A History of Queer Representation in Professional Wrestling

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DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

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Abstract

In the late 1940s, George Wagner transformed the professional wrestling industry. Wearing a sequined robe, with gold bobby pins in his hair and rose petals at his feet, 'Gorgeous' George introduced the first character to American wrestling. It was no coincidence that the first wrestling character was queer-coded. This thesis will explore professional wrestling's relationship with queerness, which has been integral to its success since the beginning of the modern industry. It focuses on the complexities that surround this relationship, as the wrestling industry has often proved unwelcoming for queerness. How wrestling reconciles the distinct queerness in its form, characters and storylines, with numerous examples of homophobia and perpetuation of harmful stereotypes, is the main focus of my analysis. This thesis is the first academic work to examine recent events in wrestling, such as the inclusion of transgender wrestlers. Primary sources will be key throughout, such as the analysis of wrestling shows demonstrating audience reactions to queerness, and interviews with wrestlers highlighting the realities of this queer-acted experience. Secondary academic sources concerning professional wrestling will be examined, including works from scholars such as Sharon Mazer and Patrice Oppliger, as well as disagreeing with historians such as Danielle Soulliere. The secondary sources used feature analysis of queer themes, such as hypermasculinity and violence used to counteract the inherent queerness of wrestling, though the use of these sources is also key in highlighting the gaps in current historiography. I suggest that, while wrestling has attempted to use certain queer characters and storylines as a method of relieving homoerotic anxieties, the relationship between queerness and wrestling is far more complex than this. Many gimmicks have become popular despite being queered, and in women's wrestling, queerness was often encouraged. These contradictions sit at the heart of the thesis.

Contents

Introduction

The character of Goldust was a part of the professional wrestling company WWE for around 30 years. During that time, Goldust wrestled legends such as Razor Ramon, Roddy Piper and the Undertaker. Goldust won multiple championships within WWE, including the Intercontinental and Tag Team Championships. Goldust was also involved in some of the most offensive and stereotypical storylines that WWE has produced over their half-century. In the 1990s, Goldust was seen sexually assaulting his opponents by grabbing their genitalia, entering the wrestling arena in bondage attire, and being stripped to near nakedness in the ring. The history of Goldust may scan as dichotomous and disjointed; one may ask how a character who was introduced as a Hollywood starlet character achieved such popularity. Goldust was, and remains, one of the most recognisable gimmicks in professional wrestling history. To add to the complexity of Goldust, the man behind the gimmick, Dustin Runnels, is a heterosexual cisgender man. In comparison, queer wrestlers such as Chris Kanyon, Darren Young and others are less famous, often relegated to the list of forgotten wrestlers. How could it be that a cisgender man portrayed a queer character and achieved such longevity, whilst very few queer wrestlers achieved high-profile success? This is not to say, however, that queer wrestlers are not also performing their wrestling characters.

Goldust succeeded where others did not largely because of a willingness to be humiliated and portray harmful stereotypes; as a straight man playing a queer character, Dustin Runnels did not have the lived experience of a queer person. If a queer wrestler portrayed a queer character, they might be more independent because of their lived experience. A wrestler's willingness to be humiliated as a queer character was a useful tool in alleviating homoerotic tensions. Queer-coded characters such as Goldust were useful within professional wrestling as they allowed not only a sense of control over the homoerotic undertones of the wrestling product, but also a way to dictate and channel these tensions and

anxieties. Queer characters such as Goldust were scripted into storylines and segments that incited crowds to shout for the character's humiliation. The queer heel (a bad person in wrestling) would raise the ire of the fans by acting queer, such as touching opponents in an unorthodox manner, or by wearing stereotypical feminine attire. The queer heel would be put against a good guy wrestler (referred to as babyfaces or simply faces), and as such, the crowd knew who to cheer and who to boo. The positioning of queer characters against babyfaces was key, as audiences were given reason to want the queer character to be beaten. Since babyfaces were sympathetic and endeared themselves to the audience, fans were predisposed to support these characters against anyone else. The fact that queer characters were pitted against babyfaces compounded the negativity directed towards them. All this positioning and scripting would eventually land the queer character in a way that allowed them to be policed. A queer character would not be allowed to get away with acting in a queer manner and would face retribution (and often humiliation) from the good people. Such policing served as an outlet for the anxiety that related to watching a distinctly homoerotic spectacle. For certain heteronormative audience members, the opportunity to lambast a queer character and revel in their misfortune allowed them to prove, perhaps to themselves or others in the audience, that they were not queer, or condoning queerness. Policing queerness was not a foolproof method of alleviating homoerotic tensions and raised questions. This thesis will focus on how wrestling at once represents and polices queerness.

One way in which queer characters in wrestling represented their queerness in negative terms was by touching their opponents inappropriately – Goldust was well known for this early in his career. Yet, in the world of professional wrestling, touching is pivotal to the product, and the lines that dictate appropriate and inappropriate touch are blurry at best. Why is it taboo for Goldust to rub his opponent's chest while it is permissible for a heterosexually coded character (such as Rikishi) to stick their rear in an opponent's face? In

attempting to portray only some touch as acceptable, professional wrestling raises questions about the homoeroticism in the entire industry. Such tensions and subtle signalling within professional wrestling lie at the heart of this thesis, and I will analyse how professional wrestling has operated with these tensions for decades.

The format of professional wrestling is such that it harbours undercurrents of homoeroticism; the theatrical aspects of wrestling, such as the focus on spectacle and physical appearance, are themes that wrestling shares with queer modes of performance such as drag. This can create tensions with a largely heteronormative audience, which is where many of these homoerotic tensions arise. It must be emphasised, though, that it is impossible to discern audience members' orientation, which limits understanding of their reactions to queer wrestlers and storylines. Further, as Thomas Hackett explains, many audience members also see themselves as having a part to play, cheering the heroes and booing the villains, and that while many audience members verbally attack queer wrestlers, they are simply performing their role, and may not believe what they are saying.[1] To further complicate matters, the lack of the internet in the 1980s and 1990s means that one can only assess the attitude towards queer acts based on audiences at wrestling shows; in recent years, wrestling fans have expressed their opinions easily and can make them widespread (the number of wrestling journalism companies has grown exponentially since the 2000s), but the issue of analysing shows from the 1980s and 1990s is that only audience reaction on the night is a reliable indicator of approval.

However, whilst professional wrestling has tried to distance itself from the inherent homoeroticism of the industry, homoeroticism has contributed to the success of professional wrestling, such as the first wrestling characters being queer coded. Queerness is fundamental

[1] Thomas Hackett, *Slaphappy: Pride, Prejudice and Professional Wrestling*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), p. 173.

to the professional wrestling industry, as the wrestling moves, presentation, storylines, and visuals are all imbued with homoeroticism. The issue is further complicated by the fact that the responses to queered storylines and characters have varied across the history of professional wrestling. Gorgeous George, the first wrestling gimmick and the first queered character, was incessantly booed, yet a similar character introduced within the same decade, Ricki Starr, received positive attention from crowds.

The argument that the 1980s to the 2000s was the period in which professional wrestling most brazenly attacked and policed queerness is not altogether new.[2] However, scholars such as David Shoemaker often fail to recognise that the 2010s and 2020s have not seen a vast improvement in the treatment of queerness. Despite Shoemaker's *The Squared Circle: Life, Death and Professional Wrestling* being published in 2013, he does not engage with any discussions on recent queer characters or storylines, or any events after 2007. This lack of attention to recent wrestling concerning queerness demonstrates the gap that this thesis will fill. Whilst it is undeniable that the twenty-first century has seen some positive steps towards creating a more tolerant industry for queer individuals, such as a significant number of professional wrestlers coming out, professional wrestling has often opted to ignore queerness. To date, there is a distinct lack of on-screen queer romance, whilst heterosexual romance is featured all too often within professional wrestling.[3] A queer individual has also never been a world champion within WWE.

[2] See Shannon Vanderstreaten, '"Blinded by the Light that is Your Velveteen Dream": Queer Villainy in Professional Wrestling', in Jason Norris, *Women Love Wrestling: An Anthology on Women & Professional Wrestling*, (Printed By Author, 2020), p. 132; Douglas Battema and Philip Sewell, 'Trading Masculinities: Muscles, Money, and Market Discourse in the WWF', in Nicholas Sammond, *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*, (London: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 263.

[3] There is a long list of famous wrestling couples from history: Randy Savage and Miss Elizabeth, Booker T and Queen Sharmell, Edge and Lita. Even in the modern day, couples such as Seth Rollins and Becky Lynch and the Miz and Maryse are given time and attention on wrestling shows. Arguably, the only memorable queer relationship that has been showcased in WWE was Billy and Chuck, who pretended to be queer.

Further complications arise when women's wrestling is considered, as queerness in this subdivision of wrestling was often encouraged and relished by heteronormative audience members. Where male queerness was often introduced to be mocked and humiliated, female queerness was presented to be enjoyed and even titillated by, especially in the 1990s and early 2000s. Queerness within women's wrestling was encouraged and enjoyed, a stark contrast to the experience of queer male wrestlers. Many queered female wrestlers enjoyed great success owing to their queer characters and storylines; Mickie James, for example, had a long match at *WrestleMania 21* as part of a queer storyline. Yet many queer male wrestlers never achieved comparable success.

Academic study of professional wrestling is comprehensive in many areas, such as on the decades of the 1980s and 1990s.[4] However, there is a lack of research into wrestling's relationship with queerness. While queerness has been discussed with reference to specific characters and storylines (it must be discussed due to queerness's pivotal role in the formation and continued success of professional wrestling), much of the academic writing on queerness within professional wrestling is piecemeal, rather than comprehensive.[5] What this thesis contributes to the existing field of research is critical analysis of various storylines and characters that have thus far been passed over, especially those storylines and characters that have emerged recently, such as Nyla Rose or Sonya Deville. This thesis will draw parallels and links between key events in professional wrestling's queer history that have often been examined in isolation, often without reference to a longer tradition of queer characters and storylines within wrestling. The benefit of this approach is that a comprehensive

[4] Both David Shoemaker *The Squared Circle: Life, Death, and Professional Wrestling*, (New York: Gotham Books, 2013) and Jim Smallman, *'I'm Sorry, I Love You': A History of Professional Wrestling*, (London: Headline, 2018) focus largely on the period between the 1980s to 2000s.

[5] For example, in Jason Norris, *Women Love Professional Wrestling: An Anthology on Women & Professional Wrestling*, (Printed By Author, 2020), no queer female wrestlers are discussed, and only two male queer characters are references, Goldust and Velveteen Dream.

chronological account of the history of queerness in wrestling allows us to see how professional wrestling nurtured a culture of stereotypes and homophobia. Queerness in wrestling did not start in the 1990s with Goldust; the role that queerness played in the beginnings of professional wrestling grew incrementally and allowed for the creation of a character like Goldust.

As mentioned, academic analysis of key individuals, especially queer characters, will be examined extensively throughout this thesis. Janine Bradbury analyses the duality of the character of Goldust, which simultaneously challenges and upholds hegemonic heteromasculinity.[6] For Bradbury, Goldust and his valet Marlena, force the audience to confront sexual binaries and stereotypes, such as the role of women as managers and how this affects the gaze on the male body, and masculine aggression. Sharon Mazer's work is also key to this thesis. Mazer was the first to identify an undercurrent of homoeroticism within professional wrestling, which undermined the "conservative homoeroticism" that professional wrestling often portrayed.[7] Mazer argues that a sense of "essential masculinity" lies at the heart of every queer performance and character.[8] However, Mazer focuses largely on the 1980s and 1990s. As such, there is room to challenge Mazer's assessment based on more contemporary queer characters, such as Sonny Kiss, who have embraced femininity in their personas. The 2000s have received less scholarly attention, but there are still key texts. R. Tyson Smith's discussion of his experience working with Indie wrestling companies around 2004 offers valuable insight into the attitudes of wrestlers and fans in a more grassroots context.[9] Smith details a world where professional wrestlers are often

[6] Janine Bradbury, 'Grappling and Ga(y)zing: Gender, Sexuality and Performance in the WWE debuts of Goldust and Marlena', in Chow, Laine and Warden, *Performance and Professional Wrestling,* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).
[7] Sharon Mazer, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998).
[8] Mazer, *Professional Wrestling*, p. 5.
[9] R. Tyson Smith, *Fighting for Recognition: Identity, Masculinity, and the Act of Violence in Professional Wrestling*, (London: Duke University Press, 2014).

uncomfortable with the perceived homoeroticism of the industry; Smith argues that wrestling walks a fine line between masculinity and homoeroticism. Close analysis of the wrestling product will feature more heavily in later chapters concerning the 2000s, as there is less scholarship to grapple with. The work of Judith Butler will also be referenced, as her research into queerness and performativity has a bearing on various discussions throughout the thesis. Specifically, Butler's analysis of drag and the performativity of gender, in which she argues that "gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed", will be central in the exploration of the role of gender in wrestling.[10]

While these works provide valuable insight and analysis of key periods and topics concerning queerness, they do not treat queerness as their sole focus. Queerness, in almost all the works referenced in this thesis, is a subdivision of the analysis rather than the main focus. This thesis will foreground queerness within multiple aspects of professional wrestling. It argues that queerness has been at the heart of professional wrestling since the beginning, and that sexual gratification is key to wrestling's success, which some historians, like Danielle M. Soulliere, have detailed was not the case.[11] Further, this thesis introduces close analysis of storylines and characters (such as Nyla Rose) that have not been examined by other academics. This is the start of the conversation on a new era of professional wrestling, as the topics of transgender wrestlers and the lack of space for non-binary people are explored in depth for the first time.

Wrestling appeared for so long as a hostile environment for queerness due to its tendency to treat queer characters as relief valves for homoerotic tensions. To support this argument, I will analyse various wrestling shows from across the decades. Wrestling shows,

[10] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1990).
[11] Danielle M. Soulliere, 'Wrestling with Masculinity: Messages about Manhood in the WWE', Sex Roles, Vol. 55 (1), (July, 2007).

both weekly and pay-per-views, will be key in the close analysis of queerness within professional wrestling as they show how queer characters and storylines have been presented. Examining wrestling shows showcases the reactions of audiences towards certain characters and storylines; the reaction of the crowd is the best gauge of how professional wrestling successfully channelled homoerotic anxieties against queer characters. There are many examples of audiences calling queer wrestlers “fags”, wrestling audiences incessantly booing queer men, whilst at the same time raucously cheering for queer women. Further, many talking sections of wrestling shows will be examined, as the vocabulary used to discuss queer topics was often harmful and reductive, usually perpetuating harmful stereotypes and encouraging audiences to harass queer wrestlers.

This thesis is divided into four chapters and will take a chronological approach towards the analysis of wrestling and queerness. A chronological approach has been chosen because it allows an appreciation of shifts and continuities. For most of wrestling’s history, the depiction of queer people within wrestling has been largely stereotypical. This has changed somewhat in recent years. Whilst these recent changes are not all-encompassing, it is important to know the history of queerness to understand why these changes might be seen as progress. This thesis will argue, however, that wrestling has not progressed that far in accepting queerness within the industry, and any positive changes in recent years have often come about due to external pressure, especially from fans, rather than internal change. Tracking the overall history reveals how often professional wrestling has resorted to using the same gimmicks and storylines involving queerness, usually offering a guaranteed way of making a heel wrestler. Further, analysing new developments in the 1950s, such as the introduction of gimmicks, showcases how queerness was at the heart of the industry. The chronological approach also demonstrates how queerness has been a means of releasing pent-up anxiety for those who can feel uncomfortable participating in a homoerotic spectacle.

Analysis of how the wrestling industry initially dealt with homoerotic undercurrents shows how a culture emerged within the American wrestling scene that allowed for the abusing and policing of queerness.

The evolution of the wrestling industry will be explored in the first chapter, which will examine the years between 1920-1992. Professional wrestling emerged in American society in the 1920s and 1930s. The first chapter will examine core principles and ideals of professional wrestling to provide a comprehensive understanding of how professional wrestling works and how queerness has been inexorably linked with professional wrestling since the beginning. Key features of professional wrestling examined in this chapter include the first usages of gimmicks (characters and actions that wrestlers adopt). The first instance of a wrestling gimmick was an overtly queer wrestling character. The chapter will also examine tag team wrestling, where wrestling matches take place between two or more teams of two wrestlers; such a close relationship between two men within professional wrestling is prime ground for homoeroticism to flourish. By the 1980s and 1990s, queerness was at the heart of many of the iconic characters and moments in professional wrestling.

The second chapter explores the years between 1993-2003. In many ways, this was the peak of professional wrestling' popularity. This success can be attributed in large part to wrestling becoming more outlandish and risqué. Professional wrestling in the 1990s and early 2000s introduced more sexually explicit storylines and intended to shock people to draw audiences and attention. As part of this edgier product, wrestling saw an increase in queer wrestling characters. This was not a positive thing; the representation of queerness often deployed harmful stereotypes and overt homophobia. As I argue, wrestling has often overcompensated for homoeroticism with hypermasculinity and increased homophobia.

The third chapter will discuss the period between 2004-2014, when professional wrestling transitioned from the bombastic qualities of the 1990s towards a product that targeted families and children. That said, professional wrestling often considered queer-bashing to be a form of family entertainment, as the storylines professional wrestling produced in this apparently family-friendly era, still perpetuated harmful stereotypes. This chapter will show that professional wrestling has had a negative impact on how Americans (who watch wrestling) view queerness, due to its harmful depictions of queerness that have been targeted towards children.

The final chapter will explore recent changes in professional wrestling regarding queerness, from 2015 until 2022. It will highlight some positive changes in the world of professional wrestling, whilst also presenting evidence of lingering homophobia. Changes such as promoting and featuring queer individuals have created an environment for both queer wrestlers and fans to enjoy the spectacle of wrestling. However, the professional wrestling industry has often been pressured by outside forces to make changes, rather than opting to make them for the betterment of queer people and in the interests of fair representation.

This thesis will largely focus on the storylines and characters that originated in World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), the largest professional wrestling company in America. Brief mentions will be made of other promotions, such as World Championship Wrestling (WCW) and other independent companies (Indies). However, in the fourth chapter, All Elite Wrestling (AEW) will also be examined. AEW is a rising wrestling company that has become very popular in a short space of time; many see AEW as WWE's newest and most serious competitor. Since these two companies reach the largest American audience, they are the companies whose work will be examined.

Chapter One – 1920-1992 (Denial of Queerness)

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the beginnings of the professional wrestling industry. Exploring the creation and emergence of wrestling allows us to understand the origins of wrestling's relationship with queerness. We will see how queerness became embedded in wrestling as it developed, becoming foundational in many aspects of the industry. This period was the start of the hetero-anxiety in wrestling that created an environment in which queer acts gained traction and attention but were also reviled. This chapter will explore how queerness, over the twentieth century, became an integral part of wrestling, yet at the same time was consistently disparaged and ignored in order to reaffirm heteronormativity. The 1920s is the starting point of this industry due to the changes wrestling experienced in this decade. Wrestling has performativity at its heart, which developed out of the world of the carnival. Queer acts, for the most part, thrive on the performativity, whether that be the carnival, drag, or professional wrestling.

Understanding performativity is key in understanding queer acts in wrestling. The rest of the chapter will explore the rise of professional wrestling within American popular culture. The 1930s saw the first boom in wrestling's popularity, partly due to the sexual nature of wrestling and how it was advertised. Promoters became aware in the 1930s of the appeal of near naked men, and this drove various marketing strategies for wrestling companies, though often only women were targeted by this advertising. In the 1950s, however, wrestling began operating in the ways that we recognise in the industry today. The 1950s saw the first wrestling characters introduced, and these characters were queer. There have been very few innovations within professional wrestling that are more important than the introduction of wrestling gimmicks. The history of wrestling gimmicks shows that queer has been at the heart of professional wrestling since the beginning, yet perplexingly, so has homophobia and

hetero-anxiety. Professional wrestling companies seemed wary and hesitant of promoting queer characters and storylines, out of fear of being perceived to endorse it. As such, wrestling companies often presented queerness as a negative and dangerous thing, and encouraged audiences to reject signs of queerness.

Throughout the chapter we will see instances of queer characters being reviled, despite being megastars; homoerotic acts were policed by both heteromasculine fans, and those who held power within wrestling companies. Wrestling has often used queer acts as a bait for homophobia; audiences often relished the idea of freely hurling abuse, ultimately allowing wrestling companies to sell tickets. Yet this only happened to the most ostentatious and overt queer acts. As this chapter will show, queerness permeates all aspects of professional wrestling, including the moves that are used and the formatting of wrestling shows. This is a fact that many within the wrestling world, and the wider historiography, have intentionally ignored. Interestingly, as this chapter will demonstrate, women were also ignored in these earlier decades, treated as objects to be seen, rather than autonomous people. Women, as we will see, were depicted as a passive other, a relief valve for the homoerotic tensions that fill any arena in which a professional wrestling show is performed. The treatment of queerness as a method of alleviating homoerotic tensions continued into the 1980s. One can see a resurgence of the queer act, with individuals and tag teams having more creative license to operate than ever before. This chapter will closely examine the increased role of queerness within professional wrestling since its inception in the 1920s, to its cultural peak of the 1980s.

Beginnings

The beginning of professional wrestling is a topic that invites discussion and disagreement amongst academics. Some wrestling historians argue that wrestling has evolved from the times of the ancient Greeks, with their competitions in the ancient wrestling style. Historians such as David Shoemaker and Jim Smallman, when discussing the emergence of modern professional wrestling, point to George Hackenschmidt as the foundation for wrestling. Both Shoemaker and Smallman argue that Hackenschmidt was professional wrestling's first star.[12] This is a valid argument, for Hackenschmidt's stardom rose meteorically in 1904, when his rivalry with Frank Gotch began. Thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, were invested in the battle between these two physical specimens; Shoemaker likens them to Greek gods.[13]

Yet, this is not the beginning of modern professional wrestling. Though the matches between Hackenschmidt and Gotch represented wrestling's first mainstream success, at this point the sport was still legitimate. This wrestling was more akin to amateur wrestling, that honourable sport that promotes fierce competition. This is not how one would describe professional wrestling. It seems wrong to demote the genuine competition to the amateur level, whilst the farce and excessiveness we see on television is deemed 'professional'. As wrestling in Hackenschmidt and Gotch's era was still a legitimate contest, I disagree with Shoemaker and Smallman as to the origins of modern professional wrestling.

Modern professional wrestling began in the 1920s, deriving from carnival culture. Mikhail Bakhtin's description of carnival culture sheds light on how professional wrestling emerged. Bakhtin details the world of the carnival as one of excess and showmanship, where

[12] David Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle: Life, Death, and Professional Wrestling*, (New York: Gotham Books, 2013), p. 12; Jim Smallman, *'I'm Sorry, I Love You': A History of Professional Wrestling*, (London: Headline, 2018), p. 32.
[13] Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, p. 11.

someone would go to lose themselves in the majesty of those performers who displayed their bodies and a willingness to endure pain to provide entertainment.[14] Chad Dell has explored the links and parallels between carnival and wrestling, arguing that both rely upon the integration, and participation, of audience and performer into the spectacle.[15] Dell contends, using Bakhtin's work, that everyone is a participant in the spectacle, whether that be wrestling or carnival.[16] Bakhtin's ideas also apply to the spectacle of professional wrestling. Bakhtin's analysis of the body is mixed. Bakhtin describes the physicality of the body as "grotesque", but then describes the acts of the body through performativity as "extraordinary realism", imbuing the spectacle with "a wealth of meaning".[17] Wrestling too focuses largely upon the body, yet in most situations, as we will see, the bodies are not 'grotesque'. A great deal of emphasis is put on the wrestlers looking the best that they can.

However, as much as both professional wrestling and carnival are about the spectacle of the performance, they are concerned with being lied to and cheated. This is the concept that professional wrestling builds upon: deceit. Both carnival and professional wrestling achieve their spectacles only when the audience suspend their disbelief, and fully engross themselves in the narratives being portrayed, rather than the realities of how these feats were managed. Those uninitiated to the world of professional wrestling might wonder why someone would seek out entertainment in a pseudo-sport where there is no real competition. The best answer comes from the central figure in early wrestling scholarship, the poststructuralist Roland Barthes. Barthes contends that people make a mistake by expecting a

[14] M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, (London: MIT Press, 1968), p. 197.
[15] Chad Dell, '"Lookit That Hunk of Man!": Subversive Pleasures, Female Fandom, and Professional Wrestling', in Cheryl Harris and Alison Alexander, *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture and Identity*, (Cresskill: Hampton Press, 1998), p. 95.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 309.

sport when watching wrestling; infamously, Barthes deemed wrestling a "spectacle", arguing that it was more like watching a classic play than a boxing match.[18] Barthes explains:

> The public is completely uninterested in knowing whether the contest is rigged or not, and rightly so; it abandons itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle, which is to abolish all motives and all consequences: what matters is not what it thinks but what it sees.[19]

Barthes argues that audiences watch wrestling to lose themselves in the excessive of the spectacle, experiencing each moment as it happens, and revelling in their emotions. Based on this description of the allure of professional wrestling, it is easy to see carnival's influence on the industry. From the participation of the audience to the focus on the body, carnival and wrestling share many of the same hallmarks. John Fiske argues that this influence lasted well into the late twentieth century; if the carnival was a spectacle for the masses that often pushed boundaries, so too was wrestling.[20] John Rickard adds to Fiske's point, arguing that as professional wrestling developed in the late 1920s from the strong man competitions that were so popular in the carnival, the display of bodies was extreme, especially the amount of bare skin that was on display.[21]

Professional wrestling, then, increasingly became a spectacle of its own in the late 1920s, rather than just an element of the carnival. Those involved with the carnival began to affect the world of amateur wrestling, scripting fights and making it a more spectator-oriented business. By the 1930s, modern professional wrestling was being fleshed out.

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[18] Roland Barthes, 'The World of Wrestling', in Sammond, *Steel Chair to the Head,* p. 23.
[19] Ibid.
[20] John Fiske, *Television Culture*, (London: Taylor & Francis, 2010), p. 242.
[21] John Rickard, '"The Spectacle of Excess": The Emergence of Modern Professional Wrestling in the United States and Australia', *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 33 (1), (1999), p. 133.

1930s

By the 1930s, professional wrestling had developed a business model that was successful, with promotions emerging across the country; from the 1930s until the late 1980s, wrestling operated in a territory system, with every state or couple of states having its own promotion, such as Mid-Atlantic Championship Wrestling in the Carolinas, or Georgia Championship Wrestling in Georgia. Competition, in such a compacted market, was fierce, and each promotion relied purely on ticket sales to stay afloat. Marketing, as a result, was key. Unlike modern professional wrestling, wrestling in the 1930s was targeted mainly to a female audience. There are different schools of thought as to why.

John Rickard and Danielle M. Soulliere support a more technical, less sexual reading of such marketing. Rickard argues that it was an interest in the physical form, without sexual undertones, that made wrestling popular among Americans.[22] Rickard contends that a sexual gaze upon the male form would not have been acknowledged in the 1930s, in a society that heavily regulated the display of flesh: "the interest in the male physique, on the part of both men and women, could be asserted without embarrassment, simply because, in that relatively innocent era, no one would have presumed to identify the sexual dimension of these images."[23] Soulliere makes a similar case that wrestling drew such large crowds, and regularly retained them, because wrestling perpetuated a model of masculinity that was aspirational. Dominant constructions of masculinity came under pressure in the 1930s. As Josep Armengol details, "the hegemonic ideal of American masculinity had been based on self-making and economic success ... millions of American men thus felt deprived of their traditionally masculine identities, which they had also associated with their twin identities as

[22] Rickard, '"The Spectacle of Excess"', p. 135.
[23] Ibid.

household heads and breadwinners".[24] Michael Kimmel concurs with Armengol's argument: "American men began to link their sense of themselves as men ... to their economic success".[25] Wrestling presented a return to a simpler model of masculinity, where strength, poise and technique allowed men to settle disputes in the simplest means. Ultimately, audiences, Soulliere argues, support those performances of masculinity that they agree with, thus allowing the success of professional wrestling in the 1930s.[26]

Other wrestling historians, such as Claire Warden and Chad Dell, have challenged Rickard and Soulliere's reading of the success of wrestling in the 1930s. I too would contend that Soulliere and Dell's arguments are too simplistic, and ignore the sexual undertones at work. It may be that 1930s America was a sexually conservative society, but the desires attending to watching near-naked men grappling cannot be ignored as a factor in wrestling's success. Warden and Dell both identify sexual desire as one of the main driving forces for the early success of professional wrestling. For Dell, wrestling offered one of the few opportunities for women in America to express sexual desire; he likens wrestling shows to male strip clubs, which were not permissible in 1930s America.[27] Dell explains that wrestling offered a chance for women to "transcend behavioural expectations and engage in conduct that was 'out of control'".[28] However, a largely female audience was beneficial for both wrestlers and audience. For the audience, it was a chance to express their sexuality freely and unrestrainedly, an opportunity that did not occur often for women in the 1930s. For the

[24] Josep M. Armengol, 'Gendering the Great Depression: rethinking the male body in 1930s American culture and literature', *Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 23 (1), (2014), p. 60.
[25] Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 7
[26] Danielle M. Soulliere, 'Wrestling with Masculinity: Messages about Manhood in the WWE', *Sex Roles*, Vol. 55 (1), (July, 2007), p. 9.
[27] Dell, '"Lookit That Hunk of Man!'", p. 93.
[28] Dell, '"Lookit that Hunk of a Man'", p. 98.

wrestlers, however, having women in the audience was important. As Sharon Mazer explains, it allowed wrestlers to expose their bodies comfortably:

> Women as watchers represent the appropriately heterosexual other in the male wrestlers' displays, allowing the wrestler to assert that he is not exposing his body for the approbation of other men per se by directing his sexual orientation past the other men toward the female.[29]

Mazer is recognised as the foremost authority on gender, sexuality and queerness within professional wrestling. Mazer is arguing here that a female audience is a channel by which homoerotic tensions that arise in professional wrestling can dissipate. Without the participation of women within professional wrestling, both in audiences and as wrestlers, professional wrestling would be an audience of men watching two near-naked men grapple with each other. However, Mazer does not consider the importance for the heterosexual section of the audience in having women in the attendance; the presence of women in the crowd allowed heteromasculine men to demonstrate their masculine prowess by giving them another they could distinguish themselves from. Ironically, John Rickard noted that in much of the historiography covering professional wrestling, scholars have wilfully ignored the sexual undertones that are always present, but Rickard himself does not recognise the possibility of sexual motives driving female audiences in the 1930s.[30]

Claire Warden concurs with Dell's argument that women were prompted to watch wrestling, at least partly, by sexual desire, with the marketing for wrestling in the 1930s focusing largely on the "muscular, dexterous bodies" that would be on display.[31] Warden makes it clear, though, that this did not extend to men in the audience as well. Warden

[29] Mazer, *Professional Wrestling*, p. 134.
[30] Rickard, '"The Spectacle of Excess"', p. 135.
[31] Claire Warden, '"Queer Music-Hall Sport": All-In Wrestling and Modernist Fakery', *Modernism/Modernity*, Vol. 27 (1), (January, 2020), p. 158.

clarifies that professional wrestling was often connoted with sex, but these suggestions were targeted only towards women. Wrestling in the 1930s offered a different allure for men at this time, which was a desire, as Soulliere explained, to see masculinity represented in a simpler way. [32] Warden argues that men were fond of watching wrestling because it was a subculture where men did not have to care about their appearance.[33] This contrasts with professional wrestling, a medium which places considerable importance on how men present themselves.

There has been little discussion of queerness in the academic scholarship discussed so far. If one considers the 1930s as the period that witnessed the emergence of professional wrestling in America, then one must also consider the 1930s as the beginning of homoerotic tensions within this arena. Yet, the historians mentioned above have focused on women when discussing the sexually charged preferences of a wrestling audience. One must concede that if wrestling held a sexual appeal for women, then the same would hold true for queer men. The avoidance of this topic is a clear example of the academic field conforming to a binary, heteronormative lens of study, even when discussing a queered industry like professional wrestling. The debate between the two schools of thinking, those who contend that wrestling held a sexual allure for audiences, and those who argue wrestling was popular because of its presentation of masculinity, continues and there are merits to both. It cannot be discounted that professional wrestling would draw crowds due to the sexually charged environment that it created. Rickard and Soulliere appear as naïve when denying the sexual tension inherent to professional wrestling. Professional wrestling implied from the beginning that sexual enjoyment of wrestling was permissible only for women. Even in the 1930s, professional wrestling had begun to ostracise queer people due to discomfort with its sexual undercurrents.

[32] Warden, '"Queer Music-Hall Sport"', p. 150.
[33] Warden, '"Queer Music-Hall Sport"', p. 158.

Development of a Modern Wrestling Style

The transition from amateur to professional wrestling saw a shift in focus from competition to visual presentation. Amateur wrestling did not need style, it relied upon competent combatants. Emerging from the world of the carnival, 'spectacle' was crucial. Like most aspects of modern professional wrestling, the wrestling style that developed was a mixture of sporting prowess and showbusiness spectacle. Wrestlers needed to perform moves that both required skill and presented a good show of pain. In the development of this style, an unmistakable parallel can be recognised between these wrestling moves and simulated sex. Sharon Mazer argues that those moves that look most threatening and often require the most skill, are also the most sexualized.[34] Mazer uses the example of the piledriver. The piledriver requires a wrestler to hold another wrestler upside down, with their head in-between the legs of the aggressor, who then drops to a sitting position, thus simulating dropping someone on their head and neck with extreme force. This move requires extreme care and precision, for it has caused several injuries, including famously to Stone Cold Steve Austin at *Summerslam 1997*.[35] Whilst the piledriver looks dangerous and damaging, it also looks undeniably sexual. With another's head in the genital region, the comparison to oral sex requires very little imagination. There are countless examples of wrestling moves that would not look out of place in porn, which then raises the relationship between sexual acts and the depiction of violence. As Sharon Mazer points out, "sexuality is always commingled with violence", as wrestling demonstrates.[36] Where one or both participants in sex may enjoy pain and/or violence, in wrestling, there are thousands of spectators glorying in the simulated battering of

[34] Mazer, *Professional Wrestling*, p. 112.
[35] *Summerslam 1997*, WWE (1997), accessed via *WWE Network*, [accessed on 04/02/22].
[36] Mazer, *Professional Wrestling*, p. 112.

a human body. As John Rickard succinctly puts it, the engagement from the crowd, especially when seeing those moves most like sexual acts, is "suggesting a certain relish in seeing the male body pilloried".[37]

Patrice Oppliger has also focused much of his work on the relationship between wrestling moves and sexual acts. Like Mazer, Oppliger uses a specific wrestling move, the bronco buster, to prove his point.[38] The bronco buster sees one wrestler resting on the lowest turnbuckle in one corner of the ring, with another wrestler proceeding to charge at them. The running wrestler then jumps, splitting their legs, situating the immobile wrestler's head into the genital area of the other wrestler. The aggressor then raises themselves up and drives back down onto the other wrestler, repeatedly driving their crotch into their opponent's face. This leads Oppliger to observe that there is a fixation within wrestling on the penis. Oppliger references the frequent low blows that occur within wrestling, stating that this is a symbolic way of a wrestler stripping an opponent of their manhood.[39] Where wrestling has developed flashier moves that would impress audiences, it has also developed a roster of moves that could only invite comparisons to sexual acts. The sexual suggestiveness of these moves contributes to the anxiety for heteromasculine men in the audience; watching two men perform these moves could invite uncomfortable questions of those in the audience. This spectacle is what led to many in professional wrestling demonstrating that they were not queer. Queer wrestling characters, as we will continue to see, emerged as a relief valve for the homoerotic anxieties within professional wrestling. Where Mazer and Oppliger examine the sexualised wrestling moves, they fail to examine the impact of these moves on the industry.

[37] Rickard, '"The Spectacle of Excess"', p. 136.
[38] Patrice A. Oppliger, *Wrestling and Hypermasculinity*, (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2004), p. 96.
[39] Oppliger, *Wrestling and Hypermasculinity*, p. 96.

Other academics, such as Nicholas Sammond, have looked at wrestling in similar ways to Mazer and Oppliger, but have focused on sexual desire as the motivation of violence, which borders onto the realm of sadomasochism. Sammond has argued that sadomasochism is infused within wrestling and is most evident in submission holds.[40] Queer communities, Arien Muzacz explains, are inextricably linked with more subversive and non-normative sexual acts, especially in being more open in their practicing of them. Subsequently, due to the heteronormative structure of society, queer participants in kink and BDSM are "more likely to experience discrimination if openly kinky than people who identify as heterosexual due to systems of privilege and oppression in the United States."[41] As wrestling focuses mainly on the expression and the display of pain, rather than experiencing it, linking sadomasochism and wrestling is both understandable and yet misguided. Whilst one can argue that wrestlers are not participating in an erotic space, as they are performing not experiencing pain, there is a distinctly sexual aspect to an audience viewing the performance of pain and deriving a sense of enjoyment out of it. As Rickard has it, seeing the infliction of pain on another person allows people to vent their rage, which gives the opportunity for audience members to experience a release comparable to participating in sadomasochistic or kinky sex. In this vein, Lucia Rahilly argues that the reversal of momentum within a wrestling match, with either wrestler taking control, represents the battle for dominance that occurs within queer sex; with often two bodies of the same sex, there is sometimes a struggle as to who fulfils which position, top or bottom.[42] However, as Rahilly herself points out, this is a simplistic, and heteronormative, view of queer sex. The belief that two men in a

[40] Sammond, *Steel Chair to the Head*, p. 4.
[41] Arien K. Muzacz, 'Expressions of Queer Intimacy: BDSM and Kink as Means of Actualization', *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, (June, 2021), p. 2.
[42] Lucia Rahilly, 'Is *Raw* War? Professional Wrestling as Popular S/M Narrative', in Sammond, *Steel Chair to the Head*, p. 218.

relationship would battle as to who is top or bottom is a dangerous belief stemming from heterosexual fears over appearing weak, a fear that is directly linked to penetration.

The fear of penetration is something that Heather Levi discusses in her work on lucha libre wrestling. Whilst lucha libre is situated within Mexico, and thus is influenced by different social stigmas and beliefs, there are many similarities between wrestling in Mexican and American culture. In both, there is a fear of being penetrated or appearing as submissive, as Levi says the key to masculinity in lucha libre is "appearing impenetrable".[43]

Rahilly points out that wrestling can be analysed in a deeper way than simply a battle over sexual positioning. Wrestling, Rahilly contends, is "supportive" of sadomasochism because it does not focus on the genitals when it comes to inflicting pain.[44] The decentralization of pleasure and pain from the genitals to the rest of the body is key in both wrestling and sadomasochism – for wrestling, low blows are illegal, whilst in sadomasochism, the entire body provides opportunity for stimulation. Interestingly, whilst these academics have examined the roles of men navigating wrestling, and its direct connections to sadomasochism, queer theorists such as Annamarie Jagose focus much more on female experiences when discussing sadomasochism. Jagose argues that sadomasochism is a more pertinent to the lesbian community, as those butch lesbians who have been influenced by patriarchal society have adopted the abuse they receive from men and include abuse and pain within their sexual lives.[45] In wrestling, however, low blows in women matches are almost unheard of, and are not illegal. This may be a sign of the patriarchal influence within wrestling.

[43] Heather Levi, *The World of Lucha Libre: Secrets, Revelations, and Mexican National Identity*, (London: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 144.
[44] Rahilly, 'Is *Raw* War?', p. 220.
[45] Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, (New York: New York University Press, 1996), p. 65.

The First Wrestling Characters

By the 1950s, wrestling was incredibly popular, but it had yet to become the spectacle that we recognise today. What was noticeable about wrestling in these early decades was the lack of gimmicks (a theme or character that one adopts in wrestling) that have become the linchpin of modern wrestling. In the 1940s and 1950s, wrestlers simply wrestled as themselves, relying on their technical prowess and athletic acumen to impress the crowd. Wrestling matches did not tell stories, they were simply an exhibition for displaying the best matches wrestlers could devise. This would all change due to Gorgeous George. George Wagner realised early on in his career that his small stature and lithe body would not help him attract the admiration of the crowd. Wagner's invention of a wrestling persona, which was complete by 1947, was intended to make audiences pay attention to him. Wagner adopted the moniker "Gorgeous", coming to the ring played in by Edward Elgar's 'Pomp and Circumstance', and accompanied by a valet, who would spray perfume on George and the audience. George wore lace and fur, attire that would have traditionally been worn by women.

Gorgeous George is credited as the creator of "sports entertainment", a unique term that WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) have used exclusively in branding their form of television.[46] As the first person to adopt a character within wrestling, Gorgeous George ushered in the modern age of wrestling. Interestingly, the first wrestling gimmick was not designed to gain the adulation of a crowd, but rather to anger them. Audiences, up until Gorgeous George's time, had never been given a reason to dislike a wrestler so vehemently, but this was another change George introduced to the world of wrestling. George's idea was simple; as David Shoemaker states, the idea was to draw heat, the ire of a crowd, due to the

[46] 'Gorgeous George: Bio', *WWE*, [accessed via https://www.wwe.com/superstars/gorgeousgeorge], (accessed 06/02/2022).

"simple fact of his existence".[47] As Shoemaker explains, it was not just that fans wanted Gorgeous George to lose (they had wanted this many times before when certain fan favourites were wrestling), rather they wanted to see George humiliated due to his queer persona.[48] Gorgeous George purposefully adopted feminine traits because he knew that it would draw negative attention towards him; George knew that as soon as audiences began to hate him, he would be guaranteed superstar status as so many would be clamouring to see him beaten. This is the oldest recipe for success in both wrestling and television.

George's adoption of many stereotypically feminine attributes, such as taking out his hairpins and passing them to his valet, brought out anger in the crowd, challenging heteronormative masculinity. The use of perfume, for example, is widely recognized as a gendered action, as is the perfume itself; one can tell from the scent of the perfume whether it is intended to be used by men or women.[49] The wearing of lace and fur was a radical move. Given that the 1950s saw a much more repressive system in place for the depictions of nonhegemonic masculinities, especially in the media, George's presentation as a queer heel was revolutionary for 1950s television.[50] However, there has been disagreement among contemporary scholars surrounding queer representation on television in the 1950s. Taking Gorgeous George as an example, Thomas Hackett argues that the 1950s were not as conservative and conformist as many cultural historians and queer theorists, such as Alan Sinfield, argue. Hackett controversially states that the millions of people watching wrestling on TV did "believe there was something marvellous about a buxom man in drag".[51] This statement easily attracts rebuttal. Those audiences watching the wrestling shows themselves

[47] Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, p. 49.
[48] Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, p. 50.
[49] Anna Lindqvist, 'Gender Categorization of Perfumes: The Difference Between Odour Perception and Commercial Classification', *Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, Vol. 21 (3), (2013), p. 218.
[50] Alan Sinfield, 'Out of the 1950s: Cultural History, Queer Thought', *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 77, (February, 2014), p. 265.
[51] Hackett, *Slaphappy,* p. 44.

did not believe George to be "marvellous", but rather they regarded him as unnatural, and called for him to be mercilessly beaten. Gorgeous George would prompt the audience in this manner, inviting a homophobic tirade.[52]

Sharon Mazer also describes Gorgeous George as dressing in "Liberace drag".[53] It can be argued either way whether such terminology is appropriate. Drag usually involves the "gender-bending" appearance of an individual, in which they first appear as over-the-top and, in the case of men, hyperfeminine, and then go on to reveal the male body underneath their attire.[54] It would be a stretch to state that George appeared as hyperfeminine, as he did not wear makeup, and apart from his lace and fur cape, he did not wear anything else that would be considered as feminine attire. Also, George did not ever hide his body, which is not in line with the usual conception of a conventional drag queen, which often sees elaborate costumes that are meant to amaze, but at the same time hide the body underneath; wrestling often requires the wrestler to expose their body. To say that George performed in drag can be contested, though one must concede that at the time that George was performing, it would certainly seem a radical appearance.

Gorgeous George was pushing boundaries in 1950s America when it came to appearing queer, but there were certain boundaries that would not be crossed. Most notably, George's appearance as queer only extended as far as his entrance. During a match, George would mostly appear as a straight, masculine man. As Sharon Mazer points out, in early wrestling, those more queered heels would still exhibit heteronormative violence.[55] In the ring, George would not exploit his opponent sexually, despite the clear opportunities to do so.

[52] Mazer, *Professional Wrestling*, p. 93.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Meredith Heller, *Queering Drag: Redefining the Discourse of Gender-Bending*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020), pp. 1-2.
[55] Mazer, *Professional Wrestling*, p. 5.

Also, later in Gorgeous George's career, he would replace his valet with his real-life wife. As Patrice Oppliger explains, there was a line that even the most feminine male wrestlers would not cross in the early decades of modern professional wrestling, and this was the line into the homosexual.[56] There was a certain tolerance for those men who acted more effeminate, but those openly homosexual would not be permitted. Gorgeous George's antics were also accepted on television because he was acting the heel. George was still furthering the point that effeminate men are antagonists, not to be supported, and more importantly, deserving of a beating. The accompaniment of Wagner's wife for Gorgeous George was key, as it showed that George, despite all his feminine antics, still upheld the heteronormative, hegemonic model of masculinity in 1950s America.

Whilst Gorgeous George's actual appearance never strayed too far into the territory of the homosexual, one cannot deny George's impact on the industry, especially for the development of wrestling heels. David Shoemaker argues that Gorgeous George introduced a new subset of wrestling heels: the arrogant heel.[57] Becoming the first model of the arrogant heel allowed other wrestlers to build upon George's work, creating alterations of the arrogant heel to create the "faggot heel".[58] Gorgeous George had introduced an entire new genre within wrestling, and created the most important component of modern professional wrestling: gimmicks. In David Shoemaker's words, Gorgeous George was monumental because his presence "was an invitation to be oneself, or to be a very loud version of oneself".[59]

The successor to Gorgeous George's legacy of queering professional wrestling was Ricki Starr. Wrestling in the later 1950s, Ricki Starr saw a completely different career

[56] Oppliger, *Wrestling and Hypermasculinity*, p. 115.
[57] Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, p. 50.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.

trajectory to Gorgeous George, despite both utilizing very similar ideas. Ricki Starr was a wrestler who, like Gorgeous George, ushered in a revolutionary idea into the world of professional wrestling; Starr was one of the first to utilise his past to create a gimmick. In the case of Starr, this was ballet. Starr was a trained ballet dancer before he emerged in the world of wrestling and incorporated his classical training into his wrestling. Laura Katz Rizzo has written extensively on Starr, noting that he would make his entrance to the ring wearing ballet shoes, with a leap and a pirouette.[60] Unlike other effeminate and queer wrestlers, such as Gorgeous George, Starr would not conform to a heteronormative model of violence when wrestling an opponent, but rather would continue to dance and leap around the ring, and perform actions that were specifically coded homosexual, such as putting his rear in the face of his opponent and wiggling it.[61] Rizzo describes Starr as having the stature stereotypically associated with queer men, that being small, lithe and light.[62] Starr went a lot further than Gorgeous George in provocatively performing as a queer wrestler; the adoption of his ballet dancer gimmick further reinforced the image of Starr as queer. Ballet has often been connotated with queer performers, especially men, in the cultural imaginary. Men in ballet are often thought to occupy a "female world", and male ballet dancers need to navigate their masculinity within this feminine arena.[63] As Rizzo states, "it is feminine to be on display", which applies to both ballet and professional wrestling.[64] One can argue that professional wrestling and ballet are more akin to one another than, say, wrestling and American Football. Both feature a performance of intricately planned out moves and routines, which requires the

[60] Laura Katz Rizzo, '"Gold-dust": Ricki Starr's Iconic Performances of the Queer Commodity in Popular Entertainment', in Broderick Chow, Eero Lane and Claire Warden, *Performance and Professional Wrestling*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), p. 127.
[61] Mazer, *Professional Wrestling*, pp. 94-95.
[62] Rizzo, '"Gold-dust"', p. 127.
[63] Trenton M. Halton and Meredith G. F. Worthen, 'Male Ballet Dancers and Their Performances of Heteromasculinity', *Journal of College Student Development*, Vol. 55(8), (November, 2014), pp. 757-758.
[64] Rizzo, '"Gold-dust"', p. 130.

participants to be trained thoroughly and possess a high level of physical fitness. What is important in both is the storytelling that goes into the moves that the performers enact, the narrative that is crafted over the course of the show. It is interesting, perhaps then, that wrestling is deemed a very low-brow form of entertainment, while ballet is seen as a zenith of social sophistication.

Ricki Starr adopted a gimmick that would be considered highly queer today. Certainly, Starr performed with much more femininity than Gorgeous George. It is perhaps surprising, then, to see the level of popularity that Starr reached. For a man who performed with a queered gimmick like ballet, and acted in a stereotypically queer manner, the fact that Starr was one of the most popular babyface (good guy) wrestlers in the early decades of modern wrestling is surprising. Rizzo states that Starr had an easily likeable personality in front of the crowd; audiences could not help but laugh at Starr during his entrance and were intrigued as to how Starr hoped to compete against much larger and stronger opponents.[65] One could argue that this was not necessarily an indication that American audiences in the late 1950s and early 1960s were more accepting of queer acts than historians have often argued, but rather that queer acts such as Starr were packaged in a non-threatening form, so that heteronormativity was not challenged. Starr made himself a comedy act, a featured performer that audiences could laugh at as he leaped around the ring. Arguably, Starr was not meant to be taken seriously, and as a result, audiences could abide and encourage his queer actions as a novelty. Rizzo counters this argument, as she states that post-war America celebrated "fluid masculinity", especially within professional wrestling.[66] Rizzo goes as far as to argue that Ricki Starr gave new dimensions by which spectators considered masculinity, allowing it to be measured not just by strength "but also in style, finesse, intelligence, beauty

[65] Rizzo, '"Gold-dust"', p. 129.
[66] Rizzo, '"Gold-dust"', p. 130.

and power".[67] It is also important to note that Starr was not a fully comedic character, as he was highly successful, winning many matches against larger and stronger opponents. Having Starr win matches against these men was a bold statement to make in the late 1950s.

There is a consensus within the historiography of queer professional wrestling, small though it may be, that Gorgeous George was the trailblazer who paved the way for the explosion of queer representation that professional wrestling has seen over almost a century. There is no denying George's legacy, as the first wrestler to adopt a queer persona. However, the histories have also done a great disservice to Ricki Starr.[68] Starr pushed the limits of masculinity within 1950s and 1960s America, and even more remarkably, gained high levels of popularity while doing so. Starr portrayed a character that was arguably more overtly queer than almost any other wrestler to this day; Starr did not resort to the hegemonic form of masculine violence that almost all wrestlers enact. Keeping his gimmick whilst wrestling is a commitment that few wrestlers, especially those queer-coded ones, sustain. To be a queer wrestler and popular is something that few have ever achieved, and as a result, Ricki Starr deserves more attention and recognition.

Tag Team Wrestling

As with many aspects of professional wrestling, tag team wrestling (a form of wrestling featuring a team of two wrestlers against another team, with one man from each team in the ring, who can exchange places with their partners) started to develop in the 1950s and 1960s. This form of wrestling has been the subject of intense discussion among both

[67] Rizzo, '"Gold-dust"', p. 134.
[68] Laura Katz Rizzo is the only historian to discuss Starr in any great detail.

wrestling historians and queer theorists. The work of Henry Jenkins III is perhaps the most comprehensive on this topic. Jenkins discusses the emergence of tag team wrestling as deriving out of the exploration of male relationships. Jenkins contends that tag team wrestling is an admission of weakness within the kayfabe world of professional wrestling, as a man is admitting that he needs help and support from another man.[69] Kayfabe involves treating wrestling storylines as real events, as though a soap opera were real life. Jenkins further articulates that tag team wrestling is the site of greatest intimacy between men within the world of wrestling, as it sees two men struggle together, navigate success and failure, and ultimately find solace and support from one another.[70] The central moment of tag team wrestling is the tag itself, which sees one wrestler touch hands with another wrestler; in more recent times, tags are now permitted to touch almost any part of a partner's upper body. The sexual connotations that surround the image of two men touching hands are exacerbated, Jenkins states, because nearly naked men feature in this act of intimacy.[71] Tag team wrestling is an important aspect of queer wrestling, as it is the most homosocial and homosexual subgenre of wrestling. Wrestling explores male intimacy in no greater depth than within tag team wrestling, displaying how two men can come to depend on one another so completely. As Sharon Mazer explains, tag teams are comparable to marriages, in that the two wrestlers that compose a team often declare their love for one another, will care for each other when they are injured, and will avenge them.[72] However, tag teams also face the possibility of splitting, like marriage.

The splitting up of a tag team occurs in varying circumstances, much like marriages. Over wrestling's history, tag teams have disbanded for innumerable reasons. When a tag

[69] Henry Jenkins III, '"Never Trust a Snake": WWF Wrestling as Masculine Melodrama', in Sammond, *Steel Chair to the Head*, p. 54.
[70] Jenkins, '"Never Trust a Snake"', pp. 54-55.
[71] Jenkins, '"Never Trust a Snake"', p. 54.
[72] Mazer, *Professional Wrestling*, p. 111.

team splits due to a betrayal, a protracted series of bitter matches usually follow. This is much like divorce proceedings. This is perhaps an overly romanticized analogy; while tag teams are depicted as close units, to equate a marriage with the absurdity of wrestling is a stretch. Divorce proceedings rarely lead to an extreme rules match, for example, or a 'loser must quit their job' scenario, which is often seen following tag team splits.[73] Wrestling is often straightforward, it is good versus bad in almost all scenarios, and there is always a winner. To liken marriages and divorces, which are incredibly complex and varied, to wrestling, is simplistic. Yet Jenkins argues that there is always a degree of separation and reservation within tag teams, as though there is some distance that will not be bridged between the two participants.[74] In kayfabe, Jenkins states this is because the two wrestlers who comprised a tag team would not want to become too close, as they could perceive a time in the future in which they would need to compete with one another.[75] This was more common in the 1950s-1970s, as there were not as many tag teams that were devoted solely to tag team wrestling; rather, two single wrestlers would join forces to become a team for a while. While fear of having to face one another would be a justifiable explanation in kayfabe, such a scenario might prompt anxieties for heteronormative men. In the 1950s and 60s, the image of two men becoming close, and coming to present something akin to a homosexual relationship, was an invitation for homophobia and virulent rage amongst the audience, examples of which will be discussed later in the chapter.

One way wrestling promotions have skirted the taboo area of homosexual relationships within tag team wrestling, Patrice Oppliger explains, is by making teams comprised of brothers and cousins.[76] As Thomas Hackett states, tag team wrestling is

[73] For example, see 'Michelle McCool v. Layla: Loser Leaves WWE' at *Extreme Rules 2011*.
[74] Jenkins, '"Never Trust a Snake"', p. 55.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Oppliger, *Wrestling and Hypermasculinity*, p. 98.

"inherently homoerotic", but when family members form a tag team, no one could infer sexual desire between family members.[77]

To understand the impact of the visibility of male tag teams, one must compare their relationships to those of men in other sports. For Brian Pronger, there is little to distinguish between sex and sport, as they both stem from a place of desire.[78] Pronger asserts that in most sports there is a codified expectation concerning the governance of the body, whereby bodies are not permitted to interact with one another in certain ways, lest athletes' desire become uncontained.[79] Mazer summarises this when she describes the practice and performance of professional wrestling as to "touch without touching, to be touched without being touched".[80] Heavily regulated rules of sport concerning body contact is pervasive and absolute across sports, though most concern opponents touching. For athletic teams, such as wrestling tag teams, Pronger argues that homophobia is rife amongst teams because of the constant implications of homoeroticism surrounding same-gender sports teams.[81] Pronger admits that there is a certain acceptance of "loving generosity" amongst teammates, but this is a particularly tricky area.[82] Again, the rules and regulations that govern the intimacy of teammates is uncodified but operates as a 'know it when you see it' experience. Those athletes who stray too far over the homosexual line can face mockery, ostracism, and abuse as punishment. It is not just in professional wrestling that there is an expectation of bodily governance amongst same-sexed athletes, at once permitting a certain level of familiarity and intimacy, but also denying more overt expressions of desire.

[77] Hackett, *Slaphappy*, p. 170.
[78] Brian Pronger, 'Homosexuality and Sport: Who's Winning?', in Jim McKay, Michael Alan Messner and Donald Sabo, *Masculinities, Gender Relations and Sport*, (London: SAGE Publications, 2000), p. 235.
[79] Pronger, 'Homosexuality and Sport', pp. 235-236.
[80] Mazer, *Professional Wrestling*, p. 102.
[81] Pronger, 'Homosexuality and Sport', p. 236.
[82] Pronger, 'Homosexuality and Sport', p. 237.

Michel Foucault's seminal work on sexuality, and especially his discussions of sexuality within sport, identifies an omnipresent silence surrounding homosexuality in sporting environments.[83] Homosexuality and homoeroticism were often undiscussed realities within sports, especially for much of the twentieth century, to maintain a hegemonic heteromasculine hierarchy to the operation of professional sports. Yet, as Pronger details in his work on the topic of homosexuality and team sports, homosexual men are highly unlikely to participate in team sports, despite what seems the perfect opportunity to express their desire for other men.[84] The rampant homophobia in almost all team sports is, understandably, a message to queer people to stay away from this arena. As such, those athletes who competed in team sports, such as tag team wrestling, were not openly homosexual men, but rather men who more often than not disavowed any link with homosexuality. Despite the homoerotic subtext of tag team wrestling, and other team sports, for the most part, homosexuality is not tolerated. For example, few footballers playing in the more competitive leagues, such as the Premier League, Bundesliga or Serie A, have come out as queer. Later analysis of the Bushwhackers and Beverly Brothers in the chapter highlights the negative attitude towards homosexuality in tag teams.

It is important to note here that, up until around the 1980s, women were not allowed to participate in major sporting leagues, including wrestling. It is not until the past decade or so that women have seen the opportunities to receive mainstream recognition for their talent, and as a result, their contribution to queer representation and team sports have been limited by outside factors.

[83] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, (New York: Vintage, 1990), p. 27.
[84] Brian Pronger, *The Arena of Masculinity: Sports, Homosexuality, and the Meaning of Sex*, (New York: St Martin's Press, 1990), pp. 24-26.

Beginnings of Televised Wrestling

As America moved into the television era, wrestling saw a boost in audience interaction. Wrestling was easy to televise, often requiring one camera and basic graphics. In the 1960s and 1970s, wrestling became a staple of American television. By the 1970s and 1980s, the format of wrestling came to resemble, Henry Jenkins III argues, a soap opera.[85] Another stalwart of television, soap operas are considered a distinctly feminine genre, in which the audience are asked to "identify" with female characters, whilst also developing the mindset of "a sort of ideal mother", possessing greater wisdom than the characters on the show.[86] According to Tania Modleski, the form of the soap opera is feminine, yet as both Jenkins and Dalbir S. Sehmby argue, wrestling adopted this feminine form to great success. Sehmby argues there's a dichotomy between the form of professional wrestling and its imagery. Visually, Sehmby states, wrestling is a hypermasculine programme, featuring contests for "pride, honour and gold championships", a televised spectacle that has a clear beginning, middle and end, and features violence between men.[87] Such structure is tailored towards a male audience. Sehmby argues television wrestling also follows a feminine, operatic structure. The format of professional wrestling sees a serial narrative unfold, where storylines are developed over weeks, months, and sometimes even years, much like soap operas. Sehmby details the feminine narrative format as one consisting of a serial structure, melodramatic expressions by characters, and the verbalization of emotions.[88] Jenkins states unequivocally that wrestling is "serial fiction for men".[89] As discussed earlier, wrestling originally became popular in the 1920s and 1930s, in part, because it allowed for an

[85] Jenkins, '"Never Trust a Snake"', p. 51.
[86] Tania Modleski, 'The Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Operas: Notes on a Feminine Narrative Form', *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 33(1), (Fall, 1979), p. 14.
[87] Dalbir S. Sehmby, 'Wrestling and Popular Culture', *Comparative Literature and Culture*, Vol. 4(1), (March, 2002), p. 5.
[88] Sehmby, 'Wrestling and Popular Culture', p.5.
[89] Jenkins, '"Never Trust a Snake"', p. 51.

expression of rugged masculinity that many felt had been stripped away from society. However, by the 1970s and the televised age of wrestling, wrestling was popular for almost the opposite. As Jenkins notes, wrestling allowed for the expression of men's emotions, something that was taboo in American society: "such campy self-acknowledgement ... makes male spectators' affective engagement with this melodramatic safe and acceptable within a traditionally masculine culture which otherwise back away from overt emotional display".[90] These socially constructed restrictions meant that men had very few avenues in which to express their emotions. Over the course of four decades, wrestling had transformed the model of masculinity it promoted.

Jenkins's argument must be tempered somewhat. While it is true that men often discussed their feelings on wrestling television, these were mainly feelings of rage and anger, or else pride at having won a match. Deeper emotions, of fear, excitement, and most certainly desire, were still tabooed within wrestling.

Televised wrestling is also comparable to the soap opera due to the encouragement of gossip amongst its fanbase. In the 1970s and 1980s, kayfabe was still a highly protected commodity in wrestling, with believability being key to many fans. However, as wrestling's popularity increased, many fans grew aware of the staged realities of wrestling. Those who still believed in wrestling's authenticity wondered how their heroes would overcome the evils that they were facing, whilst fans who were aware of more than just wrestling storylines speculated about backstage rumours, about which wrestlers would be getting a push into the main event, or which wrestlers were looking to switch companies. This is a tradition amongst fans that soap operas have cultivated for years as well, discussing with one another the ongoing storylines and fates of certain characters. To integrate a stereotypically feminine trait

[90] Jenkins, '"Never Trust a Snake"', p. 52.

amongst a largely male fanbase demonstrates that professional wrestling, from the birth of the televised age, contained distinctly feminine designs in its formatting and content.

The 1980-1992: A New Image

The 1980s and early 1990s is considered the golden age of wrestling. Uncoincidentally, in 1982, Vince McMahon Jr. took control of the WWF (later WWE) from his father, perhaps the most important act in the history of professional wrestling. The tonal shift in WWF, which had established itself as the biggest wrestling promotion in America, was noticeable over the course of the 1980s. Almost every wrestling fan is aware of what McMahon values in his televised wrestling, and chief amongst these is the look of a wrestler. McMahon has always prized heavily muscled male wrestlers, so much so that in the early 1980s he established his own bodybuilding company, the World Bodybuilding Federation, though it quickly failed.[91] McMahon's love of muscled physiques has become a running joke in the wrestling community.[92] The 1980s witnessed the inception of this visual shake up.

Lucia Rahilly has compared 1980s wrestling physiques with gay bodybuilding. Rahilly argues that both professional wrestling and bodybuilding encourage extreme body types, which supports John Rickard's assessment of professional wrestling as a "spectacle of excess".[93] Unlike other sports, where the body is conditioned to maximise performance, whether that be the lithe body of swimmers or the muscular stature of weightlifters, both professional wrestling and bodybuilding encourage vascular bodies purely for the sake of

[91] Eric Blattberg, 'No Chance: Vince McMahon's History Of Business Failures Outside Of WWE', *The Sportster*, (June 8, 2021), accessed via https://www.thesportster.com/news/vince-mcmahon-business-failures-xfl-wbf/, [accessed on 11/03/22].
[92] See Ross Tweddell, 'WTF Moments', *Cultaholic*, accessed via YouTube; in this series, Tweddell often includes a segment introduced by the jingle "Vince McMahon loves big, sweaty men".
[93] Rahilly, 'Is *Raw* War?', p. 226; see Rickard, '"The Spectacle of Excess"'.

spectacle. A certain level of fitness and musculature is required to perform professional wrestling moves safely, but the finely chiselled bodies that litter professional wrestling companies' rosters are excessive. Rahilly contends that these body types are promoted within these industries to be admired, and erotically appreciated.[94] This, Rahilly notes, flouts the usual masculine convention of acting rather than being seen; men are not supposed to be on display, but rather are the spectators of sexualized women, and such role reversal causes a new phenomenon that Rahilly terms "hypermasculinsed effeminacy".[95] This again lends credence to Chad Dell's comparison of wrestling to strip clubs, as both Dell and Rahilly align professional wrestling with industries that encourage men to showcase their bodies for the gratification of the audience. What distinguishes professional wrestling from bodybuilding and male strip clubs is the size and make up of their respective audiences. Professional wrestling attracted a far greater audience than either bodybuilding or strip clubs, especially in the 1980s. Further, most of the audience watching professional wrestling are men, a fact that moved Rahilly to articulate that "the spectacle of overtly sexualised, barely clad, intimately grappling same-sex bodies would threaten the stability of the boundaries of heterosexual identity".[96]

Wrestling, since the 1920s, had always fixated on larger statures and muscular men, the 1980s and early 1990s merely saw Vince McMahon make this a priority when picking wrestling stars. What had not been seen since the times of Gorgeous George and Ricki Starr was the exploration of alternative masculinities. Sharon Mazer points to certain wrestling stars of the 1980s in explaining what she terms the "blending" of masculinities.[97] One such wrestler was the Ultimate Warrior, whom Mazer describes as being attired in "comic book

[94] Rahilly, 'Is *Raw* War?', p. 227.
[95] Rahilly, 'Is *Raw* War?', p. 228.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Mazer, *Professional Wrestling*, p. 101.

drag".[98] While not wearing out and out feminine attire, Mazer argues that there is still the air of camp and queer in the appearance of wrestlers such as the Ultimate Warrior. Though, as Mazer also says, "to some degree, a professional wrestler is always in drag".[99] An undercurrent of homoeroticism always persists within professional wrestling; queerness is as ingrained in the business as the moves themselves. Mazer highlights more specific examples when discussing the broader range of masculinities that were explored within the 1980s. A new form of wrestler was debuted in the 1980s in the shape of Lex Luger and Mr. Perfect, whom Mazer categorises as "cute brutes".[100] By the early 1990s, these characters had evolved into some of the most reviled wrestlers in WWF. Both Lex Luger and Mr. Perfect represented a change in the ethos of professional wrestling, at least within WWE. Wrestlers looked the part of heroes by the 1980s and early 1990s, rather than just possessing talent and skill. Luger and Perfect were competent wrestlers, and Mr. Perfect was heralded as one of the greatest technical wrestlers in history. By the 1980s, however, wrestlers were starting to differentiate themselves, rather than easily slotting into the binary categories of bland babyface or foreign heel.

Shannon Vanderstreaten also regards the 1980s as the decade when wrestling saw more variety in its performers. She notes that wrestlers in the 1980s were beginning to incorporate aspects of queerness into their characters, such as Jesse Ventura wearing a feather boa.[101] Vanderstreaten confidently states that "in his own way, Hulk Hogan was as over the top as RuPaul".[102] Vanderstreaten, in comparing the theatricality of RuPaul and Hogan, allows one to make an argument that Hogan's is more of an act, as Terry Bolea shares less in common with Hulk Hogan than RuPaul Andre Charles shares with his public persona.

[98] Mazer, *Professional Wrestling*, p. 101.
[99] Mazer, *Professional Wrestling*, p. 100.
[100] Mazer, *Professional Wrestling*, p. 98.
[101] Vanderstraten, '"Blinded by the Light that is Your Velveteen Dream",
[102] Ibid.

Once again, however, Mazer observes that whilst appearances may have been changing within wrestling in the 1980s and early 1990s, there was still that same line that could not be crossed, specifically because wrestlers had to enact heteronormative masculine aggression once in the ring.[103] Mr. Perfect and Lex Luger may have obsessed about their looks during entrances and promos, but once in the ring, they showcased wrestling skill and masculine aggression that would not have differentiated them from many other wrestlers. Wrestlers were still not permitted to act overtly queer in the ring, even if their characters possessed feminine qualities, with perhaps one exception.

It must be remembered, too, that wrestling is not limited to America, and making comparisons with wrestling promotions in other countries illuminates how far American wrestling had come in its treatment of queer. Heather Levi has written a highly detailed account of the history of Lucha Libre in Mexico. Levi notes that by the 1980s, Lucha Libre had begun to feature prominent queer acts, particularly May Flowers and Pimpernela Escarlata, who openly identified as gay.[104] This did not seem feasible in the American wrestling industry, as the rampant homophobia negated the chance for queer individuals to find a safe space. Alongside Escarlata and Flowers, Levi also indicates Gardenia Davis and Ruby Reynosa as the acts who pushed the boundaries of queer activities within the wrestling ring. Davis and Reynosa began to erotically touch and even kiss their opponents, a much bolder step than one would see in American wrestling in the 1980s.[105] It is interesting to see then that it was not necessarily the wrestling industry itself that perpetuated homophobia, but the environment of America.

[103] Mazer, *Professional Wrestling*, p. 102.
[104] Levi, *The World of Lucha Libre,* p. 153.
[105] Ibid.

Rick Rude

Rick Rude, one can argue, was the queerest wrestler in the industry since the 1950s. Rude never made any overt references to desiring men, so homosexuality was never overt, but both his actions and attire were immediately striking and undeniably homoerotic. Sharon Mazer goes as far as to say that Rick Rude is the perfect example of the intermingling of masculine and feminine aspects within the world of professional wrestling:

> The performance of Ravishing Rick Rude in the late 1980s and early 1990s provides a paradigm of wrestling's conflation of the feminine and masculine markers, working within a camp aesthetic that is somehow at once hetero- and homosexual.[106]

Rick Rude was one of the few wrestlers of the 1950s-1980s period who incorporated aspects of the camp and queer into their presentation and actions. Firstly, Rude's entrance to the ring was sexually suggestive. Rude's entrance music would start with a woman in a suggestive voice asking "Ricky, you're so ravishing, where did you come from?"[107] This sexually codified Rude's performance, as Rude would walk to the aisle with a stereotypically sensual jazz number playing him down to the ring. The lights would be dimmed just enough that the audience could only see the reflections of some bulbs on the sequins of Rude's feathered gown. This garment became synonymous with the wrestling 'nature boy', a categorization of a wrestling heel that derived from Gorgeous George's performance of queer.

In discussing the 'nature boy' character, Michael R. Ball explained that this character was coded as queer, as "in keeping with the image of the 'nature boy' being a 'sissy',

[106] Mazer, *Professional Wrestling*, p. 113.
[107] 'Starrcade 1986', *WCW* (1986), accessed via *WWE Network*, [accessed on 16/03/22].

audience yells of "'go home you queer' or 'get a haircut, ya fag' are not uncommon".[108] Many wrestlers have adopted the gimmick of the 'nature boy', the first success after Gorgeous George being Buddy Rogers. Inarguably the most successful 'nature boy' wrestler has been Ric Flair, considered by many to be the greatest wrestler of all time. All these wrestling characters contained feminine traits; Ric Flair, for example, wore the same sort of robe as Rick Rude, and had long bleached blonde hair. It is often the case in professional wrestling that these characters are presented as womanizers, possessing sexual magnetism unlike any other man. Rick Rude's entrance certainly suggests that he is popular amongst women, given the voice that announces his arrival. This is a tactic used in the wrestling industry to give cover for wrestlers who sport queer attire or perform queer acts. Sharon Mazer explains eloquently the role of women who are associated with a male wrestler and those in the audience:

> Women as watchers represent the appropriately heterosexual other in the male wrestlers' displays, allowing the wrestler to assert that he is not exposing his body for the approbation of other men per se by directing his sexual orientation past the other men toward the female.[109]

This is certainly a narrative that Rude, and the wrestling companies he worked for, encouraged. The first line of Rude's biography on WWE's website is a quote that Rude often spouted upon arrival in the ring: "What I'd like right now is for all you fat, ugly inner-city sweathogs to keep the noise down while I take off my robe and show the ladies what a real sexy man looks like".[110] This served as a reminder that no matter the homoerotic undertones

[108] Michael R. Ball, *Professional Wrestling as Ritual Drama in American Popular Culture*, (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), p. 93.
[109] Mazer, *Professional Wrestling*, p. 134.
[110] As quoted in '"Ravishing" Rick Rude', *WWE.com*, accessed via https://www.wwe.com/superstars/rick-rude [accessed on 21/03/22].

of Rude's act, it was meant for a female audience, and subscribed to heteronormative expectations of sexual gazing. This reminder of Rude's heterosexual status was deemed necessary, as after he had disrobed, another symbol of his homoeroticism would emerge. For big matches, Rude often wore specially made tights that sported his opponent's face on the crotch area. One of Rude's most high-profile feuds was with the Ultimate Warrior, and during their *Wrestlemania 5* match, Rude sported Warrior's visage on the rear of his tights, rather than the crotch, as a mark of disrespect.[111] Ali Khan has discussed the importance of the wrestling wardrobe, stating that the attire of wrestlers is often indistinguishable from gay erotica.[112] Khan notes that much of the attire seen within the wrestling ring can also be seen within the world of gay porn, because it made of spandex material, which is very tight fitting and revealing. Further, Khan discusses the impact of wrestlers such as Rude, especially the forcing of the audience's focus to the crotch and genital regions of wrestlers. Khan argues that physical gestures involving the crotch, and specifically the male genitals, are the equivalent of trash talking in the ring, with the intention being the other wrestler's humiliation.[113] Here again we see the dominant masculine narrative within the world of professional wrestling.

Once Rude had disrobed, he would gyrate his hips, whilst seductively jazzy music played. In Rude's match with Warrior, Ultimate Warrior focused largely on Rude's abdominal region, which meant Rude could not gyrate his hips.[114] This can be seen as an act of policing the queer by Ultimate Warrior. Often Rude would wiggle his hips when he had an opponent in a submission hold (especially his finishing submission the Rude Awakening) until his opponent passed out. In the matches where Rude applied the Rude Awakening and

[111] 'Wrestlemania 5', *WWE* (1989), accessed via *WWE Network*, [accessed on 21/03/22].
[112] Ali Khan, 'Beyond the Mat: Interpreting Eroticism in the over-the-top Aesthetics of Professional Wrestling', *Fashion, Style & Popular Culture*, Vol. 6 (3), (October, 2019), p. 413.
[113] Khan, 'Beyond the Mat', p. 410.
[114] Ibid.

went on to win the match, Rude would follow up by inviting a woman from the audience into the ring. Once in the ring, Rude would kiss the woman, who would promptly faint and fall beside Rude's opponent. As Sharon Mazer points out, this practice served several purposes. Firstly, by displaying a graphic act of heterosexuality, it dispelled the prevalent homoerotic undertones evoked by Rude's presence.[115] Secondly, the carefully choreographed act of having a woman faint served to further humiliate Rude's opponent. Both Rude's opponent and the woman whom Rude kissed were rendered unconscious due to a sexual act enacted by Rude, and they end up in the same place: unconscious on the mat.[116] To align Rude's opponent with a swooning woman was both humiliating and degrading to the opponent, but also served to enhance Rude's heteromasculinity.

The Beverly Brothers vs. The Bushwhackers

By the 1980s, tag team wrestling had become a large part of the wrestling product. As mentioned in the previous tag team section, many tag teams were paired together due to their familial relations, such as the Hart Dynasty or the Wild Samoans. Another example was the Bushwhackers, a tag team that often features in discussions of wrestling acts that have aged poorly. The Bushwhackers were kayfabe cousins who were presented as mentally ill, appearing not to understand the company they were in, as they often did not wrestle in a traditional style. A storyline that showcases the treatment of queer characters in the 1980s and early 1990s was the Bushwhackers feud with the Beverly Brothers. The Beverly Brothers were coded as queer due to their appearance; sporting purple tights and bleached blonde hair, the Beverly Brothers took the next step in queering the 'nature boy' gimmick. As both Patrice Oppliger and Henry Jenkins IV point out, the appearance of Beverly Brothers, despite them

[115] Mazer, *Professional Wrestling*, p. 131.
[116] Ibid.

being packaged as brothers, still invited intense homophobic abuse from the crowds.[117] Jenkins, the son of Henry Jenkins III, whose seminal piece on tag team wrestling was discussed above, gives an interesting insight into growing up watching wrestling in this period. Initially, Jenkins states "I'd been raised to believe all people were bisexual whether they realised it or not, and that homophobia was the biggest problem facing our country", and with this ingrained worldview, reminisced on his own experience seeing the Bushwhackers versus the Beverly Brothers:

> One of the early shows I attended featured the Beverly's versus the Bushwhackers, and the Bushwhackers started harassing their opponents because they'd hugged. They led the audience in a chant of "Faggot! Faggot!" I remember my dad, red in the face, telling me to stop joining in. It was usually something completely innocuous … and the more I thought about it the more I realised what was going on around me was really screwed up … I didn't like these people anymore.[118]

There are several revealing things in this recollection. Firstly, the Bushwhackers police the homosexual actions of the Beverly Brothers. In this instance, the Beverly Brothers' hugging, which introduced affectionate bodily contact, was a step too far, and such an act apparently needed to be punished. Whilst this is not the first instance of policing queer acts, it is perhaps the strangest. The mere act of hugging does not carry homoerotic undertones, especially for a tag team who were labelled as brothers. What is more unctuous is the fact that the Bushwhackers took it upon themselves to punish homoerotic acts.

[117] Oppliger, *Wrestling and Hypermasculinity*, p. 98; Henry Jenkins IV, 'Afterword, Part II: Growing Up and Growing More Risqué', in Sammond, *Steel Chair to the Head*, p. 319.
[118] Jenkins IV, 'Afterword, Part II', p. 319.

The Bushwhackers, aside from being a tag team depicted with severe mental health difficulties, also participated in their own questionable activities. Henry Jenkins III also remembered watching the matches between the Beverly Brothers and the Bushwhackers that his son later described. Jenkins III described the Bushwhackers as "polymorphously perverse", with good reason.[119] The Bushwhackers acted in a much more perverse manner than the Beverly Brothers, such as licking each other's faces, and the faces of people in the audience. Jenkins III argues that it was key to partner tag teams such as the Bushwhackers against the Beverly Brothers, as it allowed a tag team with some homoerotic tendencies to go against a clear-cut queered team; in having a tag team that were clearly coded as queer, and thus subsequently as heels, the Bushwhackers could be sure of being cheered by the audience.[120]

The other important aspect of Jenkins IV's recollection is his statement that he, like most members of a wrestling audience, would chant whatever word or phrase was being bellowed, which was usually an inoffensive chant. The fact that the audience was chanting "faggot" without shame showcases the general acceptance of homophobia within professional wrestling. This was incredibly offensive, but also highly dangerous. As Jenkins IV admitted himself, it took him a while to work out what was so wrong with the audience's behaviour, and only then because his father prompted him to reflect upon his actions. For the many children in the audience whose parents did not see anything wrong in abusing queer wrestlers, this was a formative experience in teaching them that queer people were to be abused and tormented.

Whilst the Jenkins saw these two teams interact at a live show, this feud spanned some time. Their inevitable clash came at the 1992 Royal Rumble. In a pre-match promo, the

[119] Jenkins III, '"Never Trust a Snake"', p. 55.
[120] Ibid.

Bushwhackers appeared excited at the prospect of beating up a gay tag team, referring to the Beverly Brothers as the "Beverly Sisters" multiple times.[121] The Beverly Brothers act as a sort of queer foil for the Bushwhackers, dispelling any insinuation of the Bushwhackers being queer themselves. As Jenkins IV explains, wrestling "create[es] a realm of male action which is primarily an excuse for the display of masculine emotion (and even homoerotic contact) while ensuring that nothing which occurs there can raise any questions about the participant's 'manhood'".[122] While the Bushwhackers may have been questioned if facing another team due to their actions, because they were abusing a homosexually coded tag team, they could be cheered unashamedly. Again, the Beverly Brothers did not perform any overt gay actions, a hug being their most ostentatious form of physical contact. The Beverly Brothers were part of the ethos that had governed the world of professional wrestling since the beginning: no matter how queer a wrestler appeared, they all performed the same hegemonic masculine violence, the only exception being Ricki Starr. This would change somewhat in the later 1990s.

[121] 'Royal Rumble 1992', *WWE*, 1992, accessed via *WWE Network,* [accessed on 24/03/22].
[122] Jenkins III, '"Never Trust a Snake"', p. 56.

Chapter Two: 1993-2003 (Mockery of Queerness)

Introduction

As the 1990s progressed, professional wrestling underwent a transformation. Where wrestling in the 1980s and early 1990s could be categorised as a more wholesome and family-friendly affair, the later 1990s and early 2000s saw wrestling become extreme. Wrestling at this time, which was known as the 'Attitude Era', would be best described as gratuitous, with storylines that pushed boundaries on taste and offensiveness. This period was the peak in popularity for the industry. Much of this success can be attributed to the increase in sexual content. WWE itself recognises the increase in sexualised content in the period, dubbing it a "sexually charged transformation".[123] Professional wrestling began to acknowledge and feature queer acts in bigger storylines, though these storylines often revolved around the humiliation of queer characters. This period is an example of the heterosexual anxiety that had infected professional wrestling. Since professional wrestling had taken a sexually charged shift, homoeroticism was only more pronounced. As a result, policing queerness featured much more prominently; one can notice a correlated rise in the amount of wrestling television that featured queer characters or storylines, and the extreme violence featured in this programming. Wrestling of this period compensated for the increased queerness of their shows with increased violence and gore, as a sort of balancing act between the queer and the heteromasculine.

For the first time, women received considerable attention within the world of wrestling, but for the wrong reasons. Lesbianism was explored in this period, but through a masculine gaze. While queerness was featured in wrestling at this time, it was primarily framed to either sexually stimulate or humorously entertain straight men. This chapter will

[123] 'Embracing a New Attitude', *The Monday Night War*, (WWE, 2014), accessed via *WWE Network*, [accessed on 29/03/22].

largely feature case studies of queer characters and storylines to argue that, counterintuitively, the more screen time these received, the more damage it did to the queer community. This chapter will argue that professional wrestling not only featured troubling homophobic content, but also framed it as an attitude to be celebrated and emulated. Professional wrestling exemplified the idea that, in the Attitude Era, it was encouraged to violently police queerness.

Lesbianism

Women were featured in high profile storylines as competitors and put on matches that displayed their talents in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Women had been featured in wrestling promotions prior to the Attitude Era (the years of 1993-2003), either in matches that occupied the lowest spots of the card, or as managers and valets involved in male wrestlers storylines, such as Miss Elizabeth and Sensational Sherri. In the Attitude Era, women could compete in more than one match and had storylines of their own. However, as Patrice Oppliger contends, many of these storylines revolved entirely around lesbianism.[124] While WWE contends that they "expanded the role of female talent" during the Attitude Era, and that the "traditional mould of female personalities had been given a makeover", the reality was that WWE used scantily clad, attractive women to entice men to watch their product.[125] These comments were made in a WWE-made documentary about the Attitude Era, only released on the WWE Network, so it is unsurprising that they would paint a positive image of themselves. The function of lesbianism in the wrestling product was again to alleviate the heteromasculine anxiety about watching two men wrestle; the presence of women, and the subsequent sexualised spectacles they engaged in, was a counterbalance to the homoerotic tensions. WWE specifically targeted the "male audience" when discussing

[124] Oppliger, *Wrestling and Hypermasculinity*, p. 99.
[125] 'Embracing a New Attitude'.

this increase in representations of female sexuality, once again erasing the presence of queer women.[126] In this way, wrestling was comparable to other forms of entertainment, such as cinema, which, according to Karen Hollinger, often depicted lesbian relationships as "pornographic sexual turn-ons for the male audience".[127] Where WWE try to argue that this sexual revolution was a liberation for female talent, others would argue that WWE exploited female sexuality for their own gain and put their female employees into situations in which they felt uncomfortable.

A notable example of WWE creating a storyline around the forced performance of lesbianism was between Stephanie McMahon and Eric Bischoff in 2002. Bischoff and McMahon were competing authority figures and wanted to battle each other with surrogate tag teams. Bischoff made the stipulation that if McMahon's team lost, then she would have to engage in lesbian action for Bischoff's enjoyment. The match took place at *Unforgiven 2002*. It would become a queer affair, as McMahon chose Billy and Chuck as her representative tag team; a pair of bleached blonde, muscular men, Billy and Chuck operated in WWE's closest attempt to depict a full gay relationship in the company's history, a relationship that will be explored in depth later in the chapter. The fact that McMahon chose Billy and Chuck as her tag team was perhaps ironic, as she was asking two queer-acting men to save her from "French kissing a lesbian".[128] In another backstage segment, Bischoff's tag team, 3 Minute Warning, stated that once they won the match, Bischoff could "grab some popcorn, a dab of Vaseline, sit back and relax and watch Stephanie McMahon perform some hot lesbian action".[129] 3 Minute Warning did win the match, and in a backstage segment following the match, Bischoff was seen celebrating; accompanying Bischoff were a number of women

[126] 'Embracing a New Attitude'.
[127] Karen Hollinger, *Feminist Film Studies*, (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2012), p. 131.
[128] 'Unforgiven 2002', *WWE* (2002), accessed via *WWE Network*, [accessed on 29/03/22].
[129] Ibid.

whom the audience took to be the lesbians in question, with it being remarked that Bischoff had a "great selection" of lesbians.[130]

The 'lesbians' of this segment were treated as objects for Bischoff's sexual gratification. Later in the night the lesbians entertained Bischoff and 3 Minute Warning, fawning over them and sitting in their laps.[131] Despite their apparent lesbianism, it seemed that the women could not help but be enamoured by the physical prowess that the men had displayed on the night; the suggestion is that lesbians would be impressed and sexually stimulated by a show of heteromasculine dominance. In all these backstage segments, the women only ever focused on the men in the room, and never interacted with one another. Towards the end of the night, the 'hot lesbian action' took place. Bischoff escorted the women to the ring, where they were introduced as "the Lesbians", and not given names of their own until in the ring, demonstrating that they did not need to be treated as real people.[132] Eventually the lesbians were introduced as "Peaches" and Cream", again sexualising lesbianism and making it marketable for the hetero-male audience.[133] Bischoff invited the women to give a "sneak preview" for the audience as to what McMahon was about to engage in, which prompted the women to start frigidly touching each other. Bischoff openly stated that he wanted participation in lesbian activities to be the "most humiliating" experience for McMahon, showcasing the attitude that to participate in queer activity was shameful.[134] Bischoff then replaced the 'attractive' lesbians with someone he described as an "ugly lesbo", again to make the process humiliating for McMahon.[135] As the events transpired, McMahon intertwined herself with the new lesbian, who turned out to be male

[130] 'Unforgiven 2002'.
[131] Ibid.
[132] Ibid.
[133] Ibid.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Ibid.

wrestler Rikishi in drag; McMahon used this deceit to encourage Rikishi to attack Bischoff, planting his signature move on Bischoff, the 'Stink Face', where Rikishi shoves his opponent's face in his buttocks.

Lesbianism is presented in this storyline only as a form of entertainment for men, lacking any real substance or depth. Lesbians are depicted as attractive props, there to do the bidding of the straight man who held power over them. This may be because, as Annamarie Jagose contends, homosexuality is deemed as a "male proclivity" by society, whilst female homosexuals are not often considered.[136] Secondly, participating in lesbian activities is often referred to as a humiliating experience. Forcing an individual to participate in sexual acts with someone of the same sex has often been presented as the height of humiliation. The humiliation that forced participation in queer acts cause for men has been well explored; Heather Levi states that masculinity comes in two forms, as either the aggressive top or the passive bottom, and that securing the position of aggressive top is achieved "through displays of virility, violence, and risk-taking".[137] For a man to be forced into the role of the passive bottom, thus highlighting his inability to protect and defend himself, is to seemingly rob him of his masculinity. Queer women have not received comparable attention, perhaps because, as Ken Plummer notes, in a male-dominated culture, lesbianism has been "constructed as either romantic or a male 'turn on'".[138] Perceptions of lesbian sexuality have been skewed by the male imaginary, and Stephanie McMahon and Eric Bischoff's storyline is the perfect example of this.

The commentary that accompanied warrants close analysis, as the commentary team of a wrestling show plays an important role in contextualising events, often indicating to the

[136] Jagose, *Queer Theory*, p. 45.
[137] Levi, *The World of Lucha Libre*, pp. 140-143.
[138] Ken Plummer, *Modern Homosexualities: Fragments of Lesbian and Gay Experiences*, (New York: Taylor & Francis, 1992), p. 185.

audience how they should be feeling. As Nicholas Sammond states, wrestling commentary has always sexualised women's bodies, which was on full display at *Unforgiven 2002*.[139] Wrestling commentary teams have tended to operate as a two-man team, with one playing the role of the heel commentator, who sides with the in-ring heels and tries to justify their actions, and the good commentator, who condemns the heels and supports the faces. The most iconic commentary team was that of Jerry 'The King' Lawler and 'JR' Jim Ross, who were the commentators for this show. Lawler was best known for being a "pervert", as he described himself.[140] During the show, Lawler repeatedly exclaimed his excitement at the prospect of watching 'hot lesbian action', whilst JR lamented McMahon having to endure "a humiliating moment".[141] JR, as the face commentator, expresses the opinions and arguments that the audience should agree with. JR's statement that participating in lesbian actions was humiliating vocalised how WWE saw such queer activities. The audience at the show, however, seemed to agree with Lawler. Raucous chants of 'H-L-A' abounded throughout the show, with loud boos and groans when Bischoff dismissed Peaches and Cream from the ring.[142] Sam Ford has argued that wrestling audiences are participants in the fakery just like wrestlers, and that one cannot judge what the audience believes as they are also putting on a show: "the wrestlers pretend to fight while the fans pretend to believe".[143] This is not an altogether convincing argument. The previously discussed audience's abuse of queer-appearing wrestlers was very extreme, and here, the audience seemed very invested in watching this lesbian storyline play out, though this assessment can only be made from general audience noise and reactions, which is not always accurate.

[139] Sammond, *Steel Chair to the Head*, p. 3.
[140] 'Embracing a New Attitude'.
[141] 'Unforgiven 2002'.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Sam Ford, '"He's a Real Man's Man": Pro Wrestling and Negotiations of Contemporary Masculinity' in Melissa A. Click and Suzanne Scott, *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2018), p. 179.

Another lesbian storyline was also playing out in 2002. Involving the female wrestlers Dawn Marie and Torrie Wilson, lesbianism in this storyline also came about due to the involvement of a man. In this storyline, Marie was to marry Wilson's father, as a way for Marie to "torment" Wilson.[144] WWE have since described the storyline as "wildly bizarre", though it seemed contrived to put the two women into sexual situations.[145] The situation came to a head when Marie propositioned Wilson: if Wilson had sex with Marie, Marie would cancel the planned nuptials with Wilson's father. WWE once again maximised queered interactions between women for the sexual gratification of the audience. At *Armageddon 2002*, Dawn Marie unveiled the footage of Wilson and herself in the hotel room. Marie introduced the footage by asking "how hot was the footage", again highlighting the sexually charged currents of this storyline. If it had been a man who had forced another man into a sexual situation, and then shown footage of it, the majority of a wrestling audience would likely be horrified rather than entertained, and the instigator viewed as a villain.[146] Whilst the footage of the hotel scene was shown, fans were audibly heard whistling and cheering Marie.[147] Where wrestling had previously been compared to male strip clubs, this scene is more akin to a lesbian softcore porn film than professional wrestling, with Marie in the scene saying to Wilson, "only a woman knows how to make another woman feel good".[148] One difference between this scene, and the segment involving Stephanie McMahon at *Unforgiven 2002*, is that both commentators are supportive of Marie. When Torrie Wilson's father asked for the footage to be stopped, Michael Cole called him an "ass", and Taz is heard telling him to "shut up". Further, when Marie protested, saying that "the people

[144] 'Dawn Marie: Bio', *WWE*, accessed via *WWE.com*, [accessed on 30/03/22].
[145] Ibid.
[146] 'Armageddon 2002', *WWE* (2002), accessed via *WWE Network*, [accessed on 31/03/22].
[147] Ibid.
[148] Ibid.

want to see more", Taz stated "so do the commentary team".[149] Unlike the McMahon-Bischoff storyline, everyone during *Armageddon 2002* was supportive of Marie's actions, despite the fact that she was supposed to be the heel in the storyline; this demonstrates that someone is not viewed as a heel if they are encouraging 'hot lesbian action' between two attractive women. In a male dominated world like professional wrestling, to encourage graphic lesbian content seemed to be a babyface move, rather than a heelish one.

These are storylines that were widely encouraged, yet the women involved in these storylines were often the lone dissenters. The most infamous incident of these grievances being aired occurred when Sable sued the WWE in a $110 million harassment suit in 1999. Sable claimed in the lawsuit that she, along with other female wrestlers, were pressured by WWE management during this era to appear topless during wrestling shows, and to participate in lesbian storylines.[150] The lawsuit stated that Sable "has been variously induced, cajoled and threatened to appear and perform under increasingly obscene and compromising conditions that have crossed the line of acceptable conduct."[151] To lend more credence to these contentions, when Sable did return to WWE in 2003, she was soon engaged in a lesbian storyline with Torrie Wilson. For example, a segment on the April 10th, 2003, edition of *SmackDown!* saw Sable taking Wilson's towel when she was in the shower, and then making Wilson walk towards her naked.[152] Whilst decisions to force female wrestlers into these scenes and storylines were made largely behind the scenes, and many wrestling fans were unaware of this lawsuit, hearing the experiences of the wrestlers involved highlights the heteromasculine fear that led to many decisions. WWE treated queer storylines as a tool in

[149] 'Armageddon 2002'.
[150] Oppliger, *Wrestling and Hypermasculinity*, p. 99; Alex Marvez, 'Sable won't bare her chest, sues for harassment', *Southcoast Today*, (6th December, 1999), accessed via https://eu.southcoasttoday.com/story/sports/1999/06/12/sable-won-t-bare-her/50523469007/, [accessed on 31/03/22].
[151] Marvez, 'Sable won't bare her chest, sues for harassment'.
[152] 'SmackDown', *WWE* (April 10, 2003), accessed via *WWE Network*, [accessed on 31/03/22].

drawing in a larger heterosexual male audience and did not seem to care how the performers themselves felt about participating in these storylines. Queer storylines were not meant to be authentic or representative of queer experiences, as lesbian storylines involved wrestlers who did not want to be there, acting in a manner that was clearly a creation of the male imagination.

Chyna

These lesbian storylines involved women who were conventionally attractive, to attract as many straight men as possible. During the Attitude Era, women who did not fit into this specific mould were also featured on wrestling programming, often in high profile storylines. The best example of a woman who attracted support within the world of professional wrestling, despite not fitting into the societal expectations of female attractiveness, was Chyna (real name Joan Laurer). Chyna was an incredibly muscular woman, and WWE went to much effort in exploiting Chyna's physique. The attire that wrestlers adopt is key to their characters, as Chyna demonstrates. Chyna would often wear revealing outfits to highlight her body, especially tight clothing that accentuated her musculature.[153] However, it was not just that Chyna's outfits emphasised her body, but her wardrobe also indicated her sexual power; Chyna often wore dominatrix-styled attire, including leather and chains, which gave her an air of authority and command.[154] WWE certainly treated Chyna differently to other female wrestlers. Despite Vince McMahon initially hating the idea of a woman who could go one-on-one with male superstars (he declared that "I have no interest in seeing a big woman ass kicker"), Chyna was eventually introduced into the wrestling stable (group) of D-Generation X, with Chyna becoming a full-

[153] Oppliger, *Wrestling and Hypermasculinity*, p. 128.
[154] Rahilly, 'Is Raw War?', p. 226.

time participant in the male wrestling storylines. [155] For example, Chyna was the first woman to enter both the King of the Ring tournament and the Royal Rumble, and became the first, and only, woman to hold the Intercontinental Championship.[156] Pat Murphy and Dan Laprade highlight the irony of Chyna's name, naming one of the most powerful female wrestlers as something fragile.[157]

Chyna is an important case study in queer wrestling as she is arguably the first wrestler to display an overt sense of female masculinity. Jack Halberstam has written in depth on the role of female masculinity within society, which is often considered as "the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing."[158] Halberstam contends that masculinity has clear links to "power and domination" and is something that women can achieve as well as men.[159] Halberstam goes so far as to argue that "the shapes and forms of modern masculinity are best showcased within female masculinity".[160] This is certainly an argument that could be applied to Chyna. Chyna had a career that many male wrestlers would envy; Chyna was always presented as a match for the men she wrestled, and she competed against some of the best male wrestlers of all time, such as the Rock and Chris Jericho. Chyna highlighted a dominance and power that few wrestlers, male or female, have demonstrated. This is perhaps unusual for women in sport. As Heather Sykes contends, often women in sport must transgress "normative female gender" when they are competing alongside or against men.[161]

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[155] As quoted in Pat Laprade and Dan Murphy, *Sisterhood of the Squared Circle: The History and Rise of Women's Wrestling*, (Toronto: ECW Press, 2017), p. 185.
[156] 'Chyna: Bio', *WWE*, accessed via *WWE.com*, [accessed on 01/04/22].
[157] Laprade and Murphy, *Sisterhood of the Squared Circle*, p. 186.
[158] Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, (London: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 1.
[159] Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, p. 2.
[160] Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, p. 3.
[161] Heather Sykes, 'Queering theories of sexuality in sport studies', in Jayne Caudwell, *Sport, Sexualities and Queer /Theory*, (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2006), p. 17.

Yet Chyna also upheld more conventional concepts of femininity. As Lucia Rahilly points out, when Chyna was partnered with men, heteronormativity was never negated; Chyna stated that she was "not a lesbian … just a girl who loves lifting weights".[162] A good example of this was when Chyna was paired with Eddie Guerrero, who referred to Chyna as his "Mamacita"; such naming was a distinctly feminising experience for Chyna, as she was the object of a male's lust and affection.[163] This did not stop other wrestlers in storylines from discounting Chyna's femininity, targeting her powerful physique to reframe her as masculine. Throughout Chyna's career, her sex was often questioned by her opponents, so much so that Chyna titled her autobiography *If They Only Knew*, "partly a reference to the various snide remarks then being made about Laurer's biological sex".[164]

The treatment Chyna received from male wrestlers fluctuated, depending on whether she was a heel or face at the time. When Chyna was a heel, questions and jokes about her biological sex would surface, with multiple instances of male wrestlers inferring that Chyna had a penis. When Chyna was a face, however, male heel wrestlers often treated her as a 'damsel in distress'. One of the more famous segments where Chyna was feminised was on the August 24th, 1998, episode of *Monday Night Raw*. During a segment with the Rock and the Nation of Domination, Chyna attempted to attack the Rock, but was held on her knees by the Nation, with The Rock telling her that was "where she belongs".[165] The Rock went on to say that Chyna "looks good on your knees, it almost looks like a natural position". Grabbing her by the face, the Rock told Chyna to "pucker up, shut your eyes, and enjoy the magic", before Chyna was saved by Shawn Michaels.[166] If queer acts served to confirm the

[162] Rahilly, 'Is Raw War?', p. 226.
[163] Laprade and Murphy, *Sisterhood of the Squared Circle*, p. 187.
[164] Oliver Lee Bateman, 'Revisiting Chyna's Autobiography, And The State Of Tell-Alls In Wrestling', *Vice*, (30th May, 2016), accessed via https://www.vice.com/en/article/78nvny/revisiting-chynas-autobiography-and-the-state-of-tell-alls-in-wrestling, [accessed on 01/04/22].
[165] 'Monday Night Raw', *WWE*, (24th August, 1998), accessed via *WWE Network*, [accessed on 01/04/22].
[166] Ibid.

heteromasculinity of their opponents, Chyna experiences aggressive heterosexuality to confirm her own femininity. Chyna is held captive by men, and is saved by a man, which puts her in a traditional role of female passivity.[167] There is a suggestion that women possess an inherent femininity that make them the subjects of aggressive heterosexuality; while Chyna had proved to be a match for men in the ring, the power dynamic showcased in scenes such as the one with The Rock demonstrate a clear disparity in the power dynamics between men and women.

Again, the backstage situations are important to explore. When Chyna left the WWE in 2001, she appeared in some pornographic films, including with fellow D-X wrestler Sean 'X-Pac' Waltman, in a film entitled *One Night in Chyna*.[168] It is widely believed and reported that WWE refuse to put Chyna in their Hall of Fame because of her career in porn.[169] This is hypocritical of WWE, a company who have boosted their product by using graphic lesbian sexuality yet refuse to recognise Chyna due to her making a career out of her own sexuality.

Goldust

As mentioned above, the 1990s saw WWE stray into the bizarre and absurd, blurring sexual boundaries for the sake of talking points and ratings. There is no better example of a WWE creation that encapsulates the company's desire for attention by any means necessary than Goldust. The creative decision-making that went into the creation of Goldust helps illuminate why storylines surrounding the character were so extreme and controversial.

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[167] See for example Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).
[168] Laprade and Murphy, *Sisterhood of the Squared Circle*, p. 188.
[169] Tom Clark, 'Why Chyna Won't Be Inducted Into WWE's Hall Of Fame', *Bleacher Report*, (8th August, 2013), accessed via https://bleacherreport.com/articles/1731060-chyna-should-not-get-a-wwe-hall-of-fame-spot, [accessed on 01/04/22]; H Jenkins, ' Chyna Needs WWE Hall Of Fame Induction On Her Own Says Jim Ross', *Ringside News*, (10th January, 2021), accessed via https://www.ringsidenews.com/2021/01/10/chyna-needs-wwe-hall-of-fame-induction-on-her-own-says-jim-ross/, [accessed on 01/04/22].

Goldust was a gimmick given to Dustin Runnels (also known as Dustin Rhodes within wrestling), son of the legendary wrestler Dusty Rhodes. Runnels had languished in WWE, performing mediocre matches and being an afterthought in the company, a matter made worse by the fact that many expected a lot from Runnels due to his wrestling lineage. Desperate for a chance to display his talent, and to distance himself from his father, Runnels was pitched the idea of Goldust by Vince McMahon:

> When Vince sat me down and explained the character, explained that the character was androgynous; I seriously had to go home and look up that word cause I had no idea what the hell that meant. But he explained it to me; I thought 'Ok, let's give this a shot', and he said 'I'm going to be behind you no matter what, Dustin. There's going to be a lot of people talking'. But he kept using the word androgynous; never used the word gay or anything like that, so me knowing what that means now, I'm going out there and try to dress the part but not really understanding how to act the part of the Goldust character.[170]

Goldust was a character pitched to a heterosexual man, who had no familiarity with queer experiences, simply to get people talking. Goldust debuted in 1995 at *In Your House 4*, which set the tone for the rest of his career. Goldust faced Marty Jannetty in his first match, with Vince McMahon supplying commentary. McMahon introduced Goldust's beginning promo as the "most bizarre individual in the history of the WWF".[171]

For the sake of simplicity, we will take the meaning of 'androgyny' to be the absence, and/or the blending, of any gendered traits or characteristics in a person; as Sabrina Petra

[170] Dustin Rhodes on the creation of Goldust, as quoted in Daniel Pena, 'Dustin Rhodes recalls the creation of Goldust, Issues with it', *SE Scoops*, (July 12, 2012), accessed via https://www.sescoops.com/news/dustin-rhodes-recalls-the-creation-of-goldust-issues-with-it/, [accessed 02/05/22].
[171] 'In Your House 4', *WWE*, (October 22, 1995), accessed via *WWE Network*, [accessed on 02/05/22].

Ramet explains, "androgyny implies the absolute negation, the cancelling out of sexuality. Male and female are no longer separate poles."[172] Leaving aside the fact that the person in question was a straight man, poorly acting the part of androgyny, wrestling is not a venue that accommodates androgyny very easily. Wrestling operates in a strictly binary system: performers are split into male and female, with the two sexes only wrestling each other (there has been some intergender wrestling, but WWE do not usually support this). Androgyny, belonging to no set gender, is asked to conform to a binary system; the fact that WWE positioned an androgynous character in a male-only division highlighted their lack of sensitivity to androgyny. The fact that Goldust was referred to as "he" throughout his career, despite supposing to be androgynous, shows the lack of understanding.

Goldust first appeared on wrestling screens with gold and black face paint, a blonde wig, and a gold and black body suit. This was not a look that many in America were familiar with, and just as Runnels himself had to look up what androgyny was, many in the audience did not understand the gimmick. Even wrestling historian David Shoemaker referred to the Goldust gimmick as "transvestite homoerotics" rather than any sort of androgynous act.[173] Goldust's first promo was different to any other promo witnessed within wrestling up to that point; rather than shouting and gesticulating, as was the norm, Goldust whispered very softly, adding credence to the homophobic stereotype that gay men speak softly. Again, Goldust was being mistakenly performed as a gay man, rather than androgynous. Goldust refers to his debut as a "Hollywood premiere", in which there would be "lights, cameras, and ooh, so much action".[174] Goldust originally adopted a Hollywood starlet character set, using the bleached blonde wig and references to being on film. Goldust finished his promo by saying

[172] Sabrina Petra Ramet, *Gender Reversals and Gender Cultures: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*, (New York: Taylor & Francis, 1996), p. 71.
[173] Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, p. 276.
[174] 'In Your House 4'.

"Mr. DeMille, I'm ready for my close up", using the famous line from Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*. *Sunset Boulevard* has queer undertones and is a film that has been feted by the queer community.[175] Again, this was a subtle way of alluding to Goldust's homosexuality, as WWE's understanding of queer communities was superficial. Further, there are some connections between Goldust and *Sunset Boulevard;* both narratives concern unhinged actresses. Goldust walked out into a golden spotlight during his entrance, with glitter falling and then walked onto a star with his name on it, reinforcing the idea that he was a starlet. Goldust had also adopted the feathered robe a wardrobe item connected to the 'nature boy' character and later to the 'fag heel'.

Goldust's appearance is significant for many reasons; it is easy to focus on the blonde wig and face paint, or the latex suit, but Janine Bradbury has interpreted Goldust's appearance in greater depth. Bradbury has written extensively on Goldust, and states that Goldust is one of the few wrestlers who buck the trend of showcasing as much of their body as possible.[176] As Bradbury points out, the whole attire - latex body suit, wig, gloves, face paint and boots - hid as much of Goldust's body as possible. Since Runnels is male, Goldust did not want to display any of the masculine areas of his body, but rather accentuated the more feminine areas of his body, such as his "love handles".[177] The efforts to disguise Goldust's masculinity is undercut by the commentary that accompanies Goldust's first entrance. Despite McMahon's best efforts to emphasise the queer characterisation of Goldust, Jim Ross's utterance of lines such as "he's a big man" takes away from the queerness of the character.[178] Jim Ross has spoken of Goldust's debut:

[175] Alan Nadel, *Demographic Angst: Cultural Narratives and American Films of the 1950s*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017), p. 77.
[176] Bradbury, 'Grappling and Ga(y)zing', p. 111.
[177] Ibid.
[178] 'In Your House 4'.

> I was sceptical, cos we were getting…we wanted to get as close to the edge without jumping off and committing suicide as we could and there was a lot of…you know…I had to look up what androgynous meant, cos the way it was presented in the beginning was almost anti-homophobic in some degree. And I'm not comfortable with that.[179]

Despite Goldust's queer antics, in his debut he abided by the rule that had dictated the behaviour of queer wrestlers since Gorgeous George - however queer a character may enter, they demonstrated masculine aggression once the bell rang. Janine Bradbury argues Goldust's masculine aggression is progressive of WWE, as people would not expect Goldust to possess this level of violence and would instead expect him to be meek.[180]

As Goldust's career continued, however, he began to exhibit more overt homoeroticism within the ring. Goldust's early career feuds often featured stark sexual overtones. By 1997, Goldust had fully embraced the queer characteristics that WWE promoted as authentic to a queer lifestyle. 1996 and 1997 are key years in the shaping of the Goldust gimmick. Goldust's most high-profile feud in these two years came against Razor Ramon, when they fought over the Intercontinental Championship. Goldust had only recently debuted, and the feud with Ramon was intended to help establish Goldust as a credible heel threat. Much of Goldust's character was refined in this feud, such as Goldust's mannerisms in the ring. Goldust developed the habit of visibly inhaling whilst running his hands up and down his body and then exhaling in his opponent's face. This was a trait that Goldust first

[179] Jim Ross talking about the creation of Goldust, as quoted in Matt Tennant, '"We Wanted To Get Close To The Edge" – Jim Ross on the Creation of Goldust', *Inside the Ropes*, (January 4, 2021), accessed via https://itrwrestling.com/news/we-wanted-to-get-close-to-the-edge-jim-ross-on-the-creation-of-goldust/, [accessed on 02/05/22].
[180] Bradbury, 'Grappling and Ga(y)zing', p. 110.

developed in his matches with Ramon.[181] The act would become synonymous with Goldust's career and was one of the many ways that Goldust introduced homosexual tensions into his matches. As Bradbury notes, when Goldust touched his body and inhaled, he would mimic climaxing, and directed this towards his opponent, signifying that they had stirred Goldust's passions.[182]

Goldust also developed certain moves that would become hallmarks of his in-ring style. No move is more synonymous with Goldust than the uppercut he delivered to opponents; Goldust's uppercut saw him go down to his knees, and then reach up to uppercut his opponent. Again, this was a move specifically designed to draw parallels with sex, in this case Goldust simulating oral sex on his opponent by going down on his knees in front of them and looking up. In many ways, 1996 and 1997 were the peak of Goldust's homoeroticism. Goldust's match with Razor Ramon at the *Royal Rumble 1996* is a good example. In the beginning of the match, Goldust refused to enter a standard collar-and-elbow tie-up, shying away every time Ramon approached him and then doing his classic inhalation and bodily caress.[183] Goldust further insulted Ramon by turning his back on him and wiggling his rear in Ramon's face.[184] Once the wrestling finally started, it soon stopped again. Ramon had Goldust in a headlock, but rather than wrestling his way out of the hold, Goldust began to roam his hands over Ramon's body, which unsettled Ramon, causing him to release the hold and get away from Goldust.[185] The same thing happened when Goldust performed a standing switch, with Goldust standing behind Ramon; usually the wrestler would apply a waist lock, but Goldust instead took the opportunity to caress Ramon's

[181] See his match with Razor Ramon on 'Monday Night Raw', *WWE*, (February 26, 1996), accessed via *WWE Network*, [accessed on 03/05/22].
[182] Bradbury, 'Grappling and Ga(y)zing', p. 114.
[183] 'Royal Rumble 1996', *WWE*, (January 21, 1996), accessed via *WWE Network*, [accessed on 03/05/22].
[184] Ibid.
[185] Ibid.

chest.[186] Again, commentary was key throughout the series of matches between Goldust and Ramon; after the standing switch, for example, the commentary team noted that "maybe Goldust has already gotten what he wanted out of this match up".[187] The match continued in this fashion, with Goldust taking any opportunity he could to touch any part of Razor Ramon. What changed was how Ramon operated in the match up. Ramon often slapped Goldust, including on his rear.[188] Ramon also began to target Goldust's arms in retaliation, for touching him throughout the match, thus policing homosexual touch.

It was only in these early years of 1996 and 1997 that Goldust was brazen and outlandish; Goldust's sexual touching of his opponents did not last long. Arguably, WWE introduced Goldust at his most outrageous to make a star and establish a heel; once Goldust had been cemented as a true threat, he did not need to act in such a homoerotic way. The backstage realities of Goldust are just as important as the stories that were told in the ring. Shaun Assael and Mike Mooneyham have written that Scott Hall (the real name of Razor Ramon) was deeply uncomfortable at having to work with Goldust, reportedly asking "what do I do when my kid goes to school and hears from the other kids that his daddy is a queer?"[189] This distress and dismay at having to work with Goldust was a reality that WWE did not seem too concerned with. It is interesting to note that Hall feared being mistaken as homosexual due to his work with Goldust, but not for being a wrestler in general. In most cases, it is a reaffirming angle to work with a queered character like Goldust, as it would fully establish Razor Ramon as a straight man uncomfortable with the behaviour of Goldust. The crowds certainly supported Ramon's abuse of Goldust.

[186] 'Royal Rumble 1996'.
[187] Ibid.
[188] Ibid.
[189] Shaun Assael and Mike Mooneyham, *Sex, Lies and Headlocks: The Real Story of Vince McMahon and the World Wrestling Federation*, (New York: Three Rivers, 2002), p. 150.

Whilst Goldust's feud with Razor Ramon was the most important and high profile of his first couple of years within the WWE, there were other feuds that set a clear tone of homophobia that was characteristic of Goldust's treatment. In 1997, Goldust was a part of the *King of the Ring* tournament, a bracketed competition to establish a King of WWE. In the first round, Goldust was scheduled to face Jerry 'The King' Lawler. Before their match, Lawler produced a promo about Goldust that blurred the lines between the kayfabe world of wrestling and the real lives of the performers. Lawler began to talk about Dusty Rhodes, Dustin Runnels' father. Lawler said that if Goldust was "wondering why your old man … don't love you anymore. Well, I know … it's because … you went around the ring kissing men like a flaming fag".[190] Whilst this promo has now been removed from the *WWE Network* (the WWE streaming service), it was a popular sentiment at the time. This promo is an example of the actions taken by those in professional wrestling to distance themselves from the homoeroticism so inherent in their product. The character of Goldust was created to act as a relief valve for such anxiety, as in the homophobic treatment that Goldust was subjected to by the likes of Jerry Lawler. Having a wrestler go on a homophobic tirade affirmed that professional wrestling could not be homoerotic, as it was very clearly homophobic.

Another stand out match early in Goldust's career was a match with Brian Pillman at *Summerslam 1997*. This match had an added stipulation: the loser of the match would have to wear a dress. Before even getting to the match, the stipulation served once again to highlight WWE's ignorance. If Goldust was truly androgynous, then gendered clothing, such as a dress, would not have had the same stakes for Goldust than it would have had for Pillman, a heteronormative man. WWE still saw Goldust as fundamentally masculine, despite their reported development of an androgynous backstory, and a man in a dress was framed as humiliating. The fact that it is the loser who must wear the dress displays WWE's belief that

[190] As quoted in Vanderstreaten, '"Blinded by the Light that is Your Velveteen Dream"', p. 131.

for a man to wear women's clothing was wrong, and that no man should want this. This is both homophobic and sexist. Judith Butler has explained that gender is "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame".[191] These "repeated acts" include the clothing that one wears, an industry that has been heavily gendered, and is only now seeing the liberation of fashion in terms of gendered norms. Annamarie Jagose builds on Butler's argument, stating that gender is "not organised in terms of originality and imitation. What they [gender and sexuality] manifest instead is the endless – though heavily regulated – possibilities of performativity."[192] The theory of performativity is something that Butler explored in her work, explaining the performance of gender as:

> Acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality.[193]

For Butler, gender is a social construct that is based upon the actions of individuals that lend it credence and is thus a performance. It is society that perpetuates gendered binaries, rather than there being a biological reasoning, in short.

In professional wrestling, gender is very much an enforced expectation, in that men and women are expected to perform traditional gender roles. The only times that gender norms were subverted in professional wrestling in the Attitude Era was to make someone a villain. The match between Goldust and Pillman demonstrated that the wrestling industry

[191] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 33.
[192] Jagose, *Queer Theory*, p. 85.
[193] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 173.

perpetuated gender norms, such as that wearing a dress was only for women. Further, Brian Pillman being Goldust's opponent was significant as well. Pillman was known as the 'Loose Cannon', and it was often remarked by commentary that Pillman was 'borderline psychotic'. WWE were equating some of the 'crazy' actions of Brian Pillman to wearing a dress, which suggested that wearing a dress was something to fear and only an action that a 'psycho' would choose. In a match that was heavy with sexual undertones, Goldust once again reverted to his homoerotic move set. In the match, after escaping a hold, Goldust kissed Pillman on the lips, which commentary referred to as the "lip lock", causing Pillman to run outside the ring.[194] Pillman lost the match, leading to him having to wear the dress on the following episode of *Monday Night Raw*. In this episode, Pillman is heavily resistant to wearing the dress, having to be forced out onto the stage.[195] Once again, the heteronormative viewpoint is on display here, as even a supposed psychopath was too scared to appear in a dress. This is apparently for good reason, as commentary repeatedly called the sight of Pillman in a dress "ugly".[196]

The crowd, as has been discussed previously, is an integral part of professional wrestling. By his *Summerslam 1997* match with Brian Pillman, Goldust had become a babyface, and was actively cheered by the audience. When Goldust debuted, he was a clearly codified heel. As Shannon Vanderstreaten notes, a wrestling crowd codifies a wrestler as a heel or face.[197] Janine Bradbury argues that the crowd's reaction when Goldust debuted was only going to be a negative. Goldust allowed wrestling audiences to vent their homophobic anger, providing a vessel for rage that they otherwise did not express.[198] In many of Goldust's first matches, cries of 'fag' can often be heard, such as in his match with Razor

[194] 'Summerslam 1997', *WWE*, (August 3, 1997), accessed via *WWE Network*, [accessed on 04/05/22].
[195] 'Monday Night Raw', *WWE*, (August 4, 1997), accessed via *WWE Network*, [accessed on 04/05/22].
[196] Ibid.
[197] Vanderstreaten, '"Blinded by the Light that is Your Velveteen Dream"', p. 124.
[198] Bradbury, 'Grappling and Ga(y)zing', p. 112.

Ramon. It is not surprising, since wrestlers themselves (such as Jerry Lawler) used the word against Goldust. Bradbury goes further, elucidating that Goldust performed the role that almost all queer wrestlers have done, as a channel for the homoerotic awkwardness that builds up in a wrestling show.[199] As Bradbury explains, having two heteronormative wrestlers wrestle each other brings up unintended homoerotic charges, but to have one heteronormative wrestler "gay bashing" a queer wrestler dispels this unease, and reinforces the idea that wrestlers are straight men.[200]

The audience's reactions to Goldust have been well documented. In a focus group, teenage boys who were fans of wrestling were asked which characters they did not like - one said Goldust because "he's a queer", but another refuted this, saying "he's got a chick", whilst a third boy said "nah, she's a lesbian".[201] As Assael and Mooneyham point out, "it scarcely mattered to the McMahons that Goldust was giving millions of teenagers their first images of what gay men acted and sounded like".[202] Many people who watched wrestling had no way of dispelling the homophobia that WWE presented in Goldust, as it was prevalent in American society in the 1990s. This is why representation matters. Professional wrestling has failed at positive representation for most of its history, and has caused harm and incited homophobic tendencies. Thomas Hackett notes that hypocrisy surrounds the homophobia expounded by teenage wrestling fans, as those teenage boys who shouted homophobic abuse at wrestlers also obsessed over the posters of wrestlers they had in their bedrooms.[203] Hackett contends that while the boys may not have been gay, they were experiencing a queer angst in this time of their life.[204] This is certainly a contentious argument, which many of those

[199] Bradbury, 'Grappling and Ga(y)zing', p. 112.
[200] Ibid.
[201] Assael and Mooneyham, *Sex, Lies and Headlocks*, p. 150.
[202] Ibid.
[203] Hackett, *Slaphappy*, p. 173.
[204] Ibid.

teenage boys would have refuted wholeheartedly. This once again brings up the issues of homoerotic tensions that are created by heterosexual men watching other heterosexual men wrestle. What is key in Hackett's argument is the fact that these teenage boys are undergoing a transformational time in their lives. Goldust could have shaped many young people's attitudes towards queerness, which would not have been a positive message. As wrestling had built itself upon a tradition of purposefully abusing queerness so as to dispel homoerotic tensions, this is what was handed down to these teenage fans, that the way to treat queer people was to abuse them.

Goldust entered his *Summerslam 1997* match as a babyface. This was a remarkable achievement for a character that was clearly queer. The key to this change in treatment was Marlena. Marlena, as portrayed by Terri Runnels, the wife of Dustin Runnels, was a key figure in the development of Goldust's character. Women in wrestling, since the 1950s, had mainly been featured as managers and valets. Some women had occupied prominent slots within wrestling storylines, such as Miss Elizabeth in the Hulk Hogan and Randy Savage feud of the 1980s, but they were often silent spectres at ringside, barely talking and certainly not participating physically. Marlena, it can be argued, was the first female manager who possessed power over wrestlers and was more than a prop. Marlena debuted alongside Goldust during his *Royal Rumble 1996* match against Razor Ramon. Marlena would make her entrance alongside Goldust, leading him down to the ring whilst smoking a cigar. This immediately suggested to the audience that Marlena was not going to act like other women managers. Cigars have, throughout history, been seen not only as a male symbol, but also as a sign of a man's success, making the smoker feel "metaphysically rich".[205] Making her debut smoking a cigar, a traditional symbol of male affluence, indicated that Marlena had power

[205] Joel Achenbach, 'The Power of Positive Stinking; Aficionados See Cigar Smoking As a Symbol of Male Clout', *The Washington Post*, (March 1, 1995), accessed via https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/power-positive-stinking-afficionados-see-cigar/docview/307811130/se-2?accountid=14680, [accessed on 05/05/22].

and status and was not merely a love interest. The cigar also served as a phallic symbol, and the camera work made sure that it was not missed, as television audiences would often get a close shot of Marlena taking particular relish in smoking her cigar. Once at ringside, Marlena occupied a gold director's chair that had her name on the back. Janine Bradbury explains that if Goldust was the jaded Hollywood starlet, then Marlena was his director.[206] It has been widely acknowledged that directing has been a male-dominated field of work for almost the entire history of the film industry, no matter what genre.[207] Occupying the director's chair was a conscious choice to associate the power of a director with Marlena.

Marlena provides one of the most complex characters within wrestling history, as she both upholds and dispels traditional gender roles within wrestling. Marlena reinforces Goldust's queerness, but also assigns Goldust hegemonic masculinity. As discussed previously, and as academics like Ali Khan explain, women at ringside reinforced the heterosexual order, underlining that a male wrestler was showcasing his body for his female companion, rather than other men.[208] Goldust and Marlena provided the most visceral portrayal of these dynamics, as during matches Goldust would often look over to Marlena to ensure that she was enjoying the spectacle. Such looks are coded as heterosexual, though they are still queered by the fact that both Goldust and Marlena seemed to have enjoyed some sexual gratification at Goldust touching his opponent. The queer aspect of Goldust's character are also complicated by the behind-the-scenes knowledge that Goldust and Marlena were married. As Bradbury explains, no matter the homophobic rage that Goldust could inspire, it was always tempered with the knowledge that he was in a heterosexual marriage.[209]

[206] Bradbury, 'Grappling and Ga(y)zing', p. 110.
[207] See for example Jane E. Shawcroft et al., 'Depictions of Gender Across Eight Decades of Disney Animated Film: The Role of Film Producer, Director, and Writer Gender', *Sex Roles*, Vol. 86 (5-6), (February 19, 2022), pp. 346-365.
[208] Khan, 'Beyond the Mat', p. 414.
[209] Bradbury, 'Grappling and Ga(y)zing', p. 110.

Bradbury elucidates that "fans are … paradoxically presented with the ultimate symbol of heterosexual coherence … as well as the ultimate corruption of that symbol (a polymorphously sexual husband and a wife who calls the shots)".[210] Other aspects of the relationship between Goldust and Marlena reinforced the hegemonic gender roles of man and woman. As Bradbury notes, Marlena often performed the actions and roles of the traditional woman at ringside, such as distracting the referee, or acting as a shield for Goldust against his opponent.[211] In this way, Marlena was not defying gender norms, but reinforcing them.

One final aspect of Bradbury's analysis of Goldust and Marlena that is important is the various forms of 'gaze' that the presence of these two created. Bradbury notes that, at any given time, the presence of Marlena created various gazes, both heterosexual and queer.[212] Marlena watched Goldust in the ring. Thus we see the female gaze on the male body, which was somewhat new for American wrestling at that time. Further, the gaze is directed towards a body that was not chiselled or muscular, subverting the heteronormative view of attractiveness. Very often during Goldust's matches, the camera would use Marlena as a fixed point, either showing her or her perspective. The camera was assuming the female gaze, and providing that perspective for the entire television audience; wrestling audiences, particularly in the 1990s, were heavily male, and such shots forced this largely male audience to see Goldust the way that Marlena saw him, so the camera's gaze became homoerotically charged. Bradbury brands Marlena a "mediator" of this gaze.[213] This is because the presence of a woman at ringside attracted the heterosexual gaze of the male audience, but Marlena redirected this gaze and "channel[led]" it towards a queerer view.[214]

[210] Bradbury, 'Grappling and Ga(y)zing', p. 110.
[211] Ibid.
[212] Bradbury, 'Grappling and Ga(y)zing', pp. 110-114.
[213] Bradbury, 'Grappling and Ga(y)zing', p. 112.
[214] Ibid.

Goldust and Marlena's relationship is a complex one, at once reinforcing heteronormative gender roles, but adding a queered viewpoint to any match. Marlena was an important female figure within wrestling, as one of the first female managers to exhibit power and influence over a man. While Marlena did at times perform the expected role of a woman at ringside, she added to a new sense of directorial authority. Goldust was, and remains to this day, the best-known queer character in professional wrestling. His acts were outrageous, designed to draw eyes towards the WWE product, and serve as a vessel for homophobic hate. Not since Gorgeous George had a queer wrestling gimmick been so overt and so widely promoted by WWE. However, things had changed since the time of Gorgeous George. WWE had turned into an incredibly sexualised product, and Goldust's actions were far more graphic than any other wrestler before, and arguably ever since. The audience too had changed. Wrestling in the 1990s was a much more popular affair. For the sake of ratings and sensationalism, WWE sacrificed any sort of integrity or good taste when it came to handling queerness. WWE's lack of knowledge on queerness was evident, and their ignorance shined through; though wrestling was a queer sport, to have an overt queer character meant that they had to be mocked and beaten. Goldust achieved success over his long career, but the cost was the increase in homophobia and hate that WWE perpetuated.

Billy and Chuck

Goldust's portrayal of queerness was offensive, so much so that LGBTQIA+ groups protested at this representation.[215] However, as WWE moved into the early 2000s a separate queer storyline began, which was well received. Once again, two queer wrestling characters were introduced, depicted by straight men, just like Goldust. Also, like Goldust, these two

[215] Mazer, *Professional Wrestling*, p. 115.

wrestlers, Billy Gunn and Chuck Palumbo, were already established wrestlers before adopting a queer persona. Again, this highlights WWE's disregard for authenticity in the representation of queer characters or queer relationships. Nevertheless, GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) initially supported the Billy and Chuck characters and their storylines.[216] An article by Scott Seomin, a representative for GLAAD, explained why Billy and Chuck were different from the other queer characters that WWE had introduced:

> Billy and Chuck were a welcomed departure from the stereotypical, often-victimized gay wrestlers of the past. Instead of yelling anti-gay epithets at the handsome couple, audiences cheered their engagement. Their television appearances, while entertaining, also enlightened viewers: Closeted gay teenagers across the country could feel less alone when they watch 'Smackdown!' and potential gay bashers could learn that we are everywhere.[217]

The reception to Billy and Chuck was considerably more positive than audiences' response to the likes of Goldust and Gorgeous George. Arguably only Ricki Starr had received such a welcoming audience for a queer character. Thomas Hackett contends that Billy and Chuck received a positive response from the crowd because "a sense of camp had made the subject safe".[218] 'Camp' was the key to Billy and Chuck's success. As Helene A. Shugart and Catherine Egley Waggoner explain, 'camp' has been a mainstay in American media for a long time, showing that there "is something about this sensibility that resonates with contemporary audiences."[219] Further, Shugart and Waggoner argue that camp's versatility

[216] Scott Seomin, 'GLAAD: We Were Lied To', *Outsports*, (September 13, 2002), accessed via https://www.outsports.com/2013/3/4/4064614/glaad-we-were-lied-to, [accessed on 06/05/22].
[217] Ibid.
[218] Hackett, *Slaphappy*, p. 173.
[219] Helene A. Shugart and Catherine Egley Waggoner, *Making Camp: Rhetorics of Transgression in U.S. Popular Culture*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2008), pp. 1-2.

"affords it not only endurance but mobility across a variety of venues, genres and forms."[220] Camp successfully made its way to the world of professional wrestling in 2002 with Billy and Chuck. Shugart and Waggoner's analysis of camp seems to support Hackett's argument that Billy and Chuck's camp manner disarmed the audience; Shugart and Waggoner note that "perhaps camp's popularity in contemporary culture says more about the ability of dominant media interests, invested in preserving conventional discourses, to appropriate and defuse potentially threatening strategies and sensibilities."[221] Humour animates Billy and Chuck's antics; perhaps the fact that Billy and Chuck appeared to be in a relationship meant they were not threatening to their opponents, as they already had partners. This is also the first time that a male tag team involved an overt homosexual relationship; as was discussed previously, tag teams allowed for the development of particularly close relationships between two men. Patrice Oppliger notes that Billy and Chuck acted in a much more homosensual manner than any other tag team, including hugging each other, telling each other how good they looked, and exchanging gifts on Valentine's Day.[222]

The addition of a manager, Rico, made Billy and Chuck more overtly queer. Rico was introduced as Billy and Chuck's hair stylist, who eventually became their manager. The decision to make Rico a hairdresser was a specific choice made by WWE. Hairdressers had become a stereotypically gay occupation for men, and as Adam W. Fingerhut and Letitia Anne Peplau state "gay men might be seen as effeminate and flamboyant because they have been overrepresented in feminine and artistic professions such as hairdresser".[223] By associating Billy and Chuck with another queer character in Rico, especially one who occupied a stereotypically feminine occupation, WWE reinforced the homosexual undertones

[220] Shugart and Waggoner, *Making Camp*, p. 2.
[221] Ibid.
[222] Oppliger, *Wrestling and Hypermasculinity*, p. 98.
[223] Adam W. Fingerhut and Letitia Anne Peplau, 'The Impact of Social Roles on Stereotypes of Gay Men', *Sex Roles*, Vol. 55 (3), (August, 2008), p. 274.

of the Billy and Chuck characters. When Rico was first introduced alongside Billy and Chuck, Rico gave them a makeover, whereby he criticised their fashion choices and set to improve them.[224] Not only did WWE cast Rico as a hairdresser, but also made him highly critical of fashion, another stereotype of the gay man. Notably, during the storyline between Stephanie McMahon and Eric Bischoff that was discussed earlier, Billy and Chuck were the tag team that represented McMahon in the tag match, ultimately losing and forcing Stephanie McMahon into the storyline with the lesbians. It is interesting that Stephanie McMahon chose Billy and Chuck, an openly queer team, to represent her in preventing her own queer situation. Further, in this storyline, Rico had turned on Billy and Chuck, and was helping Eric Bischoff and Three Minute Warning with strategies on how to beat Billy and Chuck. During the backstage scenes at the *Unforgiven 2002* show, Rico said that he knew Billy and Chuck "inside and out", giving a meaningful look to Eric Bischoff.[225] The heavily implied homoeroticism of this line reinforces Billy and Chuck's queerness.

The most important storyline that Billy and Chuck were a part of was their engagement and subsequent wedding. Billy and Chuck's engagement came on an episode of *SmackDown*, just after having lost a match. Though Chuck eventually asked Billy to marry him, it was Rico who prompted the situation in the first place; after the match, Rico told Chuck that he needed to propose to Billy "right now".[226] This was not the most romantic beginning to a proposal, as Chuck appeared reticent to propose, and only through Rico's urgings did the proposal take place. Like many of their backstage promos and throughout their storylines, Billy and Chuck's engagement was not devoid of sexual connotations. Rico told Chuck that before he asked the question, he needed to "dig deep into those tights, dig

[224] 'SmackDown', *WWE*, (March 21, 2002), accessed via *WWE Network*, [accessed on 09/05/22].
[225] 'Unforgiven 2002'.
[226] 'SmackDown', *WWE*, (September 5, 2002), accessed via *WWE Network*, [accessed on 09/05/22].

deep and pull out the love".[227] The homoeroticism is blatant; WWE has never been known for subtlety in their storylines, and when it comes to queer characters, subtlety is absent. Chuck's proposal speech ran: "Billy, I know we've been partners in the ring a long time, and I was just wondering, I want you to be my partner for life".[228] There is a lack of romance and emotion in the proposal. Having Rico force Chuck into proposing did not imply that Chuck wanted to propose or get married, and neither did his speech; this is notable because Billy and Chuck did not end up getting married after all.

Only one week after their engagement, *SmackDown* saw Billy and Chuck's 'commitment ceremony'. Sticking with homosexual stereotypes, Rico had planned the entire wedding for Billy and Chuck. The ceremony proceeded, with both Chuck and Billy wearing rainbow flags on their suit jacket lapels, a rare sign of support for the LGBTQIA+ community.[229] Chuck and Billy's wedding certainly contained more emotion than their engagement. During the vows both Billy and Chuck exhibited signs of nervousness and excitement, as well as Billy wiping away tears.[230] This was not a sentiment that was shared by most fans in attendance, as the entire segment was met with boos and jeers from the crowd. The crowd's reaction seemed to be anticipated, as the line in the service asking if people objected to the wedding was amended to say, "if there is anyone of the opinion that these two people should not commit themselves to each other, speak now", which was followed by raucous booing.[231] WWE changed the wording to "opinions", which included a much broader scope for people to voice their homophobia, rather than denying the legal right to partnership between two men.

[227] 'SmackDown', *WWE*, (September 5, 2002).
[228] Ibid.
[229] 'SmackDown', *WWE*, (September 12, 2002), accessed via *WWE Network*, [accessed on 09/05/22].
[230] Ibid.
[231] Ibid.

It was not just the audience who took the opportunity after the objections line, as the Godfather also interrupted. The Godfather was another character that highlighted the revolution that WWE was undergoing in the 1990s and early 2000s. The Godfather made his entrance with his 'Hoe Train', a line of attractive and scantily dressed women referred to as the Hoes. The commentary team remarks that Godfather's entrance during Billy and Chuck's ceremony "will make you go straight".[232] Aside from perpetuating a damaging notion that homosexuality is a choice, and that attractive women would affect one's sexuality, this line also reinforces the limited role of women within wrestling. Women were purposefully picked and dressed to be as attractive to heterosexual men as possible. There was no reason that Godfather needed to be involved in the Billy and Chuck storyline. The Godfather and the 'Hoes' were shoehorned into the wedding segment because it acted as a relief for the homoeroticism of this storyline. WWE, it can be argued, did not want to alienate a large part of their audience with a queer storyline, and as such, put out some attractive women to keep the audience's attention. With the appearance of attractive women, men could reassert their dominant heteromasculinity. The Godfather did end up objecting to the wedding of Billy and Chuck, asking Billy "what happened, I know that you still got the pimp in you man", and later remarking that Chuck was "one of the legendary skirt-chasers of all time".[233] This interaction raises many concerns. Firstly, sexualities aside from homosexuality and heterosexuality are seemingly ignored. Billy and Chuck are treated as entirely different people together than they were separately. The wrestling gimmicks did change for the wrestlers, but in kayfabe, there is no reason to suggest that they are different people since they are together.

[232] 'SmackDown', *WWE*, (September 12, 2002).
[233] Ibid.

After Rico told the Godfather to leave, the wedding finally reached its ending stages, whereby the Justice of the Peace asked Billy and Chuck to say yes to their marriage. At this point, Billy and Chuck appear nervous and keep looking at Rico, who had to urge them to continue with the wedding. It is not until the Justice of the Peace starts the final line of "by the power vested in me" that Billy and Chuck finally stopped the wedding. Chuck stated that "it wasn't supposed to go this far", with Billy backing him up, saying that "this was just supposed to be a publicity stunt".[234] Billy clarified that "we're not gay, I mean we got nothing against gay people", which comfortably received the biggest cheer from the crowd during the entire show.[235] The Justice of the Peace interrupted, and the situation turned strange once again, as it was revealed that the Justice of the Peace was really Eric Bischoff, and that Rico had set up the ceremony as a trap for Billy and Chuck to be attacked before their match at *Unforgiven 2002*. A wedding going wrong is nothing new in the world of professional wrestling; Randy Savage's marriage to Miss Elizabeth at *Summerslam 1991* was the only marriage ceremony on wrestling television that went all the way. In this way, it is reassuring to see a homosexual marriage receive the same depiction of dysfunctionality and disaster as heterosexual marriages. The problem was that Billy and Chuck were not romantically involved. Scott Seomin stated that WWE lied to GLAAD about the Billy and Chuck marriage ceremony, "the WWE lied to us two months ago when they promised that Billy & Chuck would come out and wed on the air. In fact, I was told (lied to) the day after the show was taped in Minneapolis that the wedding took place, and all was well."[236] When Billy stated that they were only pretending to get married for the publicity, his statement exposes the logic governing these storylines: WWE produced queer characters and storylines in order to gain attention, particularly by sensationalising queerness.

[234] 'SmackDown', *WWE*, (September 12, 2002).
[235] Ibid.
[236] Seomin, 'GLAAD: We Were Lied To'.

The sham marriage ceremony marred the fact that WWE had, in some ways, made a step forward in their treatment and depiction of queer characters; Billy and Chuck were placed in prominent storylines, and were often allowed to flourish as their queer selves. Billy and Chuck did not experience as much queer bashing as previous wrestlers, and as Seomin notes, Billy and Chuck were good queer role models.[237] This was all undone in the space of a 15-minute segment. After the failed marriage ceremony, the subtext to this storyline was that a happy, healthy queer relationship is a fabrication. While WWE were not as homophobic with Billy and Chuck, they gave fans, in particular queer fans, false hope and quickly dashed these hopes.

Extreme Violence as Compensation

In the mid-to-late 1990s and early 2000s, WWE became increasingly sexual in its programming, showcasing wrestling characters such as Chyna and Goldust, as well as erotic storylines, such as frequent lesbian storylines. This increase in queer representation led to another change in programming, which was an increase in graphic violence in professional wrestling. As Patrice Oppliger explains, "because of the insinuations of homosexuality, wrestlers compensate with brutal and cruel actions".[238] Lucia Rahilly highlights the match between Vince McMahon and Shane McMahon at *Wrestlemania X-7*, which featured blatant heterosexuality, but also "falls definitively outside the rubric of straight sexual norms".[239] This match was structured around a storyline where Linda McMahon, wife of Vince, had fallen into a coma, and Vince had started to have a relationship with Trish Stratus, a female wrestler who was operating as Vince's assistant at the time. Shane challenged his father

[237] Seomin, 'GLAAD: We Were Lied To'.
[238] Oppliger, *Wrestling and Hypermasculinity*, p. 58.
[239] Rahilly, 'Is *Raw* War?', pp. 214-215.

Vince to a match due to the treatment of his mother, a street fight that was excessively violent. Rahilly observes that this match defied the usual conventions of heterosexual norms, and points to certain parts of the match, such as Vince making Linda, who had been propped on a chair, watch as he beat up their son Shane. Vince repeatedly asked Linda if she liked watching Vince beat up Shane.[240] This links to Oppliger's argument that hypermasculinity is compensation for homoeroticism.[241] Vince and Shane moved beyond the traditional wrestling match by featuring a lot of noise, including the use of weapons against one another; this was made stranger by the fact that they were father and son, adding a familial element to their enjoyment of inflicting pain on one another. The Vince and Shane match ended when Linda stood up and kicked Vince in the groin, allowing Shane to capitalise and ultimately win the match.

Rahilly's analysis of the Shane and Vince McMahon match at *Wrestlemania X-7* has parallels to the analysis of a group of academics who went to a WWF show in 2000 to witness first-hand the spectacle of professional wrestling. They concluded that at first glance, professional wrestling could be read as homoerotic, but certain factors negated this reading, most notably the brutality on display.[242] In particular, the 'low blows' and actions situated around the male genitalia, which seemed to be executed due to the reactions that they garnered from the crowd, sent mixed signals. A low blow features a wrestler focusing on another man's genitalia, providing clear homoerotic subtext. However, the purpose of the low blow is to emasculate an opponent, thus eliminating these homosexual connotations. Male wrestlers often compare their opponents to women. As Danielle Soulliere points out, feminine terms, such as 'bitch', are often levelled against male wrestlers.[243] Queer male

[240] 'Wrestlemania X-7', *WWE*, (April 1, 2001), accessed via *WWE Network*, [accessed 10/05/2].
[241] Oppliger, *Wrestling and Hypermasculinity*, p. 97.
[242] Communication Studies 298, 'A Night with the Narcissist and the Nasty Boys: Interpreting the World Wrestling Federation', *Qualitative Inquiry*, Vol 6. (4), (2000), p. 530.
[243] Soulliere, 'Wrestling with Masculinity', p. 3.

wrestlers seem to experience this disproportionately, such as wrestler Bradshaw repeatedly referring to Billy and Chuck as “ladies”.[244]

Since the 1990s and early 2000s witnessed the peak of professional wrestling’s popularity, the period has received extensive academic attention. Douglas Battema and Philip Sewell have been especially critical of WWE during the 1990s and 2000s, arguing that professional wrestling in the 1990s represented a backlash against queerness.[245] It is hard to disagree. In the 1990s and early 2000s WWE went to great lengths to humiliate queer wrestling characters and created few opportunities for queer characters to be presented as anything other than a joke or a threat to heterosexuality. While some, like Billy and Chuck, garnered support from crowds, WWE eventually undid all the potential positives.

[244] Soulliere, ‘Wrestling with Masculinity’, p. 3.
[245] Battema and Sewell, ‘Trading Masculinities’, p. 263.

Chapter Three: 2004-2014 (Avoidance of Queerness)

Introduction

Professional Wrestling saw a seismic shift in the early-to-mid 2000s, as WWE moved away from overly sexual content, and began to tailor their product to a more family-friendly audience. The period between 2004-2014, divides into two periods the Ruthless Aggression Era (2004-2008) and the PG Era (2008-2014). As the WWE targeted the product towards children, the treatment of queer characters in wrestling also shifted. Established queer acts in wrestling, such as Goldust, were not ignored, but their sexual proclivities were toned down. These characters often just became another ostentatious individual in the over-the-top world of professional wrestling, rather than a character imbued with homoerotic tensions.

Whilst queer characters persisted within professional wrestling, they were often buried, rather than featured in prominent positions and storylines. More broadly, WWE's move towards a more family-friendly product left a gap in the market for a grittier, more violent wrestling product. The period from 2004 to 2014 saw a rapid rise in the number and popularity of independent wrestling promotions. Due to the introduction of the internet, it was easier than ever to access videos of wrestling matches and storylines from these smaller, 'Indy' shows. The usual demographic for these Indy shows were teenage boys and young men. The treatment of queerness and homosexuality at Indy shows continued to perpetuate ignorance and harmful stereotypes surrounding queerness. This chapter will demonstrate that the move by WWE into a family-friendly product had several consequences; whilst queerness was treated with less violent policing in this period, WWE still created negative implications and harmful storylines.

Chris Kanyon

Before diving into the new era of wrestling, it is important to remember that remnants of the Attitude Era lingered. Chris Kanyon was, in many ways, the opposite to Goldust; Kanyon was a gay man who portrayed a relatively stereotypical heterosexual male character. David Shoemaker argues that Kanyon's career was one of "idiosyncrasy", as he was a homosexual man, yet his wrestling persona was not ostentatious or camp.[246] This is, to put it kindly, a way of thinking that stems directly from the world of professional wrestling; Shoemaker seems to expect all queer people to make it abundantly obvious that they are queer. As mentioned previously, there is a lack of subtlety in the treatment of queer people in professional wrestling, especially WWE, and it appears that Shoemaker assumes that WWE's presentation of queer people is how queer people act.

While Chris Kanyon's career was situated mainly in the Attitude Era, he was fired by WWE in 2004, an event that saw him coming to terms with his homosexuality. Chris Kanyon was a featured topic on the documentary series, *Dark Side of the Ring*, an in-depth examination of the more disturbing and darkest events in the history of professional wrestling. In an episode that features interviews with many of the wrestlers who were closest to Kanyon, it was revealed that Kanyon became obsessed with hiding his sexuality from everyone else, fearing it would ruin his career.[247] Much in the same way that professional wrestling makes a spectacle of violently policing queer behaviour, Kanyon reportedly made it well known that he hated "the queers".[248] Many wrestlers justify Kanyon's homophobic anxiety; Matt and Nick Jackson state that in the early 2000s, "if you were gay back then, you were a bad guy, you were a heel, you were the guy that you would do the sunset flip and they

[246] Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, p. 235.
[247] 'The Double Life of Chris Kanyon', *Dark Side of the Ring* (S3:E9), *Vice*, (December 27, 2021), accessed via *All 4*, [accessed on 12/05/22].
[248] Ibid.

would pull your pants down and you would have a thong on".[249] The previous two chapters confirm this observation: in professional wrestling from the late 1980s onwards, being queer was synonymous with being bad or evil, or a joke. Nick Jackson's mention of wearing a thong, probably intended to exaggerate the humiliating treatment queer wrestlers received, is something that happened to Billy and Chuck. Other wrestlers also support Jackson's viewpoint, with Brian Cage saying that to be gay would never be portrayed "as a positive thing".[250]

Kanyon often enjoyed becoming a masked character within wrestling, which allowed him to play someone else. His most famous, and most successful, run was as the character Mortis in *World Championship Wrestling* (WCW) in the late 1990s. By the time Kanyon joined the WWE, his career began a downward turn. After returning from a long injury in 2003, he returned to WWE in a storyline involving the Undertaker. On the February 13, 2003, episode of *SmackDown*, the Undertaker received a gift from his opponent, the Big Show. When the gift, which was displayed as a big crate, was opened, Chris Kanyon stepped out of it in a Boy George outfit, singing 'Do You Really Want To Hurt Me'.[251] The Undertaker beat down Kanyon on his return to WWE, going as far as to hit Kanyon in the head with a steel chair, an act which has since been banned in professional wrestling.[252] The people interviewed in *Dark Side of the Ring* argue that Kanyon's return was managed in such a way to humiliate him; Kanyon had never been a comedic wrestling character and had certainly never opted to talk on the mic rather than wrestle.[253] The argument that WWE were subtly outing Kanyon on his return has some merit, as the decision to dress Kanyon as Boy George, a famous and popular queer pop culture star, seems quite deliberate. Chris Jericho, a

[249] 'The Double Life of Chris Kanyon'.
[250] Ibid.
[251] 'SmackDown', *WWE*, (February 13, 2003), accessed via *WWE Network*, [accessed on 12/05/22].
[252] Ibid.
[253] 'The Double Life of Chris Kanyon'.

legend within professional wrestling, states that "it's a bullying WWE trick".[254] On the other hand, figures such as Rafael Morffi, a wrestling executive and lifelong friend of Chris Kanyon, and David Shoemaker argue that WWE would not have knowingly humiliated Kanyon for his sexuality. Morffi explains that "I'm not going to buy it, that they [WWE] wanted to humiliate him, sorry. WWE is not going to have someone train to come back for a year to humiliate him on national TV. That's not going to happen."[255] Shoemaker argues that Kanyon's downfall was not due to WWE's treatment of him, but rather because Kanyon's personal life impinged upon his wrestling performance (in any case, Shoemaker did not consider Kanyon to be a major star).[256]

This cannot be settled; the only people that know if Kanyon was intentionally set up are those that wrote and organised the segment on *SmackDown*, and they likely will never give an account of this. It should be said that WWE have a long history of humiliating queer wrestling characters, but not a damning history in humiliating queer people. Chris Kanyon occupied an unusual position within wrestling in the 2000s as one of the few wrestlers who was queer. As in all sports, it can be assumed that there have been many queer athletes who have competed who have never come out, due to the fear of the backlash they would receive. As Eric Anderson succinctly explains, "an athlete is thought to represent the ideal of what it means to be a man—a definition that is predicated in opposition to what it means to be feminine and/or gay".[257] From the interviews Anderson conducted, he concluded that:

> The atmosphere of individual sports was more conducive for coming out than that of competitive contact sports. I found that about half of my

[254] 'The Double Life of Chris Kanyon'.
[255] Ibid.
[256] Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, p. 112.
[257] Eric Anderson, 'Updating the Outcome: Gay Athletes, Straight Teams, and Coming Out in Educationally Based Sport Teams', *Gender & Society*, Vol. 25 (2), (April, 2011), pp. 250-251.

> participants played on a team with a culture of heteronormativity, a don't ask, don't tell culture in which both the gay athlete and teammates colluded in silencing the voices of gay men.[258]

While Anderson's research focused on collegiate level team sports, these conclusions can still be applied to the world of professional wrestling. Chris Kanyon is an example of someone who felt that he was silenced and could not express himself. Shoemaker is right to observe that Kanyon's career saw a sharp downturn after his return, which ended with him being fired in 2004. According to James Mitchell, a friend of Chris Kanyon and the manager for the Mortis character in *WCW*, following his firing, Chris Kanyon believed that "the office was punishing him for being gay, but told me later that was all bullshit, and was just using it as an ace in the hole in case he ever had to sue them".[259] Mitchell himself called Kanyon an "unreliable narrator" for this period of his life, with even his own friends not knowing what to believe about Kanyon.[260] It is hard to argue against WWE's record of its treatment of queer characters, but to punish someone's sexuality seems a step beyond this. Further, Shoemaker makes a valid criticism of Kanyon not being a star in the eyes of WWE; Kanyon was a good wrestler, but there was no charisma or energy that would have made him a star. Whilst WWE's treatment of Kanyon was inexcusably hurtful, that they acted out of a motivation to punish homosexuality seems a stretch.

Chris Kanyon's release from WWE led to a remarkable brief resurgence in his career. As will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter, the 2000s saw a renaissance of professional wrestling in terms of the variety of wrestling promotions. WWE had dominated the market in terms of televised wrestling product. WCW were their only competition in the

[258] Anderson, 'Updating the Outcome', p. 251.
[259] 'The Double Life of Chris Kanyon'.
[260] Ibid.

1990s and early 2000s, though WWE eventually bought WCW outright. However, the internet meant that smaller wrestling promotions, which operated in a very limited capacity before the internet, spread their product online, bringing in legions of fans. Many indie wrestling promotions nurtured an almost cult-like following. It was to these indie shows that Chris Kanyon went after his firing from WWE. This was not necessarily a backwards step for him; Kanyon was often viewed as a talent whose style suited the indies more, where there was a preference for hard-hitting action and a distaste for the more absurd aspects of the WWE product. Kanyon was considered a forerunner for the indie style of wrestling, and many who worked these indie shows with him were people who Kanyon helped mentor.[261]

By 2005 and 2006, Kanyon seemed to have accepted his position as an indie wrestling star, rather than a wrestler who would entertain the world in WWE; *The Dark Side of the Ring* episode notes that during this period he started to acknowledge his homosexuality to his friends.[262] Emboldened by the acceptance he received from his friends, Kanyon was galvanised to come out publicly; James Mitchell states that Kanyon wanted to be a role model for his fans as the first openly gay active wrestler (there have been wrestlers who have come out since retiring, such as Pat Paterson).[263] Kanyon eventually came out at an indie show in 2006. Shoemaker argues that it was not an especially important moment for professional wrestling and goes as far as to say that if Kanyon had announced his sexuality in WWE when he was working there, it would not have changed his career drastically.[264] Shoemaker's assessment is difficult to grapple with because it is wholly speculative. What cannot be disputed is the significance of Kanyon's public coming out, as notwithstanding Shoemaker's comments, one cannot downplay the role of this moment in queer wrestling

[261] 'The Double Life of Chris Kanyon'.
[262] Ibid.
[263] Ibid.
[264] Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, p. 250.

history. As Kanyon himself acknowledged in his coming out speech, he was the first openly gay wrestler who was still wrestling.[265] Professional wrestling had been in America since the 1920s, and 2006 marked the first time that a wrestler had openly acknowledged their queerness and continued to compete. Such moments matter to queer children and teenagers, as that representation is key in them accepting themselves and their place in the world. Academics such as Michael McDermott have analysed the importance of queer representation within the media, arguing that significant queer representation can lead to queer audiences believing in "a hopeful, happy future".[266]

It is acknowledged by Kanyon's friends and fans that 2006 was a time when coming out was not as momentous an occasion as it had been in previous decades.[267] Further, Kanyon's friends note that Chris Kanyon wanted to be recognised as a role model in the entire industry of professional wrestling, not just to the small audiences who watched him on indie shows.[268] It was this desperation for recognition that ultimately led to Kanyon's downfall. Kanyon started to make appearances, such as on the Howard Stern Show, to increase the publicity of his coming out, as well as to vent his frustrations at the way he felt he had been treated by WWE. In an interview, for example, Kanyon states that he was told to "sing like a faggot" before doing the Boy George segment on *SmackDown.*[269] John Cena, who became the biggest star in WWE from 2004 to 2014, most comparable to Hulk Hogan, also appeared on the Howard Stern Show, refuting Kanyon's version of events by claiming

[265] 'The Double Life of Chris Kanyon'.
[266] Michael McDermott, 'The (broken) promise of queerbaiting: Happiness and futurity in politics of queer representation', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 24 (5), (2021), p. 845.
[267] 'The Double Life of Chris Kanyon'.
[268] Ibid.
[269] Ibid.

that Kanyon was fired because "he just wasn't any good".[270] Chris Kanyon committed suicide in 2010.

Kanyon's legacy is complicated. Nothing can take away from the fact that Kanyon was the first openly gay wrestler and provided a role model for those fans who knew of his work. However, his legacy has been tarnished by the hostile relationship between Kanyon and WWE, and it will never be settled whether Kanyon was bullied due to being gay, or if it was an unlucky coincidence that caused his downward spiral. Kanyon's impact may have proven much greater if he had come out while he was still an active wrestler with WWE, as that bigger stage would have cemented Kanyon as a massive success story within the world of professional wrestling. As it is, Kanyon in many ways laid the foundation for openly queer wrestlers who came after him.

Mickie James and Trish Stratus

As noted above, the early years of this period, namely 2004-2008, saw lingering remnants of the Attitude Era, where sexuality was key to storylines. Where Chris Kanyon suffered due to his sexuality, the feud between Trish Stratus and Mickie James between late 2005 and early 2006 received a lot of attention and support from the audience because it was a lesbian storyline. Trish Stratus was a well-established star by 2006, who featured heavily in sexually charged storylines, like many female wrestlers during the Attitude Era and beyond. Mickie James was introduced in WWE in this storyline as Stratus's stalker, a crazed fan who was obsessed with Stratus and proceeded to imitate her. In a documentary episode examining the rise of women's wrestling in the Ruthless Aggression Era, both Stratus and James looked

[270] 'The Double Life of Chris Kanyon'.

back upon this storyline with fondness.[271] Once again, a queer storyline was portrayed by two heterosexual individuals. Further, this storyline was less an intense rivalry than another storyline featuring lesbian imagery. Further, the queer character in the feud, Mickie James, was a person with mental health issues, as her deranged character would stalk Stratus and become enraged if Stratus ignored her or spent time with another woman. WWE had still, in 2006, not portrayed a queer character in a positive manner (one may make the argument that Billy and Chuck, the queer-coded tag team who were cheered by fans, are an exception, but their credibility as positive queer characters is undermined by the fact that they declared they were not gay). Much like Goldust, Mickie James as a queer character was depicted as abnormal and bizarre. The James-Stratus feud was another storyline concocted by WWE to entice heterosexual male fans to continue watching their product. There is no doubt that both James and Stratus were incredibly talented wrestlers, capable of creating a stellar wrestling match, but it is frustrating that such stars had to engage in storyline that objectified them and focused more on their looks than their talent.

The feud between James and Stratus was a slow build, as this story played out over half a year. In the documentary episode produced by WWE, a positive spin was given to the storyline. It is true that a lot of time was devoted to this story, a rarity for female wrestlers in the early to mid-2000s, yet it seems that the reason that this storyline received so much attention, both from WWE and from the fans, was because it was sexually charged. Eventually, Mickie James turned on Stratus for spurning her advances too often, leading to the storyline of James as the deranged ex who was obsessed with getting back at Stratus. This led to the match between James and Stratus at *WrestleMania 22*, one of the most famous women's matches in *WrestleMania* history.

[271] 'The First Revolution', *WWE Ruthless Aggression*, (February, 2020), accessed via *WWE Network*, [accessed on 24/05/22].

The match was given more time and attention than most women's matches; it took up a considerable amount of time on a *WrestleMania* show. The focus on mental health, particularly James' mental instability was a key feature of this match. The preceding match before James and Stratus's match at *WrestleMania 22* was the Boogeyman against Booker T; the Boogeyman was a comically vulgar character, who would creep up on different people and eat worms. After the Boogeyman and Booker T match, the commentary team transitioned to the James and Stratus match by noting that "we go from one crazy person, a worm eating Boogeyman, to a psychotic diva … obsessed with Stratus in some very perverse ways".[272] To liken the antics of the Boogeyman with James's obsession is a stretch, as the Boogeyman acted in a manner that could only be contrived within the fictitious arena of professional wrestling, whereas James's behaviour was more believable and realistic. The comparison of Boogeyman's obsession with eating worms to James's obsession with Stratus showcases the damaging presentation that WWE perpetuated surrounding queer feelings and relationships.

It is important to reiterate the differences in representations of queer male wrestlers, and queer female wrestlers. Where queer male wrestlers were presented as a threat to the heteronormative structure of professional wrestler, queer female wrestlers were presented as an attraction for a largely male audience. During James and Stratus's match, the audience at *WrestleMania 22* was firmly behind James, as though there was some understanding between James and the audience, perhaps because both were attracted to Stratus. James certainly demonstrated an overt attraction to Stratus; when James attempted to pin Stratus, she hooked Stratus's legs underneath her, and stacked her up, putting her into a position to simulate penetrative sex.[273] Moments later, Stratus did the same to James. The act of simulating penetrative sex harkens back to Heather Levi's point, that wrestling comprises the

[272] 'WrestleMania 22', *WWE*, (April 2, 2006), accessed via *WWE Network*, [accessed on 26/05/22].
[273] Ibid.

penetrative, masculine, aggressive top, and the submissive bottom.[274] Even in women's matches, it seems as though demonstrating "masculine" aggression is key. The sense that one must exert control over an opponent and make them submissive, and that jockeying for the position of the dominating top mattered as much to female wrestlers, is a masculine idea. There is a reinforcement of heteromasculinity, which is not surprising when all wrestling matches, including women's, were choreographed by men. The fact that women represent the same desire to be dominating as the men supports Levi's theorisation of the dominant/submissive power dynamic.

The end of the match is infamous. As Stratus was attempting to perform her finishing manoeuvre on James, James grabbed Stratus's crotch.[275] In a moment that has now been censored on the *WWE Network*, James proceeded to lick her hand, making a 'V' symbol and licking between it.[276] On the *WWE Network* version of *WrestleMania 22* now, there is a cut to the audience when James licks her hand. James would quickly go on to win the match. James's tactics to win the match, namely the grabbing of Stratus's genital area, were greeted with loud enthusiasm by the crowd, which once again showcases the difference in treatment for queer male and female wrestlers. When Goldust ran his hands over the body of his opponents, he was forcefully vilified, yet when James went even further, she was applauded. Further, the fact that James would go on to win the match reinforced the idea that, in the simplest terms, professional wrestling punishes queer male wrestlers for acting queer, but not women. This inconsistency highlights the importance and overbearing presence of heteronormativity within professional wrestling.

Following on from this storyline, Mickie James quickly left behind her character of a deranged stalker, and instead became a loveable, relatable babyface. James's role as a queer

[274] Levi, *The World of Lucha Libre*, p. 140.
[275] 'WrestleMania 22'.
[276] Ibid.

psychopath was rarely mentioned again, only once recalled when James and Stratus came face to face in the women's Royal Rumble match at *Royal Rumble 2020*. WWE had no interest in continuing to direct James as a lesbian with mental health issues, a good decision based on WWE's lack of sensitivity and taste when it came to queer characters, and characters with mental health issues.

Santina Marella

The late 2000s and early 2010s saw the mistreatment of talented female wrestlers, which often aligned with queer characters and storylines, such as in 2009, at *WrestleMania 25*. Santino Marella was a comedic male wrestler, a purposefully bumbling idiot who was a fan favourite due to his ineptitude. When it came to *WrestleMania 25*, Santino Marella did not have a scheduled match, and, as a result, decided to create the character of 'Santina' Marella, his twin sister, who would compete in the *WrestleMania 25* Diva battle royal. The match was planned and marketed as a celebration of 25 years of women at *WrestleMania*, with the winner crowned 'Miss WrestleMania'. In the end, 'Santina' Marella ended up winning the match. This result produced several issues. Firstly, it was the only 'women's match' on the entire *WrestleMania 25* show, assigned no more than ten minutes in a four-hour long show; to brand the match as a celebration of women's wrestling was insulting. Secondly, there were many talented, iconic women involved in this match, such as Mickie James, Michelle McCool (who became the first Divas Champion), and Beth Phoenix (the youngest inductee ever into the WWE Hall of Fame). None of these accomplished female wrestlers were deemed worthy of the title 'Miss WrestleMania'. Instead, a male wrestler dressed as a female wrestler won the match. There are many consequences to the decision of having Santina Marella win, and none of them are positive. Marella was a comedic wrestler, and while he did win championships such as the Intercontinental title, he was never treated as

a serious character, or any sort of a threat. Marella's win made the women look weak, as they could not overcome even an exceptionally weak male wrestler, which implied that a man would always win against women in a competitive environment, no matter his lack of sporting acumen. Further, to have a comedic character win an important match, made the match itself seem like a joke, a prize that was not worth caring about because anyone could win it.

The most contentious issue surrounding the Santina Marella character was the appropriation and subsequent mocking of transgender experience. The Santina Marella storyline occurred a decade before debates surrounding transgender athletes became widespread concerns within America. In the storyline, Marella decided on a whim to dress as a woman to gain attention and access to a match that he had no business being in. Marella's snap decision to become a woman made it seem as though being transgender was a simple and sudden decision, rather than an issue that takes trans people years to figure out and navigate. Further, Marella made the decision to become a woman because he saw that it would benefit him within sports to do so. Again, this extremely negative depiction of transgender athletes is damaging; Santina Marella's actions suggested that transgender athletes have become transgender to further their sporting careers, rather than individuals reflecting the gender that they see themselves as and making a positive decision to improve their lives. As Katherine Rizzone explains, "sport participation itself has become an area of controversy stemming from concern that some transgender athletes may have a competitive advantage over cisgender athletes."[277] A narrative has been created within the world of sports that transgender athletes are dominating their respective sports due to their biological

[277] Katherine Rizzone, 'World in Transition: Sport and Transgender Athletes', *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, Vol. 56 (3), (January, 2022), p. 125.

advantages, and many media outlets make it seem as though this is the reason why these athletes are transgender.

While the Santina Marella storyline was a comedic endeavour and limited to a man dressing as a woman for a competitive advantage, it nevertheless fed into the very harmful notion that trans athletes are only looking for an advantage over their competitors, which has led to some very damaging repercussions, as several US states have banned transgender athletes' participation in sports.[278] In 27 states, laws have been drafted that would ban any transgender participation in any sports that match their gender identity.[279] This is a much bigger issue concerning the entire arena of sports, rather than just professional wrestling. It must also be considered that professional wrestling is not a competitive sport, and as such is not governed by the laws introduced. Nevertheless, such representations of transgender athletes have contributed to a culture of intolerance. Whilst Santina Marella came to the fore around a decade before trans participation in sport became a front-page issue, the storyline was a harmful incident that could have shaped opinions on the matter of transgender athletes. Noticeably, and as Rizzone points out, the focus has almost exclusively fallen on women's sport, and trans women's participation in it, "based on the premise of either retained or continued benefit from higher levels of testosterone".[280] As Rizzone explains, "it is important to note that testosterone levels also differ within cisgender athlete populations. Yet cisgender athletes with naturally occurring higher levels of endogenous testosterone are not having their participation status examined".[281] Specifically targeting one minority group appears as

[278] See 'Florida bans transgender athletes from female sports', *BBC News*, (June 2, 2021), accessed via https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-57326790, [accessed on 30/05/22]; Kimberlee Kruesi, 'Tennessee Governor signs transgender athlete ban in girls' sports', *PBS Newshour*, (April 25, 2022), accessed via https://www.pbs.org/newshour/education/tennessee-governor-signs-transgender-athlete-ban-in-girls-sports, [accessed on 30/05/22].
[279] Zoe Christen Jones, 'The bans on transgender athletes – 6 facts', *CBS News*, (June 7, 2021), accessed via https://www.cbsnews.com/news/transgender-athlete-bans-facts/, [accessed on 30/05/22].
[280] Rizzone, 'World in Transition', p. 125.
[281] Ibid.

discrimination hiding behind the pretence of ensuring fair play. Again, these are issues that are much larger and much more complex than were ever explored by WWE with Santina Marella; yet WWE did imply that transgender athletes have an unfair advantage in sports, as Santina Marella won the battle royal at *WrestleMania 25*.

It is also worth noting that in the 2020 women's *Royal Rumble* match, Santina Marella made a return. Marella once again joined a women's battle royal. In 2020, however, Marella was summarily beaten down by Beth Phoenix and Natalya (another incredible athlete who also participated in the *WrestleMania 25* match). Perhaps WWE believed they were righting a previous wrong, yet one could argue that it was too little and too late. It was serendipitous that Marella's return took place in another battle royal match. In the *WrestleMania 25* battle royal match, Marella had hidden in the corner for most of the match, opportunistically picking spots to eliminate women. The fact that the women in the *WrestleMania 25* match ignored Marella made them seem silly and inexperienced, as they seemed unperturbed by Marella's antics. In the 2020 *Royal Rumble* match, Beth Phoenix and Natalya ignored every other competitor in the match to focus on Marella and get him eliminated. Again, this appeared to be WWE trying to make amends, but it would be naïve for WWE to think it would be as simple as that.

The Indies

As WWE began to include more storylines like Santina Marella, those wrestling fans who desired to watch hard-hitting, well-paced wrestling, rather than the absurd and comedic, began to look at new outlets of professional wrestling. Due to the internet, smaller wrestling promotions were beginning to gain attention not possible since the Territory Era of the 1960s and 1970s. These communities resembled other aspects of the earlier years of professional

wrestling, as they often harboured homophobic tendencies. As has been discussed previously, the participation and engagement of fans is crucial to the success of professional wrestling. Indie wrestling promotions (a term I use to refer to smaller promotions that do not have TV deals or wide brand recognition) need fans to aid in their success more than bigger companies like WWE. Social media has allowed smaller companies to put out their product without a television show, helping to keep small businesses afloat.[282] While smaller wrestling promotions are gaining recognition within the fanbase of professional wrestling, they still need committed fans to attend the shows and create an atmosphere that entices other fans to go in the future. Indie wrestling promotions have occupied a gap in the market; where WWE has become an incredibly large company that oftentimes ignores their fans' desires in the pursuit of profit, indie wrestling shows operate a smaller operation that allows the fans to be vocal and engaged. In the Ruthless Aggression and PG Era, WWE largely ignored their fans, who, for example, were supportive of female wrestlers receiving more time and attention, which allowed other companies to tailor their product to what fans were asking for from WWE. This was not always a positive thing for certain demographics. My discussion of indie wrestling will focus on the experience of the fans at indie wrestling shows, and the experiences and attitudes of the wrestlers who work these shows, and at how these Indie shows created a strong sense of community, which often was an exclusionary community that had little tolerance for queerness, perhaps because WWE had featured queer storylines so heavily.

Thomas Hackett detailed his experiences, as a reporter, of travelling with wrestling fans to indie shows; his book *Slaphappy* focuses on the sociological factors surrounding the fans of professional wrestling. Hackett noted that most of the fans who he travelled with were

[282] See Gail F. Goodman, *Engagement Marketing: How Small Business Wins in a Socially Connected World,* (New York: Wiley, 2012).

adolescent boys, which is not surprising; indie wrestling shows often see larger numbers of men, and especially younger men, turning up to shows. It appears younger men appreciate and are more inclined to watch a grittier wrestling product, whereas WWE's product in the late 2000s onwards was more family friendly. Having a younger and largely male audience meant that many fans were vocal about their perceptions of heteromasculinity, especially in an arena like professional wrestling that defies many of the conventions and expectations of masculinity. Hackett stated that many of the fans he travelled with questioned the masculinity of professional wrestling, such as two teenage boys arguing as to whether wearing a gold and sparkly championship belt "was gay".[283] Physical representations of sporting success are commonplace, though they usually take the form of championship trophies or rings. Championship belts are not exclusive to wrestling, as boxing also features multiple belts for each weight class. What is important about this exchange is that the teenage boys were worried by what they perceived as a physical signal of queerness, connoting a shiny, gold and gaudy championship belt with the often-ostentatious dress style of drag queens and loud homosexuality. Sporting a championship belt is usually considered a sign of masculinity, indicating that a wrestler is the best. The symbolic meaning of a championship belt, it seems, was overshadowed for these two teenage boys by the physical appearance of the belt. Physical appearance is key to professional wrestling, as even small designs can represent much when it comes to perceived masculinity.

Hackett strongly resists the reading of his wrestling companions as ignorantly homophobic, however. Hackett details a conversation he had with several fans about the implied homoeroticism in professional wrestling; while one fan stated that he was hesitant to connect wrestling to homosexuality, another replied that "it's kind of hard not to make".[284]

[283] Hackett, *Slaphappy*, p. 18.
[284] Hackett, *Slaphappy*, p. 19.

The fact that some fans are cognizant of the homoeroticism of professional wrestling speaks to the idea that not all wrestling fans saw the homoeroticism so inherent in wrestling as a threat or something uncomfortable, and were secure enough in their sexuality to enjoy wrestling. Hackett details one fan arguing that developing a wrestling character is akin to coming out of the closet, in declaring who a man truly is.[285] This is not a wholly accurate comparison, as professional wrestlers do not face the same stigmas for being themselves that queer individuals do. However, the interpretation is also reassuring, as the man who Hackett spoke to recognises that coming out involves true self-recognition. Again, the understanding and acknowledgement of queer elements within professional wrestling is evidence that many wrestling fans, especially those of indie wrestling shows who are often considered toxically masculine, cannot be portrayed as all the same.

Not all wrestling fans were as open-minded and self-aware. Hackett wrote of another male fan, who stated that he was a fan of professional wrestling, especially indie wrestling shows, because it was politically incorrect, and he could say offensive things during a wrestling show that he could not express in any other context, such as "shove it up your ass, faggot".[286] Professional wrestling giving a chance for fans to voice their pent-up homophobia is something that has been discussed by Henry Jenkins IV, as well as other historians, though they have often been restricted to queer characters. In the case of queer characters, indie shows allowed the audience to vociferously voice their homophobia towards them, as for much of wrestling history, being queer was being a heel. As has been discussed, in the late 2000s, WWE were pushing a more family-friendly product, and as a result, there was no room for offensive speech. Indie wrestling shows gave a forum for hate, though one could

[285] Hackett, *Slaphappy*, p. 20.
[286] Hackett, *Slaphappy*, p. 26.

argue that it was in a contained environment, especially as the fan acknowledges that he could not, and hopefully would not, use such language in any other place.

Further, the fan interviewed by Hackett also stated that he loved it when a wrestler called the audience "faggots", arguing that everyone was performing assigned roles.[287] Wrestling, in its simplest form, is about the connection between the audience and the wrestlers. To establish animosity between the audience and a wrestler is exactly what wrestling promotions want, as the wrestlers are making the audience engage. While this sort of interaction is positive for a wrestling promotion, it had negative effects for queer talent and fans. To enter an indie wrestling show where fans relished screaming homophobic abuse, with the wrestlers screaming it right back, does not present a welcoming environment for queer individuals. Whilst one can argue about the damage WWE was doing for queer representation by oftentimes ignoring queer characters, providing an arena for homophobia, like many indie promotions did, was incredibly harmful as well. The homophobia in indie wrestling shows has been well documented, as Patrice Oppliger also noted that indie shows feature prolific use of homophobic slurs.[288]

R. Tyson Smith's account of his experiences behind the scenes of indie wrestling shows is also key. Specifically, Smith's account of his time spent with the *Rage* wrestling promotion will be featured. The dynamics of a wrestling locker room are not something that wrestling fans are privy to. The changing room is a topic that has garnered a lot of attention from gender and queer theorists. Heidi Eng argues that "homoerotic desire and practice in changing rooms, as knowledge that is not spoken/out (outspoken), might be examples of … silences underlying and permeating discourses of normality in sport".[289] Eng draws upon

[287] Hackett, *Slaphappy*, p. 26.
[288] Oppliger, *Wrestling and Hypermasculinity*, p. 48.
[289] Heidi Eng, 'Queer Athletes and Queering in Sports' in Caudwell, *Sport, Sexuality and Queer/Theory*, p. 52.

Michel Foucault's theorisation of silences that are a common queer experience. Foucault explains:

> Silence itself – the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers – is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies … There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourse.[290]

Foucault theorises that to be queer often means to pointedly ignore the homoerotic tensions that can permeate many social interactions, especially those with heteromasculine others. Locker rooms are certainly a gendered space that can be infused with homoerotic tensions, even when there is no queer individual present. Eng discusses the indisputable link between locker rooms and sexuality:

> Body intimacy, and the fact that athletes are naked together in locker rooms and saunas, is an aspect of sport that makes it extraordinary in relation to sexuality. The social relations in the locker room exist in an atmosphere of nakedness, close body contact, and focus on the body, often in small, hot, steamy and clammy rooms.[291]

The hypersexualized setting of the changing room that Eng described prompts many male athletes to become hypermasculine. Compensating for queerness and suggested homoeroticism through over-the-top masculinity, and a belittling of queerness and rampant

[290] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, *Vol. 1*, (New York: Vintage, 1990), p. 27.
[291] Eng, 'Queer Athletes and Queering in Sport', p. 58.

homophobia, has been evident in professional wrestling for most of its history. Eng also contends that "homophobia in the sport does not prohibit sexual activity among the athletes in the changing room".[292]

Homosensual touching in wrestling is something that Smith consistently identifies in his work, drawing upon his own experiences in wrestling locker rooms. Professional wrestling, aside from amateur wrestling, is unique as it is the sport where athletes come into the most intimate contact with one another; in almost all sports, there is a distance between competitors, and if it is a contact sport, there are rules governing where contact can be made between athletes. In professional wrestling, contact can be made anywhere between two or more athletes who are usually at least semi-naked. The locker room, then, is not the only area of professional wrestling charged with homoeroticism. Smith details experiences that may be unique to professional wrestling, as there is considerable focus on appearances and the body in the locker room.

Many athletes arguably care more about how they perform than about how they look; professional wrestlers need to do both. Smith notes several practices he witnessed in the locker room that speak to a culture of intimacy and accepted homoeroticism, including wrestlers applying cooking oil and tanning lotion to their bodies, flexing and asking other wrestlers how they look, and using methods such as rubber tension cords to "get more puffed out".[293] While Foucault and Eng have theorized of silences that permeate interactions that can be seen as queer, within professional wrestling, there is, to a certain extent, an acceptance and an embracing of the homoerotic subtext in order to put on the best show possible. Smith notes that the tensions within the locker room are heightened because most of the wrestlers had a sober demeanour that contradicts their wrestling characters. Smith identifies a disconnect

[292] Eng, 'Queer Athletes and Queering in Sport', p. 58.
[293] Smith, *Fighting for Recognition,* pp. 90-91.

between a wrestler's personality and their character's personality.[294] To have a demure wrestler engage in these homoerotic displays gives a mixed message. Professional wrestling, in Smith's opinion, has always blurred the line of masculinity by creating an environment in which male wrestlers must "confront the absurdity" of performing as more masculine men than they are.[295] Smith argues that the performed masculinity of male wrestlers is bluster, and that most are more insecure than one may think. In an industry where heteromasculinity is often the expectation, it is not hard to believe that many wrestlers may feel policed in their actions and behaviour, and, as a result, compensate.

However, some aspects of the professional wrestling locker room are like those described by Eng and Foucault. Smith notes that the men in the locker room are forced to do things that they would normally only do in private, such as plucking body hairs, creating an uncomfortable sense of closeness, made even worse by the fact that they are doing it in a small space surrounded by other men.[296] This recalls Eng's description of body intimacy in the locker room, and Foucault's insistence on the importance of discretion between men during homoerotic interactions. What is interesting is professional wrestling's unique relationship with the changing room. For professional wrestlers, their entire career is infused with homoeroticism, the whole business of professional wrestling is intertwined with homoeroticism and queerness. This might make one assume that the locker room would be less awkward for professional wrestlers. This is not the case, as professional wrestlers are used to the participation of a crowd to dissipate homoeroticism. Lambasting a crowd as "faggots" confirms to all in attendance that a professional wrestler does not abide queerness,

[294] Smith, *Fighting for Recognition*, p. 91.
[295] Smith, *Fighting for Recognition*, p. 94.
[296] Smith, *Fighting for Recognition*, p. 96.

but it is all part of the act. In a locker room, there is not acting or gimmicks, and as such, wrestlers cannot dissipate homoeroticism like they can when they are in a match.

Smith prefaces his discussions of hypermasculinity and homoeroticism by stating that all the wrestlers in the dressing rooms that he inhabited identified as heterosexual. Smith frames professional wrestling, and its relationship with masculinity, in a manner that recalls Claire Warden's account of the emergence of professional wrestling in chapter one. Smith argues that professional wrestling was an outlet for men to achieve a "version of manhood that they have lost or never successfully found in other realms of life".[297] As was discussed in chapter one, Warden argued that professional wrestling in the 1930s represented a bygone age of rugged masculinity.[298] The similarity of these two arguments about two different time periods and wrestling products, speaks to prevailing structures that underpin professional wrestling. Both authors highlight the relationship of professional wrestling and masculinity, though Warden does not sense the irony that Smith notices: though wrestlers present a stereotypical version of masculinity, especially through their reliance on violence, the amount of care that goes into a wrestler's appearance directly contradicts the stereotypes of hypermasculinity.

It is safe to say that watching a wrestling match in the 1930s and watching a wrestling match in WWE in the 2000s present two distinct viewing experiences. Indie wrestling shows, however, promoted a product that was more akin to the wrestling of the 1930s than WWE. This is partly a consequence of the simplicity of presentation, as indie wrestling shows did not have the budget or facilities to put on a spectacle. In terms of character work and wrestling style, the indies were very different from the 1930s wrestling show. Some things were similar, however. *Rage* had its own gay character, once again portrayed by a

[297] Smith, *Fighting for Recognition*, p. 97.
[298] Warden, '"Queer Music-Hall Sport"', p. 158.

heterosexual man. Smith notes that this queer character would wear hot pink tights and sport a rainbow flag.[299] This queering of professional wrestling would not have been seen in the 1930s. The indies then had a mixture of styles, blending the simplicity and ruggedness of the 1930s, with modern gimmick-work and wrestling style.

When it came to training wrestlers, Smith also highlights problems that arose due to the homoeroticism that is so entrenched in every aspect of professional wrestling. Smith notes that, during his experiences at wrestling training schools, many wrestlers had a hard time adjusting to the intimate contact that they shared with other men. Trainers, Smith says, constantly apologised to trainee wrestlers for the intimacy at play but reiterated that intimacy is fundamental to wrestling. For example, one trainer advised that "you gotta really grope him! I know it looks kinda gay, but you gotta grab him".[300] This does not stop some professional wrestlers impeding their own performance due to their discomfort with intimacy. Smith states that the most common way that wrestlers attempted to deal with anxiety about physical intimacy was through humour. In one telling exchange, Smith spoke to a wrestler about wrestling's "gay tendencies".[301] The wrestler explained:

> I think it's because we touch men and things like that. It's just a way we joke about it. "Hey, just joking". I don't know exactly how to put it, just fucking around. It's hard to explain … None of my friends outside the business can understand it. You're wrestling around with men half-naked. Grabbing them by the crotch and body and things like that, so you just kind of joke around about it. Kind of makes us feel better, I guess. I don't know … I can't explain it. It just happens. It's weird.[302]

[299] Smith, *Fighting for Recognition*, p. 100.
[300] Smith, *Fighting for Recognition*, p. 99.
[301] Smith, *Fighting for Recognition*, p. 102.
[302] Ibid.

Professional wrestlers have struggled to articulate the relationship between wrestling and homoeroticism, even though they are in the best position to describe it. The jokes often are crass. Smith notes that the mimicking of sexual acts is a common way of displaying dominance over other wrestlers, which they see as different to homosexuality.[303] When Smith spotted one wrestler doing this, the wrestler responded by saying "don't worry, in real life I am actually a total homophobe".[304] This exchange is a telling insight into how wrestlers perceived queerness and their own appearance. The overcompensation for queerness by enacting gratuitous and comedic sexual acts highlights ongoing anxiety about being labelled as queer. For wrestlers to avoid being perceived as queer, they think that they must demonstrate dominance over other men, with the weakest being labelled as gay. The other important thing to take away from this exchange is that the wrestler Smith talks to believes that it is better to be seen as homophobic than to be queer.

Professional wrestling in the late 2000s and early-to-mid 2010s actively avoided queerness. Consequently, the few queer characters within professional wrestling were presumably the only reference points of queerness for some wrestling fans, which only served to perpetuate harmful stereotypes. Chris Kanyon's experience in WWE suggested that mocking gay men was acceptable, Trish Stratus and Mickie James presented lesbianism as a show, rather than reality, implying that anyone who was queer must be suffering from a mental illness, and Santina Marella reinforced the idea that transgender athletes sought competitive advantage. With WWE, the largest wrestling company in the world, presenting harmful stereotypes, there was little hope anywhere else. The indies were a throwback to older days of professional wrestling, including its attitudes towards queerness.

[303] Smith, *Fighting for Recognition*, p. 101.
[304] Smith, *Fighting for Recognition*, p. 103.

Chapter Four: 2015-2022 (Complexity of Queerness Persists)

Introduction

Professional wrestling has always been an industry that has registered broader changes in society. Oftentimes societal shifts shape wrestling storylines. In the 2010s and 2020s, American society has become increasingly accepting of queerness in many ways, which has led to a rise in media representation for queer characters and stories. As we have seen since the 1950s, professional wrestling had never gotten to grips with presenting queerness in a positive manner. Wrestling became a hostile environment for queerness with the intention of making it more difficult for the industry to be regarded as queer itself. In most examples and case studies explored above, individuals adopting queer gimmicks were heterosexual. From 2015 onwards, a period that professional wrestling has labelled the 'New Era', queer individuals became prominent wrestlers in big companies, including WWE. Professional wrestling has seen its greatest transformation concerning queerness during the New Era. This change has come about mainly due to outside factors, rather than WWE pushing for change. When Finn Balor wanted to demonstrate his support for the LGBTQIA+ community in 2018, he faced opposition within WWE. An influx of queer wrestlers, as well as more vocal queer audience members, have, since 2015, voiced their dissatisfaction at the way queerness has been represented by the company. To rectify the situation, WWE have adopted a more tolerant attitude. WWE should not be applauded for this change, but rather it should be attributed to those individual wrestlers who pushed for it. Further, while there are now many openly queer wrestlers, such as Tegan Nox and Sonya Deville, there is still a lack of queer storylines. Professional wrestling, whilst no longer openly homophobic, still seems to struggle in representing queerness in a positive manner. For example, the Liv Morgan and Lana storyline of 2019 featured many similarities to the Mickie James/Trish Stratus feud of 2003, which showcases WWE's lack of progress. This again is an argument to be held

against WWE, who still downplay queerness, and treat it with indifference, rather than acknowledging it in a positive manner. The creation of All Elite Wrestling (AEW) in 2019 has done a lot to give a platform to queer wrestling. AEW is a new wrestling promotion that has gained a significant amount of popularity and attention in a short space of time, with many seeing it as WWE's closest rival. AEW have given a platform for many queer wrestlers to express themselves, which WWE has seemed hesitant to do. There are still issues that permeate the American professional wrestling industry, despite more visibility for queer people.

Liv Morgan and Lana

While WWE skirted queer storylines in the New Era, some storylines contained queer elements. The storyline that unfolded between Liv Morgan and Lana in 2019 and 2020 is one example. On the December 30th, 2019, episode of *Raw*, wrestler Bobby Lashley was set to marry Lana (who was already married to another wrestler, Rusev). During the objections part of the wedding ceremony, Liv Morgan objected to the union.[305] Morgan stated that "the love of my life is right there".[306] The camera focused on Lashley, making the audience believe that Morgan was addressing him, and many in the audience would be prejudiced to believe that Morgan could only be referring to the man in the ring.[307] When Lashley stated that he had never interacted with Morgan before, Morgan interrupted, saying "no, no, no, I'm not talking about Bobby … I'm talking about Lana".[308] This declaration of love between Morgan and Lana was met with cheering and 'Yes' chants from the audience, showing their approval

[305] 'Monday Night Raw', *WWE*, (December 30, 2019), accessed via *WWE Network*, [accessed on 07/06/22].
[306] Ibid.
[307] Ibid.
[308] Ibid.

at another lesbian storyline.[309] A fight then ensued between Morgan and Lana, which was also met with positivity from the fans.[310] This storyline invites comparisons to the storyline between Mickie James and Trish Stratus, in which James was so infatuated with Stratus that she became a creepy, possessive figure that Stratus pushed away. The one difference between the Lana and Liv Morgan storyline and other queer female storylines examined above is that both characters were queer. All lesbian storylines examined previously, such as the James/Stratus storyline and the Stephanie McMahon lesbianism storyline, featured heterosexual women being pursued by queer women. Lana's character is particularly interesting as this storyline sees her involved with three other people: Lashley, her husband Rusev, and Morgan. A few weeks later, Lana called Morgan a "troll" and a "stalker" and stated that "She's [Morgan] obsessed with me, I don't blame her, everyone's obsessed with me".[311] Again, comparisons with the James/Stratus storyline are inevitable, due to Lana's accusation of stalking.

The conflation of mental illness and queer love is a problematic idea that WWE has repeated in recent years. In the Lana/Morgan storyline, we are left unsure whether Morgan is a stalker or a jilted lover. Another new element was that Morgan is the babyface in this storyline, with Lana playing the heel. While in the James/Stratus storyline, James was cheered by the audience as she initiated lesbian activities with Stratus, she was still portrayed as the heel. Morgan as the babyface is a turn for WWE, as it represents a woman who is in love with another woman as a positive thing (Lana is the heel for not acknowledging her love for Morgan). Analysis of the storyline between Lana and Liv Morgan must also consider the fact that Morgan became the babyface because she was the woman who was queer, just like Mickie James. Throughout the many weeks that this storyline progressed, focus seemed to

[309] 'Monday Night Raw', (December 30, 2019).
[310] Ibid.
[311] 'Monday Night Raw', *WWE*, (January 13, 2020), accessed via *WWE Network*, [accessed on 07/06/22].

shift onto the dynamics between Lashley and Rusev, and their fighting over Lana, rather than Morgan's relationship with Lana. For example, prior to a match which would see Morgan and Rusev face Lana and Lashley, Lana only referred to Morgan as selfish and attention seeking, with no hints towards a romance.[312] In singles matches between Lana and Morgan, the commentary team also did not highlight the supposed relationship between Lana and Morgan, stating that Lana had what was coming to her due to "whatever she [Lana] did to Liv Morgan to upset this young lady".[313] The commentary team, who are the conduit by which WWE pushes the narrative of storylines, completely avoiding discussing a relationship between two women showcases how WWE has not evolved in recent years to the extent that one would hope or expect.

WWE started the storyline between Lana and Live Morgan with Morgan's declaration of her love for Lana, yet in the subsequent weeks of the storyline, this fact was forgotten, and any animosity was put down to Morgan wanting attention. While this storyline did have a promising start, with WWE hinting at showing its audience the first consensual queer relationship in its history, they quickly moved away from this. WWE's tendency to shove a queer female character into a storyline and then to ignore it ever happened is damaging. To have queer female characters suddenly abandon this facet of themselves is to deny visibility for queer women, suggesting that queer women are not consistent in their identity, and may even identify as queer for attention.

[312] 'Monday Night Raw', *WWE*, (January 20, 2020), accessed via *WWE Network*, [accessed on 07/06/22].
[313] Ibid.

Queer Wrestlers

Whilst the Liv Morgan and Lana storyline demonstrated professional wrestling's tendency to assign heterosexual people queer characters, and then forget about them, the period from 2015 onwards has seen the introduction of many queer wrestlers. Social media has allowed greater access to the personal lives of professional wrestlers, and to an extent has allowed fans to differentiate between wrestlers and the characters they portray. Social media is a key tool in connecting fans with queer wrestlers; it still is the case that queer characters receive more emphasis than queer people. For example, wrestler Tegan Nox posted a picture with her girlfriend on social media, announcing that she was bisexual.[314] However, it was never addressed on wrestling television. As Nox herself stated, "It's just always been a don't ask, don't tell situation with me, if no one asked, then I'm not going to say anything, you know?"[315] This has been the case for many wrestlers: Anthony Bowens, Jake Atlas, Sonya Deville and many other high-profile wrestlers have proudly announced their sexualities, but their queerness is rarely discussed openly. One could argue that a wrestler's sexuality no longer matters, and wrestling should certainly not make their queerness a factor in a wrestling storyline. This is a valid argument, as one should focus on a wrestler's talent, not their sexuality. However, when professional wrestling companies feature storylines that heavily focus on the relationships of heterosexual couples, then it seems that wrestling is not moving away from sexuality, but rather still ignoring queerness.[316] AEW and WWE's choice to feature heterosexual relationships, but not queer ones, is a sign that professional wrestling is

[314] See Lily Wakefield, 'Bisexual WWE superstar Tegan Nox is already changing – and saving – fans' lives just by being out and proud', *Pink News*, (August 16, 2020), accessed via https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2020/08/16/tegan-nox-bisexual-wwe-nxt-superstar-wrestling-girlfriend-sierra-st-pierre-coming-out/, [accessed on 09/06/22].

[315] Quoted in Wakefield, 'Bisexual WWE superstar Tegan Nox'.

[316] Recent storylines that focused on heterosexual relationships include Seth Rollins and Becky Lynch's rivalry against Baron Corbin and Lacy Evans in WWE, and Sammy Guevara and Tay Conti's feud against Scorpio Sky in AEW.

uncomfortable with displaying queerness in a positive light. It remains the case that American wrestling promotions have never focused on a real queer relationship.

However, the fact that queer wrestlers can openly announce their sexuality, and discuss it online, is a positive move forward for professional wrestling. When one thinks back to Chris Kanyon's difficulties and suffering, which led him to suicide, then one must regard the number of openly queer wrestlers as a positive thing. Sonya Deville is the first openly lesbian WWE wrestler but argues that her sexuality should not be a focus in Deville's character. Deville discussed the role of queerness in her character:

> It's definitely one piece of Sonya's puzzle. I don't want it to define me, and I don't want it to take away from my career and what I'm capable inside of the ring. At the end of the day, I'm an athlete. I'm a performer, I'm a former mixed martial artist. There's so many layers to Sonya, but certainly her sexuality has become a part of her layers, because I firmly believe in love and acceptance for all, but that's not only in the LGBTQIA+ community. That's gender, that's race, that's anti-bullying. And those are all things that I'm super passionate about. So it's not just love and acceptance because I'm gay. That just happens to be one facet of what I stand for, because it is close and personal to me. But I also, I represent equality for all and in every other way.[317]

Deville's position is one that many queer wrestlers adopt; whilst being open about sexuality is an important facet of their lives, many wrestlers feel that it should not define them. Where many wrestling characters have had their sexuality become their entire gimmick, it is

[317] As quoted in Chuck Carroll, "WWE Superstar Sonya Deville: 'Had To Find A Way To Be Comfortable With Who I Was'", *CBS Boston*, accessed via https://www.cbsnews.com/boston/news/wwe-superstar-sonya-deville-lesbian-lgbt-interview/, accessed on [09/06/22].

encouraging to see that contemporary queer wrestlers achieve more and are not defined by their sexuality. It is certainly true that queerness, especially for women, has become a lot more open and acceptable within American media, especially television. Kate McNicholas Smith notes that "queer representation was marked by absence, subtextual hints and/or dire warnings of the dangerous pitfalls of homosexuality, LGBTQIA+ characters are increasingly normalized into contemporary media", declaring that we are living through an age of "new queer visibility".[318] Such visibility allows queer wrestlers to demonstrate their complexity, as Deville states.

Anthony Bowens, an openly gay wrestler featured prominently in AEW, also observes that American media is experiencing a turning point in queer representation, but concurs with Deville's point that sexuality does not need to be a focus for a wrestling character. Bowens explained that:

> We're not afraid at AEW to let our performers go out there and be themselves and be successful by being present and being visible on television … my form of activism has always been to lead by example … I'm a pretty quiet person. I show up, I work really hard and I do my job as best as I can … So when I do speak up, it means so much more as opposed to constantly drilling somebody. I tend to notice that the more you try to drill [a] thing into people the more they want to push it away.[319]

Whilst both Deville and Bowens believe that sexuality is just a fact of their lives and would rather it not be a factor of their characters, it is important to highlight the differences in their

[318] Kate McNicholas Smith, *Lesbians on Television: New Queer Visibility & the Lesbian Normal*, (Bristol: Intellect, 2020), p. 1.

[319] As quoted in Ryan Butcher, 'AEW's Anthony Bowens on Coming Out, Defying Haters and Becoming Wrestling's First Gay World Champ', *Pink News*, (February 4, 2022), accessed via https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2022/02/04/anthony-bowens-aew-the-acclaimed-gay-interview/, [accessed on 09/06/22].

wrestling experiences. Deville has featured on WWE programming since 2017 and has recently been in a high-profile role as General Manager of *SmackDown* (though she has since been fired on-screen). The positioning of Deville as an authority figure within wrestling programming is an impressive achievement for any wrestler, and to have an openly queer women in this role was positive, both in terms of queerness, and feminism.

Deville has been portrayed as a serious character, while Bowens' character has been portrayed very differently. Firstly, Bowens is part of a tag team with Max Caster in AEW, the Acclaimed. To have an openly gay man in a tag team with a heterosexual man is another positive aspect of representation for queerness in professional wrestling. Social scientists such as Erik Denison have explored and demonstrated that LGBTQIA+ people are less likely to be involved in team sports due to the homophobia that can be directed at queer teammates by heterosexual members of a team.[320] When comparing tag teams mentioned in the first chapter to modern tag teams, Bowens' position as part of a tag team with a heterosexual man demonstrates some progress. Not only are the Acclaimed a tag team where one member is gay, but they also engage in comedic, sexualised activities. During the entrance for the Acclaimed, Bowens and Caster 'scissor', which sees them making scissors with their hands, joining them together, and then gyrating them together. This action is infused with sexual connotations, especially as the 'scissoring' action is stereotypically associated with lesbians. A gay man and a heterosexual man engaging in these sexually charged shenanigans with one another once again points towards the friendship that can be achieved within team sports. Bowens' exaggerated facial expressions, and the relish with which he exclaims "scissor me" is sexually coded, but wrestling fans get behind it. The Acclaimed have become an

[320] Erik Denison et al., 'The Relationship Between 'Coming Out' as Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual and Experiences of Homophobic Behaviour in Youth Team Sports', *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, Vol. 18 (3), (September, 2020), p. 766.

increasingly popular tag team, suggesting that many wrestling fans are now embracing the homoeroticism that lies at the heart of the industry.

Continuing Issues

As shown in the Lana and Liv Morgan storyline, professional wrestling's relationship with queerness remains problematic, with wrestling still struggling to depict a healthy queer relationship. Recent events have further illustrated wrestling's negativity towards queerness. For example, the *WrestleMania 34* show featured a triple threat match for the Intercontinental Championship, including wrestler Finn Balor. Balor has long been outspoken about his belief in equality and fairness, especially for the LGBTQIA+ community. At *WrestleMania 34*, Balor wanted to highlight his support for the queer community. Whilst making his entrance, Balor was joined on stage by people wearing t-shirts sporting Balor's logo in a rainbow design.[321] The wrestling commentary that accompanied Balor's entrance reinforced the message: "Finn spreading his message of inclusion, that Balor club is for everyone, flanked by the LGBTQIA+ community from New Orleans".[322] The reaction in the online wrestling community to this entrance was overwhelmingly positive, and especially among the LGBTQIA+ wrestling community; Diana Scott, a transgender wrestling journalist, stated that she used to be afraid of going to wrestling shows, but Balor's entrance at *WrestleMania 34* was "the most important moment in WWE history for me and my community".[323] For WWE to show an overt display of inclusivity towards the queer community was a big step, as they

[321] 'WrestleMania 34', *WWE*, (April 8, 2018), accessed via *WWE Network*, [accessed on 07/06/22].
[322] Ibid.
[323] Diana Scott, 'Why Finn Balor's Entrance At WrestleMania 34 Was … and Is … a Big Deal', *WrestleTalk*, (2018), accessed via https://wrestletalk.com/features/why-finn-balors-entrance-at-wrestlemania-34-was-and-is-a-big-deal/, [accessed on 07/06/22].

had never shown this sort of acceptance before. Yet even this small moment was a massive struggle. Balor, when interviewed about his entrance, explained that:

> That was something I honestly believed in for a very long time, and I had pitched, and pitched, and pitched to a lot of different departments in WWE and it had been shot down, and shot down, and shot down, and it wasn't until Stephanie [McMahon] got wind of the idea that it all started to fall in to place. It's easier for a message to come down the line of command than it is to go up the line of command.[324]

The fact that Balor had to fight for so long for a largely symbolic act illustrates the persistence of institutional homophobia within professional wrestling.

Balor's *WrestleMania* entrance is a small event in the larger scale of queerness in wrestling. To further illustrate the residual homophobia within the world of professional wrestling, one must examine those individual wrestlers who have borne the brunt of homophobia. There are now many active wrestlers who are queer; however, as noted above, many of these wrestlers neither appear nor act in a stereotypically queer fashion. This is a positive thing, as queer individuals have, for too long, been stereotyped, especially within professional wrestling. To appear as queer, which some wrestlers choose, exposes an individual to more homophobia from some fans. Sonny Kiss is a perfect example of such interactions. Kiss, an openly gay male wrestler, dresses in a highly feminine attire, including makeup and fishnet tights. For a viewer, who otherwise would not know about the personal lives of professional wrestlers, to see Kiss dressed in such a way, makes it easy to identify that Kiss as gay. This has led to Kiss receiving more homophobia than most other queer

[324] As quoted in Josh Foster, 'Finn Balor On WWE Shooting Down His Idea For WrestleMania 34 Entrance', *Still Real To Us*, (January 21, 2019), accessed via http://stillrealtous.com/finn-balor-on-wwe-shooting-down-his-idea-for-wrestlemania-34-entrance/, [accessed on 07/06/22].

wrestlers. Kiss has been featured prominently on AEW television, between 2019 and 2020. The high point in Kiss's career so far has been his feud with Cody Rhodes for the TNT Championship in 2020. During this feud, due to the higher exposure and larger feature that Kiss was receiving, Kiss also received a correspondingly larger amount of homophobic abuse. It was encouraging to see the support that Kiss received in response to the harassment that he endured. Cody Rhodes stated that "if you have a problem with a gay man receiving a title shot, you can kiss my ass".[325] Kiss himself issued a statement:

> LGBTQ+ community and allies, I completely stand with you guys in making wrestling a more positive and comfortable escape for everyone … That is something that we should all strive for. So, once again, I thank you … the people on social media who spew hatred are often feeling more pain and sadness than what they're inflicting on others. I won't speak for everyone and I will continue to respect everyone's responses that come naturally to them. We're human. We have emotions. For me, I try my best to not counter hate with hate, but rather with confidence.[326]

It is affirming to see the amount of support that Kiss received in the wake of the hatred directed towards him, especially from Rhodes, a heterosexual man with whom Kiss shared the ring. However, Kiss's treatment shows the limitations of professional wrestling, and that there are still sections of the audience who do not welcome queer individuals into wrestling, even though queer people have been in wrestling since the beginning and will be there in the future.

[325] As quoted in Steve Russell, 'AEW's Sonny Kiss Releases Statement on Homophobic Social Media Trolls', *CBR.com*, accessed via https://www.cbr.com/aew-sonny-kiss-homophobic-trolls-statement/, [accessed on 09/06/22].
[326] As quoted in Russell, 'AEW's Sonny Kiss Releases Statement on Homophobic Social Media Trolls'.

Nyla Rose

As discussed throughout this chapter, the period from 2015 has seen a surge in the representation of queer people in professional wrestling. Where once lesbians were poorly represented by 'The Lesbians' and Mickie James, queer women now have Sonya Deville; where gay men once had Billy and Chuck and Goldust reinforcing harmful stereotypes, now Anthony Bowens and Sonny Kiss represent possibilities and hope for queer men; the fact that the majority of wrestling audiences, and wrestlers themselves, are supportive of queer diversity and inclusion is a marker of progress made. Santina Marella was the closest thing to representation for transgender people within professional wrestling, but now there is Nyla Rose. Rose is the first transgender wrestler to compete within a major American professional wrestling company, and as the second Women's Champion in AEW, is also the first transgender wrestler to be champion. However, as the only transgender wrestler in a major American company, Rose also bears the brunt of the transphobia that is still prevalent within professional wrestling. Making Rose a Women's Champion was a move that ignited fierce debate amongst professional wrestling fans; some fans expressed their belief that making Rose a champion was a mistake, and that she should be "wrestling men or no one".[327] Criticisms of having transgender athletes compete in sports, specifically in their gender's division, rather than in their biological sex's division, provoked intense debate as discussed in the Santina Marella section. When these debates concern professional wrestling, however, they lose any semblance of credibility. Not only is arguing that transgender athletes should not participate in sports highly painful and alienating, it also does not make sense when

[327] As quoted in Felix Upton, "Nyla Rose Drags Fan for Saying She Should Wrestle 'Men or No One'", *Ringside News*, (February 13, 2020), accessed via https://www.ringsidenews.com/2020/02/13/nyla-rose-drags-fan-for-saying-she-should-wrestle-men-or-no-one/, [accessed on 09/06/22].

discussing professional wrestling. Wrestling is scripted, and all the action is choreographed, thus when a fan argues that trans athletes should not compete, they do not seem to understand that there is no competition at all. Wrestling is predetermined, so having a transgender wrestler fulfil that role makes no difference. Santina Marella competed at a time when trans athletes were not a national topic of discussion and debate; Nyla Rose has been caught up in a wider debate, from 2019 onwards, about the fairness of allowing trans athletes to compete in sports. Notice once again that Rose is a transgender woman, the group who have been the main target for transphobic attacks. Heather Sykes argues that the participation of transgender athletes "challenges the bi-polar gender system in sport which can allow researchers to imagine new athletic embodiments of 'person'hood that take into account gender variant and intersexed athletes".[328]

As with other queer wrestlers, it is important to analyse the presentation of the wrestling character. Rose was depicted as a 'monster' heel upon her debut, and within her tenure in AEW. Larger and stronger than all other female competitors in AEW's women's division, Rose is comparable with Chyna. Comparing Rose with Chyna underlines the progress that professional wrestling has made in many ways. Where Chyna was treated oftentimes as a male-adjacent wrestler, in that she more often fought men than women, which emphasised Chyna's perceived masculinity and minimised her femininity, Nyla Rose has showcased her talents within the women's division and has not been positioned alongside or against any men. Further, Rose's position within the women's division seems natural, as there have been many strong and larger female wrestlers in the past, such as Beth Phoenix and Awesome Kong/Karma. Rose's personal life, and her trans identity, has not featured in any

[328] Sykes, 'Queering theories of sexuality in sport studies', p. 18.

wrestling storylines, which reinforces the position of many queer wrestlers such as Sonya Deville and Anthony Bowens, that their sexuality should not define their characters.

Professional wrestling operates in a binary gender system (although in several indie wrestling promotions, there are many intergender wrestling matches). Rose challenges the rigidity of these gender barriers and even advocates for trans athletes' participation in sport. There are still challenges within professional wrestling, most notably the issue of some fans' reaction to the inclusion of queer individuals. Wrestling fans have long been used to seeing depictions of queer men and lesbians, who still face harassment, but a trans athlete is unique to this period of wrestling, and as such, fans' reactions have often been incendiary. Professional wrestling, especially the larger professional wrestling companies like WWE and AEW, will inevitably be presented with new gender challenges to a binary system, and must confront the way in which an entire industry has operated for around a century. For example, there has not yet been a nonbinary wrestler within a large wrestling company; one could imagine that an industry that has, for so long, operated with a binary gender system would not appear inviting to someone who did not fit into this system. There are sure to be those, like Rose, who, in the future, will challenge how professional wrestling operates.

Velveteen Dream

This chapter has mainly examined those wrestlers who have been open about their sexuality. In recent years, mainly the 2020s, a new school of thinking has emerged concerning the social demands to label one's sexuality. Zuziwe Khuzwayo has explored shifting attitudes towards 'coming out', arguing that the act of defining oneself

> Represents an act of constantly having to validate their sexual identity to heterosexual individuals … it represented the idea of seeking equality as

> non-heterosexual individuals. CO [coming out] is an act that is only associated with LGBTQIA+ individuals and an act that they must perform in order to gain legal rights in certain countries. For the younger participants they reject CO because that means that they always have to be fighting for equality and heterosexuals do not have to perform this act at all in order to be viewed as equal in terms of the law.[329]

In wrestling, this idea of ambiguity concerning sexuality is no better represented than by Velveteen Dream. Dream was introduced onto WWE programme *NXT* in May of 2017, and the character's queerness was instantly discernible. Professional wrestling has often borrowed characters and characteristics from other forms of media, and made them gimmicks for wrestlers; for example, Razor Ramon was inspired by *Scarface*, and Sting was styled on *The Crow*. Velveteen Dream drew inspiration from Prince. Kevin Whiteneir has explored Prince's queerness.[330] As Whiteneir explained, Prince's popularity derived from his subversion of traditional masculinity, and his embrace of feminine and queer designs and styles, such as wearing lace.[331] This is the inspiration for Velveteen Dream's character, who quickly adopted a masculine-divergent character who was never defined, but clearly queered.

Shannon Vanderstreaten has written extensively on Dream's character. Vanderstreaten explains that Dream was supposed to follow the formula perfected by Goldust: to make someone an overtly queer character was to make them a heel.[332] As

[329] Zuziwe Khuzwayo, '"Why Do I Need to Come Out if Straight People Don't Have To?" Divergent Perspectives on the Necessity of Self-Disclosure Among Bisexual Women', *Frontiers in Sociology*, Vol. 6, (October, 2021), p. 8.
[330] See Kevin Whiteneir, 'The Purple Prince: How Prince Subverted Gender Through Costume, Performance, and Eroticism', Dress, Vol. 42 (2), (2016), pp. 75-88; Kevin Whiteneir, 'Dig if you will the Picture: Prince's Subversion of Hegemonic Black Masculinity, and the Fallacy of Racial Transcendence', *The Howard Journal of Communications*, Vol. 30 (2), (March, 2019), pp. 129-143.
[331] Whiteneir, 'The Purple Prince', p. 76.
[332] Vanderstreaten, '"Blinded by the Light that is Your Velveteen Dream"', p. 125.

Vanderstreaten explains, "queer villainy is acceptable as a performance, but only when it is sanctioned by a heteronormative power".[333] As we have seen throughout the thesis, professional wrestling likes to create queer characters, and dictate how they act based on preconceived and stereotypical ideas about queerness. Dream was intended to follow the same path as Goldust towards queer villainy, but as Vanderstreaten notes, in modern professional wrestling, characters are less one-dimensional, and are allowed greater nuance and depth.[334] WWE's intention was to have Dream booed by wrestling audiences, but fans responded to Dream's queerness with interest, and Dream's actions and antics often received cheers.

The main storyline featured in Vanderstreaten analysis concerned Dream's feud in 2017 with Aleister Black, which was widely hailed as one of the best WWE storylines of that year. The feud centred around Black refusing to say Dream's name. This may seem a simple and futile basis for a feud, but it was remarkably effective in creating a compelling storyline. At the beginning of the feud, Dream declared his ambition to be the "light" of *NXT*.[335] This recalls Goldust's statement that he wanted to be a star and wanted the spotlight to himself. Comparisons between Dream and Goldust were purposefully established. Dream was not as overtly queer as Goldust, it must be said, and as such, audiences were presented with a character in the Velveteen Dream who had more nuance, rather than a figure like Goldust who was deigned to draw homophobic heat. Velveteen Dream was also a queered character but acted in a more subtle way than Goldust. Vanderstreaten identifies Dream's first interaction with Black as a moment of Dream's character being queered. When Dream is addressing Black, he leans in close to Black's face, as though going to kiss him; Black

[333] Vanderstreaten, '"Blinded by the Light that is Your Velveteen Dream"', p. 125.
[334] Vanderstreaten, '"Blinded by the Light that is Your Velveteen Dream"', p. 124.
[335] 'WWE NXT', *WWE*, (September 20, 2017), accessed via *WWE Network*, [accessed on 10/06/22].

responds by kicking the microphone out of Dream's hand.[336] Vanderstreaten argues that this is another instance of a heteromasculine character policing queer action directed towards them.[337] However, while queer characters were routinely brutalised in prior decades, Velveteen Dream is not punished too severely by Black because of his queerness. Black, after kicking Dream's microphone, proceeds to sit cross-legged on the floor, but Dream follows suit, dropping down to his knees in a sexually suggestive pose, and then crawling towards Black enticingly, before slithering out of the ring.[338] In this interaction, Dream still holds some semblance of power and authority, and is not humiliated by Black. At the start of the feud, Dream is presented as an equal to Black, and as a viable threat.

Vanderstreaten notes that the feud was compelling because it pitted two very different forms of masculinity against each other.[339] Black, a brooding, goth character, is not a bland babyface who is simply disgusted at overt queerness, but rather is a quiet, reserved character who takes issue with Dream's garishness and showmanship. This new way of having two alternative masculinities interact was a positive step for WWE. The feud built for several weeks before Black and Dream finally met in the ring at *WWE NXT Takeover: Wargames*. In one of the final episodes of *NXT* before *Wargames*, Dream ambushed Black, attacking him and tying him up in the ring ropes, then proceeding to slap Black.[340] The commentators remark, whilst Black is tied up in the ropes, that "this is the most vulnerable we have seen Aleister Black in NXT".[341] As Vanderstreaten notes, the interaction has strong connotations of BDSM and bondage.[342] Further, Dream, in the scenario of a BDSM relationship, is the dominant aggressor, despite his feminised and queered appearance. Vanderstreaten argues

[336] 'WWE NXT', *WWE*, (September 20, 2017).
[337] Vanderstreaten, '"Blinded by the Light that is Your Velveteen Dream"', p. 134.
[338] 'WWE NXT', *WWE*, (September 20, 2017).
[339] Vanderstreaten, '"Blinded by the Light that is Your Velveteen Dream"', p. 136.
[340] 'WWE NXT', *WWE*, (October 25, 2017), accessed via *WWE Network*, [accessed on 13/06/22].
[341] Ibid.
[342] Vanderstreaten, '"Blinded by the Light that is Your Velveteen Dream"', p. 137.

that Dream's role as the aggressor in this scenario removes the "queer threat" represented by Dream, as he displays a normative heteromasculine violence.[343] However, one could argue that Dream's queerness is not incompatible with becoming a threat. Dream, by tying Black up in the ropes and slapping him, does not forego queerness, as these actions carry sexual connotations. Having Dream successfully ambush Black, but keep his queer persona, is a sign that WWE was beginning to understand that queerness did not have to mean a man was weak.

As with any wrestling feud, the culmination of this storyline was a match between Black and Dream at *Wargames*. As has been discussed, the comparisons between Dream and Goldust are obvious; however, Dream also drew inspiration from other queer wrestling characters. Dream grew popular in part because of his wrestling attire. Wearing purple and lace, Dream demonstrated Prince's influence on his character. Dream also took inspiration from Rick Rude. At *NXT Takeover* events, Dream always wore a pair of tights that would be airbrushed with different designs. For his match against Black, Dream wore a pair of tights that featured both his face and Black's face, with each face positioned on Dream's rear.[344] As discussed in chapter one, Rick Rude also wore tights that were designed specifically for each match, with many of the designs becoming queered due to, for example, the placement of Rude's opponent's face on his rear or crotch. Wardrobe was a key reason why Rude was vilified, but Dream's fashion just endeared him further to the audience. Dream's fashion would become a highlight during many *NXT Takeovers*, again displaying the progress that has been made for queer characters within wrestling. Dream's wardrobe could also be controversial; one of Dream's attires saw him adopt Hulk Hogan's gimmick, dressing in yellow and red, but Dream queered it by adding earrings and feather boas to his appearance.

[343] Vanderstreaten, '"Blinded by the Light that is Your Velveteen Dream"', p. 137.
[344] 'NXT Takeover: Wargames', *WWE*, (November 18, 2017), accessed via *WWE Network*, [accessed on 13/06/22].

To queer such an iconic look, and to be resoundingly cheered for it, illustrates that modern wrestling audiences have, for a large part, accepted that a queer character does not need to be a heel.

The most important indication of progress, to some degree, in wrestling's treatment of queer characters took place at the end of the Dream/Black match. Whilst Black won the match, following the pinfall, Black grabbed a microphone, and said "enjoy infamy, Velveteen Dream".[345] Since this feud had hinged on Black's refusal to say Dream's name, robbing Dream of the attention he craved, such an ending was poetic. Both men won. Black won the match, but Dream won Black's respect and attention, which is what he wanted all along. To reward Dream for his queer actions and overall persona, rather than humiliate him, again highlights progress for queer characters in wrestling. In many ways, this feud serves as a microcosm for the history of wrestling's relationship with queerness. The storyline centred around the denial of recognition, and a distaste for the loudness and pride that is linked with queerness, that was so well embodied in Dream. Black's denial and disavowal of Dream accorded with the experiences of earlier queer wrestlers. To have Black reward Dream's tenacity by acknowledging him, is perhaps a signal that queer wrestlers can express themselves more freely.

A note must be made about Velveteen Dream. Patrick Clark, the man that adopted the gimmick of the Velveteen Dream was fired from WWE in 2020 due to allegations of sexual assault. The real-life actions of Clark will forever mar the legacy of one of the greatest queer characters that WWE, and professional wrestling, has seen. If Dream had continued, it seems a reasonable expectation that he would have been one of the greatest WWE stars of the modern era. The fact that Dream was placed so prominently and was held in such high regard

[345] 'NXT Takeover: Wargames', *WWE*, (November 18, 2017).

within professional wrestling, is a testament to the opportunities that a queer wrestling character can present in modern wrestling.

Contemporary Wrestling Audiences

The likes of Velveteen Dream, Anthony Bowens, Nyla Rose and other wrestlers showcase the shifting demographics of professional wrestlers. However, it is also important to mention the shifting attitudes and composition of contemporary wrestling audiences. Sam Ford notes that it has been the assumed for many years that audiences for professional wrestling are mainly heterosexual men.[346] Since 2015, there has been a noticeable change in wrestling audiences. The treatment of Velveteen Dream, especially the audience's refusal to treat Dream as a heel, illustrates the transformation of wrestling audience's reactions to queerness.

Valerie Quartz has written about her experience, as a queer woman, of becoming a wrestling fan in recent years. Quartz notes that she was initially hesitant to attend live wrestling shows due to wrestling's reputation as a "redneck sport".[347] Quartz states, however, that it was easier to become immersed in wrestling due to increased representation.[348] Quartz argues that social media has made wrestling a much more accessible space for queer individuals. Quartz found other bisexual wrestling fans on Twitter, who could share a commonality in the representation that mattered to them.[349] Quartz details a community within a community, a space where likeminded people could discuss wrestling through a lens of personal connection, and where everyone cared about similar issues of representation.[350]

[346] Ford, '"He's a Real Man's Man"', p. 181.
[347] Valerie Quartz, 'Wrestling and the Gay Community', in Norris, *Women Love Wrestling*, p. 72.
[348] Quartz, 'Wrestling and the Gay Community', p. 73.
[349] Ibid.
[350] Ibid.

This would not have been possible before social media, partly because social media has given wrestling fans an easy means of connecting with one another, but also because before the years of social media, professional wrestling did not give a reason for queer people to become invested. As has been made abundantly clear in this chapter, representation matters. To have an array of LGBTQIA+ wrestlers in modern professional wrestling, and to have them treated seriously, rather than as a joke or a threat, has allowed professional wrestling to expand its demographic. There are still problems within the world of professional wrestling, and in the coming years there will be new issues for professional wrestling to tackle. The progress shown in wrestling between 2015-2022 is far greater than the progress made between 1920-2015, though there are still issues to be resolved. This may not have always been the choice of wrestling companies, but the landscape of professional wrestling looks a lot brighter for queer people.

Conclusion

Despite being a constant dimension of the product since its modern inception in the 1920s, the relationship between professional wrestling and queerness has been incredibly turbulent. Since Gorgeous George – the first wrestling gimmick – queerness has played a fundamental role in the commercial success of the industry. While wrestling retains the attention of audiences through the queer characters and storylines, the frequency with which these characters and storylines are depicted as undesirable showcases a paradoxical relationship. Queerness has enhanced the wrestling product, allowing wrestlers to create outlandish gimmicks such as Goldust and making the televising of wrestling into a spectacle. Take, as an example, the emphasis upon appearance that led to Rick Rude's tights and Velveteen Dream's outfits. However, wrestling has often counterbalanced queer influences by presenting queerness as something that needs to be policed – as in the case of men's wrestling – or something that is temporary and intended for the male gaze – as in women's wrestling. This is a complicated picture; wrestling would not be the industry that it is today without the influence of queerness, and yet there is an uneasiness at this fact.

This thesis has examined the representation of queer characters and the ambiguity of queer storylines that have often received scant attention from historians. Placing queerness at the heart of professional wrestling demonstrates that it is not a disposable gimmick, but a foundational part of the entire industry. The centrality of queerness to the industry has often created homoerotic tensions. Consequentially, it seemingly became necessary to introduce queer elements which would allow audiences and wrestlers to demonstrate their heteronormativity, doing so by rejecting these facets of queerness. While some historians, such as Janine Bradbury, Sharon Mazer and R. Tyson Smith, have explored the idea that queerness was crucial to wrestling's popularity, it has largely gone unacknowledged in the historiography of professional wrestling. Queerness in the work of professional wrestling

historians has often been limited to critical analysis of Goldust and Gorgeous George. As George was the first queer character, and Goldust the most outlandish, it is understandable that these two have received the most attention. Nevertheless, this does not excuse the lack of attention to others, such as Ricki Starr. Given the popularity of professional wrestling in American society and WWE's status as a multi-billion-dollar company, it is important to ask why few historians have addressed the central role that queerness has played in this success. Some case studies, such as the Liv Morgan/Lana storyline, have not received critical analysis before. A subject like Nyla Rose is a key case study; Rose represents a new horizon for professional wrestling's relationship with queerness, as one of wrestling's first depictions of a queer person that is not gay or lesbian. Transgender and nonbinary individuals have not been widely accepted into an industry that has operated with strict binaries (except in rare instances of inter-gender wrestling).

By taking a chronological approach, this thesis has laid out how professional wrestling has come to have a more positive relationship with homosexuality and lesbianism in recent years, which, when compared to many of the negative depictions of queerness discussed above, is an improvement. By comparing and contrasting the reception of certain storylines and characters, this thesis identifies inconsistencies and contradictions in the treatment of queerness. There are variables that have often determined the reaction that a queered character or storyline would receive from audiences, such as the era in which it was introduced, or the gender of the participants. Comparing the Mickie James/Trish Stratus storyline to the Liv Morgan/Lana storyline, for example, is crucial because the storylines are similar, but occurred over a decade apart. These comparisons show that female, lesbian-driven storylines were marketed towards a male, heteronormative market, with the optics of attractive women deemed more important than storylines with depth. While male-dominated queer storylines often fared little better than the raunchy lesbian storylines, there are certain

exceptions to suggest that queer men's wrestling was valued more highly. A comparison of the Liv Morgan/Lana and the Dream/Black storylines, which happened only two years apart, highlights a standard, including time and attention, for men's wrestling that was not afforded to women's wrestling. The Dream/Black storyline had depth and plotting, whereas the Morgan/Lana storyline was forgotten about a few months after it had happened. Such comparisons show how wrestling can evolve, in the case of the Dream/Black storyline, but also that some attitudes, such as lesbianism being seen as a phase, are so ingrained that they recur across different time periods.

Primary sources have been integral in the analysis of these more recent storylines and earlier case studies. Where the historiography has failed to cover the most recent examples of queerness in wrestling, a variety of sources have allowed me to examine the relationship between wrestling and queerness throughout the thesis. Wrestling shows are the core of any wrestling analysis. The entire wrestling industry is dependent upon the reaction and involvement of the audience. As such, there is no more important source than watching and hearing audiences' reactions to queer characters and storylines. Audience reactions underscore the increased acceptance and support of queer elements in wrestling. The support for Velveteen Dream, for example, is a prime example of wrestling audiences no longer treating a queered wrestler as an instant heel. However, it must also be acknowledged that wrestling audiences demonstrated support towards Ricki Starr in the 1950s, illustrating that acceptance of queered elements in wrestling is not purely a modern trend. The personal accounts of wrestlers and industry figures utilised in this thesis iluminate how queerness was, and continues to be, viewed by those who either created or enacted queered gimmicks and storylines. Jim Ross and Dustin Runnels' accounts of the creation of the Goldust character, for example, highlight a lack of knowledge, care or respect, and instead emphasises the intention to create a spectacle and drive engagement. Recent interviews and accounts of

wrestlers also highlight the problems that persist in wrestling's relationship with queerness. Finn Balor's discussion of the effort it took to have his support of the LGBTQIA+ community showcased at *WrestleMania 34*, and Sonny Kiss's account of the homophobia he has faced, demonstrate why it is wrong to say that wrestling and queerness now have a positive relationship. Nevertheless, Anthony Bowens and Sonya Deville's statements that they do not believe that their wrestling characters should be defined by their queer sexualities is a sign of progress, signalling that gratuitous sexuality no longer has a place in wrestling. Close analysis of primary sources allows arguments to be fleshed out and supported when the historiography surrounding these case studies, especially recent characters and storylines, is lacking.

Certain works in the historiography have informed my understanding of how queerness fits into the world of professional wrestling. Janine Bradbury's analysis of the Goldust character is an invaluable assessment of the implications and effects of the most high-profile queered character in wrestling history. Further, Bradbury's analysis of Marlena's role alongside Goldust, a pairing that both subverted and reinforced conventional gender roles, highlights the intricacies and complexities at work.[351] R. Tyson Smith's account of tensions in the Indie wrestling scene due to homoerotic anxieties encapsulates my central argument: queerness is the key to professional wrestling's success, and yet it often generates unease and discomfort.[352] However, it is still the case that the historiography surrounding this subject is underdeveloped. Bradbury's analysis of Goldust and Vanderstreaten's study of the Velveteen Dream character are crucial, but they are also isolated. By only studying one character, their works are uninformed by the long history of queerness in wrestling, and cannot speak to the influences upon these characters. By examining the history of queerness

[351] Bradbury, 'Grappling and Ga(y)zing', p. 110.
[352] Smith, *Fighting for Recognition*, p. 91.

in wrestling since the 1920s, this thesis has been able to chart the complexities of the relationship between queerness and wrestling, and hence provided context to the often-surprising success of queer characters. Indeed, in the context of the thesis, the popularity of characters such as Velveteen Dream can be reassessed as part of a tradition in which many other queer acts had been popular before.

Another issue that pervades the historiography of this topic is the willingness to avoid the discussion of queerness altogether. For example, although Rickard and Soulliere inspect the public's endorsement of wrestling during the 1930s because of physical health and modelling masculinity, they fail to acknowledge the role of sexuality and homoeroticism in its popularity. [353] Even Mazer's otherwise brilliant analysis of the spectacle of wrestling sometimes skips over the importance of queerness, such as the visual display of sexualised movement between two people of the same sex as seen in wrestling moves.[354] This thesis has not covered every aspect of queerness in wrestling, but it has highlighted how queerness is embedded in the industry, and how integral it has been to wrestling's success. This thesis has avoided the trend that so many historians seem to share; it has focused exclusively on queerness rather than treating it as a tangential factor.

Despite the fluctuation in treatment that the LGBTQIA+ community has received over the years, one could argue that the relationship between wrestling and queerness is trending progressively. When comparing the 2020s to the earlier decades of the 1930s into the 1980s, wrestling has come far. The argument of this thesis, which contradicts historians such as Rickard and Soulliere, is that queerness has been a constant influence on wrestling which has inspired the industry's success. One cannot ignore the blatant homoerotic undertones that are ever-present in wrestling, despite Rickard's and Soulliere's claims

[353] Rickard, '"The Spectacle of Excess"', p. 135; Soulliere, 'Wrestling with Masculinity', p. 9.
[354] Mazer, *Professional Wrestling*, p. 112.

otherwise. The denial of queerness's influence on the industry was the norm until the 1980s, with queerness being downplayed and queered personas, such as 'nature boys', being vilified. However, without such 'nature boys' as Buddy Rogers and Ric Flair, wrestling would have missed out on some of its most famous characters, and many modern wrestlers, who claim such characters as Ric Flair as influences, may not have found success.[355] Without the serialised format and production of wrestling shows, more akin to soap operas than sports broadcasts, wrestling would struggle to retain audience attention. Without the outlandish wardrobes, intimate choreography of wrestling moves, focus on spectacle and so many other things that wrestling has drawn from queered arenas, wrestling would look very different.

Much of this argument is more applicable to men's wrestling, which, as we have seen, has had its own trajectory in terms of its relationship with queerness. Women's wrestling, since the 1990s, featured queerness to titillate and appeal to heteronormative male viewers, adding another caveat that further underlines the tensions that animate wrestling's representation of queerness. Where men's wrestling was influenced by queerness, with the camera often deploying a queered lens, women's wrestling was seen through the lens of heteronormativity, creating spectacles of overt sexuality. In women's wrestling, lesbianism, which often ensured audience support, was arguably used to create a positive image of certain characters. By contrast, queerness in individual men's wrestling was used to create heels, goading audience members to react negatively to certain characters and storylines, a method by which homoerotic tensions could be dispelled. Such comparisons between men's and women's wrestling highlight the difficulty of capturing the relationship between wrestling and queerness, as each form of queerness, homosexuality, lesbianism, transgenderism, and so

[355] *Bleacher Report* have created a list of wrestlers who were inspired by Flair; see David Levin, 'WWE/TNA: Wrestlers Who Would Not Be Stars If Not For Ric Flair', *Bleacher Report*, (July 11, 2011), accessed via https://bleacherreport.com/articles/766527-wwetna-wrestlers-who-would-not-be-stars-if-not-for-ric-flair [accessed on 09/07/2023].

on has its own history. It is only in recent years, certainly within the last five years, that wrestlers' sexualities have been an open topic of conversation rather than something many (including Chris Kanyon) felt they had to hide. However, queerness has not been integrated fully into the industry in a manner comparable to heterosexuality. Queer couples are not featured in wrestling storylines, and a queer wrestler has not won a world championship in an American wrestling promotion, so barriers remain.

It is not just those who work for wrestling companies that have influenced the relationship between wrestling and queerness. Audiences play a significant role in the reception of queer characters and storylines. The introduction of queer storylines and characters are predicated on the audience responding in a certain way: when a male queer character was introduced, it was expected that he would be booed. When a female queer storyline was played out, it was expected that it would be cheered. This is not a recipe that has always worked. Ricki Starr and Velveteen Dream – the former debuting in 1953 and the latter debuting in 2017 – both experienced a groundswell of support from wrestling audiences that went against expectations.[356] Furthermore, while audiences have often responded negatively to queer characters, such reactions should not simply be seen as an accurate indication of audience members' feelings towards the role of queerness in wrestling. As Thomas Hackett has explained, many audience members feel that it is their role to play along, to boo the heels and cheer the faces, and that what they might say or do does not necessarily correspond to their own personal beliefs, much like the wrestlers themselves. Deception and acting are at the heart of this industry. After all, this is an industry in which a heterosexual man played Goldust for more than 30 years.

[356] 'WWE NXT', *WWE*, (May 3, 2017), accessed via *WWE Network* [accessed on 08/07/2023].

In 2023, Dustin Runnels, who played Goldust, is now in semi-retirement. While Runnels appears in the occasional match, now in AEW, he has taken on more of a backstage role, including coaching wrestlers and producing segments of wrestling television.[357] Runnels has also retired the Goldust gimmick, instead wrestling under his own name. Goldust's career trajectory – with its shifts from exaggerated sexuality and outlandish storylines in the 1990s towards a toned down, yet popular, character in the 2000s and 2010s – parallels the reception of queerness across the history of professional wrestling. While queerness is less overt in recent wrestling television, its influence on the industry (like that of Goldust) can still be felt. Goldust was created in the 1990s when homophobia was rampant in wrestling, and queered characters were introduced with the intention of being policed and humiliated. To dispel the homoerotic tensions that built up within wrestling, the industry tried, often in vain, to distance itself from the fact that professional wrestling was rooted in queerness. Overall, since the 1920s wrestling has been unable to get to grips with the inherent homoeroticism that pervades its arenas, but this has not stopped queer elements from succeeding. Ricki Starr's popularity, Goldust's longevity and Chyna's infamy are all examples of queered characters that were able to succeed in a business, and a period, that was overtly homophobic. Some will point to the success of modern queer wrestlers, who no longer need to incorporate their sexuality into their gimmicks, as a sign of progress. Just because queerness is not openly mocked, however, does not mean that it is at a point of parity with heterosexuality. Queer characters have constantly had to struggle to succeed, with male characters often being depicted as jokes, such as Billy and Chuck, or dangerous and deranged, in the case of Goldust. Women have struggled against the restrictions of queered performativity, forced into lesbian-styled storylines that objectify them. Yet queerness has also ensured the success of

[357] Shubhajit Deb, 'Dustin Rhodes on his run in AEW vs WWE', *Sportskeeda*, (May 10, 2022), accessed via https://www.sportskeeda.com/aew/news-dustin-rhodes-explains-time-aew-feels-completely-different-time-wwe, [accessed on 09/07/2023].

characters. The Mickie James/Trish Stratus match was given more time than usual on the *WrestleMania 22* show and is regarded as one of the best women's matches in *WrestleMania* history. Goldust, and even to some extent Chris Kanyon, were able to inspire and train younger generations of wrestlers. Queerness has not had a purely positive nor negative relationship with professional wrestling, but it has been incredibly turbulent. Through all this upheaval, however, queerness has always endured.

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