“WALK IT OFF”
Feminism, Critical Media Literacy, and My Long Journey Away From Hypermasculinity

Bill Yousman
Sacred Heart University

Inspired by the feminist adage that the personal is political, and by feminism’s challenge to conventional forms of research, in this essay I explore my personal struggle with hypermasculinity and the ways cultural studies, feminist media studies, and critical media literacy have allowed me to explore the limitations of hegemonic masculine conventions in both my academic and personal life. This essay, therefore, is composed as a blend of personal reflection and academic analysis.

“Are you a faggot?”

Those words were said more than 40 years ago but I still remember them.

It was the early 70s. I was riding the bus to middle school. Two boys I had always feared decided it was my turn to be tormented.

I can’t remember everything that was happening at the time, but I think I was making other kids laugh by talking in a squeaky falsetto voice. At 12 I never thought to question why a boy with a high-pitched voice would make other kids laugh. I just knew it did and that through humor I could acquire a little bit of elusive social capital.

Then one of the boys turned around and asked me: “Are you a faggot?”

His tone was mocking, almost humorous, but I knew the undercurrent was hostile. I can’t remember what happened after that, or how the situation was resolved, but I’ll always remember the question: “Are you a faggot?”

A question. A warning. A threat.

As Pascoe (2011) explores in her ethnography of gender performance in an American high school, the word faggot, when I was growing up and now, is used to discipline boys into the “proper” gender roles they are expected to play.

This was one of my early encounters with something scholars like Pollack (1998), Kimmel (2008), and Katz (in Jhally, 1999, 2013) have described variously as the masculinity

• **Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to:** Bill Yousman, yousmanw@sacredheart.edu

The SoJo Journal: Educational Foundations and Social Justice Education, Vol. 3(2), 2017, pp. 49–65 ISSN 2381-5183
Copyright © 2018 Information Age Publishing, Inc. All rights of reproduction in any form reserved.

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/sojo/article-pdf/3/2/49/11353613/sojo-06-2018-0005en.pdf by guest on 28 June 2026

code, or the masculinity trap, or the masculinity box, or the masculinity cage. Staying in the box or the cage means watching yourself, being careful not to behave in any way that calls your masculinity into question. Kimmel notes: “Our efforts to maintain a manly front cover everything we do. What we wear. How we talk. How we walk. What we eat.… Every mannerism, every movement contains a coded gender language” (2008, p. 48).

If you step outside the cage, the gender police will issue a warning by calling you a faggot. If you persist in challenging expectations the punishment will become more severe. I wasn’t physically harassed or assaulted that day, but I knew I could have been. That’s what you get if you act like a fag.

I encountered other frightening incidents growing up … who doesn’t? Two older, larger boys confronted me in a stairwell early in my first year in high school. They shoved me, took my lunch money (I know that’s a cliché but it really happened), threatened to kill me if I told. I remember being scared a lot in middle school and the first couple of years of high school.

And I know I hardened. I transformed from a thin little boy to a tall and fairly muscular, but still scared, young man. Plagued by trouble at home, self-doubts, and frustrations, I developed a temper. I started talking back to bullies, confronting when confronted. I took cover under a cloak of hypermasculinity. The gender police eventually take up residence in your own head, where they are strengthened by the cultural imagery they find there. Jensen lists how the lessons of masculinity are taught both interpersonally and through media and how these lessons are thoroughly intertwined with mainstream values and practices:

> We teach our boys that to be a man is to be tough, to be acquisitive, to be competitive, to be aggressive. We congratulate them when they make a tough hit on the football field that takes out an opponent. We honor them in parades when they return from slaughtering the enemy abroad. We put them on magazine covers when they destroy business competitors and make millions by putting people out of work. In short, we train boys to be cruel, to ignore the feelings of others, to be violent (Jensen, 2007, p. 32).

Raised by a Marxist father and surrounded by leftist literature, I did not buy into the ethnocentric nationalism and the celebration of predatory capitalism that Jensen alludes to as inherent in U.S. media’s tales of masculinity. Yet, despite this, I was not immune to the power of popular culture. Nobody is. Instead, I found my own versions that resonated with me despite my antiracist, anticapitalist upbringing. Stories and images of hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity come to us in so many ways that they become ubiquitous, so present that they are invisible. As hooks notes, “mass media do the work of continually indoctrinating boys and men, teaching them the rules of patriarchal practice” (2004, p. 125). As with so many boys, media and popular culture provided the scared and lonely me with exemplars of tough, violent, dominant, hard men and beautiful, compliant, sexually available, soft women. Connell and Messerschmidt note: “hegemony works in part through the production of exemplars of masculinity (e.g., professional sports stars), symbols that have authority despite the fact that most men and boys do not fully live up to them” (2005, p. 846).

Thus, I grew up as an intense NBA fan and tried to find my own masculinity on neighborhood basketball courts. I also looked to the movies. One of my favorites is a 1979 cult classic about surreal street gangs battling on the streets and subways of New York, *The Warriors*, and I often imagined myself as a character in the film, waging my own heroic urban warfare and then walking home in the rosy glow of dawn, arm around a sexy woman I had just met, scarred but alive and manly. I collected comic books and passionately devoured stories of hypermasculine superheroes like Thor and the Hulk and Captain America, and the hypersexualized female cartoons they hung out with. I became a fan of loud, angry, punk music, drank a lot, and (reluctantly and with a lot of trepidation) threw

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/sojo/article-pdf/3/2/49/11353613/sojo-06-2018-0005en.pdf by guest on 28 June 2026

myself into a few mosh pits where sweaty men pummeled each other with joy for unknown reasons. I avidly watched police shows like *S.W.A.T., Hill Street Blues*, and *NYPD Blue* and soaked in all of the images of tough guy hoodlums and "hard as nails" cops engaged in macho conflicts. I discovered my father's *Playboy* magazines and elatedly studied the two-dimensional airbrushed images of naked women found behind the provocative covers. (I hadn't yet discovered René Magritte's *Treachery of Images,* inscribed with his challenge "Ceci n'est pas une pipe," so I didn't realize yet that the centerfolds should have said "This is not a woman.") Later, a friend and I would visit strip clubs, hoping to see the paper women come to life before our eyes, not seeing the figures on the stage as real human beings. Like most of my students, to me it was all just entertainment, and it would be a long time before I discovered critical theory, feminism, and media literacy.

People who know me now would have a hard time imagining me as that skinny scared boy. I'm about 6 feet tall. Not that long ago I weighed more than 270 pounds. I have a shaved head and a goatee. I seem to glower a lot, even when I don't intend to. I guess you could call it resting bastard face. Several years ago I was walking through Grand Central Station when a man sitting against a wall called out to me: "Hey, Stone Cold!" I knew he was referencing Steve Austin, the professional wrestler known for his brutality and ferocity. Go ahead, Google his picture. I guess there is a slight resemblance. Austin's more muscular than I am. He fits the hypermasculine image better than I do. Part of me liked it when this happened, enjoyed being associated with that type of hegemonic masculinity.

But I wasn't always physically intimidating, and I knew what it was like to be bullied. I also did some bullying. It seems like there is always someone below you on the pecking order, a kid who even a picked on kid can pick on. I remember shoving one boy on the stairs at my elementary school, pinning another down on the field where we used to play.

I can't remember ever calling another boy faggot, but I wouldn't be surprised if I did. I remember one boy in particular during elementary school. Dwayne (not his real name) was skinny and had long red hair. He seemed effeminate to me and other boys in my class before we even knew what that word meant. Dwayne could be really obnoxious, needling and insulting to other kids, including me. I remember he and I argued a lot and annoyed each other. I also remember pushing him a few times and challenging him to fight.

Did I call him names like faggot or gay or pussy? Did I demean his masculinity? Probably. I don't remember. Maybe I have blocked it out because it doesn't fit easily within my self-image today. I know as a boy I felt scared, and I responded to that fear by embracing a lot of stereotypical hypermasculine traits that I found in the media and popular culture that I loved: sports, music, television, movies, comic books. There are several definitions of hypermasculinity in the academic literature, but I use the term to refer to the strongest bars of the masculinity cage: toughness, aggression, dominance, violence, lack of emotion (except anger), lack of empathy, heterosexism, misogyny. Like so many other boys, my fear pushed me right into this cage. It felt safer in there.

As I traveled from elementary to middle to high school, anger became the easiest emotion for me to express. In high school I felt like I had to adopt a tough guy pose in order to keep other boys from targeting me. I didn't play organized sports, I took honors classes, I read a lot, I auditioned for plays, I was shy around girls. All of those qualities had the potential to mark me as a likely target for bullies. I had to figure out how I could establish my masculinity despite those attributes that challenged the hypermasculine stereotype.

As modeled by my popular culture heroes, like the Hulk, anger became my solution. I developed a persona as a "hothead." I became a boy who responded with aggression every time he felt disrespected. I remember standing at the bottom of a flight of stairs and yelling "cocksucker" at a boy who had said something

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/sojo/article-pdf/3/2/49/11353613/sojo-06-2018-0005en.pdf by guest on 28 June 2026

nasty to me. Cocksucker. There's another term that is meant to emasculate, to humiliate another man or boy with the specter of queerness.

I was always actually afraid to fight, and there usually seemed to be enough people around to keep a fight from going too far. Mostly there were shoving matches, scuffles. Like a lot of boys I was terrified of real fistfights but I was more afraid of being targeted. So building a façade of toughness seemed like a better strategy than trying to keep my head low and hope that somehow the bullies and the tough guys would overlook me.

This is the paradox that so many boys find themselves in. They don't want to fight but they feel they have to. The heroes they find in the media reinforce the notion that fighting is the only solution. Boys believe they have to hide their authentic selves in order to be accepted by their peer group, in order to take the target off their backs.

Kimmel writes about this in *Guyland*:

> Violence, or the threat of violence, is a main element of the Guy Code: Its use, legitimacy, and effectiveness are all well understood by most adolescent guys. They use violence when necessary to test and prove their manhood, and when others don't measure up, they make them pay. (2008, p. 57)

That was me. Except, as with many boys, it wasn't. That wasn't really who I was. As Katz describes in the Media Education Foundation films about masculinity and media, *Tough Guise* (Jhally, 1999) and *Tough Guise 2* (Jhally, 2013) it was just that: a guise, a mask, a pose.

I didn't want to fight. I didn't want to be angry all of the time. After high school I started drinking a lot, another way young men try to fit in and prove their manhood. Like so many of us, when I drank I would get into confrontations with other drunken men. A few times it got physical but mostly it was just bluster.

The one time I got seriously physically hurt by violence was during a pickup basketball game. In my 20s I played basketball almost every day, and on the court my temper and tough guy pose really came out. I had many confrontations, exchanges of threats, shoves, near fights. One day I got nailed.

I was playing at a schoolyard with a friend and a group of guys we didn't know. The man who was guarding me was playing very physically—lots of grabbing, shoving, taunting. Finally we squared off, the first punch he threw missed and I laughed. The second punch didn't miss. He got me. Hard. His knuckles bit into the soft skin under my right eye and I was out on my feet. A large gash opened up and I began bleeding profusely.

The other men separated us, and the guy who punched me offered to take me to the emergency room to get stitched up. It was like the violence had bonded us somehow. Now that he had proven his dominance over me he felt free to be my friend. I declined his offer and my buddy drove me to the hospital, but not without urging me to not bleed on the leather seats in his new pickup truck. (Aren't young men empathetic?)

Anyone who has ever experienced it knows that actually getting punched is nothing like getting hit in the movies or comic books. I wasn't about to continue my adventure like Captain America would have. I was out of commission. My eye had instantly swollen shut, I had a raging headache that lasted for days, blood seemed to flow continuously out of my face. I was in real pain and I felt cold and dizzy.

As I was waiting in the emergency room, using my T-shirt to staunch the blood that was dripping into my beard, down my body, and onto my sneakers, a guy sat down next to me. I nodded, and as guys do, said, "How you doing …" I'll never forget: He looked at me and replied, "Better than you, man."

Better than you, man. Wow. It was true. I was a mess—physically and psychically. My tough guy pose had failed me. My big mouth on the basketball court had finally gotten me into real trouble. I had run full speed into the fist of violent masculinity.

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/sojo/article-pdf/3/2/49/11353613/sojo-06-2018-0005en.pdf by guest on 28 June 2026

I told myself that day that I would change. I would stop talking shit on the basketball court, I would drop the tough guy pose. It would be great if that's where this narrative could go: "The Moment That Changed Everything."

Unfortunately when I said I would change I was lying to myself. Change is possible but it's not easy. It's not all at once or all or nothing. A brilliant scholar that eventually would help me understand intersectionality, the connections between race and class and sexuality and gender and power, puts it this way: "It's not true that men are unwilling to change. It is true that many men are afraid to change. It is true that masses of men have not even begun to look at the ways that patriarchy keeps them from knowing themselves, from being in touch with their feelings, from loving" (hooks, 2004, p. xvii).

I mellowed out for a while, but in the months and years to come I would have plenty more confrontations. Pitting my masculinity against opponents on the basketball court. Swearing at drivers who tailgated or cut me off in traffic. Reacting to perceptions of disrespect with a confrontational stance. Sometimes I would call other men "bitches," knowing that feminizing another man was the greatest insult in our patriarchal misogynistic culture (Jensen, 2007).

Hypermasculinity was too ingrained in me, too much a part of my self-image for me to purge it all at once. As noted above, getting punched in real life is nothing like getting punched in the movies. Another difference: in the world we actually inhabit, unlike the Hollywood world, we rarely have transcendent moments that radically transform us in an instant. Change is gradual, a nonlinear process, there is plenty of backsliding. Even now I sometimes fall into the masculinity trap. Even now I still have a temper, I still sometimes adopt the tough guy pose. I know now that it comes out when I feel challenged.

My own version of hypermasculinity was centered on being tough and having a hypersensitive attitude about being disrespected. This toughness imperative is common for men but hypermasculinity is usually intertwined with misogyny as well (hooks, 2004). We prove our masculinity by distancing ourselves from the feminine. This means everything feminine must first be degraded. That's why the faggot term is about gender as well as sexuality (Pascoe, 2011). I bought into the codes of hypermasculinity in many ways but I feel lucky that contemptuous misogyny was never particularly alluring for me and I saw through it, at least partially, early on.

Despite this, every time I called another man a bitch I was reinforcing our patriarchal misogynistic culture. To paraphrase Adorno (paraphrasing Nietzsche), it was like the language was speaking me instead of me speaking the language (Adorno, 1991). This doesn't deflect from my own behavior; certainly there have also been times in my life where I have objectified women. But the "women are worthy of contempt" thing? I never derived any sense of strength from that unlike many other hypermasculine men.

I don't know why. I grew up in the same patriarchal misogynistic culture other American boys and girls grow up in: A culture that tells us everyday that women are not as capable as men, women exist solely to serve men's needs, it's okay to demean women, treat them poorly, ridicule them. Valenti begins her irreverent book, *Full Frontal Feminism*, like this:

> What's the worst possible thing you can call a woman? Don't hold back now. You're probably thinking of words like slut, whore, bitch, cunt (I told you not to hold back!), skank. Okay, now, what are the worst things you can call a guy? Fag, girl, bitch, pussy. I've even heard the term "mangina." Notice anything? The worst thing you can call a girl is a girl. The worst thing you can call a guy is a girl. Being a woman is the ultimate insult. Now tell me that's not royally fucked up. (Valenti, 2007, p. 5)

Despite living much of my life in the hypermasculine cage, contemptuous misogyny was never my thing. Maybe it's because I grew up with three loving older sisters: strong, compe-

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/sojo/article-pdf/3/2/49/11353613/sojo-06-2018-0005en.pdf by guest on 28 June 2026

tent, smart. But many misogynistic men must also have women like that in their lives. Maybe it's because the most significant older men in my early life, my father and my brother, never actively modeled misogyny for me. Maybe my rejection of white supremacist thinking, encouraged by the Black literature I was reading, and the critique of capitalism I learned from Marx and my father, helped prime me to be opposed to patriarchy as well. Without patriarchy, misogyny has no purchase. Whatever the reason, I seemed to sense early on that misogyny is built on lies and fear. Of course, underneath I knew that about the tough guy pose as well. It's something I have to think about more. Why did I buy into the tough guise but not the misogyny that is so closely linked with it? I don't fully know the answer to this but I do know the rejection of misogyny offered an opportunity. This is what opened the masculinity cage door just a crack.

I believe my rejection of misogynistic thinking and my first forays into critical media literacy education led me to an eventual embrace of feminism. And feminism aided me in questioning other aspects of hypermasculinity, including violence, dominance, and aggression. Feminism, for example, helped me understand that violence is primarily a male thing. No matter how much our popular culture tries to ignore the connection, however much media obsess about the rare exceptions, violence belongs to us boys. Writing shortly after the 2016 mass shooting at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Hamblin (2016) wrote:

> Stemming the violence, then, means deconstructing hate. It means considering every element in the creation and enabling of so many psychopaths. And one that tends to be overlooked—widely known but narrowly considered— is the simple fact that almost all mass murderers are men. As of 2014, *Time* cited the number at 98%. That makes masculinity a more common feature than any of the elements that tend to dominate discourse [about mass shootings]—religion, race, nationality, political affiliation, or any history of mental illness.

Or, as Chuck D. of the rap group Public Enemy, reflected: "I was talking to my assistant a couple of months back, and while we were talking about the obvious differences in men and women, I had to give up and say that men couldn't handle the period cycle that women go through. She countered and told me men do have periods … they're called WARS" (Ridenhour, 2001).

While I reject this equating of a natural biological cycle with the devastation of unnecessary wars, one thing Chuck D.'s assistant got right is that it is indeed men who usually start the wars (Margaret Thatcher and a few other exceptions set aside) even if we blame women… like Helen of Troy. It is men who commit the vast majority of violent crimes. It is men who continually invent new weapons and new ways to kill people, including the remote controlled drones that allow soldiers to inflict death and destruction while sitting in a sterile office and then drive home and take the kids to a ball game. It is men whose gender performances feature domination through violence or threats of violence.

Rejecting hypermasculinity means rejecting misogyny, something that came relatively easily to me, but it also means rejecting other forms of aggression and domination as well. And this is where I have needed some help.

Just like most of you who are reading this essay, I grew up in a culture that is both obsessed with, and in many ways blind to, biological sex and gender. The obsessive aspect of this begins with our need to classify every person into a binary sexual system. As Frye puts it:

> Sex-identification intrudes into every moment of our lives and discourse, no matter what the supposedly primary focus or topic of the moment is. Elaborate, systematic, ubiquitous and redundant marking of a distinction between two sexes of humans and most animals is customary and obligatory. One never can ignore it. (1983, p. 19)

Our obsession with categorizing biological sex leads us to an equally obsessive preoccu-

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/sojo/article-pdf/3/2/49/11353613/sojo-06-2018-0005en.pdf by guest on 28 June 2026

pation with gender difference, most obvious in the ways we valorize hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity. Just look around you. Pick up nearly any mass market magazine. Look at the ads. Look at the differing patterns of representation for men and women. As scholars ranging from Erving Goffman (1988) to Jean Kilbourne (1999) and others have pointed out, women in advertisements appear smaller than men, less active, less powerful, more concerned about physical appearance, more sexually available and vulnerable, more childlike.

And it's not just advertising but most of the cultural environment—take in a few hours of television, go to a few Hollywood films, watch some music videos on YouTube, browse social media, check out a basketball or football game. Over and over again we see the same patterns: hypersexualized women preening seductively for the real or imagined male gaze, and hyperviolent men demonstrating their masculinity through strength, intimidation, and aggression. This means that a critical understanding of media and popular culture is central to changing the harmful gender performance patterns that so many of us adopt without thinking. There is no simplistic cause and effect relationship between images and behavior, but there are other subtle, but still powerful, influences that are not as easy to see. This is why children and adults, men, women, and transgendered people, all of us need critical media literacy education. Katz notes:

> I argue that media do not directly cause violence, but that violent masculinity is a cultural norm … since media is the great pedagogical—or teaching—force of our time, it is critical to examine the stories we tell in media that link violence and masculinity… Once people understand better the way media representations help to shape people's identities and thus to affect their behavior, the negative images will have less of a pernicious effect. (2006, p. 251)

For example, there is a very simple exercise that I do with students in my media literacy and popular culture classes. First, do a Google Images search for "Cosmopolitan Magazine." Take a look at the article titles listed on the covers and the appearance of the women. You'll immediately notice the women are uniformly thin, highly made up, displaying lots of cleavage. Here is a sample of articles from just one of the first covers that popped up when I did this search:

- 10 Things Guys Crave in Bed;
- The Surprising Trait That 80% of Men Find Sexy;
- Tight Abs: Our No-Crunch Workout;
- Read His Dirty Mind: These Thoughts Could Make a Cosmo Girl Blush; and
- Beauty Tips That Save You Bucks.

Try it yourself. Look at several issues. The patterns are unmistakable and they range across the world of magazines targeting women and girls and out into the rest of our popular culture.

Now do a Google Images search for "Action Films." See what comes up this time. Bruce Willis, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Will Smith, Jackie Chan, Dwayne "the Rock" Johnson, Jean-Claude Van Damme. Buff, oiled-up men with fists clenched, often holding large guns in their sweaty, muscular hands.

The women on Cosmo covers are for fucking. The men in the action film posters are for fighting. This is putting it crudely, but the images and narratives themselves are binary and crude. That's the equation for much of our popular culture and the framing of masculinity and femininity. Okay, maybe that's simplifying it a little. It's not just fucking or fighting. Women fuck *and* shop. Men fuck, fight, *and* watch sports.

You might say I stacked the deck by the terms I had you search for and you would be right. Cosmo and action films? Very sophisticated analysis, Professor. Look, we know what we are going to find. But keep this in mind: Just because I rigged the results doesn't mean these images aren't out there, or that they don't range across a wide variety of media products, or that they aren't highly influential in shaping

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/sojo/article-pdf/3/2/49/11353613/sojo-06-2018-0005en.pdf by guest on 28 June 2026

our perceptions of what it means to be a man or woman. As Faludi notes about blind spots in modern notions of American masculinity in crisis: "It should be self-evident that ideas of manhood vary and are contingent on the times and the culture. Despite that, contemporary discussion about what bedevils men fixes almost exclusively on the psychological and the biological" (1999, p. 15). In other words, we ignore social and cultural influences on gender while obsessing about individual psyches and bodies.

Does popular culture include other, more complicated or nuanced images of men and women then the ones I just offered? Of course it does. But images like those are often the most widely distributed and profitable. I've seen diverse representations of men in small budget independent films and I've seen different images of women in *Bitch* magazine, but let's consider how few people those forms of media touch compared to the reach of the top selling women's magazines and the top-grossing Hollywood films.

So yes, our culture is obsessed with sex and gender. But not just any random thoughts about gender. We are obsessed with very particular stereotypical images of gender difference that frame women through their looks and sexuality and men through their muscles and violence. Yet, when feminist scholars and educators point out that violence is a guy thing, as I just did above, we often get accused of male bashing. And here is where we get to the blindness part of the dichotomy. Most cultures are indeed obsessed with sex and gender. Think about the first question we ask when we hear that a woman has had a baby. Think about our reactions when we encounter an androgynous or transgender person and our compulsive need to classify them. Think about the recent moral panic over gender-neutral bathrooms and access for transgender people. But when it comes to confronting male violence suddenly we are supposed to become gender-blind. Just as so called "color blindness" is a convenient way of refusing to confront the continuing power of racism and white privilege in the enlightened 21st century, strategic gender-blindness allows us to ignore the damage wrought by misogyny and hypermasculinity. Wise writes about what sociologist and critical race theorist Bonilla-Silva (2014) calls color-blind racism in this way:

> Colorblind racism refers to the dominant white racial ideology of the modern era, in which Whites, under the guise of being color-blind, refuse to acknowledge the reality of racism and reject any consideration of how their own racial identity provides them with privileges vis-à-vis people of color. (Wise, 2010, p. 23)

Let's play a little word game and see how easily we can use this conceptualization to also think about the role of gender-blindness in reinforcing contemporary systems of inequality. Taking liberty with Wise's words, if we just switch gender terms for race terms we see how seamlessly the patterns intersect:

> [Gender-blind sexism] refers to the dominant [male gender] ideology of the modern era in which [men], under the guise of being [gender-blind], refuse to acknowledge the reality of [sexism] and reject any consideration of how their own [gender] identity provides them with privileges vis-à-vis [women].

Indeed, just like the colorblind ideology, gender-blindness seems to be the order of the day whenever it is convenient to ignore the role of patriarchy in perpetuating systems of oppression and violence. A while back I was listening to NPR in my car. (Of course, that's what I listen to as a progressive feminist because it's the best place to find liberal, man-hating news, no?) A trio of stories came on that were all profoundly disturbing. The first was about the slaying of an entire family by one of its own members. The second was about the hazing and murder by beating of a reportedly gay band member at a Florida university. The third was about the apparent suicide of the pro-football player Junior Seau by a gunshot to the chest.

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/sojo/article-pdf/3/2/49/11353613/sojo-06-2018-0005en.pdf by guest on 28 June 2026

Aside from tragic violence and death, what did all three stories have in common? You can probably guess where I am going with this. Men were the perpetrators of the violence in each case. Yet gender was *never* mentioned in any of the three stories. From a social scientific perspective, a consistent and primary independent variable was completely ignored. This is typical in media reports of violence. As Kellner points out: "Whenever there have been school shootings over the past decade there is rarely a discussion of the role of the social construction of masculinity and gun culture in the shooting, and rarely do headlines describe the shooters as 'boys' or 'males,' usually preferring gender-neutral descriptions" (2008, p. 121). hooks similarly takes note of this media absence:

> Every day on our television screens and in the nation's newspapers we are brought news of continued male violence at home and all around the world. When we hear that teenage boys are arming themselves and killing their parents, their peers, or strangers, a sense of alarm permeates our culture. Folks want to have answers.… Yet no one talks about the role patriarchal notions of manhood play in teaching boys it is their nature to kill, then teaching them that they can do nothing to change this nature—nothing, that is, that will leave their masculinity intact. As our culture prepares males to embrace war, they must be all the more indoctrinated into patriarchal thinking that tells them that it is their nature to kill and to enjoy killing. (2004, p. 11)

Is it male bashing to point out statistical realities? And why are we so reluctant to identify patriarchy as the cause of violence, as hooks (2004) notes? Should we just fall into the "boys will be boys" camp and let men off the hook for the violence we commit? If that's the case then I guess we can't really confront the connections between patriarchy and misogyny either.

Let's consider Tiger Woods and his climb back to the pinnacle of popular fame. Just a few years after his fall, when allegations of serial adultery were revealed to the public, Woods was again signing new endorsement deals worth millions. Now, my own belief is that Woods' infidelities should really only have concerned him and his wife. But what is usually ignored, both during his original crisis and his quick recovery in the public imagination, was the way sex and violence were mingled in the text messages he sent to one of his "love" interests:

> I want to treat you rough. Throw you around, spank and slap you. Slap your face. Treat you like a dirty little whore. Put my cock in your ass and then shove it down your throat. You are my fucking whore. Hold you down while I choke you and Fuck that ass that I own. Then I'm going to tell you to shut the Fuck up while I slap your face and pull your hair for making noise.

Touching. Yet most of the constant media coverage around Woods missed this part of the story. How much does Woods hate women if this is his idea of foreplay? Or are he and we just caught up in a widespread culture of pornography that frames violence and misogyny as sexy? As Jensen argues, "the way sex is done in pornography is becoming more and more cruel and degrading at the same time that pornography is becoming more normalized than ever" (2007, p. 16).

Misogynistic attitudes and behaviors actually seem to enhance public figures' popularity. Donald Trump's climb to the top of the Republican race for president in 2016 seemed to be facilitated by every misogynistic remark he made. People forget Charlie Sheen had a history of violence against women long before his strange behavior became a big media story. But his multiple incidents never seemed to have any negative impact on his career as he continued to star in a hit prime time sitcom long after his aggression became public. NFL player Ben Roethlisberger was accused more than once of sexual assault against women. His penalty? A six-game suspension quickly reduced to four. Just a few weeks before writing this essay I saw a young boy wearing a Roethlisberger jersey. What do you think cul-

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/sojo/article-pdf/3/2/49/11353613/sojo-06-2018-0005en.pdf by guest on 28 June 2026

tural heroes like Woods, Trump, Sheen, and Roethlisberger imagine when they think about women?

Because in many ways this is about men's misogynistic imaginations, and our imaginations are powerfully shaped by the culture we are immersed in. How does another sports hero, Brett Favre, imagine women if he thought sending a picture of his penis would be enough to get a female New York Jets employee to come running to his hotel room? Former New York Representative Anthony Weiner also seemed to share the belief that photos of his penis would function as a great aphrodisiac. Granted, neither Favre nor Weiner were accused of violence against women, but maybe we might consider texting a photo of your penis to be a bit … macho? Or is their notion of women falling totally under a man's control with just one look at his penis something they absorbed from the world of pornography?

I could go on and on listing misogynistic men who are powerful leaders or cultural icons. Stories like this are common in the worlds of media, entertainment, sports, and politics. These are just a few of the arenas where hypermasculine, misogynistic, and sometimes-violent men are consistently rewarded for aggressive and domineering behavior. Just like in pornography. What is amazing is not that these events happen but how quickly the men who perpetrate these deeds are able to shrug off public disapproval and climb back to their privileged aeries. Sure, Weiner ended up having to resign from public office but is it unimaginable or predictable that he will climb the power ladder again? According to Wikipedia's entry on Weiner:

> Less than a month after leaving Congress, Weiner created the consulting firm Woolf-Weiner Associates in July 2011, where he advised over a dozen companies including electronic medical records providers, biofuel firms, and worked with Covington & Burling, an international law firm. His work helped increase his combined family income to $496,000 in 2012, according to public disclosures ("Anthony Weiner," 2016, "Post-congressional consulting and lobbying work," para.1).

Reportedly, even before he resigned Weiner was offered a cameo spot on the supremely misogynistic HBO program, *Entourage* (What's Next for Anthony Weiner?, 2011). As *Entourage* teaches its viewers: Bros gotta hang together, right?

What is both stunning and perfectly predictable is that the terms misogyny and patriarchy almost never come up in public discussions of male entertainers, athletes, politicians, and other powerful men who either commit violence against women or exhibit little but contempt for the women they attempt to seduce with their witty and engaging banter about the sizes of their penises.

Most obviously in the world of pornography, but also in many other forms of popular culture, sex and violence often get mixed together in a strange noxious brew. Dines has noted that today's pornography reveals "an overt hatred for women that is evidenced in the dialogue and the fascination with body-punishing sex, such as frequent references to how much the woman can take before she breaks." (2015, p. 367). Sounds a lot like Tiger Wood's sexting fantasies quoted above.

While sexuality and danger have historically been intertwined in media and popular culture going back to early films and romance novels, only in patriarchal misogynistic cultures can the diametrically opposed acts of human sexual touch and violence become blurred to such an extreme extent. In some ways I feel lucky I grew up in the days before the Internet brought violent pornography so easily into children's lives. As a young man the closest I came to pornography were the times noted above when I snuck into the back of my father's closet and stole peeks at the stacks of *Playboy* magazines he kept there. Of course, feminist scholars have rightly identified the inherent misogyny behind *Playboy*'s categorizing of women as decorative objects only really worthwhile for sex or masturbatory fantasies. As Dines puts it, *Playboy* and its imi-

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/sojo/article-pdf/3/2/49/11353613/sojo-06-2018-0005en.pdf by guest on 28 June 2026

tators "taught boys and men that women existed to be looked at, objectified, used, and put away until the next time" (2010, p. xvii). I agree with this argument about the cultural influence of even soft-core pornography, but in the magazines I gazed at in the 1970s at least there were no explicit images of sexualized violence amidst the soft focus photos of naked women lounging on silken sheets.

However, as the 20th century rolled on, and much of U.S. society embraced a backlash against the struggles for women's equality (Faludi, 1991; Wolf, 1991), violence and sex became less and less distinct, more and more articulated, in the pages of magazines like *Hustler*, in Hollywood films, and, eventually, on the Internet where the most extreme images now thrive and proliferate. This is not to say that violence against women is only now being sexualized. Take a look at a few Hitchcock films to dispel that notion (shower anyone?), or even, some might say, the strangulation scene in *Othello*. But I do believe my children will have to navigate a more dangerous media landscape, where misogyny and sexualized violence against women are more widely available and, in some ways, more celebrated, then they were when I was a young man.

But this sexualized violence is framed as "just entertainment" and we really aren't supposed to think too deeply about it. In fact, there really isn't much room for thinking at all in the hypermasculine cage. Young American men have long been taught to value their muscles over their brains, after all the United States has a defiantly proud history of anti-intellectualism (Hofstadter, 1963; Jacoby, 2008). But this (anti)philosophy is even more powerful today than it was just a couple of decades ago, when the most impressive aspect of an iconic movie character like Good Will Hunting was not his ability to use his fists but his ability to use his mind.

In the past several years there has been a cultural transformation of historical male figures, both fictional and nonfictional, whose fame was born of their intellectual capabilities, into action figures who love to kick ass and blow shit up. While Arthur Conan Doyle did refer to Sherlock Holmes as a skilled boxer, knowledgeable in several martial arts, this was usually not central to the stories. However, in the 2009 Hollywood reimagining of Sherlock Holmes, his master intellect became window dressing while Holmes was recast as a full-blown vigilante and ultimate fighter. Explosions and violent confrontations seem to rival expert deductions in the adventures of the new hypermasculine Sherlock Holmes.

Similarly, Abraham Lincoln now wields an ax like a martial arts expert while hunting vampires. Who needs book learnin' and careful contemplation when a mallet and a wooden stake can solve our nation's problems? (Actually, there are interesting metaphoric parallels between vampires and 19th century slaveholders, but I digress …) I guess it shouldn't be surprising that the author of the best-selling *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* (also a 2012 Hollywood movie) first brought us *The Big Book of Porn* in 2005. There was even a lot of Internet buzz about a Hollywood film that was going to depict Sir Isaac Newton as an action hero. (Understanding the universal laws of motion will allow me to kick your ass!) You might say all of this is just meant to be good fun, but that begs the question—why is violence considered sexy and fun in our culture? Why is violence considered more worthy than intellect?

All previous societies have told stories of violence, but as Gerbner (2002) argued, the violence in mythology, the Bible, Grimm's fairy tales, Shakespeare and the like, reflected moral debates and conveyed cultural mores. It was not violence meant simply to excite our emotions and move product:

> Violence is a legitimate and necessary cultural expression. It is a dramatic balancing of deadly conflicts and compulsions against tragic costs. Even catering to morbid and other pathological fascinations may have its poetic or commercial license. Historically limited, individually crafted, and selectively used symbolic misanthropy is not the issue. That has been swamped by television vio-

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/sojo/article-pdf/3/2/49/11353613/sojo-06-2018-0005en.pdf by guest on 28 June 2026

> lence with happy endings produced on the dramatic assembly line, saturating the mainstream of our common culture. (2002, p. 263)

Gerbner coined the term "happy violence" to describe the joyous celebration of violence as a spectacle in much of the commercial media environment. In light of this we should ask what it means for a culture to transform even its most thoughtful and intellectual icons into weapon wielding action stars? What's next, Gandhi kicking British ass with spin kicks and a hidden sword in his cane?

Lest I be accused of a simplistic argument, critical media literacy does not suggest that any particular young man will be turned away from philosophy and toward the Ultimate Fighting Championship just by going to a couple of Robert Downey, Jr. films. But just as saturating a society with stories and images that denigrate women leads to the easy acceptance of misogyny, a culture that continually denigrates the intellect while valorizing violence similarly cannot escape the consequences. Faludi puts it this way:

> By the end of the American Century, every outlet of the consumer world—magazines, ads, movies, sports, music videos—would deliver the message that manhood had become a performance game to be won in the marketplace, not the workplace, and that male anger was now part of the show. An ornamental culture encouraged young men to see surliness, hostility, and violence as expressions of glamour, a way to showcase themselves without being feminized. (1999, p. 37)

A critical media literacy perspective allows us to see that culture matters, that the stories and images that colonize our every waking moments create the social and political worlds we inhabit. The culture of hypermasculinity that Faludi dissects is how we end up with a two-term President like George W. Bush and a leading nominee for the Oval Office like Donald Trump. I don't mean that facetiously or hyperbolically. Bush's macho persona, calculated or not, was thoroughly "shoot first, think later (or never)." Shortly after 9/11, when conservative pundit Ann Coulter said "we should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity," what was this but a moment of happy violence rhetoric that would have been cheered if it had been uttered during a climactic moment of a Vin Diesel movie? And we saw an invigorated return to this in the 2016 presidential primary campaign when Ted Cruz promised a foreign policy of "carpet-bomb[ing] them [terrorists] into oblivion" and making Middle Eastern sands "glow in the dark," and then Trump turned bullying and intimidation into a key part of his appeal to disaffected voters.

Politics, popular culture, pornography, these are all arenas where violence is celebrated, where manliness is equated with aggression, where domination of others is framed as righteous action. Think about the world of sports, one of the primary sites of socialization for boys in the United States and many other places in the world. Many will say participating in sports teaches young people important values such as leadership, cooperation, and teamwork. But sports also teach aggression and domination. Writing about his own conflicted feelings about football, Edmundson muses: "The game can make a player intolerant of gentleness. It can help turn him into a member of a pack that mistreats and even scapegoats others—the weak, the differently made. The game can make men unthinking; their football-based character often seals them off from real reflection" (2014, p. 225).

And it's not just football. Some of my most macho students over the years have been baseball players. Many fans of hockey love the fights more than the game itself and the NHL seems to encourage this. It was on a basketball court where I ran my mouth until I got punched in the face. Watch any NBA game and before long you are sure to see some hypermasculine posturing after a player throws down a dunk in an opponent's face. And, as Steve Almond (2015) points out, the NFL is even worse. In an Associated Press story about ex-NFL player Junior Seau's apparent suicide, a reporter

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/sojo/article-pdf/3/2/49/11353613/sojo-06-2018-0005en.pdf by guest on 28 June 2026

wrote: "The same intensity that got the star linebacker ejected for fighting in his first exhibition game helped carry the Chargers to their only Super Bowl, following the 1994 season. A ferocious tackler, he'd leap up, pump a fist and kick out a leg after dropping a ball carrier or quarterback" (Flaccus, 2012).

This descriptive note was intended as praise not condemnation.

I have to admit I can easily get caught up in this even while I critique it in my teaching and writing. I can't count how many times I jumped up and cheered when Kevin Garnett of the Boston Celtics shucked off an opponent, threw down a dunk, and then glared, bellowed, and intimidated the other team and their fans alike. It's not just sports on television either. Several summers ago, during my son's baseball game, there was a close play at home and the runner on the other team was tagged out. His father yelled from the bleachers, "Next time knock him down!" The boys were 10 years old. I was appalled. How dare he teach his young son that scoring a run was worth potentially hurting another player? I was also angry. Without thinking, I yelled toward the father, "How about I knock *you* down?"

In the famous words of another macho Texas Governor, Rick Perry, after a forgetful moment during a primary debate … "Oops." Upset by the other father's aggression and implied violence I responded with … aggression and the threat of violence. It's apparent my struggle with hypermasculinity continues. This is because identity is a social and cultural practice not a static thing. Connell and Messerschmidt put the word "masculinity" in quotes when they argue that the term "represents not a certain type of man but, rather, a way that men position themselves through discursive practices" (2005, p. 841). My shouting at the other father is thus no less a discursive reaffirmation of hypermasculinity than this essay is a discursive refutation of it.

But even as I struggle I recognize there are consequences of hypermasculinity we can't continue to ignore. Later in the article on Junior Seau, the reporter notes:

> In October 2010, Seau survived a 100-foot plunge down a seaside cliff in his SUV, hours after he was arrested for investigation of domestic violence at the Oceanside home he shared with his girlfriend. The woman had told authorities that Seau assaulted her during an argument. (Flaccus, 2012)

Eventually, as noted above, he would successfully commit suicide. Like Seau and his girlfriend, how many boys and girls, men and women, are trapped in the cage of patriarchal hypermasculinity? I think about my own childhood and then I think about my two daughters and my son.

I don't want my girls to be denigrated, harassed, assaulted, or worse. I don't want my son to denigrate, harass, assault, or worse. Men and women are both caged, but changing hypermasculine culture has to start with men. Men are the perpetrators of most violence and the primary enforcers of hypermasculinity. If men want to escape from the tough guise cage they also have to help other men find their way out. Every man who truly wants to stand against violence, heterosexism, and misogyny has to find his own way toward becoming an activist against patriarchy.

For myself, I see my teaching in the fields of media literacy and critical cultural studies as a type of activism. I know teaching as activism is a controversial notion, but I believe in the Freirean notion of pedagogy as liberatory dialogue not as transmission of information: "Acquiring literacy does not involve memorizing sentences, words, or syllables—lifeless objects unconnected to an existential universe—but rather an attitude of creation and re-creation, a self-transformation producing a stance of intervention in one's own context" (Freire, 2008, p. 43). As bell hooks said, reflecting on her early educational experiences:

> A "good education" was not just one that would give us knowledge and prepare us for a vocation, it was also an education that would encourage an ongoing commitment to

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/sojo/article-pdf/3/2/49/11353613/sojo-06-2018-0005en.pdf by guest on 28 June 2026

> social justice, particularly to the struggle for racial equality. (2010, p. 1)

The focus of this essay is not the complicated and often contentious debates around teaching and objectivity. But I will note briefly that the whole notion of teachers as neutral, ideologically blank, robotic conveyors of objective information is simply absurd.

I wear my ideological heart on my sleeve when I teach and make little attempt to disguise my point of view. But I also believe teaching should be a dialogue, and I explain to students that I want them to think for themselves, speak their mind, and not just replace someone else's dogma with my dogma.

A key conversation that I encourage in the classroom is one that focuses on gender, power, and how we got to this place of diametrically opposed hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity. I want every student in my classroom to think and talk about the many ways our culture is defined by oppressive hypermasculine ideologies, and how we can walk away from these constraints.

This can be a challenging conversation for some students. We are all caught up in the culture of hypermasculinity in one way or another, and as I have reflected on in this essay, it can be extremely difficult, even for those who are unsatisfied with the status quo, to change our ingrained and unconscious beliefs, reactions, desires, and behaviors. Sometimes students resist being challenged. They certainly resist any mention of the word feminism—almost all of the men and most of the women. But they have been enculturated to be suspicious of feminism without fully understanding the concept and their resistance is part of a process. They have to be given the space to gradually work through years of hypermasculine and hyperfeminine socialization. Some will never really give the challenge a chance. But I find most students are actually eager to talk about all of this. They want to discuss hypermasculinity, hyperfeminity, misogyny, gender stereotypes, etc. And they usually have a lot to say. Even if students haven't thought about these issues consciously, they clearly have an impact on their everyday lives and relationships, and the minute they start talking their beliefs and feelings come pouring out.

My job when this happens is to channel feeling into thinking, to challenge them, to push them to consider alternative ways of considering gender and power, to get them to look beyond the stereotypes and really question why they are resistant to the word feminism. To encourage them to see how men, women, and transgendered people might all buy into misogynistic ideologies and that this conversation isn't just about other people … it's about them. And it's about me too.

It's hard work and sometimes it's frustrating. But I have a lot of support because I never walk into the classroom alone. When I challenge my students to think critically about gender and power I do it alongside all of the scholars and authors and educators I have personally encountered or met through their writing. When we discuss gender in my classes I have bell hooks and Michael Kimmel with me. I come into the classroom with Gail Dines and Robert Jensen. Naomi Wolf is there and Jackson Katz and Sut Jhally. In fact, it can get pretty crowded: Angela Davis, Jessica Valenti, Alfredo Mirande, Jack Banks, Lori Bindig, Doug Kellner, Lynne Phillips, Michael Morgan, the Susans (Bordo, Douglas, and Faludi), Laura Mulvey, Melissa Harris-Perry, Dwight McBride, Ariel Levy, Claudio Moreira, Erica Sharrer, Leda Cooks, Larry Gross, Jean Kilbourne, Carol Stabile, Katherine Sender, Janice Radway, Lisa Henderson, C.J. Pascoe, Mark Anthony Neal, my grad-school amigas Nina Huntemann, Silvina Berti and Chyng Sun, Patricia Hill Collins, Robin Andersen, Julie Frechette, and many more. I'm fortunate to be able to call a few of these people friends. Some have been my teachers. Most I have just read. But collectively they function as an abundant resource for the ideas I want to explore with my students. And as I continue to read and talk with colleagues the crowd keeps growing larger.

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/sojo/article-pdf/3/2/49/11353613/sojo-06-2018-0005en.pdf by guest on 28 June 2026

My father is there too. And so is my son. Escaping from the shackles of patriarchy and hypermasculinity is a process. It can take a while. I have been struggling for most of my life with those chains and I want my son to break free more than I have just as I've tried to go beyond what my father was able to do. Don't get me wrong, my father was a good person, a progressive person, especially considering he was born in 1911 (my father was 9 years old when the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified). As noted above, my father was a Marxist who taught me to despise oppressive structural forces, to respect all human beings, and to fight for justice and equality. My father taught me how white supremacy and capitalism degrade human dignity. But he never said very much about patriarchy or misogyny or homophobia. My father also didn't explicitly say, "I love you" very often. I know he loved me because of the affection he showed and because he worked so hard, for so little money, to take care of my siblings and me. But his version of masculinity constrained him in many ways—verbally, physically. Toward the end of her beautiful, self-reflexive book on culture and the male body, Bordo relates a story of a phone call with her 80-year old father that reveals we are never too old to start to dismantle the cage of patriarchal hypermasculinity. Talking with her about Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill, Bordo's father starts from a typically patriarchal perspective: that Hill was lying, Thomas was pure. But during the call something happens:

> He asked me questions. He listened to my answers. He interjected, but with genuine curiosity and respect, silently acknowledging my greater expertise and experience. By the end of the phone conversation my 80-year old Jewish father, remarkably, had "gotten it." (2000, p. 332)

Walking away from hypermasculinity is a process. I want to go further than my father. I want my son to go further than me. I talk to my own kids about social justice and liberation, about racism and misogyny and classism and heterosexism. I tell my daughters and my son that I love them every single day, usually multiple times a day. I hug them and kiss them constantly. I cry at all of their school events, and I'm not ashamed of this, even though they tease me about it. I want my girls and my boy to see a different type of masculinity. I want them to know that stereotypes of masculinity and femininity are limitations on personal freedom. I want them to know I am a feminist.

This is a process. I want my boy to be a better man than I am. He is already so much better than I ever was as a child. Nate is surrounded by women who embrace feminism: his mother, his stepmom, his sisters, at least some of his aunts. One night, when he was just 10, we were watching a basketball game. He turned to me during a timeout and said, "Dad, how come this channel doesn't have any women announcers?" I hadn't noticed that myself but he was right. I told him there is still a lot of gender discrimination in media and that he was correct, they should have more women. This thought would have never occurred to me at 10. Okay, let's be honest, it probably wouldn't have occurred to me at 20. He is already so much better than I am.

Nate is totally comfortable with being a human being instead of hiding behind some kind of stereotype of what a boy is supposed to be. During one of his soccer games I noticed him hugging teammates who had made a good play. Some of the boys seemed uncomfortable with this, but Nate just didn't care.

This is a process. I know Nate is going to have some hard times and he is going to have to negotiate his way through a patriarchal culture that still glorifies hypermasculinity. He really has been told to "walk it off" when he hurt himself during gym, and he found this profoundly unfair. In fifth grade the girls in his class decided that on Tuesdays they were going to wear tutus. They called it Tutu Tuesday. When Tuesday came around Nate borrowed a pink tutu from his sister and wore it over his jeans. Another boy said to him, "What's it going to be next week, Nathan is gay day?" Nate was troubled, not so much by

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/sojo/article-pdf/3/2/49/11353613/sojo-06-2018-0005en.pdf by guest on 28 June 2026

being called gay, but by the hostility he felt from a boy he had considered a friend. When I called the other boy's parents to talk about the incident his mother said "who knows what really happened" and, when I tried to pursue it further, she hung up on me.

After I discussed the comment with Nate's teacher and principal, the other boy was told to apologize, which he did. But here's the main point: Just a few weeks later Nate invited him to his birthday party. (See, I told you he is already a better man than I am.) Being able to forgive is also a challenge to hypermasculinity and the tendency to hold onto our rage.

This is a process. But feminist men have to do all we can to move this thing along. It's taking us too long to make empathy, rather than cruelty, hegemonic. Faludi's words from almost 2 decades ago are more relevant than ever: "As men struggle to free themselves from their crisis, their task is not, in the end, to figure out how to be masculine—rather, their masculinity lies in figuring out how to be human" (1999, p. 607). It's far too late in the day for patriarchy, misogyny, heterosexism, and hypermasculinity to be as powerful as they still are. We have to confront ourselves and each other. We have to work individually, collectively, and politically to dismantle the gender cages and to push for social change. We have to make it easier for our children to see through the myths, half-truths, and lies that our culture accepts as "just commonsense." I struggle with this matrix every day, but my son is already doing so much better than I did as a child. I struggle to be what Hagan (1998) calls a Good Man and I want my son to be a good man as well. I have to admit, sometimes it's not easy for either of us, as Hagan acknowledges:

> For both men and women, Good Men can be somewhat disturbing to be around because they usually do not act in ways associated with typical men: they listen more than they talk; they self-reflect on their behavior and motives, they actively educate themselves about women's reality by seeking out women's culture and listening to women while not imposing on sacred ground. They avoid using women for vicarious emotional expression; they can offer observations about a woman's internalized oppression without judgment or sarcasm; they ask permission before touching. When they err—and they do err—they look to women for guidance, and receive criticism with gratitude. They practice enduring uncertainty while waiting for a new way of being to reveal previously unconsidered alternatives to controlling and abusive behavior. They intervene in other men's misogynist behavior, even when women aren't present, and they work hard to recognize and challenge their own. Perhaps most amazingly, Good Men perceive the value of a feminist practice for themselves, and they advocate it not because it's politically correct, or because they want women to like them, or even because they want women to have equality, but because they understand that male privilege prevents them not only from becoming whole, authentic human beings but also from knowing the truth about the world. (1998, p. 168)

This is a process. I learned to detest racism and inequality and injustice from my father. I learned to question hypermasculinity from some of the great teachers I've been lucky to have, and I learned about feminism from the scholars I've read. I hope my students and my children learn something from me. I know my son is already farther along in the journey away from hypermasculinity. And that's just the way it should be.

REFERENCES

Adorno, T. A. (1991). *Notes to literature*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Almond, S. (2016). *Against football: One fan's reluctant manifesto*. New York, NY: Melville House.

Anthony Weiner. (n.d.). In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved June 14, 2016, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthony_Weiner

Bonilla-Silva, E. (2014). *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in America* (4th ed.). Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/sojo/article-pdf/3/2/49/11353613/sojo-06-2018-0005en.pdf by guest on 28 June 2026

Bordo, S. (2000). *The male body: A new look at men in public and in private*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender and Society* 19 (6), 829–859.

Dines, G. (2010). *Pornland: How porn has hijacked our sexuality*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Dines, G. (2015). The White man’s burden: Gonzo pornography and the construction of Black masculinity. In G. Dines & J. M. Humez (Eds.), *Gender, race, and class in media* (4th ed., pp. 366–372). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Edmundson, M. (2014). *Why football matters: My education in the game*. New York, NY: Penguin.

Faludi, S. (1991). *Backlash: The undeclared war against American women*. New York, NY: Broadway Books.

Faludi, S. (1999). *Stiffed: The betrayal of the American man*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.

Flaccus, G. (2012, May 3). *Seau’s ‘buddies’ left in shock*. Retrieved from http://www.usatoday.com/USCP/PNI/Sports/2012-05-03-PNI0503spt- Seau_ST_U.htm

Frye, M. (1983) *The politics of reality: Essays in feminist theory*. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press.

Gerbner, G. (2002). Violence and terror in and by the media. In M. Morgan (Ed.), *Against the mainstream: The selected works of George Gerbner* (pp. 260–274). New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Goffman, E. (1988). *Gender advertisements*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.

Hagan, K. L. (1998). A good man is hard to bash: Confessions of an ex-man-hater. In S. Schacht & D. Ewing (Eds.), *Feminism and men: Reconstructing gender relations* (pp. 161–170). New York, NY: NYU Press.

Hamblin, J. (2016). *Toxic masculinity and murder*. Retrieved from http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2016/06/toxic-masculinity-and-mass-murder/486983/

Hofstadter, R. (1963). *Anti-intellectualism in American life*. New York, NY: Knopf.

hooks, b. (2004). *The will to change: Men, masculinity, and love*. New York, NY: Atria.

hooks, b. (2010). *Teaching critical thinking: Practical wisdom*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Jacoby, S. (2008). *The age of American unreason*. New York, NY: Pantheon.

Jensen, R. (2007). *Getting off: Pornography and the end of masculinity*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

Jhally, S. (Producer & Director). (1999). *Tough guise* (Motion picture). Available from the Media Education Foundation, 60 Masonic St. #A, Northampton, MA 01060.

Jhally, S. (Producer & Director). (2013). *Tough guise 2* (Motion picture). Available from the Media Education Foundation, 60 Masonic St. #A, Northampton, MA 01060.

Katz, J. (2006). *The macho paradox: Why some men hurt women and how all men can help*. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks.

Kellner, D. (2008). *Guys and guns amok*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm.

Kilbourne, J. (1999). *Can’t buy my love: How advertising changes the way we think and feel*. New York, NY: Touchstone.

Kimmel, M. (2008). *Guyland: The perilous world where boys become men*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.

Pascoe, C. J. (2011). *Dude, you’re a fag: Masculinity and sexuality in high school*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Pollack, W. (1998). *Real boys: Rescuing our sons from the myths of boyhood*. New York, NY: Henry Holt.

Ridenhour, C. D. (2001, September 13). *A twisted sense of god*. Retrieved from http://www.publicenemy.com/index.php?page=page3&item=43

Valenti, J. (2007). *Full frontal feminism: A young woman’s guide to why feminism matters.* Emeryville, CA: Seal Press.

What’s next for Anthony Weiner? (2011, June 17). Retrieved from http://newyork.cbslocal.com/2011/06/17/whats-next-for-anthony-weiner/

Wolf, N. (1991). *The beauty myth: How images of beauty are used against women*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.

Downloaded from http://ftp.nowpublishers.com/sojo/article-pdf/3/2/49/11353613/sojo-06-2018-0005en.pdf by guest on 28 June 2026