

Disrupting the White Man’s Game: Violence, Hegemonic Masculinity, and an American Pastime

Introduction

On February 5, 2017, approximately 110 million Americans tuned into Fox to watch the New England Patriots, led by quarterback Tom Brady, defeat the Atlanta Falcons in Super Bowl LI, the fifth most-watched program in television history.¹ A National Football League (NFL) season that began with former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick, a biracial individual raised by white adoptive parents,² refusing to stand during the national anthem in protest of the oppression of persons of color will (presumably) conclude with Brady – a well-known supporter of President Trump – triumphantly visiting the White House as a “total” winner.³ Although football may seem trivial to those concerned with pressing political issues, closer analysis reveals the sport operates as a breeding ground for systematic oppression.

For many young American men, football serves as a common means to achieve various ends: popularity with womxn, social acceptance amongst male peers, a connection with our fathers,⁴ and – for those who are particularly talented or lucky – financial success. Although the thought that one could earn millions of dollars each year and date a supermodel amounts to a mere fantasy for the vast majority of these men, there always remains the *possibility* that these dreams could become reality. In some sense, it seems accomplishing these goals “excuses” one from engaging with everyday concerns. For example, while Pittsburgh Steelers offensive tackle Ryan Harris, a Muslim person of color, has repeatedly spoken out against the President’s

¹ A.J. Perez, “Super Bowl LI viewership ranks among top five,” *USA Today*, last modified February 6, 2017, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/nfl/2017/02/06/super-bowl-li-falcons-patriots-tv-rating-fox/97546162/>.

² Robert Lipsyte, “Donald Trump, Colin Kaepernick, And The Politics of Football,” *The Huffington Post*, last modified January 31, 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-lipsyte/donald-trump-colin-kaepernick-and-the-politics_b_14519636.html.

³ Donald Trump, Twitter post, February 5, 2017, 10:36 PM, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump>. As it turned out, Brady – along with a considerable number of other Patriots – did not join the team on their visit to the White House.

⁴ Michael Kimmel, *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 130.

Islamophobic rhetoric and immigration ban,⁵ Brady, the white, cis-presenting, ostensibly heterosexual, “all-American” face of the Patriots – and, arguably, the entire NFL – has remained complicit with structural oppression by refusing to take a stance on these disconcerting actions.⁶ Given the significant media attention Brady enjoys as the “greatest” quarterback of all-time, it would perhaps prove useful to analyze how celebrity and privilege intersect with political activism; however, considering the NFL’s role in myriad, interconnected issues, I instead focus on those persons who are methodically excluded from – and harmed by – this cultural institution.

In this paper, I address how womxn, LGBTQ individuals, persons of color, and non-Americans are simultaneously conceptualized or represented within and excluded from the white, hyper-masculine, ultra-nationalist realm of professional football. Despite the manifold connections one may readily discern between the NFL and broad issues such as classism, imperialism, and environmental degradation, I concern myself in this particular work with three general areas of concern. First, I examine how womxn are subjected to and objectified by the “male gaze” as cheerleaders and, in the case of the Legends Football League, players themselves; grounding this portion of my analysis in the work of Laura Mulvey and Naomi Wolf, I demonstrate how the “gridiron” is erected – and vigilantly defended – as a final bastion of masculinity. Second, by deconstructing the language used by play-by-play commentators and referring to Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai’s work on “heterosexual patriotism,” I attempt to establish a link between the overtly sexualized, though hypothetical, violence committed against the “Other” team and the problematic depiction of the terrorist as a sexually perverse, queered

⁵ “Steelers’ Ryan Harris on Trump’s immigration ban: ‘Playbook of hatred and divisiveness,’” *USA Today.com*, last modified January 29, 2017, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/nfl/steelers/2017/01/29/ryan-harris-president-donald-trump-immigration-ban-muslim/97225300/>.

⁶ Gary Myers, “Tom Brady shows emotions and ignorance at Super Bowl Media Night,” *NYorkDailyNews.com*, last modified January 31, 2017, <http://www.nydailynews.com/sports/football/tom-brady-emotional-ignorant-super-bowl-media-night-article-1.2960154>.

individual deserving of *actual* sexualized violence.⁷ Third, by examining the responses to Kaepernick’s national-anthem protest and Beyoncé’s performance during the Super Bowl 50 halftime show, I interrogate how black bodies are interpreted within a space dominated by whiteness. Returning finally to Tom Brady, I demonstrate that while black bodies may be allowed within the domain of football, the NFL’s disproportionate number of white owners, coaches, and quarterbacks – sometimes referred to as “field generals” – reinforces white supremacy. Ultimately, I offer this work as an initial step within a praxis of rendering visible – and responding to – those obscured forms of oppression; in doing so, I stress that we may undertake a collective opposition to the NFL concurrently alongside other forms of resistance.

Defining Hegemonic, Heterosexual Masculinity

To unpack masculinity’s toxic control within the NFL and football culture, it is first necessary to understand and synthesize theories of masculinity. The initial prong of this underlying framework consists of clearly defining the term “masculinity” or – more precisely – “white, hegemonic, heterosexual masculinity.” To understand this term, one must first recognize that there exist multiple, competing masculinities. While black and lower class masculinities are marginalized in society, others – such as gay masculinity – are stigmatized outright; moreover, each of these masculinities is subordinate to a dominant (i.e., hegemonic), “upper- and middle-class, white, urban, heterosexual” masculinity.⁸ These masculinities are also intersectional. That is to say, these masculinities do not exist in isolation from one another, but rather combine to produce unique experiences of oppression and privilege. As Cathy J. Cohen demonstrates, a gay black man and a gay white man will encounter oppression differently insofar as the latter may

⁷ Jasbir K. Puar and Amit Rai, “Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots,” *Social Text* 20, no. 3 (2002), 126. As I expand upon in this section, football provides men an opportunity to construct their own masculinity by emasculating another through implied sodomy, thus coding the Other as queer.

⁸ Michael A. Messner, *Power at Play: Sports and the Problem of Masculinity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 18.

racially oppress the former.⁹ Even though each of these individuals' identities incorporate gay masculinity, their experiences are not identical. Given that masculinity is inherently raced, it is integral that I include "whiteness" within my definition; although an individual such as Colin Kaepernick may conform to certain masculine standards (e.g., muscular build, heterosexual), their masculinity is neither "true" nor "ideal" by virtue of being black. Understanding *hegemonic* masculinity is crucial to my analysis of football as the concept a) demonstrates how confrontational, body-contact sports such as football "function as an endlessly renewed symbol of masculinity" and b) theorizes the "violence and homophobia" that pervade these sports.¹⁰ To understand "heterosexual masculinity," one notes that hegemonic masculinity implies that "true" men are heterosexually active – often aggressively so – whereas gay men's masculinity is constructed as deviant; subsequently, if a man expresses any form of sexuality that is not exclusively heterosexual, then he may be placed in a position subordinate to the dominant heteromascularity. Given that "the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity may also be the embodiment of *heterosexual* masculinity...hegemonic masculinity *becomes* heteromascularity."¹¹ Recognizing that "various characteristics one [one's] total being – for example, race, gender, class, sexuality – are highlighted or called upon to make sense of a particular situation" within any given context,¹² I use the simpler phrase "heteromascularity" in this paper to refer to masculinity which is white, hegemonic, violent, homophobic, *and* racist. Overall, this heteromascularity both derives from and reinforces "a social system that is constantly being created, contested, and changed, both in the relationships and power struggles

⁹ Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," *GLQ* 3 (1997): 437.

¹⁰ R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 835.

¹¹ Trenton M. Haltom and Meredith G.F. Worthen, "Male Ballet Dancers and Their Performances of Heteromascularity," *Journal of College Student Development* 55, no. 8 (2004): 758–59.

¹² Cohen, 440.

between men and women,”¹³ and in those between men. I examine the relationships and power struggles between men in the second and third sections of this paper, but I first turn my attention to address how male dominance exerts its influence upon female-bodied individuals.

Men Watching Womxn: The Male Gaze & the Beauty Myth

In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey discusses how womxn are exposed to the “determining male gaze [that] projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly.”¹⁴ Rather than serving primarily as independent subjects who actively progress a film’s plot, Mulvey argues that womxn are fixed as sexual objects to be viewed by men for their pleasure, ultimately providing cinema’s erotic spectacle and signifying male desire.¹⁵ Although Mulvey’s theory was developed within the context of film theory, it seems evident that the objectifying male gaze may be applied to football as well insofar as each incorporates the pleasurable act of looking. Just as a female character within a film may “freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation” rather than contribute to the story’s development,¹⁶ so, too, for example, do cheerleaders provide male viewers the opportunity to realize their voyeuristic desires in an acceptable setting without influencing the result of the on-field action. While Mulvey’s theory reveals how womxn function as objects to be viewed by men, one must turn towards Wolf to fully understand the *standards* by which womxn are judged.

Writing in 1991, Naomi Wolf describes the “beauty myth” as a (false) story which attempts to convince both men and womxn that the latter must conform to objective standards of beauty to be desired and loved;¹⁷ moreover, this myth is perpetuated by contemporary society’s

¹³ Messner, 18.

¹⁴ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989), 19.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1991), 12.

“power structure, economy, and culture to mount a counteroffensive against [supposedly liberated] women.”¹⁸ In relation to sex, Wolf describes how modern society projects images of stereotypical beauty to womxn through “beauty pornography,” which suggests that one must look like the “perfected woman” to experience erotic pleasure.¹⁹ Recalling Mulvey, and investigating the oppressive function of the beauty myth, Wolf asserts that a “[c]onsumer culture is best supported by markets made up of sexual clones, men who want objects and women who want to be objects.”²⁰ Beyond the economy, though, Wolf states that “militarism depends on men choosing the bond with one another over the bond with women and children,” suggesting that the construction of erotic lives based on mutual respect rather than domination would fundamentally serve to transform society.²¹ Within the context of football, the objectifying male gaze works in conjunction with the beauty myth to restrain womxn’s opportunities as both players – in legitimate and illegitimate leagues – and cheerleaders.

Separate & Unequal

Among all sports, football has seemingly maintained a rather unique status as “a man’s sport.” Despite the increased participation of women in virtually every other sport at the collegiate level due to the advent of Title IX and the establishment of female “equivalents” of various professional leagues, such as the Women’s National Basketball Association, football effectively remains a game for men.²² To understand this disparity, one may first examine how this “rationale” stems from traditional conceptions of masculinity and femininity.

¹⁸ Ibid., 13.

¹⁹ Ibid., 132.

²⁰ Ibid., 144.

²¹ Ibid., 144–45. At this point, it is crucial to acknowledge that Wolf’s language problematically reinforces heteronormativity insofar as she explicitly claims, “*Heterosexual* love threatens to lead to political change” (emphasis added). While this signals to me the ongoing need to queer feminist theory like that of Wolf’s, the point remains that a consumptive society based on dominance and possession blatantly aids in systematic oppression.

²² Kimmel, 136.

Speaking with Kieran Stewart, a young, female “Rookie Reporter,” in October 2016, Packers wide receiver Jordy Nelson was asked whether he thought a womxn would ever be able to play in the NFL. Cautiously approaching this question, Nelson initially said that he could see the possibility occurring someday; however, as football is “a different game [with] a lot of big people,” the “easiest and quickest” way for a womxn to play professional football would be as a kicker.²³ While Nelson’s comments may seem relatively progressive, his opinion seems to originate from an attitude that understands female-bodies as naturally weaker than male-bodies. Invoking Michael Kimmel, men responded to womxn who sought entry into the sporting world by claiming that womxn could not *biologically* compete; that is to say, they could not “do it physically or temperamentally.”²⁴ The argument may go something like this: “A womxn could do the same job as a man, and perhaps even be his boss, but she wouldn’t be able to go out on the field and take a hit from [Pittsburgh defensive end] James Harrison.”²⁵ Although this argument may indeed prove true for many womxn, two counterpoints undermine its supposed validity.

First, the “physicality” argument presumably holds for just as male-bodied individuals – myself included – as well; one is not merely born into an athletic body, but develops one over time through rigorous training – training which presumably is or ought to be equally available to womxn. Secondly, this position overlooks the fact that womxn participate in a number of other physically demanding sports such as hockey and rugby; moreover, womxn *already* have the opportunity to play unpaid,²⁶ full-contact football with the Independent Women’s Football

²³ Jordy Nelson, “Rookie reporter Kieran with Jordy Nelson,” *Packers.com* video, 2:00, October 8, 2016, <http://www.packers.com/media-center/videos/Rookie-reporter-Kieran-with-Jordy-Nelson/bb1fcad9-1c71-434f-aa9f-b657df20728b>.

²⁴ Kimmel, 137.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Mandi Woodruff, “Inside the world of women’s tackle football – where women pay to play,” *Yahoo Finance*, last modified March 30, 2016, <http://finance.yahoo.com/news/women-s-tackle-football-iwfl-wfa-183132959.html>. It is

League (IWFL), which was founded in 2000.²⁷ Admittedly, one might attempt to dispute this argument by pointing out that men and womxn do not participate in athletics within shared spaces; however, this argument merely comments on the world as it *is* rather than as it perhaps *ought* be. That is to say, the fact that womxn do not presently play professional football alongside men does not suffice as an argument for why they should not share athletic spaces. Perhaps, though, Nelson's comments reveal underlying attitudes that, outside of the issue of whether womxn could participate in football, *perpetuate and reinforce traditional ideals about male and female bodies*. Recalling that Nelson describes football as a sport with “a lot of big bodies,” and given that football is a “man's” sport, one infers that the ideal – or *true* – male body is large and muscular while a “genuine” female body is diminutive and frail. Those who fail to fit these unrealistic standards become *failed* men and womxn; by refusing to conform to those standards established by heteromascularity, the male gaze, and the beauty myth, effeminate male bodies and masculine female bodies are marked as subnormal. Given that these – and other – queer identities “embody sustained and multisited resistance to systems...that seek to normalize our sexuality, exploit our labor, and constrain our visibility,”²⁸ the heteromascularity society they threaten to disrupt attempts to police and obscure them. This societal regulation becomes apparent by examining the differences between the IWFL and the Legends Football League – the most well-known venue within which womxn actively participate as football players.

Womxn Constructed by the Male Gaze

perhaps more accurate to describe the IWFL as a “pay-to-play” league insofar as the womxn who participate in the league contribute anywhere between \$500 and \$2000 each season to cover team expenses.

²⁷ “History,” *Independent Women's Football League*, accessed February 24, 2017, <http://www.iwflsports.com/theiwfl/history/>.

²⁸ Cohen, 440.

Known as the Lingerie Football League until 2013, the recently rebranded *Legends* Football League (LFL) was conceived as a pay-per-view, “alternative” half-time show during Super Bowl XXXVIII by founder Mitchell Mortaza in 2004.²⁹ Featuring a 7-on-7 tackle format, and touting the motto “Women of the Gridiron,” it would seem – superficially, at least – that the league would serve to promote the equal representation of womxn in football; however, a number of factors make it evident that this organization has been significantly shaped by the male gaze. The first, and perhaps most blatant, manifestation of this gaze within the LFL is the uniform design. While every portion of male footballers’ bodies are covered by some article of clothing, the womxn of the LFL wear “push-up bras, spandex underwear, shoulder pads and helmets with clear masks that allow their faces to be seen.”³⁰ Although one might argue that this requirement is unproblematic given that each individual who chooses to join the league is aware of the uniform, and while it is likely that at least some LFL players have no objections to them, it is likely that coercion plays a significant role in shaping others’ decisions to join the league.

I take “coercion” here to mean the deliberate manipulation of choices that incentivizes another to select the least detrimental or most beneficial option that, in the absence of such influence, one would otherwise not choose.³¹ Given this definition, one may interrogate both the IWFL and LFL’s amateur status, and whether coercion is present in either case. Concerning the IWFL, the options are to a) pay up to \$2,000 per year to participate in a league that does not sexually objectify women, or b) not participate in the sport in an organized, egalitarian manner.

²⁹ “Lacing Up for the Lingerie Bowl,” *CBS News*, last modified February 7, 2010, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/lacing-up-for-the-lingerie-bowl/>.

³⁰ Sarah Spain, “Legends Football Leagues Is Still The Wrong Packaging For Women’s Game,” *ABC News*, last modified November 17, 2015, <http://abcnews.go.com/Sports/legends-football-league-wrong-packaging-womens-game/story?id=35252047>. Arguably, the uniform used to be more sexually explicit as players were also required to wear chokers and lace garter belts.

³¹ Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: essays in feminist theory* (Trumansburg: The Crossing Press, 1983), 56.

Considering that the players' fees are required to ensure the mere exist of the IWFL, it seems unlikely that those individuals who choose to play are victims of coercion; moreover, given that the organization is not yet a profitable enterprise, *there does not exist the possibility that the league could pay its athletes*. Given this, it seems the IWFL's amateur status is justified; moreover, it is apparent that coercion is absent both in one's decision to join the league and one's choice to remain with the league. In relation to the LFL, it seems that although coercion may not be a factor in one's decision to join the league, coercion shapes one's supposedly "free" choices while a member. In this case, the options are a) to participate in a league that sexually objectifies women or b) not participate in the sport in an organized manner. Each option initially appears similar to those present in regards to the IWFL, but the particulars diverge. For example, although womxn do not pay to participate in the LFL, their membership is not free given that players give their time and labor by going "to bars to promote their team and sell tickets."³²

While the league does provide womxn and opportunity to play the game of football in front of fans with a fair amount of television coverage,³³ the multifaceted exploitation of these individuals has been far-reaching and constant. In 2009, it was revealed that players' contracts included the requirement that they "not wear any additional garments under wardrobe provided by Producer without prior written consent from Producer."³⁴ Violation of this rule would result in a five-hundred dollar fine, although the players themselves are unpaid by the league.³⁵ In addition to this clause, players who participated in league events were required to acknowledge and not object to the possibility that the "Player's services and performances...may involve

³² Spain.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Tommy Craggs, "You Will Be Shocked To Learn The Lingerie Football League Is Not A Classy Operation (UPDATE)," *Deadspin*, last modified December 18, 2009, <http://deadspin.com/5429883/you-will-be-shocked-to-learn-the-lingerie-football-league-is-not-a-classy-operation-update>.

³⁵ Spain.

accidental nudity.”³⁶ Considering this, although coercion may be absent in one’s decision to become a member of the LFL, it seems evident that coercion functions to shape the decisions of those individuals who remain with the league. In regards to the LFL’s “amateur” status, it seems the league could feasibly compensate its athletes given that the LFL has a television deal with Fuse and charges admissions to games.³⁷ In fact, the league apparently did pay players a percentage of its revenue until an individual asked about receiving a paycheck while celebrating a victory in the Lingerie Bowl in 2011.³⁸ At this moment, which – according to Mortaza – “should have been joyous and filled with a *sense of appreciation for the experience*,”³⁹ the league decided it “needed a drastic change in policy to rid” itself of such ungrateful persons.⁴⁰

Rather than being legitimately unable to compensate its athletes, the LFL exploits its players after they join the league by taking advantage of the fact that they may perceive themselves as having no other viable alternative to playing football. For many, the “cost” of wearing lingerie to participate on an organized football team may be more appealing than paying hundreds of dollars to play each season; however, rather than being a mutual agreement made between employer and employee, it is apparent that Mortaza holds a disproportionate amount of power in relation to the league’s athletes. Considering this disparity, which presumably does not exist between the IWFL and its players, it should be apparent that one should neither excuse LFL for its superficial amateur status nor claim that its athletes “freely” choose to done its uniform.

³⁶ Craggs.

³⁷ Jason Lisk, “Lingerie Football Players Stopped Getting Paid Because One Dared Ask for Check After Title Game Four Years Ago,” *The Big Lead*, last modified September 23, 2015, <http://thebiglead.com/2015/09/23/lingerie-football-players-stopped-getting-paid-because-one-dared-ask-for-check-after-title-game-four-years-ago/>.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Beyond this mistreatment, the LFL reinforces the male gaze through its overtly sexual, hyper-feminine team names; the Seattle Mist, Los Angeles Temptation, Atlanta Steam, and Chicago Bliss – each of these stand in stark contrast to their NFL counterparts, the Seahawks, Rams, Falcons, and Bears respectively. Given the LFL’s exploitative treatment of its athletes, it is evident that womxn may be tolerated within the football club, but not welcomed in any manner which demands they be taken seriously as athletes or respected as equals. While the LFL’s sexual objectification of womxn evidently reflects the influence of the male gaze upon female bodies, the attitudes that motivate this objectification are not contained within this context. Rather than dismissing this blatant sexism as isolated from men’s professional football, I argue that it should be understood instead as amplifying those latent patriarchal attitudes towards womxn that are *already* produced by the National Football League.

If football players represent the pinnacle of masculinity, and quarterbacks represent the ideal man within that context, then it seems to follow that cheerleaders represent the ideal womxn within a patriarchal society shaped by the male gaze and beauty myth. Recalling Mulvey, one may readily discern how female cheerleaders are fixed by the male gaze as erotic objects which distract from the on-field action while male cheerleaders are either overlooked or – more often than not – simply absent. Of the twenty-six franchises that employ cheerleaders,⁴¹ only the Baltimore Ravens squad includes both men and womxn.⁴² I draw attention to the Ravens squad for two reasons. First, despite the heterogeneous makeup of the group, one notices on the Ravens website that only the female members are featured in “team” photos. For example, the interactive

⁴¹ Michael Rothstein, “Lions become one of final teams to add cheerleaders,” *ESPN*, last modified June 14, 2016, http://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/16179000/detroit-lions-adding-cheerleaders-leaving-just-six-teams-them.

⁴² “Brawn Behind The Beauty: Male Ravens Cheerleaders of NFL’s Only Co-Ed Squad,” *CBS Baltimore*, last modified January 13, 2012, <http://baltimore.cbslocal.com/2012/01/13/brawn-behind-the-beauty-male-ravens-cheerleaders-of-nfls-only-co-ed-squad/>.

banner prominently located near the top of the page displays thirty-three female members posing in skimpy outfits while no male cheerleaders are present.⁴³ Beyond the team's website, male members are excluded from the team's calendar.⁴⁴ The message is clear from these examples: while men can be cheerleaders, only womxn who meet a certain beauty standard are meant to be displayed (and studied⁴⁵) for the presumably heterosexual male viewer's pleasure.⁴⁶

Consider that while both males and females are on the same squad, they wear different uniforms – uniforms “designed” by the male gaze. Whereas the squad's female members are clad in short skirts and tops which reveal their abdomen, legs, and chest, the male members' uniform only reveals their arms. Although this sex-based representation may be common at both the professional and collegiate levels, there is no legitimate reason for this differential treatment to persist; it seems we do not have professional female cheerleaders in concealing garments – or shirtless male cheerleaders in tight shorts – solely because of the (heteronormative) male gaze.⁴⁷

Clearly, womxn predominantly occupy subordinate positions within a football context. As both unpaid players in their own leagues and employees of NFL franchises, womxn are not afforded the same professional opportunities as men, coerced into providing free labor while being sexually objectified, and are situated as erotic objects for male fans' consumption. These

⁴³ “Cheerleaders,” *BaltimoreRavens.com*, accessed February 24, 2017, <http://www.baltimoreravens.com/ravenstown/cheerleaders/>

⁴⁴ “Brawn Behind The Beauty.”

⁴⁵ The Ravens' website features “bios” for each female cheerleader which simultaneously resemble traditional football cards and dating bios. Whereas the statistics featured on football cards overview a player's career, these truncated biographies seem to cater to the male fan's fantasy of meeting one of these cheerleaders and already “knowing” them.

⁴⁶ “No Surprise: 64% Of Americans Watch NFL Football; 73% of Men, 55% of Women,” *TV By The Numbers*, last modified October 14, 2011, <http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/network-press-releases/no-surprise-64-americans-watch-nfl-football-73-of-men-55-of-women/107308/>. While over half of adult women in the U.S. watch football, the “average” viewer, for whom these womxn's uniforms are catered, is assumed to be a (heterosexual) man.

⁴⁷ “The 10 hottest NFL cheerleaders this season,” *Men's Fitness*, accessed February 24, 2017, <http://www.mensfitness.com/women/galleries/10-hottest-nfl-cheerleaders-season>. Unsurprisingly, this gallery only features womxn. Again, this reinforces the notion that womxn are meant to be sexualized and viewed for males' pleasure.

realities are shaped by both the male gaze and the beauty myth, which hold that “true” womxn adhere to traditional conceptions of femininity. In addition to policing and influencing female bodies, white heteromascularity – both within and beyond the jock culture – forces male-bodied individuals to conform to heteromasculine standards through violent, homophobic acts.

The Self as Masculine, the Other as Queer

In myriad ways, football is a violent sport. In a literal sense, it is rare for a team to escape a game unscathed; more common are the games in which multiple devastating injuries occur to players on a single team.⁴⁸ Beneath this surface, though, lies a far more sinister, unacknowledged violence that is actively perpetuated even while the NFL seeks to address issues concerning player safety: sexualized, linguistic violence that conceives of the Other (team) as queer. In this section, I first turn to Robert Baker in deconstructing the language used by play-by-play analyst Joe Buck and color commentator Troy Aikman to understand how a single play may be understood as a hypothetical sexual act that violates and emasculates the opponent. Second, I relate how this act derives from violent power relations rather than mutual same-sex desire; moreover, I discuss how adolescent men employ homophobic slurs to construct violent, everyday (hetero)masculinity through coding the Other as queer. Third, I reinforce this concept by examining how entire franchises – and, by extension, their fans – are constructed as effeminate or queer through derisive nicknames such as the Minnesota “Viqueens,” Dallas “Cowgirls,” and “Green Gay Fudge-Packers.” Finally, by appealing to Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai, I move to connect this heteronormative language to the rhetoric surrounding the war on terror, which suggests that the Muslim as Other must not merely be defeated, but sexually violated in the

⁴⁸ William C. Rhoden, “A Quick Reminder of Football’s Violence,” *NY Times*, last modified September 14, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/14/sports/football/a-quick-reminder-of-footballs-violence.html?_r=0.

process. Given that supporting American militarism is “part of the fabric of the NFL,”⁴⁹ it is necessary to interrogate how that support contributes to the interconnected oppression of LGBTQ individuals, Muslim persons, and womxn at home and abroad.

Consider this brief sequence of events: after the snap, the offensive linemen successfully block the opposing defensive players and provide abundant space for the running back to gain a significant number of yards. This is a simple outcome, but it demands attention for how it is often described by professional analysts. During a game between the Green Bay Packers and Atlanta Falcons, Joe Buck and Troy Aikman roughly used the following language: instead of clearing space, the lineman opened a “gaping hole” in the defense, allowing the running back to “ram it up the gut.” Although Buck and Aikman’s word-choice may have been overlooked by viewers, one realizes upon reflection that the two were describing the play as though it were an act of forced anal penetration. To assert why this violent language matters and ought to be examined further, rather than merely ignored or dismissed as inconsequential, I first turn to Robert Baker’s “‘Pricks’ and ‘Chicks’: A Plea for ‘Persons’”; while his particular work is concerned with how womxn are conceived in the West, I apply Baker’s insights to the context of sexual violence done against men.

Arguing that the way “we metaphorically identify something *is not a superficial bit of conceptually irrelevant happenstance* but rather a reflection of our conceptual structure,”⁵⁰ Baker goes on to show that the way womxn and sexual acts are described derives from patriarchal attitudes. For example, womxn are depicted as “playthings” and “animals,” reflecting the androcentric perspective which holds womxn as subhuman deviations from the male standard of

⁴⁹ “Salute,” *NFL.com*, accessed February 24, 2017, <http://www.nfl.com/salute>.

⁵⁰ Robert Baker, “‘Pricks’ and ‘Chicks’: A Plea for ‘Persons,’” in *Philosophy and Sex*, ed. Robert Baker (Amherst: Prometheus, 1998), 282. Emphasis added.

humanity⁵¹; more relevantly to my work, sexual acts are described in terms such as “screwed,” “banged,” or “nailed,” demonstrating that “we conceive of sexual roles in such a way that only females are thought to be taken advantage of in intercourse.”⁵² In the context of football, Buck and Aikman’s description of hypothetical sodomy is not irrelevant, but rather stem from the idea that one team *functionally emasculates* the opponent by imposing their will on the field. This “emasculatation” literally occurs through one team’s superior strength or skill, but is metaphorically conceived of as one team placing another into a sexually passive (i.e., female) position. What is perplexing – though crucial – here is how a man proves his (hetero)masculinity through hypothetically sodomizing another when such an act would imply that this individual experiences same-sex desire. As I now turn to demonstrate, this act has little – if anything – to do with desire and pleasure; instead, sodomy in this instance functions as a display of power.

To better understand why figurative sodomy does not necessarily imply same-sex desire, and is so degrading for a (presumably heterosexual) male to experience, one may refer to Leo Bersani, who writes that “*to be penetrated is to abdicate [male] power.*”⁵³ Stated differently, to penetrate – as a man is thought to “do to” (a woman) during a natural sexual encounter – is to assert one’s authority; to assert one’s authority is to affirm one’s power. Given this conception of sexuality, the sodomy Buck and Aikman’s language implies has nothing to do with sexual desire between two men, which is forbidden, but rather pertains to a violent relation of power between a dominant, heteromasculine male and an emasculated – or feminized – one.⁵⁴ While I soon return to this point of sodomizing – and harming – the Other in relation to Puar and Rai’s work on

⁵¹ Ibid., 286–87.

⁵² Ibid., 294.

⁵³ Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” *October* 43, *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* (1987): 212.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 212–13.

heteronormative nationalism, I first want to discuss how the act of emasculation is not merely constrained to football, but pervades every aspect of everyday heteromascularity.

Given its inherent frailty, hegemonic heteromascularity requires that men resort to homophobic acts to maintain a dominant position in relation to other men. Michael Kimmel defines homophobia as “the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world...that we are not real men.”⁵⁵ Stated differently, homophobia is not merely an irrational fear of gay persons, but rather the fear that other men might deprive one of their masculinity, thereby subordinating one. As Kimmel discusses, men respond to this fear – and attempt to overcome it – by “turning” other men into a “sissy” or “faggot” through violence; by fighting, one confirms one’s status as real man through the approval of other men.⁵⁶ While this exercise of displaying one’s masculinity often manifests through literal violence, my examination of Buck and Aikman’s analysis suggests that one can assert one’s masculinity through verbal means as well – a practice which seems ubiquitous to male adolescence. Within high-schools throughout the United States, it is common for young men to call other young men “fags.” As C.J. Pascoe relates, this term is not strictly targeted at gay individuals, but is broadly applied to “un-masculine males”;⁵⁷ moreover, these insults reflect homophobic attitudes which young men understand to just be a “part of what it means to be a guy.”⁵⁸ Just like physical violence, homophobic slurs seem essential to constructing heteromascularity. To reinforce this claim, I appeal to Pascoe, who examines how adolescent males establish and reinforce their

⁵⁵ Michael Kimmel, “Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity,” in *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice: An Anthology on Racism, Antisemitism, Heterosexism, Ableism, and Classism*, ed. Maurianna Adams et al. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 214.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ C.J. Pascoe, “‘Dude, You’re a Fag’: Adolescent Masculinity and the Fag Discourse,” *Sexualities* 8, no. 3 (2005): 336.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 335.

masculinity by constructing the other as a queer individual. Conducting fieldwork at “River High” in Riverton, California, Pascoe noted that young men confirmed their masculinity in two ways. First, a boy could simply call another a “fag;” second, a boy might imitate a queer individual by performing in a stereotypically feminine manner or feigning same-sex interest.⁵⁹ In each case, the boy who engages in such acts reveals to others that a) he knows “what a fag is” and b) assures others that he himself is not a fag.⁶⁰ Ultimately, the fag is an “abject” position that, through its existence outside of masculinity, effectively constitutes said heteromascularity.⁶¹ Within the context of professional football, this emasculatory violence – as a form of Othering – moves from the individual level to the communal one as the fans of one franchise construct rival teams as “fags” through homophobic and misogynistic nicknames.

In November 2007, I had the opportunity to see my first Green Bay Packers game with my mother and my grandfather. As we walked to Lambeau Field, we noticed a sign that referred to the Packers’ opponent, the Minnesota Vikings, as the “Viqueens.” Admittedly, being a twelve-year-old boy at the time, I found the wordplay rather humorous; however, considering Baker’s work, I have since realized that this phrase, rather than existing within an innocuous context, derives from and serves to reinforce hegemonic masculinity. Applying Pascoe’s work to this context, a critical transmutation occurs. Whereas the “fag” epithet serves as a fluid description in the case of River High, incessantly transferred between boys whose individual behaviors are coded as either sufficiently or insufficiently masculine, such isolated behaviors do not wholly explain the rigidly homophobic conceptualization of other football teams by fans. For example, the Vikings or the Cowboys may demonstrate their physical superiority over another team, but

⁵⁹ Ibid., 338–39.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 340.

⁶¹ Ibid. 342.

they, and their fans, are still identified as “Viqueens” or “Cowgirls.” This *identity* arises as one group of fans defines itself as heteromasculine; thus, anyone who is not a member of this group – that is to say, who is “Other” – is defined as emasculated, feminine, or queer. Recalling Buck and Aikman’s analysis, this Other must not merely be defeated, but sexually harmed in the process.

Rather than being a unique phenomenon occurring solely within a football context, this sexualized, homophobic violence pervades American society, manifesting at the national and international levels through the rhetoric surrounding the war on terror. Expanding upon a previous claim, masculinity is the willingness or the desire to fight⁶²; taken to its logical extreme, masculinity is then militarism. If masculinity is also homophobia, then it follows that militarism is homophobia. To reinforce this claim, I appeal to Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai’s work on heteronormative nationalism. Analyzing the response to the September 11 attacks, Puar and Rai reveal language mirroring that of Buck and Aikman. Consider, for example, country musician Toby Keith’s “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American).” Written in late 2001 in response to the attacks, the song’s lyrics clearly demonstrate the intersection between patriotism, American militarism, and homophobia. First, Keith declares that truly “American girls and American guys...always stand up and salute” the flag.⁶³ Second, Keith attempts to construct the terrorist as a failed man and defend American masculinity by describing the attacks as “a mighty sucker punch”⁶⁴; what Keith implies here is that only un-masculine males resort to surprise attacks in combat. Finally, Keith asserts that the United States will put “a boot in...[the]

⁶² Kimmel, “Masculinity as Homophobia,” 215.

⁶³ Toby Keith, “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American),” DreamWorks Nashville 450815, 2002, MP3.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

ass” of Osama bin Laden.⁶⁵ What this and other examples suggest is that the United States, “having experienced a castration and penetration of its capitalist [heteromascularity],”⁶⁶ views emasculatory sodomy as the only appropriate punishment for Osama bin Laden. Analogous to the boys in Pascoe’s study, “American retaliations promises...to turn [bin Laden] into a fag.”⁶⁷ Simultaneously, this response a) implies that only “fags” are against war and b) encourages violence against queer persons of color.⁶⁸ This implication is omnipresent in society; rather than being an internal response on the part of individuals, various media aim to shape entire populations as “patriotic, docile subjects through practices, discourses, images, narratives, fears, and pleasures.”⁶⁹ These infantilizing forms of entertainment utilize spectacle to persuade audiences to adopt patriotic beliefs and xenophobic attitudes that retroactively justify American military intervention in foreign countries.⁷⁰ For example, commercial media persuade audiences to derive pleasure from emotional reunions between heroic American soldiers and their families while refusing to humanize those individuals engaged in combat against the United States. As “terrorists,” these persons are stripped of their humanity; instead, they are monsters, sexual deviants who enable “a multiform power to reinvest and reinvent the fag, the citizen, the turban, and even the nation itself in the interests of another, more docile modernity.”⁷¹

In relation to football, which essentially serves as an entertainment medium, one recognizes overt patriotism and glamorized militarism not only through the ritualistic playing of

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Jasbir K. Puar and Amit Rai, 126.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid. Again, synthesizing Pascoe’s work with Puar and Rai’s, heteromascularity is homophobia is militarism; stated negatively, being anti-militarism is being anti-heteromascularity is being anti-homophobic. Given these associations, it is evident that being anti-football is implicated in anti-heteromascularity and anti-militarist attitudes.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 130.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 131.

⁷¹ Ibid., 140.

the national anthem prior to each game, but also through covering the field in massive American flags and having military jets flyover stadiums during the league's military appreciation month. Beyond these displays of nationalism, it seems the Defense Department recognizes – and takes an active interest in utilizing – the NFL's potential for reinforcing docile patriots. In November 2015, Arizona Senators John McCain and Jeff Flake released a report which found that the Defense Department had contracted each of the five major professional sports leagues to “honor the military at games,” costing taxpayers \$6.8 million; of this amount, \$6.1 million went to the NFL.⁷² While the NFL ultimately returned approximately \$700,000 of these payments that were deemed wasteful instances of “paid patriotism,”⁷³ that the league maintained over \$5 million for “legitimate recruiting promotion” reflects the intimate connection between racist, state-sponsored militarism and the NFL's homophobic nationalism.

Discursively, football serves as an arena in which male players' and female cheerleaders' bodies are disciplined and molded as heteronormative patriots; in turn, these idealized figures signal to viewers that these standards are desirable – that they, too, should conform. While Joe Buck and Troy Aikman's analysis demonstrates homophobic attitudes, the militarized, nationalist rhetoric surrounding the September 11 attacks reveals how this heteromascularity functions to subordinate persons of color abroad by constructing them as sexually perverse, subhuman monsters. In turn, this construction of the monster terrorist as “fag” insinuates that the “fag” is also a domestic monster. Recalling that heteromascularity is an inherently raced concept, it is necessary to examine how this masculinity also subordinates persons of color domestically.

Hyper-visible Whiteness

⁷² Bill Theobald, “NFL returns \$723,734 it was paid to honor military,” *USA Today*, last modified May 19, 2016, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2016/05/19/nfl-returns-723734-paid-honor-military/84592204/>.

⁷³ Ibid.

At this point, I address three issues. First, I examine Colin Kaepernick’s protests during the 2016 season and current free agent status to examine white supremacist structures within the NFL. As I demonstrate, although black men are coded as being naturally superior athletes, this subversive “hyper-masculinity” is subordinate to the white heteromascularity it threatens to emasculate through the game’s most prestigious, “whitest” position: quarterback. Second, I analyze Beyoncé’s halftime show performance during Super Bowl 50 to reinforce that the football stadium – epitomized by the Super Bowl’s spectacle – is constructed as a white space for docile male patriots. Finally, I situate Tom Brady as representative of both the NFL’s internal racism and the external white supremacist structures that more broadly manifest throughout the United States.

Currently, former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick has still yet to sign with another NFL team. According to one anonymous general manager, there are three reasons why he is still on the market. First, and least controversially, approximately 20 percent of teams believe that Kaepernick is no longer able to play at a high enough level to lead an NFL franchise.⁷⁴ Second, approximately 10 percent “fear...there might be protests or [President Donald] Trump will tweet about the team.”⁷⁵ Trump has since taken “credit” for Kaepernick’s present status as a free agent during a rally in Louisville, Kentucky, adding that “he wanted to share this with ‘the people of Kentucky because they like it when people actually stand for the American flag’.”⁷⁶ Third, the remaining 70 percent of teams “genuinely hate [Kaepernick] and can’t stand” his kneeling for the national anthem; by refusing to display interest in him, they are

⁷⁴ Jared Dubin, “Report: AFC GM says teams fear backlash of Trump tweets if they sign Kaepernick,” *CBS Sports*, last modified March 17, 2013, <http://www.cbssports.com/nfl/news/report-afc-gm-says-teams-fear-backlash-of-trump-tweets-if-they-sign-kaepernick/>.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ “Donald Trump takes shot at Colin Kaepernick’s free-agent status,” *ESPN*, last modified March 21, 2017, http://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/18964343/donald-trump-takes-shot-colin-kaepernick-free-agent-status.

simultaneously punishing him and using him “as a cautionary tale” to prevent players from repeating such actions in the future.⁷⁷ I offer here a fourth reason: Colin Kaepernick has, through his blackness, threatened to disrupt white supremacy – and emasculate white heteromascularity – by succeeding at a position traditionally reserved for white men throughout the league’s history.

Keeping in mind the insights gleaned from Baker’s analysis of language, consider the description of the quarterback as a “field general.” Beyond reinforcing antagonism toward another team through its militaristic allusion, the phrase implies a hierarchical relationship between the white quarterback and his black teammates.⁷⁸ A general, as opposed to a mere foot soldier, or “grunt,” must possess a wealth of knowledge regarding the enemy’s strategy. Similarly, the “best N.F.L. quarterbacks, like Tom Brady, Drew Brees, and Peyton Manning, have reputations as keen, obsessive students of opposing defenses, whose schemes they decode in real time.”⁷⁹ Within the context of masculinity, the white quarterback represents the ideal synthesis of intellect and strength. Physically, he conforms to traditional conceptions of masculinity, but unlike his black, hyper-masculine subordinates, he tempers this strength with a cool rationality that extends beyond the field.

While black quarterbacks like Kaepernick and Cam Newton are commonly criticized as being “strikingly childish, belligerently pouting” punks who supposedly cannot keep their emotions in check after a defeat,⁸⁰ rarely – if ever – will fans criticize white players for

⁷⁷ Dubin.

⁷⁸ Matt Ralston, “Why there aren’t more Black Quarterbacks in the NFL,” *Matt Ralston* (blog), March 26, 2013, <http://mattralston.net/sports/the-unimpressive-rise-of-black-quarterbacks-in-the-nfl/>.

⁷⁹ Nicholas Dawidoff, “What Makes a Football Player Smart?,” *The New Yorker*, last modified January 3, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/sporting-scene/what-makes-a-football-player-smart>.

⁸⁰ Lynn Miner, “Cam Newton is a Punk,” *Medium*, last modified February 10, 2016, <https://medium.com/@wlm9/cam-newton-is-a-punk-12a811860d16>.

expressing disappoint. Here, individuals like Kaepernick and Newton are caught in a “double bind” of sorts. On the one hand, any genuine, uncalculated display of emotion, such as “[hiding] beneath a towel or hoodie,”⁸¹ is both immature and inappropriately “black.”⁸² On the other hand, by restraining oneself to expressing one’s emotions in the “right” way, one effectively reinforces the notion that stereotypically “white” displays of feeling are properly masculine. In this way, white heteromascularity – as a hegemonic form – disciplines black athletes who, through their “superior” physical strength, inherently threaten to emasculate white masculinity and undermine white supremacy. What this example demonstrates is that football, serves as a locus of perpetuating white supremacism; moreover, this reinforcement manifests through the quarterback, the “*most important position in all of sports*,”⁸³ whose position as the team’s leader has no analogy in any other major sport.

In addition to being a “white” sport insofar as white owners, coaches, and general managers dominate the league,⁸⁴ football is a space designed for white, male fans who function as docile patriots; moreover, Other bodies are summarily disciplined in this space. Beyond regulating the appearance of female bodies through the male gaze, these male fans scrutinize the performance of these bodies. The Super Bowl’s halftime show epitomizes this control. As a single-day sporting event, the Super Bowl reliably captures a massive television audience; thus, the Super Bowl’s halftime show represents an opportunity to remind viewers – domestic and

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² In fact, black players toe a fine line when emoting in any context; beyond disappointment, black players are criticized for improper celebratory gestures, such as Pittsburgh Steelers’ wide receiver Antonio Brown’s hip thrusts.

⁸³ Ralston.

⁸⁴ “In Black and White: A Racial Breakdown of the NFL,” *Uptown*, last modified October 1, 2014, <http://www.uptownmagazine.com/2014/10/racial-breakdown-of-the-nfl-report-card/>. Pakistani-born Shahid Khan is currently the only NFL owner is a person of color. There are four African-American head coaches in the NFL; overall, “African-American coaches comprise 13% of all coaching positions in the NFL.” Presently, there are seven African-American general managers in the NFL.

abroad – of American values. Overtly, these “values” include the whole-hearted embrace of consumerism and nationalism.⁸⁵ Any deviation from this pre-approved script is reproached.

Consider Beyoncé’s appearance during the Super Bowl 50 halftime show. Although Coldplay officially headlined the event, Beyoncé captured the nation’s attention when she performed the song “Formation.” In sharp contrast to Coldplay’s apolitical, widely accessible pop rock, Beyoncé’s “Formation” – and its accompanying music video – is “proudly steeped in black American culture, celebrates black femininity, and is overtly political, with Beyoncé sinking a New Orleans cop car as a little boy in a hoodie dances in front of riot cops.”⁸⁶ Joined by black women dancers wearing Afros and dressed in Black Panther uniforms, Beyoncé drew attention away from “sports, corporate synergy, and entertainment” to make a bold political statement, forcing viewers to confront ongoing injustices in America.⁸⁷ Predictably, Beyoncé’s defiant act received significant criticism, with Rudy Giuliani describing the “Formation” as “an ‘attack’ on police officers.”⁸⁸

Contrast the backlash to Beyoncé’s performance to the praise for Lady Gaga’s during Super Bowl LI this past February. Beginning with the patriotic “God Bless America,” Gaga was joined by “hundreds of red, white, and blue drones [that] formed an American flag behind her.”⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Terry Lefton, “Pepsi returns to Super Bowl,” *Sports Business Daily*, last modified June 25, 2012, <http://www.sportsbusinessdaily.com/Journal/Issues/2012/06/25/Marketing-and-Sponsorship/Pepsi.aspx>. Pepsi has been the title sponsor of the Super Bowl halftime show since 2013.

⁸⁶ Caroline Framke, “Beyoncé didn’t just steal the Super Bowl halftime show. She made it a political act.” *Vox*, last modified February 7, 2016, <http://www.vox.com/2016/2/7/10934576/beyonce-super-bowl-halftime-2016-coldplay>.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Niraj Chokshi, “Rudy Giuliani: Beyoncé’s halftime show was an ‘outrageous’ affront to police,” *The Washington Post*, last modified February 8, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2016/02/08/rudy-giuliani-beyonces-half-time-show-was-an-outrageous-affront-to-police/?utm_term=.827ec5fdace2.

⁸⁹ Chris Enloe, “The differences between Lady Gaga’s Super Bowl halftime show and Beyoncé’s couldn’t be more apparent,” *The Blaze*, last modified February 6, 2017, <http://www.theblaze.com/news/2017/02/06/the-differences-between-lady-gagas-super-bowl-halftime-show-and-beyonces-couldnt-be-more-apparent/>.

Whereas “Formation” was a distinct expression of black identity, Gaga’s act featured a synthesis of patriotism, military technology, and general identification with a national identity. Prior to her performance, Gaga declared that she wanted to inspire viewers to “feel the greatness of the USA,”⁹⁰ and that “[s]aying anything divisive would only make things worse.”⁹¹ Now, while Gaga did perform “Born This Way” with a collection of “diverse dancers” in touching upon race and LGBT issues,⁹² her comments imply that Beyoncé’s Super Bowl 50 performance – that taking an opportunity to bring issues of race to the forefront of the American consciousness for a fleeting moment – was unnecessarily divisive. While it is possible that Gaga did not intend to criticize her contemporary, her comments subtly reinforce the message found within football and broader society that some bodies belong and others do not. Although criticized by some media outlets for failing to use this visible platform to make a political statement, many viewers were “just happy they got to watch football without having to worry about politics or have strong political statements pushed on them by halftime entertainers.”⁹³ Despite the government’s own latent, political interest in promoting a nationalist agenda, certain demonstrations or statements that diverge from this “official” position are subject to discipline. Within the NFL, if one does not speak from an evidently patriotic perspective, one ought not to speak politically at all.

If a single player personified the NFL, it seems as though that player would be Tom Brady. That is to say, as a white, presumably heterosexual male conservative in both appearance and political affiliation, and arguably the greatest quarterback of all-time, Tom Brady *is* the NFL.

⁹⁰ Amber Jamieson, “Lady Gaga keeps political poker face while singing of inclusion at Super Bowl,” *The Guardian*, last modified February 5, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/feb/05/lady-gaga-half-time-performance-super-bowl-51>.

⁹¹ “Will She Or Won't She? Lady GaGa Answers Whether Or Not She'll Bring Donald Trump & Politics Into The Super Bowl Halftime Show!” *Perez Hilton*, last modified February 3, 2017, http://perez Hilton.com/2017-02-03-lady-gaga-donald-trump-super-bowl-performance/?from=post#.WN_EJvnyUk.

⁹² Jamieson.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

As the face of not only the New England Patriots, but also the entire league, Brady occupies a hyper-visible position; thus, more so than either Beyoncé or Gaga, he finds himself with the opportunity to project a message to a captive audience. As evidenced by Brady's press conference during the Super Bowl's media week this year, that message claims to be an apolitical one. Responding to a question about who his hero is, Brady was brought to tears as he described his father as someone he looks up to each day.⁹⁴ Although a crying man potentially subverts white hegemonic masculinity, it is crucial to note that this emotional display occurred in relation to Brady's father. As Kimmel demonstrates, sports are one of the few contexts in which men are "allowed" to cry⁹⁵; thus, though I do not doubt the sincerity of Brady's expression, his act perpetuates the notion that it is only acceptable for men to cry in particular situations. Beyond this reinforcement of heteromascularity, Brady's refusal to speak politically demands attention.

Recalling Lady Gaga's decision to avoid decisive commentary within her halftime performance, Brady told reporters that, rather than speak about his support for Donald Trump, he wanted to "focus on the positive aspects" of football, his teammates, and their path to the Super Bowl.⁹⁶ Beyond simply diverting reporters' attention towards more trivial topics, Brady outright dismissed the notion that anything politically controversial was occurring, claiming that he had not been paying attention to current events because he is "just a positive person."⁹⁷ Admittedly, as a wealthy, white, heterosexual male in America, it would seem that Brady does have plenty to be positive about; however, that he benefits from intersecting forms of systemic oppression does not excuse him from refusing to confront political matters. In fact, given his hyper-visible

⁹⁴ Myers.

⁹⁵ Kimmel, *Guyland*, 133–34. Moreover, sports provides men the opportunity to share their feelings (about sports) and not discuss their feelings about "what's *really* going on in [their] lives" (134).

⁹⁶ Myers.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

position, Brady “has a responsibility as a public figure who has the president on speed dial to do better than feign ignorance about the dominant issue going on in the country and the world.”⁹⁸ Of course, to speak out against Trump’s travel ban, to declare that black lives matter, to express any statement that would defy white patriarchy would both undermine the structures upon which Brady’s privilege is built and expose him to criticism from those who oppose such sentiments.

What is at issue here is that quarterbacks serve as cultural icons – heroes for the modern age. Just as Joe Montana and Steve Young “were Brady’s football heroes,”⁹⁹ Brady, not “punk” Newton, and certainly not anti-American Kaepernick, will serve as a hero for countless young, white American men. As representative of the NFL, which, as a cultural institution, in turn serves as a pillar of systematic oppression, Brady is effectively telling these young white men that, if you are like him, all that matters in this world is wealth, fame, a super model wife, and good looks. Rather than confronting injustice, white men should just “try to have the most fun.”¹⁰⁰ While Brady’s failure to stand against systemic oppression is undoubtedly problematic, it is perhaps to be expected. Therefore, rather than demanding that he take a stance on political issues, it is my aim to highlight him as mobilizing the white, homophobic, sexist hierarchies that pervade American society. Brady, as the face of the NFL, encapsulates all that which is ideal for a man to be; thus, he provides a standard by which other men are judged. As the greatest quarterback of all-time, men are supposed to want to be him while womxn ought to desire him. Within our white, heteromasculine society, Brady solidifies all-American values as a heterosexual, conventionally attractive, athletic, patriotic white man. Given that American

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Myers.

football is a cultural institution which reinforces white male power, Tom Brady does not merely represent the NFL, but also embodies the United States' white heteromasculine framework.

Conclusion

Throughout this work, I have attempted to demonstrate how football, rather than functioning as harmless entertainment, serves as a battleground for establishing a white hegemonic heteromascularity which intersects with and perpetuates sexism, homophobia, nationalist militarism, and white supremacy. While these structures are often invisible because sports are thought to be apolitical, I offer this paper as the first phase in an ongoing praxis of resistance to not only the NFL, but also all other manifestations of those broader oppressive structures which it reinforces. Given the necessarily limited scope of my work, it is necessary to continue interrogating and rendering visible those multifaceted, intersecting forms of oppression that underlie football; moreover, it is necessary to apply the insights gleaned here to all sports and other entertainment media. For example, recalling how the male gaze motivates womxn's participation within the NFL, one might challenge the National Hockey League's sexist treatment of "ice girls" who clean ice rinks during commercial breaks while wearing skimpy outfits. Ultimately, while the practice of examining and revealing those problematic attitudes and beliefs that shape our broader society is a useful initial step in understanding oppression, this diagnostic act requires action lest these structures remain functional. Given this necessity, I conclude by considering how we might resist the NFL's reinforcement of systematic oppression.

In its present incarnation, football is a homophobic, white supremacist, sexist sport; however, these elements are not *inherent* to the sport. That is to say, we need not do away with football altogether, but must alter it in order to resist these oppressive structures. While it is beyond the scope of what remains to detail and adequately defend any particular method of

resistance, I suggest a few possibilities. First, aligning with recent concerns about player safety in the NFL, perhaps the future of football will move away from being a full-contact sport towards “flag football.” This movement would seem to provide womxn a greater opportunity to participate in football by reducing the game’s violence; although I have already responded to the physicality argument, flag football would allow both male and female bodies that do not conform to an athletic, muscular mold to partake in the sport. Admittedly, this radical transformation seems unlikely to occur on a mass scale in the near future; however, developing such leagues would effectively disrupt the spaces presently dominated by white, heteromale bodies.

If we are unable to subvert and interrupt these spaces, then perhaps we might boycott the NFL. This proposition raises numerous questions: Is a boycott practical? What would the goals of a boycott be? Ought we stop supporting the NFL until it acknowledges – and responds to – violence done against young black men in America? Ought we demand that cheerleading squads be less sexually objectifying? Given the interwoven nature of oppression, it is necessary to address these concerns and more, but it is also critical to consider potential drawbacks to this approach. Primarily, I wonder whether boycotting the NFL would cause additional harm to those who already find themselves occupying a disadvantaged position. Given that professional sports represent one of the avenues through which a young black man can achieve financial success in America, and recalling that nearly 70% of NFL players are black, it would seem as though these individuals would be disproportionately limited in their opportunities in relation to white men.

Admittedly, at present, I am skeptical that a large-scale boycott could gain traction throughout the country. Whether viewing football as apolitical, or simply disregarding these issues outright, the NFL fan might not be moved to relinquish a pastime that might have great personal worth for them. Beyond this, considering that football is entrenched as a social

institution, one could argue that our efforts be best spent elsewhere. I do not necessarily disagree with this stance, but I stress that one individual's choice to not directly – or, indirectly – support the NFL given its complicity in various forms of systematic oppression is a viable option when complementing other, ongoing means of resistance. Again, the purpose of this paper has been to reveal harmful structures that underlie the NFL. As the first step in a praxis of resistance to these intersecting forms of structural oppression, my work is meant to encourage readers to critically engage with those media that shape our society. While we need not abandon our pleasures, it is necessary to acknowledge how they function in relation to the intersecting oppression of others.

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