"Quick! Do Something Manly!": The Super Bowl as an American Spectacle of Hegemonic Masculinity, Violence, and Nationalism

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“Quick! Do Something Manly!” – The Super Bowl as an American Spectacle of Hegemonic Masculinity, Violence, and Nationalism

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the theoretical concept of “hegemonic masculinity” as it applies and pertains to the Super Bowl in particular and American football in general.

The Super Bowl is a contemporary media spectacle whose hegemonic undertones of misogyny and homophobia communicate to its audience punitive standards of masculinity, gender roles, and the American nation state. The meanings of pain and injury in American football serve as scaffolds for these standards and elucidate how football stylizes gender inequality by venerating bodily violence between its hypermasculine players.

The war-like narrative structure of American football reaffirms male superiority over women, teaching men and boys conformity to patriarchal and sexist cultural values. Gender is central to the Super Bowl because the spectacle inculcates masculine gender norms with hegemonic undertones of misogyny and homophobia. By enacting “exemplary identity performances in phallic aggressive simulations of war,” as Laura Langman argues (85), professional football wedds heteronormative and violent masculinity to American nationalism.

The visual and strategic similarities between football and warfare allude to the game’s history as a training instrument of the American military. Today, the Super Bowl is a prime showcase of American patriotism, featuring many displays of militarism and nationalism. The Super Bowl employs images of American nationalism, glorifying the American nation and a particular view of masculinity on which it is stereotypically predicated, to legitimate masculine gender norms.

The Super Bowl spectacle employs two levels of visual representation, contextual and textual, to impart to its audience standards of ideal masculinity. Contextually, the football game celebrates physical violence committed by hypermasculine players against their opponents. Second, textually, some commercials aired during the Super Bowl invoke images of deficient masculinity while advertising a commodity to remedy men’s supposed inadequacies. While the brutality of football visually enacts masculine gender norms on the field, many Super Bowl ads exercise violence of conformity, resulting in an intertextual and mutually constitutive relationship between the game and the ads. Close readings of four Super Bowl ads from recent years demonstrate how the commercials “converse” with the football game by reinforcing the same norms of hegemonic masculinity that are celebrated in the football game.

A contribution to cultural criticism and masculinity studies, this thesis posits that the Super Bowl worships masculine gender ideals that are deeply detrimental to the players while perpetuating misogyny and homophobia.
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“Quick! Do Something Manly!” – The Super Bowl as an American Spectacle of Hegemonic Masculinity, Violence, and Nationalism

Two mechanics, clad in blue-collar uniforms, unshaven, and rough-looking, are working on a car motor when one of the two men pulls out a Snickers bar and starts eating it. The other man is immediately mesmerized by the chocolate bar, biting into it from the other side. As the two men hungrily devour the Snickers bar, each from a different side, their lips meet. After a second of paralyzing shock, they hastily pull away from each other.

Mechanic I: “I think we just accidentally kissed!”
Mechanic II: “Quick! Do something manly!”

Both men tear out a chunk of their chest hair, screaming in agony.
Tagline: “Snickers. Most Satisfying.”

- Snickers Commercial, 2007 Super Bowl. CBS.

* 

“As much of America surfaces in a ball park, on a golf link, at a race track, or around a poker table, much of Bali surfaces in a cock ring. For it is only apparently cocks that are fighting there. Actually, it is men.” (Clifford 5)

1. Introduction

In 1972, anthropologist Clifford Geertz published his essay, “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight.” The essay recounts Geertz’s fieldwork in Bali and foregrounds one cultural ritual: cockfights, held at local gatherings, in which men compete vicariously with one another through their roosters. For Balinese culture, the bloody spectacle fulfills an important interpretive function because it represents a “Balinese reading of Balinese experience; a story they tell themselves about themselves” (Clifford 26). Balinese men participate in cockfights because they hope that their animals will, symbolically and metaphorically, validate their masculinity and sense of self within their community.
This thesis explores the embodiment of masculinity in an altogether different kind of ritual: the American Super Bowl. If the cockfight says something about Bali, then the Super Bowl might say something about America. Since its inception in 1965, the event, formally the annual championship game of the National Football League (NFL), has resided at the very center of American popular culture. Next to the Olympics, it is the most watched television event on the planet, with a viewership of more than 100 million people in the US alone. If one defines “spectacle” to be a visually striking and memorable event, then the Super Bowl, a colorful assemblage of football, entertainment, and advertising, is the most visible spectacle in contemporary American culture. The spectacle, “an extraordinary public display, has long been part of complex societies” (Langman 67), showcasing living embodiments of social constructions that are intrinsic components of cultural identity (69). Drawing attention to the representation and conceptualization of such living embodiments, this thesis is a study of masculinity ideals asserted in Super Bowl violence and ads.

However, it is important not to overstate the parallels between the Super Bowl and the Balinese cockfights. Even though the Super Bowl is certainly a cultural ritual, a world of difference still lies between the Balinese cockfight and the Super Bowl. The former is a local custom with little to no trans-regional impact whereas the latter, as a sports mega media event, epitomizes modernity, global commercialism, and patriotism like no other event in American culture. This thesis argues that the Super Bowl employs its status as beacon of American nationalism, glorifying the American nation and a particular view of masculinity on which the American nation is stereotypically predicated, to legitimate masculine gender norms. In other words, hegemonic masculinity
does not exist in masculinist sports alone, but stands in direct connection to a larger discourse about the American nation, war, and love of country.

In the Balinese cockfight, the participants balance on the verge of death – one, if not both, of the two roosters will almost certainly perish during the fight. By partaking in such fights, Balinese men engage in what Jeremy Bentham termed “deep play.” The stakes are so high in cockfights, whose result is either “utter triumph or utter defeat” (Geertz 24), that it seems irrational for men to engage in them at all (15). One might think that the low chance of success would be an effective deterrent. Still, in cockfights, Balinese men put everything on the line that marks them as men of honor, strength, and esteem in their community. One rooster defeating and killing another symbolizes the precariousness of masculine virility while bestowing figurative honor upon the victorious owner. Their participation in this ritual, as potentially detrimental to their symbolic status as it may be, reveals a great deal about Balinese culture. Michael Oriard holds that the cockfight “[throws] into relief a particular view of [Bali’s] essential nature” because it orders basic social themes, such as masculinity, rage or pride, into an “encompassing structure,” giving visual expression to Balinese cultural norms and values (Oriard 10).

Mediating between cultural norms and people, the “spectacle” is an integral element of public culture. Therefore, the study of games, performances, and spectacles adds an important dimension to cultural criticism (Oriard xv). As the prime example of an American spectacle, the Super Bowl is a “mediated cultural [ritual] preceded by major pre-event promotion and hype” and enjoys unparalleled visibility in American popular media (Messner and Montez de Oca 1883). Thus, over the course of more than four decades, the Super Bowl “has morphed from a simple sporting contest into an unofficial
Far more than a sport, American football is a cultural expression consistent with Geertz's notion of the "cultural text" (Oriard 10). Geertz reminds his readers that culture, by its nature, is an elusive field of study. Therefore, culture can only be interpreted through its contextual manifestations. According to Geertz, culture is an "assemblage of texts" (26). For instance, we have no way of understanding American culture without analyzing "texts" that express American cultural values. Much of the literature on sports in America argues that American sports functions to reaffirm men's physical and cultural superiority over women (Michener 1976; Easthope 1990; Messner 1990). Analogously, Laura Langman contends that the Super Bowl football game "[constructs and celebrates] bodies and identities in relation to broader social norms and ideals" (69, cf. also Real 42). The Super Bowl does not exist in a cultural vacuum, but possesses an interpretive power reminiscent of the Balinese cockfight.¹

The Balinese sense of masculinity relies upon a particular exercise of violence that differs qualitatively from the violence inherent in football games. The cockfight relegates physical violence to a symbolic realm that only endangers animals, leaving human (male) bodies unharmed. Cockfights sacrifice the lives of animals so that men's do not have to be. By contrast, American football relies upon an unforgivingly interpersonal type of violence. In fact, football is arguably the most aggressive and physically violent major sport currently in existence in the United States. In a football game, the "majority of the players ... [s]lam their large, powerful and heavily armored

bodies into each other” in an effort to gain control over as much territory as possible (Messner 206). To do so, players must think of their bodies instrumentally, as weapons to be used against the other team (211).

Does the Super Bowl, and perhaps even American football in general, represent an American reading of American experience; a story Americans tell themselves about themselves? Or perhaps a story that American men are being told? Michael Real would agree with the latter notion, remarking in 1975 that the Super Bowl “reveals specific cultural values proper to American institutions and ideology, and ... is best explained as a contemporary form of mythic spectacle” (31). Moreover, he holds that American football represents a “communal celebration of and indoctrination into specific socially dominant emotions, life styles, and values” (36). Real anticipates Don Sabo’s argument that “traditional sport [teaches] conformity to patriarchal values” (1). This thesis will argue specifically that the Super Bowl reflects an ideology of hegemonic masculinity rooted in displays of American heritage and patriotism, providing a “context in which a certain type of (violent) masculinity is embodied” and exalted (Messner 215) while “non-masculinity” is ridiculed and scorned.

Gender is central to the Super Bowl because the spectacle inculcates masculine gender norms with hegemonic undertones of misogyny and homophobia. By enacting “exemplary identity performances in phallic aggressive simulations of war” (Langman 85), professional football weds heteronormative and violent masculinity to American nationalism. The visual and strategic similarities between football and war are striking and allude to the game’s history as a training instrument of the American military. Furthermore, the Super Bowl today is a prime showcase of American patriotism,
featuring many displays of militarism and nationalism. If the Super Bowl is the “capstone of an empire” (Real 31), then the men expected to sustain that empire, in war or on the home front, will have to conform to certain bodily and behavioral standards of masculinity.

As I will argue, the Super Bowl employs two levels of visual representation, contextual and textual, to impart those standards to its audience. Contextually, the football game celebrates controlled physical violence committed by hypermasculine players against their opponents. Second, textually, some commercials aired during the Super Bowl invoke images of deficient masculinity while advertising a commodity to remedy men’s supposed manifold inadequacies. While the brutality of football visually enacts masculine gender norms on the field, many Super Bowl ads exercise violence of conformity. As seen in a Snickers advertisement for the 2007 Super Bowl, some commercials aired during the game construct a consumerist narrative that communicates punitive standards of hegemonic masculinity.

Commercials are vitally important to the Super Bowl spectacle because more than one in ten viewers “[tunes] in just for the ads ...” (Kanner 3). It is widely believed that “the Super Bowl audience constitutes a broadly based national sample …”, representing roughly the entire American population in age, gender, and racial proportions (Carlisle Duncan and Ayock 244). For this reason, Super Bowl ads might be able to “define a public discourse associated with advertising that has the capacity to legitimize certain modes of movement, speaking, or behavior” (ibid.). As a large number of Super Bowl ads deals with masculinity, in one way or another, advertisers evidently presume that the
majority of Super Bowl viewers will respond favorably to representations of ideal masculinity.

A contribution to cultural criticism, this thesis explores the Super Bowl as a contemporary American spectacle of hegemonic masculinity, violence, and nationalism. In the following pages, I explore the concept of hegemonic masculinity as it pertains and applies to the Super Bowl in particular and American football in general. Specifically, I hold that displays of American heritage and patriotism evoke ideals of masculinity that, in the context of this cultural mega-event, have come to be regarded as hegemonic. For example, football demands an unnatural tolerance for pain and injury from its players, which is the direct result of the hegemonic masculinity norms enforced in the context of professional masculinist sports.

Throughout this thesis, I draw upon a rich body of literature to support my argument, ranging from American sports and gender studies to cultural histories of American masculinity. While some of my most important secondary sources are from a sociological point of view (cf. esp. Connell and Messner), most defy simple categorization and reside at intersections of academic research with journalism, popular literature, advertising theory, and popular culture. My primary sources are largely videos of TV commercials aired during the Super Bowl between 2003 and 2011.

Analyzing a select number of these commercials textually and culturally, I offer close readings in order to understand how they “converse” with the football game, mirroring and reinforcing the same norms of hegemonic masculinity celebrated in football games. In proceeding in this sequence, in moving from the theoretical to the concrete, I demonstrate how the Super Bowl worships masculine gender ideals that are
deeply detrimental to the players while perpetuating misogyny and homophobia. In the following pages, I explore the Super Bowl as a contemporary American media spectacle whose hegemonic undertones of misogyny and homophobia, along with its war-like narrative structure, communicates to its audience punitive standards of masculinity, gender roles, and the American nation state. The meanings of pain and injury in American football function as scaffolds for these standards and elucidate how football stylizes gender inequality by venerating bodily violence between its hypermasculine players.

2. Theorizing Hegemonic Masculinity

This thesis contributes to the field of masculinity/men’s studies by analyzing the cultural ideals of masculinity in the context of the greatest spectacle in American culture, highlighting the violent propensity of hegemonic masculinity it celebrates. Masculinity studies seeks to make “men” analytically legible by arguing that attention to the experiences of men as men enriches the feminist/gender studies perspective (cf. Kimmel 2008). In a masculinity studies project, the notion of “maleness” must be rejected in favor of “masculinity” (cf. Young and White 110). While maleness describes a physiological or phenotypic trait, masculinity denotes cultural definitions and expectations ascribed to male-bodied individuals. In many ways, the relationship of maleness to masculinity is analogous to that of sex to gender. In a tradition of gender studies, the “late focus on masculinity is a chapter within the project of feminist Americanist cultural analysis” (Traister 277). The concept of “hegemonic masculinity,” with its attendant notion of a hierarchy of masculinities, has proved fruitful for a critical American Studies perspective

An Americanist masculinity studies approach necessitates that one subscribes, at least in part, to Michael Kimmel’s assertion that “American men have no history of themselves as men” (Kimmel 2008: 1). Although men have dominated much of American history, some scholars argue that men have not had a gender in the way that women have (ibid.). Although the influence of men on the course of American history is undeniable, little attention has been paid to the ways in which men’s experiences as men have colored their contributions. Thanks to masculinity studies, “[men] can now be named as men” and identified as gendered, as opposed to genderless, beings (Hearn 90).2 As a result, one may now ask how the gender of men informs their experiences, their doings, and their lives broadly speaking. By gender, Kimmel means “the sets of cultural meanings and prescriptions that each culture attaches to one’s biological sex” (2008: 2). The task of masculinity studies is to “make gender visible to men” by illustrating that gender is as relevant to men’s lives as it is to women’s (ibid.). However, in Traister’s words, “because masculinity has for so long stood as the transcendental anchor and guarantor of cultural authority and ‘truth,’ demonstrating its … ‘constructedness’ requires an especially energetic rhetorical and critical insistence” (281).

R.W. Connell, in her rich and instructive work “Masculinities,” argues that at any given time in history, “one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted”

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2 Granted, this argument is problematic. In gender studies, there has been lots of debate about whether men’s studies needs to be “rescued” from an overemphasis on women and femininity. While I certainly do not wish to align myself with an unequivocal focus on men, which would perhaps implicitly deny the reality of gender inequality in the U.S., I maintain that a focus on men as men engenders valuable critical perspectives for gender studies.
A hegemonically masculine man embodies “the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy ...” (ibid.). Clearly, the category “man” alone does not suffice to account for the multiplicity of male gender expressions in any given culture. Though he Balinese cockfight is in many ways a fitting metaphor for the “deep play” of American football, Geertz fails to account for the multiplicity of masculinities. In fact, men differ from one another not only in prestige gained in a contest, as Geertz’s narrative might have us believe, but they differ in more complex ways that distinguish them while conferring cultural power upon some of them.

Re-evaluating the theory in 2005, Connell and James W. Messerschmidt write, “[the] fundamental feature of the concept [of hegemonic masculinity] remains the combination of the plurality of masculinities and the hierarchy of masculinities” (846). Within any culture, particular masculinities assume a hegemonic position, which “presumes the subordination of nonhegemonic masculinities” (ibid.). Professional sports, for example, reproduce these hierarchies by enacting masculinity models to which most men fail to live up (832). Broadly speaking, hegemonic masculinity is an “idealization that comes into being and exists in opposition to other counterhegemonic constructions of masculinity” (Curry Jansen and Sabo 9).

In gender studies, the concept of “hegemonic masculinity” has proved contentious because it entails a range of conceptual problems. Connell and Messerschmidt concede that, “in the huge literature concerned with masculinity, there is a great deal of conceptual confusion as well as a great deal of essentializing” (836). Such confusion arises chiefly from theoretical questions: is there only one hegemonic masculinity, or can more than one masculinity be considered hegemonic at a given point in time? What characteristics
make certain masculinities hegemonic, as opposed to others? Jeff Hearn even posits that a focus on hegemonic masculinity is futile because “[the] social category of ‘men’ is far more hegemonic than a particular form of masculinity, hegemonic or not” (92-3). Would it be more appropriate to speak of “the hegemony of men” rather than “hegemonic masculinity?”

Cognizant of these difficulties, I maintain that the differentiation between multiple masculinities remains relevant in American culture today. However, hegemony is formed and informed by intersecting categories of identity. The cultural power of the “ideal man” is predicated on his membership in identity groups that have come to be regarded as superior to all others: male, white, heterosexual, young to middle-aged, Protestant, able-bodied, athletic, college-educated, and economically successful (Goffman quoted in Kimmel 2005: 30). In tandem, all of these categories create a hierarchy of masculinities that serves as the standard against which all men measure themselves.

However, hegemonic masculinity may manifest itself differently in different realms of identity. For instance, the hegemony of white masculinity signifies very differently from the hegemony of non-white masculinity. On the whole, as “power and privilege are differentially allocated within and between groups of men” (Young and White 110), the concept of hegemonic masculinity provides a theoretical framework with which to grasp differentiations between men and particularize their cultural implications. At the same time, an examination of hierarchical power relations between men does not deny the hegemony of men in a larger cultural and political context. To the contrary, it
demonstrates that the workings of gender oppression are intricate, multifaceted, and far-reaching.

The differentiation between hegemonic and nonhegemonic American masculinities is the result of historical processes. Although the complex history of American masculinity is impossible to condense, Connell thinks it concurrent with the history of European masculinity: the “history of European/American masculinity over the last two hundred years can broadly be understood as the splitting of gentry masculinity” into hegemonic and subordinated masculinities (Connell 2002: 249). The coherent masculinity of the European gentry, in other words, was gradually displaced by many different masculinities that came to occupy differentiated spaces in American society. However, the “history of masculinity, it should be abundantly clear, is not linear” (254). Rather, being a man “means different things at different times to different people” (Kimmel 2008: 3).

Kimmel has demonstrated that “American men have always contended with hegemonic constructions of normative masculinity operative in different historical contexts” (Traister 287). In response to challenges to the gender order by women, the modern institution of organized sport lent renewed support to the “bases of men’s traditional patriarchal power, authority, and identity” (Messner 1990: 204). “Proletarization, urbanization, and … the closing of the frontier all served to undermine patriarchal forms of [American] masculinity,” requiring reassertion of male supremacy over women (ibid.).

Although “the hegemonic definition of manhood is a man in power, a man with power, and a man of power” (Kimmel 2005: 30), this power is not self-evident. Rather, it
must constantly be defended and enacted. The idea of “anti-femininity” continues to illustrate the notion of hegemonic masculinity. Anti-femininity, or even misogyny, informs and reinforces hegemonic masculinity in important ways. For instance, the Super Bowl, a showcase for hegemonic masculinity, is a “woman-free” zone. Women are largely absent from the Super Bowl, occupying ceremonial, servile, and decorative roles, as “supportive wives and mothers, girlfriends, sexual outlets, fans, and cheerleaders” (Sabo 3). Indeed, “… the only women allowed anywhere near the field are scantily clad, leaner than lean cheerleaders” (Curry Jansen and Sabo 10). These hyperfeminine women complement the hypermasculine players on the football field. With their emphasized hyperfeminine features, cheerleaders are caricatures of femininity similar to how football players are caricatures of masculinity. In this sense, professional football is “one of the most stylized displays of the contrasts between manly men and vulnerable women in contemporary American culture” (ibid.). Indeed, football is one of the few American sports without a female equivalent, save for baseball.3

In fact, it is the degree of their anti-femininity that determines the hegemony of some masculinities. A masculinity that can claim hegemonic status “guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell 2005: 77). Following philosopher Antonio Gramsci, Connell understands hegemony as a “cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life” (ibid.). Gramsci argued that, in a diverse society, one (or more) group(s) or class(es) of people can dominate by making its (or their) ideology appear natural,

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3 One could argue that, even in sports with both male and female leagues, female athletes consistently receive less recognition than male athletes. Sabo contends that the “devaluation of women in [modern] sport ... is structurally grounded in the entire system of unequal funding and sex segregation” and reflects women’s “secondary politico-economic status” in American society (16).
inevitable, and in everyone’s best interest. However, hegemony does not guarantee eternal social power. On the contrary, the power that some men can exert over women and other men results from certain patterns of practice whose cultural currency may change over time (cf. Connell and Messerschmidt 832). As Gramsci might have argued, to conceive of hegemonic masculinity without the element of historical change would reduce “the idea of the hegemon … to a simple model of cultural control” rather than foregrounding the dynamic qualities of history and culture (Connell and Messerschmidt 831). For instance, football and television ads signify together meaningfully because they reflect complementary patterns of male practice that have currency in contemporary American culture, to the detriment of women and men whose masculinity is considered non-hegemonic, such as gay men.

To understand how men discipline and police themselves, it is instructive to consider the role of homosociality within the male gender framework. Sharon Bird takes homosociality to mean “nonsexual attraction held by men (or women) for member of their own sex” that promotes and maintains rigid distinction between men and women (121). As such, homosocial interactions are “critical to both the conceptualization of masculinity identity and the maintenance of gender norms” (Bird 122). While one might surmise that men respond to pressure from women to behave in certain ways, the opposite is true: masculinity has historically derived its meaning in the context of “homosocial competition” (Kimmel 2005: 27). The presence of other men enables men to grasp what roles they are meant to fulfill and judge their economic, social, and sexual success in comparison to their peers. Kimmel maintains that it is in fact men who guard the “essence” of masculinity by penalizing male behaviors that do not fit the bill.
By the same token, certain behaviors and traits are constructed as “feminine” and become emblematic of non-masculinity. According to this logic, the categories masculinity and femininity are mutually exclusive: men are what women are not. In other words, “being masculine ... means being not-female” (Bird 125). Moreover, men only acquire a sense of what being a man entails when in the company of other men. Their sense of inadequacy, triggered by their inevitable failure to live up to the hegemonic ideals of their gender, is compounded by their interactions with other men. As Kimmel writes, “[other] men watch us, rank us, grant our acceptance into the realm of manhood” (2005: 33), forming a masculinity police of sorts that prohibits “un-manly” forms of masculinity and enforces male gender norms from within. Sustaining any model of hegemonic masculinity “requires the policing of men as well as the exclusion or discrediting of women” (Connell and Messerschmidt 844). This, Kimmel posits, is “the great secret of American manhood: We are afraid of other men” because men have the power to unmask other men as failures to enact acceptable masculinity (Kimmel 2005: 35).

For this reason, the idea of homosocial enactment is critical to theorizing hegemonic masculinity. In “Masculinity as Homophobia,” Kimmel posits that American masculinity has come to restrict itself to a narrow definition of what it means to be a man, discrediting men who fail to satisfy the requirements. At the same time, no essence of masculinity exists that could explain the ideals of manhood that American culture has embraced (Kimmel 2005: 25). Rather, ideas about masculinity and its proper definition are “socially constructed” (ibid.). Although American culture has defined clear parameters for masculinity, this discourse is not natural, though it is clearly culturally,
historically, and ideologically naturalized, as epitomized in the Super Bowl. In fact, the Super Bowl exemplifies this constant burden of proof: the game is a public “homo-social competition” (27) in which men seek to demonstrate their superior physical strength over others to confirm the hegemony of their masculinity.

In her book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues that identities are not “self-identical [...] , unified and internally coherent” (Butler 22), but must undergo a continuous process of construction. Thus, identity is seldom about “being,” but always about “becoming.” Those upholding the standards of “proper” identity police and regulate individual performances of identity. *Gender Trouble* lends itself well to a masculinity studies project because it establishes links between gender performances and their cultural implications (cf. Traister 294). As identity is more a “normative ideal [...] than a descriptive feature of experience” (Butler 22), identity performances impart norms with particular potency when mediated in a spectacle. In this sense, the Super Bowl may be read as an identity parade in which only conventionally masculine, heterosexual masculinity seems to exist as a valid identity.

Gay masculinity, if visibly manifested, contradicts hegemonic masculinity because gay men fail to become gendered in conformity with “the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined” (Butler 23). The “matrix of intelligibility” (24) demands that male-bodied individuals have a coherent identity: they must have a male gender identity and desire only female-bodied individuals. Therefore, “certain kinds of identities cannot ‘exist’ – that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not ‘follow’ from either sex or
gender” (ibid.). Thus, gay masculinity cannot logically exist as a culturally intelligible identity.

Anti-femininity and misogyny, the hatred of the feminine, are central markers of hegemonic masculinity. As a relational category, masculinity needs to rid itself of all things feminine in order to signify as masculine (cf. Bird 122). Indeed, “... patterns of masculinity are socially defined in contradistinction from some model (whether real or imagined) of femininity” (Connell and Messerschmidt 848). As Sabo holds, “[much] of boys’ and men’s drive to conform to masculine stereotypes ... is fueled not so much by the desire to be manly, but the fear of being seen as unmanly or feminine” (4, emphasis mine).

Often, standards of masculinity operate negatively, focusing on the deficiencies in men’s gender performances. Being a masculine man means that males constantly “worry about treading too closely on the feminine side of cultural life” (Sabo 4). Anthony Easthope posits that masculinity “aims to be one substance all the way through” (167). To this end, “it must control what threatens it both from within and without. Within, femininity and male homosexual desire must be denied; without, women and the feminine must be subordinated and held in place” (ibid.). As masculinity is not one substance, but consists of a diversity of different masculinities, the existence of masculinity must be proved (Kimmel 2005: 28). The repudiation of the feminine is a constant, ongoing process without a finite end point.

The repudiation of all things feminine, invariably, entails violence. In fact, Kimmel contends that violence is “often the single most evident marker of manhood.

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4 As Chapter 5 will argue, Super Bowl ads exploit this very concern by promoting images of inadequate masculinity.
Rather it is the willingness to fight, the desire to fight” (Kimmel 2005: 35). Physical, bodily dominance is the clearest sign of the “power that some men have over other men and that men have over women” (Kimmel 2005: 30). As Messner argues, “[a] number of feminist analyses have suggested that one of the key elements of the elevation of the male-body-as-superior is the use (or threat) of violence …” (1990: 204). For example, anti-gay violence (or the threat of anti-gay violence) establishes dominance over men considered to be inferior. In fact, the notion of a hierarchy of masculinities “grew directly out of homosexual men’s experience with violence and prejudice from straight men” (Connell and Messerschmidt 831). Violence against gay men implies that hegemonic masculinity must be violent because subordinate masculinity is not. For an example, football players must be violent because all the masculinities subordinated by their aggressiveness are unable to muster an equal degree of violence – which would then endanger the hegemony of their masculinity. Thus, the violence on the football field directly defines heterosexual masculinity as a “subject position that poses a danger to others” (Mason 124). Hegemonic masculinity can be physically dangerous to others because subordinate masculinity cannot.

As homophobia is “intimately interwoven with both sexism and racism” (Kimmel 2005: 37), hegemonic masculinity can only signify in contrast to “others,” e.g. men of color, women or gay men. Although physical strength and aggression are defining qualities of ideal manhood, hegemonic models of masculinity are simultaneously so fragile that violence must constantly be enacted in their defense. Therefore, the constant interplay between fragility and strength attest to the instability of hegemonic masculinity:
“ultimately the quest for proof becomes so meaningless that it takes on the characteristics, as Weber said, of a sport” (Kimmel 2005: 28).

The question of race might conceivably call the hegemonic masculinity of some NFL players into question. After all, many successful football players are of African American, Hispanic, or other non-white descent, which would normally relegate them to marginalized masculinity. And yet, those players seem to embody hegemonic masculinity in its purest form. Evidently, their racial minority status does not compromise the cultural power of their individual masculinity. As Jachinson Chan writes in his book about Chinese American masculinities, “[in the United States], particular black athletes may [in fact] be exemplars for hegemonic masculinity” (Chan 99). However, the prestige and status that these athletes may have does not mean that American culture has broadened its definition of hegemonic masculinity on the whole. To the contrary, Chan argues that “the fame and wealth of individual stars has no trickle-down effect; it does not yield social authority to black men in general” (ibid.); their personal success has no bearing on the larger group of marginalized non-white men. This indicates that the parameters of hegemonic masculinity are not set in stone, but vary depending on the cultural context in which they are enacted.

Additionally, black men in professional sports run the risk of embodying racist stereotypes. As Messner observes, once they arrive at the top of professional American sports, black men must become “intimidating, aggressive, and violent in order to survive” (Messner 1990: 215), confirming clichés about black men being naturally athletic, aggressive, and violent. Meanwhile, the continued marginalization of “regular” men of color, or non-athletes broadly speaking, strengthens the construction of hegemonic
masculinity with its attendant racial hierarchy (214-5). Indeed, it seems reasonable to speculate that such contradictions may be integral mechanisms of hegemony – upward social mobility appears as a real possibility through some select exemplars, while the overall social order remains unchanged (cf. Connell and Messerschmidt: 838).

As this example demonstrates, the standards of hegemonic masculinity are impossible to attain for most men, if simply on the basis of their ethnicity. And yet, the ideals of hegemonic masculinity maintain tremendous potency. Moreover, as “[every] American male tends to look out upon the world from [the perspective of hegemonic masculinity]” (Kimmel 2005: 30), the ideals of American masculinity have great disciplinary power. As such, they demarcate what kinds of behaviors, traits, or actions are permissible for men – and, more importantly, which ones are not. In the words of Connell and Messerschmidt, “… hegemonic masculinities [such as those of football players] do not correspond closely to the lives of any actual men. Yet these models do, in various ways, express widespread ideals, fantasies, and desires” (838).

This elusive quality makes the cultural import of hegemonic masculinity difficult to grasp. On the one hand, it seems that masculinity studies “chart a universe surprisingly bereft of actual living embodiments of ‘normative masculinity’… (Traister 292); very few men seem to actually embody normative masculinity. On the other, these same norms proliferate in films, magazines, and beer commercials (ibid.). One of the ironies of hegemonic masculinity is that, statistically, “[the] number of men rigorously practicing the hegemonic pattern in its entirety [is] quite small” (Connell 2005 79). Furthermore, “many men who hold great social power do not embody an ideal masculinity” (Connell and Messerschmidt: 838), such as politicians, club owners in sports, or leaders in
technology and science. Therefore, the hegemony of certain masculinities “works in part through the production of exemplars … (e.g., professional sports stars)” whose authority is untainted by the fact that most men are unable to live up to them (846). As a result, at least since the late 1990s, “there has been growing attention paid in media and cultural studies to the power of images of cultural masculinity” because it is through images that hegemonic masculinity purports to be the norm rather than the exception it actually is (Katz 261). Although hegemonic masculinity is not normal in the statistical sense, it is definitely normative (Connell and Messerschmidt 832).

3. When Bodies Are Weapons: Violence, Pain, and Injury

On January 13, 2012, Gregg Williams, the since-suspended defensive coordinator of the New Orleans Saints, gave a pep talk to his players:

"Kill the head and the body will die. Kill the head and the body will die. We've got to do everything in the world to make sure we kill Frank Gore's head. We want him running sideways. We want his head sideways. ... Early, affect the head. Continue, touch, and hit the head. They're gonna come in. They're going to be shocked with our contact. They're going to be shocked with our speed. They're going to be shocked with our strip. ... Respect comes from fear. This is how you get respect in this league.” (Gregg Williams Saints Bounty Audio, YouTube.)

In his speech, Williams made explicit reference to inflicting physical injuries upon players of the San Francisco 49ers in a post-season game the next day. This incident would later uncover a secret “bounty fund” that paid Saints players money to cause injuries to opponents (Memmott). Clearly, Williams had fully embraced the “body-as-weapon” mentality, using killing metaphors to illustrate that the Saints’ victory depended

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5 Title borrowed from Michael Messner’s article, “When Bodies Are Weapons: Masculinity and Violence in Sports.” (International Review for the Sociology of Sport, 2.3 (1990): 203-20.)
upon the intensity of their aggression against opponents. Granted, this is an extreme example of the degree to which brutality is part and parcel of professional football. At the same time, it does illustrate how masculine gender norms inform the violent logic of football: strength is praised and weakness is exploited. The "head" imagery figured prominently in Williams's talk because the head symbolizes the most vulnerable element of the body. Once "killed," the head will no longer support the body. Figuratively and literally, "the body will die."

As explained earlier, it is a principal mechanism of hegemony to pass off hegemonic structures as natural and inevitable, which is particularly true for the hegemonic gender order. Are men naturally predisposed to violence? If so, is football merely an expression of this natural predisposition? Are men who are stronger, more violent, and more brutal automatically "manlier" than other men? Finally, what are the risks and costs associated with the masculine mystique of toughness, dominance, and repression of empathy (cf. Miedzian 1)? The patterns of practice associated with hegemonic masculinity, of which football is a prime example, exemplify the "injurious outcomes of the processes whereby physical risk among boys and men is naturalized, promoted, and celebrated" (Young and White 116).

The scandal at the New Orleans Saints underscored the centrality of the body within men's constant quest for genuine masculinity. Thus, this example compels us to consider the interdependence between the body and gender identity. With his pep talk, Williams unwittingly demonstrated that professional football cultivates violence as the single most important prerequisite for the achievement of hegemonic masculinity. Through homosocial competition on the football field, the players gain an opportunity to
give visual expression to their identity as masculine men and to “do” their gender appropriately.

From the point of view of hegemonic masculinity, this “doing” must include the denigration of women. Hence, the overwhelming non-femininity of the Super Bowl is compounded by its strict heterosexuality. Although the close bodily contact between the players on the field might reasonably be considered homoerotic, the fact that there is not a single openly gay NFL player attests to the homophobic climate of the league. In some way, the violence inherent in football denies the intimacy between two men inflicting pain on one another while providing a forceful preclusion of homoerotic possibility. Engaging in a sport associated with aggression and toughness “distances the participant from the possibility of being labeled a ‘sissy’ or a homosexual” (Young and White 123). If, as Gail Mason posits, violence has the “capacity to constitute sexual subject positions” (Mason 10), then the violence in football enables players to establish consensus about who they are, and who they are not.

Furthermore, Messner argues, “the major ideological salience of sport as mediated spectacle may lie … in male spectators having the opportunity to identify with the muscular male body” (Messner 1990: 214). Only in the context of sports games may male spectators identify, however tacitly, with the male body; nowhere else is such an identification permissible under the restrictions of hegemonic masculinity. Therefore, it is “reasonable to speculate that the violence [in football] is an important aspect of the denial of the homoerotic element of that identification” (ibid.). The Super Bowl represents a cultural space in which men, as players or spectators, can bond emotionally without the anxiety of questioning their sexuality. Thus, gay men are “others” both to the
hegemonically masculine football players and the male spectators, whose potential homoerotic desires are only permitted ephemerally during the spectacle. If nothing else, "football affirms that men are not the women [and gay men] they fear and desire" (Langman 82). The broader parameters of hegemonic masculinity, above all its compulsory heterosexuality and constant repudiation of the feminine, remain unchallenged.

Much like in a Balinese cockfight, the stakes are high in the "deep play" of American football because the game harbors the potential for irreversible damage. In exchange for temporary glory and fame, professional football players jeopardize their health and, by extension, their lives. However, the violence in combat sports is far from irrational; "it is clearly oriented towards goals and bound by rules, with well-planned strategies and practiced tactics" (Langman 75). Coupled with great brutality, these tactics and strategies result in one of two outcomes: "utter triumph [or] utter defeat" (Geertz 24). Despite this clarity, the immediate results disguise the long-term perils of football. In the end, all players might pay a hefty price for their participation in football, regardless of the number of games their team won or lost.

American football, being a "combat sport," exposes the players to great amounts of violence that are not only deleterious for the bodies being impacted, but also endanger their emotional health (Messner 1990: 212). For example, former NFL linebacker Junior Seau committed suicide in May 2012, after battling insomnia and depression for years. His family later decided to allow researchers to examine his brain for signs of head trauma, which might have exacerbated his conditions (Pilon). One year earlier, before shooting himself fatally in the chest, former Chicago Bears defensive back Dave Duerson
“sent family members text messages requesting that his brain tissue be examined for the same damage recently found in other retired players” (Schwarz). Duerson, it was later revealed, suspected that he suffered from chronic traumatic encephalopathy, a degenerative brain disease linked to depression, dementia, and even suicide among other deceased football players (Schwarz). Football exemplifies that, sometimes, “societies develop customs that become highly detrimental to their members” (Miedzian 174). Moreover, the high prevalence of head injury among football players confirms that “…men are more susceptible than women to sports injury” (Young and White 116).6

In a survey in the late 1980s, 78% of retired professional football players reported that they suffered from physical disabilities directly related to their careers in football (Messner 1990: 212). Moreover, the injuries typically sustained by football players, such as concussions and other head traumas, adversely affected their average life expectancy: a former professional football player in the U.S. had an average life-expectancy of about 56 years in 1990 (ibid.). The contrast between the almost superhuman, seemingly invincible football player and the sport’s potential consequences could not be starker. Hence, the “ultimate [paradox] of organized combat sports” is the discrepancy between the heroic football player on the one hand, and the high likelihood that these “heroes” will later suffer from “permanent injuries, disabilities, alcoholism, drug abuse, obesity, and heart problems” on the other (211). Ultimately, the violence once committed against others on the field can turn into violence against one’s own body (ibid.).

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6 This claim may appear strange, given that women are not usually permitted to play contact sports. However, the point that men are more frequently put in “harm’s way,” as participants in combat sports or as soldiers on the battlefield, and are thus more likely to suffer injury, is well taken.
In some way, football seems to alter how spectators and players experience violence. Normally, "running into someone with all your weight and force and knocking that person down … is viewed as bodily assault and could subject a person to arrest" (Miedzian 185). However, if this behavior is labeled tackling or blocking, it immediately becomes an admirable and respected trait (ibid.). Plainly, football celebrates behavior that could be considered criminal outside of the game itself. In this sense, the Super Bowl has a carnivalesque quality:7 it is a liminal spectacle that suspends and inverts conventional definitions of violence. As Langman holds, "[in the context of the spectacle,] inversions of norms are tolerated or even celebrated, and otherwise proscribed acts are valued" (67). Moreover, the liminality of the Super Bowl, with its suspension of societal prohibitions of violence, is clouded by the many rules governing the game. The mere existence of rules implies orderliness and rightfulness where the opposite may actually be true.

By authorizing violence through rules and guidelines, football rewards aggressiveness. Wrongly, the catalog of football rules suggests that football is a safe sport. However, it “took until 1943 for the [NFL] to mandate that players must wear helmets, and until 1948 to mandate that such helmets could not simply be plastic” (Hauge 30). Although the public seems to take greater and greater note of the ramifications of head injuries, with even officials “[limiting] the amount of full-speed collisions and other contact allowed in practice,” the rules of American football are slow to keep up with the reality of physiology (O’Connor). Additional padding and protective head gear have not minimized physical danger, but instead made more and more violence acceptable by implying that such equipment will prevent gross injury. Historically, the league’s

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7 For an in-depth discussion of the carnivalesque, see Mikhail Bakhtin’s essay, “Carnival and the Carnivalesque.”
rulebook has consistently lagged behind the tendency toward more violence (Hauge 30). At least, several rule amendments between 1979 and 1980 prohibited "dangerous forms of blocking and restricted contact to the head, neck, and face ..." (ibid.). However, what exactly constitutes "dangerous forms of blocking" has remained as opaque as many official measures against football’s violent excesses. As the violence has "progressed far more quickly than official rules and the ability to enforce codes of safety have" (Hauge 29-30), rules have done too little to protect the health of especially younger men.

As a result, the risk of crippling injury can have "deleterious consequences for male participants" in American football (Young and White 109). Injuries are commonplace, and even injuries that "to most of us would seem quite serious are routine" (Miedzian 186). From "standard" concussions and broken fingers to shockingly graphic injuries, like Joe Theismann’s career-ending leg snap in 1985, pain is experienced by the players and consumed by the audience.

The dynamic of the sport makes it seem honorable for players to "sacrifice" themselves for the team and to accept pain as a necessary element, even proof, of that sacrifice. This willingness to sacrifice oneself for the "greater good" evokes a mindset frequently associated with the military. John McMurthy, former linebacker for the Calgary Stampeders, wrote in an essay for Atlantic magazine in 1972,

“It is arguable that body shattering is the very point of football, as killing and maiming are of war. To grasp some of the more conspicuous similarities between football and war, it is instructive to listen to the imperatives most frequently issued to players by their coaches, teammates and fans. ‘Hurt ‘em!’ ‘Level ‘em!’ ‘Kill ‘em!’ ‘Take ‘em apart!’ [...] Competitive, organized injuring is integral to our way of life, and football is one of the more intelligible mirrors of the whole process: a sort of colorful morality play showing us how exciting and rewarding it is to Smash Thy Neighbor.” (Michener 433)
To borrow a phrase from Elaine Scarry, the need to “out-injure” the other team necessitates that football players develop an “extremely instrumental relationship to [themselves] and others” (Messner 1990: 212). In football, smashing others alternates with being smashed, which means, quite simply, that “the side that inflicts greater injury faster will be the winner ...” (Scarry 89). In order to win, football players must be able to transform their conceptions of self and others. First of all, they must conceive of their own bodies as weapons, to a point where any amount of pain becomes tolerable, or even a source of pride. Secondly, they have to systematically objectify their opponents, repressing any sense of empathy that would hinder their success as combative athletes. In order to “injure” their opponents into submission, football players must stop conceiving of them as people with real feelings and sensations, and instead think of them just as instrumentally as they think of themselves.

This thorough objectification of self and others entails silence, as much as outward violence. The culture of sports violence, on display in the Super Bowl, teaches young boys that they must be able to silently endure harm, injury, and pain in order to qualify as “real” men (Miedzian 199). In 1967, Vince Lombardi famously lectured his players, “Don’t talk about injuries to anyone, not to your neighbor, not to your father, not to your brother. Don’t even tell your wife. Keep your mouth shut” (Michener 421). George Allen, Lombardi’s successor at the Green Bay Packers, once remarked on record, “Every time you win, you’re reborn. When you lose, you die a little” (ibid.). Byproducts of this must-win mentality, the long-term dangers of silenced pain are grave: in addition to suffering permanent physical damage, many former players have difficulty
maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships and exhibit destructive tendencies towards women and gay men (Messner 1990: 212).

4. The Super Bowl, Patriotism, and American Nationalism

It is impossible to imagine the Super Bowl as divorced from patriotism and images celebrating the American nation. In many ways, the Super Bowl is the prime example of “sport as a political arena” (Billings et al. 126) and it represents a “key trope of American identity” (Langman 69). In the Super Bowl, “the construction of national identity is intertwined with sports, the military, patriotism, and popular entertainment” (Kooijman 178). Exhibiting all of these moments in spectacular fashion, the Super Bowl is a popular representation of American identity. As such, American football “[celebrates] a general allegiance to an American conception of self” that metaphorically reproduces dominant norms and values of the American nation (Langman 72). This allegiance, centrally, entails affirmation of traditional hegemonic masculinity (73).

For these reasons, the Super Bowl is a “prominent institution through which ideology is communicated and politics is engaged and enacted” (Billings et al. 127). As a mass-mediated mega sports event, the Super Bowl lays bare “sport’s relationship to nations and nationalism” (134). While football games are “vehicles for cultivating and displaying community and national values and identities” (Curry Jansen and Sabo 13), they also function to reaffirm male dominance over women by celebrating warrior-like male bodies and denigrating women to objects of male lust. As Langman argues, the Super Bowl began in the era “that gave rise to feminism and more women moving into professional and managerial positions” (Langman 83), exacerbating the perceived
challenge to male dominance in American society. According to Carl Stempel, these challenges “have roots in a variety of social developments [in the United States], including the increased social power and independence of women and gays …” (85). Therefore, it is instructive to think of the Super Bowl as a mass-mediated reflection of broader cultural and political ideology in response to a continued “crisis” of masculinity.

As a cultural ritual shared by more than hundred million viewers, the Super Bowl is infused with displays of nationalism such as the national anthem, patriotic songs like “America the Beautiful,” and live conferences with American troops stationed overseas. Additionally, FOX Sports has made it a tradition to feature a reading of the Declaration of Independence before the Super Bowl game, which involves players, coaches, and other football personalities reciting the document in locations around the country.8 All these displays reaffirm the distinctly American character of the Super Bowl and suggest that the event reflects American heritage and sentiment. In this sense, the “annual ritual of watching the Super Bowl … can be perceived as [an] activity that helps to shape collective national identity” (Kooijman 180) by displaying cultural artifacts that Americans are expected to revere.

Another ritual, the Star-Spangled Banner, evokes a distinct sense of national belonging. Through the national anthem, Super Bowl viewers are addressed as citizens loyal to the American nation state and “believing in the values of America should stand for” (Kooijman 180). Indeed, the nationalism inherent in American sports is made manifest “by the playing of the national anthem at the beginning of virtually every competition from Little League Baseball to the Super Bowl” (Real 42). The invariable

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8 Since 2005, the Super Bowl has been broadcast on a rotating basis by CBS, FOX, and NBC.
presence of the national anthem “defines a game in terms of nationalism, suggesting that a sporting event is an appropriate place to affirm the principles that bind Americans together as a people” (Billings et al. 126).

According to Oriard, the narratives of American football games are “open-ended, multivalent [stories] responsive to diverse social needs …” (Oriard xiv). The national anthem at the Super Bowl has told many stories, many of which have had to do with the state of the American nation. In 1991, mere days after the beginning of the Persian Gulf War, the Super Bowl morphed into an ultra-patriotic display of national unity. The Star-Spangled Banner, performed by recording artist Whitney Houston, “turned the Super Bowl into a pep rally to cheer on the American army in its war against Iraq” (Kooijman 178). In similar fashion, Super Bowl XXXVI in 2002 saw Mariah Carey perform a rendition of the national anthem urging national unity shortly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (ibid.).

Rather than providing mere diversionary entertainment, the Super Bowl functions as a “‘propaganda’ vehicle strengthening and developing the larger social [and political] structure” (Real 42). To guarantee that the performances proceed error-free, they are “heavily rehearsed and monitored, the vocals often pre-recorded, to ensure that no surprises can interfere with its … ritualistic status” (Kooijman 183). Evidently, the national anthem is too important for the spectacle, too essential for weaving the tale of American nationalism, for its performance to be jeopardized by human error. Generally speaking, the Star-Spangled Banner reinforces a presumption of political and ideological consensus while the football game itself is visually and strategically tied to American militarism.
Historically, American football has been closely associated with the American military. Prior to and during World War II, the game was believed to engender “psychological traits and a respect for authority and loyalty important for the war effort” (Seifried and Katz 158). In his book, ‘Football! Navy! War!’ Wilbur D. Jones writes that American football played a “sizable but little-known role in helping to win the war” (23). Between 1942 and 1945, male officer candidates were placed in army training camps, where they were encouraged to play football games amongst each other (15). Through football, the recruits were to improve their physical resilience, learn about strategic risk-taking, and embrace the rough and merciless physicality of combat (ibid.). By engaging in such war games during training, recruits could “emotionally experience violent, dangerous, and intensely competitive games without ... having to live the real-life consequences of direct participation [yet]” (Stempel 88).

In essence, “each and every soldier was socially engineered to value determination and winning over sportsmanship” (Seifried and Katz 158). And indeed, the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) would later “publicly [recognize] the tremendous value of football as an integral part of the war training program” (Jones 23). Jonas Ingram, former athletic director of the Naval Academy, once remarked that football was “the closest thing to war in times of peace” (224). During their tours of duty in the European and Pacific theaters, American troops continued to play football in their free time. For them, the game meant an “exciting diversion from the horrors, sacrifices, and boredom of war” while aiding their performance of duty (23).

This history of militarism in football continues to resonate today. As Craig Forney suggests,
“[Football] portrays the American stories of chronic opposition from hostile enemies like the communists of old days and present-day Muslim fundamentalists. The violence of a game depicts the struggle against belligerent human beings who are dedicated to destruction of the enemy. Games are ‘battles,’ ‘wars’ between two fiercely opposed groups” (Forney 56).

Indeed, a great deal of literature connects “the United States military to American football through descriptions, imagery, and metaphor” (Seifried and Katz 154), a connection that resonates today just as much as it did in earlier times. As militarism functions metaphorically as much as ideologically (Butterworth and Moskal 412), football can be read as an allegory of war in which two opposing teams combat each other to determine a victor and a loser. Not unlike war, sport is “organized around the four moments of defeat, combat, victory and comradeship” (Easthope 70). Without a doubt, sports and war share some obvious features: both “involve contests and … usually produce winners and losers” (Billings et al. 131).

Scarry cautions, however, that a rhetorical conflation of ‘contest’ and ‘war’ is perilous. The term ‘contest’ is habitually associated “not only with peacetime activity but with that particular form of peacetime activity that is least consequential in content and outcome” (Scarry 82). Whether one wins or loses a game is, ultimately, inconsequential because the outcome of a contest does not decide over life and death. In war, by contrast, the stakes are infinitely higher. Troops failing to “out-injure” the other side will be captured or killed, and will possibly lose the war. In the end, the “severe discrepancy in the scale of consequence makes the comparison of war and game nearly obscene, the analogy either trivializing the one or, conversely, attributing to the other weight of motive and consequence it cannot bear” (83). Nonetheless, Scarry concludes, the rhetorical
analogy of contests to war must be made because it enables us to make sense of war, to understand it in terms that are comprehensible and familiar.

As an extension of Scarry’s argument, Michael Butterworth and Stormi Moskal hold that the American public, by and large, has fully accepted “the military’s place in the economic and political segments of U.S. society” (412). The militaristic rhetoric of the Super Bowl illustrates that the inflection of sports language with war vocabulary has become commonplace. As the authors posit, it “has become functionally impossible to live outside the rhetorical production of war” because Americans are implicated in a “structural relationship between government, the military, and entertainment industries” (Butterworth and Moskal 413). The language of sportscasters, for instance, often draws on military terminology to describe football games: attack, blitz, bombs, offense, defense, penetrations, flanks, and conflicts are typical examples of such language (Curry Jansen and Sabo 3).

In a study on televised sports events, Messner et al. found that commentators used martial metaphors, as well as language of war and weaponry, an average of nearly five times an hour to describe sports actions (388-9). In their study, examples of such argot included battle kill, ammunition, attack mode, firing blanks, blast, explosion, and point of attack, among others (ibid.). The basic aim of a football game, territorial control, in addition to the militaristic language describing the action on the field, has “produced an almost seamless relationship between the game and warfare” (Billings et al. 133). The names of popular football teams, frequently racist and often sexist, further underscore the language of war and conquest: Redskins, Giants, Jets, Chiefs, Rams, Raiders, Bengals, Cowboys, Eagles, Bears, Chargers, Packers, and others (Curry Jansen and Sabo 10).
In an illuminating article, Stempel demonstrates that such language also has tangible implications for the political attitudes held by men involved in what he terms the “televised masculinist sport-militaristic nationalism complex” (MS-MN complex) (82). While perpetuating a narrative of hegemonic masculinity (cf. Messner et al.), televised sports events have tended to influence their viewers’ attitudes towards foreign policy. For example, masculinist sports had an important role in “buttressing support for the Iraqi war and for the broader Bush doctrine,” which declared the authority of the United States to militarily attack countries deemed threatening to its security, prior to direct threats to the U.S. (82). Furthermore, Stempel shows that the level of involvement in televised masculinist sports was correlated with support for the Iraq war and for the unilateral preemptive doctrine championed by President Bush (ibid.). In sum, Stempel’s analysis indicates that the conflation of war and football is not merely rhetorical.

The political dimensions of masculinist American sports go hand in hand with their perpetuation of hegemonic male gender norms. As Curry Jansen and Sabo argue, “[sport/war] tropes exaggerate and celebrate differences between men and women” by valorizing men and, conversely, trivializing women (9). By suggesting that to be an American warrior, and a truly patriotic American, requires being a “manly” man, the football spectacle naturalizes inequalities between men and women, and likewise between men and other men. Some feminist scholars have suggested that “sport operates, in part, as an institutionalized mechanism for venting, galvanizing, and cultivating resistance to gender-based forms of social equality” (ibid.).

In the case of the Super Bowl, resistance to gender equality is cultivated not only by the football game and its attendant performances of violent hypermasculinity, but also
by the advertisements during the game. Many Super Bowl commercials deal, in one way or another, with issues of masculinity, depicting contemporary American men whose masculinity is undermined in some capacity. As Langman reminds us, “[sports] in consumer capitalist societies are both an economic enterprise and an ideological mirror of the system” (81). Some Super Bowl commercials demonstrate how economic and ideological dimensions mutually reinforce one another. Many ads promote a commodified ideal of masculinity that is presumed to be receptive to advertising for cars, beer, and clothing. By suggesting that to consume a given commodity will make a man more “manly,” advertisers purport to afford male viewers an opportunity to partake in hegemonic masculinity.

5. Super Bowl Commercials: American Manuals on Masculinity

Advertising is a powerful mediator between culture and economy, between people and products (Jhally 1990). Thus, critical analyses of advertisements can make visible how advertisers exploit cultural knowledge to sell commodities. Simply put, consumers are presumed to be responsive to commercial messages that evoke meanings with which they are familiar. Therefore, advertisers draw upon “the same corpus of displays that we all use to make sense of social life” (134). The job of the advertiser, then, is to “understand the world of the … audience, so that the stimuli that are created can evoke the stored information: it has to resonate with information that the [audience] possesses” (129). At the same time, advertisers have to sustain their consumer base in order to continue to make such “educated guesses.” As such, “[advertising]’ is the main weapon
that manufacturers use in their attempt to ‘produce’ an adequate consuming market for
their products” (3).

Advertising does not merely reflect already-existing meanings, but also constitutes them (Jhally 129). For instance, as “any culture must constantly work to maintain existing gender relations,” advertising can be an exercise in gender ideology (134). As a prime display of gender ideology in advertising, Super Bowl ads produce twin outcomes. While they are primarily intended to influence men’s consumption choices in order to generate sales of the advertised products, they also strongly reaffirm cultural ideals of masculinity in the process. As Jhally maintains, American advertising is unique because no other culture “has been this obsessed with explicit portrayals of gender relations” (136). As a matter of fact, advertising has elevated questions of sex and gender to a privileged position in popular discourse, doubtless because they have proved fruitful for the advertising of certain commodities (ibid.).

Super Bowl ads are among the most coveted and expensive airtime spots on American television. Moreover, the price of a 30-second spot in the Super Bowl has increased dramatically over the years. For instance, the cost of a Super Bowl commercial in 1991 was $800,000, compared to $2.7 million in 2008 (St. John 91).9 Not least due to these exorbitant costs, but also due to the unparalleled exposure for their work, advertisers are under pressure to produce highly original, memorable, and mass-compatible commercials. As a result, “[the] Super Bowl broadcast has turned into the world’s largest festival of short films” (175). The majority of these short films, it has become evident, deal with themes of masculinity, sexuality, and gender. More

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9 Adjusted for inflation, the price of a 30-second airtime spot in the 1991 Super Bowl was still only $1,198,515 – less than half of the cost of the same slot in 2008 (St. John 91).
specifically, many Super Bowl ads aim to associate their products with “manly needs and pursuits that we are led to believe have existed from time immemorial” (Katz 264-5). While particularizing Jhally’s theoretical reflections, the following examples from recent Super Bowls illustrate what constitutes such “manly” needs. Moreover, they also exemplify the centrality of gender and masculinity within this particular brand of television advertising.

I. “Surely There is a Limit to Your Chivalry” - Dodge Charger

One particularly interesting example of the conflation of consumerism with gender ideology is a commercial for the “Dodge Charger” that aired during the 2010 Super Bowl. The tagline of the ad reads: “You’ve sacrificed a lot, but surely there is a limit to your chivalry. Drive the car you want to drive.” These men’s male identities, the ad implies, have been compromised by women who demand that they “take out the trash,” “walk the dog,” and “be quiet when you [their partner] don’t want to hear them say no,” among other demands. The men have been silenced and shamed into behaving in ways that run contrary to their “essential” manhood. Because the man has been stripped of nearly all qualities that make him a man, he drives a Dodge Charger, speeding away on a deserted highway, a “woman-free zone.” The car symbolizes a kind of physicality and force that the commercial juxtaposes with the inexpressive, stoic faces of the muted men. It is the car that affords these men an opportunity to engage in an explosive, powerful performance of their masculine gender identity.

10 See appendix for screen shots of all commercials discussed in this paper.
The narrative of this ad suggests that men have been forced to mask their “true” identities as men by their female partners, who exemplify the demands of modern society as a whole. As the partners are never identified as female, they remain invisible “others.” While any number of reasons could explain their absence, it seems that they are made, quite literally, invisible. The women are “emotional blackmailers” and “bitches” who “threaten to undermine individual men’s freedom ...” (Messner and de Orca 1887). In this sense, the ad is a guide on reclaiming masculinity, because it first identifies the “problem” (nagging women who demand civility) and then promptly offers a solution (the car, an agent of wilderness and freedom). A Dodge Charger is depicted as the last bastion of American manhood where “men can still be men.” The ad rehabilitates traditional American masculinity, which has supposedly come under attack by women and the demands of modern life. Furthermore, the narrative reaffirms essential, profound, and immutable difference between men and women. Finally, the ad’s effectiveness lies in its outrageousness: it legitimates a discourse of oppressed manhood that is otherwise unsayable.

II. The Sauna – Doritos

An ad for Doritos chips, considered for the 2011 Super Bowl, relies on homophobic humor as a sales strategy while exploiting stereotypes about masculine race relations between African-American and white men. This commercial depicts two men sitting in a sauna: one man is African-American, very muscular, bald, and hypermasculine, whereas the other man is white, rather slim, and weak-looking. During

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11 The commercial did not make the final cut for the actual Super Bowl. It was pitted against and ultimately lost to another, somewhat less inflammatory, gay-themed Doritos ad in a webcontest (Hall).
the first seconds of the ad, the white man looks longingly at the other man, whose eyes are closed. After a few seconds of hesitancy, he lowers his head as if to perform oral sex on the African-American man. However, before the first guy reaches the other man’s genital area, he opens his eyes and glares at his sauna partner, as if to say, “What do you think you’re doing?!” The last scene shows the African-American man feeding the other guy with Dorito chips, purring in an effeminate tone, “Do you like that?”

This ad is a textbook example of the homosocial “masculinity police.” The African-American man reacts with a threatening glare to the other man’s perceived sexual advance, which belies the already established homoerotic context of two half-naked men together in a sauna. Although this commercial does not feature actual violence, the threat of violence suffices to discourage the “gay” guy from crossing the line. The line, of course, is blurry. Certain forms of physical proximity, such as tackling or enjoying the sauna together, are acceptable, while others, e.g. sexual attraction between men, are off-limits. Of course, as it turns out, the object of lust is not the other man’s genital area, but rather a bag of Dorito chips, which makes for a sexual double-entendre that relies on the viewers’ discomfort with same-sex male sexual innuendo. However, the ad ultimately does not offend the viewers’ moral sensibilities with regard to gay male sexuality, resolving the double-entendre before the scene can cross into “morally questionable” territory.

Secondly, the ad evokes links between masculinity and race. The African-American man is depicted as hypermasculine, almost animalistic, and rejects the “homosexual” advances by other guy with great intensity. By contrast, the last few seconds of the ad show a complete reversal of this image, with the African-American
man caressing the other guy, cooing effeminately, and feeding him Dorito chips. The complete change from hypermasculine man to feminized caricature evokes racist stereotypes, which have historically oscillated between fear of the sexual prowess of “the black man,” and caricaturing meant to emasculate them to privilege white masculinity.

III. The Male Consumer as the Loser - Bud Light

The beer commercial, a subgenre of television advertisements, illustrates marketing of a product that is highly masculinized. As Lance Strate points out, “the beer industry relies on stereotypes of the man’s man to appeal to a mainstream, predominantly male target audience” (Strate 78). The beer commercial demonstrates the degree to which educated guessing is part and parcel of advertising. As they can never know exactly what kind of imagery will be the most effective sales strategy, advertisers present their product in ways they presume will resonate positively with consumers. As a “carrier of cultural myths” (ibid.), the beer commercial functions as a carrier of cultural meanings ascribed to masculinity. Following Barthes, Strate suggests that beer commercials engage in myth-making, myths being “uncontested and generally unconscious assumptions that are so widely shared within a culture that they are considered natural” (ibid.). This air of naturalization evokes a sense of incontestability and eternity, both of which are central characteristics of hegemonic masculinity.

It is insightful, then, to consider how sport and beer have been commodified in convergent ways to maintain hegemonic ideals of masculinity. As Wenner and Jackson point out, “both beer and sports are masculine-centered social products that have far-reaching consequences for gender relations and identities …” (Wenner and Jackson viii). Additionally, “the traditional connection between sports and beer has grown stronger as
beer companies have become some of the largest advertisers on TV sports event” (Miedzian 1993). While the characteristics of beer and competitive sports may appear directly opposed (narcotic vs. physical fitness), promotional culture connects them visually and conceptually, creating a “sign of a vestigial but potent hegemonic masculinity” (1).

As a result, “sport, media, and beer have inexorably bonded in a synergistic system of mutual sustenance,” providing a foundation for the social and material practices that form the central pillar of hegemonic masculinity (Wenner and Jackson 11). Within this system, many nonhegemonic men can gain from the hegemony of other masculinities. In other words, the majority of men “benefit from the patriarchal dividend [and] gain from the overall subordination of women” (Connell 2005: 79). For example, by drinking beer while watching the Super Bowl on television, men engage in a performative act complicit in the making of hegemonic masculinity. Obviously, passively watching other men on the football field does not contribute directly to the maintenance of violent masculinity. However, “the difference between the men who cheer football matches on TV and those who run out into the mud and make the tackles themselves” is ultimately insignificant for the patriarchal gender order that masculinist sports help frame and sustain (Connell 2005: 79).

While the majority of beer television ads have historically foregrounded physical labor and beer as features of masculinity, Budweiser’s contribution to the 2003 Super Bowl depicts a somewhat different scenario. In this ad, we see a marginal masculinity employing beer as a vehicle to validate itself. Two nerdy-looking, white young men attend a yoga class, using prosthetic legs to help them feign the different exercises. Their
reason for attending the class is pure voyeurism: they want to gawk at the women on the yoga mats while enjoying their Bud Lights and each other’s company (Messner and de Orca 1888). The women in the ad fulfill two roles: 1) the yoga instructor, a woman, instructs the participants to “... inhale, arch, thrust your pelvis to the sky, [and] release into the stretch,” providing a suggestive verbal context, and 2) the participants are reduced to sex objects whose bodies (pelvises, breasts, and legs) serve to excite and entertain the two guys. The beer, ostensibly, lowers the men’s inhibitions and allows them to “transgress the female space of the yoga class” (1887).

Ultimately, however, the yoga instructor discovers what the two guys are doing, throwing them summarily out of the class. Their prosthetic legs are thrown at the guys as they stand out in the street, still holding their beer bottles, puzzled by the women’s defiance. They are left as losers because they have failed to transform their fantasy into reality: the female bodies they desire remain inaccessible for them. According to Messner and de Orca, the two guys in this ad clearly fall into the category “loser” (1887). They are “chumps” whose masculinity is precarious (ibid.). Beer allows them to transcend, however momentarily, their marginal status as losers and imagine themselves as the lovers of beautiful women. The women in the yoga class, by contrast, “serve as potential prizes for men’s victories and proper consumption choices” (ibid.). Although the women ultimately humiliate the men by banning them from their space and refusing them sexual access to their pelvises, breasts, and legs, they do not emerge empowered, but remain faceless and invisible. The guys retreat from the female space comforted by each other’s company, their beers, and the possibility of future sexual encounters with conventionally attractive women. Beer is the symbolic “magic key” that bonds these men together in an
invisible system of gender superiority, forming a visual universe in which women are relegated to commercialized positions of objectification.

IV. “Quick! Do Something Manly!” – Snickers

This 2007 Super Bowl commercial for the candy bar “Snickers” exemplifies promotional culture conflating male homosexuality with femininity, and then rendering this conflation as a source of emasculation. The setting of this ad is a car repair shop/garage, a masculinized space reserved for a masculinized commodity, the car. Two mechanics, clad in blue-collar uniforms, unshaven, and rough-looking, are working on a car’s motor when one of the two men pulls out a Snickers bar and starts eating it. The other man is immediately mesmerized and irresistibly attracted by the chocolate bar, biting into it from the other side. As the two men hungrily devour the Snickers bar, each from a different side, their lips meet. After a split-second of paralyzing shock, they hastily pull away from one another, their heads bowed and eyes staring at the ground. Their shame, embarrassment, and humiliation is palpable, causing one of the two guys to cry out, “I think we just accidentally kissed!”, to which the other guy replies, “Quick! Do something manly!” In order to prove their manliness, they each pull out a chunk of their chest hair, screaming in agony. The ad ends with a shot of a Snickers bar and the tagline “Snickers. Most Satisfying.”

Amid protests from gay organizations such as GLAAD, the advertisers responsible for this commercial ultimately pulled it off the air (Horovitz 2007). The ad was part of a multimedia campaign; Super Bowl viewers were directed “to a special website where visitors could vote for alternate endings to the hair pulling — including the two drinking motor oil, the two fighting with wrenches or the two being joined by a third
mechanic who asks, ‘Is there room for three on this love boat?’” (ibid.) The fact that Snickers provided alternate endings suggests that the advertisers believed homophobic humor would be such an effective sales generator that they could not decide on a single version. The irony that the men choose hair removal to prove their masculinity, an activity usually reserved for women, appears to have been lost on them.

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While all of these advertisements advocate hegemonic masculinity in different ways, the 2007 Snickers ad is perhaps most insightful. The campaign does not only point to anti-gay humor as a marketing strategy, it also mirrors the very ideals of hegemonic masculinity that are dominant in the Super Bowl: homophobia, anti-femininity, and worship of physical violence as proof of masculinity. This begs the question as to why Snickers chose to inaugurate this commercial at the NFL’s championship game. Why does the ad cast same-sex male sexuality as equivalent to femininity? To answer this question, it is instructive to return to the theory of hegemonic masculinity. As discussed earlier, gay men are among the most “unmanly” of men because their sexuality diffuses the gender distinctions between men and women. Gay men threaten hegemonic masculinity because they embody a diffused gender identity in which male-bodiedness coexists with romantic and sexual intimacy with other men. The Snickers ad relies on its viewers’ familiarity with this cultural knowledge, reaffirming that gay men and hegemonic masculinity are fundamentally incompatible.

12 Compare the Doritos ad campaign four years later (p. 36), which also pitted several gay-themed ads against one another.
Clearly, the Super Bowl football game and the commercials converse with one another, forming an intertextual relationship in which the former enacts ideals of masculinity that the latter echoes. In other words, the hypermasculine football players on the field personify ideals of hegemonic masculinity that the entertainment part of the spectacle reiterates and reinforces. In their in-depth study of masculinist television sports events in the United States, Michael Messner, Michele Dunbar, and Darnell Hunt observed a “master ideological narrative that is well suited to discipline [men’s] bodies, minds, and consumption choices …” (380). Clearly, televised sports events do not just depict sports games, but actively perpetuate ideological narratives. In promoting “men’s” products, their narrative structures construct discourses that constitute, enforce, and sustain cultural norms of hegemonic masculinity. This intertextuality conveys a fairly coherent and “consistent message about what it means to be a man” in America (Messner et al. 390), affirming an ideal of American masculinity that is intimately linked with denigration of women and ridicule of gay men.

6. Conclusion

Close readings of the “language” of Super Bowl advertisements suggest that ideals of hegemonic masculinity have great cultural and commercial resonance in the context of the Super Bowl. Thanks to the immense visibility of the spectacle, the commercials discussed in Chapter 5 can all reasonably be considered manuals on American masculinity. Moreover, their open play with the insecurities and instabilities of masculinity signifies intertextually with the Super Bowl football game and its assertion of hegemonic masculinity.
The Dodge Charger ad asserts that women inhibit men’s true nature as men by prescribing codes of male conduct that foreground dreary civility, rather than exciting wildness and freedom. Racist and homophobic, Doritos’s 2011 ad makes clear that “true” men must never indulge in attractions to other men, even in the most homoerotic of contexts. Bud Light’s 2003 Super Bowl commercial relates to its male audience that it is O.K. to not embody hegemonic masculinity, to not have sexual access to conventionally attractive women, so long as the “loser” consumes a nice, cold beer after having his lack of masculinity yet again confirmed. Finally, the Snicker’s ad explicitly renders same-sex male desire as something shameful for “manly” man, suggesting that to be gay is repulsive and to be avoided at all costs. However, the Snickers ad also makes clear that attraction to men is not condemnable for its own sake, but rather because “gayness is easily assimilated to femininity” (Connell 2005: 78). In order to be considered “unmanly,” homosexuality must be conceptually equated with femininity, thus becoming emblematic of non-masculinity.

In spite of its shortcomings, the concept of hegemonic masculinity is a useful theory with which to understand the Super Bowl as a spectacle of masculinity. The NFL’s annual championship game showcases exemplars of hypermasculinity that mirror Connell’s ideas about hegemonic masculinity (cf. Connell and Messerschmidt 838). Football represents a “homsocial cultural sphere” whose all-out worship of traditional masculinity stands in direct contrast to the oft-cited crisis of masculinity, as pointed out by Kimmel and others (Messner 1990: 204). Indeed, a “crisis narrative” (Traister 288) invariably accompanies any attempt at a history of American masculinity, illustrating the anxieties surrounding masculine gender identity.
As this thesis has suggested, American football requires of its players an unnatural tolerance for pain and injury. This tolerance, evidently, stands in direct connection to masculine gender norms. Football teaches boys and young men that “to endure pain is courageous, to survive pain is manly” (Sabo 9), conversely making non-violence suspect of femininity. In a context that venerates violence, “men are fed the cultural message that pain is inevitable and that it enhances one’s character and moral worth” (ibid.). Although the repercussions of its reverence for aggression are dire, football continues to perpetuate “gendered norms [that] often have deleterious consequences for male participants” (Young and White 109). Participation in combat sports appears to be predicated on men “glorifying and celebrating a set of bodily and relational practices that … place boys’ and men’s long-term health prospects in jeopardy” (Messner et al. 391-2). Hegemonic masculinity is violent, can withstand harm and injury, and is at liberty to injure others, precisely because all these actions are considered non-feminine in American culture. In the context of American football, utter opposition to the feminine, in any way other than women’s sexual attractiveness, is a continuous process marked by violence, injury, and emotional stoicism.

Although NFL officials and football coaches are beginning to implement stricter rules to prevent traumatic head injuries, much remains to be done. Future research will have to inquire in more depth into the attitudes towards head injuries in professional football in order to understand more deeply the relationship between the male body as an “injurable” object and American football. As Greg Williams’s chilling pep talk indicates, violence against the head continues to figure prominently in the argot and mentality of football as a sure way to knock out opponents and win the game.
Through participation in masculinist sports, as athletes or spectators, boys and men learn that “competition, a proneness for violence, supremist [sic] attitudes, ... and emotional inexpressivity are part of the ‘stuff’ from which manhood is forged” (Sabo 3). The American military, historically a male-dominated domain and showcase for hypermasculinity, features as a carrier of patriotism and nationalism in the Super Bowl. In the United States, football is deeply tied to “nationalism, patriotism, and zeal about sending our boys to war” (Miedzian 193). For future research, it might be interesting to explore the history of the “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” policy of the American military, which prohibited gay and lesbian service members from disclosing their sexual orientation, as it related to masculinist televised sporting events evoking militaristic language and mentality. An instructive research question might ask how the policy, with its attendant legal discrimination of gays and lesbians, contributed to an overall sanctioning of homophobia in American culture. As Curry Jansen and Sabo hold, the sport/war analogy marginalizes women in the military and licenses homophobia while privileging straight masculinity. Thus, “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” was “crucial for the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity” (11).

Part and parcel of the event, love of country is central to the spectacle of the Super Bowl in the form of visual enactments of American patriotism. Indeed, it is impossible to imagine the Super Bowl in any other country than the United States. American football, and the Super Bowl in particular, are unequivocally and distinctively American. This thesis has suggested that this distinctive American quality remains closely linked to male domination of women. Furthermore, the Super Bowl spectacle is rooted in the history of the United States as a war-faring nation. The militaristic rhetoric
of football, rife with references to war and armed combat, can be partially explained by way of this historical connection (cf. Kooijman 181).

Football is a textual narrative that weaves American dramas with masculine players as protagonists, heroes and anti-heroes, and winners and losers. Tacitly, the Super Bowl spectacle sanctions certain American masculinities while excluding and denigrating others. Images of nationalism and militarism give legitimacy and credence to those definitions of “proper” American masculinity while defining physical violence as an acceptable, indeed admirable, element of masculine identity. The strong patriotic overtones of the spectacle give emphasis to these notions by suggesting that to be aggressive and violent is fundamentally American.

Ultimately, the question remains how vicarious participation in masculinist televised sports is connected to real-life violence, if such a connection exists at all. For example, do Super Bowl viewers have a greater tendency to cultivate an understanding of masculinity that normalizes male violence and makes aggressiveness culturally permissible? For many years, a popular myth circulated of women’s shelters having one of the worst days of the year on Super Bowl Sunday, as domestic violence increased dramatically on that day (St. John 43-4). A study by Old Dominion University suggested an increase in the number of hospital admissions and police reports in the Washington, D.C. area on Super Bowl Sunday in 1988 and 1989 (44). However, these findings were later debunked by a reporter of the Washington Post, who cited the miniscule sample used in the study (ibid.). Evidently, the relationship between domestic violence and football games is too complex to be reduced to a simple equation.

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13 See especially Oriard (1993) for an exploration of the “narrative possibilities” of American football.
No stimulus-response relationship can establish causality, or even correlation, between the Super Bowl and real-life violence. However, it seems worthwhile to explore how popular representations of violent masculinity, both in masculinist sports and in advertisements, contribute to a cultural climate of aggression and hate against women and gay men. For instance, the Super Bowl seems to be both emblematic of and contributory to homophobia. It seems probable that an immensely popular spectacle, one that celebrates an ideal masculinity that denigrates and ridicules women and gay men, would have implications for American culture more broadly speaking. In this sense, the Super Bowl is a performative cultural space that normalizes violence to a degree where aggression against women and gay men may seem less condemnable than other crimes. The spectacle exhibits ample and clear hegemonic undertones of misogyny and homophobia that underscore its potential effects on real-life violence.

Overall, the Super Bowl constructs a cultural narrative about American hegemonic masculinity that interweaves nationalistic imagery and competitive sports with a commercial message that aims to influence men’s consumption choices. The “sacred union between electronic media and spectator athletics” (Real 32) creates a marketable product comprised in equal parts of sports, entertainment, and advertising. Ideals of hegemonic masculinity, enacted on the football field and in many advertisements, seek to discipline men’s consumption choices, attitudes towards gender inequality, and patterns of social practice.

All things considered, however, the Super Bowl is not the “master key” to American culture, any more than bullfighting is to Spanish, or the cockfight is to Balinese culture (cf. Geertz 29). And yet, much like the Balinese cockfight, the Super Bowl is a
trope of national identity (Langman 69) because it throws into relief ideas, values, and norms that are foundational to American culture. Furthermore, it throws into relief the constant instability of American masculinity – male gender identity, like all identities, is always in the process of “becoming.” For this reason, the identity parade of the Super Bowl is one of many cultural texts whose interpretive meanings make up the complexity of what it means to be a man in America.
Appendix
Below are screen shots of the advertisements discussed in this paper, in the order in which they appear:

*Dodge Charger Ad, 2010 Super Bowl. ABC.*
Doritos Ad (not aired during 2011 Super Bowl)
Bud Light Ad, 2003 Super Bowl. ABC.
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MOST SATISFYING
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