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Lifestyle TV for Men: the Nostalgic Fantasy of History Channel's Blue-Collar Infotainment

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LIFESTYLE TV FOR MEN: THE NOSTLAGIC FANTASY OF
HISTORY CHANNEL'S BLUE-COLLAR INFOTAINMENT

by

Stephanie Ann Menders

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ABSTRACT

LIFESTYLE TV FOR MEN: THE NOSTALGIC FANTASY OF
HISTORY CHANNEL'S BLUE-COLLAR INFOTAINMENT

by

Stephanie Ann Menders

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2020
Under the Supervision of Professor Elana Levine

This work considers the commercial and ideological implications of History's branding shift as exemplified by the debut of its reality programming slate in 2007. History's blue-collar infotainment, which focuses on men in rugged and traditional forms of work, represents a masculinized and conservative response to the feminized and often socially liberal-minded lifestyle-programming trend. The social, industrial, and cultural context within which these texts exist, particularly the 2008 recession and the growing emphasis on workplace and TV diversity, are foundational to History's rejuvenated brand. Themes from *Ice Road Truckers*, *Ax Men*, *Swamp People*, *Pawn Stars*, *American Restoration*, *American Pickers*, and *Forged in Fire* hail a nostalgic male viewer and suggest the fantasy of an authentically masculine lifestyle. Nostalgic narrative frames, homogenous casting, and the representation of labor illuminate the forms of race, gender, and bodily ability that are valorized within these series.

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To

My loving and hard-working parents,

My thoughtful friends,

And my wonderful colleagues and professors,

For patiently sharing your guidance, support, and knowledge with me.

Thank you.

Chapter 1

Introduction: Particularizing History Channel as a Masculinized

Subcultural Forum

History Channel has aired reality programs about truckers, urban miners, lumberjacks, alligator hunters, mechanics, sharpshooters, taxidermists, vintage car restorers, blacksmiths, and butchers, to name a few. Consequently, the channel has become known for its buffet of macho reality content depicting men in rugged and traditional forms of work. History's brand has substantially shifted since the channel's founding in 1995 when it primarily aired war documentaries and reenactments, earning a reputation at the time as "The World War II Channel." History began producing reality TV fairly late, after many others, with the premiere of *Ice Road Truckers* in 2007, but this delay did not diminish the level of commercial success that the channel would see as a result of this trend. History's onset of reality programming boosted the channel's ratings amongst men ages 18-49, a demographic coveted by advertisers.¹ This move is credited as pushing the channel into the number two spot as a cable destination for men, second only to ESPN.² This switch in programming occurred just at the onset of the 2008 recession, which disproportionately impacted jobs held by men and fueled an economic and social crisis with which America continues to struggle to this day.³ It is significant, then, that History,

¹ Andrew Hampp, "Top Producers, Brands Wake Up to History," *Advertising Age*, May 18, 2009.

² Brian Stelter, "Channel's Swift Rise Attracts Ads and Envy," *The New York Times*, December 19, 2011.

³ Erica Meade, "Men Hit Harder during the Recession, but are Recovering Jobs Faster than Women," *Urban Institute*, May 13, 2015.

with its predominantly male viewership, first began offering content with fantastical narratives of men in traditional work modes at this particular time.

History's contemporary brand engages with issues and conversations similar to those being discussed in the political and popular culture arena more broadly. The anxieties and discourses that its series address about American industrialism, diversity, and generational divides are particularly similar to those that thrived during Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign.⁴ History's repeated attention to these themes and very traditional representations of gender may similarly be considered a conservative response to popular feminist discourses such as the attention to "toxic masculinity" in the late 2010s by major publications such as *Esquire* and *The Atlantic*, and by the men's grooming company Gillette.⁵ In part, the popular debate on toxic masculinity is so divisive because of its perceived attack on traditional expressions of masculinity associated with older generations of American men. Like much of conservative media, History represents a cultural response to such anxieties.

In light of the alignment between these industrial, socioeconomic, political, and cultural trends, I explore how the channel's recent emphasis on work valorizes particular gendered expressions and how representing such forms of work as highly skilled and

⁴ Jim Tankersley, "How Trump Won: The Revenge of Working-Class Whites," *The Washington Post*, April 29, 2019.

⁵ Dave Holmes, Luke O'Neil, & John Hendrickson, "The Rules of Being a Man are Bullshit," *Esquire*, August 22, 2017; Peggy Orenstein, "The Miseducation of the American Boy," *The Atlantic*, December 20, 2019; Gillette, "We Believe: The Best Men Can Be | Gillette (Short Film)," YouTube video, 1:45, January 13, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=koPmuEy P3a0>.

dangerous creates the fantasy of an authentically masculine lifestyle.⁶ A detailed textual and discourse analysis of the themes and narrative conventions that reoccur across History's reality series reveals the channel as a masculinized and conservative response to the lifestyle TV trend. An analysis of History's *Ax Men* (2008 - present), *Swamp People* (2010 - present), *American Restoration* (2010 - 2016), and *Forged in Fire* (2015 - present) exemplifies the significance of the physically laboring male body in this programming. I argue that the focus on the male body's ability to withstand injury and impart violence glorifies masculine power and contributes to the channel's idealization of particular renditions of white masculinity. I also explore how History series like *Ice Road Truckers* (2007 - present), *Pawn Stars* (2009 - present), *American Pickers* (2010 - present), *American Restoration*, and *Curse of Oak Island* (2014 - present) masculinize labor in a contemporary economy and consumer culture that is constructed as feminizing. These series reconcile the traditional image of the American workingman in a feminizing culture through appeals to masculinized knowledge, entrepreneurialism, and a blending of hard and soft skills.

History's reliance on WWII, in particular, set up the cable channel to age-out of its brand. The ensuing Korean, Vietnam, Gulf, and Iraq wars lack the same popular recognition of moral purpose as WWII does for American viewers, meaning History would have eventually bottomed out on viable source materials on which it could base its war documentaries. As its audience and production opportunities dwindled, History could no longer continue the same narrative of American exceptionalism as tied to righteous war. History's recent wave of reality series represents the effort to maintain the channel's

⁶ R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2005); Augie Fleras & Shane Michael Dixon, "Cutting, Driving, Digging, and Harvesting: Re-Masculinizing the Working-Class Heroic," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 36, no. 4 (2011.)

longstanding educational and patriotic brand associations while introducing a new focus on working-class labor and blue-collar masculinity. Throughout my argument, I refer to this trend of History's programming as "blue-collar infotainment," in which the blue-collar image becomes a new locus for the projection of American exceptionalism. These series are distinct from History's other contemporary infotainment programs, like *Modern Marvels*, *Ancient Aliens*, and *Life After People*, because of their reality format and their explicit focus on blue-collar traditions of work. Rather than from expert commentary or archival research, the entertainment of these series derives from the narratives that arise out of the workdays of real-life workers and the bonds that form among them. My analysis considers how History's blue-collar infotainment partakes in discourses surrounding the perceived crisis in masculinity and unravels the ideological work these series are doing to particularize, recuperate, and celebrate white masculinity and American identity. An analysis of industrial discourses reinforces that History uses such themes and narrative conventions with the ultimate goal of appealing to a commercially viable niche male audience.

In addition to exploring constructions of masculinity in and around History's blue-collar infotainment, my research identifies and seeks to fill a gap in the existing literature in the study of masculinities and of media by illuminating how the cable channel's shift toward reality programming offers a masculinized response to the wide array of feminized and socially-liberal lifestyle programming occurring on networks like Bravo, E!, The Food Network, HGTV, TLC, and Lifetime since the mid-2000s. Due to its frequent emphasis on consumer culture, domestic topics, fashion, and advice, lifestyle TV is a subgenre of programming that is often feminized and, therefore, disparaged. However, its cheap

production costs and commercial appeal with networks and media buyers alike has made it perhaps the most economically viable TV formula to date. This research explores how History's blue-collar infotainment represents modern white masculinity and work, how this ultimately fits within the contemporary lifestyle TV trend, and how such themes are commercially driven. My attention to these themes and the channel's lifestyle appeal reveals how History functions as a site in which white masculinity as a cultural signal is produced, circulated, enacted, and commercialized.⁷

Literature Review

Although some scholarship on the mediated representations of blue-collar masculinity exists, none has discussed such programming in terms of its lifestyle appeal. The following literature—which is organized into the categories of social construction of white masculinity, labor and working-class masculinity on TV, and lifestyle and reality programming—addresses the themes discussed throughout my ensuing argument. This literature forms the foundation for understanding masculinity as a hegemonic social construct and for conceptualizing labor as a critical dimension of the maintenance of patriarchal power. Literature also identifies themes that have become trademarks of contemporary lifestyle media and the ideological work such branded content often performs.

The Social Construction of White Masculinity

Historically, gender has been understood through a representation of binaries; the differences between masculine and feminine were long conceptualized as biologically inherent opposites. However, gender scholars have theorized in more recent decades that

⁷ Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for "Blackness"* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995.)

society and culture formulate gender roles that are then dictated as ideal or appropriate for individuals of a particular sex. In her book *Masculinities*, R.W. Connell discusses how the agencies of socialization—family, school, and mass media—transmit gendered expectations as social facts. Connell is largely known for developing the framework of hegemonic masculinity, which builds upon Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony to articulate that masculinities are constantly adapting to social, cultural, and economic changes in an effort to maintain dominance or power. Connell specifically names the workplace as a site of gender configuration, revealing how a capitalist economy and a gendered division of labor ultimately imbue patriarchal power relations.⁸

Connell argues that emphasizing manual labor as masculine has functioned as a means for asserting economic superiority over women, in that men's physical, bodily abilities *are* their economic asset.⁹ In contrast, the classification of sedentary and consumer labor as "women's work" denigrates women's labor and justifies the devaluing of their compensation.¹⁰ Much of how work is compensated, therefore, is based on the value of the skill associated with the workers performing it. Relatedly, labor studies scholar Steven Maynard asserts that skill is not an "objective economic fact" but is socially constructed and highly gendered.¹¹ Maynard argues that skill is an "ideological category imposed on certain types of work by values of the sex and power of the workers who perform it."¹² This division of labor is rooted in a traditional understanding of bodily capabilities—that men are active and strong and women are passive and weak. Since labor also organizes

⁸ Connell, 74.

⁹ Ibid, 55.

¹⁰ Ibid, 56.

¹¹ Steven Maynard, "Rough Work and Rugged Men: The Social Construction of Masculinity in Working-Class History," *Labour/Le Travail* 23 (1989.)

¹² Ibid, 162.

economic, medical, and social structures, the workplace is a critical site for the maintenance of patriarchal structures.

However, this notion of work as a site of masculine dominance is troubled when we consider that capitalist economies must constantly adapt. The goods and services that are valued change over time because of fluctuations in populations, availability of resources, advancements in medicine or technology, and countless other factors. In his 1973 book *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting*, Daniel Bell argues that the shift from a goods-based economy that values production and "raw muscle" to a service-based economy that values knowledge and flexible skills contributed to an upheaval in American class structures.¹³ In the process of economic change, he argues, the process of differentiation, or how we determine our social status, also changes. Shifting conceptualizations of labor and shifting work values can uproot men's roles in society, forcing an adaptation of hegemonic conceptualizations of masculinity.¹⁴ Although Bell is writing in the 1970s, the anxieties that he discusses surrounding the shift from physical to informational or service labor are valuable to this discussion as they display how such changes are inherently associated with anxieties about shifting gender roles and power dynamics. This examination of changing labor markets is useful in understanding how hegemony must adapt to social pressures and economic changes, and in understanding how a TV channel like History can emerge as one of many sites where that work can be done.¹⁵

¹³ Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society; A Venture in Social Forecasting*. (New York: Basic Books, 1973.)

¹⁴ Raymond Williams, "Traditions, Institutions, and Formations," in *Marxism and Literature*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.)

¹⁵ Ibid.

Darren Nixon's 2009 essay summarizes working-class men's resistant attitudes toward entry-level service work, which largely reinforces and updates Bell's previous projections while taking into account the forms of labor more common to the modern economy.¹⁶ Participating interviewees overwhelmingly expressed averseness toward displaying or learning skills valued in a service economy (like emotional labor, customer service, or hospitality) because they considered them antithetical to "the working-class masculine habitus," which, as they explained, included elements of physicality and competition that were linked with a feeling of pride.¹⁷ Nixon concludes that men were more apt to partake in "masculine service niches" such as prison officers, warehouse/distribution workers, security guards, or taxi/cab drivers, each of which are positions that include little interactivity with customers and little emotional labor.¹⁸ Nixon's research clarifies that the concepts Bell discussed decades ago—that the shift to a new economy uprooted working-class men's perceived position—continue to be relevant today. Even as industrial jobs disappear, men continue to gravitate toward work that holds more control, authority, physicality, or power.¹⁹ Just as hegemony is challenged, it must adapt. My research elaborates on these concepts by applying them to contemporary television narratives that primarily address related anxieties and values of male viewers.

The transition away from industrial, American-based production is often cited in scholarship as a primary determinant in creating what has been called a "crisis in masculinity," the theorization that manhood is in a state of turmoil because of

¹⁶ Darren Nixon, "'I Can't Put a Smiley Face On': Working Class Masculinity, Emotional Labour, and Service Work in the 'New Economy,'" *Gender, Work, and Organization* 16, no. 3, (2009.)

¹⁷ Ibid, 303.

¹⁸ Ibid, 307.

¹⁹ Ibid, 318.

contemporary conflicts in identity.²⁰ Sarah Banet-Weiser identifies the discourses that evolve from the assumed crisis of masculinity as "popular misogyny," an "ongoing recuperative project" that revolves around simultaneous axes of entitlement, capacity, and injury.²¹ Popular misogyny, which can occur in legal, political, cultural, and interpersonal realms, amongst others, assumes that advancements in feminism have injured the status of men, which must be recuperated. This projection of injury may also be understood as establishing an avenue through which to maintain or reassert patriarchal power.

In his book *Affirmative Reaction: New Formations of White Masculinity*, Hamilton Carroll cites the nation's increasing multiculturalism, identity politics, and the globalization of labor and economics as serious forces that have pressured new formations of patriarchal white masculinity.²² These changes have resulted in a phenomenon known as "white injury," which Carroll describes as a way of "protesting the erosions of white men's historical advantage while denying that advantage ever existed."²³ Though traditional forms of masculine expression exclude emotion, Carroll argues that nostalgia and a longing for past conceptualizations of work and gender are constructed as appropriate spaces for men's emotion since they idealize patriarchal power in any of its renditions.²⁴ Nostalgia positions previous iterations of masculine power as an appropriate outlet for, or as a

²⁰ Roger Horrocks, *Masculinity in Crisis*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994); Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (New York: W. Morrow and Co., 1999); Rebecca Feasey, *Masculinity and Popular Television* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008); Michael Albrecht, *Masculinity in Contemporary Quality TV* (London: Routledge, 2015.)

²¹ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.)

²² Hamilton Carroll, *Affirmative Reaction: New Formations of White Masculinity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011.)

²³ *Ibid*, 5.

²⁴ Daniel Marcus, *Happy Days and Wonder Years: The Fifties and the Sixties in Contemporary Cultural Politics* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004.)

plausible solution to, contemporary anxieties.²⁵ Nostalgic figures and media that glorify blue-collar work—such as History's blue-collar infotainment and its casts—provide outlets for the appropriate celebration of whiteness and the shunning of cultural diversity. This maintains the centrality of whiteness in an age that celebrates diversity and in which the general presence of difference holds a sense of cultural allure.²⁶ My research explores the distinct formations of white masculinity that are communicated as ideal within History's blue-collar infotainment.

Labor & Working-Class Masculinity on Screen

History's emphasis on labor, especially in its more physical forms, is a critical contribution to how white masculinity and a sense of American identity are being constructed in its blue-collar infotainment. The physical work represented in these series inherently emphasizes the masculine body—frequently testing its capabilities and its limits. This is similar to the hypermuscular heroes made popular in 1980s action films as outlined in Susan Jeffords' book *Hard Bodies: Masculinity in the Reagan Era*.²⁷ Action heroes' hypermuscular bodies and their ability to withstand bullet wounds or knife slashes became a mode of measuring American manliness.²⁸ This focus on physical ability, especially as it manifested in films through themes of injury and recovery, can also be applied to the laboring male body as it is represented on History Channel. Even if cast members of History's blue-collar infotainment rarely display any muscular physique, my

²⁵ Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006.)

²⁶ Ibid, 10.

²⁷ Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994.)

²⁸ Ibid, 50.

research reveals how their bodies are nonetheless masculinized and their identities Americanized through their physical labor and ability to withstand injury.

As the television industry grows increasingly competitive, how might History's blue-collar infotainment prove economically appealing? In her book *Cable Guys: TV and Masculinities in the 21st Century*, Amanda Lotz argues that men and their social roles have become increasingly complicated in contemporary TV and that, due in part to the ever-expanding and diversifying televisual landscape, intricate and distinct forms of masculinity have become a means for individual series or networks to establish a competitive brand.²⁹ Lotz argues that TV does not communicate a uniform expression of masculinity as ideal or hegemonic, but rather that distinct forms of masculinity are made hegemonic within a series' or network's own narrative universe. She states that this is largely driven out of modern TV companies' desire to achieve a competitive, niche appeal.³⁰ Therefore, History's nostalgic framing of traditional masculinities can be understood as a conservative response to the more progressive or diverse representations that have become common in modern lifestyle TV.

History's reality series are so distinct, in part, because of their uniform blue-collar branding. Scholars argue that such mediated images of the working-class man have fluctuated in both tone and approach through the years. In their work, Augie Fleras and Shane Michael Dixon argue that televisual representations have historically depicted this demographic as "knuckle dragging Neanderthals."³¹ As blue-collar industries waned, the scholars argue media depictions of working-class men became more commonplace and

²⁹ Amanda Lotz, *Cable Guys: TV and Masculinities in the 21st Century* (New York City: NYU Press, 2014.)

³⁰ Ibid, 38.

³¹ Fleras & Dixon, 581.

turned toward a more heroic tone. The scholars argue that such representations "reproduce a white gender order . . . that reaffirms aspects of hegemonic masculinity and uncritically whitewashes reality."³² Fleras and Dixon's argument clarifies that the valorizing tone of History's blue-collar representations is born from an effort to recuperate the image of the white male worker.

Many of History's blue-collar infotainment series are framed around an American sense of identity. Lisa Kirby asserts that Discovery Channel's reality TV series *Deadliest Catch*—which is similar in form and style to History's blue-collar infotainment—emphasizes Americanness to celebrate working-class masculinity.³³ Formal and narrative conventions liken the crab fishermen to rock stars or cowboys, each of which evoke distinctly American and hypermasculine associations. Kirby also emphasizes the physical toll that crab-fishing has on the workers in *Deadliest Catch*, and argues that the realistic depiction of the dangers of working-class labor likely accounts for a heroic characterization of participants. Similarly, Peter Thompson discusses how Spike's 2011 reality series *Coal* "accentuates the macho attributes" of workers by pitting men and their bodies in a battle against the environment and forces of nature.³⁴ These programs interweave narratives of hard work, the importance of family, and overcoming adversity to present stories that align with the American Dream ideal and the myth of the everyday hero. As Carroll asserts, such narratives present a venue for the recuperation and celebration of the injured white male

³² Ibid, 593.

³³ Lisa A. Kirby, "Cowboys of the High Seas: Representations of Working-Class Masculinity on *Deadliest Catch*," *Journal of Popular Culture* 46, no. 1 (2013.)

³⁴ Peter Thompson, "'Ready to Do Battle with the Mountain': Masculinity, Nature, and Sacrifice in Spike TV's *Coal*," *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 25, no. 1 (2018.)

image. Further, these representations are wrapped up in a sense of specifically American masculine identity.

The existing literature largely disregards the sociocultural milieu in which these series have appeared. My research will pay greater attention to how and why these programs matter by focusing on the broader discourses, anxieties, and issues they are likely addressing. I also aim to understand these series as a form of lifestyle programming that fits particular industrial and economic goals while contributing to certain constructions of masculinity. My claim that History's blue-collar infotainment is a masculinized response to lifestyle television is unprecedented in the existing literature.

Reality TV & Lifestyle Branding

According to reality television scholars Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette, the massive popularity of reality TV stems from the promise of an unmediated, voyeuristic, and playful look at "entertaining real . . . 'authentic' personalities, situations, and narratives."³⁵ The format is akin to documentary media in this distinction, though much of the audience's engagement with reality TV programs relies on their awareness that the content is somewhat "constructed and contains 'fictional' elements."³⁶ Ouellette and Murray state that the "space" between fact and fiction that these programs occupy becomes a site of negotiation for the viewer, writing that "what results is an unstable text that encourages viewers to test out their own notions of the real, the ordinary, and the intimate against the representation before them," hinging on the "culturally and politically complex notions of

³⁵ Susan Murray & Laurie Ouellette. "Introduction," in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, eds. Susan Murray & Laurie Ouellette (New York: New York University Press, 2004.)

³⁶ John Corner, "Performing the Real: Documentary Diversions," *Television & New Media* 3 (2002); Murray & Ouellette, 5.

what is real and what is not."³⁷ This establishes History's blue-collar infotainment as a site in which viewers may work through their own understandings of white masculinity, American identity, class, labor, and other cultural anxieties, or through which these terms are given particular meanings.

Murray and Ouellette also state that one of the most "compelling" aspects of reality TV is the degree to which it has diversified media representation through its use of real people or non-actors.³⁸ Ensemble casts or competition formats often include large numbers of players on screen, which raises the stakes on including people of different identities. However, Murray and Ouellette's book was published in 2004, several years before the onset of History's blue-collar infotainment. History's casting of primarily white and heterosexual men indicates the channel's conservative response to the large number of diversely casted reality programs available at the time of its development.

Relatedly, the use of non-actors suggests why the reality trend grew exponentially in the millennium. Reality TV's cheap production, low labor costs, and ad-friendly content made it an economically sound strategy for networks and cable channels. Due to its emphasis on consumer culture and aspiration, lifestyle TV quickly emerged as one of the form's more financially advantageous sub-genres. TV scholar Maureen Ryan discusses how the general concept of "lifestyle" has been defined throughout recent history as a means for organizing the self and the structure of one's everyday life.³⁹ The term has often been used to differentiate the values and practices of particular social groups, as exemplified through the labeling of the hippie movement in the 1960s or the identification of yuppie culture in

³⁷ Murray & Ouellette, 6.

³⁸ Ibid, 8.

³⁹ Maureen Ryan, "Life-Style: The History of an Idea" in *Lifestyle Media in American Culture: Gender, Class, and the Politics of Ordinariness* (New York: Routledge, 2018.)

the 1980s. Ryan points to the commercial appeal this holds. She asserts that lifestyle is used to frame differences in a way that organizes people into social groups marketers may then target more particularly and effectively. She also discusses the forward-thinking nature of lifestyle media, asserting that it often constitutes the self as malleable and aspiring. Ouellette similarly discusses lifestyle media's penchant for communicating a sense of aspiration for "who to be and how to live."⁴⁰ However, like most scholars who have written on lifestyle media, Ryan and Ouellette focus primarily on more feminized content like cooking shows, design competitions, or fashion blogs.

Scholars have primarily focused on the ideological mechanisms of lifestyle media, arguing that aspirational narratives support neoliberal forms of labor and veil the policing of self-expression as issues of *taste*.⁴¹ Murray, Ouellette, and Ryan's discussions of authenticity, aspiration, and commercial appeal provide a theoretical base for considering History's reality programming as a masculinized and conservative response to the lifestyle media trend. Though on the surface History's blue-collar infotainment seems to simply highlight the extraordinary elements of the ordinary days and work of men, my reading of these series reveals how such narratives also reinforce traditional notions of whiteness, masculinity, American identity, class structure, and labor.

Aspiration and self-improvement in lifestyle TV is clearly *economically* attractive to networks and advertisers. My research into trade publications and marketing materials surrounding History's onset of reality programming reveals the commercial drive behind

⁴⁰ Laurie Ouellette, *Lifestyle TV* (New York: Routledge, 2016.)

⁴¹ Laurie Ouellette, "American Next Top Model: Neoliberal Labor," in *How to Watch Television*, eds. Ethan Thompson & Jason Mittell (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Robert Westerfelhaus & Celeste Lacroix, "Seeing 'Straight' through *Queer Eye*: Exposing the Strategic Rhetoric of Heteronormativity in Mediated Rituals of Gay Rebellion." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 23, no. 5 (2006.)

the channel's branding shift. Whereas lifestyle programming is largely targeted toward women, History's blue-collar infotainment presents distinctly masculine workplaces and macho themes. The nostalgia that is inherent within these programs can be understood as pining for a traditionally masculine lifestyle. Therefore, lifestyle TV as it appears on History may be less about upward mobility and more about communicating appropriate expressions of American identity and inciting aspiration for an authentically masculine lifestyle.

History's Industrial Context & Masculine Address

In the effort to conceptualize History's blue-collar infotainment as a masculinized lifestyle space, it is important to first understand the channel's positioning within the television industry and how it constructs its audience. History is owned by A&E Television Networks, an American broadcast company that is a joint venture between Hearst Communications and Disney Media Networks. Alongside History, the company also owns cable channels A&E and Lifetime. That History and Lifetime in particular share a parent company is significant, as both brands are largely commercialized through their gendered appeals. Whereas Lifetime offers series that are geared to a white, upper-middle class female demographic, History executives have candidly discussed the channel's brand in terms of its "male-skewing" appeal.⁴²

History reaches beyond hailing an audience that is simply male, though. Trade materials particularize the channel's constructed audience by pinpointing their imagined values and identities as distinct from audiences of other television spaces. In general, trade materials in the late 2000s often encouraged media buyers to consider masculine

⁴² Jonathan Kuperberg, "Big Game: Finding Male Viewers Beyond Sports," *Broadcasting & Cable*, October 13, 2014.

audiences in niche ways, as opposed to as a unified mass. The male viewer is discussed in trade materials as a "big game;" as an *Advertising Age* article insists, "Much like with women viewers, brands making generalizations about male viewers miss large potential opportunities."⁴³ The onset of History's blue-collar infotainment comes out of a commercial effort to construct the channel's ideal audience as middle-class, educated white males within the economically desirable 18 to 49 age bracket. The cable channel's appeal to particular identities, interests, and values frames History and its imagined audience as what Lotz identifies as a subcultural forum.⁴⁴ Lotz argues that TV acts as a subcultural forum when it "reproduces a similar experience as the electronic public sphere, but among more narrow groups that share cultural affinities or tastes," reaching smaller, more like-minded audiences.⁴⁵ Through this construction of its audience as a subcultural forum, History is able to more effectively develop and promote its brand, and can, in turn, promise niche audiences to media buyers.

History's onset of reality programming is largely regarded as an attempt to garner a *younger* male viewership within the commercially desirable 18 to 49 age bracket, while maintaining the cable channel's existing brand associations.⁴⁶ Trade and popular press materials regularly frame History's reality shift as a pursuit of more "entertaining" television that builds upon the channel's pre-existing "educational" and "historical" brand associations.⁴⁷ The cable channel's then-new president Nancy Dubuc, appointed in 2007, is

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Amanda Lotz, "Understanding Television at the Beginning of the Post-Network Era," in *The Television will be Revolutionized*, (New York City: NYU Press, 2007.)

⁴⁵ Ibid, 47.

⁴⁶ Stuart Levine, "Revising History: Facts are Out, Reality is In," *Television*, May 2011.

⁴⁷ Hampp; Brad Lockwood, "High Ratings Aside, Where is the History on History?" *Forbes*, Oct. 17, 2011.

credited with transforming an episode of *Modern Marvels* about treacherous Alaskan trucker routes into the channel's first reality series, *Ice Road Truckers*.⁴⁸ Her production decision exemplifies History's shift away from its tired docu-series format and toward a more youthful and entertaining reality subgenre that maintains an educational theme. In the trade press, the premiere of *Ice Road Truckers* was discussed as a successful move for the channel—one that "expanded its programming slate," maintained its "core" viewer base, and attracted younger male viewers.⁴⁹ The first quarter after the premier of *Ice Road Truckers* and its follow-up, *Ax Men*, marked History's best quarter ever, making it the fastest growing top 10 entertainment ad-supported network among men ages 25 to 54 at that time.⁵⁰

A primary way that History particularizes the values and interests of its male audience is through frequent comparisons with ESPN. A 2014 edition of *Broadcasting & Cable* discusses History as a main avenue for advertisers to market to male viewers beyond sports.⁵¹ History executives insinuate that advertisers can reach the "same viewer" as ESPN since both channels target a male demographic, but they are careful to demarcate between the two audiences. Whereas NFL content is largely understood as one of the last remaining broadcast events to garner mass audiences, History's audience members are conceptualized in trade pieces as "appointment viewers" with niche values and interests.⁵² Dubuc discusses the imagined History audience in trade press interviews as a "loyal"

⁴⁸ Dubuc resigned in 2018 and is now the CEO of Vice Media.

⁴⁹ "History is on a Roll," *Advertising Age*, 2008.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Jon Lafayette, "History Wants More Ad Dollars in its Future," *Broadcast & Cable*, May 2, 2011.

subset of viewers who are more consistent than viewers of "big specials and events."⁵³ History's audience is represented as reliable, brand loyal, and therefore commercially valuable.

History's educational brand associations further distinguish the channel's male audience from the average sports viewer. History's reality shift is regarded as advantageous to advertisers looking to reach an *educated* 18 to 49 male demographic.⁵⁴ The trade press frames the educated male audience as particularly difficult to reach through reality TV, likely because it is a genre that is often thought of as frivolous, lowbrow, and feminized.⁵⁵ Whether content takes the form of a dramatically produced war reenactment, a conspiratorial retelling of ancient histories, or an alligator hunt on the Louisiana bayou, the imagined History viewer desires a healthy dose of information in his entertainment. However, the forms of information and history that the channel communicates are distinctly working-class and America-centric. Since History emphasizes its imagined male audience's interest in specific educational themes, the viewer is constructed as more discerning or refined than that of the sports viewer.

History claims to know a lot about its audience. This largely reflects Lotz's assessment of the commercial drive behind the channel's portrayal of distinct forms of masculinities as a branding strategy. Regardless of the composition of History's actual viewers, History has an economic interest in constructing its audience as predominantly male and holding a conservative or traditional set of values. At the channel's 2018 Upfront, a presentation to potential media buyers, History's vice president for insights asserted that

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Levine.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

their executives are experts at utilizing "dude-ology," a catch phrase meant to encompass the findings of an in-depth study conducted for History about modern men's interests and values through focus groups, census data, and individual interviews.⁵⁶ The results of this study revealed that men feel most comfortable in male-dominated settings; enjoy getting information in their entertainment; continue to be interested in traditionally male activities; are interested in women who are interested in masculine activities; and feel they are more involved in their families than previous generations of men.⁵⁷ Many of these themes do indeed appear in History's blue-collar infotainment, which tends to present uniquely male and white casts; often depict family businesses; and depict activities most closely associated with the male sex.⁵⁸ Similar research was conducted for MTV on millennial viewers and for Lifetime on female viewers. In this case, however, History's audience is imagined to hold a set of conservative values that align with traditional conceptualizations of gender, work, and a masculine lifestyle. My argument considers how this commercial drive influences the lifestyle themes that Murray, Ouellette, and Ryan discuss—such as authenticity and aspiration—as they appear in History's blue-collar infotainment.

Although the accuracy of such studies is questionable, especially given that this data is gathered and used with the specific intent of supporting the channel's economic and commercial interests, it creates an impression that History is able to authentically address their audience's values and desires. At its 2019 Upfront presentation, History executives announced production partnerships with Sylvester Stallone and Garth Brooks, featuring

⁵⁶ Jon Lafayette, "History Woos Media Buyers With Data on Modern Men," *Broadcasting & Cable*, March 16, 2018.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

speeches from the two celebrities, as well as from former President George W. Bush.⁵⁹ These voices appear as brand ambassadors that embody and directly speak to the values and interests of History's constructed audience and the lifestyle they are imagined to desire. They represent a conservative, patriotic, rugged, and rural sense of masculinity that embodies the values of the traditional American man's lifestyle. History's branding decisions acknowledge and address its masculinized subcultural forum, while also appealing to marketers that are eager to more effectively communicate with niche male audiences. History is ultimately economically motivated to develop conservative and traditionally masculine themes within its programming.

Methods & Chapter Breakdown

My research draws from a sizable sample of episodes across History's blue-collar infotainment. These series include *Ice Road Truckers*, *Ax Men*, *Swamp People*, *American Restoration*, *Curse of Oak Island*, *Pawn Stars*, *American Pickers*, and *Forged in Fire*. The above programs qualify as either some of History's longest running or most popular series, according to ratings at the time of their respective premieres. All of these programs, except for *American Restoration*, are in continued production. All are also regularly re-run on History's cable channel and are available for streaming on History's website.⁶⁰ These programs span from the premiere of History's first reality program in 2007 to the onset of its competition-based programming in 2015. Although I have not watched every available episode of these eight selected programs, I have watched enough to recognize the major

⁵⁹ Jon Lafayette, "A&E Brings Out the Stars for Upfront Presentation," *Broadcasting & Cable*, March 27, 2019.

⁶⁰ Users must enter their cable subscription to access the streaming feature on History.com.

reoccurring themes and patterns common within the channel's blue-collar infotainment trend.

This argument is primarily the result of textual analysis and discourse analysis. The eight selected programs have been the subject of detailed viewings, during which I identified reoccurring themes, narratives conventions, and prominent examples. Conducting a discourse analysis has allowed me to recognize the broader political and cultural contexts that these series are attempting to address, which much of the literature on reality TV outlined in this chapter does not explore in depth. This research also includes attention to History's marketing materials such as trade articles, trailers, YouTube extras, and promotional ads to address how it is utilizing a conservative and masculine lifestyle appeal to package its blue-collar infotainment. This case study of History's brand reveals why such a strategy is commercially advantageous in a diversifying and increasingly competitive television landscape.

The bulk of my original analysis is broken into two main chapters that are organized according to programs and narrative themes. The focus of chapter two is on History's blue-collar infotainment series that valorize industrial and physical labor as a means to celebrate white masculinity. Programs that fit within this theme include *Ax Men*, *Swamp People*, *American Restoration*, and *Forged in Fire*. These series follow men employed as lumberjacks, alligator hunters, vintage car restorers, and blacksmiths, respectively. My analysis explores how these series utilize a nostalgic frame to idealize the image of the traditional American worker. These series' attention to regional specificity—rurality, in particular—and generational divides comes to signify the rendition of American identity that is revered in History's blue-collar infotainment. Themes of skill, injury, and recovery

fetishize the labors of the white male body, emphasizing his abilities as inherently superior to others. This chapter considers History's homogenous casting and the ways that series deal with the rare appearance of racial difference. I connect these series' sense of nostalgia for the industrial blue-collar image to contemporary generational anxieties about gender, American exceptionalism, and work. I conclude this chapter with a discussion about the framing of trade work as a desirable alternative to higher education, speaking to popular discourses about workplace diversity and booming student loan debt.

Although they take place in the present, the series included in chapter two are primarily concerned with representing or recalling forms of labor from the past, when such work was more available, more respected, more adequately compensated or organized, and offered a degree of job security. Series included in chapter three are much more concerned with how traditional forms of white masculinity can be maintained in a contemporary society that is constructed as both economically and culturally feminizing. This chapter includes examples of new-economy labor as it appears in *Ice Road Truckers*, *American Restoration*, *Curse of Oak Island*, *American Pickers*, and *Pawn Stars*. I explore how these series remap masculine traits and hard skills onto modes of work that are largely considered more sedentary and feminized. In these series, consumption and knowledge are framed as masculine infotainment and the image of the small businessman is repeatedly employed to emphasize masculine authority and the American Dream ideal. These programs attempt to masculinize service and information work that is more common to modern consumer culture, addressing anxieties about the future of white masculine privilege and workplace authority in the face of changing labor economies. The bulk of chapters two and three are comprised of textual and discourse analysis. They are distinct in

that chapter two is primarily concerned with outlining how History is addressing the past, while chapter three is focused on how History addresses the current and future state of white masculinity.

The fourth and final chapter asserts that both of the aforementioned themes contribute to History's conservative, masculine lifestyle brand. This chapter includes attention to industrial factors, like the early 2000s trend of reality television and the commercial appeal of lifestyle programming. I argue that History's blue-collar infotainment offers an aspirational tone for an authentically masculine lifestyle. Whereas much of lifestyle TV looks to the future with a socially-liberal outlook on self-governance and social improvement, History Channel looks to the past for a more conservative and nostalgic rendition of aspiration. An analysis of History's media buyers, advertisements, and branded products reveals the commercial drive behind History's niche appeal.

Chapter 2

Nostalgic Narratives and the Celebration of White Masculinity

History Channel's brand is inherently nostalgic. Since the channel's inception, it has been devoted to producing narratives of the past—particularly of war, industry, and the frontier—with an overwhelmingly American- and male-centric framework. Focusing on soldiers, business tycoons, and pioneers as the center of the nation's past erases and makes insignificant the female figures or feminized realms of history. The channel's blue-collar infotainment is a new rendition of this representation of the world, particularly of America, but the framework largely remains intact. As scholars have suggested, the label "reality " when applied to TV performs the ideological work of not only authenticating but also giving authority to those experiences and viewpoints depicted and expressed within the program.¹ Labeling these series as both history and reality formulates a space that exists on two axes of legitimation, making it a nuanced site within which to analyze the narrative reproduction of hegemonic culture.

Raymond Williams identifies the "retrospective affirmation" of tradition to exemplify how culture can operate as a "point of retreat" for those in society who feel they have been disenfranchised by a particular hegemonic development.² The patterns and themes discussed throughout this chapter exemplify how History's blue-collar infotainment operates as this "point of retreat" for an imagined conservative male

¹ Susan Murray & Laurie Ouellette, "Introduction," in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, eds. Susan Murray & Laurie Ouellette (New York: New York University Press, 2004); John Corner, "Performing the Real: Documentary Diversions," *Television & New Media* 3 (2002.)

² Raymond Williams, "Traditions, Institutions, and Formations," in *Marxism and Literature*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977): 116.

audience. This chapter analyzes the nostalgic themes that History employs across its blue-collar infotainment to create a universalized and traditional narrativization of white masculinity. This research considers the narrative structures that History's reality series adopt, what functions its storytelling conventions serve, and how or why these conventions appeal to the imagined History viewer.³ In particular, this chapter explores how History represents the white male American worker and how these representations both accentuate and assuage the imagined anxieties of viewers who feel alienated by changing work economies, expanding generational gaps, and increased cultural attention to diversity.

Storytelling conventions from *Ax Men*, *Swamp People*, *American Restoration*, and *Forged in Fire*, in particular, exemplify how History utilizes a nostalgic view of labor to legitimate the celebration of white masculine power and privilege. These programs represent men performing distinctly physical forms of work such as logging, alligator hunting, mechanical restoration work, and blacksmithing, all of which are remarkably different from the forms of labor that women perform when they (rarely) appear in these series. The presence of nostalgia in History's blue-collar infotainment, especially as it manifests through the recurring theme of father/son relationships at work, speaks to generational anxieties and the cultural prominence of patrilineal legacies. History's homogenous casting—as is exemplified through these series' regional specificity, overwhelming whiteness, and marginalization of women—becomes a way to distinguish this nostalgia as exclusively for previous iterations of *traditional* and *white* masculinity. Prominent themes of risk and injury across these programs draw attention to the physical

³ Research questions adapted from: Michael Newman, "From Beats to Arcs: Toward a Poetic of Television Narrative," *The Velvet Light Trap* no. 58 (2006.)

capabilities of the male body in a de-sexualized context, distinguishing the male body as inherently superior to the female body and to women. These narrative tropes form a site in which conservative expressions of white masculinity may be made historic, real, and ultimately be celebrated.

Nostalgic Narratives of Blue-Collar Labor

Though traditional forms of masculine expression exclude emotion, nostalgia is understood as a proper mode of male sentimentality.⁴ In particular, a longing for past conceptualizations of work and gender are generally considered appropriate spaces for men's emotion. Scholars have asserted that nostalgic media that glorify blue-collar work provide an outlet for the appropriate celebration of the white masculine status and idealize patriarchal power in its earlier renditions.⁵ Various storytelling elements and narrative themes from *Ax Men*, *Swamp People*, *American Restoration*, and *Forged in Fire* invite viewers to look upon masculine, working-class labor nostalgically. These patterns emphasize the historical significance of masculinized labor in order to legitimate, distinguish, and celebrate it.

Although these series take place in the present era, the work represented therein is largely framed as a continuation of historical traditions. History invites the viewer to begin with a nostalgic position through voiceover and title card introductions that emphasize the historical significance of the work being performed. For example, each episode of *Swamp*

⁴ Hamilton Carroll, *Affirmative Reaction: New Formations of White Masculinity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011.)

⁵ Carroll; Augie Fleras & Shane Michael Dixon, "Cutting, Driving, Digging, and Harvesting: Re-Masculinizing the Working-Class Heroic," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 36, no. 4 (2011); Daniel Marcus, *Happy Days and Wonder Years: The Fifties and the Sixties in Contemporary Cultural Politics* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004); Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006.)

People opens with the title card, "The way of life depicted in this program dates back 300 years," which establishes alligator hunting as a historically significant form of labor and as a well-preserved tradition. This labor is distinguished here as more unique, skilled, and respectable than contemporary work, introducing the viewer to a narrative universe wherein this particular mode of work is to be valorized. Similarly, *Forged in Fire's* introductory voiceover announces, "Since the dawn of human civilization, mankind has made weapons. Blade-smiths have honed and perfected their craft over thousands of years and now, for the first time ever, these men will go head-to-head and put their skills to the ultimate test." This voiceover alludes to the historical precedent of the work being performed. Further, the incorporation of words like "mankind" and "men" announces the appropriate sex of the imagined workers who perform this trade, and interpellates a conservative male viewer by addressing his anxieties about changing labor and gender norms.

This nostalgic framing is again utilized in the introductory voiceover of *American Restoration*, in which restoration shop owner and main cast member Rick Dale says, "Remember back in the day when things were made by hand and people took pride in their work? . . . I bring these things back to life." The opening phrase, "Remember back in the day," very explicitly invites the viewer to recall an imagined, collective past. This introduction brings to the forefront the values associated with traditional forms of labor—that people made things by hand and were proud of it—but positions craftwork and pride as values of the past that have somehow diminished or are no longer found in contemporary labor. The subtext of this claim is that people (specifically American men, we can assume given the identity of the series' star) no longer make things by hand or do not

hold the level of skill to perform such physical work at the professional level. Historical framing establishes the series' workers and their labors as significant and highly skilled. This ultimately invites the viewer to occupy a nostalgic position for the traditional forms of labor and masculinity represented in these programs.

According to Daniel Marcus, "Recollections of the past take shape out of current needs and pressures. Nostalgia thrives when the stability of personal identity is challenged by rapid social change, discontinuity, and dislocation."⁶ This begs the question: why is History revamping nostalgia for these particular forms of labor at this point in time? These programs are not uniformly recalling a certain era of American history. Each references a different period—"300 years ago," "the dawn of human civilization," and, most vaguely, "back in the day"—but, more importantly, each is nostalgic for an imagined tradition of masculine work. Although the era that these series recall varies, the masculinization of the work therein is consistent. The recollection to a past that emphasizes physical power and labor establishes an appropriate space for the celebration of conservative masculine values and harkening to traditional labor or power structures.

The imagined past that is being recalled here is one of an industrial economy in which the primary source of capital and jobs was found in manufacturing and production. This era is largely regarded as a time of job security and prosperity for the American white male and the nation, more broadly. A leading force in the 20th century industrial economy was the auto industry, of which the U.S. boasted the largest and most successful in the world until it was surpassed by Japan in the 1980s. Around that same time, economic interests began to shift toward information technology—with libraries expanding and

⁶ Marcus, 67.

computer software developing at unprecedented rates. The decline in factory and industrial work during this time period largely impacted 'Rust Belt' cities and largely eliminated jobs held by men.⁷ By 2010, 8.8 million jobs—many of which existed in the industrial sector—had been eliminated and the U.S. government had already agreed to a nearly \$18 billion bailout to aid the American auto industry.⁸

By the time History revamped its programming in 2007, many Americans—including the imagined History viewer—would have been significantly concerned about outsourcing, job security, the decreasing availability of "men's" work, and the bruised ego of America as a nation long considered an economic powerhouse. History addresses these anxieties directly, even prioritizing the American auto industry as a corner of the nation's past worth highlighting within these nostalgic narratives. The channel has produced multiple series focused on the restoration of classic cars—*Counting Cars* (2012 -), *Lost in Transmission* (2015 - 2015), *American Restoration*, *American Pickers*, *Big Easy Motors* (2016 -), and *Truck Night in America* (2018 -). In these series, the restoration of the classic vehicle functions symbolically as the restoration of the American auto industry, industrialism, and, relatedly, the American workingman. Further, History's narratives provide a locus for the return of American exceptionalism. Series represent insulated, American-centered businesses, ignoring the messiness of transnational economics. In these series, all levels of the economy, including labor, capital, and product, remain tidily within American borders. These programs' themes of nostalgia and American exceptionalism are surely imagined to resonate with History's audience during a time of economic precarity.

⁷ Erica Meade, "Men Hit Harder during the Recession, but Are Recovering Jobs Faster than Women," *Urban Institute*, May 13, 2015.

⁸ Christopher J. Goodman & Steven M. Mance, "Employment Loss and the 2007-09 Recession: An Overview," *Bureau of Labor Statistics Monthly Labor Review* (2011.)

Another way History heightens its sense of nostalgia is through a narrative focus on father/son relationships. The shift between the industrial and information economy has been theorized as creating a division between generations of men.⁹ This economic transition fueled generational anxieties about the value of hard work and manual labor, which has played out in media narratives centering on the father/son relationship.¹⁰ Scholars have argued that white men have expressed much anger and discontentment over their belief that previous generations of men have left an unsustainable legacy, unable to protect the patriarchy from past threats of social change.¹¹ The importance of the father/son relationship in media has been considered representative of the patriarchal pressure to continue a male-centered legacy of power and success.¹² On History Channel, father/son figuring creates a space for the projection of anxieties related to economic shifts. These narratives both accentuate and alleviate this unease by positioning the tense father/son dynamic as one that ultimately secures a patrilineal legacy.

Throughout these series, father/son relationships are represented as crucial to the future of blue-collar industries and traditional masculine values. For example, *Ax Men's* first episode features a logger stating, "I don't know why we do it, we just followed our parents in the same industry."¹³ Though he says, "parents," it is implied that he is following his father's, not his mother's, career path. This is clarified as the camera then cuts to a

⁹ Carroll, 89.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Marcus; Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994.)

¹² Jeffords.

¹³ *Ax Men*, Season 1, Episode 1, "Man vs. Mountain," produced by History, aired March 9, 2008. <https://play.history.com/shows/ax-men/season-1/episode-1>.

father/son team and a self-proclaimed "fourth generation logger" on the job.¹⁴ This suggests that the male-centered legacy is integral to the continuation of the logging industry. *Swamp People* similarly features several father/son teams throughout the show's run. In the first season alone the show introduces long-time alligator hunters Troy, Mike, and Joe working alongside their respective sons. The father/son relationships in these series are largely represented as positive, encouraging a nostalgic view that longs for traditional family and workplace dynamics.

Father/son teams are often featured in these series as opportunities for mutual learning and camaraderie, encouraging the continuation of a masculinized workplace. However, this dynamic also presents the possibility of a power struggle, as the younger male is likely capable of physically outperforming the older. One way in which this generational tension is addressed is through the representation of the younger male worker as a greenhorn who requires the supervision and expertise of the more experienced veterans in their field. For example, in the first episode of *Swamp People*, Joe's stepson Tommy improperly loads a rifle and is unable to shoot an alligator on the first try.¹⁵ This presents an opportunity for Joe to teach Tommy to always double-check the rifle's chamber before approaching a gator. Although Tommy is much younger than his stepfather, and often outperforms him in the more strenuous labor of the job, the frequent emphasis on Joe's experience in the field positions him as a superior worker. The sense of nostalgia enacted here is one that prioritizes experienced forms of labor that older generations of men own.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ *Swamp People*, Season 1, Episode 1, "Big Head Bites It," produced by History, aired August 22, 2010. <https://play.history.com/shows/swamp-people/season-1/episode-1>.

Another example of this theme appears in the first season of *American Restoration*, when a younger employee at Rick's Restoration must be repeatedly corrected or given direction in his work. In episode two, he is seen unsuccessfully attempting to power-sand rust off aluminum.¹⁶ When his supervisors arrive to inspect his work and find it incomplete, they check his work area and discover he has been going about the process incorrectly. The elder worker directs the novice that he must use walnuts, not sand, when working with aluminum. Scenes and narratives such as these position older generations of workers as all-knowing mentors, creating a narrative universe wherein the elder worker is more masculine due to his greater knowledge of the trade. The superiority of older generations of workers also plays out through the framing of younger workers' inexperience as feminizing. This is demonstrated in the first season of *Ax Men*, when a more seasoned logger mocks a greenhorn for unraveling industrial cord "like a girl."¹⁷ The masculinization of the veteran worker and the feminization of the greenhorn alleviate generational anxieties by maintaining the dominance of the father figure.

However, the feminization of the younger generation may threaten the patrilineal legacy. This creates a large source of tension in the early episodes of *Swamp People*, which feature experienced alligator hunter Mike as he encourages his 25-year-old son to refine his skills on the bayou. Son T-Mike is represented as lazier than his father and grandfather, who each claim they began alligator hunting alone at age 12. This tension is expressed through scenes that are crosscut between T-Mike—who is seen petting a small, fluffy dog as he watched TV on the family couch—and the elder males of the family who look on

¹⁶ *American Restoration*, Season 1, Episode 2, "Ice Cold," produced by History, aired October 25, 2010. <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2a5n38>.

¹⁷ *Ax Men*, Season 1, Episode 1, "Man vs. Mountain," produced by History, aired March 9, 2008. <https://play.history.com/shows/ax-men/season-1/episode-1>.

disapprovingly.¹⁸ The younger is feminized through his relaxed and passive posture in the home. In the next sequence, T-Mike is explicitly represented as less skilled than his elders when he runs into several issues while alligator hunting alone for the first time. Footage of T-Mike's apprehensive demeanor as he hesitantly and slowly guides the boat throughout the swamp is crosscut with footage of his father, who is confidently at the helm of his boat as it gracefully speeds through the swamp. The repeated crosscut footage between the two clarifies that Mike, although he is older than T-Mike, is the superior worker here due to his more complete knowledge and vast experience on the bayou. The tension between Mike and T-Mike simultaneously resolves the threat of the skilled youthful worker and stresses the importance of securing a patrilineal legacy. In addition, this storyline plays to the conservative male audience's imagined anxieties about younger generations of men being unable or unwilling to partake in masculine modes of work or refusing to conform to traditional gender roles. History's reoccurring representations of father/son relationships at work create a primary site for the projection and alleviation of the viewer's generational anxieties.

Homogenous Casting & Disciplining Difference

History's repetitive storytelling elements and themes make clear that this sense of nostalgia is reserved for not only particular forms of work, but also for particular identities. The homogenous casting of these series prioritizes particular iterations of gender, race, and region, disciplining or excluding any appearance of difference. For example, although family is a theme throughout many of these series, especially in the form of father/son relationships, women occupy peripheral positions. When women (rarely) appear in the

¹⁸ *Swamp People*, Season 1, Episode 4, "Cannibal Gator," produced by History, aired September 12, 2010. <https://play.history.com/shows/swamp-people/season-1/episode-4>.

early seasons of these programs, they are often represented as an insignificant part of the episode's main storyline. Women are represented primarily in the home as a mother or wife, occupying a supportive position for her husband and children. A minor part of the male cast member's characterization includes a glimpse into his home life, frequently depicting the wife cooking (*Swamp People*), child-rearing (*Ax Men*), or expressing concern about her husband's dangerous career (*Ice Road Truckers*, *Swamp People* and *Ax Men*). Women appear in these minor scenes simply to clarify the presence of traditional gender roles, the nuclear family, and heterosexual coupling.

History benchmarks this nostalgia as hailing *male* audiences through the representation of women in very different work roles than men. The representation of work across these series aligns with conceptualizations of gender as a binary, clarifying that this nostalgia is projected onto the male image and not the female. In *American Restoration*, for example, cast member Kelly does not partake in the business' restoration work but is rather primarily responsible for maintaining payroll and customer relations. Danielle Colby occupies a similar role in *American Pickers*, coordinating the main cast members' schedules and maintaining the customer service in their shop while the men are out on the road in search of antiques and collectibles. It is significant that women are depicted partaking in more sedentary forms of labor than the men because it not only reinforces traditional ideas about gender roles and the feminization of the service economy, it also removes these women from the primary narrative focus of the show: the work. This is common across History's slate of blue-collar infotainment. Only four of the 41 cast members appearing in *Swamp People's* 10 seasons to date have been women. Only one of these women, Liz Cavalier, is a reoccurring cast member given a title card in the series'

introductory sequence. The remaining three women who appear throughout the series are helpers who occupy secondary roles on the alligator-hunting boats. This homogenous casting clarifies that, in the interest of hailing a particular male audience, History's nostalgia is reserved for a certain kind of labor belonging to the bodies of men.

History's nostalgic tales of work and industry do not just emphasize traditional gender roles and family structures; this nostalgia is also regionally and racially specific. In *Marxism and Literature*, Raymond Williams argues that tradition is an "actively shaping force . . . an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a pre-shaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification."¹⁹ Williams writes that certain meanings and practices are selected for emphasis while other meanings and practices are negated or excluded.²⁰ The recollection of tradition occurs in the interest of a specific class, he writes, and can be understood as a version of the past that is "intended to connect with and ratify the present."²¹

Although people of different races and ethnicities undoubtedly perform the work detailed in these series, the whitewashing of History's blue-collar infotainment allows for the idealization of a particular iteration of masculinity. These series present primarily male and predominantly white casts, which clarifies that working-class white men are the principal focus of this nostalgia. The representation of a homogenized work environment is a main pillar of how History's reality series are formulating a 'traditional' workplace. In addition, History problematically responds to the contemporary cultural emphasis on diversity by tokenizing and disciplining racial difference when it does appear. Within these

¹⁹ Williams, 115.

²⁰ Ibid, 115.

²¹ Ibid, 116.

series' nostalgic frames, the rare and disciplined representation of racial and gendered difference creates a vision of the present that negates any conversation about the value of diversity or equal opportunity rights. This ensures that although the white masculine status adapts to contemporary cultural pressures, it ultimately remains intact.

Forged in Fire's treatment of Ryu Lim, the only non-white competitor featured in the series' first season, is a leading example of how the appearance of racial difference must be disciplined within History's nostalgic narratives. Ryu's storyline heavily focuses on his childhood in the Philippines as a way to distinguish his blacksmithing skills as different from his fellow competitors. The judges refer to him as a "traditional panday," the Filipino word for blacksmith, throughout the episode.²² The repeated identification and explanation of his race among the primarily white cast disciplines the difference that he comes to represent, while whiteness remains unspoken. The link being made here between race and skill is one that idealizes whiteness. History's tokenization and disciplining of difference heightens the narrative centrality of whiteness in a time when diversity is emphasized in the workplace and holds a sense of cultural status or allure.²³

However, these series are not nostalgic for any and all expressions of white masculinity. History is able to further particularize white masculinity through its attention to rurality, which becomes code for conservative and traditional. History's glorification of the rural location encourages the presence of "rural characteristics" in masculine performances regardless of location. In "The Question of Rural Masculinities," Hugh Campbell and Michael Mayerfeld Bell suggest considering how the rural and the masculine

²² *Forged in Fire*, Season 1, Episode 3, "Viking Battle Axe," produced by History, aired July 6, 2015. <https://play.history.com/shows/forged-in-fire/season-1/episode-3>.

²³ Becker.

intersect on the "symbolic level," introducing a distinction between "the rural in the masculine" and "the masculine in the rural."²⁴ The authors outline "the masculine in the rural" as the variety of ways that masculinity is constructed in rural spaces, whereas the "rural in the masculine" recognizes that rural themes (specifically the image of the hardy, pioneering laborer) already exist in American notions of masculinity that are independent of the rural setting.²⁵

History's blue-collar infotainment represents rural-based industries like logging, trucking, land excavation, and alligator hunting, with series taking place in isolated areas of the country like the forests of Oregon, the Arctic north of Alaska, the farmlands of Iowa, and the bayou of Louisiana. Even those series like *American Pickers* that travel across the country primarily travel through rural locations—across the Midwest, in particular. Rural areas of America, particularly the south and the Midwest, are commonly, though problematically, understood as locations that bolster conservative social values and traditional gender roles. When considered in context with History's homogenous casting, rurality hyper-specifies American as code for white, masculine, and conservative.²⁶ Regional specificity is a crucial component of how nostalgia and white identity come to be particularized in these series.

The rural location is frequently referenced to frame the labor of History's cast members as a battle against Mother Nature, which "accentuates [their] macho attributes"

²⁴ Hugh Campbell & Michael Mayerfeld Bell, "The Question of Rural Masculinities," *Rural Sociology* 65, no. 4 (2000): 539.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 540.

²⁶ Thierry Devos & Mahzarin R. Banaji, "American = White?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 88, no. 3 (2005.)

as biologically inherent in working-class men of a particular (rural) region.²⁷ For example, the introductory voiceover in the first season of *Ax Men* states: "The coastal forest of Oregon, a remote frontier hardened by the Pacific Ocean. Here, a rare breed of men gamble with life and limb and accept the consequences. They wrangle thousand-pound logs, dodge bone-crushing steel, and fight Mother Nature at every turn all to carve out their piece of millions in logging fortune." This introductory voiceover is played over images of loggers handling chainsaws, falling trees, and operating heavy machinery in the deep forests of the American northwest. This introduction establishes the location of the series as a distinct determinant of the cast members' performances of masculine labor. The reference to these men as a "rare breed" implies that their rural upbringing has ingrained in them distinct values or bodily abilities that make them superior to men in more urban locations or city jobs.

Repeated contrasts between the sprawling countryside and the containment of urban living points to History's romanticism of rurality. *Swamp People's* Troy—because he has the thickest Cajun accent of all the series' cast and often needs to be subtitled—comes to most explicitly represent the Cajun identity and rurality, more broadly. At the end of a Season One episode, he sits in his boat as the sun sets behind him on the bayou. In the midst of this beautiful scenery, Troy expresses that he could never work in a big city like New York and vastly prefers life in his rural corner of Louisiana. A cast member of *Ax Men* nearly mirrors this sentiment in Season One, saying of the possibility of working in New

²⁷Peter Thompson, "'Ready to Do Battle with the Mountain': Masculinity, Nature, and Sacrifice in Spike TV's *Coal*," *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 25, no. 1 (2018): 74.

York City, "You might as well put me in a cage and shoot me in the head."²⁸ The male cast member's attachment to his rural location and his rural identity is crucial to the establishment of his character, the series, and History's blue-collar rendition of masculinity.

Utilizing the rural location as code for traditional American values and masculine physical abilities, the regional specificity of these programs becomes a way to particularize the kinds of performances of race and gender that are most desirable.²⁹ *Swamp People's* setting in the Louisiana bayou is repeatedly emphasized as a crucial component of the cast members' performances of gender and labor and is used to link the men to a particular set of unidentified but wholesome values. Participants repeatedly refer to their work ethic as 'the Cajun way,' frequently implying that their values and work ethic is inherent to their region and lineage. The Cajun Way is referenced as cast members talk about their family's secret alligator recipes or while hand-making hunting hooks. When a construction team volunteers their equipment to help cast member Troy load his haul of alligators from his boat to his truck, Troy again calls the workers' generosity the Cajun way.³⁰ This connects the regionally specific identity of men to an unspoken set of traditional, but predominantly helpful, self-sustaining, and community-oriented principles. Although these representations most explicitly align with Campbell and Bell's "masculine in the rural" frame, they also insinuate that the rural in the masculine is desirable. The characteristics and values that these men display—community, a wholesome work ethic, and self-

²⁸ *Swamp People*, Season 1, Episode 1, "Big Head Bites It," produced by History, aired August 22, 2010. <https://play.history.com/shows/swamp-people/season-1/episode-1>; *Ax Men*, Season 1, Episode 1, "Man vs. Mountain," produced by History, aired March 9, 2008. <https://play.history.com/shows/ax-men/season-1/episode-1>.

²⁹ Berit Brandth & Marit S. Haugen, "Doing Rural Masculinity: From Logging to Outfield Tourism," *Journal of Gender Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005.)

³⁰ *Swamp People*, Season 1, Episode 3, "Troy's Gamble," produced by History, aired September 5, 2010. <https://play.history.com/shows/swamp-people/season-1/episode-3>.

sustainability—are communicated as ideal masculine attributes regardless of the regional setting.

Even series that are set in more urban locations—like *Forged in Fire*, which is filmed on a soundstage in Brooklyn, and *American Restoration*, of which the first six seasons take place in the outskirts of Las Vegas—reinforce the idealization of rurality. The introductory sequences of these series largely ignore the famous skylines of their hosting cities. *Forged in Fire* never reveals the production set's location within its narrative universe and *American Restoration* takes place primarily within the confines of Rick's restoration shop. His shop is located away from the city's iconic main strip, with shots framing it as a space that evokes associations with a Western American desert.³¹ Although these series are set in more urban locales than others, the men in these programs nevertheless display rural themes such as rugged individualism, stoicism, and a hearty "do-it-yourself" mentality in their masculinity, exemplifying what Campbell and Bell refer to as the "rural in the masculine." Campbell and Bell specify that rurality "brings an air of the natural to images of masculinity," which legitimates such expressions as pure or traditional.³² History's blue-collar infotainment offers a universalized representation of masculinity that is focused on rural expressions and themes, marking a more traditional and conservative expression of masculinity as not just environmentally induced, but also somehow biologically inherent.³³

The inclusion of primarily white cast members in these rural locations glaringly excludes the history of indigenous peoples or slave labor, again particularizing for who and

³¹ The seventh and final season of the show does not include Rick's restoration shop but rather focuses on five restoration shops in Sun Valley, California; Maggie Valley, North Carolina; Detroit, Michigan; Frankfort, New York; and Marietta, Georgia.

³² Campbell & Bell, 540.

³³ Amanda Lotz, *Cable Guys: TV and Masculinities in the 21st Century* (New York City: NYU Press, 2014.)

what History's expression of nostalgia is reserved. *Swamp People* frames alligator hunting in the bayou as beginning when French-Canadians developed the first Cajun community 300 years ago. The artistic renderings that appear in cutaways to explain the local history of such work include images of what most often appear to be white-European settlers. However, the Acolapissa, Atakapas, Biloxi, Timucua and Seminole tribes, among others, frequently hunted big game—including alligators—long before the settlement there of French-Canadians.³⁴ Many descendants of those tribes continue to hunt alligators in the Pointe-au-Chien region to this day.³⁵ In what is likely a nod to this history, *Swamp People's* producers cast Jay-Paul Molinere and his son R.J. Molinere Jr., who both descend from Houma ancestry, for seasons two through 10. However, similar to the way Ryu is represented as a traditional panday in *Forged in Fire*, *Swamp People* accentuates the Molinere's ancestry as significant to their practices, distinguishing their way of alligator hunting as different from that of the white cast members. Again, this clarifies the sense of nostalgia as reserved for particular identities and positions whiteness as the default representation within these historical narratives. Although rurality does not inherently equal white, in History's homogenously casted series, it does. Coding rurality as conservative and traditional is a deliberate fixing of identity. Rurality becomes a quickly identifiable code that particularizes which renditions of white masculinity are to be glorified and what notion of the past is to be resurrected. In this context, regional specificity becomes a way to reserve nostalgia for white men who possess rural—code for traditional and conservative—values.

The Fetishization of the Laboring Male Body

³⁴ "Southeastern Indian Hunting," *Native American Netroots*, June 19, 2016.

³⁵ "Coastal Louisiana Tribes - Tribes & Climate Change." *Northern Arizona University*.

Across History's blue-collar infotainment, physical labor is represented as the paramount form of work. The repeated visual attention these series pay to the laboring male body emphasizes physical power as uniquely masculine and ascribes a biologically inherent value to the male body that positions it as distinct and superior to female bodies.³⁶ Programs are framed in a way that invites the viewer to marvel at the male body at work. This highlighting of the male body's capabilities is reminiscent of Susan Jeffords' discussion of 1980s action heroes in her book *Hard Bodies: Masculinity in the Reagan Era*.³⁷ The popularity of such celebrities as Sylvester Stallone in *Rambo* and Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Terminator* are treated as evidence of Hollywood's (and society's) promotion of a particular American masculine ideal during the Reagan presidency— one that emphasized physical strength, a sense of autonomy, and independence.³⁸ Jeffords asserts that the bodies of these eighties action heroes became a mode of measuring manliness—heroes withstood bullet wounds, slashes, and other physical attacks—and that the men often were responsible for quickly treating and recovering from their own wounds.³⁹

History's blue-collar infotainment glorifies the male body through an emphasis on extreme skill and the ever-present risk of injury. The blacksmithing represented in *Forged in Fire*, for example, requires open flames, high temperature workspaces, hammering, and the bending of metals. Contestants are asked to create sharply edged weapons, which are then tested within their immediate vicinity against sheet metal, ropes, car doors, and suits of armor. Indeed, injury, and even death, is looming in each of these programs. Cliffhangers in *Ax Men*, *Swamp People*, and *Forged in Fire* frequently tease the possibility of injury within

³⁶ R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.)

³⁷ Jeffords.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid, 50.

their respective work settings as an attempt to secure the viewer's attention across a commercial break. The risk of injury reaches extreme proportions in *Curse of Oak Island*, in which two brothers explore a rural island in search of a legendary treasure. Each episode opens with the re-telling of a legend that seven men must die before the treasure is located; six men died prior to the current team's arrival.

The emphasis on risk and even death does more than just entice the viewer; it fetishizes the labors of the male body. Such risk is represented as part and parcel of the work on display in these series and it is often *celebrated*, as well. As a result of the highly physical and dangerous nature of the work represented in *Forged in Fire*, episodes often prominently feature contestants weathering cuts or exhaustion. First aid responders are constantly present on the production set and appear periodically to treat a cut or burn. However, competitions are timed three hours per round and the clock does not stop when a contestant is being treated for injuries. Therefore, the rules of the game reward those contestants who either refuse treatment or accept it and quickly return to work. Those male contestants in *Forged in Fire* who continue to compete after a cut or a bout of exhaustion are often lauded for their perseverance and may even win the \$10,000 prize. The contestant's ability to overcome injury and continue laboring is framed as rugged determination worthy of reward.

In Season One, Episode Three, the aforementioned contestant Ryu Lim insists on abandoning the machines made available to contestants on set to forge his weapon by hand, a physically exhausting act.⁴⁰ Not long after, he is overcome by the heat of the forge and, appearing weak and shaken, temporarily escapes to a hallway behind the soundstage.

⁴⁰ *Forged in Fire*, Season 1, Episode 3, "Viking Battle Axe," produced by History, aired July 6, 2015. <https://play.history.com/shows/forged-in-fire/season-1/episode-3>.

In a confessional interview, Ryu describes hearing the sounds of hammers clattering while lying down behind the scenes. He insists in a voiceover that the sounds of the other men's blacksmithing calls him back to work, saying, "I need to go back out there, I'm losing time. When I walk back in, I felt like a gladiator walking back into the arena."⁴¹ Ryu is greeted with a pat on the back from a fellow contestant and is later told by a judge that he was "glad to see [him] come back and that despite everything that happened [he] forged [a] weapon." Ryu is celebrated for returning to work in a timely manner and completing the task at hand. His comparison of the forge to an arena frames the contestants as gladiators, a comparison that contributes to the male contestants' heroic representation. Here, the distinctly *male* body is made significant regardless of race. Although in this scene Ryu is set apart from the other contestants in certain ways (specifically in regard to his ethnicity), the fact that his body can withstand the rigors of the forge as would any other man's is paramount. The strength of his body is a commonality with other contestants, exemplifying that the ability and the maleness of the body overcomes its other attributes.

As if the act of blacksmithing were not dangerous enough on its own, the formula of the series provides superfluous opportunities to display violence. At the end of the second and third rounds of each episode, completed weapons are subjected to a series of tests designed to determine the strength, durability, and sharpness of the competitors' blades. Such moments become benchmarks of each episode and further attune the viewer to the capabilities of the male body. Tests frequently pit the blade against inanimate objects like a metal drum or a thick rope. Weapons are also frequently graded on how well they can impart damage on materials mimicking the human body, like giant hanging slabs of animal

⁴¹ Ibid.

meat or ribs. Most significantly, every finale challenge features an edged weapons specialist using contestants' blades to attack a biologically correct ballistics dummy. The see-through skin of the dummy clearly displays when a blade punctures arteries, slices muscles, breaks bones, or ruptures major organs. The specialist testing the weapon always notes when the weapon successfully "disembowels" the dummy or does significant damage, slipping his fingers into the faux wound. When he is pleased with the performance of the blade, the judge will recite his now-famous tagline: "Congratulations. It will kill." This line is regularly delivered in a somber tone and in close-up, often right as the episode's hard rock music momentarily cuts out. This tagline is represented as the ultimate compliment for the contestant as it signals that he has created a dangerous and effective weapon that can withstand the simulated rigors of battle. *Forged in Fire* valorizes a masculine form of power and labor that accentuates the capabilities of the distinctly male body by highlighting the potential mayhem, violence, and destruction man's hand-made creations can cause.

Although these examples come from *Forged in Fire*, themes of risk and injury occur in History's other blue-collar infotainment series, as well. The risk of extreme injury and death looms in each episode of *Swamp People*, as hunters hold a rifle in one hand and wrangle a fishing line with one of the world's deadliest animals at the end in the other. The hunters come within uncomfortably close proximity to the reptiles, all while standing in a small powerboat that could capsize and throw them into the dangerous and murky bayou water at any moment. Logging and restoration work are also highly dangerous. Each requires the use of machines and tools that threaten injury at any turn. For example, the aforementioned introductory voiceover used in early episodes of *Ax Men* says, "Here, a rare breed of men gamble with life and limb and accept the consequences. They wrangle

thousand-pound logs [and] dodge bone-crushing steel." This statement plays over the image of a main cast member, Jay Browning, who lost his left hand in an incident as a young logger. Now, as a 34-year veteran of the industry and an owner of his own company, Browning uses a prosthetic hand to operate a chain saw. In this introductory voiceover, the narration pauses for Jay to hold up a handmade hook prosthetic and say, "I should be able to run a chainsaw with this thing, don't you think?" Jay has grown accustomed to the dangers of his field. This moment not only signifies the risk inherent in this line of work; it also represents the skill that Jay has garnered over his years in the industry. He displays skill in his ability to craft a prosthetic; more significantly, his skill is amplified because he went on to start his own successful logging company after his injury. His ability to keep laboring after a severe injury has informed his current representation in the series as a highly skilled veteran. This storyline emphasizes the resiliency of the male body and the importance of adapting in the interest of continuing to work. The themes of skill and risk emphasize the capabilities of the male body and invite a celebration of the traditional image of the American blue-collar worker.

In each of the series addressed here, skill is the only plausible way for a worker to diminish or eliminate risk. This is, in part, how veteran workers are portrayed as more masculine than their younger, less-experienced counterparts. According to labor studies scholar Steven Maynard, skill is not an "objective economic fact" but is socially constructed and highly gendered.⁴² Maynard argues that skill is an "ideological category imposed on certain types of work by values of the sex and power of the workers who perform it."⁴³ In

⁴² Steven Maynard, "Rough Work and Rugged Men: The Social Construction of Masculinity in Working-Class History," *Labour/Le Travail* 23 (1989.)

⁴³ *Ibid*, 162.

these series, skill is also *aged*, as elder workers are often represented as seasoned veterans in contrast to the younger greenhorn. Therefore, narrative conventions that emphasize skill can be understood as reinforcing gendered and generational power dynamics. The emphasis on skill again attunes the viewer to the capabilities of the masculine body.

Forged in Fire best exemplifies the channel's penchant for emphasizing skill as a masculine characteristic. As History's first competition series, the very premise of *Forged in Fire* hinges on differentiating the presumed skill in each contestant's work. Each episode opens with the image of a flame emerging from a forge, upon which a disclaimer appears that reads, "Forging is dangerous. Please do not attempt without extensive training and safety measures in place." It is significant that this image opens each episode because it draws the viewer's attention to the levels of risk and skill associated with the work of blacksmithing. The characterization of *Forged in Fire* participants and cast members of other History blue-collar infotainment series as highly skilled professionals recuperates and distinguishes the white male image while giving the viewer permission to marvel at the male body's skilled capabilities.

As the most recently developed program in History's blue-collar infotainment trend that is examined here, *Forged in Fire*'s heightened emphasis on danger and injury reveals an emerging theme. Other newly developed series include a butchering competition (*The Butcher*, 2016), a survivalist competition (*Alone*, 2015), and a series in which two men subject themselves to severe animal and insect bites and rank their pain in the "interest of science" (*Kings of Pain*, 2019). Since their inception, History's reality series have focused on the laboring male body. Over time, that focus seems to be turning more toward an emphasis on withstanding direct injury and pain as an expression of masculinity. Just as the

attention to physical labor denotes a biological assumption for the valuing of male bodies, the attention to pain and injury marks the male body as inherently distinct from and superior to the female body. Since History's audience tends to skew male, the emphasis on the male body and the dominant male presence throughout its blue-collar infotainment must be represented in such a way as to de-sexualize the gaze. The attention to injury, violence, and the grotesque invites the viewer to marvel at the skill that is enacted by the male body. Especially when framed within a nostalgic narrative, such themes ultimately de-sexualize the viewing process and clarify the text as a space for a distinctly heterosexual male gaze.

Conclusion: Gendering Compensation & Trade Labor

In "Prime Time Ideology," Todd Gitlin writes, "Shows are made by guessing at audience desires and tolerances, and finding ways to speak to them that perpetuate the ongoing system."⁴⁴ History's blue-collar infotainment employs nostalgic framing to address the imagined male viewer, playing to his socio-economic anxieties in a way that reproduces hegemonic understandings of labor, gender, skill, and race. These series perform the ideological work of distinguishing and celebrating the image of the blue-collar worker—his body's abilities, his rural values, his inherent superiority to the younger, the racially different, or the feminine. These series use narrative themes and stylistic elements to evoke a sense of nostalgia for a collective, re-imagined past that emphasizes masculine skill and productivity. History's blue-collar infotainment creates a space for the revaluing of masculinized hard skills like brute strength, relentless determination, and competition in an era that prioritizes soft skills and service work. Although blue-collar jobs in America are

⁴⁴ Todd Gitlin, "Prime Time Ideology," *Social Problems* 26, no. 3 (1979.)

waning, scholars argue that they continue to be associated with a sense of masculine, and specifically American, grit. Veiled in these series as a return to tradition, this particular manifestation of nostalgia suggests the fantasy of a homogenous workplace and the prioritization of the white male earner.

Almost uniformly, the work represented in History's blue-collar infotainment would not require a college degree but rather trade schooling, experience, or certifications. History's nostalgia likely resonates with generational anxieties about the increasing cost of higher education and booming student loan debt. The U.S. Department of Education reports that the number of students enrolling in trade school has almost doubled in the past decade, prompting many popular press publications and blogs to ask the question: trade school or college?⁴⁵ It's a debate that seems to primarily speak to young men. Higher education in America is more expensive than ever before—the cost of college has risen 206 percent between 1980 and 2014—and is more heavily occupied by women.⁴⁶ Popular press highlight that women are becoming the majority in higher education while men continue to enroll in trade and career school programs at a much higher rate.⁴⁷ Where women are the majority in cosmetology, health services, and childcare programs, men

⁴⁵ Trent Hamm, "Why You Should Consider Trade School Instead of College," *The Simple Dollar*, January 24, 2019; Dave Tomar, "Trade Schools on the Rise: Is Trade School Right for You," *The Best Schools Magazine*; "The 20 Best Auto Mechanic Schools," *The Best Schools Magazine*, November 7, 2019; "Trade School versus College: Which is the Better Choice," *My College Guide*.

⁴⁶ Emmie Martin, "Here's How Much More Expensive it is for You to Go to College than it was for your Parents," *CNBC*, November 29, 2017.

⁴⁷ Jon Marcus, "Why Men are the New College Minority," *The Atlantic*, August 8, 2017; Mary E. Lufkin, Mary M. Wiberg, Courtney Reed Jenkins, Stefanie L. Berardi, Terri Boyer, Ellen Eardley, & Janet Huss, "Gender Equity in Career and Technical Education," in *Handbook for Achieving Gender Equity Through Education*, eds. Susan S. Klein, Barbara Richardson, Dolores A. Grayson, Lynn H. Fox, Cheris Kramarae, Diane S. Pollard, & Carol Ann Swyer (New York: Routledge, 2007.)

represent between 75% and 91% of students enrolled in agriculture, precision production, engineering, construction and repair, and automotive programs.⁴⁸ The division between these trade programs reflects the notion that there are appropriate forms of labor to be performed by men and by women. The gendered division of education funnels into a gendered division of labor, which is then translated into an inequity of compensation between feminized and masculinized work. History's narratives reinforce this gendered divide. Although the cast members in these blue-collar infotainment programs do not outwardly endorse career and trade training, the repeated attention to and celebration of physical work industries propagate ideas that these spaces are reserved for men. Trade work and physical labor are conceived as avenues to escape the feminization of higher education and the service economy.

Although trade work is indeed a valuable component of our society and trade school is a viable option for many, audiences and scholars should be wary of mainstream media devoted to idealizing work in any form. These reality series disregard the economic, sometimes environmental, and often health risks associated with many of these industries. This neglect reproduces ideas about labor and capitalist structures. Fetishizing the laboring male body has dangerous implications for men, as it revalues them strictly for their physical ability, and for women, as it justifies the devaluing of their labor. It is whiteness and maleness that are at the forefront of these expressions of nostalgia. The focus on physical labor and the idealization of work in any of its forms perpetuates a capitalist dynamic that subjugates citizens as laborers and consumers, and rewards only the few who remain at the top.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Chapter 3

American Masculinity and Performative Labor in New Economy Infotainment

There is a clear thematic divide within History's reality content. Although much of History's programming focuses on physical labor to evoke a sense of nostalgia for an imagined past, it also produces narratives that maintain traditional expressions of masculinity within the contemporary work economy. The latter takes the form of reality TV programs that follow men in service and information-based businesses more common in the new economy like *Ice Road Truckers*, *American Restoration*, *Pawn Stars*, *Curse of Oak Island*, and *American Pickers*. The origins of what is commonly referred to as the 'new economy' is traceable back to the 1980s, the era when America's primary source of job creation began deriving from the service and information sectors while industrial and production-oriented jobs began rapidly declining.¹ Both the service and information work sectors prioritize soft skills like communication, customer service, performativity, and interpersonal relationships, skills that are in direct conflict with traditional conceptualizations of masculinity. The colloquialism "pink-collar workers" is commonly used to refer to the feminization of labor and the workforce in the new economy.² Karen Lee Ashcraft and Lisa A. Flores argue that this understanding of modern work, with its "lack of physicality, bureaucratic sterility, suppression of the body [and] self-imposed

¹ Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society; A Venture in Social Forecasting* (New York: Basic Books, 1973.)

² Louise Kapp Howe, *Pink Collar Workers* (New York: Avon Books, 1978.)

discipline" largely comes from its contrast to blue-collar work which is often viewed as more inherently masculine because of an emphasis on bodily capabilities.³

History Channel's blue-collar infotainment directly addresses these anxieties and discrepancies. Its brand is associated with a blue-collar, American sense of identity that is constructed as belonging to men. Therefore, the threat that consumer culture poses for the status of traditional masculinity must be tempered. Examples from *Ice Road Truckers*, *American Restoration*, *Pawn Stars*, *Curse of Oak Island*, and *American Pickers* illuminate how the channel's representations of gender and work masculinize labor in the new economy as an effort to align with History's branded image of the American white male worker. The men in these programs undoubtedly display less rigid characteristics than those rugged and burly men of *Ax Men* or *Forged in Fire* who persistently display their physicality and injuries. However, these series maintain the brand's uniform idealization of traditional white masculinity through appeals to a blue-collar rendition of American identity.

The frequent utilization of the label "American" is a crucial component of how these series are functioning ideologically; it's a term that reappears in the titles of several blue-collar infotainment series. Although it is likely meant to evoke patriotism and conservative values, it ultimately calls upon a racist and sexist legacy of manifest destiny, the frontier, and cowboy imagery. Especially when utilized in the labeling of narratives about work, "American" carries the burden of identifying which workers are valuable and deserving of proper compensation. Veiled as a sense of patriotism and rugged masculinity, the blue-collar image has come to signify a devotion to work that prioritizes institutional production and capital over concern for individual's physical and financial well-being. History's

³ Karen Lee Ashcraft & Lisa A. Flores, "'Slaves With White Collars': Persistent Performances of Masculinity in Crisis," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 23, no. 1, (2003.)

traditional take on American identity is clarified through the casting of men who predominantly embody stereotypically blue-collar appearances. Cast members of *Ice Road Truckers* are perhaps the most traditionally rugged and macho of these series, commonly sporting beards and tattoos, showing off their beer bellies, and punctuating their sentences with curses. The main cast members of *American Pickers*, *American Restoration*, and *Curse of Oak Island* also resemble the traditional image of the macho blue-collar worker. They commonly appear in jeans, flannels, sleeveless shirts, unshaven faces, and literal blue-collars. Cast members rarely if ever have shown up to work in a white button down and khakis.

Casts borrow from popular blue-collar imagery to masculinize their performative labor both in a feminized work sector and on a reality show. Series emphasize working-class forms of knowledge and information, as well as profit, as a rendering of consumer culture that appeals to hegemonic identities. The repeated theme of family-owned, and especially male-owned, businesses as they appear in *Pawn Stars* and *Curse of Oak Island* also resonate with popular conceptualizations of masculine leadership, control, and economic authority. Further, series invite cast members to blend hard and soft skills—owned and performative labor—to maintain the channel's traditional representations of masculinity. Although these series blend feminine and masculine skill sets, they continuously demarcate and subordinate the female presence. These representations and narrative themes reinforce traditional understandings of American masculinity while adapting to contemporary economic and social pressures. Identifying these series and their casts as "American" masculinizes their performances and labors, and becomes a

clandestine way to celebrate American economic dominance and perpetuate patriarchal power structures.⁴

Framing Consumption & Knowledge as Masculine Infotainment

Knowledge and consumption go hand in hand throughout these series as a means to masculinize work in a consumer culture. Given that these series each center on businesses devoted to dealing in or restoring historic items, *Pawn Stars*, *American Pickers*, and *American Restoration* each bestow visual attention and narrative focus on individual objects. Items are often heralded for either their economic or cultural worth; in close up, the camera will pan over an item while text on the screen details the estimated cost of the item, calculates the possible economic profit it might garner for the business, or provides a bullet point overview of its historical relevance. Value is posited according to the item's uniqueness and the level at which it has been preserved. Each of these series use this graphic strategy to emphasize the item's economic and cultural significance. The function of this reoccurring graphic theme is two-fold.

First, the frequent relaying of information to the viewer masculinizes the process of viewing reality television, making it seem educational as opposed to the purported frivolous or feminized elements of reality television. History executives identifying such programs as "infotainment" signifies that the appeals to education or knowledge within these series contribute to History's masculinized branding.⁵ The male consumer audience

⁴ Thierry Devos & Mahzarin R. Banaji, "American = White?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 88, no. 3 (2005.)

⁵ Jon Lafayette, "History Woos Media Buyers With Data on Modern Men," *Broadcasting & Cable*, February 28, 2011; Madeleine Esch, "Picking Through History: 'Mantiques' and Masculinity in Artifactual Entertainment," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no. 5 (2017.)

is thereby constructed as educated and practical in contrast to the female consumer audience, commonly constructed as irrational and impulsive. Second, the emphasis on the economic and historical significance of the item masculinizes the nature of the show's focal business. Since consumption and shopping are largely associated with women, the pawn, antique, and restoration shops in each of these series must be distinguished as more masculine than the average consumer business or retail store. The attention these series pay to the historical and economic significance of their goods emphasizes profit. This particularizes consumption, especially antiquing and collecting, as masculine work rather than feminized hobby.

These series are devoted entirely to upholding *masculinized* and *American-made* items as historically, culturally, and economically significant. This largely reflects the channel's brand, which is devoted to representing a window of history that prioritizes male figures and American industry. In *American Pickers*, main cast members Mike and Frank explicitly state that they are on the hunt for 'mantiques,' which they describe as things with engines or rust. This implies that both the appearance and the function of the item are crucial to its economic desirability. Even had the cast members not explicitly gendered these items by labeling them as 'mantiques,' the frequent viewer can decipher this theme on their own. The show regularly prioritizes items that hail from American auto industries, prominent food and beverage brands, boyhood toy companies, and oil corporations. For example, the pair doles out \$900 for a weathered Martin Schwartz Script-Top Mobil Gas Pump in a Season 14 episode.⁶ Even though the pump is in fairly poor condition, Mike and

⁶ *American Pickers*, Season 14, Episode 11, "Who's the Rarest of them All?" produced by History, aired on January 6, 2016. <https://play.history.com/shows/american-pickers/season-14/episode-11>.

Frank rely on the brand name to justify their purchase, saying that they know it can sell for \$2,000. The brand name is significant for the cast of *American Pickers* because it not only increases the likelihood of their ability to profit, but also because it recalls the prominence of American industrialism and masculine entrepreneurialism. The American-made items and the masculinity they come to symbolize clarify the pickers' consumption and labor as masculine. The emphasis on profit and male-centered history clarifies the series as a masculinized text that aligns with History's blue-collar infotainment brand, which had already been well established by the time of *American Pickers'* premiere in 2010.

In the case of *American Restoration*, items more frequently recall a history of working-class sociability as opposed to industrial notoriety. In Season Seven, Episode One, for example, the cast restores a vintage barber chair, a motorcycle, and a fire truck.⁷ It is no coincidence that barbershops, motorcycle groups, and fire departments have each been stalwarts of working-class male sociability. In the episode, it is clarified that each item belonged to a different era of men: a client's grandfather, a client's father, and a 1930s team of L.A. firefighters, respectively. As the camera pans over the ratty vintage barber chair, a cast member provides voiceover that signals to the fraternal camaraderie bolstered by the barbershops of the early 1900s. He states, "Barber shops were the social clubs of the day. Guys would hang out for hours and catch up on current events, talk sports, whatever they wanted to do. When you got your 20 minutes in the chair, you were the king. These chairs were lavish. They were beautiful. They were comfortable. They were your throne."⁸ In this instance, the history of the average Joe—the man who was temporarily made to feel like a

⁷ History, "American Restoration: "Under Fire (Season 7, Episode 1) | Full Episode | History," YouTube video, 43:17, April 1, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KcX704bXNkg>.

⁸ Ibid.

"king" on his "throne"—is the history that is most worthy of recognition. Barbershops have historically been a space associated with *Black* male sociability. However, the scene fails to acknowledge this tradition.

Similarly, the client who brings in her late father's motorcycle for a full restoration boasts of his good times riding alongside his friends, and the historical society that brings in the vintage fire truck for restoration recalls the team of firefighters who would have operated the vehicle. These items are all deemed worthy of thorough restoration because of their imagined history of social significance among working-class men. Therefore, the series becomes not only about the restoration of the item, but also about recollecting the sense of fraternity associated with previous generations of blue-collar labor. The focus in *American Pickers* and *American Restoration* on masculinized goods and the past that they recall—whether of industry or sociability—reconciles the tension between the cast member's blue-collar appearance and his performative labor.

Although the primary goal of *American Pickers'* Mike and Frank is to find items that would bring money into their store, the series also includes segments in which the men travel to locations in the interest of simply viewing—not purchasing from—impressive collections of historical items. It is in these scenes that the duo function as interviewers or information gatherers, communicating the historical significance of items to the viewer. This can be seen in a Season 18 episode titled "Double Bubble Trouble," in which Mike and Frank travel to Michigan to view a collection of rare bubble-top cars, or in a Season 16 episode titled "Divide and Conquer," in which they travel to Racine, Wis. to view a local

man's collection of historical items related to the town.⁹ In both of these cases, Mike and Frank are not on the hunt for possible 'picks.' In fact, they don't purchase anything from either location. In such segments, Mike and Frank's pursuit is first and foremost for knowledge. Their business's name—Antique Archaeology—connects Mike and Frank's search for antiques to a very masculinized field of information gathering. The men must effectively tie their business and work to masculinized disciplines like archaeology or history to reconcile their traditional blue-collar image within the feminized realm of consumer culture.

Mike and Frank's labor is often portrayed as a hunt for treasure: a pursuit of historical, economic, and cultural knowledge. Success hinges on their ability to find historically and economically significant items within the crowded scene of a barn or attic like a real life 'I Spy' game. However, similar to consumption and shopping, antiquing and collecting have feminized and upper class connotations. More specifically, antiquing is a practice that was previously most associated with the very different, more highbrow *Antiques Roadshow*. Mike and Frank frequently refer to themselves as archeologists and compare their process of looking through garages, sheds, farmhouses, and storage spaces to "sifting for gold."¹⁰ These plot points frame them as treasure hunters with refined eyes. Where the viewer may see a hoarded mess, Mike and Frank revel in the possibility of uncovering gold. Although ties to archaeology and history may seem to reinforce the upper-class nature of antiquing, physically "sifting" through items and the ability to recall

⁹ Ibid; *American Pickers*, Season 16, Episode 17, "Divide and Conquer," produced by History, aired January 30, 2017. <https://www.history.com/shows/american-pickers/season-16/episode-17>.

¹⁰ *American Pickers*, Season 18, Episode 9, "Double Bubble Trouble," produced by History, aired February 5, 2018. <https://www.history.com/shows/american-pickers/season-18/episode-9>.

American industrial histories call upon a blue-collar set of skills and knowledge. The series must draw on a working-class and masculinized understanding of labor and profit in order to reconcile the cast members' work in a feminized sector, as well as to justify the presence of an antiquing series on a male-interest cable channel.

The business at the forefront of *Curse of Oak Island*, one of the channel's most highly rated series, is different from that of the pawn, antique, or restoration shop because its primary objective is not consumer-driven, but rather based in research.¹¹ This series explicitly represents how appeals to working-class imagery and forms of knowledge masculinize information-based labor common to the new economy. Main cast members Rick and Marty Lagina lead a team of dozens of men in their search for treasure on a small Canadian island. Similar to Mike and Frank on *American Pickers*, the Oak Island team members' labor is framed as a pursuit for knowledge. The Oak Island team members likewise compare themselves to archaeologists, literally sifting and digging for possible clues across the island. But they are on the hunt for a treasure that isn't just a chest filled with gold coins; cast members' dialogue, trailers, and narration frequently emphasize that the treasure could possibly be historically upheld items like the Holy Grail, Shakespearean manuscripts, or the Ark of the Covenant. This frames their search less as a selfish pursuit for riches or personal profit, and more as a culturally and historically significant mission.

Curse of Oak Island maintains a working-class sensibility through the team's reliance on construction lingo, trade knowledge, and physical labor, which exemplifies how History's blue-collar infotainment can elicit a sense of inclusion for the imagined male viewer. Cast members casually and regularly pepper terms like "oscillator," "box drains," or

¹¹ Unless you count the series itself as an arm of the Oak Island search team's business, in which case the primary objective is indeed consumer (viewer)-driven.

"caisson" throughout dialogue and, since there is rarely any definition or explanation provided within the episode, the implication is that the imagined audience already possesses such a vocabulary. Cast members' frequent use of phrases like "10x," "Hedden Shaft," "Money Pit," "Smith's Cove," and "Nolan's Cross" to denote specific sites or previous excavation projects also addresses the audience as a frequent viewer. The cast members' self-referential vocabulary enacts a sense of exclusivity. Only the returning viewer who possesses a working understanding of trade terminology may easily enjoy the show's dialogue. This vernacular incites a viewing position that privileges the attentive, returning, and particularly experienced audience, which encourages a feeling of empowerment in the viewer. A sense of masculine know-how and authority is shared between the on-screen cast and the knowledgeable at-home viewer.

The American Dream of White Male Authority

Another way that History masculinizes new economy labor—and in turn maintains its blue-collar infotainment brand—is through recurring themes of authority and American entrepreneurialism. Each series focuses on businesses with white, traditionally masculine men at their helm, each of whom are clarified as born and raised Americans. Even on *Curse of Oak Island*, which takes place in Canada and first aired on History Canada, Rick and Marty's upbringing in Michigan is frequently referenced. In these series, Americanness is connected to business leadership and economic control, both of which preserve the significance of the commanding white male worker and reinforce ideas about the performative labor of male authority.

The scholarship of Darren Nixon, who studies gender and work in the new economy, reveals how authority and power underlie the tensions between traditional masculine

values and feminized work.¹² His 2009 interviews illuminate working-class men's resistant attitudes toward performing or learning skills valued in a service economy, such as emotional labor, customer service, or hospitality. Such skills are largely considered antithetical to "the working-class masculine habitus."¹³ Nixon notes a gendered divide within service work, wherein women are more likely to heavily occupy positions in the home, retail, care, or hospitality fields and men are more likely to occupy positions as prison officers, warehouse/distribution workers, security guards, or taxicab drivers.¹⁴ Nixon concludes that men were more apt to partake in "masculine service niches" and were more likely to pursue or obtain service occupations that retained power, authority, or control over some aspect of the service encounter largely because men considered such positions in line with traditional performances of masculinity.¹⁵

In History's blue-collar infotainment, central male cast members are represented as maintaining control financially and symbolically, reinforcing traditional gender dynamics in the workplace. *Curse of Oak Island* cast members perform their authority primarily through episodic meetings that take place in what they identify as the 'War Room.' This phrase is most commonly used throughout military history to refer to the location where military leaders would discuss strategy and the current state of their troops. More colloquially, the phrase refers to a business headquarters room used for conference and planning. The phrase War Room itself references the need to masculinize sedentary work, communication, and teamwork and symbolizes the reservation of a distinct space for the

¹² Darren Nixon, "'I Can't Put a Smiley Face On': Working Class Masculinity, Emotional Labour, and Service Work in the 'New Economy,'" *Gender, Work, and Organization* 16, no. 3 (2009.)

¹³ Ibid, 303.

¹⁴ Ibid, 307.

¹⁵ Ibid, 318.

practice, enactment, and performance of male authority. For those who may not watch regularly, the War Room becomes a space that clarifies which cast members among the crowded ensemble cast hold the most authority: Rick and Marty, who are frequently seated at the head of the table. They are the primary financial backers of the exploration and thus occupy the primary authority position not just within the narrative but also within the War Room.

Interestingly, the War Room is a space almost exclusively occupied by older white men, reinforcing a gendered and aged power dynamic that emphasizes experienced masculine leadership in the workplace. In contrast, the construction teams and physical laborers are often comprised of younger males. For example, Marty's son, Alex, rarely appears in the War Room but frequently partakes in physical labor like running cables, digging, and sifting through mud and dirt. There is a generational divide in the forms of labor represented in the series. Although the men who meet in the War Room rarely partake in the physical labor of land excavation, drilling, or diving, the exclusivity of the War Room positions them as powerful and authoritative figures. This again hails a particular History viewer, one who may relish the image of an authoritative white male who has been recognized and rewarded for his experience.

History's *Ice Road Truckers* presents a unique mode of masculine authority since truckers are primarily employed as contractors. Cast members elect to partake in the seasonal haul of goods and machinery to a remote gold mining camp in the Arctic north of Alaska, and thus determine their own driving schedules. They have the right to refuse hauls and drive at a pace they see fit; however, they are economically motivated to make as many treks as fast as possible. As a result, drivers spend the majority of their time on the road

alone where they are, in essence, their own bosses. Cast members across these series are largely represented as autonomous businessmen who hold a level of control over their individual economic stability.

The theme of masculine authority is broadly enacted across History's blue-collar infotainment through the recurring centrality of the small businessman, a figure that has long been a cornerstone of the American Dream. The small businessman image reflects the neoliberal idea that American citizens have an equal opportunity for economic and social success so long as they display determination, an honest work ethic, and traffic through the proper bureaucratic channels. However, the small businessman image and the notion of the American Dream are troubling, as there are structural inequalities that maintain the likelihood of success for some while others face increased risk and decreased support. Individuals with varying and intersecting marginalized identities have historically been excluded from owning the means of production. Marginalized individuals were largely relegated to laboring positions that were poorly compensated and organized, while positions of ownership were reserved for more privileged white men. In History's blue-collar infotainment, the image of the small businessman secures an authoritative position for the expression of "the working-class masculine habitus" in the feminizing culture of the new economy.¹⁶

Nostalgic frames establish entrepreneurialism and authority as specifically *masculine* and *American* characteristics. Series such as *American Restoration*, *American Pickers*, and *Pawn Stars* lay out a legacy of American male ownership, framing historical industries and products as contributing to the success of contemporary male-owned

¹⁶ Nixon, 303.

businesses. In these series, the business owner's profit derives from his ability to acquire, restore, and sell masculinized items that primarily hail from American industrial businesses. This creates a cycle of male-centered economy from which the white male worker is able to continuously profit. Although some items may be more valuable based on their material composition—for example, a product made of high-quality metal like gold, silver, or copper—most are valued according to their cultural significance or rarity. For instance, Mike and Frank spent a whopping \$55,000 for a rare 1910 Royal Pioneer Motor Bike, of which only 500 were made and most of which were destroyed in a factory fire that consequentially shuttered the business.¹⁷ The Pioneer Motor Bike was projected to sell at \$92,000, turning a sizable profit for the pickers. This kind of transaction creates a cycle in which a contemporary American, male-owned consumer business is funded through an earlier American, male-owned industrial business. Even if the former business is long defunct, its items can still contribute to the economic success of a modern American businessman. This narrative trope provides a broad example of how a cycle of white male economic ownership maintains the image of the American male worker in a feminized consumer culture.

This cycle may also be seen on a smaller scale through the trope of the family-owned business, which projects the image of the authoritative male into the future. Casey Ryan Kelly has written about TV series like *Doomsday Preppers* that frame hegemonic masculinity as an "antidote for a crumbling and emasculated society."¹⁸ Kelly argues that such shows visibly demonstrate the "male subject's preparedness to return to

¹⁷ *American Pickers*, Season 9, Episode 1, "The Royal Risk," produced by History, aired May 27, 2013. <https://www.history.com/shows/american-pickers/season-9/episode-1>.

¹⁸ Casey Ryan Kelly, "The Man-pocalypse: *Doomsday Preppers* and the Rituals of Apocalyptic Manhood," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 36, no. 2-3 (2016): 96.

pre/industrial America."¹⁹ In such narratives, it is the father figure who is responsible for securing the future of his family and his own masculinity, as well as preserving the cultural significance of traditional gender roles. History's blue-collar infotainment is similarly preoccupied with ensuring that traditional masculine values not fall prey to an emasculating society. Again, the responsibility falls on the father figure to preserve past, maintain present, and project future renditions of traditional gender roles. On History, the trope of family-owned businesses secures a legacy of male authority, which similarly projects the blue-collar image into the future.

The *Pawn Stars* shop, in which three generations of men work, is a clear example of the prominence of family-centered authority. Family patriarch Rick Harrison, affectionately nicknamed 'Old Man,' originally opened the shop in 1989. The series follows him working alongside his son, Rick, who is the present-day manager; grandson Corey; and Corey's childhood friend Austin, better known as 'Chumlee.' The representation of three generations of men within this narrative simultaneously secures the past, present, and future of the male authority figure. The importance of family-owned industry is repeatedly emphasized in the series' narrative not just through the main cast members themselves, but through historical appeals, as well. For example, a Season Nine episode of *Pawn Stars* features Rick purchasing a Marlin Model 1894 rifle, one of the most expensive items featured in that season.²⁰ Text that is laid over an image of the rifle reads, "Marlin's two sons took over the company after his death in 1901." This scene is significant because it

¹⁹ Ibid, 110.

²⁰ *Pawn Stars*, Season 9, Episode 25, "Choo Choo Chum," produced by History, aired March 27, 2014. <https://play.history.com/shows/pawn-stars/season-9/episode-25>.

reemphasizes the legacy of an American family-owned business and reflects the patriarchal American Dream ideal that is embodied through 'Old Man' and his kin.

This emphasis on patrilineal legacies as fundamental to preserving masculine authority is also present in *Curse of Oak Island*. The series frames the cast's search for treasure as a continuation of the labors of previous generations of men. Historical references are often framed through the father/son team of Dan and David Blankenship. Dan, who first conducted research and excavation in search of the island's possible treasure in the 1960s, along with his son, Dave, are reintroduced to the treasure's lure when Rick and Marty first arrive on the island to begin their search in Season One. Although Dan is elderly and appears very frail—having trouble even walking at some points throughout the series—he is still considered a prominent member of the team. His previous work on the island, especially his history of very physical and risky labor, informs his role as a valuable contributor on the modern search team. Dan passed away at age 95 just before the start of the series' 2018 season. The Season Seven premiere episode, titled "The Torch is Passed," aired shortly after his passing and heavily focused on the impact he had on the course of the search.²¹ In that episode, the Oak Island team remembers him as a local "hero" and a "legend." Dan's history of labor on the island is understood as laying the groundwork for the contemporary team, which aligns with the cycle of masculine control established through the channel's theme of white male authority figures. On History, elders like Dan and 'Old Man,' and even the generations of men before them and the businesses they owned, are to be respected for their contributions to the success of the modern

²¹ *Curse of Oak Island*, Season 7, Episode 1, "The Torch is Passed," produced by History, aired November 5, 2019. <https://play.history.com/shows/the-curse-of-oak-island/season-7/episode-1>.

American businessman. In this cycle, the prominence of the generations of men and their labors that industrialized America's past will always be remembered and idolized.

Distinguishing Between Performative & Owned Skills

It is worth noting that there are layers to the labor being represented within these programs. According to Mark Rademacher and Casey Kelly, masculinized television series centering on consumer culture, like A&E's *Storage Wars*, appropriate feminized skills of consumption, thrift, and teamwork to fit into a masculinized skill set of self-reliance, individualism, and competition.²² The scholars argue that this reframing of the feminized as masculine recuperates hegemonic masculinity in the feminizing culture of the new economy.²³ History's reality series similarly attempt to resolve this dissonance by alternating between work that requires hard and work that requires soft skills, a necessity of the consumer-oriented labor represented in these programs. Since Mike, Frank, Rick Dale, and Rick Harrison are each attempting to operate a successful and profitable consumer business, they are required to perform customer service, listening, and communication skills. But cast members are also seen conducting physical work and employing hard skills. On *American Pickers*, Mike and Frank climb on piles of cluttered oil drums and cars; on *American Restoration*, Rick Dale operates a blow torch and hammers dents out of a piece of sheet metal; on *Ice Road Truckers*, drivers heave straps atop their trucks' oversized loads and tighten them with a wrench. This is work that seemingly comes naturally to the male cast members, who must effectively blend their use of soft and hard

²² Mark A. Rademacher & Casey R. Kelly, "'I'm Here to Do Business. I'm Not Here to Play Games.' Work, Consumption, and Masculinity in *Storage Wars*," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* (2015.)

²³ Ibid, 4.

skills to be successful at work. However, not all skills are represented as equally belonging to each cast member.

Curse of Oak Island frequently emphasizes the physical and dangerous labor of previous generations of treasure hunters to justify the current team's employment of soft skills. This frames cast members' archival work, drafting design, and use of technology as more refined and educated approaches to the hunt. The soft skills seen throughout the series become a continuance of and improvement over the previous generations of labor, which are recalled as risky and physically strenuous. Nearly every episode of the series recounts an incident called 'The Restall Tragedy,' in which four men died in the island's shafts in 1965. This recollection informs how the viewer is meant to see the current team's use of technology—like sonar equipment, advanced metal detectors, and high definition cameras—as well as their use of heavy machinery. Such equipment allows the team to make informed decisions before they begin any heavy excavation or physical work, which in turn contributes to workers' safety.

The team's reliance on technology and machinery could be framed as weak and effeminate in comparison to the extreme physical labor performed by previous generations of men or in different History series. The cast members' sedentary labor is at risk of appearing quite dainty if episodes are scheduled to be bookended by series like *Ax Men*, *Forged in Fire*, or *Swamp People*, which proudly display hardened skills and physical labor. However, each episode of *Curse of Oak Island* opens with a title sequence that retells the island's curse, stating that seven men must die in their pursuit of the treasure before it can be found. This introduces a level of risk that heightens the narrative stakes from the outset. The historical context of previous men's work—six men have died so far—positions the

current use of machinery and technology as masculine savvy. The modern team is perhaps superior to the previous teams of men because its members have access to a technology that diminishes their own risk of injury or death. This framing is in direct contrast to the prominence of injury as it appears throughout other History blue-collar infotainment series like *Ax Men* or *Forged in Fire*. Whereas the ability to withstand and recover from injury is framed in those programs as masculine determination and skilled bodily ability, the ability to divert or diminish injury in *Curse of Oak Island* is seen as a performative enactment of the benefits of advancements in masculine knowledge. Whereas physical skill is acknowledged as diminishing risk and improving reward in those series, knowledge and technology are framed as the premiere solution in *Curse of Oak Island*.

Men on *American Pickers*, *American Restoration*, *Pawn Stars*, and *Curse of Oak Island* can be read as much less rigid than cast members of *Ax Men*, *Swamp People*, and *Forged in Fire*. The representation of these casts likely reflects the structure of each respective program. *American Restoration*, *American Pickers*, *Pawn Stars*, and *Curse of Oak Island* feature primary cast members who carry the narrative focus of the show. Rick Dale, Mike and Frank, 'Old Man' and 'Chumlee,' and Rick and Marty occupy the majority of series' airtime and often partake in narration. By contrast, the ensemble casting of *Ax Men*, *Swamp People*, and *Forged in Fire* means there is no one star or even one group of laborers who are the series' main focus. *Ax Men*, for example, features four separate logging companies. This casting strategy allows for the quick movement between scenes, sub plots, locations, and cast members. In those series, no single cast member is responsible for carrying the entertainment of the series. Ensemble casting allows individual participants to get away with curt and rigid performances. The lack of ensemble casting in *American Restoration*,

American Pickers, *Pawn Stars*, and *Curse of Oak Island* means that cast members must come across as more redeeming, relatable, and likable; they must more effectively complete the performative labor of being on a reality TV program.

Across these series, the male cast member is made to multitask, balancing his hardened persona and his performative duty. The ability of Hugh 'Polar Bear' Rowland, a main cast member for *Ice Road Truckers*' first eight seasons, to effectively marry these tasks undoubtedly contributes to his status as a fan favorite. Heavy set and burly, he most closely resembles the casts of *Forged in Fire* and *Ax Men*. He walks in sub-zero temperatures with his flannel sleeves pushed up to his elbows, is competitive against other truckers, curses wildly, and speaks in a hoarse yet booming tone. The 'Polar Bear' is the embodiment of History's branded traditional masculinity. But since the majority of the ice road trucker's time is spent isolated in his cab for up to 40 hours, his duty also includes informing and somehow entertaining the viewer at home. Throughout his tenure on the show, he has sung, set off flares, pulled pranks, told harrowing stories from his years in the business, explained trucker/mechanical lingo, and vented about family issues or economic pressures. The layers of labor in these series—hard and soft skills/trade and performative labor—create a space for the remapping of feminized traits onto masculinized bodies.

The overwhelming displays of masculinity across History's blue-collar infotainment make women's appearances all the more obtrusive. As a result, narration and visuals must work to temper the threatening female presence, and gendered differences must be heightened. Just as the male presence is made glaringly macho, like that of the 'Polar Bear,' the female presence must be made glaringly feminine. Since labor and authority are constructed as inherently owned by the male cast member, his performance reads as

authentic to his identity. In opposition, the female cast member's work is framed as performative—something to be visually consumed by the heterosexual male viewer. Female cast members may only temporarily and superficially embody the masculine skill set. The blue-collar image is constructed as belonging to the man; the woman can only *perform* it.

Katelyn's introduction in Season Six of *Ax Men* exemplifies the framing of female cast members' skills as performative. The viewer first sees Katelyn in a sequence that is starkly different from the introduction of any male cast member of History's blue-collar infotainment. The first shot of Katelyn is focused on her midriff as the camera pans across the pink bikini strings peeking out above the belt-buckled waist of her denim shorts.²⁴ The camera subsequently focuses on her heart tattoo, bracelet, and cowgirl boots before the viewer first sees her face. The camera work frames her body as decorative. She is something for the visual entertainment of the imagined male viewer, a subject for his heterosexual gaze. Throughout her introductory episode, Katelyn is seen surprising male cast members with her sharp shooting skills and her ability to drive a motor boat at high speed. The camera regularly focuses on her body to contrast her more masculinized skills of sharpshooting and driving with her feminine appearance. Her femininity and her difference is heightened through repeated wide shots that frame her standing next to overweight, disheveled male cast members. In this occurrence, the female must be made into the hyper-sexualized, the petite, and the ultra-feminine in order to comfortably fit within the male-dominated workplace. This frames her skills as a shocking and sexy performance for the consumption of the male viewer.

²⁴ History, "Ax Men: Meet Katelyn | History," YouTube video, 2:00, March 21, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YpoGoGwrsG0>.

The effort to distinguish and ultimately temper the value of the female skill set is best exemplified through *Ice Road Truckers'* framing of its first female cast member, Lisa Kelly. Lisa's gender is repeatedly referenced throughout the series, especially in early episodes that utilize narration and visuals to justify her presence and explain her difference. When she appears in the Season Three premiere introductory sequence, she is shot in close up to emphasize her blonde highlights, shimmering lip gloss, and eye makeup.²⁵ This is in stark opposition to how male cast members are shot in the introductory sequence; they appear in wide framed, unflattering shots from a distance with their arms crossed. Male cast members are also filmed from a low angle, which makes them appear larger in stature and almost heroic. By comparison, Lisa's close up—shot from a higher angle reminiscent of a beauty shot or an acting reel—makes her appear petite. Since trucking is an inherently isolated gig, Lisa is not seen working alongside any men. As exemplified by the visual framing of Katelyn in *Ax Men*, physical difference can be heightened when women and men are shot together side-by-side. In *Ice Road Truckers*, the viewer is not treated to any shots of male truckers' reactions to or interactions with Lisa that exemplify her physical difference from the men of her trade. However, the narration works in the same way those images would have.

Within her roughly two-minute introductory package at the start of Season Three, Episode Two, the narrator makes repeated reference to a tension between Lisa's gender and this line of work. The narrator introduces her narrative arc in the opening teaser,

²⁵ Although she appears in the Season Three premiere introductory sequence, Lisa does not appear in the series' main narrative until Season Three, Episode Two; *Ice Road Truckers*, Season 3, Episode 1, "Deadliest Ice Road," produced by History, aired May 31, 2009. <https://www.history.com/shows/ice-road-truckers/season-3/episode-1>.

stating simply: "A female trucker takes on the haul road."²⁶ Lisa's difference becomes the primary focus of her appearance throughout her introduction. The narration continues: "Out of more than 200 truckers on the Dalton, only three are women. And at 28 years old, Lisa is the youngest . . . As a woman working in a man's world, she had to want it more than anyone else . . . In an industry dominated by men, Lisa's career choice shocks the guys."²⁷ Narration stresses that Lisa's presence is an oddity in the industry. The narration and visuals also represent Lisa as less skilled than her male counterparts. The narrator frames her as a novice, stating that she "has only been ice road trucking for two years" and "is a former school bus driver."²⁸ The title of the episode, "Rookie Run," reinforces that Lisa is new to the gig, and the remainder of the episode follows her attempt to "prove her worth" by making a run in record time.²⁹ Unlike the men in the series, this work is represented as not inherently belonging to her.

Narration that emphasizes her skills as that of a novice works in tandem with her appearance throughout the package. Although we first see her partaking in the very physical labor of strapping down a heavy load to her truck, her appearance throughout the remainder of the segment is child-like and flirty. She wears her hair in two braids that drape across her shoulders, sports a red fitted sweater, and again has on a visible amount of lip gloss and eyeliner. In the final shot of the sequence, she is seen from a distant aerial shot as she blows a kiss from the window of her truck's cab. Within her first several minutes on the series, producers have infantilized and sexualized her presence. Lisa's

²⁶ *Ice Road Truckers*, Season 3, Episode 2, "Rookie Run," produced by History, aired June 7, 2009. <https://play.history.com/shows/ice-road-truckers/season-3/episode-2>.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

sudden appearance is explained in a way that distinguishes her presence as more performative than that of the male cast members, assuring that she poses no threat to their economic stability.

The series' move to a new location at the start of Season Three is also a crucial part of how Lisa's initial appearance is framed. The narrator emphasizes the danger of this new route, announcing that it is "such a deadly route [that the truckers] earn the equivalent of combat pay."³⁰ A trucker augments this statement saying: "They don't pay us so much because it's easy. The girl scouts aren't up there doing that."³¹ This sexist statement speaks to the sudden presence of a young woman in the series. Lest the viewer think Lisa must be more skilled to venture onto this treacherous route, the narrator quickly explains that companies are grappling with a low level of applicants and must lower their standards. An operations manager explains in an interview that the trucking companies are desperate and "will take anyone."³² This lowers the expectations and assumed skills of the driver, which justifies the presence of the series' first female driver. Her appearance must be tamed through the explanation that her skills are different (code for inferior to) her male counterparts. According to this narrative, she can perform these skills to the best of her ability, but such labor will never fully *belong* to her.

Across History's blue-collar infotainment, male cast members are represented as far more versatile and flexible than female workers. The male worker is represented as able to embody soft skills like communication, teamwork, performance, and customer service as well as hard skills like physicality, resilience, and trade knowledge. The male cast member's

³⁰ *Ice Road Truckers*, "Deadliest Ice Road."

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

ability to blend hard and soft skills makes him appear as a well-rounded and therefore more valuable worker in comparison to the female cast member's limited and more performative set of skills. Yet, this is part of what makes Lisa's appearance in *Ice Road Truckers* so transgressive. Although her gender is exhaustively addressed throughout her four-season tenure, Lisa ultimately represents a rarity on History Channel. She partakes in the labor that is the primary focus of the series, has become a fan favorite, and is also a main cast member on the spin-off series *IRT: Deadliest Roads*. Her continued presence as both a main cast member on a male-dominated cable channel and as a successful worker in a male-dominated industry is undeniably worth recognition.

Conclusion: The Exploitative Nature of Blue-Collar Branding

Some may argue that series like *American Pickers*, *American Restoration*, *Pawn Stars*, and *Curse of Oak Island*, which represent more nuanced and less rigid expressions of gender and labor, have broadened History's politics of representation. It can be said that the channel has created a spectrum of masculine traits, values, and bodies. Although the spectrum is short and prioritizes whiteness and traditional manliness, the inclusion of a strong female presence like Lisa Kelly and the softening of the masculinized skill set may signify that the channel is augmenting its illustrations of gender and work. Ultimately, however, any minor appearance of less rigid masculinity is counterbalanced with a plethora of hypermasculine images and personas, like that of Hugh "Polar Bear" Rowland or any number of contestants on *Forged and Fire*. Throughout these representations of work, white masculinity becomes the prevailing marker of economic authority and success.

As a whole, History's blue-collar infotainment is preoccupied with preserving past, present, and future renditions of American masculinity. Even though the channel has

devoted so much time to representing "American" labor, it has excluded and ignored any talk of the true nature of American capitalism. Across History's reality series, there is little mention of unions, benefits, compensation, the drawbacks of working for major industrial corporations, or the difficulties of being in business for oneself. Especially in *Pawn Stars*, *American Pickers*, *American Restoration*, and *Curse of Oak Island*, work is represented as family time, hobby, pleasure, and passion. Labor becomes the 'end-all be-all' of American life in these series.

History Channel's ability to profit from the mediation of the images of both the small businessman and of the nostalgic industrial worker reflects distinct power dynamics. History's focus on Rick's pawnshop or Mike and Frank's Antique Archaeology has undoubtedly rocketed those businesses to fame and likely boosted their foot traffic, notoriety, and sales. For these businesses, becoming the center of a reality program is likely a commercial branding godsend. Although little information is publicly available or reliable about how History compensates its stars, paychecks have undoubtedly padded cast members' bank accounts, aided in the funding of highly expensive cross country travel or, in the case of *Curse of Oak Island*, somewhat ameliorated the burden of a seemingly never ending dig into a 'Money Pit.'

For those workers on *Ax Men*, *Swamp People*, *Forged in Fire*, or *Ice Road Truckers*, however, the publicity of being on a reality show works quite differently. Since the lumberjacks, blacksmiths, truckers, and alligator hunters in these series lack an existing brand or business that the public can seek out or patronize, those cast members are not presented with the opportunity to reap supplementary financial benefits through public attention. They are paid for their appearance on the program and for their work in the field.

Many of these workers are already poorly compensated or organized. It is unlikely that the compensation for these cast members' real-life forms of work increases, as it does for those small business owners who may be able to profit from the increased notoriety brought on by History's cameras.

Although cast members may jump on to licensing or book deals, it is unlikely they receive sharp profits through such opportunities. Licensing deals tend to ultimately privilege corporations over individuals. The licensee normally is cut a check for signing the deal, but the ultimate profit often goes to the primary company—the licensor, not the licensee. In the case of licensing deals for cast members of *Swamp People* or *American Pickers* (which include products like books and bobble heads), such items primarily function as free PR for History Channel as they ultimately drive traffic to the channel's programming. Licensing deals are rare for History cast members, however, and in most cases either History or parent company A&E own whatever products are available for sale that are related to their programming. History has refined a branding strategy centered on the traditional American white male as a way to market the channel to an imagined set of consumers and to advertisers. If the businesses in *Pawn Stars* and *American Pickers* are able to profit from a history of male-centered businesses, so too is History Channel profiting from an extension of that same cycle. For History Channel, the ability to profit off both the performative and lived labor of cast members is seemingly an endless opportunity.

Chapter 4

Conclusion: The Commercial Drive Behind History's Authentic Masculine

Lifestyle Brand

History's blue-collar infotainment enacts the fantasy of a traditionally masculine lifestyle and hails the nostalgic, white male viewer. History's *Ax Men*, *Swamp People*, *American Restoration*, and *Forged in Fire* exemplify the continuous visual significance of the physically laboring male body. The centrality of the white male figure makes clear that the channel's sense of nostalgia is reserved for particular histories and particular bodies. Reoccurring themes of injury and recovery, the glorification of the violent capabilities of the male body, and the disciplining of gendered and racial difference contribute to History's masculine and traditionally blue-collar mode of address. Other themes as they appear in series such as *Ice Road Truckers*, *American Restoration*, *American Pickers*, *Pawn Stars*, and *Curse of Oak Island* center on masculine forms of knowledge and entrepreneurialism to reconcile the image of the American male worker to an economy and consumer culture constructed as feminizing. In these series, cycles of male authority and profitability project the American businessman image from the past, in the present, and into the future. These themes ultimately reveal how History functions as a site in which white masculinity as a cultural signal is produced, circulated, enacted, and commercialized.

History's masculinized lifestyle brand holds commercial and ideological implications. The channel's nostalgic retellings of an industrial past and its construction of an American-centered identity reproduces specific worldviews to address a masculinized subcultural forum that holds conservative values. The form of masculinity that is idealized

on History resembles the popular blue-collar American image and reflects traditional notions about race, gender, nation, and labor. In a TV landscape that is constantly growing and diversifying, History hails a niche, commercially desirable male audience through its idolization of traditional identities.

This research contributes to a subsection of media studies in which there is a dearth of scholarship: studies of masculinities. While much scholarship exists on feminized media, which is of course necessary and illuminating, more attention must be paid to masculinized media and the ideologies they circulate. Niche male audiences have become a major market for advertisers and History has been constructed as a distinct space through which to effectively address the male consumer. This research fills a void in the existing scholarship by considering History Channel's blue-collar infotainment and the cultural anxieties it addresses as a response to the feminized and socially liberal-minded trend of lifestyle media.

Although my arguments are the culmination of detailed industrial, cultural, and textual analysis, there are undoubtedly limitations to my findings. This research focuses more on the tactics History employs to construct its audience, as opposed to uncovering the lived identities, values, and interests of its actual viewers. Like most subsections of media studies, there is a particular lack of research on the audiences of masculinized media, a neglect that future research should address. While some sociology and media researchers locate their focus on extremist media texts such as far-right news blogs or alt-right Twitter and its users, there is little scholarship on how audiences engage with masculinized media objects that are more covert in their politics, like that of History Channel. History Channel's conservative politics are veiled due in part to its longstanding educational brand

associations. Appeals to information, knowledge, and history represent the channel as an apolitical, fact-based forum. Scholars and audiences alike should be more critical of media texts like those of History's reality series that attempt to exhibit a moderate, middle-of-the-road sensibility and make such an effort to show that they traffic in facts. History's blue-collar infotainment appears apolitical and does not explicitly address the political sphere but has political ramifications nonetheless. Although it may seem secondary to the channel's blue-collar branding, History's seemingly apolitical yet surreptitiously conservative nature is a primary contributor to its commercial success.

History as a Competitive Lifestyle Brand

History's distinctly themed reality programming points to the increasingly competitive nature of cable television. Since the early days of the medium, television has continuously adapted to industrial changes like the accessibility of home video, the development of cable, the consolidation of companies, and the popularity of streaming.¹ The proliferation of media and the increasing segmentation of audiences continue to encourage the development of unique brands and competitive original content. Since the majority of television content is ad-driven, networks and channels must simultaneously maintain their commercial appeal and attract commercially desirable niche audiences. In the face of increased competition, many TV networks have turned to diverse casting, politicized issues, and minority audiences to form a branded niche appeal.² Specifically, cultural diversity has been recognized as a popular strategy for cable channels and

¹ Douglas Banks Hindman & Kenneth Wiegand, "The Big Three's Prime-Time Decline: A Technological and Social Context," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 52, no. 1 (2008.)

² Daniel G. McDonald & Shu-Fang Lin, "The Effect of New Networks on TV's Diversity," *The Journal of Media Economics* 17, no. 2 (2004.)

networks looking to develop recognizable brands.³ There then exists a market for a televisual space that is the inverse of that embrace of diversity, one that is devoid of such edgy or progressive content. It is here that History's brand emerges. History Channel capitalizes on this vacuum through the creation of a distinctly branded space that does not invoke or engage overtly with politics and diversity. For History Channel, the *shunning* of cultural diversity becomes a competitive strategy for brand management in a diversifying TV landscape.

Given the homogeneity of its casts, print and digital promotional advertisements for History's blue-collar infotainment become a space to communicate the lack of diversity on the channel. The presence of ensemble casts in these promotional images simultaneously draws attention to the lack of diversity in these series while it refrains from explicitly mentioning it. The repeated use of the label "American" in series' titles as well as the recurrent appearance of American maps, red and white stripes, and flags in promotional ads reveal how the channel utilizes patriotic imagery to package its blue-collar infotainment as a conservative rendition of lifestyle TV. For example, a promo for *American Restoration* features main cast member Rick Dale sporting a light blue denim shirt with the sleeves torn off as he stands in front of the red and white striped front end of a truck.⁴ A framed photograph of his family and fellow cast members appear in the lower right of the image. The inclusion of the ensemble cast, especially members of Rick's family, emphasizes the series' whiteness, the presence of heterosexual coupling, and the importance of conservative family values. Interestingly, Rick regularly appear in promos wearing that

³ Melanie S. Kohnen, "Cultural Diversity as Brand Management on Cable Television," *Media Industries Journal* 2, no. 2 (2015.)

⁴ Image accessed at "American Restoration History," *WhooshStudios*, accessed April 6, 2020. <https://www.whooshstudios.com/american-restoration-history>.

same blue cut-off shirt, often positioned in front of shimmering red and white items of Americana like refrigerators or cars. In these promotional ads, Rick literally embodies the blue of the red, white, and blue flag as he stands beneath the "American" label of his series' title. For the imagined conservative-minded viewer, the emphasis on American identity and lack of diversity packages History's blue-collar infotainment as apolitical content.

The embodiment of American identity is also seen in promotions for *American Pickers*. An image posted to the channel's website superimposes a map of the United States onto the profiles of cast members' Mike and Frank's faces.⁵ The areas of California, Oregon, Washington, Nevada, and Utah—a region commonly associated with the Western frontier—appear atop Mike's face. The region of Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio ranging down to the southern states of Louisiana and Florida cover Frank's. In this case, the men are explicitly linked with areas of America that evoke very rural and traditional connotations, excluding the Northeast region altogether. This emphasis on traditional American identity undoubtedly informs Mike and Frank's constructed blue-collar identity and reflects History's conservative lifestyle branding.

Print and digital promotional ads for History's blue-collar infotainment regularly feature only two elements: cast members and a symbol of their work. For example, ads for *Ice Road Truckers* regularly feature cast members at the forefront of the image with a rig behind them, and ads for *Forged in Fire* feature the series' judges standing in front of a flaming forge. Such imagery implies a tie between the cast members and their labor that evokes a masculine sense of lifestyle, one in which labor is the primary determinant of each

⁵ Image accessed at "American Pickers," *History*, accessed April 6, 2020. <https://www.history.com/shows/american-pickers>.

one's characterization. This representation connects with traditional notions of masculinity and labor and therefore indicates the channel's conservative yet apolitical branding.

History's lifestyle brand addresses an imagined male audience that desires conservative values like patriotism, traditional representations of identity and family, and is critical of mainstream media's emphasis on diversity. The intentional centrality of the American, heterosexual, white male is unspoken yet dominant in both the channel's series and its promotional materials. History's masculinized and conservative iteration of lifestyle television suggests implications that are both ideological and economical. Ideologically, History's politics of representation, themes, and narratives recuperate the image of the white male, becoming a space where whiteness and masculinity can be assigned conservative meanings. Economically, this rendition of lifestyle TV creates a competitive brand with the potential to attract an ad-friendly niche audience that History may then effectively market to media buyers. History's lifestyle TV is a conservative response to the networks and channels that utilize diversity as a strategy for brand management.

Looking to the Past for Aspiration

The general concept of lifestyle is used to frame demographic and psychographic differences, organizing people into social groups according to overlapping values and interests.⁶ Commercially, lifestyle branding is perceived as a somewhat exacting strategy that allows marketers to more particularly and efficiently target consumer audiences according to their desires and ideals. Lifestyle brands are understood as forward thinking in nature, often constructing the imagined consumer's sense of self as malleable and

⁶ Maureen Ryan, "Life-Style: The History of an Idea" in *Lifestyle Media in American Culture: Gender, Class, and the Politics of Ordinariness*, (New York: Routledge, 2018.)

aspiring.⁷ A common criticism of lifestyle media is that it polices expressions of gender, race, and sexuality through an aspirational tone of self-improvement. Such programs like *What Not to Wear* (2003-2013), *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003-2007), or *Extreme Home Makeover* (2003-2012) are often charged with offering representations and consumer solutions that are gender-conforming and align with middle- to upper-class, white-hetero tastes.⁸

As opposed to upper-class forms of respectability, History's rendition of lifestyle television encourages aspiration for rugged, traditional, and working-class representations of race, gender, and labor. Nostalgic frames within these programs represent the pining for a traditionally masculine lifestyle, one that embraces previous renditions of macho performances and blue-collar modes of work. These series' documentary style depicts how men preserve an authentic and traditional way of life that is rooted in the past. This differs from feminized forms of lifestyle media, which largely project an idealized view of either an individualized or collective future. For example, a major theme of Netflix's reboot *Queer Eye* (2018-) is the repeated call for acceptance and equality among diverse identities. On the individual level, the *Queer Eye* cast promises a better, more improved future for the makeover participant. On a broader scale, the series is often referenced as a step toward an idealized, socially progressive future for media as well as for society.⁹ Whereas much lifestyle programming looks to the future for motivation, History looks to the past.

⁷ Maureen Ryan, "Empires of the Everyday: Gender, Entertaining, and the Emergence of Lifestyle Media" in *Lifestyle Media in American Culture: Gender, Class, and the Politics of Ordinarity* (New York: Routledge, 2018.)

⁸ Robert Westerfelhaus & Celeste Lacroix, "Seeing 'Straight' through *Queer Eye*: Exposing the Strategic Rhetoric of Heteronormativity in Mediated Rituals of Gay Rebellion," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 23, no. 5 (2006.)

⁹ Millie Feroze, "What *Queer Eye* Has Taught Society," *Glamour UK*, March 15, 2019.

History's promotional materials become a space for the communication of the nostalgic blue-collar image as an aspirational lifestyle. Promos glaringly heighten the channel's representations of machismo and danger well beyond the level at which they appear in the series themselves. In promotional ads that emphasize risk, violence, and the possibility of death, cast members appear heroic, stoic, and rugged. They often wear leather and denim jackets that differ from their usual garments, resembling classic American machismo images like that of the rock star or cowboys. They hold tools and weapons, lean against vintage cars, and stand in power poses with their arms folded. Promos feature taglines like "The most dangerous frontier in history" (*Ax Men*), "Best blade wins" (*Forged in Fire*), and "There's fresh blood in the swamp" (*Swamp People*). Promotional ads for *Ice Road Truckers* feature terrifying imagery like a truck puncturing through ice or dangling at the edge of a cliff, with the text "a job to die for" at the top.¹⁰ History's promotional ads center on the most dangerous aspects of these careers and tease a sense of hypermasculine aspiration.

Although History glorifies working-class labor, it predominantly features advertisements for commercial items that align with middle- to upper-class tastes. Although detailed information about the channel's advertisers is rarely made public, ads for trucks, high-end cars, camping equipment, and home improvement tools have appeared regularly during my own cable viewing of History Channel. This largely reflects the demographics of History's audience. According to its media kit, roughly 56 percent of History's audience has a household income exceeding \$50,000, with 38 percent above

¹⁰ Image accessed at "When Does Ice Road Truckers Season 12 Start on History?" *ReleaseDateTV*, August 12, 2017. <https://releasedatetv.com/ice-road-truckers-season-12-start-history-release-date/>.

\$75,000.¹¹ This, alongside the fact that almost half of the audience has a college degree, signifies that it is unlikely most viewers currently are employed in the working-class careers that are represented in History's blue-collar infotainment.¹² Perhaps the viewer is imagined as working odd jobs in these fields during their younger years, having had a father or grandfather employed in these trades, or partaking in forms of work like car repair, 'mantiquing,' or restoration as hobbies in their spare time. Regardless of their actual association with these lines of work, middle-class viewers are desirable to a commercially driven cable channel because of their assumed level of class mobility, disposable income, and spending power. The discrepancies between the identities of the men on screen and the identities of the imagined History audience create a space that enacts a sense of fantasy and aspiration. History's nostalgic narratives invite the middle-class male viewer to revel in the fantasy of a blue-collar lifestyle.

Glances to the past, however, are not universally nostalgic. Only those individuals who have historically held power and wealth, such as able-bodied, heterosexual white men, would find comfort and aspiration in the past while others who have historically been or continue to be marginalized or oppressed must look to the future for hope. History presents nostalgia and aspiration for an imagined past, one in which men were self-sustaining and productive, and the social mores and taboos of contemporary politics reinforced, rather than threatened, male power. This nostalgic aspiration represents a more conservative response to the socially liberal-minded lifestyle subgenre, positioning traditional representations of gender, race, sexuality, and labor as ideal for both the

¹¹ EffectTV, "History Channel One Sheet," accessed February 15, 2020.

<https://www.effectv.com/content/history-channel>.

¹² Ibid.

individual and society. Lifestyle TV as it appears on History is less about the fantasy of upward mobility and more about aspiring to an authentically masculine lifestyle.

The Commercial Appeal of Authentic Masculinity

The commercial success of History's lifestyle brand relies on the viewer's impression of its narratives and performances as authentic. Broadly speaking, reality television's casting of "average" folks has established the prominence of the "ordinary celebrity" figure.¹³ However, the modern ordinary celebrity figure increasingly resembles the Hollywood celebrity figure. Series like *The Bachelor*, *Keeping Up With The Kardashians*, and *The Real Housewives* cherry pick conventionally attractive, upper class, well-dressed, and professionally done-up "ordinary" individuals. In essence, the standards for what qualifies as "ordinary" have shifted. The enhanced appearances of ordinary celebrities have led to an unprecedented volume of branding opportunities and the emergence of an influencer culture; History's commercial appeal, however, relies on a very different form of authentic address.

In a sea of reality TV stars who look incredibly "produced" or "manufactured," History cast members read as remarkably "ordinary" and "authentic." The channel's new slogan, released in 2011, "History: Made Every Day," points to History's renewed focus on the 'Average Joe,' the everyday history maker. In History's blue-collar infotainment, cast members may be overweight, have missing teeth, dress in stained clothes, or have unkempt beards, but they unequivocally appear *real*. This analysis is not meant to disparage cast

¹³ Helen Wood, Jilly Boyce Kay, & Mark Banks, "The Working Class, Ordinary Celebrity, and 'Illegitimate' Cultural Work," in *Media and Class: TV, Film, and Digital Culture*, edited by Judy Deery (New York: Routledge, 2017); Su Holmes, "Reality TV and 'Ordinary' People: Re-visiting Celebrity, Performance, and Authenticity," in *Trans-Reality Television: The Transgression of Reality, Genre, Politics, and Audience*, eds. Sofie Van Bauwel & Nico Carpenter (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2010.)

members' appearances, but rather to establish the context within which they and their lifestyle read as authentic. A History executive is quoted calling these cast members "pioneering frontiersmen," wording that reveals how these representations are wrapped up in the fantasy of authentic—and traditionally American—masculinity.¹⁴ Although these programs sometimes play for laughs—like when the title character from *The Legend of Shelby the Swamp Man* encounters an escalator for the first time while navigating a new life in the "big city"—these series primarily invite authentic, as opposed to ironic or critical, viewing from the middle-class viewer. Cast members' authenticity encourages a sense of aspiration for a lifestyle that is represented as purely and distinctly masculine, one that is untouched by the feminizing process of contemporary work and consumer culture. This informs a sense of fantasy for the viewer who is imagined as restricted by the social mores and taboos of a feminizing society. This lifestyle is not readily available to him because of his 'middle-class-ness,' but clarified as exclusively (and imaginatively) belonging to him.

The reading of cast members' performances as authentic assuredly relies on successful appeals to reality. The viewer believes that Troy is an *actual* alligator hunter or that Hugh 'Polar Bear' Rowland is an *actual* ice road trucker. Cast members' real-life lines of work contribute to the programs' sense of authenticity, making their blue-collar performances seem an attainable lifestyle for men. Media scholar Laurie Ouellette asserts that an emphasis on choice is a hallmark of lifestyle programming, representing self-improvement as an ongoing, neoliberal project.¹⁵ On History, self-improvement is framed as a return to traditional masculinity and labor. Physical and industrial labor, because of their emphasis on bodily abilities, are understood as more natural or *authentic* to men than

¹⁴ "History is on a Roll." *Advertising Age*.

¹⁵ Laurie Ouellette, *Lifestyle TV* (New York: Routledge, 2016.)

new economy labor. Labor becomes a crucial component of the aspiration and fantasy that History is selling. However, the hoped-for viewer is in fact not like these men in his own labor identity. But since these series represent the capabilities of the male body as biologically inherent and therefore innately superior to the capabilities of the female body, the authentic lifestyle represented in the program is constructed as something that is always attainable for the imagined History viewer. His class mobility affords him the fantasy that choice will always allow him to return to the blue-collar forms of labor that are more authentic to his masculine sense of self.

As scholarship on lifestyle branding and influencer culture has demonstrated, the framing of celebrity as attainable encourages the viewer's sense of aspiration and the likelihood of engaging with sponsored products.¹⁶ History's glorification of a traditional masculine lifestyle pairs well with encouraging the consumption of traditionally masculinized goods. History capitalizes on this opportunity via the inclusion of related items available for sale in its accompanying digital space, in which the company heavily invested in 2008 alongside their programming expansion.¹⁷ On History.com, viewers can purchase History-branded goods associated with particular series. The user can shop products organized into categories like apparel, home, accessories, drinkware, or holidays. The "home" section features blankets, bottle openers, knife holders, knives, pillows, skillet, and wall art. A *Forged in Fire* branded line of knives and cutting boards is also available on

¹⁶ Morgan Glucksman, "The Rise of Social Media Influencer Marketing on Lifestyle Branding: A Case Study of Lucie Fink," *Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications* 8, no. 2 (2017.)

¹⁷ "HISTORY Official Store: T-Shirts, Gifts, Mugs, DVDs and More!" *History*, accessed November 10, 2019; "History," *Advertising Age*, 2008.

Walmart's website. Lifestyle media's aspirational framing is an economically viable marketing tool for History both on the airwaves and online.

Because of the channel's narrative focus on the American auto industry in particular, History is an ideal space for car-related advertising. History commercialized this brand association when it hosted its first "Car Week" in August 2017, stacking its schedule with car-themed programming and related advertisements for an entire week.¹⁸ A NASCAR driver hosted the event, providing easy transition into footage of official NASCAR races, cars, tracks, products, and drivers. The event brought in ad deals with car brands like Mitsubishi and Ford, and with other car-related brands like GEICO, Exxon, Midas, Cooper Tires, and drive-in restaurants like Sonic.¹⁹ The development of History's online shop and its now annual Car Week reveals the commercial appeal of an authentically masculine lifestyle brand. Commercialism thrives within History's content because its masculinized sense of aspiration hails a desirable niche audience and its traditional politics of representation make the channel an uncontroversial space for sponsor investment.

Conclusion: The Conservative Charm of Apolitical Television

An analysis of promotional materials, sponsors, and TV trade materials clarifies that History's shift toward incorporating more reality programming is a strategy to develop a conservative blue-collar lifestyle brand that appeals to a niche, masculine demographic. In turn, the promise of a niche male audience makes the channel more attractive to advertisers. History's congruence with the contemporary trend of lifestyle television is significant because the genre is predominantly geared toward feminized and socially

¹⁸ Jon Lafayette, "Advertisers Rev Up Car Week on History," *Broadcasting & Cable*, August 14, 2017.

¹⁹ Ibid.

liberal audiences. Whereas much lifestyle TV aspires to upper-class tastes and progressive sensibilities, History Channel glorifies an authentically masculine lifestyle and uses nostalgic frames to invite a sense of fantasy in the middle-class viewer. History formulates a commercially viable lifestyle appeal that aligns with a particular set of values and interests constructed as belonging to its audience on the most primal and authentic level. To embrace the lifestyle that is represented on History and to embrace History's brand itself is to embrace the most authentic rendition of one's own masculinity.

History's ability to successfully formulate a traditional masculine lifestyle appeal speaks to the social context within which the brand exists. The rise of conversations on race, feminism, and sexuality in contemporary media has spurred a backlash among conservative voices. The heightened visibility of feminism and its accompanying messages of confidence and equality have been met with discourses of "popular misogyny," an anti-feminist expression that "circulates to wide audiences on popular media platforms."²⁰ On History Channel and elsewhere, themes of nostalgia, nationalism, and authenticity, which emphasize a sense of tradition and American exceptionalism, have become veiled techniques for speaking back against progressive discourses. Conservative thought perceives white masculinity as under threat because of the current mainstream focus on sexual harassment and race among members of the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements who often position white men as perpetrators. The co-optation of victimization becomes a new avenue for the powerful to skirt blame or avoid discussions that challenge existing social structures. The conservative framing of white men as under attack ensures the continuance of hegemonic gender and race relations, reframing the debate in such a

²⁰ Sarah Banet-Weiser & Kate Miltner, "#MasculinitySoFragile: Culture, Structure, and Networked Misogyny," *Feminist Media Studies* 16, no. 1 (2016.)

way that the victims, as opposed to the perpetrators, must justify their actions. An imagined media consumer who is frustrated with debates on political issues and accusations of inappropriate behavior is most likely an individual who stands to benefit from the perpetuation of hegemony and, therefore, likely seeks out content that shuns such conversations. Just as the History viewer looks to the past for aspiration and fantasy, so too does the conservative patriarch. History is a space where the conservative-minded viewer—imagined as white, heterosexual, middle-class, and male—may turn to escape political discussion and revel in nostalgic programming that reinforces his notions of traditions, white male authority, and American exceptionalism.

History's content may be read as apolitical by its imagined audience because the channel's traditional representations of gender, work, race, and sexuality are assumed as normal or ideal in conservative American thought. In essence, apolitical media possesses a certain degree of conservative charm. A media space like History, devoid of politicized discussions, becomes a safe haven for apolitical viewing that reproduces hegemony; this theme would be particularly desirable amongst 'family-room' viewers. Just because History has developed this masculine, niche mode of address, however, does not mean that other categories of viewers don't enjoy the programs. According to History's media kit, the cable channel's audience is roughly 60 percent male and 40 percent female, with most viewers falling within the 35 to 55+ age range.²¹ Over 55 percent of viewers are married, roughly 30 percent have at least one child in their household, and more than 70 percent own their home as opposed to rent.²² As generational and gender divides often reflect political divides, History's covertly conservative content has the potential to be an option for

²¹ EffectTV, "History Channel One Sheet."

²² Ibid.

uncontroversial viewing among adult and young adult family members who are cohabitating and co-watching. This is particularly interesting given the popular argument that the proliferation of media and streaming has divided family viewing.²³ The multiplicity of devices per household has allowed family members living under the same roof to avoid fights over what to watch on the living room television. Watching TV has become a solitary act for many, something to be done with headphones or on a hand-held device. The division of family time, either between wife and husband or parents and children, threatens to undermine the conservative image of the traditional nuclear family and the significance of heterosexual coupling. History's ability to offer covertly conservative content, devoid of cultural diversity or explicit conversations about hot-button issues, may fulfill traditionalist desires to strengthen the nuclear family through the activity of watching TV. The family is reunited around the hazy glow of the television when History is on the screen.

²³ Sean Coughlan, "The End of Watching TV as a Family," *BBC News*, January 31, 2018.

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