

Hegemonic Masculinity and Violence in Nic Pizzolatto's *True  
Detective: Season One*

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## Introduction

Marty: Do you think - do you ever wonder if you're a bad man?

Rust: No, I don't wonder, Marty. World needs bad men. We keep the other bad men from the door.

- ("The Locked Room")

The first season of *True Detective*, a television crime series produced by HBO in 2014, tells the story of two male homicide detectives and their pursuit of a serial killer in rural Louisiana. Starring Woody Harrison and Matthew McConaughey, the show earned a 9.1/10 on IMDb and a 75% on Rotten Tomatoes, its popularity established immediately when it aired to 2.3 million viewers upon its release. I watched it for the first time with my two brothers, who had been talking excitedly about it for weeks. As I viewed it, I came to appreciate the writing (Nic Pizzolatto), directing (Cary Joji Fukunaga) and the charisma between the two stars. I also found its portrayal of gender especially interesting, and for quite a while after I watched it, I brought it up constantly, interested to hear other people's opinions. Generally speaking, most of the individuals I talked to enjoyed it and the few who didn't were all women. The people who liked it the most were straight, mostly white men. Every man, regardless of race or sexuality, I have talked to who has seen it has loved it, has excitedly asked me my thoughts about it, has gushed over how good it was, how impressive, how profound. This initially puzzled me - not because of its quality, which, as I've said, is objectively quite good - but because I wondered why so many men in particular were so drawn to a story that, upon my first viewing, seemed to me to be extremely critical of men and the myriad of violences committed by them upon women and children. It was this question that sparked my academic interest in the series and that drew me

back to it again and again. After watching it more than ten times and engaging in a year's worth of research revolving around violence, gender, and masculinity, I believe I have come to better understand what makes it so appealing to men.

*True Detective's* first season is an articulation of (specifically white, heterosexual) men's anxieties within patriarchy and gives voice to the reality that even the most privileged classes of society suffer under systems of authority, hierarchy, and dominance. The attraction of *True Detective* lies in its ability to broach hard and painful topics - male violence, privilege, and power - in ways that are accessible to men, that neither relieve them of their responsibility as powerful agents in patriarchy nor blames or shames them for possessing privilege they never asked for in the first place. It articulates *feelings* - of rage, grief, confusion, fear, alienation - that men themselves are unable to express under the social norms installed by patriarchy, that they don't (in my experience talking with those who had viewed the series) even fully realize they share with the characters. It is subtle, taking staunch ethical stances without being overly threatening, without spooking men, without immediately putting them on the defensive - a feat that many feminist texts and films about gender issues struggle to achieve. It portrays men who are powerful, smart, and cool but also troubled, vulnerable, and flawed. And it also maintains an extremely precarious balance between subverting and reinstating patriarchal ideology, making it progressive but not *too* progressive, portraying the problems inherent to patriarchal masculinity without asking men to fully renounce it. In short, it points out why patriarchy is destructive for men but ultimately refuses to follow its own logic to its natural conclusion in terms of violence and privilege, which makes it easier to swallow; men can relate to the struggles depicted without having to do the hard work of rejecting the patriarchal philosophy of violence that lies at its

heart. Thus, *True Detective* is not without its inconsistencies and problems, but its relatable approach to a vitally important but often under-discussed issue assists in providing men the lexicon that patriarchy itself has denied them; it opens the possibility for a dialogue surrounding gender and violence that recognizes the complexity of social privilege and the great individual and societal costs of patriarchy. By drawing from gender, film, and trauma theory, I hope to situate *True Detective* as a text of potentiality and reflection, a rumination on the present deeply conflicted state of American gender politics. Both its progressive potential and its contradictory patriarchal messages are equally important; as a piece of popular media, it functions as a mirror, showing us how far we've come and how far we have yet to go in our movement forward towards a more equal and less violent society.

The foundation of my research lies in gender studies, a field that arose out of feminism's inquiries into society's assigned and unequal gender roles. During the second wave of feminism, writers and theorists such as Luce Irigaray, Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan and many others focused on examining women's role in Western culture. They were concerned with the ways femininity was constructed and moulded by society and the inherent inequality and unfairness of patriarchy, a sociocultural system that favours men in terms of political, economic and social power. Like any movement, however, it was not entirely inclusive; women of colour, homosexual women, and transgender women did not initially find space within the budding second wave feminist movement. Men, also, were also left unexamined, portrayed only as oppressors: "Such research provided valuable insight into the depiction of femininity, feminism, and a woman's role, it also meant that masculinity and male heterosexuality continued to be understood as fixed, stable, unalterable, and therefor beyond query" (Feasey 3). In other words, a

theoretical inquiry into the nature of Western masculinity did not occur until feminism began to become more inclusive and diverse, until the focus came to include multiple gender identifications, sexualities, races, classes and other marginalized groups.

Before masculinity studies emerged out of gender theory, the common and widely accepted view was that “true masculinity [was] always thought to proceed from men’s bodies - to be inherent to a male body or to express something about a male body” (Connell 45). Now, “gender is no longer viewed as two autonomously homogenous categories but, rather, as configurations of practice within social relations... gender is relational, and, as such, it cannot assume a certain practice from which its interests and identity develop, except in contrast to some other” (Howson 57). This means that instead of being an innate and predetermined set of traits, masculinity is, first of all, only intelligible in terms of what it is not (mainly, femininity): “He [man] must first define what he is not - a female” (Lisak 257), and secondly, it suggests that masculinity is a product of history, not biology. That is to say, masculinity is a construction, a social creation that is constantly in flux and changes depending on time and place: “...our concept of masculinity seems to be a fairly recent historical project, a few hundred years at most. In speaking about masculinity at all, we are ‘doing gender’ in a culturally specific way” (Connell 68). What it means to ‘be a man’ in the 21st century is not the same as what it meant in the 17th or 18th centuries. Our biology might remain the same, but the social definitions applied to that biology are fluid and based upon social structures. Thus, “masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals. Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and therefor, can differ according to gender relations in a particular social setting” (“Hegemonic Masculinity” 836). This means that

masculinity is multiple and dependent upon other forms of intersecting identities. This important distinction between what is biological and what is cultural - the understanding that maleness is one thing and masculinity quite another - raises the question of how we define masculinities and what role they play in the shaping and maintenance of our society.

If gender is referential, then masculinities must be defined in terms of something. The term 'hegemonic masculinity', which I will use synonymously with 'toxic', 'masculinist', and 'patriarchal' masculinity, represents the cultural ideal and overarching norm of masculine expression:

There exists, within the multiplicity of types [of masculinity] a largely symbolic, though legitimate type of masculinity that imposes upon all other masculinities (and femininities) coherence and meaning about whether their own identities and positions within the gender order should be. Crucially, though, while this ideal emerges and develops from within the socio-eurocultural milieu, it becomes essentialized and ultimately reified as the benchmark against which all men must gauge their success in the gender order (Howson 3) .

It is, essentially, what 'being a man' is 'supposed' to mean within a white supremacist, capitalistic patriarchy. Another way of articulating it is to approach hegemonic masculinity as the "gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy" (Connell 77). Thus, hegemonic modes of masculinity are formative and sustaining aspects of patriarchy. The ideology behind these constructions is called masculinism, which "justifies and naturalizes male domination" (Brittan 4). What then, are the traits and ideals

behind this hegemonic construction of masculinity? What are the qualities needed to establish and reinforce patriarchy?

The first and perhaps most basic quality of hegemonic masculinity can be defined as what it is not - femininity. The patriarchal male “typically adopts the gender-based values of his society, enjoys the privileges accorded to him as a male in a fundamentally patriarchal culture, and suffers - usually with little or no awareness - from the inner and interpersonal alienation that results from his actualizing the masculine labeled parts of his personality, while repressing those labeled as feminine” (Lisak 245). What is labeled as feminine is generally anything related to emotionality or feeling, softness, submission, and open expression. As a result, hegemonic masculinity requires of men emotional numbness, hardness, and the will to dominate, all qualities that are necessary in the continuation of the naturally hierarchical system of patriarchy. While these characteristics are favourable when it comes to acquiring power and control over others, they come at a steep psychological cost, a state of ‘gender role conflict’, which James M. O’Neil describes as “a psychological state in which socialized gender roles have negative consequences for the person or others. It occurs when rigid, sexist, or restrictive gender roles result in personal restriction, devaluation, or violation of others or oneself” (O’Neil 42). The patriarchal sense of self “has a voracious appetite for expanding its domain in ownership and its territory in control in a bid to suppress other competitors and achieve omnipotence” (Hatty 11), but simultaneously, “choose[s] patriarchal manhood over loving connection, first foregoing self-love and then the love they could give and receive that could connect them to others” (hooks 72).

Important to note also is the way masculinity articulates patriarchy, and in turn, how patriarchy reinforces and works alongside other forms of oppression:

From a GRC (gender role conflict) perspective, personal and societal oppression occur because of men's abuses of power, destructive competition, homophobia and interpersonal violence that maintain privilege and power over others... the critical issue here is how racism, classism, ethnocentrism, heterosexism, ageism and all other forms of oppression are directly related to patriarchal, masculine structures and GRC that oppresses men, women, and children (O'Neil 61).

Masculinist ideology is present in every form of oppression because of its relationship to power and domination, and it is arguably impossible to separate masculinism from any hierarchical power structure, so deeply ideologically embedded as it is. In turn, patriarchy relies on other forms of oppression to subsist; our masculinist society could not exist as it does without racism, classism, and a whole host of other -isms that, woven together, constitute the social fabric of American culture. The hegemonic ideal is not just male; it is white, able-bodied, young to middle aged, heterosexual, middle to upper classed, educated, and so on. All of these privileged terms converge upon the site of the hegemonic ideal. It is not a matter of ontological origins, or what came first, or what is the 'ultimate' original form of oppression; they are all so deeply intertwined that they are only able to exist through and alongside each other. I will, throughout this paper, at times make connections between patriarchy and other forms of oppression such as classism and racism, my purpose being to resist the temptation to only look at patriarchy as a gender issue, for this would be to oversimplify a deeply complex set of issues while simultaneously doing injustice to differing, diverse subject positions.

Hegemonic masculinity, as a cultural ideal, is not really meant to explain or reflect the experiences of actual men; it is one of patriarchy's great deceptions that it becomes naturalized



and assumed to be a norm when in fact it represents usually only a very small population - if anyone at all. This image became, for my research into film theory, the site at which gender and film studies intersect; how are masculinities portrayed on screen? In what ways does the nature of film and performance reflect and interact with societally prescribed gender roles? How does one perform the performative? How does masculinity relate to genre, particularly to *noir* and neo-*noir*, the styles and themes of which feature predominantly in *True Detective*? And, finally, how does film serve as connective tissue for studies in trauma and gender?

Like any media form, film is, by its very nature as a medium of representation, highly politicized. It is a means through which culture manifests itself and is therefor deeply invested in the political and social systems that uphold and maintain that culture: “The cinematic gaze is by no means neutral as regards the representation of raced and gendered bodies, but it is rather complicit in the prevailing visual regime which inscribes certain identities, especially gender and race, indelibly on the flesh... in other words, all bodies that populate the cinematic screen are necessarily marked” (Rehling 5). Bodies themselves are saturated with meaning, and when represented on the cinematic or television screen, they appropriate new meanings depending on aspects such as character, genre, the actor or actress themselves, and whatever (often subliminal or unintentional) political slant of those generating the material. A blockbuster action flick, for example, might not appear or intend to be overtly political, but most reflect hegemonic identity politics even in their apparent neutrality - indeed, what is ‘neutral’ or normalized in society (white, male, able-bodied, heterosexual - the typical and most prevalent representation of the action hero) is itself deeply politicized. Thus, the ‘unintended’ politics of film are rich and telling; so too, though in a different way, are those works that are intentional with their politics

and the layered meanings of their representations: “Popular cinema is not only a prime site in which identities are played out, produced, consumed, negotiated, and contested; some contemporary popular films have also recently shown themselves to be extremely self conscious about politicized discourses of identity” (Rehling 9). *True Detective* is one of these filmic works that purposefully addresses issues of - particularly masculine - identity. Thus, while the series focuses on hegemonic norms - like many of its contemporaries, being a neo-*noir* crime film - it does so from a critical standpoint, placing these ‘neutral’ identity positions under the microscope to closely examine the myriad of ways they are constructed and maintained under the current sociocultural systems of American society (such as patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism, and so on).

The question then becomes, how does one perform the performative? This will be a major focus of my argument in regards to *True Detective* and is a question that I came to via the intersections of filmic and gender studies. Because of the established fact that “...what constitutes ‘masculinity’ is always constructed”, masculinity is thus “itself an image”, meaning “only conceptions or representations of normative masculinity exist” (Peberdy 7). Therefore, what the audience sees on the screen is essentially a rendered image of an image, a complex interplay of meanings established *outside* but then represented *inside* the realm of the theatre. Some of these meanings are contradictory; for example, the contradiction between the active, dominating connotations attributed to masculinity and the fact that these traits are being displayed in a passive form for the consumption of the audience: “The male body has traditionally been seen as one of action in opposition of passive femininity... the male body, whether in motion or at rest, is problematic because of the contradiction between the vulnerable

passivity implied by being in a position to be looked at as the site of spectacle on the screen and the dominance that the male is supposed to exhibit” (Gates 38). By merely rendering the male body a site of voyeuristic pleasure in representing it on screen, masculinity as it is understood within American culture is already destabilized; perhaps this accounts for the over masculinization of action heroes, who, in order to preserve their masculinity must overcompensate for the fact that they are the object of the gaze and therefore in a traditionally feminine position. *True Detective* highlights these inconsistencies; we see men in action, usually participating in violence, and we see men at rest, most often alone and, interestingly, deep in thought - the resting man is the isolated, contemplative man, a form of masculinity that is recognizable and palatable (and *not* feminine) for an audience socialized in a highly gendered society. These juxtapositions help to construct representations of masculinity, and they also, when articulated in certain ways, call attention to what we as the audience in patriarchy take for granted - that is, normative standards of masculinity. By focusing on masculinity as a key factor to their performances, the two leading actors “not only expose the performative ‘nature’ of ‘normative’ masculinity in their failure to achieve the male ideal... manliness is foregrounded as an act, an identity to be staged” (Peberdy 89). The audience watches both men struggle within and because of their masculine identities, their attempts to embody the ideals of patriarchal masculinity. *True Detective*, for this reason, is a valuable text to examine from a feminist and gender studies perspective; not only are the intentional gender politics of the series available for scrutiny, but so too are the blind spots, the moments when, unwittingly, *True Detective* reinforces what it seems so ardently to denounce, when masculinity is portrayed according to the dominant narratives of patriarchy. This speaks to the power of the normative; even when actors, writers,

and directors try to resist the hegemonic standards, they are hard to escape - they creep back in, lurking beneath and behind the more obvious and deliberate attempts at the subversion and redefinition of masculinity. Film, because of its performative and reflective nature, proves to be an excellent medium through which to tackle and address the ways we as a society negotiate these gender norms.

The other filmic aspect of my interrogation into *True Detective* involves genre and the ways masculinity functions within films of the *noir* and, like *True Detective*, neo-*noir* style. While *True Detective* bridges several genres, including southern-Gothic, I chose to pursue it as a neo-*noir* work because I felt *noir* encapsulated many of its other genres (mystery, crime, police) and because I found *noir*'s treatment of gender to be directly relevant to my research on masculinity and the series itself. I will briefly outline the common themes and narrative styles of *noir* and neo-*noir* and how they relate to masculinity in order to give context for many of my later arguments, especially surrounding story structure, male trauma, and the concept of the divided or split male self.

*Noir*, a term applied by the French to a specific body of post-war American film, emerged in the 1940s and '50s, "...in an intellectual climate in which the figure of the criminal became a metaphor for 'dark' dimensions of the self that remain incomprehensible" (Fuick 379). In the "... post-war atmosphere of disillusion, distrust, alienation, loss of orientation and existential despair" (Fuick 381), *noir* is characterized by cynicism, as well as a (for the period) "new, 'psychological' trend in the representation of character, and a recurring attention to excessive and obsessive sexuality" (Krutnik x). Another of classic *noir*'s defining features is its portrayal of masculinity as a site of intense psychological conflict; indeed, the 'psychological trend' Krutnik

describes occurs through a decidedly gendered lens. Femininity is traditionally portrayed in the image of the *femme fatale* - as deadly, overpowering, all-consuming, and unified. Masculinity is - interestingly enough - split between, on the one hand, "...an overt masculinization of both language (the aggressive and competitive 'hard-boiled' banter) and action (the predominance of violence)" (Krutnik 88), (or, in other words, a traditional hegemonic standard of ideal masculinity demonstrated through the narrative techniques used) and on the other hand, the "disassembling, fainting, unconscious, overpowered, and out of control" men who populate these films (Abbott 7). The major conflict these men face is an internal one surrounding their gendered identification within patriarchy:

Indeed, the 'tough' thrillers continually institute a discrepancy between, on the one hand, the licit possibilities of masculine identity and desire required by the patriarchal order, and, on the other hand, the psychosexual make up of the male subject hero... they are all unified by what can be seen as an obsession with the non correspondence between the desires of the individual male subject and the cultural regime of 'masculine identification' (Krutnik 85).

The very meaning of 'masculinity' is at serious risk in these films, and they "often offer an engagement with problematic, even illicit possibilities within masculine identity". Despite the fact that, like *True Detective*, "they cannot fully embrace or sanction such 'subversive' potentialities" (Krutnik xiii), they reveal - expose - the fragile construction that is hegemonic masculinity. Not only do they imply that this ideal of masculinity is unobtainable for most men, they also shed light on the serious psychological impact this has upon men as a result of the doomed struggle to embody it. This splitting between the conceptual, intangible 'norm' and the

lived experience of men is also reflected in the narrative styles used in many *noir* and neo-*noir* works, including *True Detective*: “The sense of subjective drama is intensified by the narrative strategies found within many of these films. The use of flashback and voiceover structures become commonplace... in such cases, the process of story telling becomes submerged within a whirlpool of subjective over-determination, where objective parameters become difficult to establish” (Krutnik 47). In a later chapter, I will in fact argue that these narrative styles achieve the opposite effect in *True Detective*; rather than blur the lines between subjective and objective, they function to clarify the sharp disjunction between the ideal and the real male self. In these ways, genre is crucial to understanding the way gender functions in *True Detective* because it comes from a tradition of deep skepticism towards the normalized societal parameters of what it means to be a man in the United States.

This image of the fractured male in *noir* is reflective of its time and the trauma incurred by the second world war. *Noir* is an example of filmic representation and trauma theory converging, and this intersection led my research into the field of trauma studies. Theorist Cathy Caruth describes trauma as “...the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available...” (“Unclaimed Experience” 4). This ‘woundedness’ is one of, simultaneously, forgetting and remembrance, an experience and its affect that cannot fully be assimilated into the psyche; trauma is the pain we try to forget, that we don’t fully understand, that we nonetheless carry with us always. While it is a reaction to an event or circumstance, it is not the event in and of itself that is traumatic. In order for trauma to register as trauma, there must be “some conception of a system” (Smelser 35). Rather than being identifiable within a single event, “it is the *meanings* that provide the sense of shock and

fear” (Alexander 10, my emphasis). This explains why one experience might be traumatic for one person but not another, or why some trauma suffered in the past can only reemerge later in life, when the person understands the sociocultural significance of the event they survived. This also means that trauma is not an isolated event that occurred in the past and is simply ‘remembered’ as something that happened and is over; it is, rather, *relived*, occupying a unique temporal position that defies our conceptual and categorical systems, causing a psychic kind of ‘short circuiting’:

While the trauma returns uncannily in actual life, its reality continues to elude the subject who lives in its grip and unwittingly undergoes its ceaseless repetitions and reenactments. The traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of ‘normal’ reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after. The absence of categories that define it lends it a quality of ‘otherness’, a salience, a timelessness and a ubiquity that puts it outside the range of associatively linked experiences, outside the range of comprehension, of recounting, and of mastery. Trauma survivors live not with a memory of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, obtained no closure and therefor.... continues into the present and is current in every respect. The survivor, indeed, is not truly in touch either with the core of his traumatic reality or with the fatedness of its reenactments, and thereby remains entrapped in both (Felman 68).

Societies can also suffer from trauma; World War II devastated much of the world, including the people of the United States, resulting in “indelible marks [left] upon their group

consciousness,” (Alexander 1). Trauma on a large-scale societal level “shatters a culture’s symbolic resources” (Kaplan 12) and dissolves sociocultural cohesion, even if only briefly. Trauma, having shaken the very foundations of a society’s structures, tends to bring with it rapid social change. These traumas are memorialized in the media and the art born from the period. For example, *noir*: could the *femme-fatale* be a response to women entering the work force in greater numbers after the war? Could her emasculating power be linked to women’s expanding economical power? Probably so. Trauma, in the case of *noir*, and in the case of *True Detective* is linked to and arises from the anxieties of men surrounding an increasingly unstable gender system. In traditional *noir*, the threat lies in the perceived weaknesses in men - weaknesses meaning the failure to live up to the idealized standard of masculinity. While this is an issue that *True Detective* tackles, the main source of anxiety, confusion, and pain arises not from men’s weaknesses, but from their power - social, economic, physical, and so on - and what this power *does* to men psychosexually. These concepts of power, privilege, representation, and trauma will constitute the foundation of my argument concerning patriarchy and men’s place within it.

The representation of trauma in media - again, the merging of film and trauma studies - is a tricky and delicate subject, because “what makes trauma different from more traditional issues of representation (for instance, of how ‘accurate’ or ‘truthful’ a film is in relation to the history it is purporting to depict) is the idea that trauma suspends the categories of true and false, being in some sense performative” (Elsaesser 199). This idea of trauma representation as performative (“the symptom speaks the subject’s body” [Elsaesser 199]) echoes the representation of gender - both resisting being definitively pinned down and categorized, and also, most importantly, both



are societally constructed. What is considered traumatic is, once again, not inherent to any particular event, but is culturally decided, and media plays a huge role in this process:

A more valid approach would be to ask how and why media representations defined... particular events as traumatic when so many other events involving massive human suffering were and are not so defined? Whenever we hear the phrase ‘traumatic event’, we need to ask: for whom is the event traumatic? If we assume events and their representations are not traumatic in themselves, we need to critically examine the role media plays in reproducing traumatic effects and traumatic structures of memory and forgetting (Meek 34).

I will examine the ways trauma is represented in *True Detective* with this basic idea in mind: “... media does not respond to public trauma so much as they define public trauma” (Meek 180). Like representations of gender, the way trauma is translated to filmic representation is by no means a neutral process. This is because while “trauma blocks our ability to make sense of events”, the media “through the production and reproduction of images, are always bestowing meaning” and “these meanings are usually familiar and ideological rather than directly responsive” to trauma (Meek 173). What is portrayed as traumatic in *True Detective* is highly political and completely gendered - male trauma is constructed differently than feminine trauma, and it is through my investigation into the representations of male trauma that I will come to address the series’ approach to violence and masculinity.

My argument is divided into four parts: the first, describing masculinity as it is portrayed in *True Detective*, the second, examining the ways that masculinity interacts with the feminine other and how this comes to define masculinity itself, the third, explaining how the story

structure and narrative techniques function to portray the male psyche as split and therefor in constant conflict, and the final chapter, to argue that the portrayal of violence, the male body, and male trauma interact to present contradictory stances on male violence. Ultimately, I will claim that despite its attempts at subverting masculinist narratives in American culture, *True Detective*, in its concluding episode, unconsciously naturalizes male violence, denies its own stance on trauma, and reinforces dangerous patriarchal philosophy. My goal in making these points is to suggest that *True Detective* is reflective of the current, ambiguous feelings surrounding gender equity. Its triumphs in representation and its failures at subversion attest to the ambivalence of American culture in the face of our rapidly changing and expanding spectrums of gender and reveal the complex and deeply ingrained nature of patriarchal philosophy and men's roles within it.

### Regarding Masculinity

"I don't think that man can love, at least not the way he means."

- Rust Cohle ("The Locked Room")

*True Detective* is a story about men. This may seem obvious; its two main protagonists and its primary antagonist are all men. But, more acutely, *True Detective* is an exploration of what it *means*, both literally and symbolically, to be a man in American society. Its depiction of masculinity, personified by the two detectives Rust Cohle and Martin Hart as well as the serial killer they hunt, Childress, is one that has inspired heated debate amongst critics. For some, "...*True Detective* is not an interrogation of masculinity, it's a celebration of one" (Paskin). Rust Cohle would be the most blatant example noted by critics of this opinion. Played by Matthew McConaughey, who appeared on People's "Sexiest Man Alive" list in 2005<sup>1</sup>, Rust is not necessarily portrayed as unattractive or less desirable because of his often very problematic and toxic masculinity. Certainly it could be argued that *True Detective* toes a dangerous ethical line because "...tackling the appeal of self-centered, angry men in order to solve the mystery of persistent gender roles is a sort of trap: what you are trying to critique might just look cool" (Lambert). Many viewers are also exhausted by the fact that *True Detective* is yet *another* text that revolves around the struggles of one of the most privileged classes of people in American culture. To posit members of this group as victims (which *True Detective* does, though not, I would argue, without deeply complicating the idea of the victim/offender binary) can seem

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<sup>1</sup> People Magazine, <http://people.com/style/2005s-sexiest-men-alive/matthew-mcconaughey>

tasteless. Judith Franco, discussing this particular trend in contemporary American film, remarks that these narratives

...push victimization to the limit by casting the...white male in the morally superior position of the physically and emotionally damaged victim-hero whose invisible wounds not only justify his transgressive/criminal behaviour, but also absolve him of all responsibility and guilt. These predominantly homosocial narratives exhibit melodramatic traits... in terms of the *mise-en-scene* of the hyper-damaged male who becomes a pleasure spectacle, and a smoke screen for the realignment of patriarchal power structures (Franco 30).

There is no denying the fact that American media is oversaturated with depictions of straight, cis-gendered white men. And indeed, it can be hard to sympathize with *True Detective*'s leading men; but perhaps that is the point. And while lack of representation of women and people of colour is a sizeable problem in American media, a constructive examination of the ideology that creates and maintains this systemic overrepresentation of a privileged class is still valuable.

These arguments against *True Detective*, understandable and useful as they are in discussing the series' flaws and inconsistencies, still fail to acknowledge that it isn't the series itself that makes "self-centered, angry men... look cool" or "absolve" men of their bad behaviour. Rather, American - and, arguably, the west's as a whole - values of masculinity and manhood have already been encoded in the behaviours that *True Detective* is addressing. To represent a pre-existing signifier is not necessarily to endorse its cultural meaning. Donna Peberdy, in discussing masculinity and film performance, writes that "There is a problem in seeing each and every performance of masculinity as an attempt to reinforce patriarchal dominance. The

distinction appears to lie in the difference between those performances that attempt to perpetuate the myth of 'true' masculinity by *masking performance* and those performances that highlight and call attention to the construction of masculinity rather than concealing it" (Peberdy 29) [my emphasis]. This is not to say that *True Detective* is necessarily always consistent in its treatment of masculinity and it is not to say that the judgements it seems to endorse are always radically sagacious, but to write it off as a masculinist celebration of patriarchal ideals of manhood is to ignore the fact that its "transgressive 'potential' is not to be found in its conclusions: rather, it "finds expression in the writing *before* the ending - in the body of the text... [it] cannot be reduced to the sum of [its] resolutions; [it] must be considered in the light of the conflicts and tensions [it] mobilize[s] en route..." (Plain 6). At the very least, *True Detective* opens a space for conversation about masculinity, a topic that is often foreclosed or ignored in texts that truly glorify masculinist or patriarchal ideology. Even when *True Detective* does replicate or seem to endorse hegemonic models of masculinity, its failure to consistently decry patriarchal masculinity speaks to the complexity of the subject matter and reflects American culture's own often split and contradictory feelings about what it means to be a man. Rust, Marty, and Childress stand as the three major signifiers of toxic masculinity in *True Detective*, and each character represents different faces of the multifaceted hegemonic construction of masculinity. Their individual personalities, as well as their homosocial relationships with one another, function to articulate a deeply critical view of American masculinity. Ultimately, the series reveals the devastatingly destructive consequences of traditional masculinity not just for the feminine other (women, children), but also for men themselves. In this way, *True Detective* makes the compelling argument that patriarchy and patriarchal ideals of masculinity are bad for

everyone, and that men, rather than being willing agents of patriarchy, are equally trapped by a system that, while privileging them in terms of power, acts as a serious impediment to constructive and healthy self-realization.

Most of the arguments against *True Detective* - specifically those that posit the series as a tribute to hegemonic masculinity - centered around the character Rust Cohle as the main example of toxic masculinity made "cool" or appealing.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, "cool" is a good way to describe him, and in many ways, these arguments make a good point; Rust *is* sexy. He represents the "fantasy phallic figure" who "men both desire and want to be" (Wilson 156). He is strong physically and mentally, fits the hegemonic standard of beauty, is an almost unnervingly efficient and practical fighter, a brilliant detective, and a monkish philosopher all in one. He embodies "the heroes of America's popular culture", being "tough and independent" and "challenging conformity or the loss of self reliance by remaining [a] loner..." (Gates 35). Most of all, he is seemingly emotionally numbed and approaches life logically and with judgemental detachment. Rust is what every insecure fourteen year old boy longs to be: self-sufficient, superior to his peers in almost every way, a pillar of manly autonomy. And he seems to epitomize this model of masculinity effortlessly, naturally - as if that's 'just who he is'. It's no surprise that so many critics found him to be a superficial embodiment of the traditional masculine ideal. However, as the series progresses, it becomes clear that Rust doesn't actually represent the ideal but the *unnatural impossibility of that ideal* and the terrible personal cost of attempting to constantly manifest it. He is a deconstruction of the cliché he seems at first to personify and functions to expose that cliché as the destructive and impracticable facade that it is. In his book about film noir, Frank

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<sup>2</sup> See Adams, "Female Bodies and the Philbroscopy of *True Detective*"

Krutnik writes of the classic noir hero that, "...the conventionalized figuration of 'tough' controlled and unified masculinity is invoked not so much as a model of worthwhile and realistic achievement but more as a worrying mark of what precisely is lacking" and that these films articulate "a series of inversions, delays and schisms" that reflect this misalignment of masculine idealization with the physical and psychical reality of the male experience (Krutnik 88). Rust is not meant to personify phallic fantasy; he is meant to demonstrate "what precisely is lacking" in the traditionally ideal model of masculinity, namely, the necessary potential for human connection.

Rust's character might be sexy and cool, but ultimately he is completely unable to function in relationships with other people as a result of all the masculinist traits that at first seem to make him so attractive. From the premier episode, Rust's status as loner is portrayed as an inability to function within normal social contexts. For example, when he goes to Marty's house to have dinner with his family, Marty remarks that "It was kind of funny, the flowers, you know? Like he read somewhere that if you get invited to dinner somewhere, you're supposed to bring flowers?" ("The Long Bright Dark") His eccentricity here is not portrayed as self-elected or mysterious but rather as a failure to understand basic social norms and interact with other people. Rust doesn't spurn interpersonal communication because he is too cool to connect with other people; he literally doesn't know *how*. Perhaps once his alienation was self-inflicted, but he has lived in it for so long now that even when he tries to break out in order to meet certain social expectations, he is unable to; indeed, he is so wracked with nerves as the prospect of interacting with Marty's family that he relapses and shows up on their doorstep drunk. This is not a moment of the emotional detachment and self-control that seems to usually define his personality. It's a

moment of incredible vulnerability, loss of control, and anxiety. Thus Rust comes to embody the inherent contradictions in his "unrealistic standard of manly strength..." (Seitz). His outward appearance of cool indifference is in fact underpinned by extreme apprehension; he spends so much of his energy trying not to care because under the facade he in fact "suffer[s] from extremely powerful emotions" (Lambert). The coolness - as in, the emotional detachment and general disdain for human interaction - that is coded as so appealing in American masculinity is firstly impossible; we all feel, whether we like it or not. Secondly, an attempt to live up to this illusory ideal functions to seriously impair a man's ability to socialize normally with other people.

Another example of the way that Rust's practice of masculinity proves to be elusive and detrimental to his ability to form relationships is the manner with which he interacts with other men. Toxic masculinity is not simply about the way men interact with the feminine other; in fact, patriarchy "is built on... the systemic engendering of fear in others: in men, women and children, but most of all, in other men" (Miles 22). His relationship to the men in his workplace further supports the argument that traditional modes of masculinity operate to isolate the male subject and make sustainable and healthy relationships, particularly between men, impossible. This has to do directly with the competitive aspect of masculinity, as well as the fact that masculine "potency must be proved and asserted, rather than simply being assumed" (Krutnik 88). Shortly after the debacle at Marty's home, Rust, now in a work setting, proves to be unable to interact with his fellow coworkers without masculinist posturing and a show of force and intimidation. His brilliance as a detective isolates him from the other men at the station (even if he doesn't feel the need to compete, they do), and when he feels insulted by one of his peers, Geraci, he slaps



him across the face ("The Long Bright Dark"). In doing this he is asseverating his masculinity even as he further isolates himself from the people around him. His resistance to authority ("It's like you eat your fucking young and it's all fine as long as you got something to salute, hmm?" ["Haunted Houses"]) is what characterizes him as the tough guy loner and individualist, and indeed is something that the series itself at times holds in high regard; after all, it is his refusal to bow to authority that leads him to pursue the truth when no one else will. In this way he embodies the "hero of the detective genre" who "struggles between two opposing forms of social conformity and independence; he must assert his independence as a hero while working within the boundaries of the law and often within the bureaucracy of a law-enforcement institution" (Gates 35). And yet, *True Detective* acknowledges the personal psychological cost of this kind of masculinist vision of independence. He has no friends at the precinct, loses his job as a result of his inability to conform, and in the absence of any kind of social life, has little to distract him from the enervating and all-consuming obsession that, while it wins the day in the end, seriously distorts and poisons the quality of his life. In the masculinist view, his refusal to interact with the (arguably corrupt) men around him speaks to the integrity of his character. But as Marty notes, "he'd pick a fight with the sky if he didn't like its shade of blue" ("The Long Bright Dark"). From a sociopsychological perspective this sort of attitude and behaviour "emphasizes the impossibility of authentic male-male bonds... and the barren aloneness" that plagues Rust from the beginning (Greven 26) and indeed that isolates boys and men, both from one another and from women, throughout American and western culture.

Rust is not just tough; he's a thinker, too, and his philosophy, perhaps moreso than anything else, speaks to the complexity of the male subject and masculinist identification,

because while it seems to be the world view of a man unconcerned with human experience, it is predicated on a moment of profound vulnerability and trauma: the loss of his daughter, Sophia. His philosophical outlook interestingly oscillates between challenging masculinist ideals and aligning with them, a reflection of his own often fractured and deeply fraught experience as a man. On the one hand, his nihilism seems at times to be almost disdainful; he doesn't seem to hold human life as particularly valuable, and he certainly doesn't seem to respect anyone who believes in anything other than the hilarious futility of life. In regards to a church gathering of an impoverished, rural community that he attends while working the case, he remarks, "The ontological fallacy of expecting a light at the end of the tunnel, well, that's what the preacher sells, same as a shrink. See, the preacher, he encourages your capacity for illusion, then he tells you it's a fucking virtue. Always a buck to be had doing that, and it's such a desperate sense of entitlement, isn't it? 'Surely this is all for me. Me, me, me, I, I, I'm so fucking important!'" ("The Locked Room"). And then, in the same scene, he sneers that "I don't think anyone here will be splitting the atom". People capable of faith are, to Rust, "so goddamn frail they'd rather put a coin in a wishing well than buy dinner" ("The Locked Room"). His abrasive contempt for others (particularly, it would seem, poor and uneducated people who have the gall to believe in something bigger than their own hard and often miserable lives) aligns with modernist, patriarchal ideology, in which "appropriating truth as some kind of possession" (Seidler 47) and "exercising control over reason and language" (Seidler 29) justifies universality of opinion and domination of a single world view (for example, the colonialist history of the west). It isn't enough for Rust to have his own opinion and let everyone else have theirs; he is compelled not just to repeatedly announce his views - to anyone who will listen - but also to simultaneously

ridicule any opposing philosophical or religious position. Despite the aggressive means of expression his pessimism takes, however, it remains at its core an expression of pain and vulnerability. In fact, it is Rust's masculinity that channels this pain into something angry; unable to swallow his own human frailty and insecurity, he does what men often do when they're backed into an emotional corner. He goes on the offensive.

While his behaviour reflects his toxic masculinity, the feelings behind his beliefs intrinsically challenge patriarchal ideology. The death of his daughter and his strong emotional reaction is indicative of the way that "Loss clearly challenges modernist [and patriarchal] notions of the self as a bounded, masterful, integrated and autonomous universe and... seriously threatens the illusory security of the...self. For the modern self, the realization of the fragile and capricious nature of life is likely to be deeply disturbing, engendering feelings of fearfulness, insecurity and pervasive anxiety which may linger indefinitely" (Hatty 12). Instead of responding by clinging tighter to this widely accepted construction of the self, his philosophy congeals around the repudiation of a basic tenet of masculinist thinking. His rejection of this patriarchal interpretation of the self is apparent in from the very beginning: "We are things" he tells Marty in the premier episode, "that labor under the illusion of having a self, this accretion of sensory experience and feeling. Programmed with total assurance that we are each somebody when, in fact, everybody is nobody" ("The Long Bright Dark"). Being a "somebody" is an important aspect of American individualism and aligns neatly with western patriarchal logic, in which "The narcissistic dimensions of the imperial self are manifest in the preoccupation with the cultivation of an image that accords with socially constructed symbols of perfections, status, and success" (Hatty 12). Rust is unconcerned with status and success (though he does have his own definition of

"perfection") and rejects the common American virtue of personal achievement and advancement. And while his "posturing atheism" (Seitz) is certainly a form of macho swagger, the psychological vulnerability that lies beneath it and the sensitivity that it engenders in him is in itself a rejection of the facade he tries to uphold throughout the series. His philosophy, his "pessimism, like depression, attends to the details. An attention grown so assiduous that it becomes itself *a variety of pain* and again and again Hart remarks on Cohle's myopia, his blinders, his tunnel vision, but this ridiculed focus is Cohle's only retreat from the whole that would otherwise consume him" (Masciandaro 3) [my emphasis]. His nihilism is not a manly contempt for the world and the people in it; it's a deep, trauma-induced depression that has made him so sensitive to the dark realities of the world that he essentially shuts down all emotions in order to function within it, especially in the context of his work as a homicide detective.

If Rust's character is an examination and deconstruction of the patriarchal philosopher, then Marty is likewise the study of the patriarchal every man, the average Joe, the 'normal', mainstream embodiment of hegemonic heterosexual, white masculinity. He represents both the normative ideal and the failure of that ideal, the inherent futility in trying to replicate a mode of masculinity that "do[es] not correspond closely to the lives of actual men" (Connell 838). He might not be a genius or a philosopher like Rust, but Marty is socially a very successful man; he has a good job, a good house, a family of his own. In this way he represents "widespread ideals, fantasies and desires" (Connell 838) of masculinity. But his Achilles heel, his obsession, is in his sexuality. The sexually virile male is valued in patriarchy, where "the penis becomes valorized... it is in this context that the penis is transformed into the phallus, into a sign of difference and domination" (Brittan 56). Thus masculinity and sexuality are, in Marty's case, conflated; Marty

defines himself as a man through his sexuality, understanding "masculinity as the constant and irrepressible capacity for desire," ("Fuel For Fantasy" 269) and finding self-actualization through sexual conquest. And yet, while simultaneously encouraging men to prioritize sex in this way, patriarchy also imposes extreme restrictions on men's sexuality, "associat[ing] sexual yearnings with guilt of shame" ("Fuel For Fantasy" 269), particularly extramarital yearnings. This is disastrous for the man who, like Marty, wants to have his cake and eat it too. For the patriarchal, individualistic man, "...it is the concealed, even furtive compulsion to commit wrongs, to break the rules, especially those controlling sexual conduct" (Miles 186). Marty's sexual appetite can not be satisfied within the sanctioned borders of marriage, and because of the fact that "men are powerful and visible, yet fractured and disconnected" and their "lives are split into compartments" (Hatty 161), he feels he can cheat on his wife. This compartmentalization is addressed early in the series, when Marty tells Rust (condescendingly) that he's obsessed with the case:

Rust: You're obsessive too, just not about the job.

Marty: Not me, brother. I keep things even. Separate.

Rust: People incapable of guilt do have a good time. ("The Locked Room")

Sexuality thus becomes "central to their [men's] lives," while remaining "isolated from other aspects of life and relationships" ("Gender of Desire" 15). It is not about connectivity; an intimate connection with another person through sex might be what Marty *needs* but it's not what he's looking for, because this would result "in the feeling that one is emasculated, weak, inferior, unmanly, worthless, ashamed, and/or feminine" (O'Neil 66).

Despite the short term success Marty has "keeping things separate", it isn't long before his philandering begins to ruin the important relationships in his life. Even before he is caught by his wife Maggie, Marty's relationship with her begins to deteriorate, and it is his masculinity that makes intimate connectivity with his spouse impossible. He, like Rust, is unable to deal with the feelings that are the cause of his promiscuity, the innate vulnerability that lies at the heart of his sexual machismo. bell hooks, in her book concerning the devastating psychological effects of patriarchal masculinity on men, writes that

The unhappiness of men in relationships, the grief that men feel about the failure of love, often goes unnoticed in our society precisely because patriarchal culture really does not care if men are unhappy... patriarchal mores teach a form of emotional stoicism to men that says they are more manly if they do not feel, but if by chance they should feel and the feelings hurt, the manly response is to stuff them down, to forget them, to hope they go away (hooks 5).

The truth of Marty's situation is that his seemingly insatiable sexual appetite is not proof of his natural manliness, but rather, as Rust explains astutely, "an expression of weakness, pain" ("Who Goes There"), a result of the isolation which "is a piece of [men's] conditioning as boys" that is carried "with [them] into [their] manhood" (Bearman 216). This isolation is an important aspect of patriarchal manhood, a silence that men wrap around themselves. Faced with his wife's frustration at the emotional distance she feels increasing between them, Marty says helplessly, "I'm not good at, you know, expressing" and describes his psychological state as one of pervasive vulnerability and precarity: "It's like I'm the coyote in the cartoons, running off a cliff and if I don't look down and keep running, I might be fine, but... I think I'm all fucked up" (The Locked

Room"). This interaction between husband and wife is addressed by hooks when she argues that "Women demanded of men that they give more emotionally, but most could not understand what was being asked of them. Having cut away the parts of themselves that could feel a wide range of emotional response, they were disconnected" (hooks 66). Faced with the uncertainty inherent to natural human emotion, Marty turns to sex, not even as a means of comfort but as a method of reinforcing the thing at stake, the thing that, by the very impossibility of its nature, can never stay: his masculinity.

Sex, then, becomes a "way of self-solacing" (hooks 82), and more importantly, a way of reinforcing one's subjectivity as a patriarchal male. The idea that sex is about desire or pleasure is part of the masculinist myth around which masculine sexuality is constructed by patriarchy. The reality, as personified by Marty, is that "Sexual pleasure is rarely the goal in a sexual encounter; something far more important than mere pleasure is on the line...[men's] sense of... [themselves] as men. Men's sense of sexual scarcity and an almost compulsive need for sex to confirm manhood feed each other, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of sexual deprivation and despair" ("Fuel for Fantasy" 269). Thus, sex is simultaneously the standard by which Marty comes to define himself as a man and an addiction (one that is enflamed by his alcoholism). Like any drug, the escape from the damaging emotional limitations of patriarchy offered by sex is short term because masculinity "is shown to require constant maintenance and reconstitution" (Abbott 7). The macho ideal of the sexually voracious male is here exposed for what it is: a front, a painful masquerade, an attempt to disguise the inability to process emotions and connect intimately and authentically with other people. Marty's character, who loses everything that matters most to him as a result of his obsessive need for sex, is a sad

representation of the intrinsically oxymoronic nature of patriarchal sexuality and of its destructive capacity.

Marty's relationships with women are not the only ones adversely affected by his masculinity. His interactions with other men are just as weighed down by his insecure sexuality even if men are not his preferred choice of sexual object. When we see him affiliating with other men, usually coworkers, he isn't any more honest or genuine with them than he is with the women in his life. This is because

Competition in the workplace can make it all the more difficult for men to express feelings... when men gather together at work, they rarely have meaningful conversations. They jeer, they grandstand, they joke, but they do not share feelings. They relate in a scripted, limited way, careful to remain within the emotional boundaries set up by patriarchal thinking about masculinity. The rules of patriarchal manhood remind them that it is their duty as men to *refuse relatedness* (hooks 98)[my emphasis].

Right before the series introduces Marty as an adulterer, he is shown at a bar, drunk, and having a good time with two other men from the precinct. Instead of talking about the case, which is presumably the real reason he feels the need to get so drunk, he focuses the conversation on sexuality, because although he is not interested in men sexually, "manhood is" still "demonstrated for other men's approval" ("Gender of Desire" 30). He seems to be enjoying himself; loving to be the center of attention, he tells a story about one of his sexual escapades that makes his coworkers laugh ("Seeing Things"). This scene, which is followed immediately by one revealing his affair, speaks to hooks' theory about the way that men interact with each other. There is a definite inclination towards superficial posturing and braggadocio and an aversion to



emotionally oriented conversation. This tendency does not, however, eradicate the human *need* for "relatedness", and despite Marty's adherence to the patriarchal rules of male-male interactions, he still feels this need. Right after his night with the boys, he satisfies (for the moment) that need by meeting up with his mistress in an attempt to acquire that sense of connectedness that so eludes him.

The only relationship Marty has that is unadulterated and authentic is the one he shares with Rust. It is only with Rust that Marty ever allows himself to be honest, despite the fact that their relationship is marked by competition and strife. Indeed, part of their intimacy is in the contentiousness of their relationship, in the fact that it is only with each other that they allow themselves to feel. It is to Rust that Marty poses the uncertain question: "Do you ever wonder if you're a bad man?" when he is clearly talking about himself ("The Locked Room"). It is Rust who riles him up the most, who makes him the angriest and most frustrated; Rust is the closest thing he has to a real friend, and he is also the biggest threat to Marty's masculine vision of himself. This speaks to the fact that positive homosocial relationships are incompatible with patriarchy, which encourages men to compete with each other rather than work together. The sexual rivalry between the two men, which is largely an insecure projection on Marty's part, is intense and intimate despite its combative nature. In her discussion about love triangles in literature, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes that "In any erotic rivalry, the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved: the bond of 'rivalry' and 'love', differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent" (Sedgwick 21). In this case, the relationship Marty shares with Rust is arguably deeper than the one he shares with his wife (the "beloved") because it involves a wide

range of emotion and is the only place where that emotion can find expression. Admittedly, most of the emotions Marty feels in regards to Rust are somehow connected to anger, but even still, "rage is the easy way back into the realm of feeling" (hooks 73) and is, while not constructive, at the very least *real*.

The relationship between Rust and Marty is central to the story and functions to show the reality of patriarchal models of masculinity and the manner in which they split and confuse the male psyche. In his article about the double-protagonist Hollywood film, David Greven makes several observations about the "psychosexual significance" (Greven 25) of stories where traditional, isolated "manhood is transformed into dyadic manhood" and how this "threatens to topple the reign of heterosexual relationships presumably central to Hollywood film" by focusing on "a central, often contentious, always complex relationship between two male protagonists played by two male stars of commensurate stature, who therefore demand equal attention and narrative importance" (Greven 24). These films, and *True Detective* as well "suggest that manhood's center cannot hold, that manhood is split, that the warring elements of manhood spill out beyond the individual subjectivity of the star protagonist and that the burden of male representation must be carried out by two stars rather than one" (Greven 23). In many ways, Rust and Marty represent two sides of the same coin: the patriarchal mind embodied by Rust and the patriarchal body portrayed by Marty. In this way, despite the fact that the story "pit[s] the protagonists against each other", these two men "demonstrate the merging of the two... into one; the males are always complimentary halves of a dyad that suggests not two individuals but two warring halves of one consciousness" (Greven 25). Late in the series, while arguing with his partner, Rust says contemptuously that, "Without me, there is no you" ("Haunted Houses"), a

statement that, although it doesn't acknowledge the mutuality of their dependence, at the very least seems to understand that their relationship is a defining feature of who they are. The end of the series, when they have their confrontation with Childress - a battle neither could have won alone - they are both seriously wounded in the fight, and through this shared experience they finally have a moment, however brief, of mergence, where both men are complete in having each other, even as they lay bleeding on the ground together. After, while recovering in the hospital, Marty recalls "That's the last thing I remember. I was on the ground. Sirens. Saying my friend's name" ("Form and Void"). This is the first and only time he ever refers to Rust as his friend, and in fact the only time he seems to refer to any friendship he has. It is only through the fusion symbolized by their experience finally catching and killing Childress that either can let down their masculinist defences and reach a place of self-realization. Through this renunciation, both ultimately have transformative moments that suggest a possible alternative to the patriarchal thinking to which they had thus far been so committed. Ultimately, what saves them both is the fact that they are finally able to forge and *accept* a strong, authentic bond with another person, something that had been impossible for them before because of the psychic isolation and rupture caused by patriarchal thinking.

If Rust and Marty each represent the flawed patriarchal ideals of manhood, then Childress, the serial killer they hunt, illustrates masculinity at its most monstrous. Childress' masculinity is the most problematic of the three as it exposes some of the ways *True Detective* replicates patriarchal ideas regarding radically othered models of masculinity. The hegemonic standard of white, heterosexual masculinity is thoroughly classed; and *True Detective* uses an old trope in horror narratives that strongly contradicts the series' usually sympathetic vision of

poverty. Nicola Rehling writes that, “On the surface, screen serial killers have little to tell us about normative masculinity, since they occupy a position of monstrous otherness, often achieved through pathological discourses of sexual deviance and/or a class inferiority... cinematic representations of non-phallic or 'white trash' serial killers point to what *must be excluded* for the constitution of 'ordinary' white heterosexual masculinity” (Rehling 228)[my emphasis]. Despite the ongoing narrative regarding the mistreatment of the poor in the United States, *True Detective* still relies upon the stereotype of the 'white-trash' killer; he's presumably disenfranchised, uneducated, and the series even employs the incest stereotype that is so often applied to poor rural populations. This (probably unintentional) deployment of such a harmful cliché reinforces patriarchal and classist ideologies. Childress is portrayed as a product "of a sick family, ensnared in Oedipal dramas that prevent [him] from achieving phallic subjectivity" (Rehling 229), or, in other words, his character is constructed as a man who has not appropriately matured into an acceptable mode of masculinity. This emphasis on his psychosis as a result of arrested development (he and his half sister call having sex 'making flowers' ["Form and Void"]), producing a creepy but decidedly childish effect) plays into the stereotypes of impoverished rural communities and essentially normalizes and extends Childress' monstrosity to an entire socioeconomic group. *True Detective* "deploys the image of the 'white trash' serial killer to represent primal, unadulterated 'natural born' aggression" (Rehling 234), further naturalizing his insanity and demonizing the entire rural working/lower class. The 'culture' he creates, "the arcane signs of Carcosa" which for most of the series seem to carry mysterious significance, ultimately "are disclosed to refer to nothing but themselves, just childlike scribbling, the nonsensical writing of a signifier 'outside the other'" (Wilson 159). Stripped of any

symbolic significance other than his radical 'otherness', Childress is an infantilized stereotype that supports rather than catechizes the oppressive, classist narrative so clearly evident in patriarchal mores.

Despite the fact that by resorting to crude stereotypes *True Detective* reflects the values and beliefs of normative, patriarchal masculinity, Childress also serves a purpose that is meant to deconstruct and interrogate that same model. Like Rust and Marty, Childress' masculinity is rife with contradiction; he is the aberrant other with whom few men can relate, but his defining traits are familiar. His obsessions are merely exaggerated caricatures of the features found in the main characters. He, like Rust, shares a fatalistic view of the world, and like Marty, Childress' masculinity is dependent on his deviant and seemingly irrepressible sexuality. If Marty and Rust indeed represent two complementary halves of a single masculine psyche, then Childress is that psyche's dark twin, its aggrandized and distorted foil. In this way, Childress' behaviour

however apparently unnatural, mindless, or abhorrent, merely repeat[s] in an exaggerated form all the key themes and inescapable imperatives of normal masculinity: the fantasy of heroic endeavour, the competitive urge to dominate and excel, to get ahead, the need to blunt all tender feelings, the search for significance through the transcendence of fear and weakness, the centralizing of the penis and its demands, the resort to penis power and phallic control as the first and final weapon at moments of stress or need (Miles 229).

The killer's character serves as an acrimonious indictment of the more benign forms of patriarchal manhood; his monstrosity is simply a purified and intensified version of the ideals for which both Marty and Rust, as well as many men in American society, strive.

Early in the series, Rust says of Dora Lange, the murder victim, and her unknown killer that, "She articulated a person with vision. Vision is meaning. Meaning is historical" ("Seeing Things"). While the signs of Childress' "vision" might only be self-referential, it is clear that for him, killing is very meaningful. His violence is not random because "all behaviour, even that of the maddest of mad men, has a function and a purpose" (Miles 223). The purpose of Childress' behaviour is self-actualization; killing another is a way to reaffirm his own existence, and more specifically, his identity as a powerful male. His victims, like Dora Lange, are "chum in the water" ("Seeing Things"); that is, they are a means to an end. His dehumanization of women and children is what makes his extraordinary cruelty possible, and it is, strangely (or perhaps not so strangely, after all) reflected somewhat in many of Rust's philosophical monologues. There is a reason that Rust is the prime suspect in the case; the way he talks about people mirrors the way that Childress *treats* people. The nihilism, in Rust, manifests largely in a *self*-destructive fashion as a profound depression. In Childress, the fatalistic view of the world is what allows him and enables him to do what he does. Despite the fact that Rust would never harm a woman or child, his rants are at times chilling and disturbing:

This is what I'm talking about... time and death and futility... you look in their eyes, even in a picture, doesn't matter they're dead or alive, you can still read them and you know what you see? They welcomed it. Mmhmm. Not at first, but right there in that last instant, it's an unmistakable relief, see, because they were afraid and now they saw for the first time how easy it was to just let go, and they saw, in that last nanosecond, they saw what they were. That, you, yourself, this whole big drama, it was never anything but a jerry-rig

of presumption and dumb will and you could just let go finally now that you don't have to hold on so tight... to recognize that all your life, you know, all your love, all your hate, all your memory, all your pain - it was all the same thing. It was all the same dream, a dream that you had inside a locked room, a dream about being a person... and like a lot of dreams, there's a monster at the end of it. ("The Locked Room")

Rust believes in a "desertified universe" (Wilson 159) and accepts - or at least pretends to accept - the complete insignificance of life. Childress, by the very nature of what he is, holds little value for life, viewing the lives of others as raw material for his own grand project - transcending that inherent meaninglessness. Childress refuses to passively acknowledge the "dissolution and the collapse of boundaries" (Hatty 93) inherent to this philosophy because of the threat it poses to his subjectivity. His violence is an extreme masculinist attempt to overcome the inherent futility of life: "My ascension removes me from the disc and the loop" ("Form and Void"), the disc and loop being the world as *Rust* describes it earlier in the series when he explains the m brain theory:

It's like, in this universe, we process time linearly forward, but outside of our space time, from what would be a fourth dimensional perspective, time wouldn't exist and from that vantage point, could we attain it... we'd see out space time would look flattered, like a single sculpture with matter in a superposition of every place ever occupied, our sentience just cycle through our lives like carts on a track. See, everything outside our dimension... that's eternity, eternity looking down on us. Now, to us, it's a sphere, but to them... it's a circle ("The Secret Fate of All Life").

Childress represents Rust's philosophy taken to its most dangerous conclusion. In fact, Childress is the *source* of Rust's philosophy, the monster at the end of the dream, because it was Ladoux - mouthpiece for Childress - who first told Rust "Time is a flat circle" ("The Secret Fate of All Life").

Marty's struggle with the darkness is not philosophical but sexual. While he isn't a predator the way that Childress is, the compulsivity that motivates his extramarital affairs is similar to the one that motivates Childress' violence. They are both responding to insecurities relating to their masculinity, or "the failure of paternal law", but for Marty, the reaction "is not here the familiar one of psychosis but rather of perversion" (Wilson 159). His relationship with Beth is probably the best example of the problematic nature of his sexuality, because while she is an adult when they become sexually involved with each other, he meets her as a child (and she is childish even as an adult) and her interest in him is clearly one stemming from admiration because he told her to "do something else" when she was working as a prostitute ("Seeing Things"). Ironically, seeing Marty hand Beth the money with which to "do something else", Rust asks snidely, "That a down payment?" to which Marty replies, "Is shitting on any moment of decency part of your job description?" ("Seeing Things") The irony, of course, is that in a way it *is* a downpayment; years later, Beth "repays" his generosity with her sexual interest in him. Now, because of her age when he has sex with her, as well as the clear fact that it is consensual, Marty isn't really doing anything exactly *wrong*, but the circumstances surrounding their affair definitely blurs lines of appropriateness and makes Marty's ethical position uneasy and precarious. Marty clearly recognizes this fact; we see him hesitate, torn, when Beth invites him over for a drink, but his compulsive need for validation through sex wins out. His motivation for



sex, which is "about releasing [his] own pain" and not "about connecting to someone else" (hooks 82) reinforces the idea that for Marty, sex is addictive. He doesn't *want* to have sex with Beth; he wants to stay faithful to his wife and family. But the overwhelming force of his societally constructed sex drive triumphs.

Childress' sexuality, although infinitely more abhorrent in its disregard for consent and its violent and murderous constitution, stems from a similar addictive urgency. In one scene, we watch him watch a young boy at the school where he's working as a handy man. There is no dialogue, just shots of Childress and shots of the boy, and in a strange, surreal sort of way, the boy seems to be the one in a position of power; he stares at Childress with all the blunt confidence and curiosity so common to children, unafraid, as if he knows, somehow, the power he holds over this stranger. And Childress, the great monster, the predator, stares back at him, helplessly transfixed by his own perverse desires ("Form and Void"). The scene is short but important, because it hints at the fact that while there is nothing that could excuse his behaviour, Childress is driven by something beyond his control. Like Marty, he is overwhelmed by the masculinist demands of his sexuality, demands that must be satisfied regardless of the destruction they might reap. Both men experience sex as, simultaneously, a "fix", a way of reasserting their subjectivity, and also as "the disintegration of masculine identity" (Hatty 94) because of their inability to control it.

Discussing the serial killer narrative and the construction of space in such narratives, Steffan Hankte ruminates over the nature of the audience's relationship with the killer and his space:

Still, the pleasure of seeing space 'produced' and 'consumed' must be a guilty one, for

defensive measures and legitimizing strategies come into play right away. The demonization of the killer, the polarization of the conflict between him and us, and the insistence on his otherness sustains both sides of the structural ambiguity underlying all fantasy. What must inevitably strike us as similarities between him and us is written off as a successful camouflage. It is exactly this strategic, uneasy and ambiguous process of ostracizing the serial killer and the space he occupies that make his person and his space become radically fictitious. The more we fantasize about him without acknowledging that we are separated by nothing but genre conventions, the more closed the gap between him and ourselves becomes... we are left with ideological constructs reflecting, articulating, sustaining and exorcizing the preoccupations and fear that run through our cultures. In the process, the serial killer narrative disambiguates and objectifies; it gives definite shape to our latent and half-glimpsed obsessions and brings us face to face with them as objects out in the real world" (Hankte 182).

*True Detective* uses these strategies of othering - particularly in regards to class - in order to radically separate the serial killer from both the audience and the two main characters. However, in other ways, *particularly* in regards to issues surrounding masculinity, *True Detective* makes a concerted effort to minimize rather than accentuate the gaps between him and the heroes. This expresses "anxieties about normative masculinity's lack of a specific, positive identity" by stressing "the difficulties these white profilers have in distancing themselves from the serial killer" and the way this "articulates concerns about white heterosexual masculinity's relation to power and violence" (Rehling 236). Even more concerning is the fact that *True Detective's*

narrative also implicitly challenges the masculinist ideologies of its audience by situating Childress' character in such close proximity to normative masculinity. Hatty concludes that,

The desires and fears of the (male) serial killer regarding bodies and gender differences have been transposed into a constellation of cultural desires and fears. These emotions are no longer confined to a small band of 'post-modern' monster... This small company of killers now act out the desires of a significant proportion of mass society: these post-modern monsters embody the violent, murderous desires that transact parts of American society" (Hatty 203).

Thus, Childress is meant to trouble the audience not because of his *differences* but rather because of the way he reflects, admittedly in magnified terms, imperatives that are widely accepted and normalized in patriarchal society. His propinquity to the main characters is a strategic attempt on the part of Pizzolatto to highlight the dangerous, violent undertones that are inherent to patriarchal masculinity.

*True Detective* is indeed a television show about men, but not, perhaps, in the same vein as many other action/suspense/horror film and shows are, where masculinity is so often polarized into the "good" (personified by the detective or law enforcer) and "bad" (personified by the criminal). Instead, the approach that *True Detective* takes is one that acknowledges the complexity of issues surrounding American masculinity, especially issues of selfhood and violence. Like the characters themselves, issues of gender identification are nuanced, a sea of blurred lines and grey instead of a clear picture in black and white. By focusing on the experiences of men, the series not only pays attention to the damage done so often to women and children, but also the manner in which masculinity harms men. Masculinity in *True Detective* is a

site of intense inner turmoil and conflict for the men who seek to embody it, and there is always a price to pay for "being a man" by the standards of American culture and patriarchy. Whether it is alienation, loss, or violence, hegemonic masculinity proves to be an impediment to self actualization at its best and a system that "promotes insanity" (hooks 30) at its worst.

## Regarding Women

Maggie: Girls always know before boys.

Marty: Why is that?

Maggie: Because they have to.

- ("The Locked Room")

*True Detective*, in regards to the 'woman problem' (that is, the problem of representing women), is more complex than might be assumed at first glance. There are hardly any women characters at all, and the ones that the series does have are marginalized and fairly underdeveloped. And yet, as revealed by the wide ranges of responses made by critics and reviewers, it clearly has something to say about women, despite their apparent absence. The question then becomes, how are they represented - the few times they are represented - and why? Zainab Akande writes scathingly that "the few women who do appear are marginalized and degraded. There are no female police officers but there are dead prostitutes. Hart has mistresses. The serial killer has an affair with his half sister. The female victim's corpse of the first episode is nude, branded, and left rotting in the sun" (Akande). Her view is echoed by many critics, who see the blatant objectification and abuse of women throughout the series, along with the overall lack of female presence and autonomy, as standard run-of-the-mill misogyny.<sup>3</sup> This is not unfair; between the barbarism of the violence alluded to and the shameless fanservice scenes of sex and nudity, it is a difficult task to excuse the show from accusations of sexism.<sup>4</sup> And yet the monumental role that women play in the lives of the main characters and in the structure of the

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<sup>3</sup> See Paskin, Turley

<sup>4</sup> See Adams.

story cannot be ignored. The role women play in *True Detective* is a familiar one, invisible and yet profound; it is through their relationships to women that the men of *True Detective* come to know and to define themselves.

It is with a woman (or rather, the body of a woman) that the story begins. Her corpse acts as "the end point of a life that simultaneously signifies the beginning of a narrative" (Plain 12). The question that haunts the entire series, the question that haunts the main characters for twenty years, is about a woman: Who killed Dora Lange? That she is dead is unsurprising, particularly considering the genre of the detective story, and this initiates the series into a relationship with women that is right off the bat objectifying - nothing, after all, is more objectified than a corpse. Having lost its subjectivity the body becomes a thing, an object to be absorbed by the spectator. The dead body, for the living, is a sadomasochistic glimpse into the possibility of violence and destruction, allowing the audience "an indulgence into the spectacle of murder" (Gates 166) without directly implicating them in it. The fact that it is a woman's body is important, because although the corpse is reduced to being a thing, it still "bear[s] the inscriptions of [its] cultural production - socially determined markers of gender, race, sexuality and class that profoundly influence the way in which they are read" (Plain 12). That the body is a woman's adds an inevitably sexualized element to this voyeuristic consumption; discovered naked, Dora Lange's body is infused with macabre sensuality. Americans are already accustomed to seeing women on display for the male gaze, only now there is the element of utter destruction of self, the ultimate objectification, and they eagerly gobble it up.

Dora Lange is discovered amongst sugar cane fields in the swamplands of Louisiana kneeling at the base of a tree with hands bound in front of her as if in prayer. The brutality of her

murder - torture with a knife and strangulation - has been carefully washed clean from her body. Her pretty strawberry blond hair is loose and crowned with a headdress made of twigs and a pair of deer antlers. The shots of her body are as striking as the *post mortem* arrangement of her corpse. The series captures a kind of grotesque beauty; Dora Lange, "of far more interest in death than she could have been in life," (Stapleton 164) has become someone's work of art. Autonomy - the reality of a living subject named Dora Lange - is eradicated by death, and her corpse becomes the blank canvas or the lump of clay, the physical material that is reworked and transformed into a symbol of her killer's design, his power, his spiritual ecstasy. "Her body is a paraphilic love map," ("The Long Bright Dark") Cohle tells Hart at the crime scene. Her body is saturated with new meaning, none of it of her making. Blindfolded and branded, she is the silenced victim, the vacuous emptiness around which the story and its characters orbit, the black hole at the center of everything. It is with Dora Lange that the two detectives become obsessed: "She provides a locus of necrophilic intensity for the partners, as their lives become consumed by details of hers" (Stapleton 164). She is the catalyst for the plot and the conduit through which a dialogue between and amongst the men of the show is first initiated. It is Dora Lange's body that "becomes the abject one, written upon by the killer and [that] becomes a text to be read by the detective - and spectacle to be beheld by the audience" (Gates 166). At the beginning of this story seemingly exclusively about men, there is first and foremost the body of a woman.

Dora Lange therefore represents the precedent for the role that women play in the series: the role of the absent referent. Masculine self-identification through "secondary" relationships to women is at the heart of *True Detective*. An overwhelmingly male centered show, women exist on the periphery and can be categorized as either extensions of the male characters or as victims

of male violence of both. Their marginalized position does not render them nonexistent, just invisible; the complete lack of autonomous femininity in the series was one of the first things I noticed about the series as a viewer. Luce Irigaray notes the way femininity has historically been equated with a "lack, deficiency, or... imitation and negative image of the subject" (Irigaray 796). But whereas history has always portrayed masculinity as self-sustaining and in fact has created a "gender based, individualist ideology in which women are male-defined" (Smith 80), *True Detective* acknowledges that its very existence as the center of attention and subjectivity depends upon its inverted relationship to femininity. Although practically, tactilely absent, women are nonetheless at the heart of not just the main plot line, but each major male character's personal history and identity. Like Dora Lange's body, the symbolic and physical lack that is constituted as feminine acts as mirror and measuring stick for masculinity to reflect upon itself. Despite their apparent helplessness and absence, women are by far the most influential forces in the lives of both detectives and the serial killer they hunt.

In the premier episode, Marty, in the 2012 timeline, says with the confidence of an old man who thinks he's seen it all that "passed a certain age, a man without a family can be a bad thing" ("The Long Bright Dark"). His identity as a man clearly hinges on his role as husband and father, and both 'husband' and 'father' hinge upon the relationship between himself and his wife and two daughters. And yet, contradictory to this is the fact that Marty never really ever fully commits to these roles by which he defines himself. Nevertheless (or perhaps because of this), he guards them jealously. At one point, Cohle mows Hart's lawn unbeknownst to the latter; when Marty returns home to find Cohle chatting, sweaty and nearly bare chested, to his wife Maggie, his reaction is comedic in its aggressive insecurity: "I don't ever want you mowing my lawn,



alright? I like mowing *my* lawn" ("The Locked Room"). What this scene clarifies is the precariousness of masculine identity. Marty thinks the threat is to his wife, but really what is threatened in this moment is his role as husband, bread winner, mower of lawns. Without the certainty that Maggie is "his", his wife, Hart's identity as a family man is shattered; he becomes, instead of a man with a family (notice, a man *with* as in a man *possessing* a family), he is a man who can't "hold on to what's his", that is to say, no man at all. Hart's wife, to whom he is repeatedly unfaithful and often resentful, is thus a sort of point of origin when it comes to the image of manhood to which Marty aspires. When she leaves him the first time, it is not merely a matter of heartbreak for Hart. His nearly hysterical rage is in fact a panicked response to identity crises. "People give you rules," he tells Detectives Papania and Gilbrough. "Rules describe the shape of things" ("The Locked Room"). His relationship with his wife defines who he is as a man; without her, there would be no rules by which to live and no shape to support his identity as a man, an ideal that he thinks of as fixed, natural, given.

Marty's infidelity is, on the one hand, a testament to his weakness, and on the other hand, for him, proof of his manliness. He is weak in that he fails (twice) to resist seduction and falls willingly under the sway of younger women; but for Hart, keeping a mistress is a necessary means of proving to himself that, despite having settled into masculine maturity as a husband, he is still a virile and desirable man. Fidelity to his wife would be an open admission of her power, her gargantuan influence over his construction of himself, a construction he believes to be self-sustained and independent, the natural summation of every successful acquisition he's made up to this point. The fact that Maggie is the classic cop-movie wife, the one who nags and berates her husband for his inattention, only further intensifies Hart's desire for extramarital

relationships; taking a mistress is a self-conscious and rebellious act of self-affirmation, an attempt to maintain a masculine vision of himself that does not depend upon the overbearing and overpowering influence of his wife. He cannot do this on his own. He needs another woman to prop up his masculine ego without smothering it. He succumbs to his desire for his second mistress after running errands for his family in the 2002 timeline; he's carrying shopping bags of tampons in one scene and having sex with the girl in the next. He falters in a moment of self-conscious emasculation (a man, buying tampons for the women folk), and his dalliance speaks to his fear that he has lost what it takes to be a 'man', that his masculinity has been snuffed out and engulfed by the femininity of his domestic life. When his hold over these women proves to be illusory, he exhibits the same rage and frustration that marks his break up with Maggie - not because he loves them, particularly his first mistress, whose date he drunkenly assaults in a jealous rage - but because losing them is another emasculation, a precarious slip into the deep chasm of masculine insecurity which demands he overcompensate with aggression and violence.

But sex is not the only context in which Marty relies on women to define himself. He is also a father of two girls, children in 1995, teenagers in 2002, and young adults in 2012. He mentions his own father, fondly bolstering the other man's masculinity when he says, "You know, even at the end, he still could have taken me" ("The Long Bright Dark"). Fatherhood is clearly tightly interwoven into his construction of masculinity; he admires his own father's toughness and emotional remoteness, something he clearly tries to emulate throughout the series with his own children and something that clearly doesn't come off as actually good parenting. "You know what it means to be a father?" he asks condescendingly of the two detectives interviewing him. "It means you are accountable for people. You are responsible for their lives" ("The Locked

Room"). Despite taking clear and vocal pride in his role as father, he commits to it about as much as he commits to his marriage, that is to say, inconsistently and with resentment. Instead of chastising his daughter for drawing inappropriate pictures at school he strains to see over her head and watch the sport's game on the television. His conception of fatherhood is essentially a kind of ownership more than it is a responsibility; his children are his most precious possessions, but when they shift the power dynamics in the household, when they threaten his role as ultimate *paterfamilias*, he loses all capacity for understanding, warmth, fatherliness. When his daughter is caught having sex with two older boys, his response is to call her a slut and slap her across the face as opposed to showing any actual concern for why she might be behaving the way she is. Her insurrection, her decision to exercise her sexual autonomy as a young woman, sparks the same kind of panic and rage that his mistresses or wife might. Her decision to be sexually active with men is such an insult to him because he feels he has ownership over her body and sexuality. His jealousy is not of the incestuous kind, but it does mirror the jealousy he exhibits over other women in his life, a possessive, fearful jealousy, a jealousy spawned from the terror he feels at the possibility of loss - not of the women themselves, but of his own sense of authority and control. Audrey not only disobeys the law of the father, but she does so as a sexually independent woman, the obedience and submission of whom Hart relies upon in order to maintain his illusion of what it means to be a father and a man.

Each of Marty's fraught relationships with women incites in him a "rage to control the uncontrollable (ie the female)" (Miles 44). His efforts to control the women in his life stem from the fact that "denied his own stable core identity, the male is driven to seek stability and impose his autonomy as a way of resolving his ambivalence and the anxiety it engenders" (Miles 44).

His desire to "own" the women in his life, to secure them safely under his control, speaks more to the hold that women have over Hart than the power he holds over women. So much of the masculine persona he wishes to project depends upon the women who seem to play such small roles in the grand scheme of the show. But Marty's entire identity is relational and specifically relational to women; like Dora Lange's body, the story not so obviously hinges upon these relationships and the way Hart is shaped by them. For Hart, "woman serves as one of the principle means by which the hero seeks to define himself... she serves as an articulation of ambivalent tendencies within masculine identity and desire" (Krutnik 112). To Hart and to the audience, these women constitute the foundation upon which he attempts to build and maintain a masculine persona of his own, one that lives up to hegemonic ideals of dominance, success, and conquest. His relationships with women simultaneously reveal the archetype he strives to embody and his blatant inability to do so. Ultimately, his inability to engage with women in a productive way leads to divorce and isolation; in the 2012 timeline he is completely estranged from his family and is portrayed as a lonely and emasculated man unsuccessfully perusing the online dating scene. Although he doesn't realize the root cause of his failure, he understands that he has failed: "Solution to my whole life was right under my nose - that woman, those kids - and I was watching everything else. See, infidelity is one kind of sin, but my true failure was inattention. I understand that now" ("The Secret Fate of All Life"). He admits, in hindsight, how crucial a role the women in his life play. His 'inattention' was his resistance to this fact, to this truth that who he is and who he wants to be depend upon the presence of women. By the time he has figured out how dependent his sense of self is upon his relationships, he has all but destroyed them. Now a lonely old man, stripped of the illusions of manliness that had blinded him for most

of his adult life, he is a picture of decay and regret - the only things left once the women who defined him have left.

Rust Cohle, Marty's contentious partner, projects a different type of masculine persona, one more in line with classic *noir* - he is a loner, psychologically damaged by tremendous loss and purposefully alienated from the rest of society - but like Hart, he too has constructed his identity as a man in relation to women. Whereas Marty tends to cling most tightly and possessively to the physicality of women, whether it be the sexualized bodies of his mistresses or the sexually maturing bodies of his daughters, the women in Cohle's life are spectres, occupying his past and haunting his present: "Back then I'd sleep, and I'd lay awake thinking about women. My daughter, my wife. It's like something's got your name on it, like a bullet or a nail in the road" ("Seeing Things"). Rust's pessimistic fatalism, a defining feature of his character throughout the series, is here inseparable from his relations to women, which he associates with death and loss. The tragic demise of his daughter in 1990 sends him into a self-destructive, obsessive spiral of overwork long before we meet him in 1995; whoever he was before he lost her died with her and has been replaced by a man who can only connect with the world recklessly through danger and violence. After Sofia's death, he spends four years working high risk undercover drug operations, submerging himself in cultures of violent hypermasculinity and alienating himself from femininity to the point that his marriage falls apart. While Marty's masculine persona requires him to be surrounded by women to bolster his own self-image, Cohle's is characterized by a complete rejection of femininity. He expunges women from his life, although it is ultimately an unsuccessful exorcism; the more he embodies the image of an unfeeling and realistic man in control of himself, the more he is haunted. Driving through a poor

rural town he sees a little girl standing by the side of the road in flimsy pyjamas; she waves, and he blinks like he thinks she might be a figment of his imagination - the audience is just as unsure of her reality as he is. "You believe in ghosts?" he asks Marty ("The Long Bright Dark"). All the complexity of his world view can be reduced to "nothing but an alibi, drawing attention both away and towards his inability to free himself from the melancholy and mourning" (Wilson 161). His entire construction of himself is a kind of desperate reaction to the trauma of his loss; he overcompensates for the excess of feeling by adopting an exterior of cold reason (a marker of traditional masculinity) and philosophical pessimism.

Despite his best efforts, women slip into Cohle's life anyway, fracturing his carefully albeit precariously constructed selfhood. His sexual encounter with Hart's wife Maggie does to Cohle what murder, drugs and the occult cannot: it destabilizes his vision of himself. Were Rust a woman, the interaction would without a doubt be considered sexual assault; he is drunk when Maggie makes persistent advances on him, ignoring him when he says no and tells her to stop. But because Cohle is a man, the series depicts the interaction ambiguously, like it can't decide whether he has been assaulted or merely hoodwinked. On the one hand, his hysterical reaction speaks to the fact that he has been violated to some degree; he screams at her to leave his home, clearly shaken if not by the physical intercourse itself than by its implications. On the other hand, the series quickly moves beyond Rust's possible emotional damage and uses the scene as a catalyst for a confrontation between Rust and Marty. Maggie's role as rapist is downplayed and she is posited instead as the seductress who comes between the two men; once again, the woman is relegated to acting as a channel between men, a female instigator of male-centered drama. Despite being quickly brushed back to the margins of the story, Maggie still succeeds in shaking

the very foundations of Cohle's seemingly untouchable masculine facade; his assault is a loss of control, a suspension of his steel-like will, and a chink in the stoic armour he wears to keep out any uncontrollable (ie feminine) influence.

Finally, the identity of the serial killer, Childress, depends upon the women and children he murders in order to attain its own sense of power and subjectivity. The religious theology to which he ascribes and the mythology he creates around himself are masculinist ideologies of dominance and power to which femininity must be figuratively and literally sacrificed. His victims are mostly nameless - there is little Marie Fontenot, the woman at the Lake Charles murder, Dora Lange, the two children kept and tortured by Ladoux and his partner - and yet despite the anonymity, despite the peripheral position of these women and children, they are the vital means by which Childress achieves subjectivity and transcends mortality, transforming himself into the god-like Yellow King: "My ascension removes me from the disc and the loop" ("Form and Void"). His 'ascension' can not be achieved independently; he needs a human medium, a bridge to carry him to the divine, a sacrifice. Even more than the circle of men constituting the vodon cult to which he belongs, Childress' victims define him. The only "mark" ("Form and Void") that he can leave on the world - as a poor and uneducated man from the swamp - is through murder. Through the staging of his victims' bodies and the stick sculptures he leaves behind him, he communicates both a message and a claim, a declaration of self-expression through horror and violence. The self/other binary collapses during the act of murder; the physical and psychical boundaries between victim and killer blur and conflate. A sort of osmosis occurs as the other is dominated and claimed - the killer steals the will and subjective autonomy from his victim in the act of killing them. Through this "the self/other distinction is

replaced by an ultimate self-sameness" which "points to a mergence between the murderous acts of female obliteration and the imperative of male self-genesis, of continually recreating a new identity through incorporation" (Hatty 202). Like a parasite, Childress can only maintain his fantasy of godliness by feeding on others. Without his victims he is "characterized by a lack, by a kind of psychological vacuum" (Hatty 199). Indeed, when we are first introduced to Childress as killer (the first time we see him *knowing* that he is the killer) he is switching between personalities, picking up and dropping accents, darting from one emotional extreme to the next, volatile and without a consistent personality.<sup>5</sup> With no solid sense of selfhood, the act of killing becomes a sacred affirmation of his fantasy identity by the domination and destruction of someone else.

The fact that the masculine identities of all three men, Childress, Cohle and Hart, depend so heavily upon women is indicative to masculinity's reliance on otherness (ie femininity) to identify itself. Unable to support itself, it must constantly be bolstered and maintained in relation to that which it victimizes in order to articulate itself. The precarious nature of this relationship means that "the more fragile the masculinity, the more violent the extremes of self-definition" (Miles 22). Each of *True Detective's* three main characters suffer from the inability to actualize themselves as men, and their extreme reactions, be it outward displays of violence or repression (its own type of violence, only directed inwards), directly correlate to this personal instability. None of these men are able to interact and maintain healthy relationships with women because all three cling so tightly to their perceived masculine ideals, whether that be stud, loner, or god respectively. These ideals lack the substance necessary to actualize themselves; they are,

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<sup>5</sup> "Form and Void"



by themselves, weak, empty, and completely dependent on the constant and reiterated oppression or repression of the feminine in order to exist. Thus women become in *True Detective* a kind of invisible adversary, one that none of the men in the series even realize they are fighting. The destructive struggle of toxic masculinity against the feminine other is at the heart of the show, even if the women themselves remain on the fringe of it.

Akande concludes her critique of *True Detective* with the assertion that "by the end of its debut season, while a crime is solved, no justice is served for misogynistic crimes that accompany the lack of agency for the women of *True Detective*" (Akande). Her point is well taken and not inaccurate; *True Detective* is not about doing justice to women. This does not mean, however, that it is a misogynistic text that downplays or ignores femininity. On the contrary, *True Detective* articulates, in its examination of men and masculinity, the reasons why the relationship between men and women is so fraught, so violent, and why femininity is so often repressed or violated. The role of women in *True Detective* is a reflection of the role femininity plays in the construction of toxic masculinity. Under represented? Without a doubt. But their lack of representation does not diminish their importance; as Alyssa Rosenberg points out, "without these women, our anti heroes would be decidedly shrunken men" (Rosenberg). Thus *True Detective* walks a thin and dangerous line; its portrayal of women as marginalized victims is undoubtedly problematic, and its focus on the problems of white heterosexual men certainly isn't in itself groundbreaking, but the series is a critique of the gendered system that marginalizes and victimizes women and valorizes masculinist definitions of manhood. It becomes a matter of "the difference between portraying something and endorsing it" (Lambert), and while *True Detective* is not necessarily always successful at walking this tightrope, it nonetheless uses the

marginalized position of women to make a point and to attempt to explain the oppressed position women occupy in masculinist culture.

## Regarding Performance and Story Structure

"The world is a veil, and the face you wear is not your own."

- Reverend Theriot ("The Locked Room")

Film, as a medium, is well suited to depict the complexities of gender representation because it highlights gender's performative nature. An actor, when gendering his character, relies upon certain socially codified clues that will make his character 'legible' in the context of the prevailing gender system: not just the lines he speaks but the set of his shoulders, the volume of his voice, the way he walks and occupies space - all of these are markers that situate the character on the gender spectrum. Film "is characterized by the intermeshing of 'subject' and 'culture' (being a means by which culture is made 'comprehensible' for the subject, and the subject made 'recognizable' within the terms of culture)" (Krutnik ix) and represents a space where "discourse and representation come together via the performance of male social roles that are constructed and maintained by a multitude of cultural and media forms that are then taken up in screen enactments" (Peberdy 4). This creates a interpretive context in which gender is the combined result of the individual behaviours of the actors playing their characters and the culture at large both in the film and outside it. *True Detective* plays in the spaces between the cultural and the individual, the expectations of the existing gender system and the realities of the lived experiences of the characters as gendered subjects. It takes up the inconsistencies and fissures that occur within the male characters not just by way of the actors' performances but also in terms of the narrative structure of the series. The narrative is split, like the patriarchal masculinity it is examining, between the characters' performances and their inner and outer realities. Through the use of flashback combined with voiceover, as well as the employment of

the video recorded interview as a mode through which to tell the story, *True Detective* portrays the patriarchal male subject as fractured, incongruous, and wounded by the dissonance between what is demanded of him by traditional gender roles and what they are able to actually project. The result of this is always inner psychic violence, which only acts to further open the gaps between the ideal and the reality of the characters' perceived masculinities.

The use of a flashback coupled with voiceover is a recognizable filmic technique used in classic *noir* film, and as a southern gothic neo-*noir* work, *True Detective* employs this strategy in order to share the complex psychological inner workings of the characters with the audience. In conventional *noir*, the flashback/voiceover combination often "places us in the roles of confidante as well as accomplice and makes us sympathize with the criminal" (Fuick 392). In *True Detective* it functions in a similar fashion in that it helps the audience see the contradictions within the psyches of the characters, particularly in regards to the way they perform and embody their identities as male subjects. The difference between what they say and what is revealed through flashback gradually unveils the fissions that confuse and trouble their sense of personal identity. For Rust, the technique is used to show the process by which he came to be so desensitized to death and violence and how this numbness leads him to the philosophy that is such a profound part of his character; for Marty, the flashback/voice over combination acts to explore the ways guilt, regret, and the process of aging have divorced his own idealized self-image from reality and the consequences this has on his life.

The flashbacks and voiceovers are, for Rust, used less to point out the inconsistencies present in his personal sense of manhood and more to explain the process by which he has arrived at his current world view and how this in turn is reflected in his own sense of masculine

identity. Unlike Marty, who has a tendency to tell the story in ways that flatter himself, Rust uses the interview as an opportunity to create a platform on which to display his nihilism and also to gather information on the case that has come to dominate his life. These two motives are linked; it is the pursuit of the case that has, in part, led him to the philosophical convictions he feels, and this is what is revealed through the use of flashback and voice over. The nihilism proves to be a reaction to the trauma of his work, a method of desensitization, a hopelessness that engulfs him and helps to silence the ghosts who haunt him. We watch him fall into obsession as he goes through unsolved cases, filing through countless photographs of the corpses of women and children in the middle of the night, the light of the copy machine flashing across his sallow, emotionless face. Superimposed over these shots we hear him break into one of his many harangues about the meaninglessness of existence: "People. I've seen the finale of thousands of lives, man - young, old. Each one is so sure of their realness, that their sensory experience constituted more than a biological puppet. Well, the truth wills out. And everybody sees, once the strings are cut, all fall down ("The Locked Room"). His attempt to reduce subjectivity to a matter of dumb biology is both an attempt to frame what he has witnessed in a less horrifying light, and also to help explain his own existence, the numbness he feels, a numbness of which he doesn't even realize he is the author. Compound the trauma of his work with the initial trauma of his daughter's death, and it makes sense that Rust would try to limit his own subjectivity to "sensory experience", to facts and events instead of feelings.

Shortly thereafter, he leaves the archives of unsolved killings and goes on a double date with a young woman introduced to him by Maggie. It's almost comical to watch him dance, his body going through the motions while his face remains set and blank, zero signs of interest in the

woman with whom he is dancing apparent in his expression, most likely still preoccupied with images of murdered women and children. He spins her around the dance floor and we hear him continue his previous monologue: "Each body so certain that they were more than the sum of their urges. All the useless spinning, tired mind, collision of desire and ignorance" ("The Locked Room"). The combination of his narrative with the visuals of him at work and then at the bar allows the audience to understand that his apparent diminishment of human life is not, in fact, a sociopathic disdain for humanity. It is not that Rust is incapable of feeling: it is that he feels too much. His obsession with solving the case requires a certain amount of emotional distance in order to be effective: he must look at the files (this is, after all, what leads him to Ladoux). The voice over functions to explain the way he maintains this emotional distance: through an intellectual framework that banishes emotion and reduces the human experience to "dumb will" ("The Locked Room"). Embracing the meaninglessness of existence is an evasive maneuver, a way to avoid the painful process of trying to explain and react to the horrors to which he must bear witness.

Rust's unwillingness to work through his trauma is a reaction that squares neatly with patriarchal definitions of manhood: he hardens himself to the affective nature of his work, squashing any emotional response and replacing it with cold reason. His obsession is a result of this rearrangement of priorities: his mania stands in for feeling, replaces sadness and horror with the sheer force of will that drives him. Work therefore becomes "the place where [he] can flee from the self, from emotional awareness, where [he] can lose [himself] and operate from a space of emotional numbness" (hooks 97). Unlike most men, however, whose work is what distracts them from the source of their pain, Cohle's work requires him to submerge himself in it, which

demands an even more violent separation from his emotive self. The result of this alienation of the mind from the heart is what hooks calls "psychic self-mutilation" (hooks 66), a process with which Rust, as a man, would be familiar since his boyhood. It is the act of severing the possibility of deeply emotional connection with the other and is an integral part of the indoctrination of young boys into patriarchy (hooks 66). It requires the severing of the emotional from the rational<sup>6</sup> and the psychic amputation of that which would help in working through and with emotionality, and it is especially necessary for Rust considering the work he is doing. The irony of course is that his desire to solve the case, implicit in the loss of his daughter and his reaction to people who mistreat children ("Haunted Houses"), is deeply rooted in a more human desire to protect those victimized by the killer. And yet, in order to solve the case, he renders himself practically incapable of forming connections with those for whom he sacrifices so much of himself. He never once interacts with Maggie's children, can barely even look at them, and resists any attempts Maggie makes to introduce him to someone until after the case is (seemingly) solved in 1995. Even after meeting someone with whom he spends three years, once he reopens the case in 2002, the relationship abruptly ends. He can't even sustain a meaningful or supportive relationship with his partner Marty, caught up as they both are in their tense rivalry. The flashbacks of him working and dancing at the bar speaks to this emotional shut down; we watch his face and can find nothing but a kind of sterilized despair, a gaping emptiness behind his tired eyes.

Considering these shots in relation to his many rants, however, allows the viewer to understand that despite his best efforts, he has only buried his anxieties, not exorcised them. His

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<sup>6</sup> See Seidler pgs 17-27

talkativeness betrays him: who is he trying to convince, the detective interviewing him? Or himself? Marty hits the nail on the head when he observes smugly that "for a guy who sees no point in existence, you sure fret about it an awful lot" ("The Locked Room"). The layering of flashback and voice over helps to explain this split, tying together Rust's work and his masculinist nihilism in a way that opens him up and gives him away. He is torn between patriarchal silence - the pressure to bear his pain quietly and alone - and a desperate, painful urge to speak, even if it's only to convince others of the "truth" of his philosophical facade.

The source of Rust's angst here is his inability, due to expectations put upon him by patriarchal masculinity, to deal with trauma; the source of Marty's angst, although deriving from the same root source (patriarchal masculinity), is guilt, regret, and the transience of aging. Rust is constantly trying to demonstrate the validity of what he himself cannot fully believe; Marty is either attempting to justify and explain the mistakes he made in his past or endeavouring to find meaning in the reality of his present, which is a direct result of those past mistakes. Ultimately, his failure to accomplish either of these objectives is due to his own inability to maintain a sense of self that doesn't rely on a toxically masculine - and therefore depleted and unstable - identity. We see the divergence between who Marty is and who he wishes he were when comparing the differences between the way he addresses his past infidelities and the way he talks about aging. The Marty who seems all too willing to talk about cheating on his wife with two total strangers is a man convinced of his own innocence, of his sexual entitlement, bolstered and inflated by a grandiose vision of himself as a Man with a capital "m". But the Marty who less willingly discloses the realities of his experience of aging and the regrets that accompany it is one who is wounded by his own warped, masculinist perception of himself. Meanwhile, the flashbacks



articulate the truth behind his real motives in regards to his infidelities and also to paint the aging process as one of unequivocal decline.

Early in the interview, Marty clearly postures as a man who has it all figured out and who is generously providing the two detectives conducting the interview (Papania and Gilbough) with the secrets of his success, secrets of the trade, so to speak. When he talks about his affairs, at first, he does so "in terms which flatter the male, implicitly defend his right of conquest, or invite us to share the nudge-and-wink assertion that boys will be boys" (Miles 194). He is all at once justifying his actions while simultaneously appealing to Papania and Gilbough as men and as fellow detectives, assuming they will understand his logic. The first instance this occurs, the flashback presents us with a drunk Marty having a drunken laugh with some colleagues at a bar. He is boasting about past sexual exploits, while his voice over explains that "you miss some things on the job... you know what I mean. You got to... decompress before you can go being a family man" ("Seeing Things"). Only moments later, it cuts to him driving to his mistress' apartment as we hear him say, oblivious to the irony of it all, "it's for your wife and kids, too... in the end it's for the good of the family" ("Seeing Things"). This scene demonstrates the complex intertwining of masculine personas that are inherently oppositional but that come together to form the contrary masculinist logic that Marty is purporting to believe. On the one hand, the voice over would have us believe that Marty is actually fulfilling the traditional role of husband and care taker by cheating on his wife, that despite not exactly jiving with the "family man" ideal, his actions remain, at heart, pursuant to the expectations of this duty as husband. He views it not as a breach of trust but as a selfless act of catharsis that allows him to fully commit to the responsibilities of being a husband and father.

The flashbacks, however, showing him first at the bar getting drunk and bragging about his sexual prowess and then arriving at his mistress' apartment, divulge the truth, which is that the extramarital sex he has stems from selfish motives. While it might have brief, fleeting cathartic effects, it is in truth a way for him to reassert something to himself, something he doesn't even realize he needs: the constant validation of his sexuality as a patriarchal male. His affairs are not about "letting off steam" for the benefit of the family; rather, this forbidden relationship becomes "...about the need to constantly affirm and reaffirm one's selfhood" (hooks 82). Now, to be fair, there is, without a doubt, a connection between his consumption of alcohol and taboo sex and the work he does as a detective, particularly on the Lange case. Like Rust, Marty has to find some way to cope with the darkness and violence inherent in the job. And like Rust, he does not feel as if he can share the burden he bears in a healthy, productive way with people who love him. Sex is not just a means of feeling manly, it is also "the one vehicle through which it might still be possible to express and experience essential aspects of... humanness that have been slowly and systematically conditioned out..." (Bearman 218). So in a twisted sort of way there is some validity to his argument (though he doesn't recognize it); sex is a release, but it's not for the benefit of the family because it does not actually help at all. That is what Marty fails to share in the voiceover, what is left unsaid and revealed throughout the series. His marriage crumbles, his relationship with his children becomes tense and estranged, his drinking worsens. Rust's philosophy does not succeed in soothing his pain; sex fails to do the same for Marty, working against rather than for him.

The second instance Marty's infidelity is explored via voiceover and flashback is when he (drunkenly) breaks into his mistress' apartment and beats the man with whom she'd been having

sex. Once again, the irony is comical: after attacking the woman's date, we hear his voice, distractedly: "That's what I always said Rust needed a family. It's boundaries. Boundaries are good" ("The Locked Room"). His criticism of Rust implies two issues of note: first, that he believes the function of a family is to provide "boundaries", to curb the obsessive qualities that both he and Cohle share, and the second is that he, unlike Rust, can navigate these boundaries successfully. On the first note, his vision of the family reflects the narcissism inherent within patriarchal masculinity, the "'myth of ME!'... the demands of pure egotism, the conviction that getting whatever ego gratification you want is both an inalienable right and an essential part of personal development..." (Miles 188). "It's supposed to be what I want," he snaps at his wife, a glass of scotch clenched in his hand: "It's supposed to help me" ("Seeing Things"). This vision of the family is one of the reasons Marty is unable to hold onto his; he sees them more as possessions which ought to behave the way he wants them to than he does as kin bound by love. He, like Rust, is unable to form deep meaningful relationships because he is unable to see the other as an independent subjectivity; his objectification of the other is a reflection of his patriarchal training. The second point of relevance, that he is able to accept and work within other people's boundaries, is shown through the flashback to be a farce, for the same reason that his vision of the family is warped. We watch him explode in drunken rage after being rejected, forgetting all of "rules" that "describe the shape of things" ("The Locked Room"), losing sight of the realities of his relationships (for example, the fact that his mistress has every right to want a man who isn't married, a fact she's told him more than once). The juxtaposition of his clear sense of gendered entitlement against his proselytizing comment about curbing one's obsessive tendencies with an understanding of people's limits demonstrates the logical dissonance inherent

to his self-image. His rage is an expression of powerlessness, and for a patriarchal man, this is perhaps the worst and most humiliating of feelings because it is one "of men who were raised to believe themselves entitled to... power, but do not feel it" (Kimmel 40). In the voiceover, he expresses at the very least a power of restraint he holds over himself, the ability to manage within appropriate social boundaries. The flashback, however, unveils him to be a man completely powerless to his own rage: no control, not over his mistress or himself. The voiceover represents his attempt to preserve his own sense of self-sovereignty, even as we see through flashback that all it takes is a disobedient woman to completely shatter the coherence of his self construction.

The other theme expressed through voice over and flashback that Marty's character returns to again and again throughout the series is aging. While anxieties about aging transcend gender binaries, there is, for Marty, a close connection between his masculine identity and the way he conceptualizes the aging process. In *True Detective*, aging serves to show the ways that the characters' lives as detectives and broken men (haunted by addiction, alienated by the psychological effects of their work) have manifested on their bodies and in their minds. Erin K. Stapleton observes, "The series traverses the temporality of the story through the territories of the characters' bodies, as they recount, in the present, details of their past experiences. The show orients the audience in time... by carefully exacting a particularly unkind aging process... unevenly on each of the living characters' bodies, which serves to demonstrate the physical effects of living imperfect lives in the shadow of crime and the corpses it creates (Stapleton 165)". The balding, bloated Marty of 2012 views his present state as the result of his failures: his failure to stick to the job, his failure to hang onto his family, his failure to (impossibly) maintain

the self of his youth. His work and his family were the means through which he most easily defined himself as a successful man, and now without them he is bereft of anything except regret, which becomes more and more visible as the interview progresses.

The first instance that aging is addressed through these particular filmic techniques is a moment of subtlety, one that can only be fully understood in relation to the later example. The flashback is of Marty in 1995; he's fit, trim, with a full head of hair, and is addressing his colleagues as the lead detective on what will be the biggest case of his career. We have yet to see him cheat on his wife or drink himself into a stupor; this is Marty at his best and most successful. Over this scene we hear Papania ask, "You stay busy, the business?" And Marty, with little enthusiasm, responding: "Well, yeah, I got the security firm... PI stuff, routine. Lot of guys leave the job, cemetery within ten. No family, idle hands. Some advice? You make it out, you stay busy" ("The Long Bright Dark"). There are three things to note about this piece of dialogue: the first, that he mentions family as if he wasn't one of those without one; second, that he categorizes what he does not as "routine", a word that implies it is not something he does because he finds it fulfilling and certainly not something he is going to brag about (which is saying something for Marty, who loves to brag). And third, that he brings up "the job" and death in the same breath. As a homicide detective, his work was a matter of wading through death, dealing with it on the day to day. Now that he's retired, however, death is seen as closer than ever, as if it's a predator waiting to pounce on him the second he lets down his guard. What we see in this scene is Marty on top of the world; what we hear is Marty, working a job for which he clearly has little to no passion, alone, with death on the brain. In the flashback, of course, Marty doesn't realize that he is at his peak, but the Marty of 2012 knows, resignedly: it is all downhill from there.

The second instance that Marty references aging helps to inform the first, because his dialogue relates directly to the passing of time: "You know the good years when you're in them, or you just wait for them until you get ass cancer and realize that the good years came and went? Because there's a feeling - you might notice it sometimes - this feeling like life has slipped through your fingers... like the future is behind you, like it's always been behind you. You know, I cleaned up, but maybe I didn't change, not the way I needed to" ("The Secret Fate of All Life").

The images on the screen are somewhat more ambiguous than the fairly self-explanatory monologue. We see his two young daughters playing with a plastic crown; the older one snatches it from the younger, "give it back!" but instead she throws it up into the branches of a tree where no one can get at it, where it remains as time moves forward. It stays there, fading with age as the years pass until the camera pans back down, having fast forwarded to 2002. The exchange between the girls is a reflection of Marty's mood as he speaks; he feels as if he has been robbed, like life has been unfairly taken from him. Like the crown, Marty feels as though he's been standing still and that the world and time has moved around and passed him, leaving him behind. We watch the crown for those few seconds on the screen, understanding that years pass only because of the way it grows shabby, dirty, old. Marty is told by his wife Maggie at one point, "You put a ceiling on your life, on everything, because you won't change!" ("The Locked Room") And in his middle age he recognizes this reality, that the only thing that changed about him was his body as it began to show signs of age. Marty's regret is therefore not limited to the loss of his family; it encapsulates a deep disappointment in life. Despite having everything he purported to want during those "good years", they slipped by him anyway; something was left unfulfilled. This is an inevitable result of the patriarchal male mindset, which, by its very nature,

can never be truly satisfied because "the very rules of manhood which govern the efforts to 'make it' or 'get there' (competition, exclusion, progression through the hierarchy of achievement to the records of success) encourage men to keep striving, keep wanting more and to feel entitled to more" (Miles 186). Marty is a man who has always lived by traditionally masculinist terms: by the success of his professional life, by his family, by his sexual appeal, etc., and now, in his middle age, he no longer has any of those things, nothing stable upon which to build a sense of personal identity. He still feels the same pressure to measure up, to possess these things that have become lost to him, which in turn keeps him from moving on and finding healthy ways to cultivate a new self-image.

These moments represent for both characters brief glimpses into the all-too human vulnerability that they both try so hard to bury and disguise. They are also moments when they fail, at least to a certain extent, to perform or live up to their own definitions of masculinity, both of which are diametrically opposed to any form of emotional openness or vulnerability. These failures are like subconscious confessions, Freudian slips that allow the viewer to peek at the psychological wounds both men have suffered, that reveal the ways that being men - particularly men submerged in lives of death and violence - have twisted their world views and the way they see themselves. The stylistic approach to these moments articulates what James M. O'Neil describes in his work about gender role conflict as "precarious masculinity", which "implies that manhood is an elusive state, one that needs to be earned, and once achieved is tenuous and can be lost or taken away by others; therefore it requires public demonstration or proof" (O'Neil 98). In order to feel secure as men, Rust and Marty have to consistently perform and manifest their visions of manhood in order for their masculinity to retain any sense of realness.

While the voiceover/flashback combination functions to emphasize these performative lapses, the role of the interview over all as a stylistic and story-telling device is to put a spotlight on the ways Marty and Rust construct and perform their masculinity successfully. The interview provides them with a platform, a stage, on which to present the version of themselves with which they most identify. Both men position themselves in ways that reinforce and reiterate their idealized versions of masculinity. Like actors, they see the video camera (one of the first shots used in the opening episode is of the video camera focusing, and then shots of both men through its lens) as a mirror through which they attempt to display themselves in their best light. They use the opportunity to display, to boast, and to dominate the interview, which thus acts as a sort of stylistic foil to the voiceover/flashback, as it presents the affectations that the voice over and flashbacks systematically dismantle. The interview allows the audience to see the personas that both men are trying to maintain without any of the messy realities that are evidenced via the flashbacks or honest confessions of the voice overs. Rust and Marty use the interview and their interactions with the detectives Gilbough and Papania to assert dominance, to boast about their past achievements, and to convince their interviewers (and themselves) of their own illusory self constructions. The overall effect, especially read in conjunction with the voice over/flashback scenarios, is to reiterate the fact that 'manhood' in and of itself is not an identity in the sense that someone can *be* a man, but rather a series of behaviours that must be repeated and most importantly interpreted and accepted by others. Manhood, as the two former detectives understand it, is therefore a violent and impossible illusion that requires a devastating psychic split in the men who attempt to embody it.



Marty and Rust both exhibit behaviour and make statements in order to feel like alpha males - like the most dominant person in the room. These instances occur in aside conversations with the two detectives interviewing them, and both instances speak to the violent and compulsive need to dominate that is inherent to patriarchal, and specifically white patriarchal, masculinity. Gilbough and Papania are two black men - the only prominent characters of colour in an almost entirely white cast - which adds an extra layer of complexity to the push and pull dynamic between interviewers and interviewees while also stressing the multiplicities and hierarchies of power and masculinity that exist in American society. In western culture, "certain masculinities are more socially central, or more associated with authority and social power, than others" and "the concept of hegemonic masculinities presumes the subordination of nonhegemonic masculinities" (Connell 846). Not all men are created equal; and although neither Marty nor Rust are necessarily outright flagrant racists, their need to dominate the space within the interrogation room speaks to their inculcation in a system that empowers whiteness at the expense of blackness. They exhibit racial microaggressions, not consciously with the intention of belittling Gilbough and Papania's blackness, but with a subconscious desire to feel that sense of power promised to them by patriarchal white masculinity.

Rust wastes little time with pleasantries. He asserts himself as the one in control of the situation immediately when he tries to light a cigarette and both Papania and Gilbough tell him he cannot. "Don't be assholes," he replies. "You wanna hear this or not?" ("The Long Bright Dark") He takes advantage of the fact that the detectives need him to some extent, or need something from him - his consultation on the case, or so he believes, not yet realizing he is in fact a suspect - in order to get his way. His insistence on smoking when he's not allowed is a way

of letting the other two men know who is in control, who has power over the situation. It reflects the masculine desire to "occupy space in [a] way that connote[s] strength, potency, and assertiveness" (Hatty 120). It also marks the beginning of what becomes clearly a competitive drive that Rust feels in regards to the two detectives; instead of viewing the interview as an opportunity to make the investigation a collaborative effort, he sees it as a competition, which perhaps explains why he enters the conversation so contentiously. Later, he makes them buy him beer, going so far as to patronizingly blow money across the table at them, his expression one of confidence and disdain. This, too, is an act of domination: forcing them to run errands for him, reiterating silently that he is only there because he wants to be, that they have no power over him but that he has clear power over them. Now, these rude actions are not innately racist; he probably would have acted similarly towards two white men. This fact does not, however, negate the racialized nature of the exchange. The interaction is racialized because they are black and he is white, because Pizzolatto chose to set up Rust's relationship to these two black men in terms of dominance and submission. Regardless of intention, "such representations of black males are also vital to the maintenance of the gender order; they ensure that hegemonic white masculinity remains dominant and that subordinated black masculinity revolves, to some extent, around... hegemonic white masculinity" (Hatty 165). These scenes articulate this concept of blackness being subordinated to whiteness, accommodating and submitting, even if it's just to run and get some beer, to whiteness. Rust's instinct to monopolize the space and rudely assert himself might not be an intentional act of discrimination, but it plays into larger cultural relationships in which white masculinity feels entitled to the time and labor of other, marginalized forms of masculinity.

Marty's enactment of racialized and dominating masculinity occurs later in the series, when he uses the word "coonhound":

Marty: ...must have been a coonhound in another life.

Papania: Coon?

Marty: Raccoon hound. Everybody is a fucking drama queen nowadays ("The Locked Room").

The word 'coon' has a long racialized history in the United States, and for a black man in the South, it makes perfect sense that Papania would have a gut reaction to it, would be sensitive to hearing it, particularly from a white man. Of course, like Rust, Marty does this obliviously and without racist intentions. But his response to Papania's comment is a brilliant example of white, masculine privilege in the works. There is, first and foremost, the ignorance behind the comment itself; if Marty was even slightly cognizant of the cultural implications of the word, he might have chosen a different one, but his privilege allows him not to see. And instead of apologizing for the offence (because it was clearly taken as one), he responds defensively and arrogantly, dismissing and invalidating Papania's perspective as being overly sensitive - an easy task when you've never experienced racism. His response also implies that Papania is the one in the wrong, as if the offence taken is grounds for *him* to be offended. His refusal to submit even just enough to admit it was a poor choice of words speaks to the dominant position his whiteness affords him, a position he refuses to relinquish. Once again, as with Rust's demand for cigarettes and beer, the offensive behaviour goes unchecked and unchallenged; a shot of Gilbough after Marty's comment shows him with a sort of neutral, patient half smile on his face, the expression of a man who is silently counting to ten in his head because he knows that in this circumstance it would be

more trouble than it is worth to comment any further. White, patriarchal masculinity is upheld in the microcosm of the interrogation room; the cultural, racialized gender hierarchy remains strongly present and completely intact.

Marty's and Rust's need to feel in control extends passed their racial microaggressions and evinces itself in their at times hilarious bravado. The common inclination to swagger is a result of the lack lying at the center hegemonic masculinity, the "sterility and emptiness" that renders it such a fragile source of personal identity (Rehling 1). Everybody has something to prove, because all forms of "identity [are] always constructed in relation to others" and "those others, however, rarely provide the required stability, rendering identity as an ongoing site of resignification and contestation" (Rehling 2). But for men who embody and believe in patriarchal forms of masculinity, this desire is even more urgent, because they are constantly faced with the threat of dissolution in the form of emasculation. Bragging, for these men, represents an attempt to asseverate whatever individual qualities they believe 'make' them men. Its purpose is to prove that they are in fact 'authentic', powerful, exceptional men by virtue of whatever it is they are boasting about. Marty and Rust both have moments where they shamelessly brag about themselves either as a form of competitive self aggrandizement or as a way to assure their interviewers of the legitimacy of their manhood. For Rust, this desire is of course linked to his work (the principle means by which he defines himself) and his reputation. For Marty - wonderful, hilarious, ridiculous - Marty - it has to do with his penis, the ultimate masculinist symbol of strength and virility.

Rust believes, at the beginning of the interview, that he's been called in as a consultant on the case because of his reputation as an "ace case man" ("The Long Bright Dark"), and it is

apparent from the start that he enjoys his fame, that he is still proud of his career even if he left it a decade before. When they mention the fact that they don't know much about his past before he moved to Louisiana he grins smugly and says, "What, you two don't know about that? Those files are still sealed, huh? Shit. Just what have you two heard about me?" ("Seeing Things") He enjoys the notoriety he has earned over the course of his career; even Rust, who insists upon the idiocy of police bureaucracy and culture, can take pleasure in his success. His posturing continues as Gilbough shamelessly flatters him and at one point he says, "I never been in a room more than ten minutes I didn't know if they did it or not. How long it take you?" ("The Locked Room") He can't resist the urge to compete, especially because he knows he is liable to win. Scott Wilson observes that, "His little boasts about his prowess in this regard are part of the game of rivalry and show and tell that he is playing with the detectives and the viewer" (Wilson 152). He takes such enjoyment out of this game that he is playing because when it comes to work, regardless of his facade of indifference, the melancholia that seems to elevate him above such petty satisfactions, he wants to be, and knows he is, the best. Patriarchal masculinity "is measured by a man's capacity to win" (Blackwell 79), and although Rust would like us to believe that he couldn't care less, that the work alone is what motivates him, these scenes corroborate the fact that he buys into the masculinist rhetoric of competition and posturing as much as the next man. The interview just happens to be one of the few spaces where he can so blatantly display this understated part of his character.

We are introduced to Marty leaning back in his chair with the aura of a man about to grace some poor ignorant soul with some deeply profound wisdom. The dialogue that follows

between him and Papania is a brilliant introduction to his character, especially in regards to his masculine identity:

Marty: I've seen all the different types. We all fit a certain category... the bully, the charmer, the uh, surrogate dad, the man possessed by ungovernable rage, the brain - any of these types could be a good detective, and any of these types could be an incompetent shit heel.

Papania: Which type were you?

Marty: Oh, I was just a regular type of dude... with a big ass dick ("The Long Bright Dark").

This scene works on multiple levels to create a surprisingly detailed character portrait of Marty. Firstly, he begins by asserting his superior knowledge; he's imparting his wisdom, so to speak, upon two men who are in the business and do not really need or want to hear Marty's opinion on what it takes to be a good detective. He, like Rust, takes advantage of the fact that he is in the unique position to say whatever he likes; the interview has given him the freedom and the rapt attention of an audience. His line about the 'types' is a way of expressing his own expertise and experience in the field, which of course is why he thinks he has been called in to be interviewed in the first place. And then, despite having just said that "we all fit into a certain category", he proceeds to differentiate himself in a hilarious impression of modesty: "I was just a regular type of dude." He effectively signals himself out as the exception to the rule of which he just spoke - he, Marty Hart, defying all categorization - while at the same time pretending to downplay himself, though only for a moment before, hiding the boyish beginnings of a grin behind his coffee mug he tacks on the "big dick" comment. This is a fascinating example of masculinist

culture, because it is all at once a boast and an appeal to familiarity. He cracks a joke, fully expecting and anticipating that the two detectives play along and laugh while also shamelessly asserting himself as a Man with a capital m and a 'big ass dick', the supreme masculine signifier. It symbolizes the fact that "men are taught that possessing a penis is a sign of their different and power" (Brittan 55). He is using locker room humour to try and forge a sense of masculine kinship between himself and the other men in the room while at the same time not at all subtly signalling himself as a dominating and sexually potent patriarchal male.

Finally, the interview serves as a way for both Rust and Marty to project an image of themselves that they believe truly represents them. Keenly aware of the camera's eye on them, these are moments in which they are in control, performing their definitions of masculinity to the nines, and inserting into their telling of the story comments that are meant to define who they conceive themselves to be. These comments have little or nothing to do with the story they've been summoned to tell. Their purpose is to recenter the story on themselves, for however short a period, to allow both men to bask in the rare attention they are now receiving. After all, both of them live and work alone. They are, frankly, starved for attention, although neither would ever admit it or go to any lengths to solve the problem. The interview is a rare opportunity for them, privileging their narratives as important and relevant when they themselves no longer feel attached to the world. For Rust, this becomes a space where he can declare himself as a nihilist and a loner, and for Marty, one where he can cling on to the vestiges of fatherhood and responsibility.

Rust spends more time ranting about the futility of life than he does telling the story of the case. Although he's there for the purpose of gathering more information on the case, it

becomes clear that occasionally, somewhere along the way, he loses track of his objective, often drifting into dark rumination about time, death, the great farce that is human existence and so on. When he talks about himself, he is situating his own sense of identity within the context of his philosophy, constructing the image of an isolated loner, a kind of monk (Childress calls him "little priest" ["Form and Void"]) who has resigned himself to his torment and alienation. The most blatant moment of self-description occurs early on, after the detectives ask him about his last girlfriend, Laurie: "I can be hard to live with... and sometimes I think I'm just not good for people; it's not good for them to be around me... you reach a certain age, you know who you are. Now I live in a little room out in the country, behind a bar. Work four nights a week; in between I drink and there ain't nobody to stop me. I know who I am. After all these years, there's a victory in that ("Seeing Things"). Of course, part of this is a lie; he does more than drink, but the fact of the matter is there is not anyone around to stop him from obsessing over the case, either. The bitterness in this "victory" is palpable, but Rust speaks with the kind of tired conviction of a man who has convinced himself that this is the way he wants to live. His commitment to the role of the loner is integral to his self-image as a man. His masculinity comes into play because of the inherent "machismo of pessimism" which "outreaches itself: a hard stance to main, the toughest way to live" (Shipley 23). This "toughness" exudes from Rust and is a trait he values in himself as a defining characteristic of his personality. Whether he realizes it or not, part of the reason that Rust is so attached to his world view - why he feels the apparent need to display and make reference to it again and again - is because he sees in it the attractive, masculine qualities he himself strives to emulate: self-sufficiency, the blunting of most emotional feelings, and the



rejection of authority. In his discussion of film *noir* and the classic *noir* hero, Frank Krutnik observes,

The shabby, obsessively lonely heroes are persistently glamorized. According to Freud's formulation, one may initially consider this kind of hero to be the inverse of the ideal ego, and hence an unsuitable vehicle for narcissistic identification. However... such figures do mobilize powerful - albeit manifestly inverted - narcissistic attraction. Whereas in Freud's account, the hero as ideal ego signifies a celebration of masculine superiority, the defeatist and self-pitying 'tough' hero suggests a masculinity that has turned narcissistically in upon itself. One can thus regard these hero-figures as narcissistically inverted ideal egos, for they may permit an identification with a 'retreates' self-love at the expense also of any outward directed object-relation, and at the expense also of any identification with the culturally regulated superego. Rejecting external attachments and value systems, the loner heroes can cling to their own secluded and untested sense of perfection (Krutnik 90).

Rust's isolationist perspective and loner attitude is absolutely glamorized in the series; there is a sexy aura of tragedy that hangs around him, and his tendency towards isolation makes him all the more attractive. He "stands out at the series' signifier of desire and being" (Wilson 156). All of the characters desire him on some level, whether it is to be him or to have him. The more he withdraws, the more attractive he becomes. Thus Rust, while not a vision of the traditional Freudian ideal, asserts himself as an equally masculinist inversion of that ideal, choosing the rough and solitary life by rejecting "external attachments and value systems" as well as any possibility of human connection. He allows the case to become his sense of "perfection", the

center of his life. The narcissism that Krutnik describes is, in Rust, a kind of fetishistic loneliness, where alienation represents the ultimate path to enlightenment (in pessimism) and truth, and where human connection only works to muddle the nihilist realities he professes to know and believe.

Marty defines himself in terms of paternalistic power and authority, an equally powerful masculinist philosophy that also grounds itself in the subordination of emotions and human connectivity. Following his comment about the different types of detectives, he says, "A lot of it has to do with how they manage authority. There can be a burden in authority, in vigilance, like a father's burden. It was too much for some men. A smart guy who's steady is hard to find. I was alright, better than some, but you know, I knew how to talk to people. And I was steady" ("The Long Bright Dark"). Here authority is synonymous with power, the power that Rust later describes as power "to do terrible things to people with impunity" ("Seeing Things"). This issue of power lies at the heart of patriarchal masculinity; a real man is "a man *in* power, a man *with* power, and a man *of* power" (Kimmel 30). Interestingly, Marty touches on the negative impacts of possessing this kind of authority, referring to it as a burden, but even so, in doing this he also casts it in a positive light by implying that a man who *can* carry such a burden is a man who *ought* to, a man upon whom the burden of power should naturally fall. Only "steady" men can carry the weight, men like Marty (who we learn is anything but steady). For Marty, "steadiness" is a way to describe the emotional detachment required in his field of work, the willingness to live a life entrenched in violence. In conflating the power of law enforcement with the power of the father, Marty is also naturalizing the familial relationship in terms of masculinist power. When he speaks of his own father, Marty (rather ironically) states that, "...Marines, Korea. Never

talked about it. There was a time when men didn't air their bullshit to the world, you know, it just wasn't a part of their job" ("Seeing Things"). Despite the fact that he will go on to air all of his personal bullshit, Marty regardless values the generally accepted masculinist law of silence and emotional stoicism both as a man and a father. He values the image of the quiet and severe patriarch, both in regards to his family and his work. This is the image that he tries to emulate and it is one that ends up having severe consequences on his life: his attempts to control his wife and daughters lead to their estrangement, and his attempts to operate as a detective with no emotional reaction to the horrors he has to witness leads to his eventual retirement. Regardless of these facts, Marty still clings to this vision of the paternalistic authority figure.

The structural strategy utilized in *True Detective* - the segmentation of story through the use of the interview and flashback - functions to show and to tell the inner conflicts of Rust and Marty. In so doing, it underscores the deeply and uniquely gendered experience of both characters, revealing to the viewer the fact that their personal and professional struggles are indelibly linked to their volatile and precarious identities as male subjects attempting to function within the strict and injurious borders of patriarchy. The employment of these narrative techniques provides a structural reflection of one of the main thematic elements in the series: the ways that patriarchal thinking splits and erodes the male sense of self and the psychological damage that results from this process. The narrative disjunctions and gaps evoked by the insertion of flashbacks, as well as the contrast between reality and personal masculinist fiction generated by the interviews, help to manifest, in the very organization of the series, the fact that being a man in patriarchy requires a violent psychic rupture that ultimately manifests itself in the inability to

connect or empathize with the other as well as the deep insecurity and precarity of personal identity at the heart of toxic masculinity.

## Regarding Violence, Trauma, and the Male Body

"This kind of thing doesn't happen in a vacuum."

- Rust Cohle ("The Long Bright Dark")

As a series about crime (not to mention one produced by HBO, a production company known for its graphic depictions of sex and violence), it is hardly surprising that *True Detective* is a violent television show, both visually (as in, the violence it depicts on screen) and thematically (the violence it refers to but does not directly show). It can, like so many contemporary television programs (such as *Game of Thrones*, *Dexter*, and *The Walking Dead*, to name just a few) be at times gratuitous and difficult to watch. However, it distinguishes itself because more than just *being* violent, it is also *about* violence, addresses violence as a sociopolitical issue in America, and interrogates violence's charged relationship to western standards of masculinity. In fact, *True Detective* sees violence as inextricably constitutional of patriarchal masculinity: that is, violence and masculinity are articulated through one another and masculinity is defined in terms of the capacity to do violence. *True Detective* explores multiple forms of violence, such as personal, familial, sexual and institutional violence, and forges connections between each articulation of violence with patriarchal ideologies of masculinity, contextualizing it as a distinctly male issue in American society. The series also questions the means through which masculinist violence is made possible by its portrayal and treatment of the male body: the way it is constructed by patriarchal ideology *allows* for expressions of extreme violence through and towards the male body. This view of the body and violence as extensions of masculinism and patriarchy also raises the issue of trauma, a central thematic topic in the series. *True Detective* addresses different forms and perspectives of male trauma, initiating a dialogue

concerning the realities and personal consequences of men's experience of violence, a topic that is often shut down or ignored in most violent media. It makes a subtle and compelling argument about the inherently traumatic nature of patriarchy through its exploration of the role of the male witness. However, it is also on the subject of trauma that *True Detective's* stance on masculinity and violence becomes murky and at times, inconsistent; while it troubles many patriarchal assumptions and ideologies, it ultimately fails to maintain its subversive position of the denunciation of masculinist violence. Despite arguing extensively against violence done by men to women and children, its treatment of male-on-male violence on screen reveals some of the weaknesses of its ethical position. By aligning itself with some essentialist ideas of men and violence, *True Detective* downplays the traumatic effects of male-on-male violence. In this way the series reflects the often contradictory and ultimately patriarchal leanings of a society that is simultaneously horrified by the widespread epidemic of violence and that nevertheless values violence as a 'natural' and indeed, healthy expression of maleness and a channel through which men can achieve self-realization.

There is, unfortunately, no way to truly address hegemonic masculinity without entering into a conversation about violence. It can be tempting to view violence as a social problem in America having nothing to do with sex or gender, but as Rosalind Miles observes,

Not all violence is 'sexual' in the sense of an act designed to produce sexual gratification or release *but all violence is sexual in the most basic meaning of the word, determined by sex as breasts and testes are...* only men habitually prey on those weaker than themselves, stalk the night in search of the lonely victim, hunt each other in packs, devise initiation rituals, exquisite tortures, pogroms and extermination camps, delight in Russian

roulette... and all the world's never ending games of pain, fear, and death (Miles 20).

Her point is not that men are the *only* people to participate in violence *or* that *all* men are violent; rather, she is stressing the reality that, in American society, most violence is committed by men and that there is a patriarchal culture that is attached to and inseparable from this violence. Our culture of violence stems from patriarchal attitudes about individuality and selfhood, a connection that Suzanne E. Hatty draws from her understanding especially of modern philosophical thinking:

Rational, emotionally contained, competent, and in control of both internal and external forces, the modern self is the epitome of... modernity's relentless subjugation of the natural world, the banishing of contingency and the ruthless imposition of order and predictability. The modern self is concerned with the preservation of autonomy not only as a personal goal, but also a manifestation of the self's allegiance to the order-imposing, self-determining spirit of modernity. Violence, in the service of the modern self, preserves individuality and forestalls the possibility of fusion with the dangerous not-self. Violence, as a modern strategy, guarantees both individual and social control while maintaining and perpetuating hierarchy (Hatty 10).

While this diagnosis of the violence 'problem' in western culture is not limited to men alone - all of us are, after all, subjects immersed in a violent patriarchal system - many of the key words Hatty uses to describe the modern self are pillars of masculinist identification: rational, emotionally contained, competent, in control, orderly, autonomous, self-determined, hierarchical. This prioritizing of the modern self over the "dangerous not-self" is integral to patriarchy, which demands a relationship consisting of a dominating (masculine) self and a dominated (feminine)

other. Once again, this is not to say that all violence occurs between a male violator and a female victim; rather, the doer of violence occupies a gendered yet *symbolic* role: “The act of killing signifies in itself masculine power so that the victim though biologically male, is always *functionally* and *symbolically* feminine” (Hankte 180)[my emphasis]. This symbolic, masculinist role of violator can be extended to women, like, for example, the Medea killer in *True Detective*, Charmaine Boudreaux, (“Haunted Houses”), a mother with Munchausen by Proxy Syndrome. However, she is presented by the series as an atypical case; most violence, in *True Detective*, as in the real world, is committed by men. This is simply because men are assigned the role of dominator in the dominator/dominated, self/other binary; they are the ones most thoroughly inculcated into masculinist ideology. However, different men - with different intersectional levels of privilege, such as race, class, able-bodiedness, and so on - relate to different forms of masculinity, and not all of them are necessarily as violent as others. However, all of them are oriented around and measured against the most violent form of masculinity - the hegemonic standard that is the definition of “what it means to be a man” in American culture: “In some cases, men’s violence... may be constitutive of masculinity: it may be a central and typifying, even symbolizing feature; in other cases, men’s violence... may be less obviously, more subtly, related. It may appear to contradict the dominant, overt form of masculinity yet may reinforce it through its *presence, potential, or threat*” (Hearn 37)[my emphasis]. All forms of masculinity, no matter how benign, have the inevitable potential for violence as a result of their relationship to the patriarchal standard. It is “the truth that no one wants to name” that “all boys are being raised to be killers, even if they learn to hide the killer within and act as benevolent patriarchs” (hooks



19). Boys and men learn that violence is an integral aspect not just of who they are ‘by nature’ but also who they are *supposed* to be as members of patriarchal societies.

*True Detective* understands that violence is constitutive of hegemonic standards of masculinity on multiple levels within society and in a myriad of different manners - such is the prevalence and influence of masculinism in American culture. At the personal, individual level, the series documents two forms of violence that are at once distinct and at the same intertwined: familial violence and sexual violence. They are often portrayed as inextricable from one another, with the family being a site of sexual violence. This in turn functions to construct the “paternal family as sick and dysfunctional” (Covey) and to highlight the dark reality lurking behind the idealized picture of the traditional family unit (headed by a man). Whether the familial violence illustrated in the series is sexual or not, violence in the context of the family is portrayed as aberrant and destructive to both the person committing the violence (in every case a man) and the victim receiving it (usually, but not always, a woman). The non-sexual violence of the family, particularly of fatherhood, is shown through the philosophy of Rust and the actions of Marty. The sexualized violence is portrayed by children of abusive fathers: Dora Lange and her killer, Earl Childress.

Rust mentions his daughter on multiple occasions throughout the series, but does not speak extensively about his role as a father. However, there is one moment in particular in which Rust equates fatherhood with the violence that plagues the world:

When I think about my daughter now, you know what she was spared? Sometimes I feel grateful. Doctors said she didn’t feel a thing. Went straight into a coma and then somewhere in that... blackness, she slipped off into another, deeper kind. Isn’t that a

beautiful way to go out? Heh! Painlessly, as a happy child... yeah, trouble with dying later is you've already grown up. Heh! Damage is done, it's too late. You got kids? Well, you've got the hubris it must take to yank a soul out of nonexistence into this... meat. And force a life into this... thresher. And as for my daughter, she, uh, she spared me the sin of being a father ("Seeing Things").

Now, it is fairly apparent that this outlook on his daughter's death is a coping mechanism, a desperate attempt to alleviate some of the horrific pain and guilt from which he so acutely suffers. It is also apparent from Rust's various other philosophical declarations that he purports to view life as innately pointless and meaninglessly painful, but this is because he has seen first hand the violence that defines "this thresher", has lived it, has instigated and been a part of it. His point is simple: there is no way to get through life without being exposed to that societal violence, whether it is in the public or private sphere. Everyone "learns" violence, because "... violence is itself a *form of knowledge* - for both the violator and the violated" where "in doing violence, the man knows violence, has knowledge of and in violence; and similarly, in receiving violence, the woman knows violence, has knowledge of and in violence... the man knows the woman *through his violence* and the woman knows the *man as violence*" (Hearn 38). Rust knows what kind of world his daughter would have had to live in, especially because of her status as a girl, and he knows what she would have had to live *through*, the kind of 'lessons' she would be forced to learn. And Rust understands also that she would learn these lessons, most likely, at the hands of men. In the last line of his monologue, he talks about the "sin of being a father", implicitly incriminating masculinity and the symbolic role of the father in that violence. This is not to say that he was or would have been a violent or abusive father to his daughter - Rust feels

nothing but contempt and hatred for those who hurt children - but rather that his very role of being a father implies a responsibility for the violence that would have inevitably touched his daughter in some fashion. Cohle sees the state of the world as a failure on humanity's part, a failure for which we must all account. However, as the symbolic position of father occupies a space of ultimate authority and power in traditional patriarchal ideology, the father is, for Rust, the *most* guilty: guilty of creating a horrifyingly violent world and guilty for subjecting the life of a child (particularly a female child) to that world. His monologue is therefor an indictment of patriarchal violence in the guise of a nihilistic indictment of parenthood. The sin is not in creating a life; the sin is in creating a *world* that is inherently threatening and dangerous to life.

While Rust has been 'spared' (if you can use that word to describe a father whose child has died) "the sin of being a father" and the violence implicit in that role, Marty, father of two, is guilty of acting out that sin. The most dramatic moment of violence occurs between father and child; after finding his daughter Audrey having sex with two older boys, he clearly loses his self control in a desperate attempt to regain that same control over his daughter: "What the fuck is wrong with you, huh?" he asks her. "Or is this one of those things that I'll never understand, you being captain of the varsity slut team?" When she responds with an angry, "Fuck you", he slaps her hard across the face ("The Secret Fate of All Life"). His verbal abuse is a type of violence in and of itself; it is more than a reprimand made by an angry parent, because there is nothing constructive about it. He is not trying to teach her how to behave or why what she did was 'wrong'; he is calling his own daughter a slut to her face, belittling and shaming her. When he hits her for having the nerve to respond to his insult, his violence escalates, a clear attempt to reign her in back under his thumb. This form of violence is what bell hooks describes as "the

most common form... of patriarchal violence”, one “that take[s] place in the home between patriarchal parents and children” with the intention of “reinforc[ing] a dominator model, in which the authority figure is deemed ruler over those without power and given the right to maintain the rule through practices of subjugation, subordination, and submission” (hooks 24).

Up to this point, aside from some condescending dialogue on his part, Marty has not used violence against his children, but the second Audrey steps too far out of line, he loses his cool and resorts to violence as a means of enforcing his rule over the family. *True Detective* not only acknowledges the way violence is enacted in patriarchal households but also continues to expose the damaging effects this type of parenting has on the relationships within the family. There are very few scenes after this one of Audrey and Marty interacting; and when they do interact, she ignores his existence while he tries to act like nothing has happened (evidence, perhaps, of his own feelings of shame and regret concerning his behaviour). His altercation with Audrey is contextualized in the plot as a catalyst for the slow but thorough disintegration of his family. Shortly after this scene, Marty and Maggie separate again, and it is implied that he becomes completely estranged from both his daughters, leaving him alone and stripped of his role as an authoritative father figure. Thus, instead of keeping the family unit together and under the control of the father, violence acts to separate and isolate parent from child and succeeds at creating the opposite effect from what is desired by the parent, which is, in Marty’s case, cohesion and obedience.

For Rust, the violence of the father is symbolic; for Marty, it is literal. But what is portrayed as the most aberrant kind of familial violence in *True Detective*, the violence most poisoned by toxic masculinist entitlement, is sexual violence. Neither Rust nor Marty would ever

sexually assault someone, let alone their own child, and in fact, Marty (the more ‘guilty’ of violence against women of the two) is so disgusted with the sexual abuse of children that he murders Reggie Ledoux when he finds out the man had been keeping two children as sexual slaves (“The Secret Fate of All Life”). It is without a doubt considered by both detectives and the show itself to be the most heinous of abuse, and it is implied that it was endured by, interestingly enough, the murder victim Dora Lange *and* her murderer, Earl Childress. By casting both violator and violated as victims of sexual abuse, *True Detective* portrays the different, lasting psychological effects of sexual violence that, while seeming to be polar opposites, both feed into a destructive, self-perpetuating cycle of patriarchal violence.

Dora Lange, the murdered woman around whom the entire plot revolves, is depicted (postmortem - the series begins with the discovery of her body) as a troubled young woman; with multiple arrests (some for soliciting), an ex-husband currently serving time in prison, and multiple drug habits, she is constructed by the show as unstable and susceptible to the influence of dangerous and abusive men. *True Detective* could have left it at that; the writers did not need to develop a backstory for a character that essentially simply functions as ‘the dead woman’. Instead, however, they use the short scene in which Marty and Rust interview Dora’s mother to give her lifestyle context and to explain why, perhaps, she has led such a hard and dangerous life. In her mother’s house there are pictures of Dora everywhere, but there is something off about all of them - in one, she, maybe ten years old, lies on her stomach with her feet kicked up in an almost pin-up girl style; in another, she stands at the center of a circle of four men on horseback wearing masks (which we learn later is a sign of the pedophilic, killer vodon cult of which Childress is a part) - small details that by themselves would amount to nothing but together help

to construct a picture of her home life that is then solidified by the dialogue between the detectives and Dora's mother:

Rust: What about her father? Did they have a relationship?

Ellen: Why? What have you heard?

Rust: I heard he passed. Is that correct?

Ellen: Why wouldn't a father bathe his own child? ("Seeing Things")

Like so many of the subtleties of the series, this moment is one of implication, not explicit confirmation of fact. After all, there certainly is nothing wrong with a father bathing his child. However, the defensiveness apparent in the woman's response speaks volumes about the reality of the relationship between father and daughter. With the context provided by this scene, the negative impetus behind the way Dora lived her life articulates a complex psychological reaction to trauma. She flees her home young and, not having the faculties (education, experience) to make a 'respectable' life for herself, does what she can to survive. But more than just explaining her situation, the fact that she was sexually abused also helps explain the reason why she was attracted to the Yellow King, or Childress, who would eventually murder her. Discussing the ways that violence is cyclical, Jeff Hearn writes: "The idea of trauma reproducing violence allows for an intrapsychic model of violence or a composite model containing social learning and psychodynamic insights... attention is... directed to inter-generational processes in the reproduction of violence" (Hearn 26). Hearn here is specifically addressing the processes by which violent men are produced in society. However, the same logic can be applied to the processes by which women who are systematically abused are produced. The combination of her 'social learning' (as in, learning from a young age that her body did not belong to her and that

someone who was supposed to love her could and would violate her body) and the ‘psychodynamic insights’ (as in, the extrapolation from her social learning of a single dysfunctional relationship that *all* intimate relationships possesses a dimension of violence) result in a destructive attraction to powerful, abusive men. One of the most important things children learn in the family is how to relate and interact with other people; Dora Lange learned from an early age that interacting with men specifically involved a level of exploitative sexuality. Thus, sadly, despite escaping the man who initially traumatized her, Dora runs head-first into the arms of a man who will do the same and worse to her, continuing the cycle of masculinist, sexualized violence that began during her childhood in a toxic and hyper-patriarchal family.

While it is explicitly stated that Childress was physically abused by his father (who burned and disfigured his face), it is unclear whether or not he was sexually assaulted as a child. However, considering the fact that his grandfather sexually abused Childress’ half sister, it is apparent that even if Childress himself was not a victim (and he might very well have been), he was living in the home and growing up under the eye of a two male child molesters. While Dora responded to her abuse in a sort of Stockholm-syndromesque manner, Childress, because he is male, replicated the abuse he received and he saw other children receiving. His relationships with the authoritative men in his life support the “correlations between... parental variables and the standardized measures...” which indicate that “the worse a subject’s relationship to his father [or grandfather], the more he expresse[s] hostility toward women, dominance over women, underlying power motivations, and hyper-masculine attitudes” (Lisak 248). Clearly, his relationship to his father was deeply disturbed; after apparently torturing and murdering him, he talks to his father’s corpse, assuring him he’ll get him some water for the heat (“Form and

Void”). This scene communicates the compelling and yet contradictory feelings Childress has for his father: on the one hand, he hated him so much for the abuse he suffered that he killed him, but on the other hand, he keeps his corpse and talks to it with what seems like affection and concern (he calls him ‘Daddy’), reflecting a son’s love and respect. This extreme split between hate and love is a conflict at the most basic level of self-hood; as a man, he has learned to emulate the behaviour of his male role-models, which has led him down a path of perversion and violence, but he cannot overcome the deep trauma he experienced at these men’s hands. “You know what they did to me?” he asks Rust as he’s being pursued into the labyrinth he created, his Carcosa: “What I will to all the sons and daughters of man” (“Form and Void”). Here, “violence and abuse comprise a context in which to understand men and their masculinity. Many men who victimize others usually have been victimized themselves and are showing their wounds through their abuse” (O’Neil 148). Violence becomes inseparable from patriarchal masculinity; boys learn to be men *through* violence. Miles observes the sad fact that, “Throughout history, ‘becoming a man’ is inescapably involved at some level with violence, either as perpetrator or victim” (Miles 22). Childress, as a man, was not born violent nor was he born perverse; he was *made* that way, moulded by violence both sexual and non sexual, taught by his male family members that selfhood - manhood - can only be realized through the domination and indeed eradication of the feminine other. And while his abuse might not have been sexual in the way Dora Lange’s was, it is apparent that there is a clear sexual aspect to the violence that he recreates. This is because “for males, violence is sexual...: it is inextricably bound up with the masculine sense of self and sexual self...” which creates “violent men” who are “frantic to assert masculinity in a society which repeatedly castrates their every initiative” (Miles 21). If we



consider the abuse Childress suffered when he was a little boy as a kind of psychic expurgation, it follows logically that he would attempt to overcome it by doing what was done to him to others who are as vulnerable as he was.

Familial violence - whether sexual or not - occurs within the private sphere and is enacted by individual people, usually men in the all-powerful patriarchal position of father: "A man's house was his own" Miss Delores, a woman who worked for the Childress family, tells the detectives ("After You've Gone"). In patriarchy, the father is king, judge, jury. However, patriarchal violence is not only limited to what happens behind closed doors. It might be tempting to view masculinist violence as a matter of the private sphere, as an issue involving individual men who can then be easily categorized as 'bad' people who bully and abuse those weaker than themselves. This would be a mistake, and more than a mistake, it would play into a patriarchal narrative: that violence is a matter of a few 'bad apples' and not a societal issue. bell hooks notices that after the second feminist wave, "one of the ways patriarchal white males use... mass media to wage war against feminism [is] to consistently portray the violent woman-hating man as aberrant and abnormal" (hooks 130). This strategy functions to create a scapegoat upon whom all the blame for violence against women and children can be placed and also to render the societal, institutionalized violences of American culture invisible. The reality is that in patriarchy, violence is foundational not just to the unique development of the individual male but also to the entire culture. *True Detective* explores violence as a systematic masculinist issue in its approach to the corruption of certain social institutions, particularly the means with which it addresses the authority of the law and those that it privileges. The law is represented by two main groups of people in the series: the main characters, Rust and Marty, and the various police,

government officials, and community leaders that turn out to comprise the vodon cult responsible for countless deaths of women and children in the bayou. Marty and Rust are meant to portray ‘good’ men who struggle with the darkness associated with their own privilege, power, and the violence inherent to their work. The other group functions to expose the fact that in patriarchal society, positions of power and authority, despite being - according to masculinist narratives - reserved for the best and most honourable of society, are in fact the breeding grounds for corruption, abuse of power, and violence.

In the public sphere, there are two kinds of violence: that violence which is aligned with the law and that violence which is not. Marty and Rust stand as the major representatives of lawful violence because they are a part of a nation-wide institution that is essentially meant to fight fire with fire and battle unlawful violence with violence on the side of the law, and, according to the narrative, the side of ‘justice’. This distinction between lawful and unlawful violence is one that is upheld in patriarchal ideology by the idea that some violence is what one might call a ‘necessary evil’, one that is deemed acceptable and even admirable; the praise heaped upon soldiers and police officers attests to this societal construction of acceptable forms of violence. But as bell hooks notes, regardless of intention or motivation, violence of any kind comes from the same emotional origin: “...he [my brother] was taught that rage was permitted and that allowing rage to provoke him to violence *would help him protect home and nation*” (hooks 19)[my emphasis]. Thus, while the motivation for appropriate (or state approved) violence is often - but not always - defensive rather than offensive, the reality is that all forms of violence stem from feelings of aggression, anger, and fear. The law, then, in order to be effective and in fact to come into existence at all, must be built upon a foundation similar to patriarchal

ideology: dominance, submission, fear, and the potential for violence as a measure of enforcement. In his discussion of crime and abjection, John Lechte notes that "...positive law (as opposed to natural law)... is fundamentally underpinned by violence" (52) and goes on to explain that

Violence weakens the law rather than strengthens it; yet violence is also a secret precondition to the extent that the law articulates a way of life... the hidden face of the law, therefor, could be thought to be double evil: on the one hand, the law, to come into being and exist, has to call upon violence to assist it, and on the other hand, it works to keep this fact secret... violence... thus implies that abjection is also at the origin of the law (Lechte 57).

Thus those who represent the law must eventually - inevitably - be violent because of the fact that they are enforcers of an inherently violent system. Simultaneously, they are lauded as peace keepers (an inherent contradiction - the idea that you must use violence to keep the peace) and guardians of society; this is the secret and the disguise that keeps that secret. The other aspect to lawful violence is the generally accepted idea that it is concerned with truth and justice, and that violence in the service of these ideals occupies a higher moral tier than unlawful violence: "The lawless context of the 'mean-streets' world legitimizes the [detective's] own aggressiveness in pursuit of his mission to establish a regime of truth" (Krutnik 93). It is the pursuit of these ideals (which are upheld by patriarchal law) that distinguishes the violence Marty and Rust perform from that which Childress does. Despite the fact that the end product of violence is always the same - death, pain, despair - the motive and position in reference to the law produces a good/bad

ideological split that patriarchy attempts to simplify (police are good, criminals are bad) and solidify through the imposition of the law.

*True Detective* delves into the nature of this apparent contradiction through Rust and Marty's relationship to their job and the law. While neither men is necessarily corrupted by his work and the authority he holds as a detective, both are seriously effected by their positions and both experience difficulty in navigating their civilian lives under the burden of their institutional power. Both are quite aware of the power they possess and both use that power beyond the jurisdiction of their jobs. For Rust, the consequence is an almost complete lack of social life and obsessive tendencies; for Marty, the result is a destructive blurring of the line between his private life and his job and ultimately, abuse of his position, which in turn leads to the disintegration of his family.

Early in the series, when Rust is buying drugs from a young prostitute named Lucy, he makes it clear that he understands the power that comes with his title and position as a law enforcer:

Lucy: ...kinda strange, like you might be dangerous.

Rust: Of course I'm dangerous. I'm police. I could do terrible things to people with impunity ("Seeing Things")

In that moment he is, in fact, using his position (although some might argue he is being to a certain extent noble; at least he pays for the drugs instead of taking them from her) to break the law by buying illegal substances. However, this, in turn, is because he suffers from insomnia caused by a combination of traumas: mostly, the death of his daughter and the discovery of Dora Lange's body, two separate events that are brought together by the fact that Dora's body is found

on the anniversary of Sofia's death. Perhaps this is part of the reason that he becomes so obsessed with solving the case or perhaps it is simply the perverse nature of the crime, the symbology and culture that fascinates him so (after all, some of his only possessions are books on satanism and sex crimes). Either way, he becomes so consumed by the case that his ability to sleep, as well as his capacity for social interaction, is deeply effected. He rejects any and all attempts made by Maggie to set him up with women and while the audience is shown plenty of Marty's private life, Rust is rarely shown doing anything outside of his work: "There is always a sense that the characters cannot resume their normal lives until the story of the crime is reconstructed and the criminal is brought to justice" (Gates 13). However, in Rust's situation, his inability to return to his normal life stretches back before the case. This obsession with his job - which can be reduced to an obsession with death and violence, since death and violence is at the heart of his work - and the negative consequences on his psyche reach back to before the story begins, when he was living in Texas. Presented with a scene so incorrigible and disgusting (a meth head shooting up his infant daughter), he reacts in the only way he knows how: with violence. After killing the man, he is sent to an institution and it is after his release that he moves to Louisiana ("Seeing Things"). His trauma also has a physiological aspect to it as well on account of his working in an HIDTA (High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area) in Texas. His 'visions', or hallucinations, last up until the present day and he says himself, "It never stops, not really. What happened to my head, it's not something that gets better" ("Form and Void"). While he is very good at his job, it ultimately traumatizes, isolates and physiologically damages him, making his life "a circle of violence and degradation" ("After You've Gone"). This is a common trope in crime fiction and film, because

The reason that the noir, vigilante and action heroes are so effective in defeating the enemy is that they think along the same lines and have the guts to use the same methods as those they pursue; these abilities may work in a fight against crime, but they are considered undesirable for the average citizen to possess. While these men fight for the preservation of American society, they are not invited to be one of its regular members” (Gates 34).

Thus Rust is portrayed as a kind of social sacrificial lamb, a necessary, but as Gates notes, ‘undesirable’ evil; too good at what he does to do anything else, he occupies an abject and alienated social position, the trade off for his authority and power. His life, his mind, his body are all given up to the institutional violence that is required to combat criminality in American society.

Marty’s struggle, meanwhile, is to maintain his private, social life without it becoming infected by his power and authority as a police officer. There are several instances during which Marty feels he is losing control over his private life - specifically his family - and during these moments, in desperation, he attempts to impose his systemic authority as a way of regaining rule over his wife and daughters. Not only are his attempts unsuccessful, but each one reveals the way his abuse of power functions to spoil his relationships with those he loves, suggesting that the power and violence that defines his life as a detective is exceptionally incompatible with a healthy personal life. So while Marty has a social life where Rust does not, he - through his inability to keep personal and public separate - also occupies an alienated, ostracized social space as a result of his position working for the law.

There are two primary instances where Marty attempts to use his authority as a state police officer to influence his personal life, and both instances involve him committing acts of violence in varying degrees. The first occurs after Maggie has left him for the first time and he goes to the hospital where she works in an attempt to beg her forgiveness. As their conversation escalates to an argument and he becomes visibly desperate and aggressive, a doctor intervenes. Marty pulls his badge and says, "Everything's fine, doc. I'm state police" ("Who Goes There"). The scene cuts to a brooding Rust and when we return to Marty he is physically fighting against two hospital security guards trying to get to (or at?) Maggie. Enraged that his authority as an officer has been ignored, he calls the security guards 'mall cops', trying to lunge past them to get to his wife. It is only when Rust arrives with information on the case that he backs off, telling Maggie "I love you, honey, and I ain't givin' up" (*Ibid.*). He means it as a promise, a reinstatement of the fidelity he has broken, but from the expression on Maggie's face and his previous violent behaviour, it comes across equally as much as a threat: you can't get away and I'm not *going* away regardless of your wishes. Maggie's face is twisted into an expression that is difficult to read: embarrassment maybe, perhaps some shame, and anger. What is clear is that the power and violence Marty is accustomed to wielding as a police officer does not translate well to his personal life: things are worse off now than before he came to the hospital. While Marty wins the day in the end and reunites with Maggie eventually, in this moment he has further increased the distance between them, his hysteria unable to find any outlet other than aggression. This scene reveals the fact that the more Marty feels the people he loves resisting his control, the more he leans and relies upon both the power and the violent tactics of his profession as a law enforcer.

The second and more serious violent abuse of power occurs when Marty assaults the two young men who had sex with Audrey. Like Rust, he openly acknowledges his power in the situation, telling his daughter, “I can do whatever I want to those damn boys. You think about that” (“The Secret Fate of All Life”). His threat is meant to intimidate his daughter into obedience (and when this doesn’t work, of course, he resorts to physical violence). ‘Whatever he wants’ amounts to beating them outside their jail cell (after the guard on duty leaves Marty the keys - which is a detail worth noting; there is a culture of acceptance concerning the misuse of power amongst the police officers). His reasoning is of course that they took advantage of and abused his sixteen year old daughter - despite her insistence to the contrary - and thus he feels he has every right as both a father and an officer of the law to exact punishment. The punishment, however, is unlawful, firstly, and qualifies more accurately as vengeance than any kind of fair justice. This sort of violence is a “hypocritical crime”, a “crime that pretends to be on the side of the law and is not” (Lechte 54). Lechte describes this sort of action as one of abjection<sup>7</sup>, which fits perfectly in Marty’s case; even he can’t stomach what he has done and vomits immediately after the incident, a symbolic purging of an action that cannot be assimilated into Marty’s sense of himself as an honourable man and a decent cop. The intersection of his personal with his professional life results not only in an inevitable abuse of his institutional authority but also the jeopardizing of his own sense of morality. This moment of violence is also indelibly connected to Marty’s masculinist ideas of manhood. He tells the boys: “A man’s game charges a man’s price” (“Haunted Houses”) and goes on to say, “Take that away from this if nothing else” (*Ibid.*), perversely contextualizing his own violence as an educational moment for two boys who even he

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<sup>7</sup> See Kristeva on abjection



understands have not fully entered into adulthood. In this scene *True Detective* intertwines patriarchal ideologies about violence, power, and masculinity, and directly associates these doctrines with Marty's profession as a police officer. More than this, the series also implies that while his job affords him privilege and power, these two concepts do not equal well being or happiness; rather, they destroy the most important relationships in Marty's life, leaving him alone and deeply unhappy.

The police are not the only institution that *True Detective* criticizes for being corrupt and violent. Almost every level of government and every major social institution is implicated on some level for being abusive towards women, children, and the poor. Childress' father was sheriff and orchestrated the kidnapping and murder of Marie Fontenot; Reverend Tuttle uses his project building religious schools as a pool of candidates from which to pluck potential victims; the governor, Billy Lee Tuttle, though never directly tied to the vodon cult, is implied to be involved through his relation to both Reverend Tuttle and the Childresses. The investigation ultimately

...leads not to the pith of one perverted individual, but to a complex web of political relationships in which the detective[s] become even more entangled. Resolution of the crime... becomes nigh impossible because even insofar as the sources of certain evil can be deciphered, they are so deeply imbedded in political and societal structures that it would take *nothing short of total social transformation to uproot them* (Connoles 34)[my emphasis].

While Childress is the series' main antagonist, his status as a serial killer is a microcosmic reflection of the much wider abuses being carried out throughout society. This is because serial

killers by their very nature “are nestled in the core of civil society. They are concealed *inside* the ordinary machinery of every day life, obscured within institutions and able to criss cross various sites without detection” (Hatty 197). So while Reverend Tuttle might not qualify as a serial killer *per say* (though we don’t know that; he very well might), he occupies a space similar to Childress’ identity as a predator, a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Their ability to blend into society - the fact that there are no visible signs of psychopathy; these are well respected, presentable, social men - allows them to simultaneously climb social and institutional ladders (such as in the government or police force) and accumulate social and political power, which in turn allows them to pursue their perverse appetites for pain and death. In this way, positions of authority, such as in the police or government, are especially attractive to violent, sadistic men. It is masculinist culture that provides the myth that power attracts good people who want to take on the responsibility of protection or leadership; what attracts people to power is power, and the people who want it the most are likely to have violent tendencies, no matter how well hidden they might be.

*True Detective*’s depiction of men’s violence supports the argument that there is a clear and undeniable relationship between masculinity, violence, and power. The question of why and how this happens - the question of the mechanics behind this destructive relationship - is also addressed, albeit less overtly, in the series’ discourse around the male body. After all, as R.W. Connell astutely observes, “The body... is inescapable in the construction of masculinity... the bodily process, entering into the social process, becomes part of history (both personal and collective) and a possible object of politics” (Connell 56). Thus, an examination of masculinity and violence would be incomplete without addressing the role the body plays, since all violence

is performed and experienced through the body. In fact, masculinity's construction of the male body is partly to blame for the violence enacted by and upon it. The objectification and compartmentalization of the male body - or, the dehumanizing and the metaphorical (and sometimes literal) dismembering of it - allows for and encourages violence.

While women are commonly reduced to sexual objects within patriarchy, men are often reduced to machines - assessed for their productive value instead of their status as human beings. This produces in men a sort of psychic severing from the body, a point noted by Seidler: "As men, we learn to treat our bodies as separate, as something that needs to be trained". He goes on to explain the psychological effects of this division between mind and body: "Often we push ourselves because we can be testing ourselves against the limits of our bodies as some kind of a affirmation of our manliness. Even if our bodies are carefully tuned instruments that are ready to obey out every command - the language itself reflects an education into authority and dominance - we can be left with little relationship to them" (Seidler 17). The male body is curtailed to the status of a tool, and as Seidler notes, the social construction of the male body is an inherently dominating and violent one, rendering the male body a tool for the *production* as well as the *endurance* of violence. Men "learn, sometimes literally, to harden [themselves] against pain, strain and physical effort... this is exactly the training needed to convince men to work themselves to the point of abuse..." (Bearman 217 ). This abuse or violence can be as simple or seemingly benign as overworking oneself to the point of exhaustion; think of Rust, unable to sleep, spending all of his time and energy on the job and ignoring and suppressing the needs of his body. It can also be extreme; Rust values the integrity of his body so little that he shrugs off the possibility he might be murdered when he goes undercover as a gang member, saying

essentially that a bullet to the head is low stakes. bell hooks comments that “my brother was taught that his value would be determined by his will to do violence... he was taught that for a boy, enjoying violence was a good thing...” (hooks 18) Examining this statement in terms of the body further supports the idea that men and boys are raised to think of their bodies as violent machines, and in professions such as that of the soldier or police officer, this idea is cemented even more into the male psyche. The consequence of this is a culture that, despite privileging the male body with certain forms of power, nonetheless dehumanizes it; once this dehumanization is internalized, it allows men to disconnect and disassociate from their bodies, which in turn paves the way for various forms of violence directed internally or externally. Our culture wants men to be unafraid of violence and the possibility of death that it carries with it; we want soldiers and police officers to be willing to die for their mission or nation. In order to achieve this, our culture encourages “men’s experience of the body” as constituted by “feelings of alienation and absence”, resulting in the fact that “men will frequently speak of the foreign character of their own bodies, as if they are referring to a physical entity that is not integral to their identity as male subjects” (Hatty 120). Thus the male body, despite being the medium through which men experience their power and privilege in society, is constructed within patriarchy as a mechanical, “achievement-oriented” puppet, creating “a body both desirable and threatening”. However, “it is ultimately a fragile creation, defined by its own failures” (Hatty 120), meaning that when the machine does not perform the way it should (be it as the result of age, disability, or resistance to societally approved forms of violence), a man’s masculine identity is at risk. Thus, the masculinist vision of the body further merges violence and masculinity, uniting them at the site of the male body both in literal and figurative terms.

A major aspect of the objectification of the male body lies in the way it is compartmentalized, because by metaphorically reducing it to its separate pieces, the body - indeed, the person - as a whole is lost. In *True Detective* this issue is addressed in both a metaphorical or psychic and a literal context. The first example occurs in present day, when Rust explains why he decided to switch to the homicide department after his stay in a mental institution:

Gilbourgh: Why homicide?

Rust: Something I saw at Northshore. A quote from Corinthians: "The body is not one member but many. Now are they many but of one body."

Papania: What's that mean, though?

Rust: I was just trying to stay a part of the body now ("Seeing Things").

There is much to say about Rust choosing a biblical excerpt as his source of inspiration considering his fairly consistent and outspoken rejection of religion. However, this quote, when removed from its dogmatic context and taken literally, speaks also to the way Rust feels about his own self through a metaphor revolving around the body. The many membered body is made whole by the interdependence of its various parts, each one working seamlessly with the other. Yet each part is also separate and can only be a part of the whole by fulfilling its properly assigned function, be it a foot to step or a hand to grasp. When Rust says he was "just trying to stay a part of the body" he is speaking of himself as a fractured, disjointed part of a greater whole. When he is institutionalized for killing someone on the job, he becomes, essentially, a broken piece of the greater societal machinery. His switch from working with drugs to homicide is an attempt to reinsert himself into the greater cultural body. That he uses the body as a

metaphor for his struggle to find his place speaks to patriarchal views of the body as fractured, a conglomeration of stray parts that make up the human (or, here, societal) machine rather than a unified person living in a whole, complete body. His work - his proscribed function as a homicide detective - ultimately alienates him from society because of its inherently violent nature, indicating the failure of this kind of patriarchal vision of both the individual man living in society and the body. The violence that he both suffers and perpetuates as a result of his work is a reflection of the violence surrounding masculinist perceptions of the male body as an instrument made up of parts. This opens the door for the disassembling of these divided segments of the body, the taking apart of the human machine through extreme spectacles of violence.

This ideological dissection of the male body is reflected literally when Rust recounts the tortures invented by a cartel he used to work on the border between the United States and Mexico:

They, uh, had this routine. They'd duct tape you to a chair that was bolted to the floor, use a couple rolls, make sure you couldn't budge an inch. And they'd cut around your face, grip your scalp, yank down... rip your face off. And they'd put a mirror in front of you, so you could get a good look at yourself... and they'd cut your dick and balls off... shove 'em down your throat until you bled and choked out while you were watching. ("Who Goes There")

The slow and methodical process of taking the - specifically male - body apart is here not just a method of torture and death, but also a procedure for the humiliation, emasculation, and dehumanization of a male victim. By creating "a spectacle of the gross in relationship to the

human body” (Gates 167), the personhood of that body is destroyed as the body itself becomes an object of the abject:

These attacks from beyond the borders of the body may result in corporal disintegration: the spilling out of the body’s viscera and organs, and a radical failure of the body’s border (that is, skin) to hold. If this occurs, the person loses her or his integrity as an individual and is transformed into an undifferentiated, bloody pulp. And proximity to this monstrous body - indeed, the very process of *becoming* monstrous - produced a reaction of horror. this reaction of horror is fundamental to the experience of abjection (Hatty 194).

This process happens in relation to any sort of horrific or violent death; here, the focus on the penis specifically articulates a kind of objectification particular to males. In western culture, manhood is often defined by the possession of a penis - and with the penis comes the phallic power and privilege afforded to boys and men: “Boys learn that they should identify with the penis... while simultaneously learning to fear the penis as though it were a weapon that could backfire, rendering them powerless, destroying them” (hooks 80). The focus on a specific body part as the determining factor in deciding a person’s humanity is ultimately destructive, not just because it teaches boys that their worth is decided by their anatomy, but also because it reinforces the psychic (and in this case, clearly literal) segmentation of the male body. The violent removal of the penis therefor is not just an emasculation but a way of removing all sense of selfhood from the victim, further reducing the person to a now mutilated mass of disconnected body parts. As is made apparent by the fact that in the Cartel culture this is normalized to the point of being “routine”, the objectification of the male body is partly what allows for such horrific displays of violence. When the self is made a separate entity from the body, and when

that body in turn is depleted into a series of discontinuous sections, it functions as an invitation for extreme displays of violence; because violence enacted against a thing, or a compilation of things, is always easier to perform than violence enacted against a human being.

Violence demonstrated upon the body - which, as opposed to dualistic thinking favouring a split between mind and body, *includes* what we call the mind, or personhood - leaves scars both visible and invisible. As a product of violence, trauma occupies an important thematic position within *True Detective*'s examination of violence and masculinity. The representation of trauma - what the series codes as traumatic and what it does not, what it chooses to show and what it does not, who is traumatized and who is not - is a deeply gendered and equally conflicted one. On the one hand, *True Detective* makes a strong argument for the idea that patriarchy is innately traumatizing for everyone (to varying degrees depending on a person's subject position), and, on the other hand, its depictions of male-on-male violence and its conclusion downplay the reality of male trauma, rendering it invisible and reflecting patriarchal society's unwillingness to acknowledge that men, too, suffer from violence both received and inflicted. Instead, particularly in the final episode, the series reaffirms the essentialist, masculinist ideology of violence, positioning it as a necessary part of male experience and a channel through which he can achieve self-realization.

*True Detective* positions the man, in relation to trauma, as witness, and the male witness to the trauma of patriarchy is represented by Rust. He is the character who knows the most - his twenty-year investigation has revealed to him the extent of the horror going unchecked in the bayou. He is the one who has the photographs of victim after victim after victim taped to the walls of his storage unit. He is the one who must watch the snuff film in its entirety. It is he who



has sacrificed at least a quarter of his life to stopping the character who most completely represents the worst of patriarchal ideology. And it is he who is the most wounded, most jaded, most hopeless all because of the trauma he experiences second-hand as the witness. The role of witness, because of the fact that “the listener [or witness] to trauma comes to be a participant and co-owner of the traumatic experience: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma himself” (Felman 57), is “implicitly humanizing”, “offer[ing] a space of identification for viewers” (Meek 180). Despite all of his nihilism and his outspoken contempt for life, he is the series’ most deeply *feeling* character; indeed, his nihilism is a desperate reaction to the fact that he relates and empathizes with those who suffer terrible traumas. Beneath the seemingly harsh and pragmatic facade, his philosophy is a philosophy of trauma. The language he uses to describe his view of the world, mirrors the language of trauma, “which [is]... marked by repetition, return, fragmentation, and split subjectivities” (Horner 36).

There are three short monologues in which Rust’s philosophy most clearly epitomizes aspects of trauma and trauma theory:

See, we all got what I call a life trap, this gene deep certainty that things will be different. That you’ll move to another city and meet the people that’ll be your friends for the rest of your life, that you’ll fall in love and be fulfilled. Fucking fulfillment, heh! And closure... nothing is ever fulfilled until the very end and closure... no no no, nothing is ever over (“The Locked Room”).

Why should I live in history, huh? Fuck, I don’t want to know anything anymore. This is a world where nothing is solved... everything we’ve ever done or will do, we’re gonna do over and over and over again, and that little boy and that little girl, they’re gonna be in

that room again and again and again... forever ("The Secret Fate of All Life")

In eternity, there is no time. Nothing can grow. Nothing can become. Nothing changes.

So, death created time to grow the things that it would kill... and you are reborn but into the same life that you've always been born into... when you can't remember your lives, you can't change your lives. And that is the terrible and secret fate of all life, you're trapped in that nightmare that you keep waking up into ("The Secret Fate of All Life").

In each of these excerpts there is a focus on temporality and memory, both critical to understanding the way trauma functions within the psyche. Trauma is "an event that is always displaced in space and time" (Meek 5), and is constantly relived, trapping its victim in a inescapable cycle of experience - lives, in Rust's terminology. With no concrete end, carried as it is into the present, trauma precludes closure and thus suspends its sufferer in time. At the same time, because trauma "totters between remembrance and erasure, producing a history that is, in its very events, a kind of inscription of the past; but also a history constituted by the erasure of its traces" ("After the End" 20), despite its reappearance and haunting nature, it is defined by "its very unassimilated nature - the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance" ("Unclaimed Experience" 4). This juxtaposition between repeated experience and distortion of memory appears when Rust talks about being reborn into the same life with no memory of the same past lives. The traces of trauma are erased even as they reappear, which "suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it... the repetitions of the traumatic event - which remain unavailable to consciousness but intrude repeatedly on sight - thus suggest a larger relation to the event that extends beyond what can be simply seen or what can be known and is inextricably tied up with the belatedness and

incomprehensibility that remain at the heart of this repetitive seeing” (“Unclaimed Experience” 92). And Rust expresses all of this with great despair - he “doesn’t want to know anything anymore” and asks, “why should I live in history?” - which in turn articulates the trauma inherent to the role of the witness: “The oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival. These two stories, both incompatible and absolute inextricable, ultimately define the complexity of what I refer to as *history*” (“Unclaimed Experience” 7). Thus, *True Detective*, in the character of Rust, articulates male trauma as the trauma of the witness to patriarchy.

The trauma of the male witness is not the only variation represented in *True Detective*, both through its thematic content and the violence that it depicts on screen. The question of what can or cannot be represented visually - essentially, what is or is not too traumatic to be portrayed in action, is a complicated one, because the effects of traumatic images can vary. On the one hand, “traumatic images have the potential to shock the viewer” (Meek 31), and this shock can replicate traumatic memory “in ways that exceed conscious perception and understanding” (Meek 7). Essentially, a traumatic image does have the potential to translate the trauma to the viewer and therefor position the viewer in the role of witness. However, “this potential can be reduced by their reiteration,” meaning that prolonged or repeated exposure to traumatic images “has allowed viewers over time to insulate themselves against the impact of such images” (Meek 31). The effect of this process of mental numbing is voyeurism, which “is dangerous because it exploits the victims and secretly offers a sort of subversive pleasure in horror” (Kaplan 10). This in turn motivates the media to “constantly...increase its capacity to shock and surprise” (Meek 95), or to have any emotional effect on the viewer at all. As seen in

*True Detective*, there are certain modes of violence that American audiences are accustomed to viewing - namely, male on male violence, which is shown extensively in the series - and certain modes that still pack a proverbial punch - violence by men against women and children, which is not.

Ultimately, the choice of what to show and what not to show functions to define trauma as the unseeable, the unrepresentable, and in *True Detective*, this process of constructing trauma is thoroughly gendered. Male on female (or children) violence is never shown despite being at the center of the series' subject matter. The only real moment of physical violence between men and women that is shown on screen is the scene in which Marty slaps his daughter Audrey. Everything else - rape, assault, murder - is merely alluded to, whispered about, hinted at, or otherwise kept off screen. Rather than downplay the impact of these varying forms of violence, the decision to not show them *increases* the horror, the unspeakable nature of the crimes committed. The audience is left to imagine the terrible acts committed on the snuff tape; all they need to see is Marty's expression as he watches. This is more than enough. Indeed, the crimes alluded to in the series are so heinous that it is debatable as to whether or not representations of these violences could make it onto the small screen at all - the image of a child beaten or a woman raped, while available within American media, is not nearly as prevalent and normalized as the image of a man enacting any type of violence on another man.

*True Detective* is replete with disturbing and at times gratuitous violence between men; we see men shot in the head, torn to pieces by grenades and beaten. And yet, somehow, despite the traumatic nature of these images, the impact is constructed as less than the scene with the snuff tape, which visibly moves one of the main characters to horror and fills the imagination of

the audience with that same horror. This has to do partly with the fact that those who suffer these violences are evil men, and the violence done to them is therefor 'justified' within the patriarchal narrative of justice and law. However, it is important to note that within patriarchy, violence amongst men is naturalized to the point that its numerous representations fail to register as traumatic in the same way that violence against women and children does. The male body, having been dehumanized and compartmentalized through patriarchy, is opened up and torn apart in horrible ways and in *True Detective*, this violence is depicted in gross and traumatizing detail, rendering it a site where its "courting and staging of violence" becomes "a breeding ground for trauma" (Kaplan 17). With every portrayal of violence between men, the impact of that violence - the trauma inherent to that violence - is lessened and the audience becomes more hardened until, by the end, they cheer the defeat and killing of the serial killer, whose brain gets blown out of his skull on screen. This functions to erase male trauma. Ironically, while the invisibility of violence against women and children is what makes that violence meaningful to the audience, the blatant visibility of the violence done to men renders the inherent trauma of these images obsolete, merely succeeding in further normalizing violence amongst men while objectifying their bodies for a twisted voyeuristic pleasure (as in a "he got what he deserved" attitude).

Male trauma is also suppressed when, at the end of the season, both Marty and Rust reach a new height of self-realization through an act of violence. By making the killing of Earl Childress a catalyst for positive change in both characters, *True Detective*, perhaps unwittingly, reaffirms essentialist patriarchal narratives about the "violent nature" of men and the idea that violence is a necessary part of male expression and indeed, in both Rust and Marty's case, it is

only through an act of violence that they can relinquish some of their own masculinist ideologies. In Rust's case, the violent act is a spiritual awakening that begins directly before his confrontation with Childress; he sees a vision in the maze of the universe and is then stabbed brutally. It is reaffirmed as a life-changing experience when, after waking up from his coma (it is difficult not to see him as a resurrected quasi-Jesus figure, particularly during the shot of his reflection in the hospital window ["Form and Void"]), he describes the interconnectedness of all life in a universe ruled by love:

There was a moment - I know when I was under in the dark that something... whatever I'd been reduced to, not even consciousness... it was a vague awareness in the dark, I could - I could feel my definitions fading. And beneath that darkness, there was another kind, it was - it was deeper, warm, you know, like a substance. I could feel, man, and I knew my daughter waited for me there. So clear. I could feel her. I could feel a piece of my - my pop, too. It was like I was a part of everything that I had ever loved, and we were all... the three of us, just fading out. And all I had to do was let go, and I did. I said "Darkness, yeah, yeah" and I disappeared. But I could - I could still feel her love, there, even more than before... there was nothing but that love ("Form and Void").

Ben Woodard describes this ending to the series as "the collapse of the proper scaling of the negative" and concludes the ending is "weakness masquerading as optimism, masquerading as mystery" (Woodard 112). The optimism of Rust's ending, when he goes on to tell Marty that the light is winning, marks a complete transformation - every second we have seen of Rust up to this point is washed away, all his pretence, every snide nihilistic comment and even the trauma of the loss of his daughter is conveniently tied up with a feel-good bow. While he is able to relinquish

some of the masculinist ideology that haunted him throughout the series - his self-alienation, his posturing pessimism - there still remains the fact that this entire metamorphosis is the result of a violent act and physiological trauma, implying to an extent that it is only through violence (disguised as justice) that he can evolve as a character and find some peace (and once again, the irony appears in the pairing of violence with peace).

Marty's evolution is predictably less mystical and rather more social; after being hospitalized, his family comes to visit him, and he is allowed a moment of emotional vulnerability instead of attempting to embody the patriarchal image of the father figure:

Marty: It's so good to see y'all. I didn't expect you.

Audrey: How are you?

Marty: Oh, good. I'm fine. Yeah. I'll be fine. I mean, I am fine ("Form and Void").

It was his hospitalization after being nearly killed in the altercation with Childress that brought his family to him - it seems he had become so estranged that he is truly surprised when they show up - which first speaks to the damage his patriarchal attitudes had done to his family unit, and second, once again positions an action of violence as the trigger for a sweeping change in character. Marty tries to put on a brave face ("I'm fine"), but in that moment, finally, surrounded by the people he loves most in the world, he finally allows himself to break down and weep. It is the only time in the series that he cries or shows any overwhelming emotion other than rage. After the transformative (violent) experience in Carcosa, and now reunited (even if only briefly) with his family, he can finally surrender the masculinist construction of what he thought he had to be in his role as father and man.

The consequence of this portrayal of violence, the body, and trauma, essentially spells out the problem without giving a solution. bell hooks puts it succinctly when she writes, “Contemporary books and movies offer clear portraits of patriarchy without offering any direction for change. Ultimately they send the message that male survival demands holding onto some vestige of patriarchy” (hooks 133). Rather than attempt to push beyond patriarchal ideologies surrounding violence, justice, and manhood, *True Detective*, despite its complex and accurate depiction of patriarchal violence, instead falls back upon one of the very foundational philosophies of patriarchy: that male violence must be channeled correctly (according to patriarchal narratives), not that it must stop. Violence done for the ‘right’ reason is not only necessary for society to function, but is equally necessary for the psychological well-being of men. While both Marty and Rust are able to shed the destructive patriarchal facades they had built around themselves for most of their adult life, they are only capable of doing so through an act of violence, and this contradictory narrative - that men find self-realization through violence - is at the heart of patriarchal ideology.



## Conclusion

“It’s just one story. The oldest. Light versus dark.”

- Rust Cohle (“Form and Void”)

*True Detective*’s failure to fully indict patriarchal violence speaks to the complex and deeply imbedded nature of masculinism in American culture. After all, it positions itself as a text that constructs masculinity as a psychically fracturing cage that traps and destroys men even as it privileges them with the right and the power to commit violence. But ultimately, the hard work lies not in simply seeing the problem but in moving forward towards a solution. And I do not have one. I do not have the answer to the question of how to address the overwhelming, widespread problem of patriarchal violence. For all of human history it seems, violence has been a consistent strategy in the maintenance and continuance of societies, the tool through which social hierarchy and order is achieved, and the weapon used to squash dissent and dominate opposing points of view. My research has not enlightened me to the cure for human violence, nor has it provided me with the answer to the harrowing question of how to tackle patriarchy, which subsists not just as a social system but as a conceptual one, living and breathing in social structures, yes, but also in our minds, our psyches, our personal visions of ourselves and those around us. So, perhaps it is unfair of me to be overly critical of *True Detective* for not fully divorcing itself from patriarchal logic. I do believe it is a unique and notable text about masculinity, and I do believe that it expresses hard and painful truths about men’s experience in patriarchy. Certainly, this project led me to empathize with male experience more than I ever had. And for me, this fact alone - that it communicates pain and angst and hardship without ever attempting to excuse violences committed as a result - makes it stand out. It gives perspective,

and its failure to provide a healthy alternative to patriarchal ideologies surrounding violence speaks to the complexity of the problem. *True Detective* presents the problem from a subject position that is often ignored or downplayed in discussions surrounding gender and sexuality, not in order to ‘make the problem of sexism about men’, or distract from the devastating effects suffered by women and children, but to help explain why men are violent, how they become violent, and also how this violence, though often useful in acquiring power, does nothing for the mental health or well being of those it privileges. And by helping to *explain* masculinity’s relationship to violence, it in turn opens up a space for dialogue on how to combat that violence. It provides a starting point for addressing societal forms of violence by situating it as a problem imbedded in patriarchy, and by doing so, forces any discussion about violence to deal with the role patriarchy plays in promoting it. In order to move forward, it claims, we must, as a culture, face the way we construct masculinity, the way we socialize our boys, and the way we use our men to promote and sustain the cycles of pain, violence, and death that plague western society.

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