looked at this in television, movies, advertisements, I decided to look into the pop culture phenomenon of professional wrestling in the United States to find this. After looking at how masculinity has changed over time, I wanted to explore how contemporary wrestling employs stereotypes of masculinity and gender. From here, I wanted to uncover if professional wrestling's use of gender and masculinity stereotypes is evidence of new gender norms from the contemporary global wrestling community in the Global North.

Method and Data

This thesis is a historical comprehensive case study on masculinity in professional wrestling. I look at cultural frames of masculinity displayed in wrestling by going through performances of specific wrestlers in American history, cross-referencing cultural representations and understandings of gender and masculinity that correspond with the time period of each wrestler. This was also the result of a content analysis taking the themes and theories mentioned previously and applying them to decades of professional wrestling performances.

I utilized biographies, books written by wrestlers and wrestling analysts, and blogs written by wrestling fans. I also had the benefit of the WWE Network, the WWE's streaming service similar to Netflix, that allows viewers to watch televised wrestling shows, pay-per-view events, live un-televised events, interviews, and documentaries made by the company. The Network also has a search option, allowing me to look for performances by a specific wrestler, an advantage previous scholarship did not use, as others doing a content analysis of wrestling like Barret and Levin, would do a random sampling of TV programs. In this case, when viewing decades of events and interviews, the streaming service serves as the best option for research.

I divided the body of my thesis into five separate time frames, discussing sociopolitical and popular culture at the time, and how stereotypes of masculinity were utilized by performers and interpreted by the audience. The first section is pre-WWII

through the Post-War period, when the seeds of professional wrestling were first planted. Here, the carnival is the site of this form of entertainment. There is also no television at the beginning of this period, meaning that the only place to witness wrestling was at the carnival. Due to the view at the time that wrestling was a legitimate sport, characters and stereotypes were not necessary at the time, although the performers interaction with the audience was important, and would continue to be important in professional wrestling to this day. After the carnival days, I discuss the Post-War period and how the advent of the home television set launched professional wrestling from a carnival side-show attraction to a pop culture phenomenon. In this section, I introduce the first Gorgeous Gold Peacock, Gorgeous George. I discuss the post-war culture of the time and the conservative direction the U.S. was heading in, and the sociopolitical environment that resulted. I reveal how Gorgeous George understood the culture and use idea on masculinity stereotypes to create a character that he knew would be a hated heel in professional wrestling. His unique version of the character fans “loved to hate” made him millions, at one point making as much money per year as the top baseball players of the day.

The following section discusses masculinity in the 1970s. Gone is Gorgeous George in professional wrestling, and with it, the concept of the hated feminine heel. In this wrestling era, men combined masculine qualities with flamboyance to create new superstars of the day. Sociopolitical culture of the time that included Peace movements, resulting from the ongoing Vietnam War, and the women’s movement, resulted in new forms of hegemonic masculinity, and the stereotypes in professional wrestling.

After this section I move onto the 1980s and the era of Reagan. The United States experiences the loss in Vietnam and Reagan’s push for nationalism, and as a result, we see

the rise of hyper-masculinity in movies, in popular culture, and in professional wrestling. In this time, we see the biggest bodies in wrestling history, as steroids were rampant. In this era, Hulk Hogan is discussed. In the 1980s and early 1990s, Hulk Hogan dominated American wrestling. He represented a positive form of masculinity, and, thus, represented the United States, often quite literally. His masculine performance would emulate other hyper-masculine performances in popular culture due to new and evolving hegemonic masculinity. This period would last until the mid-1990s, at which time Vince McMahon was indicted and tried before a Senatorial Committee, accused of forcing his wrestlers to take steroids. This was no secret, as many wrestlers would discuss rampant steroid use in interviews decades later. Although McMahon would be found to be not guilty, the scare drastically changed the wrestling business, and smaller bodies started to appear. This would lead to the next period.

The next section discusses the late 1990s to 2001, called the Attitude Era. The Attitude Era of wrestling was its most successful period, which saw the top two wrestling companies in the U.S., WWE and WCW, battling for television ratings, both hoping to put the other out of business. This resulted in new narratives and storylines, which was heavily influenced by other pop culture at the time. This would also introduce new forms of masculinity, which was both homophobic yet homoerotic. Here I discuss Goldust, the Gorgeous Gold Peacock that would be the subordinate version of masculinity to a new raunchier, sexist, misogynistic, and homophobic version of masculinity.

The last section discussed is the contemporary wrestling product, including the global wrestling community. This period, starting in 2014 with the introduction of the WWE Network, introduces new ideas of masculinity and gender roles that are more global

ideas than of previous periods, due to the invention of the internet. With a new, heterogenous and global audiences, the professional wrestling needs new stereotypes of masculinity and characters, as the absent other had changed. With more LGBTQ visibility and LGBTQ issues becoming global issues, new ideals cause new variations of the Gorgeous Gold Peacock that resonate with a global audience. Here I discuss “The Party Peacock” Dalton Castle and The Velveteen Dream. Both of these wrestlers take new concepts of gender roles and masculinity to create contemporary versions of the Gorgeous Gold Peacock that get cheered by audiences, rather than booed the way previous Gorgeous Gold Peacocks did. While these two wrestlers are new, they have already made an impact on professional wrestling, causing new discussions regarding gender roles and masculinity in popular culture that reflects a globalized culture.

Pre-WWII Through the Post-War Period

In this section I discuss the Pre-WWII period and the period after the war through the 1950s and early 1960s. At the beginning of professional wrestling, it was part of the carnival. Later, with the advent of the home television set, the wrestling industry boomed as the product was able to reach more viewers. In the early carnival days, the interaction with the performers and the audience was created, where the audience was part of the show. This audience and performer interaction would continue into the Post-War period, with the audience needing to be emotionally invested. In the 1950s, the advent of the television would put wrestling into homes across the country, increasing viewership and introducing performers to a new audience to care about their characters. While many performers were using ideals of masculinity to get audiences to like them, Gorgeous George, formerly George Wagner, would use these ideals of masculinity to create one of the most infamous and influential wrestling characters ever created. His use of a feminized, yet tough, masculinity would be the creation of the Gorgeous Gold Peacock character.

Wrestling in the Carnival: Pre-WWII

From the early days of the carnival at the turn of the 20th century, the professional wrestling audience would try to find out the inner-workings of the spectacle. These were considered “smart” fans, a term that is still used today. The other members of the audience, who would often bet on carnival wrestling, thinking the outcome was legitimate, were called “marks”. A “mark” represents the audience that can be manipulated, and in the early

days of carnival wrestling, these marks would think that a local competitor from the crowd had a chance of beating the professional, because the professional would play weak, giving the underdog wrestler a chance of winning, only to be beaten at the end. Aside from the obvious marks, certain smart fans would “mark out”, meaning they would get into character of an audience member that doesn’t know how the match can end, thinking both competitors have a chance to win.

Social Deviants and Wrestling

George Chauncey, in his book on gender and urban culture in New York City before 1940, described the fairy as an individual of an intermediate sex to others, one that might be described as a “female impersonator”, or “male inverts” (Chauncey 1994). Tabloid newspapers around the country published cartoons depicting fairies as “men who thought they were women” (Chauncey 1994: 46). These men, who were often working class, embraced a feminine lifestyle which included mannerisms and stylish, colorful dress, to send signals to other feminine or homosexual men within their own class. This would also establish a community and culture of these non-hegemonic men in a society that rejected their existence. Due to laws against cross-dressing in the first half of the 20th century, many gay men or male inverts had to find creative ways to adopt feminine attire, and thus, certain attires were made and worn by these fairies to help with this identification. As self-proclaimed fairy Ralph Werther explained, a fairy’s attire “was to be as fancy and flashy as a youth dare adopt” (Chauncey 1994: 52).

Around the 1930s and 1940s, gay writers started describing a system of principles for this contemporary male fashion, saying “green suits, tight-cuffed trousers, flowered bathing trunks, and half-lengthed flaring top-coats as distinctively homosexual attire, along

with such accessories as excessively bright feathers in their hat-bands” (Chauncey 1994: 52). Other gay writers at the time discussed the importance of flamboyant clothes and suede shoes as “the insignia of a flaming queen” (Chauncey 1994). These men were out in public in working class neighborhoods of big cities, and their images were in comic strips at the time, allowing newspaper readers in small towns to enjoy making fun of and laughing at these “gender inverts”, as medical journals would call these men at the time. The medical analysis of the categories of people including “inverts, perverts and normal people” reflected distinctions widely recognized by the broader American culture (Chauncey 1994). These individuals were not just dressing in a specific fashion while in public, but in private as well. Drag balls, where drag queens would dress up and have same-sex dances, were popular in New York City in the 1930s and 1940s. Often, police raids at these clubs would result in numerous arrests for breaking laws against decency, including same-sex dancing and cross-dressing. Because of the arrest news coverage in the local paper, many fairies, homosexuals, cross-dressers, and male inverts became associated with degeneracy.

Individuals within the fairy and homosexual community were also making money on their unique look and personality, as many would perform at nightclubs as singing acts. One act in New York City in the 1930s, The Ubangi Club, “had a chorus of singing, dancing, be-ribboned and be-roughed pansies, and Gladys Bentley who dressed in male evening attire, sang and accompanies herself on the piano” (Chauncey 1994: 252). Many middle- and working-class people, whether looking for a nice night out or slumming in the lower-class neighborhoods, enjoyed these types of performances, even if they did not agree with the idea of gender inverts. These gay and feminine male entertainers at the time may

have dressed and acted a particular way as part of their performance, but “few were open to outsiders about their homosexuality” (Chauncey 1994: 252).

Early Wrestling Narratives

Narratives and characters from the WWII period into the 80s and even into the 90s were mostly based on cultural, racial, or ethnic stereotypes. The original reason for this was due to just who was watching wrestling at the time. At the beginning of the 20th century and into the 1950s and 60s, the United States saw a big influx of immigrants from Europe. These groups including Italians, Irish, Russian Jews, German Jews, and the Polish (Capouya 2009). These groups were first generation immigrants, and working-class. Audiences were local communities that were homogenous and shared similar backgrounds. Common cultural connections of the audience helped with the development of characters, as many played the ethnic card to gain sympathy from the audience. This included characters like “Abe Goldberg, Sammy Stein, Ali Baba, The Turk, Gino Martinelli, John Gudiski “the Pole”, among others” (Capouya 2009). Although these characters were based on stereotypes, they were positive representations. While some of these characters were factual personalities of the wrestler, many of these names traveled from region to region around the United States, often getting attached to people who were not of the ethnicity they were portraying. This, again, was to get the audience behind a wrestler to help move the narrative.

National rivalries were used to gin up interest in certain wrestlers by creating narratives based on them. For example, audiences watching a working class Russian Jew who was stronger than they were, defeating an evil Nazi wrestler, would no doubt cheer on one of their own (a working-class Russian Jew) defeating a national rival of the United

States. The Nazi would taunt the audience, telling them he wants to kill the Jews in the audience. The announcers, wondering if anyone can defeat the evil Nazi, would introduce Sammy Stein or Abe Goldberg as a new wrestler to the audience, who would see one of their own defeat a shared cultural enemy. This was a common way to get audiences to care about new wrestlers in the company and have them be “face” characters.

Stereotypes were always used for wrestling characters, but who and what these stereotypes were based on was differed, reflecting the local audience of the wrestling production. Villain characters have always been constructed to reflect cultures or people not present in the audience (Capouya 2009). This is to ensure the heel in the storyline does not get cheered based on a connection the audience might feel. This explains how Nazi characters and evil Japanese characters were successful as heels around WWII, and why evil Russians and Middle Easterners were successful heels during the Cold War. The good vs. evil dichotomy did not just take the form of national vs. foreign rivalry, however.

Masculinity and Homosexuality From McCarthyism to the Cold War

After WWII, McCarthyism and the Cold War brought new ideas about masculinity, citizenship, patriotism, and femininity. Homosexuals, or perceived homosexuals (non-hegemonic men) were being hunted by the Federal Government to be removed, or some jailed for fear that they were communists, and as such were “security threats”. What it meant to be a “real” man in America was becoming more narrowly defined, which forced masculine men in America to turn up their masculinity, further creating the divide between good, masculine, “accepted” men, and the feminine, subordinate men. The mid-20th century was not a good time for non-masculine men, as many were targeted for harassment, policing, and other forms of violence. Pop culture would take this cultural knowledge of

these two categories of men, one known to be good and right, and one known to be bad and wrong, and would use it to create easy-to-spot antagonist for its hegemonic masculine protagonist.

While homosexuality was not understood by the masses in the first half of the 20th century, many were aware of the culture, as homosexual men, on display as fairy's or dandy's, were out in public, in newspapers, and giving nightly shows at clubs around the big city. In the 1950s and 1960s, with the relaxation of censorship codes for movies, depictions of homosexuals started to become more available, although they would almost exclusively be negative. These depictions were coded in negative stereotypes, and often depicted homosexual men and women as sadists, psychopaths, or killers (Epstein and Friedman 1996). Since homosexuality was classified as a mental illness at the time, negative depictions were the only ones accepted. This trend continued outside of Hollywood, entering public schools in the form of short films that made connections of homosexual men as psychopathic killers. Films shown in American public schools like "Boys Beware" warned boys that homosexual men, who "may look normal in appearance", are, in fact, dangerous and should be avoided (Davis 1961). This message would eventually shift into the popular "stranger danger" campaign during the 1980s and 1990s, but during the 1950s and 1960s, it was the association of homosexual men with psychopathic killers that attempted to scare children.

This association was also witnessed outside the classroom, as courtrooms in the 1950s and 1960s started seeing the "gay panic defense", a legal defense used to strengthen a "self-defense" legal argument. While almost never used for full acquittal, many used it to obtain a lesser charge (i.e. second degree murder instead of first degree murder), and

judges would often cite homosexual solicitation as a reason for a violent crime (Salerno 2015). This defense could also help reduce a sentence, as it would show that the murderer was not the aggressor. Homosexuals, seen as perverts at the time, had their murders justified with this defense, as it made heterosexual male aggressors out to be victims. This helped in the solidification of the link between the homosexual male, the feminine male, and the dangerous, psychopathic killer.

Outside of the courtroom, homosexuals, and suspected homosexuals were being targeted as dangerous, being called a “national security threat” by the federal government. In the 1950s, Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin stated that the State Department had been infiltrated by communist sympathizers, and thus, must be cleansed of the un-American subversives to American life. McCarthyism, as it would be called, was only a product of the Red Scare, which was the larger threat of communists to the American public. A little talked about side effect of the Red Scare and the anti-communism campaign popular in Cold War America was the Lavender Scare, a witch hunt and mass firing of homosexual or perceived homosexual employees from the Federal Government, notably from the State Department. While this was lesser-known, it was, in fact, more dangerous, according to former Senator Alan Simpson. The State Department was scared that homosexuals were dangerous, as they could give up State secrets to Communists through blackmail; blackmail about their homosexual lifestyle, because a homosexual lifestyle was looked down upon by the United States Government. Essentially, homosexual men were a security risk because the US government convinced everyone that they were a security risk. At the time, communists and homosexuals were both associated together as “subversive to American culture” (GLBTQ Encyclopedia). Senator McCarthy also linked homosexuals to

communists, as both were “threats to the American way of life” (Carlson 1997). The American way of life in post WWII America was capitalist, white, heterosexual, patriarchal, with nuclear families. Individuals who were not in these categories, therefore, were seen as threats to the American way of life.

Professional Wrestling Enters Popular Culture with Gorgeous George

In 1946, the RCA 630-TS, the first mass-produced television set, entered homes around the United States. Television sets at the time were new to American households, with only .5% of the US owning a set by 1946. Less than ten years later, more than 50% of US households had a television set, with that number almost doubling again by 1962, with 90% of households owning a set (Television History TV). Finally, forms of entertainment that were only to be viewed at in-person events could be viewed from the comfort of the home, with the entire family of mom, dad, and 2.3 children sitting around the TV every night to watch local programming. Aside from the popular television show version of Superman, one of the most popular television programs on the local stations was professional wrestling. The professional wrestling product at the time in the 1940s and 1950s was regional, meaning local wrestling promotions would travel around their own specific territory (Florida, the Mid-Atlantic, New York City, Texas, West Coast, and Minnesota/Mid-West to name a few) running live events in gyms and arenas throughout the small and localized area. The advertising for these shows was done through the local TV station, so when TV stations needed programs to fill their time slots, professional wrestling was a good choice. Professional wrestling promotions would film in their own studios and didn't require equipment from the local stations and were essentially a paid advertising program for the live show, where audiences would see storylines on television

that would entice them to see a live performance. This created a win/win situation for local stations. They had a cheap way to fill in a timeslot, and the wrestling company got to advertise its program practically for free. This type of deal allowed wrestling to be one of the biggest programs in many regions, often running an hour every night for seven days a week (WWE: The Legends of Wrestling 2009). With wrestling being broadcast so often in major cities around the US, the industry boomed for the first time, ushering in the Golden Age of professional wrestling.

The story of one of the most famous (and infamous) wrestlers in the world starts with a prank. Local tough man and professional wrestler George Wagner was out training one day in 1939, when his wife Betty, who was also his valet (woman who accompanies a male wrestler to the ring), his seamstress, and personal assistant, wanted to “swerve” him (a term for when wrestlers would pull pranks on one another). Today the term is used to trick the audience into thinking one thing is going to happen, only for something completely different to happen). Betty had purchased some frilly white lace from a fabric store during her time-off from helping with her husband’s wrestling. For this swerve, she decided it would be funny to sew this frilly white lace onto his plain black trunks (the standard uniform for a professional wrestler at the time was standard black trunks and wrestling boots). She sewed rings of the lace around both legs of George’s trunks and shoved the trunks back into his wrestling bag. When George was ready to enter the arena and get dressed for the night’s wrestling show, Betty handed him his trunks, telling him they were all ready for him. When George pulled out his trunks, it “resembled gym shorts that had been involved in a tragic accident with women’s lingerie” (Capouya 2009: 67). The other wrestlers and audience members gave him a reaction that he had never received

before. Some wrestlers began cat-calling Wagner. Members of the audience were whistling at him, calling him ‘sweetheart’ and “Mr. Fancy Pants”, and asking if he was free that night (Capouya 2009). George was smiling. Not because he enjoyed being cat called by the other wrestler’s or hit on by the audience members, but because he was successfully swerved by the love of his life. Betty, without even knowing it, helped create the first modern “character” in American professional wrestling. Betty and her husband George, who would go on to change his in-ring name to “Gorgeous George”, started to get reactions from fans that successful heels wanted to get. At only 5’ 9” and 215 pounds, George was never one of the biggest wrestlers, so he needed something that would set him apart from other heels. Gorgeous George, finally getting a heel’s “heat” (the negative reaction wrestlers receive from the fans), realized the character he would need to become to stand out. Using the shared cultural frame of masculinity of the 1940s and 1950s, Gorgeous George would tap into people’s “fear” of homosexual, feminine, and fairy-type men to create one of the most “hated” character’s in wrestling history. Fans would pay money to see Gorgeous George wrestle, in the hopes of seeing him humiliated in defeat, making him one of the most popular wrestlers of his day and being the first wrestler to personify the “love to hate” characteristic that “heel” wrestlers would hope to emulate for the decades following Gorgeous George.

Gorgeous George understood American culture, and more importantly, American ideals of masculinity and hero culture of the time. The U.S. had just entered WWII, and Superman, the embodiment of American manliness and masculinity, was just starting to gain popularity in American popular culture. Symbols of American manhood, manliness, and masculinity were being culturally re-defined. “Real” men served their country; “real”

men were the sole breadwinners with no help from their wives; “real” men were fast, and tough, but honest, with integrity. Gorgeous George was deferred from fighting in WWII several times, despite his physical state of being a professional wrestler and an athlete (Capouya 2009). This was to ensure that he could continue to wrestle and make money for wrestling promoters around the country. He would make his deferments a known fact in order to get further heat from the audience, many who served or knew someone who had.

Between Superman, Westerns, cop dramas, and professional wrestling, the TV provided hours of masculine, American entertainment, and families across the country were being socialized on the values of a proper American man. Gorgeous George, seeing this blossoming American culture, decided if he was going to stand out and perform as a successful heel, he would need to tap into this celebrated American culture, and become everything that it wasn't; Gorgeous George would become one of the first counter-culture icons in American popular culture (Capouya 2009). If Superman had slicked-back, black hair, Gorgeous George wanted curly blonde locks. Superman had integrity and honor, so Gorgeous George had attitude and would cheat whenever he could. American's were proud of their soldiers who had just defeated the Nazis and the Japanese in WWII, so Gorgeous George would show off his war deferments. With his avoidance of war, his bleached blonde hair, his fancy and colorful robes that shined in the light, and his “I'll do what I want on my own time” attitude, Gorgeous George was trying everything in his power to be what the hegemonic American male wasn't. He became an expert on wrestling psychology, causing audiences to hate and boo at him by the little things he did. Gorgeous George would not enter the ring until it had been sprayed with a scent, because he didn't like the smell of the other men in the ring (this idea was shown in the cartoon “Soda Squirt”

mentioned earlier). Audiences hated this, because “real” men didn’t care what the ring smelled like, and, in fact, liked the way male sweat smelled. Instead of simply throwing his jacket at his valet as other wrestlers did, he took time to fold his sequined robe before entering the ring. Often, he would take up to ten minutes to fold his robe in just the right way, which infuriated audiences (Capouya 2009). Who is this feminine sissy wrestling with these manly, masculine men, audiences wondered. Audiences wanted nothing more than to see this Hollywood-looking sissy get what was coming, and they would pay a lot of money to see it. By the mid-1940s, Gorgeous George was making \$100,000, as much money per year as legendary Yankees baseball player Joe DiMaggio (Capouya 2009: 5).

Gorgeous George tapped into homosexual anxieties stemming from the Lavender Scare and McCarthyism that was in the news at the time. Homosexuals and feminine men were to be feared and hated, as they were portrayed as criminals, dangerous individuals, social deviants, and worst of all in professional wrestling, un-American. Professional wrestling has always been a platform that allows audience members, living vicariously through the performers, to live out fantasies they could never achieve in their own lives. This might be watching the strong Jewish-American hero defeat the evil Nazi character in a steel cage match, or it might be watching the hyper-masculine strongman beating down the feminine man who dresses like a fairy.

Successful heels in professional wrestling work because they often represent the “absent other”, resulting in no audience members relating to a successful heel, and during the Lavender Scare and McCarthyism, no audience members would openly identify with a fairy, homosexual, or a dandy. The country’s male citizens, needing to show American hegemonic masculinity to the world in this post-war period, would always get behind a

character facing the subordinate masculine, hoping they could live vicariously through this performer as he justifiably beats the Gorgeous Gold Peacock to a bloody mess. Only a few times would these actions be taken outside the ring, in which Gorgeous George would have to run out of town quickly, but most of the fans knew this was a fantasy they were viewing, which made the justified beating even better entertainment as the audience did not have to face the social consequences of cheering on a vicious beating if it were to happen on the streets. This is similar to movies, where audiences could delight in the eventual murder of the antagonist because, at the end of the day, it's only a movie, just for entertainment.

George Wagner would go on playing the Gorgeous character into the early 1960s, moving from territory to territory around country, making audiences hate him, and earning big money at the same time. He would build up his character in a local territory, then be served a humiliating defeat, with several hair vs. hair matches towards the end of his career, which would see Gorgeous George bet his golden curly locks on his victory, only to come up short, resulting in having his head shaved in front of thousands of screaming and cheering fans. Not only would Gorgeous George become the first counter-culture icon of American pop culture, he would influence other counter-culture icons of the second half of the 20th century. He would also set the stage for successful heels for future generations of wrestlers, but, like his time wrestling, the success of the Gorgeous Gold Peacock would depend on contemporary sociopolitical culture of the mainstream United States. The flamboyant, feminine showboating that made Gorgeous George one of the most hated wrestlers of the time would stop working in the 1970s and was altered in the 1980s for a short-lived character made only to humiliate the performer. The death of Gorgeous George in 1963 left a void for successful heels, which led to one of the first downward slopes of

the professional wrestling product since the Golden Age of wrestling ushered in by the advent of the TV set.

Conclusion

This section started with professional wrestling in the early days of the carnival in the beginning of the 20th century, and how performers and characters evolved until the Post-War era. I showed how sociopolitical culture of the U.S. influenced George Wagner to create the Gorgeous George character, and why the character was a success in professional wrestling. He wasn't successful because he won matches, but because he caused audiences to emotionally invest in his narratives and would make them pay money to see him humiliated and defeated. Gorgeous George would die in the early 1960s but the ideas and concepts he created would live on, and wrestling would continue to use stereotypes of gender and masculinity to create new character, whether positive or negative. This would evolve over time, but always reflected the culture of the United States and ideals about masculinity at the time.

1970s: Masculinity in Crisis

In this section, I explore masculinity in American culture and professional wrestling. This was during the Vietnam War and American imperialism was waning. Hippies, peace movements, and the women's movement were on the rise, and masculinity was in crisis. Gender norms were changing, and the culture reflected this. This would usher in a new era of professional wrestling with new variations of masculine stereotypes that reflected the culture of the time; a muscular, yet colorful persona.

Hairstyles, clothing, and attitudes that were once gender-specific were starting to blend and become gender-neutral. Masculinity would become more flamboyant and colorful, and professional wrestling would reflect this, as the most colorful characters ever seen were mixing with the biggest bodies seen to date. Gorgeous George was gone by the 1970s, but his influence lived on. At this time, the counter-culture that George created, and others outside of wrestling had emulated, was now becoming mainstream, resulting in new versions of masculinity being accepted.

Starting in the 1970s, the wrestling world changed, with smaller, territorial promotions closing up shop, with only three major organizations (WWE, NWA, and AWA) buying exclusive contracts to wrestlers, eventually becoming only two organizations by the end of the 1980s, the WWE and WCW, which was an offshoot of the NWA. At the beginning of this time, flamboyant wrestler's like "Superstar" Billy Graham, Hulk Hogan, Jesse "The Body" Ventura, Jimmy "Jam" Garvin, and Michael

“Pure Sexy” Hayes, were headlining wrestling shows all over the country. While these flamboyant personalities were all over the wrestling world, they were without the culture of the Lavender Scare and McCarthyism, which ended in the previous decade. These flamboyant yet masculine characters weren’t hated, but were considered cool, edgy, and new to the boring “old guard” of wrestling of the past. Throughout wrestling history, there existed a battle between the “old guard” (the old timers who wanted traditional wrestling with traditional characters) and the “new guard” (newer, younger wrestlers who wanted to showcase new moves and personalities). The old guard liked traditional “catch-as-catch-can” wrestling, where wrestling holds and amateur wrestling throws and suplex’s (a type of amateur wrestling throw in which you hold on to your opponent as they hit the ground) were mainly used. Characters were simple and based on real life personas, even if they were forged (many New York City wrestlers who had ethnic characters were not the ethnicity they portrayed). The new guard embraced over-the-top, exaggerated characters, who were larger than life, whether it be their body or their personality. Wrestlers in this old guard like Bob Backlund, a scrawny white male whose background and gimmick were that of an amateur wrestler, were starting to bore audiences, and changes were needed (Reynold 2017).

The old dichotomy of dominant masculine male vs. subordinate masculine male was no longer working, with audiences in the late 1960s and 1970s embracing colorful personalities, moving away from patriotic characters that dominated the Golden Age of wrestling. This was fitting for a time that saw the emergence of disco, color television sets, anti-war protests, and the sexual revolution. Hegemonic masculinity was changing in the US, and the clean-cut image of Superman was no longer the envy of patriotic, masculine

American men. The counter-culture that Gorgeous George had started had now gone mainstream, with the most popular acts in professional wrestling and American popular culture borrowing their ways and mannerisms from the Gorgeous Gold Peacock that came before them.

Conclusion

The 1970s was a new era in professional wrestling, that would become more colorful and flamboyant while welcoming bigger and more muscular bodies. Masculinity was in a crisis due to the ongoing Vietnam War, and the rise of the peace and women's movements. Reflecting this and adding in the counter-culture that had become mainstream by this time, professional wrestling saw its most colorful characters to date, many that combined feminine sexuality and muscular masculinity to create a new type of wrestler for the 1970s. This would not last, however, as the next period in professional wrestling would get less colorful, but more muscular.

The 1980s and the Reagan Era of Masculinity

This chapter starts in the early 1980s and the rise of Hulk Hogan in professional wrestling. His rise would coincide with the rise of Ronald Reagan and new ideals of American masculinity that resulted from the loss in Vietnam, and Reagan's need to toughen up America. The Cold War was also coming to an end, and American culture and professional wrestling had to increase its use of patriotism and nationalism. This would result in bigger, more muscular bodies and hyper-nationalism, presenting a message that a strong, Christian male represented the United States. This is how Reagan wanted America to be personified, and this personification came in the way of Hulk Hogan.

Bigger Bodies of the 80s

At the end of the 1970s and moving into the 1980s, American male bodies started to change, as the rise of feminism in the 60s and 70s, the loss in Vietnam, and the economic decline put American masculinity in a crisis, and by the 1980s, American pop culture was hyper-masculine, with hyper-masculine representations once again dominated mainstream popular culture (Burrows). This was also impacted by the long-lasting Cold War, and the perception of how American masculinity was superior to Soviet masculinity. Movie stars like Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, Hulk Hogan, Lou Ferrigno, Dolph Lundgren, Jean-Claude Van Dam, and Mr. T became embodiments of Western masculinity, often appearing in movies where they defended

American cultures and values against a foreign, anti-American villain. Professional wrestling, acting as the funhouse mirror to American pop culture soon followed suit, with steroids running rampant in wrestling locker rooms across the country, with big, muscular bodies pushing smaller, scrawnier bodies out of the business by the end of the 1980s and into the beginning of the 1990s. Stories of steroid abuse abounded within the wrestling business; steroids were used to emulate the hyper-masculine bodies being produced in popular culture.

The 1980s was the time of Hogan, who ruled the wrestling ring. Reagan wanted a tougher America, and that was personified in Hulk Hogan. Hulk Hogan would become the embodiment of American masculinity in the 80s and 90s with his 24-inch “pythons” (his biceps and triceps), Cross necklace around his neck, veins popping from his muscles, proudly waving the American flag with his theme song “I am a Real American” blaring throughout arenas. Hulk Hogan was an exaggerated example of the hegemonic masculinity that American men were supposed to embody in the 1980s and 1990s. He didn’t just stand up to his opponents and argue with them, he would bump his chest into his opponent and scream at them. He would flex his twenty-four inch “pythons” to show the viewers that he was more than man, he is almost superhuman, or a mythological God come to life. Even Hogan’s nickname, the “Immortal” Hulk Hogan, conveyed this.

Hogan as America

A major part of Hogan’s hegemonic masculinity was his overt patriotism and nationalism. This was important to his persona and character, as he would do battle with the evil foreigner, be it Andre the Giant (from France), Sgt. Slaughter (representing Iraq and Saddam Hussein), or The Iron Sheik (Iraq, Iran, Middle East, or whatever was

convenient for the storyline). These battles would culminate in the American hero, Hulk Hogan, getting beaten down, often through cheating and dirty tricks from the evil foreigner bad guys, an example of the xenophobia in professional wrestling. Hogan, feeling the power of the American spirit and the power of his Hulkamaniacs (his fans) would fight through the pain, and conquer the evil foe.

When battling The Iron Sheik, the evil Iraqi (or Iranian, depending on America's foreign policy at the time of the narrative) Hulk Hogan could be attacked from behind, and have his smaller, weaker friends beaten up while Hulk remains unable to help, only for him to fight back, push through the enemy, and come out on top, as a hero to all. This, of course, was an exaggerated, or funhouse mirrored version, of how the United States would handle foreign conflicts, such as WWII, when the US would be attacked from behind (by Japan) and would have its smaller, weaker friend (England, France, Poland) getting beaten up by a bigger and more powerful foe (Germany) as the US sits back, unable to help. Only for them to come in and save the day in the nick of time and celebrate as the hero of the story. These sociopolitical narratives are played out in professional wrestling, so the audience can re-live the American hero story taught in history books.

Many wrestling events at the time would end their broadcast with Hulk Hogan waving the American flag, posing with his muscles, as his theme song, "Real American" blasted throughout the arena. Joy Taylor, in her study on whiteness and patriotism in professional wrestling, concluded that symbols of the US Nation State, such as hegemonic masculinity, would always be the good character in a storyline. Professional wrestling storylines, like the one's involving Hulk Hogan against the evil foreigner, are constructed in a simple, dualistic narrative, a public performance of power relations (Hill 2014).

Conclusion

In conclusion, Hulk Hogan WAS America in the 1980s and his storylines would further emphasize this. He would be the muscular, nationalistic, and Christian masculine character that defined not only professional wrestling at the time, but The United States as well. His storylines were almost exclusively defined by America's national rivalries, and he would invoke national sociopolitical culture to get the fans behind him, becoming one of the most popular wrestlers of all time. This would not last, however, as the end of the Reagan years also brought the end of big, muscular bodies. This period would end in the 1990s with the infamous steroid trial of Vince McMahon and the Senatorial Committee. Although found not guilty of distributing steroids to his performers, the scare would cause smaller, less muscular bodies in professional wrestling, which also reflected a turning masculinity in the 1990s.

1990s: The Attitude Era and the Monday Night War

This section discusses the late 1990s through September 11th, 2001. At this time, professional wrestling was in decline after Hulk Hogan and the masculine 1980s. Hogan's version of hegemonic, nationalistic masculinity was no longer attractive to the American culture or the wrestling fan, and Hogan left wrestling in 1993 for a few years. In this time, new forms of masculinity would take over the American culture. A hyper-sexual, misogynistic, and homoerotic, yet homophobic form of masculinity was taking over American culture. While LGBTQ issues were known to people, mainstream America cared very little for LGBTQ rights, and negative stereotypes were rampant in popular culture. These masculine ideals and stereotypes would translate into the most successful period in professional wrestling: The Attitude Era.

America and Homophobia in the 1990s

On October 12th, 1998, twenty-one year old Matthew Shepard, a gay male student from the University of Wyoming, was tied to a fence, beaten, and left to die. "The horrific events that took place shortly after midnight on October 7, 1998 would become one of the most notorious anti-gay hate crimes in American history" (Matthew Shepard Foundation). At the trial that followed, one of the accused murderer's girlfriends said the act was caused by the murderer's anti-gay sentiments. While this statement was later recanted, it reflected a larger cultural problem; that hegemonic, dominant, heterosexual masculinity was toxic, even deadly, to men who did not conform to hegemonic and heteronormative masculine

standards. The funeral of Matthew Shepard also brought about the nation's introduction of the Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas. The Westboro Baptist Church was known for its anti-Semitic rhetoric and its anti-homosexual stances. They would gain notoriety for picketing and protesting at funerals of gay men killed by violence or killed by AIDS. This type of harassment, and the American public's silence on it, only furthered the idea that masculinity that was a subordinate, feminine, or homosexual form, was still not accepted in mainstream America. With no laws passed to protect funeral attendees from harassment by protestors until the mid-2000s, the Westboro Baptist Church would be allowed to harass and protest families and friends of AIDS victims, telling them that they are sub-human, and other such insults (Scott 2003).

While these events happened countless times to countless LGBTQ individuals throughout the 20th century, this had been the highest profile case. LGBTQ issues, specifically violence towards them, had been in the mainstream American media, and were starting to come to the foreground. While American culture was starting to come around on LGBTQ issues, as advocacy and lobbying groups representing LGBTQ individuals started to form, the anti-PC movement in professional wrestling started to catch wind. If they knew there would be one character that would get booed and he was bullied and humiliated by tougher, more masculine men, it would be a homosexual male. This character that wouldn't be an "out" homosexual, or even a closeted homosexual.

Starting in 1994, the image of the American male professional wrestler changed. No longer were steroid-induced muscles on television and in popular culture, as wrestlers, and the masculine pop culture stars that many tried to emulate, would start to get smaller and smaller. The changing dynamic of the industry, and an overall shift in the ideals of

American hegemonic masculinity, was taking place. Older audiences were leaving the wrestling product behind, as they did not believe in these smaller, less masculine individuals that were now wrestling. Professional wrestling was not even wrestling anymore, according to the biggest name in the industry, Vince McMahon. It was now “sports entertainment”. This was due to the McMahon not wanting WWE to be regulated the same as other contact sports such as ultimate fighting, amateur wrestling, and boxing. So, at the end of the 1980s, Linda McMahon, wife to Vince and acting Vice President of WWE, announced that they were no longer in the “wrestling” business, but in the sports entertainment business, in one of the most infamous days in professional wrestling history (Baer and Reynolds 2003). With this shift away from wrestling and towards sports entertainment, many in the industry weren’t sure what to do; many tried out new characters like a wrestling clown or a wrestling plumber, while others, like Hulk Hogan, left the industry altogether, even if only for a short time.

This led to another low period in professional wrestling. The moderate ratings the industry experienced with Hulk Hogan, “Superstar Billy Graham, Michael “P.S.” Hayes and others were now gone since these flamboyant, yet hyper-masculine wrestler’s left the industry. This was also a period of change in American culture. With Bill Clinton taking office in the mid-1990s and the eventual dot.com explosion, American masculinity was becoming cooler, edgier, and offering more to younger audiences. Suddenly, more adult-oriented themes were entering main stream society, with middle and high school kids discussing their President receiving oral sex in the White House. The Jerry Springer Show, a daytime tabloid show hosted by the former Mayor of Cincinnati, was featuring mature themes on a major network, NBC. MTV was becoming more popular, featuring music

videos and programming aimed at a younger generation. Cartoon shows for mature young adults, like *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and *Beavis and Butthead* were becoming more popular, and for the first time ever, millions of people were able to share ideas with one another over a vast network of machines that could be found in households across the country, as the internet was new and connecting wrestling fans and fans of pop culture from around the United States. And it took the professional wrestling industry borrowing (or stealing) ideas from these pop culture phenomena for it to enter its most successful period in history and receiving its highest Nielsen ratings ever.

The professional wrestling product, using its funhouse mirror effect to obtain a hyperbolic-reflection of American pop culture, would use America's new counter-culture attitude to introduce The Attitude Era of wrestling, which featured the Monday Night Wars, a battle for television ratings supremacy between the two biggest wrestling companies North America has ever seen, WCW and WWE. Raunchy, adult-themed, sex-oriented characters and storylines started filling wrestling arenas across the country, with vulgar audience members cursing, throwing trash, and embracing the new "adult-themed" wrestling product. With this new wrestling product came new types of dichotomies. No longer was good "cool" and bad "evil"; as the tables had turned. A new style of anti-hero wrestlers who didn't follow the rules were now being cheered, while the characters who followed the rules and were clean-cut "cleanies", would get booed. Ideals of hegemonic masculinity were also changing, so too ideals of subordinate masculinity. One wrestler who had been wrestling for the previous decade, being trained by his legendary father, would see this change, and do his best to pounce on the opportunity to be the newest heel wrestler. Formerly known as "The Natural" Dustin Rhodes, a clean cut boy from Austin Texas,

would shave his head, bleach it blonde, don a bright blonde wig on top of it, put on a bright gold robe that shined in the light, and plastered his face with makeup. This new creation would go on to have a twenty-plus year career in the WWE and wrestle all over the world as this character. His name was Goldust.

Professional wrestling, and American culture, was becoming raunchier, edgier, and sexier. Although this was a successful period, it led to sexist, homophobic, and hyper-masculine culture in professional wrestling. Fans in the audience would shout new slogans like “suck it!”, made popular by the wrestling faction D-Generation X, and “show your puppies”, a chant from audiences directed at female performers and valets demanding that they expose their breasts, which some did. With new forms of hegemonic masculinity that were hyper-sexual came a new type of Gorgeous Gold Peacock. They would need a new word to describe this subordinate masculine character that audiences would need to boo upon first seeing him and hope that the more masculine and dominating wrestler would beat him, fulfilling the young heterosexual male audience’s fantasy. They would create the “Bizarre One”; “bizarre”, basically being a “euphemism for ‘gay’” (Reynolds 2017). Because the humiliation that would justly end the masculine morality play of professional wrestling would be of a homoerotic nature, someone who would enjoy the humiliating act of having to “suck it” wouldn’t be satisfying. Therefore, an ambiguously gay character had to be created, meaning that the writers and commentators of the wrestling program would never have to explicitly state that the character was homosexual, but would allow the performer to use mannerisms, symbols, clothing, verbal and body language to send out clues to a knowing audience that he was homosexual.

America’s New Attitude and anti-PC culture

In the late 1990s, with the American culture changing, so was the professional wrestling product. The two biggest wrestling companies in North America at the time, WCW, owned by Ted Turner in Atlanta, and WWE, owned by Vince McMahon, were locked in a battle for television ratings, with both companies hoping to put the other out of business, and take the entire wrestling audience for itself (WWE 2014). WCW, using older wrestlers that WWE formerly employ, started creating more realistic characters that used their real names instead of character names, to create a sense of realness and true-to-life programming. For the first time since wrestling came to television, the wrestling industry “was no longer about kids anymore, as it was about the young adults who were being targeted” recalled Michael Cole, current WWE commentator who got his start as a backstage interviewer during the Attitude Era (WWE 2014). While WCW was having more real-to-life programming, as they called it, WWE had yet to introduce this new reality-style product that WCW had already perfected. Like Jerry Springer and South Park, both popular at the time, the aim of this reality-style product was that the viewer had to tune-in, because they never knew what was going to come next. This style, known as “crash-tv”, would include audience swerves, where an audience expected one outcome, only to have another outcome occur, solely because it would trick, or “swerve” the viewers.

With the dip in their ratings, WWE and Vince McMahon attempted to copy this new style of professional wrestling and began introducing new characters for existing wrestlers. These transformations became some of the most influential wrestlers in wrestling history. Goldust, McMahon transformed Dwayne Johnson, known then as Rocky Maivia, the man who always smiled, into the trash talking The Rock; The Ringmaster, who never spoke and only showed off his technical ability, became Stone Cold Steve Austin, the self-

proclaimed bad-ass who would drink a few beers before throwing a few into the audience, and then ask them to give him a “Hell Yeah!”. Hunter Hearst Helmsley, the aristocratic blue-blood from Greenwich, Connecticut became the foul-mouthed, crotch-pointing HHH (pronounced Triple-H), who would go on to form the tag-team known as D-Generation X and popularize the famous catchphrase “suck it”. HHH (who would become the real life Chief Operating Officer of WWE in 2011) would form this team with Shawn Michaels, who once posed for the magazine *Playgirl*, one nominally for straight women but popular with gay men. These wrestlers, through the funhouse mirror effect, would represent a new form of hegemonic masculinity in American popular culture.

Combatting what was perceived as annoying political correctness has always been one of the intriguing aspects of professional wrestling (Maguire 2005). This would be most noticeable during the Attitude Era, when professional wrestling began embracing sexual innuendo and shock television, which saw more nudity, more cursing, and more adult-oriented themes within the narratives, which up until this point, had been written for family viewership. But this was no longer the case.

One of the most notable differences in WWE’s programming between 1996 and the beginning of 1998 “came in the form of increased sexuality, pioneered by the group of D-Generation X” (WWE 2014). Suddenly, half (or fully) naked women were all over wrestling, with WCW introducing the “Nitro Girls”, cheerleader type dancers aimed at entertaining men in the audience during commercial breaks. The WWE would start to bring women on television just to show their body parts to the audience, with the fans and commentators chanting that they wanted to see “puppies” (a term coined by announcer Jerry “The King” Lawler to mean female breasts). All this increased sex, violence, and

shock reality-style TV led to increased viewership in late 1997 and into 1998. This new ultra-violent, sex-fueled, risk-taking masculinity reflected a different form of masculinity within the American culture at the time, which was starting to embrace extreme sports like ESPN's X-Games and risk-taking television shows like MTV's Jackass. One of the smaller, yet influential, companies in wrestling, Extreme Championship Wrestling, was gaining popularity at the time, as its performers would compete in "hardcore" matches, which often involved weapons, high-risk moves, and lots of blood. This form of extreme masculinity also appeared in differences between men and women. Heterosexual men were at the top of the hierarchy, commanding sex and nudity from women, who really had no say in the wrestling business at the time. They were mainly used as sexual objects and would compete in matches that men would not have to compete in, such as a "bra and panties" match, wherein the two female wrestlers would attempt to remove the other's clothes, until they are only in their bra and panties. This was a common match type on the weekly TV programs for WWE, as it was only used to retain young male, heterosexual viewers.

The subordinate masculinity, in this late 90s form, would not only get the justified physical beatdown and humiliation, but would get a sexualized, and thus homoerotic and homophobic humiliation. In this new Attitude Era, women were using their sexuality to their advantage, gaining a bit of leverage at times, but never taking the power. This differs from the subordinate masculine, who never obtains the power. The new form of subordinate masculinity, in the form of Goldust, would be different from previous incarnations of the Gorgeous Gold Peacock, as while Gorgeous George embraced a fairy-style to him, Goldust embraced negative stereotypes of homosexuals that would include

acting in a hyper-sexual manner and engaging cross-dressing, two aspects based on false stereotypes of gay men at the time. This emulated the same fear in other wrestlers as heterosexual, hegemonic men felt towards homosexuals and feminine men within American culture at the time.

His name is...Goldust

“The Bizarre One” Goldust would wear a skintight gold suit, with his name running across the back. He would breathe softly into his opponents’ ear while stroking their chest. In a new era of sexuality, homophobia paired with homoeroticism, and new forms of masculinity across American culture, Goldust was the wrestler that fans loved to hate. In his subordinate masculine form, he would be the literal answer to the hegemonic masculine’s rhetorical demand of “suck it”. While this act never took place in the physical sense, it was symbolic. The wrestler who would demand the other to suck it is the hegemonic, heterosexual, dominant male. Not only does he command women to undress and kiss for his pleasure, but he can command the feminine, subordinate masculine, or “bizarre” man to do what he wants, which includes metaphorical sexual pleasure, even if this only accomplishes the goal of asserting his dominance. While no longer explicitly being linked to patriotism, this contemporary form of hegemonic masculinity was linked to hyper-sexuality, increased risk-taking, homophobia, and violent personalities; many aspects of hegemonic masculinity that masculinity studies scholars recognize today (Pappas 2019).

Goldust became the perfect heel character for The Attitude Era that solved the problem of the anti-hero. The anti-hero, being the most popular form of masculinity in professional wrestling during The Attitude Era, would become the face by default.

Suddenly, rude, cheating characters were being cheered, and the professional wrestling product needed a successful heel to challenge the anti-hero. One of these characters was Goldust.

As more anti-hero characters were being cheered in wrestling, Goldust would need to evolve his homophobic stereotype, and thus, “The Artist Formerly Known as” Goldust was created. Goldust would dress up in hyper-sexualized costumes like S&M bondage outfits, elaborate women’s lingerie, and even leather collar and leashes with a horse bite in his mouth, being led around the ring by his valet, the masculine female Luna Vachon. The more masculine the anti-hero would appear, the more submissive Goldust would be, furthering the divide between hegemonic and subordinate masculinity in wrestling. Tapping into the shared cultural knowledge pertaining to dominant masculine men’s fear of subordinate men, homosexual men, and gay panic, Goldust would go on to a 20-plus year career as the character, although, after the Attitude Era ended, the character would have to transform.

New Millennium, New American Culture

As America entered the new millennium, WWE would buy out WCW, becoming the only major wrestling company in North America, eventually becoming a publicly traded company on the New York Stock Exchange. New changes to the American culture brought new changes to the wrestling product, with one major American tragedy changing professional wrestling for the next decade. That event occurred on September 11th, 2001 in New York City.

The September 11th attacks on New York City had great impacts on the popular and sociopolitical culture in the United States. Not only did the US have a new enemy in Osama bin Laden and global terrorism, but, domestically, the attacks temporarily destroyed the tourism industry, with airline travel and hotel occupancy declining 50% in the United States after the attacks (Goodrich 2008). While this would be a bad time for tourist attractions like Disney World, it would be good for the wrestling industry, as more families, staying home rather than traveling, were watching more television. This resulted in more families turning in to watch WWE, the only wrestling TV show available in North America at the end of 2001 and heading into 2002. The WWE would take advantage of this by changing their program rating from MA (mature audiences), as it had been during the Attitude Era, to a PG rating, hoping to grab the families watching television who were not traveling. This PG rating would drastically change the direction of the creative team, the writers, performers, and other members of the professional wrestling production. Sex, sexual innuendo, race issues (stemming from the racialized “Gang Warz” storyline that was going on during the Attitude Era that had an African American gang, a Puerto Rican gang, and a white motorcycle gang battling weekly), and other issues deemed too controversial for family audiences would be cut. In its place... nobody really knew. WWE became directionless, trying anything to get ratings to go up to the levels they were at during the Attitude Era, which were the highest in company history. One of these ratings ploys included a million dollar giveaway, where fans at home would be able to receive a phone call from Vince McMahon, informing them they had won a million dollars. These segments were a ratings disaster, and the storyline ended with the stage imploding, and set pieces falling on and “injuring” McMahon; a confusing end to a confusing storyline

involving WWE trying to pay fans to watch their program, instead of offering a program that made fans want to pay (O'Donnell 2015).

This new era of wrestling in WWE, known as the PG Era, was a huge ratings failure for the WWE. Since the end of the Attitude Era and WWE's buyout of WCW, "WWE's TV ratings trends have been fluctuating between the proverbial "free fall" and the proverbial 'graceful descent with a parachute'" (Baer and Reynolds 2003). This decade long decline in WWE's ratings helped the independent wrestling scene, known as "the indie's", to flourish. These indie promotions didn't have long-term contracted wrestlers like WWE, but instead used performers on a freelance basis. This allowed indie wrestlers to perform all over the world, learning from a new, globalized wrestling community, that was growing more with the sinking ratings and shrinking interest in WWE's domestic, American product. Starting in 2013, WWE started to recognize this new global approach to professional wrestling, and, thus, opened its first official training center and new TV show to showcase the talent training at its training and performance center. The show is called *NXT* (2012). What was important from the beginning of this show was that many of the talent came from across the globe, from England, South Africa, Japan, India, South America, and other places. This was a different scene than the Americanized, post-9/11 WWE product, which felt pressure from its investors to double-down on patriotism to help bring the country together, similar to wrestling's attempts to create a common bond among American viewers after WWII. This would feature wrestler John Cena becoming a military-supporting patriot, and WWE's annual production of *Tribute to the Troops*, an annual live wrestling tour for military personnel serving in Iraq and Afghanistan that has been running since 2003.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this section discussed American masculinity in the 1990s and the changing American culture at the time. This included a new hegemonic masculinity that was edgier, more sexist, homophobic and homoerotic, and hyper-sexual. These new ideals created a new Gorgeous Gold Peacock in Goldust. Goldust would use ideals of homophobia to become a hated character, one that would become the evil “heel” character to the most masculine and heterosexual hegemonic men in professional wrestling at the time. This dichotomy continued until the 9/11 attacks, which not only changed the industry, but the entire country. This, along with the WWE becoming a publicly traded company ended the Attitude Era. A new family-friendly product brought with it new ideals of masculinity and femininity. Whether related to this or not, it brought it a low point in professional wrestling, which had very little in creativity, and even less in the way of making money. Vince McMahon and the WWE were desperate for the viewership they received during the edgier and sexier Attitude Era, but to no avail.

Contemporary Wrestling in the Globalized Era

This last section is on the contemporary wrestling product of the globalized era of wrestling. This period begins in 2014 with the advent of the WWE Network, a wrestling online streaming service like Netflix. This would transform the North American wrestling product from a homogenous, local American product into a global, heterogenous production with new, global views stemming from a globalized culture and global wrestling community. With this comes new ideas of gender roles, gender norms, masculinity, and LGBTQ issues from a global culture that start to influence American professional wrestling, and, thus, American popular culture. I introduce two wrestlers, Velvetene Dream and “The Party Peacock” Dalton Castle, who both utilize concepts of socially constructed masculinity and sex categories to create new forms of Gorgeous Gold Peacocks. These forms have come full circle, as the mannerisms, clothing, and symbols that once caused audiences to boo and hate Gorgeous George cause Velvetene Dream and Dalton Castle to be cheered and celebrated.

A New Product for a New Millennium

For the first time since the 1980s, WWE, America’s biggest professional wrestling company, was taking a global approach to wrestling. The difference, however, was this modern approach was free of the xenophobia that had plagued previous generations of American wrestling. The Xenophobic days of wrestling, which relied heavily on showcasing American patriotism, nationalism, and masculinity, would no longer apply. It

worked in the mid- to late-20th century, because the WWE product was only being shown to North Americans within the United States, therefore, the non-American “other” could be an unpopular heel character, as there were few in the audience to connect with them. Wrestlers billed from Japan, like the aforementioned Mr. Fuji is a good example of this. Him simply being billed from Japan meant that the American audience would likely boo him, as, representing the “absent other”, audiences rarely had a reason to connect with him. With a more globalized product of the 21st century and the internet age (specifically the age of online streaming services) this absent “other” no longer existed. When Japanese Hideo Itami (formerly known as KENTA) made his debut for the WWE product, his Japanese heritage, including changing his name to honor Japan, was celebrated. Fans had known of Itami’s work in Japan and were excited for one of the innovators of Japanese Strong Style (a style of wrestling known for hard hitting kicks) to debut his style in North America. WWE, to fully embrace this new globalized wrestling market, would make one of the smartest decisions the company ever made, allowing past, current, and future wrestling fans to enjoy the company’s product, while reaching a larger, more diverse audience than ever before. They would introduce the WWE Network, a globalized online streaming service like Netflix, that would allow audiences around the world to watch live programming, past WWE pay-per-view events (major wrestling shows where storylines often concluded, not available on free cable television), and new documentaries produced by the company. This move would not only make available the American wrestling product, and thus, the American culture, to new audiences, but would usher in a new era in professional wrestling, the era of globalized wrestling.

The beginning of 2014 saw a new direction for professional wrestling with the launch of the WWE Network, the company's online streaming service. Audiences would be able to watch past events, documentaries, old televised wrestling programs, and live pay-per-view events, all for the low price of \$10 a month. This, compared to the \$40-\$60 dollars that cable companies would charge for pay-per-view events, would allow a wider audience to access more of the product for the first time ever. The early days of professional wrestling on television saw televised programs that were used to advertise the local wrestling live shows. WWE's marketing strategy starting in 2015 was to use their televised wrestling program to advertise their own streaming service, with the commentators often telling its viewing audience how stupid they are for buying a \$60 pay-per-view from the cable provider, instead of paying \$10 for the WWE Network (Mrosko). The idea was to push their own product for a cheaper price even at the expense of viewer's feelings. The WWE really wanted to push its Network, which not only provided pay-per-events which coincided with storylines from the weekly cable television shows, but new wrestling shows with original storylines that would only be available through the Network. These included special tournaments like the all-women's tournament Mae Young Classic, a show with original storylines centered on smaller wrestlers weighing under 205 pounds called *205 Live*, and *NXT*, which was a show centered on wrestlers that were being trained through WWE's training facility called The Performance Center. WWE uses *NXT*'s and the Performance Center's social media pages to promote newly signed performers from across the globe, often documenting tryout tours, which would see the *NXT* training staff go to different countries to find the best local wrestlers. The most promoted of these tours would be in countries like India and China, both brand new markets for the WWE.

Different Audience, Different Culture

On *NXT* paying audiences would get to see wrestlers that were new to wrestling altogether that were being trained for the first time, and seasoned wrestlers that had toured the globe on the indie circuit but were new to the WWE. *NXT* films exclusively at Full Sail University in Orlando Florida (except on rare occasions for Network Specials), and thus, had almost an entire crowd of college students in their 20s (Dilbert 2013). This younger crowd provided a new opportunity to reach a new audience. The average age for the WWE cable television show is 54 years old (Hanstock 2017), but WWE uses Facebook and its Network to reach a younger demographic. This younger demographic gets treated to storylines and characters that are not featured on cable, often to test them out and see if they will be successful. While there has been an absence of the Gorgeous Gold Peacock character since the end of the Attitude Era, when Goldust transformed from an oversexualized subordinate masculine into a grizzled veteran wrestler but still donning the makeup, a new version of the Gorgeous Gold Peacock was introduced to fans at Full Sail Arena.

Patrick Clark, experienced indie wrestler and former contestant on *Tough Enough* (2015) in 2015, WWE's competition show aimed at finding the next WWE Superstar in a similar fashion to America's Next Top Model, understood the history of the business and would show it off every chance he got. In fact, it was a reason why so many other competitors on the show did not like him, as they thought he only knew the history of the business, and that it wasn't enough to be successful in the business. But they were wrong. Although Clark would get eliminated halfway through the show, he made more of an impact on the business than any other competitor on the show. The two winners for this

season would never make their WWE Network debut, as both were cut from the company after a few months. Clark would not only debut on the WWE Network's show *NXT* as the Patrick Clark Experience, but his knowledge of the history of the business, plus his understanding of the contemporary American culture, would launch the modern incarnation of the Gorgeous Gold Peacock, as Patrick Clark would transform into The Velveteen Dream.

The Velveteen Dream represents a new take on the Gorgeous Gold Peacock, as dichotomies in professional wrestling have dramatically changed, and this is due to the changing American culture, along with the new globalized professional wrestling product. Early dichotomies were established on the simple premise of the “good” character, that the audience could care about because they could relate to the character in one way or another, being country of origin or location (the local boy), ethnicity, or by representing a hegemonic masculinity. The “bad” character would have to be the “absent other” to ensure that audiences wouldn't cheer for the character they should be booing. This worked in the early days of homogeneous audiences, when the majority of the audience were of the same ethnicity or culture; due to the show being held in a local arena, being on local cable television, or being reproduced for an entire country on satellite television. With the WWE Network streaming in countries around the world, an absent “other” was near impossible if based on country of origin or ethnicity. In addition to this, ideas about masculinity and LGBTQ issues have evolved globally since the Attitude Era, due social media issues like the #MeToo movement, and legal legislative victories like the legalization of same-sex marriage. LGBTQ characters on television shows are also at record highs, showing that the television viewing public is becoming more accepting of the previously known absent other

(Kacala 2018). As such, professional wrestling, with its funhouse mirror interpretation of sociopolitical culture, created the modern day Gorgeous Gold Peacock in The Velveteen Dream.

What sets The Velveteen Dream apart from Gorgeous George, Goldust, team of Billy and Chuck, and other versions of the character that have not been mentioned but certainly existed like “Adorable” Adrian Adonis, “The Model” Rick Martel, and The West Hollywood Blondes, is his race, as Patrick Clark is black. Due to the ethnic and somewhat racist past of professional wrestling gimmicks, many promoters would never attempt to create a feminine black character, and Clark is the first of his kind.

Patrick Clark would take American pop culture and his background as an African American growing up a single-parent household and become one of the most popular wrestlers on *NXT* by drawing inspiration from the Gorgeous Gold Peacocks of the past, as well as black pop culture icons like Jimi Hendrix and Prince, to create his new character. The younger audiences that attend *NXT* and watch the program online are known to appreciate “ironic characters”, that draw on inspirations from the past and combining them with contemporary symbols of popular culture to create unique characters, as Clark has done (Dilbert 2017). Clark, like Gorgeous Gold Peacocks of the past, uses feminine mannerisms to appear as the subordinate masculine to his opponents more dominant masculine, both of which have new ideals to this younger generation of viewers. One of Clark’s first storylines on *NXT* as The Velveteen Dream involved him harassing and stalking *NXT* Champion Aleister Black, attempting to get the silent bad-ass, punk-rocker stereotype Aleister Black character to say Dream’s name. Both the stalking/harassing of the more masculine performer, and him needing to say his name, are both homages to

storylines used by Goldust during the Attitude Era. The Velveteen Dream will always pose and take his time as he walks to the ring in order to demonstrate that him putting on a show is more important than wrestling, a strategy he learned from Gorgeous George, who was the first wrestler to make his ring entrance a full dramatic performance with shiny costumes, entrance music, and a special scent to get rid of the awful smell of the ring. Clark, knowing these strategies would not work in today's modern wrestling production, puts his own contemporary spin on things, using his inspirations to create an irritating character that fans love to hate.

From being voted off a reality show to being named 2018's Most Improved Wrestler by Pro Wrestling Illustrated, Clark as The Velveteen Dream has redefined the subordinate masculine character that has always been present in American professional wrestling. Clark demonstrates his knowledge of the wrestling product and American popular culture by invoking popular entertainers that have a non-traditional version of masculinity. Unlike previous era of wrestling, where this non-hegemonic version of masculinity would be booed, a younger and more globalized audience is making Clark one of the most popular performers, recently winning the World's Collide tournament, which put the best wrestlers from the WWE Network's wrestling programs into a tournament, with the winner earning a Championship match. From this, he would go on to win NXT's North American Championship. Clark's character is still new, so one can only make predictions on how successful his character will continue to be.

The Gorgeous Gold Party Peacock

This new form of the subordinate masculine wrestling character is not only appearing in the US, but another wrestler, named "The Party Peacock" Dalton Castle, is

currently touring the globe, performing a version of masculinity (and sexuality) never seen in professional wrestling. Castle performs as a flamboyant showman with an androgynous personality, similar to Gorgeous Gold Peacocks of the past, but with a new twist. While Gorgeous George would still come to the ring with a valet played by his wife, Castle plays on new ideals of masculinity, sexuality, and femininity. Castle comes to the ring in a brightly colored, bedazzled robe, followed by “the boys”, a group of scantily clad, masked men, who will dance and flutter around him, hold the rope open for him and remove his entrance attire, drawing comparisons to valets of the past, except played by men instead of women. While there is no doubt that this act would get boos from audience members in the past, Castle’s knowledge of the globalized culture and views on masculinity causes him to be cheered by the audiences not only for his unique twist on the Gorgeous Gold Peacock character, but for his in-ring ability, like Clark. Castle’s unique character is a new creation of a professional wrestling character, truly the first of its kind. While his character would most certainly get booed in the past, or not even allowed to perform, his unique views on androgyny, femininity, and subordinate masculinity helped him to be voted number fifteen on the Pro Wrestling Illustrated Top 500 List of 2018 (Pro Wrestling Illustrated 2019).

Castle and Clark are proof that the Gorgeous Gold Peacock character is a timeless professional wrestling character which is always relevant, and one that can be successful in the wrestling business if played the right way. The dichotomy of dominant masculine vs. subordinate masculine, as evident by Clark and Castle, will continue to exist in wrestling, although it seems like who plays the “face” character and who plays the “heel” character has become blurred, with audiences cheering on both Clark and Castle as they perform this subordinate masculine character. Once Castle and Clark are done with their

careers, can this Gorgeous Gold Peacock character be redone? Could a future performer invoke newer ideals of masculinity, femininity, and gender, such as a gender non-binary character? One thing that Clark and Castle demonstrate is that the American culture, and the global wrestling community, views masculinity differently than it did half a century ago. Subordinate masculinity will not be booed simply for existing against a dominant masculine but will also be cheered and celebrated. While some could argue that this may lead to the erasure of the subordinate vs. dominant masculine dichotomy in professional wrestling, I argue that this will never go away. Professional wrestling in North America has always been the masculine melodrama, according to Roland Barthes on Wrestling. Therefore, it seems like the masculine dichotomy will always be present, but what represents the “bad” masculinity and what represents the “good” masculinity will always be in flux, just like in American culture, further demonstrating the funhouse mirror effect that professional wrestling uses to reflect the sociopolitical culture of its audience.

Conclusion

In conclusion, these two new wrestlers are evidence of new gender norms and new views of masculinity showing up in North America from across the globe. LGBTQ issues are not only becoming more visible but are becoming more mainstream. Wrestling in the U.S. no longer has solely an American audience, and thus, needs to embrace narratives and stereotypes from other parts of the world where its new audience resides. These new stereotypes no longer rely on nationalistic or xenophobic ideals, but rely on a bigger and more global audience, causing the need for a new approach that reflects the global audience. While stereotypes still exist, they are not as negative as they once were. Evidence also shows that while men are becoming more androgynous in their performance, a

hierarchy still exists that positions them on top of the feminine, which is still perceived as “bad”.

Both performers are celebrated by audiences, wrestling writers, and analysts, causing audiences to rethink hegemonic masculinity and feminized masculinity. Velvetene Dream takes cues from counter-culture icons like of non-traditionally masculinity like Prince and Jimi Hendrix to offer audiences a new take on the Gorgeous Gold Peacock. Dalton Castle takes old fears of homosexual men in a masculine sport and turns this into a new character. Castle, with his valet’s “The Boys”, forces audience members to rethink contemporary gender and sexuality norms as he impresses the crowd with his spectacular wrestling ability, daring audiences to boo him as he out-wrestles other wrestlers as he tours the globe. Both performers are cheered and celebrated for ushering in a new era of masculine representations in professional wrestling. Like the blurring of masculine and feminine in contemporary gender norms, roles, and issues, so too is the wrestling products representations of “good” and “evil” masculinity being blurred.

Conclusion and Closing Remarks

Overall, this study furthers scholarship on masculinity studies in popular culture. This study has shown that stereotypes in professional wrestling that are based on nationalism and the sociopolitical culture of the U.S. are not just ethnic or race based, but based on gender, homosexuality, and masculinity stereotypes. This is not a contemporary issue or one from the past, but, as I have demonstrated, one that has always been present in professional wrestling, but has taken on different forms and has gotten different reactions. While this study only looked at a few wrestlers, the data and theoretical framework can easily be applied to other wrestlers to look at other stereotypes of masculinity or gender, stereotypes of ethnicity or race, or even of class and ability.

In each time discussed, I looked at the sociopolitical culture of the U.S. to point to representations or ideals known to the majority of wrestling audiences to demonstrate how audiences translate the messages that the performers send out. These messages are coded with stereotypes based on shared cultural knowledge and frames and can only be successfully decoded when audiences have this knowledge, including common cultural connections. These commonalities allow the audience to collectively get behind the “face” wrestler and hate the “heel” wrestler, but as my study has demonstrated, a change in this cultural knowledge changes the audience reactions. The more global influence on the wrestling community and American popular culture will keep stereotypes of gender and masculinity changing, and stereotypes that once got booed are now being cheered, due to

this new global wrestling community and changing American culture. This study fits with current scholarship as it demonstrates the use of stereotypes in popular culture and how they are created using American culture, similar to Benton's work on anti-Semitism and wrestling, and Taylor's work on white nationalism and wrestling.

Future Research

Taking the knowledge and theoretical framework from this study, I can concentrate on negative representations of specific marginalized groups like homosexual representations, or class representations. It can also be used to see how "positive" stereotypes on African American wrestlers are constructed. This, in turn, can be used to create new types of character in professional wrestling based on positive stereotypes of certain once marginalized groups, like feminine men, homosexual men, masculine women, homosexual women, or even gender-neutral individuals.

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