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Abstract

The critically acclaimed television series *Friday Night Lights* presents a complex and problematic portrayal of masculinity, disability, and sport. Our analysis explores how its disability imagery and themes obscure displays that inform a subtext of homoerotics. Bringing queer and disability theory together, we craft a lens for reading the show's coordination of compulsory able-bodiedness and compulsory heterosexuality in its presentation of quarterback Jason Street after he becomes quadriplegic. Reading Street's disability story as a queer narrative, we argue that combining these theories uniquely reveals the series' tension between homosociality and homoerotics, emasculation and rehabilitation, and athletics and disability.

Keywords: Disability, Queer Theory, Homosociality, Erotic Triangles, *Friday Night Lights*

Queering Street: Homosociality, Masculinity, and Disability in *Friday Night Lights*

“They’re usually smacking each other with towels, pulling the towels off of each other, bragging about their virtues here and there—you know how it is” (Kyle Chandler, “Coach Eric Taylor,” *Friday Night Lights*).

Ironically, Kyle Chandler’s statement to the *The Advocate* was not him remembering the boys’ locker room during his high school days nor a scene from the NBC and DirecTV’s award-winning television series *Friday Night Lights* (*FNL*) in which he starred. Instead, he described the actors on that show’s set, revealing what happened off-camera. As Chandler clarified: “And those shower scenes *that are not on film* [emphasis added] sure have sparked some curiosity *on the set* [emphasis added]” (Voss, 2007). The homosocial reality of the boys’ locker room is so potent, that it arises unbidden in the simulation of that space. As it does in Chandler’s epigraph above, this play would appear as blatantly homoerotic were it not masked by the (supposedly) hypermasculine setting of football. Frequently film and television sustain this hypermasculine façade through portrayals of male-male interactions as fun-loving kids exploring their (hetero)sexuality through good-natured hijinks on and off the football field.¹ But Chandler’s comments and the actors’ play reveals how transparent the disguise can become; whether conscious or not of the homosociality of the locker room and sport, on some level we really do “know how it is.”

The show *Friday Night Lights* is based on the critically-acclaimed nonfiction book of the same name by journalist H. G. Bissinger, which chronicled the 1988 season of the Permian Panthers, one of the most successful high school football teams in Texas state history. Its account of the city of Odessa’s identification with its team—and the ways class and race complicate that

relationship—provided ready-made drama for the big screen.² The 2004 film fictionalizing the story was similarly praised for its honest approach to exploring the harsh realities of Texas' working-class life, infatuation with high school football, and racial issues (Scott, 2004). The television show *FNL* further dramatized the narrative, placing it in the fictional town of Dillon, Texas.³ The TV show debuted in 2006 to mixed but ultimately positive reviews for its writing, realism, visual imagery, and display of disability (Duncan, 2007; Goldblatt, 2006; Haller, 2008).⁴ Although it had not been present in either the book or the film, the central drama of the pilot episode and a primary storyline in the series' first season revolved around Jason Street—the team's star quarterback who developed quadriplegia as a result of a severe football injury. The show remains one of the few prime-time television series to portray disability in the context of sport, and the only one to engage explicitly how sexuality fits into the picture.

The close relationship between the body, gender, and sport warrants a closer examination of the show's images of disability and necessitates consideration of masculinity and sexuality. In Western culture, at least, participation in sport among men was, and to a large extent still is, considered "normal," healthy, and expected. As such, sport functions as a form of socialization into a particularly narrow, heterosexual view of sexuality and masculinity (Pronger, 1990). Additionally, the increased focus on pushing the body past its limits invokes a stoic masculinity that frames the sporting body as utilitarian, as a well-oiled machine (Messner, 1992). Recent research (Darrow, Collins, Yard, & Comstock, 2009) indicated that high school athletes suffer 2 million injuries annually, with boys' football accounting for 38% of all severe injuries. Although disabling injury from participation in high school football is still relatively rare, an increasing focus on the college national signing day (Mandel, 2011), in which heavily recruited high school football players announce the college for which they will play, ensures that high school football

players will face more and more pressure to play up to and, as Darrow et al. (2009) imply, past their bodily limits. Pushing one's body in this way is part and parcel of traditional masculinity in the arena of sport (Messner, 1992). In our critical reading of the mediated images of disability in the television show *FNL*, we explore dimensions of heteronormative masculinity that permeate mediated images of sport.

To make visible relationships among disability, masculinity, and sport in the media, this article employs queer theory to illuminate ways of seeing athletics as visually enmeshed in and between compulsory systems of heterosexuality and able-bodiedness.⁵ Following Robert McRuer (2006), we agree that “Queering disability studies” has the potential to create “critically disabled spaces overlapping with the critically queer spaces” from which critics can “challenge the ongoing consolidation of heterosexual, able-bodied hegemony” (p. 19). This political project brings together queer and “crip” as radical identities grounded in (re)claiming marginalized orientations. Other scholars have noted clear parallels between these efforts (Brownworth & Raffo, 1999; Clare, 1999; Guter & Killacky, 2004; McRuer & Wilkerson, 2003). Additionally, Julia Bryan-Wilson (2009) argued that queer theory reveals how organized sport works to reinforce gender normativity and “traditional standards of bodily integrity,” thereby uniting queer and disabled populations as “unruly bodies” that challenge these social regimes (p. 61). Strengthening connections between the projects of challenging heterosexist and ableist culture thus enhances an important alliance while extending the utility and application of queer and disability theories.

Images of sport visibly construct arenas that sideline queers and people with disabilities, so that the media spectacle fans consume displays players presumed to be both able-bodied and heterosexual. Pronger's (1990) exploration of gay men's eroticization of athletic images

illustrated not only the inextricable connection between sexuality, gender, and sport but the difficulty with which these resistant readings can be deployed. Inherent in these images is also the notion of an able body as the only acceptable image of an athlete; mechanical prostheses (e.g. an artificial limb) and assistive devices (e.g. a wheelchair) are as verboten as the depiction of openly gay athletes.⁶ Sport, the myth goes, is about the “natural ability” of “normal” people. To sustain this mythology, mediated images of same-sex sports must vehemently deny the presence of potentially homoerotic play, even on the American football field where men slap each other’s butts, grapple vigorously when blocking and tackling, and hug to celebrate victory. As we have argued earlier, this practice of rejecting and obscuring homosocial implications also appears in sports exclusively played by men with disabilities—such as quad rugby or wheelchair basketball—where “daredevil masculinity” works to reaffix heteromascularity to athletic performance in order to rehabilitate the identities of men who become quadriplegic (Lindemann & Cherney, 2008, p. 114). In order to avoid being seen as “homosexual” when potentially homoerotic images appear in these sports, a rhetoric of “real athletes” and “real men” produce a heteronormative resolution to this homoerotic tension, which allows the players to repair their masculine identities (Cherney & Lindemann, 2009; Lindemann & Cherney, 2008).

In our analysis, *FNL* resists the convention of displaying male athletes as able-bodied, but it too nevertheless masks homosociality and reinforces the heteronormative regimes that prescribe a narrow way of reading male-male relationships in mediated images of sport. Western culture’s institution of athletic sport teaches homophobia and ableism, twisting each together into a Gordian knot. As McRuer (2006) declared, “the system of compulsory able-bodiedness, which in a sense produces disability, is thoroughly interwoven with the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces queerness . . . in fact, compulsory heterosexuality is contingent on

compulsory able-bodiedness, and vice versa” (p. 2). Revealing this action and the conditions of possibility that sustain it can make a significant contribution to how we understand—and might interrogate—the socially constructed bond of “natural” and “normal” and challenge both social compulsions.⁷

By examining the mediated images and narratives of the popular television show *FNL*, we explore how this naturalized ableist orientation and displays of bodies work to (re)produce culturally sanctioned ways of seeing. As ideologies that masquerade as common sense, ableism and heterosexism rely extensively on dominant images and codes that govern interpretation of the visual. All the facets we examined in *FNL*—homosociality, disability, masculinity, and rehabilitation—were thoroughly tied to the way the show manages visibility. Directing attention to some aspects of sport and away from others, mediated images of sport and sport narratives produce and perpetuate norms of visibility through revelation and concealment. Disability, particularly when it arises in a sport context, must be seen, displayed, and replayed; as Lennard Davis (1995) put it, “Disability is a specular moment” (p. 12). Likewise, masculinity arises from appearance and the codes governing exhibition—to *be* masculine is to *seem* masculine. Although perhaps not as obvious, rehabilitation also manages visibility. Reading the word etymologically as “return to habitat” focuses attention on how the process of rehabilitation moves one from being visible in the public sphere back into the domain of the private sphere.⁸ Rehabilitation seeks to return the disabled person from the hospital—and the criminal from the panoptic prison—to the private home. To be rehabilitated is to journey from spaces dictated by the gaze of authority to places where one (presumably) controls being seen (McRuer, 2006).

By extension, the management of vision plays a critical role in how sport, masculinity, disability, and publicity relate in Western culture. For male sport to retain its unquestioned hetero

status, the fans, officials, teams, and media ensure that even the intimate touches that saturate the activity between men are never seen as sexual. A fugitive erotic attraction stalks both the watching of sports and the “seeing” of disability. Fans are voyeurs, but pervasive homophobic and heterosexist norms in sport discourage revealing physical attraction when men watch other men play (Messner, 1992; Price & Parker, 2003). In perfect parallel, Robert F. Murphy’s (1987) anthropology of becoming disabled, Martin F. Norden’s (1994) study of cinematic film, and Rosemarie Garland-Thompson’s (2009) analysis of staring, explained how the display of disabled bodies both attracts and repels looking. The projects of queer and disability politics intersect on the issue of vision. McRuer (2006) noted that significant shifts in “the relations of visibility in circulation around heterosexuality, able-bodiedness, homosexuality, and disability” can together measure progress made against ableism and heterosexism (p. 2).

Work on queer figures on television (Becker, 2006, 2009; Wlodarz, 2009) and the literary device of the erotic triangle (Sedgwick, 1985) provide effective tools for examining stories that visualize relationships among disability, masculinity, and sport. Here, we “queer Jason Street” to reveal how the media employ ways of seeing disability that extend compulsory able-bodiedness and coordinate ways of seeing sexuality in a system of compulsory heterosexism. We do this by closely examining the visual and narrative dimensions of “homosocial triangles” at the center of the first (2006) season of *FNL*. The earliest episodes construct an elaborate storyline around the character of quarterback Jason Street. Street, who becomes quadriplegic in the pilot episode after an injury playing American football, initially embarks on a conventional journey toward rehabilitation. However, Street’s relationships with his girlfriend Lyla Garrity and his best friend Tim Riggins—who is secretly in love with Garrity—change radically when he becomes disabled, and the erotic triangle they form undergoes a significant transformation. Additionally, as Phil

(Jason's male nurse) helps Street rehabilitate, Jason begins to play quad rugby and develop close relationships with men on the team, particularly his roommate Herc. Applying this queer theory of homosociality in *FNL*, we reveal how Street's disability visually manages his triangular relationships with these characters and uses his quadriplegia to mask homoerotic imagery as he rehabilitates his masculinity. We thus demonstrate one way queer and disability theory can be used together in media criticism to articulate how images of sexuality and disability visually reflect and sustain ableism and heterosexism.

The Homoerotic Triangles of *Friday Night Lights*

When Street's body changes, so do his romantic and homosocial relationships. To reveal the interaction of ableism and heterosexism in the series, we observed and analyzed the evolution of his ties to Tim and Lyla (Triangle One) and Herc and Phil (Triangle Two). In analyzing the erotic homosocial triangle we drew on the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985). The triangle describes a set of relationships between three characters in which two compete for the attention of the third. Sedgwick argued that the conventional male-female-male triangle works to closet homosocial relationships and shield them from public scrutiny. In the erotic triangle, the relationship between the two male rivals forms a powerful homosocial connection; Sedgwick noted that "the bonds of 'rivalry' and 'love,' differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent" (p. 21). Cultural "homosexual panic"—homophobic regulation of male homosocial relationships—requires diverting attention from the erotic potential of homosocial display, and the presence of the woman in the triangle doubly denies the same-sex relationship of the men. As rivals for her attention, the men appear motivated by heterosexual imperatives; their competition with each other masks the closeness of their relationship. Examining specific erotic triangles in *Friday Night Lights* reveals how disability

obscures homosocial desire and when Jason Street's relationships change after he becomes quadriplegic. In general, the show's depiction of disability subverts the homosociality that arises in the erotic triangles it displays. Additionally, the medical context invoked by the image of Street's disabled body, when viewed from an ableist perspective, functions as a closet for the homosocial eroticism of male bonding and same sex team sports.

Triangle One: Tim—Lyla—Jason

The series begins with a comfortably familiar erotic triangle between three high school students: Jason Street (the star quarterback of the Dillon Panthers football team), Lyla Garrity (his girlfriend and a cheerleader for the Panthers), and Tim Riggins (Street's best friend and teammate). When the series opens, Tim has kept his attraction to Lyla secret, but later episodes reveal that he has harbored a desire for her since their youth. When balanced, as it is at the start of the series, the triangle allows Tim and Jason to develop a strong homosocial bond, which Lyla's presence helps shield from closer scrutiny. The series' pilot episode, in a scene of a party held the night before the cataclysmic game, foreshadows the plotline of Jason and Tim's homosocial relationship. Although the scene primarily displays them in a heterosexual context—Jason sits with Lyla on his lap and Tim pauses the conversation to engage in a long kiss with Tyra Collette, his girlfriend at the time—the homosocial subtext arises as the boys joke about Tim's plan to ~~someday~~ buy a ranch together someday. Laughing, Jason says that the “one little problem” with the plan is that he would not want Tim living on his land. As Tim reaches into a cooler for a new beer he replies, “Yeah you do. I'm your caretaker, Streeter. Whether you like it or not.” They all laugh, but Tim continues with a toast: “Here's to God, and football, and ten years from now, Street, good friends living large in Texas. Texas forever, Street.” Raising his own beer, Jason echoes “Texas forever,” affirming the pact at the heart of their relationship.

The triangle also occludes the homoerotics of male sport behind a veneer of hypermasculinity; displays of Jason's romantic relationship with Lyla testify to his heterosexuality. When Jason becomes quadriplegic after an injury playing football, his relationships with Lyla and Tim grow turbulent as Lyla and Tim develop a sexual relationship without Jason's knowledge. His disability also destabilizes the conventional gender roles in the triangle. As Lyla and Tim begin to compete for his attention, *he* becomes the symbolic property over and through which they enact their rivalry. As the triangle turns to position Street in the middle, his homosocial relationship to Tim becomes more pronounced, his heterosexual relationship with Lyla becomes desexualized, and Tim and Lyla's heterosexual bond becomes actively visible. In terms of the triangle and the ableist assumptions about living with quadriplegia, Street is effectively emasculated by his condition.⁹

This turning of the triangle takes place over roughly the first six episodes of the season, and several scenes explicitly detail the loving bond of Jason and Tim as well as their contentious relationship with Lyla. A close look at a few key scenes suffices to show the dynamics of visibility governing homosociality and disability.

In the fifth episode, "Git 'Er Done," Tim visits Jason for the first time after the accident when a large contingent of members from the team visits prior to a rivalry game. The scene opens with a long shot through the door of Jason's hospital room, and then cuts to a close-up shot of the bulletin board on the wall across from Jason's bed. On opposite sides of the board are photographs of Lyla and Tim. Lyla enters the room telling Jason that he has a visitor. As Lyla looks on near the head of Jason's bed, Coach Taylor and then a stream of his teammates come in to visit. The first player, "Smash" Williams, tells Jason that they came by to say "We love you, and we're going to win for you." Tim enters last, hesitating, as if he cannot bear to enter. As he

walks forward both Tim and Jason begin to cry. Jason chides him for not having visited before, and the camera cuts to a close-up shot of Tim holding Jason's hand. Tim turns away distraught, Lyla kisses Street, and then Lyla and Tim exit the room together. The scene ends with Jason crying in earnest, weeping from the emotional encounter with Tim. At this point in the series, Tim and Lyla have become lovers. In a teaser scene at the beginning of the episode, Lyla forgoes her regular visit to Jason's bedside to go for a run in the neighborhood, which ends when she jogs to Tim's house and they tenderly embrace. But at this point in the series, Jason remains unaware of their relationship. Jason's disability works to destabilize the conventional male-female-male triangle as his status as Tim's rival fades, and Lyla begins to compete with Tim for Jason's attention. As the episodes progress, Tim and Jason's emotional homosocial bond becomes more visibly homoerotic, while Lyla's rivalry with Tim becomes more pronounced and complicated by their sexual relationship.

One of the most visible depictions of the potential homoerotics of Tim and Jason's homosocial relationship occurs in the sixth episode, "El Accidente." After a doctor discourages Jason from engaging in intercourse because it "is not medically safe" for him to ejaculate, he calls Tim and demands that he come over so they can talk. After Tim arrives, Jason angrily tells him, "Well, I'm guessing you know what this is about." Tim acts taken aback, apparently thinking that Jason has somehow found out about his tryst with Lyla. But Jason refers instead to Tim's lack of visits to the rehabilitation center. In a soliloquy Jason proceeds to detail the banal activities of his typical day, which involve a variety of intimate events that might imply a sexual undertone. He spends "pretty much the whole day . . . laying down in this bed on my sorry quadriplegic ass," being poked and prodded "like I'm a piece of meat," and inserting his catheter "in places you don't even want to know about." "My big adventure of the day is going to the

commode . . . Impressive, huh?” He concludes by shouting “I need you here, Tim! I need you here! . . . You’re my best friend. Grace period’s over.”

Later in the episode, the two arrange to take an illicit “field trip” out of the rehab center. Tim enters the physical therapy room where Jason works on an exercise machine, and proceeds to take the place of the female therapist holding Jason. Tim stands behind Jason with his hands on his shoulders. A pastiche of medium and close-up shots show Jason from the front under Tim’s hands, Tim from front/right with his head bowed gazing peacefully down at Jason, and both from the side so that Tim appears to be holding Jason in an embrace pressing their bodies together. If Jason were an able-bodied female instead of a disabled male, even the most oblivious heterosexual audience would not miss the erotic power of these images. Tim is sweet, gentle, loving, coy, and seductive. Jason warms up to Tim’s offer of a “date,” becomes excited, and is clearly pleased by the attention from Tim. Tim (with a husky John Wayne swagger in his voice) “What’s say you and me get out of here later?” Jason (laughing) “Where do you think we’re going to go?” Tim (coyly) “I’ve got some ideas.” Jason (slyly smiling) “All right, genius. When are we doing this?” Tim (quietly, seductively) “I’m thinking tonight.” Jason: “Let’s do it.” The sexual energy is so prevalent, this closing line sounds less like a closeted homoerotic pun than it does an explicit call to imagine Jason and Tim playing out the erotic potential in the scene.

The audiovisual erotics of the scene—the physical press of their bodies, the coy smiles, and seductive tones—practically dare audiences to view its homoerotic appeal explicitly; the whole plan is developed sotto voce and implies that its violation of the rules makes it daring and secretive. As a transgression of the guidelines designed to protect Jason from harm, the trip also employs daredevil masculinity to counter to his emasculation. We suggest that the medical context of this scene works to project the heteromascularity that obscures the homoerotics

displayed. In the scene Jason is receiving medical attention, and Tim's physical contact takes place under the direction of the therapist, who shows him where to stand and place his hands. Therapy provides a medical explanation for Tim's touches and his close stance with his front pressed against Jason's back. In Western culture, touching, holding, probing, and stimulating bodies—even those parts considered private erogenous zones—can be seen as *asexual* activities when done by doctors to patients. In effect, the rehabilitation center directs viewers to see the disabled body in the medical context, which de-eroticizes the gentle interaction of Tim and Jason.

Jason and Tim are embarking on their excursion when Lyla arrives. Tim has just hugged Jason in a close embrace to lift him out of his wheelchair and into the seat of Tim's pickup truck, so her entrance interrupts the potentially homoerotic scene. Although Lyla insists initially that the two should go on their "boys' night out" without her, she relents when Jason begs her to join them. They drive away with Lyla between them in the front seat of Tim's pickup truck. A series of close-up and medium shots from the front and each side show the triangle from all three of its points as they embark. In the close-up side shots their faces appear connected, overlapping each other, so that Jason's face melds with Tim's via Lyla's. The front medium shot shows them equidistantly spaced in perfect symmetry.

Three shots that briefly appear during this sequence explicitly suggest the competition between Jason and Tim over Lyla. First is a medium shot from the front framed so that it shows only Jason, who talks as if to himself about how much he "needed this." Visually isolating Jason implies the connection between Lyla and Tim, metaphorically placing him on the sidelines of their affair. The second shot, a close-up, reinforces this impression by cutting Jason from the frame and focusing exclusively on Lyla gazing at Tim.¹⁰ The third is a close-up shot from

outside the driver's side window where Jason has leaned forward and turned so that viewers see Lyla and Tim in profile, faces connected, with Jason directly facing the camera. Jason smiles, but Tim's sticks his lip out and Lyla stares forward with a stony expression. Tim turns to meet Jason's gaze and the two look at each other across Lyla, who continues to stare straight ahead. All three of these images dramatize the rivalry between Jason and Tim even before the Jason becomes aware of Lyla's relationship with Tim. This irony does not last long. At the end of the episode, as Lyla and Tim leave after returning Jason from the adventure, he watches from the window as the two exchange a sustained hug and brief kiss. Seeing they are more intimate than "just friends," Jason rolls away with a disconcerted look on his face. As the dimensions of this triangle become exposed, its transformation appears supported by another unconventional three way relationship, which ultimately blossoms into a close homosocial bond between Jason and another quadriplegic named Herc.

Triangle Two: Herc—Phil—Jason¹¹

The character Herc plays a significant role in the series' sport and disability narrative. Herc serves as a mentor and friend for Jason, an "experienced" quad who teaches the neophyte how to live with a disability. As the character that introduces Jason to quad rugby, Herc also plays a key role in the sport's plotline in the series. Finally, Herc appears aggressively heteromasculinist, embodying the "ideal" of the (re)masculinized quadriplegic male. When Jason experiences difficulty having sex with Lyla, he turns to Herc for advice. In short, Herc operates at the intersection of sport, rehabilitation, and masculinity more clearly and earlier in the series than any other character. From the time that Herc first appears in episode 4, his character instructs audiences how to view the relationship between these three systems, establishing a perspective of disability sport that works to emphasize its heteromascularity and obscures any

homosocial characteristics. We identify aspects of this lens Herc provides and suggest its ableist implications through a close reading of the scene in which Herc first appears.

The scene at the start of the fourth episode, “Who’s Your Daddy,” begins with a long shot from outside the door to a room where a banner reading “GET WELL” hangs across a window that runs the length of its back. Partially visible behind the banner, and noticed primarily because the words on the banner direct viewers’ gazes toward that part of the frame, is a hazy image of large office building a short distance away. The haze emphasizes viewers’ uncertainty about the scene’s location: the only thing of which audiences can be sure is that this is not small-town Dillon. This disorientation encourages viewers to reorient and locate themselves in this new and unknown place, directing attention to the room’s familiar characteristics associated with a hospital. An institutional white laundry bin sits immediately outside the room and a privacy screen with its ceiling track hangs directly in the center of the frame. The walls are bare of decoration, painted in the soft tones of tan and seafoam green; gray linoleum covers the floor. Various pieces of equipment are mounted on the walls. Most viewers cannot identify these items from their profiles, but clearly they are not the kinds of things one associates with non-medical spaces such as a hotel room or one’s home. Collectively these trappings place the room in a medical context.

Two bodies embracing rise into the visual frame from the right and appear through the doorway. Both are male, and the next shot—a close-up of their faces—reveals one of them as Street. Jason and the man are literally cheek to cheek as the latter helps the former into a wheelchair. The camera reverts to the long shot from outside the door, and another man in a wheelchair rolls himself into the room. A countershot flips the view to reveal the new arrival’s face directly between those of Street and the other man, and the latter’s now visible stethoscope

identifies him as a medical professional. Like the room, Phil's status as a hospital employee places the scene's action in a medical context so that even his close physical contact with Jason becomes desexualized. The new arrival jibes "Hey, when you're done putting the newbie in that gay wheelchair, let me know." The man retorts, "You are talking to a gay man, Herc." Herc shoots back, "I don't mean 'gay' as in homosexual, I mean 'gay' as in 'retarded.'" Phil persists: "Maybe I have a retarded son?" Herc, unfazed, pops his eyes and responds "Is he gay?" As the man turns away in disgust, Herc, exasperated, declares: "I'm *joking*. There *can* be a genetic component to homosexuality. Watch the *Discovery* Channel, Phil." The sequence serves several purposes. Via the concept of the genetic component to homosexuality, this scene links physical difference with being gay, crafting a point at which disability and gender identity overlap. Furthermore, Herc's equation of "gay" and "retarded" as identical slurs suggests this link functions as a site of both ableist and heterosexist oppression. Additionally, the sequence reveals that the strategy of medicalization plays a role in this second triangle, since Phil's medical role obscures the potential for his status as a gay man to call attention to the scene's homoerotic appeal. Finally, Herc's casual use of gay as a derogatory adjective primes the audience to view him as the model of aggressive heteromascularity; the scene's conclusion reinforces this perspective.

Abruptly changing the subject, Herc tells Phil that the bench press on the second floor gym is broken, and that he "needs a 'walkie' to help me fix it." Only with his final exit line does Herc address Street: "Welcome to paradise, kid." With a medium shot tracking Herc's exit, the frame shifts to show Herc wheeling himself back out of the door, and the stickers placed on the back of the chair come into view. One displays a "Jolly Rodger," another shows the insignia of a quad rugby team, and a third depicts the iconic "mudflap girl" silhouette—a full body profile of

a nude woman leaning back on her hands with one knee raised. In white American culture, this icon became a popular decoration for the mudflaps on tractor-trailer rigs, and has signified aggressive heteromascularity and often overt sexism.¹² Its presence on the back of Herc's wheelchair, like its continued presence on the back of trucks on American highways, defies viewers to see the displayer as anything but heterosexual.¹³ After Herc departs, the frame returns to the original close-up shot of Street's profile, who asks "'the hell was that?'" The shot slides to Phil, who replies seriously, "Your roommate."

The scene depicts the relationship of Herc, Phil, and Jason as a potent triangle, one dominated by homoerotics. Jason and Herc initially come together in competition for Phil's attention, which he directs exclusively toward Jason until Herc interrupts. That the two men compete via a third (gay) male instead of a female potentially exposes the homosocial nature of the erotic triangle, so a viewer must either overlook the relationship's homosociality or let it out of the closet. Especially in the context of Herc's reference to the broken weight-lifting equipment, these homoerotics infringe upon the world of male sport, in which men come to love and care for other men. Transferred to the playing field, this triangle would undermine the connection of heteromascularity and athletic prowess by bringing homosociality into the picture. To avoid this interpretation, an audience must erase the triangle from the visual field, employing mutually reinforcing strategies that deny its presence. First, the medical context occludes the sexual implications through disassociation. Second, the derogatory use of "gay" particularly in the presence of a gay male and as a metaphor emptied of its sexual denotation renders the homoerotic interpretation as "bad" or "wrong," thus categorizing it as an incorrect way of seeing. Employing these two strategies, an audience could overlook the scene's homoerotic potential and ignore the triangle one sees clearly upon abandoning such interpretive guidelines.

Once established, these ways of seeing can continue to operate as lenses for viewing Jason and Herc's relationship in later scenes of male bonding and wheelchair rugby play. Importantly, these later scenes appear outside of the hospital-like rehabilitation center, so the only way to place them in a medical context is to medicalize the characters themselves, either through the vehicle of the wheelchair or other direct evidence of disability. As before, the institutional setting allows viewers to see the disabled body in a medical context and protect the veneer of heteromascularity. Stripped of this perspective when the characters leave the sterile environment, the potential homosociality present in the images might be revealed. Medicalizing their disabled bodies thus brings the conventions of the rehabilitation center back into play even once Jason and Herc leave the hospital and enter the arena of sport.

Triangulating Competition: Repetitions, Reassertions, and Renewals

Segregated male sport overflows with homoerotic potential through its intimate physical action and encouragement of male bonding. If a viewer watching *FNL* abandoned the medicalized perspective, he or she would have to rely on the homophobic perspective to avoid seeing and vicariously enjoying the homoerotics of physical contact visible in the violent collisions of wheelchair rugby. In other words, if a viewer saw disability in a less ableist fashion, such as the social perspective advocated by many disability activists, the homoerotics of these activities spring into view. The presence of the medicalization strategy alongside the homophobic strategy tends to link them, so that ableism and heterosexism operate as dependent upon each other. In sum, either interpretation obscures the homoerotic triangle, reinforcing heteronormativity.

Later scenes in the fourth episode demonstrate the strength of the relationships established by both the Tim—Lyla—Jason and Herc—Phil—Jason triangles. A scene set in

Jason's room begins with a squabble between Phil and him, after which Lyla arrives. Phil leaves, and Lyla takes his place encouraging Jason to eat. Then Herc enters with another man in a wheelchair he introduces as Corey. Herc boldly grabs some food from Jason's plate and eats it, challenging Lyla's status as Corey introduces himself to her. Herc's connection to Corey seems to undermine his homosocial bond with Jason formed earlier by introducing another rival. Shortly after this, the Tim—Lyla—Jason triangle also appears to dissolve as Lyla confronts Tim in school and tells him that their sexual encounter was a mistake and that she feels nothing for him.

But by the end of the episode, both triangles re-emerge. Herc confronts Jason, initiating the conversation with a leer: "Where's the dutiful girlfriend?" When Jason replies that Herc does not know anything about his girlfriend or his life and tells him to "stay out of his face," Herc points out that he knows exactly what Jason is going through and proceeds to lay out a timeline of dissolving relationships Jason can expect to experience over the next two years. Herc punctuates his lecture by ramming his chair into Jason's. Jason, finally driven past self-pity by frustration and anger, shouts and, by swinging his hand, knocks a glass of water on Herc. After moment of silence while Herc and Jason look at each other directly, Herc smiles and says "Good, I knew you had some fight in you." As Herc rolls out of the room, Jason looks with amazement at his hand, flexing it at the wrist. By literally forcing Jason's hand, Herc has helped him make the realization that even paralyzed he retains the ability to express himself and shape his identity. This intimate moment, notably played out through anger and physical confrontation, cements Herc and Jason's relationship.

Similarly, the Tim—Lyla—Jason triangle reasserts itself at the end of the fourth episode. While Tim is unable to visit Jason out of guilt and fear, Tim is also completely smitten with Lyla

and to her surprise appears at night in her bedroom. Although Lyla initially protests his presence, she relents as they kiss and embrace passionately, suggestively falling back onto her bed as the scene ends. The hidden nature of their relationship crafts it as something that even they cannot discuss. A scene in the fifth episode features Lyla and Tim, who have just finished having sex. The two argue after Tim makes a half-hearted attempt to start a conversation about her mathematics class, and Lyla asks sarcastically if he wants to talk about how he is sleeping with his “paralyzed best friend’s girlfriend.” Lyla’s challenging question implies the necessity of silence to maintain the fragile relationship; such silence characterizes the typical triangle and allows its homosociality to operate below the surface of discourse.

A later sequence in the eighth episode, “Crossing the Line,” repeats the pattern. Herc tries to convince Jason to break up with Lyla, and the two get into a fight. The dialogue subtly suggests the scene’s homosocial dynamics when Jason taunts Herc, “You got a little crush on me?” Herc and Jason end up falling from their chairs to wrestle on the floor, and they bond over the experience of being unable to get back into their chairs without someone assisting them. Jason asks Herc if he knows the secret to getting up off the floor. Mock seriously, Herc says he does – and begins yelling: “Phil!” Laughing, Jason joins in and they call for Phil in unison. Their homosocial bonding transforms their initial rivalry for Phil’s attention into a shared desire for him to help them together.

Physically absent from the scene (which ends before he arrives), Phil emerges as “the secret” that we literally see Herc share with Jason. As with the quad rugby scenes, the medical context obscures the homosociality in this scene. Herc and Jason’s disability drives them to “helpless” laughter and in need of Phil, a medical figure, to come to their aid. Their chairs, their inability to reseat themselves, and their need for assistance provide a visible excuse for their

closeness, so that the intimacy of the moment can be seen as a function of their disabilities. Viewed through the lens of the homosocial triangle, however, Jason and Herc's relationship testifies to the erotic potential of the rivalry between men over a third figure, and displays the need to bond with other men as a human desire instead of the accidental coincidence of their paraplegic conditions.

Although the Tim—Lyla—Jason triangle faded from the first season as additional plot lines developed, the relational pattern continued to influence the series. In the second season, the second through sixth episodes featured a storyline where Jason travels to Mexico in pursuit of a radical experimental therapy that is not legal in the United States. Tim accompanies him on the trip, becomes deeply suspicious of the procedure, and calls Lyla begging her to come and help him convince Jason against it. The three take a boat ride where Tim confronts Jason and promises: "Listen. I love you. And I will knock you out and bring your ass back to Dillon if I have to." As Tim moves to the bow to talk with Lyla, Jason glares at Tim and then throws himself overboard. After allowing himself to sink for a moment—an ambiguous act which could be read as a spontaneous suicide attempt, a baptism, and/or a declaration of independence—Jason swims ashore. When Tim and Lyla find him there Jason agrees to skip the surgery and go back to Texas, and the scene closes with a long shot of the three sitting on the shore looking out into the Gulf of Mexico. They sit arranged by the now well established triangle, with Jason in the middle between Tim and Lyla.

Similarly, in the third season Jason decides to move to New York to explore a career as a sports agent and reunite with Erin, with whom he had a son in a plot twist at the end of the second season. Tim goes with him on the trip, and after Jason secures the job they visit Erin together. On the way, they role-play so Jason can practice what he will say when he sees her.

Playing “Erin,” Tim interrupts Jason’s monologue to announce “I’m pregnant,” and Jason becomes offended that he has not been taking him seriously. Affronted, Tim replies “I was *being* [he hesitates] “your gal.” This homoerotic subtext foreshadows their dramatic farewell at the end of the episode. Choking with emotion Tim promises Jason he will always be his best friend, and the two part repeating their mutual vow of “Texas forever.” Watching Erin and Jason embrace, Tim sighs with loss and shakes his head with a wry grimace; he seems torn between Jason’s apparent happiness and his own sorrow at being left behind. In the episodes surrounding Jason’s departure, Tim and Lyla reconciled and renewed their sexual relationship.

Numerous other triangles appear throughout the series, and most of the major characters are involved in at least one during the first season. A homosocial triangle between Matt Saracen (the quarterback who takes Street’s place after the accident), Julie Taylor (Coach Taylor’s daughter), and Landry Clarke (Saracen’s best friend) follows the stereotypical pattern of a generic male-female-male triangle. Like Matt, who replaces Jason on the football team, the conventional Matt—Julie—Landry triangle takes the place of the Tim—Lyla—Jason triangle as the latter shifts when Jason becomes quadriplegic. Homosocial triangles persist throughout the series, and the general formula of the triangle accounts for almost all of the dramatic tension in the show. At its core, *FNL* is primarily about the competition between two characters or groups rivaling for the attention of another. The pattern even describes the football games around which the show revolves: two teams engage in physical grappling while superficially competing for the win, but always enjoying its homosocial dynamics and the “*love of the game*” reflected in the Panther’s oft repeated motto of “Clear eyes, full hearts, can’t lose.”

The prominent role of the erotic triangles in *FNL* implicates the established themes of sport, disability, rehabilitation, and masculinity. The series as a whole rejects typical ableist ways

of seeing, encouraging audiences to view disability as a normal part of everyday life.¹⁴ But media depictions of disability that obscure displays of homosociality sustain and integrate compulsory systems of able-bodiedness and heterosexuality. This reinforces the appropriateness, utility, and oppressive potential of ableist and heterosexist strategies of viewing. Hierarchies of ability and masculinity become more firmly enmeshed; fortunately, calling attention to their mutually supportive relationship exposes these strategies to critique and promises to alter the conditions that empower said strategies. Additionally, the show's narrative of Herc introducing Jason to quad rugby relies on the dominance of hypermasculinity in men's disability sport, limiting the rehabilitative function of the activity and perpetuating sexism in the name of recovering one's manhood. Yet audiences could resist these traditional readings of disability and sport by engaging queer theory to reveal how these themes and plot devices work in relation to each other.

Conclusion

The times, they are a' changin (albeit rather slowly), and the revolution in gender portrayals *is* being televised. The key to this transformation is destabilizing binaries—gay/straight, disabled/abled—that simplify and protect discrimination as common sense. For Becker (2009), contemporary American television negotiates the “double bind rooted in the fuzzy line between *homosexuality* and *homosociality*” (p. 123); and blurring this boundary generates the male homosexual panic described by Sedgwick. Becker notes that stabilizing this boundary—projecting gender and sexuality as immutable and innate—motivates what Judith Butler (1990) named “the heterosexual matrix.” Fixing “normal” bodies and “straight” genders as *natural* constructions sustains this “cultural grid of intelligibility” (Becker, 2009, p. 123).

Positioning normal as natural, ableism and heterosexism cloak ideology as mere descriptions of human nature. They discipline diverse bodies to fit within simplified binaries that lend themselves to hierarchy. Queer and crip political identities expose, complicate, and frustrate the gay/straight and able/disabled binaries as artificial constructs, and void their status as natural necessities. Normalized as a “natural” distinction between physiques, ableist assumptions resist change as they “go without saying” and belie their own rhetoricity. One can often recognize ableism and its social operation by bringing to light the ways that media visualize normalcy—i.e. identifying its artifice—and exposing systems that “naturalize” those constructs as “simply the way things actually are.” Reified as media convention, displays that mark athletes as able-bodied heterosexuals deflect homosocial or homoerotic appeal, but atypical images of ability and sexuality provide opportunities to (re)vision normalcy. In the case of *FNL*, realizing this potential requires attention to—and resistance of—the ways that the show’s images of disability risk complicity with visual regimes closeting queer sexuality. Taking such a view necessitates what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) label “articulation”: naming and calling out that which would lurk in the silences. Once *said*—and we would include *seen*—such assumptions may be interrogated and questioned, generating pressure to defend their ideological stances and calling attention to the systems that make them appear reasonable. Critics can challenge ableism by revealing its accepted presence and articulating its ways of thinking implicit in artifacts and texts. Consider a stairway. This common architectural device treats as normal the “natural” act of moving by raising one’s feet and climbing. It reifies assumptions about the body, erasing them from view until one “reads” (or “sees”) a set of stairs as a sign declaring “for walkies only.” Thus articulated, the ableist message of the stairway easily appears discriminatory. Furthermore, when people defend the stairway by saying “But it’s normal to be able to move this way and only

natural that architecture serves the needs of the average population,” then the ideological implications of treating normal as natural are articulated as well.

Dominant groups use stable categories to access hegemony and protect their superior position in social hierarchies. Stabilized, the assumptions underlying these categories fade into the background, and they are accepted as commonplace. Thus protected, these categories elude critique; they take their place as ideas taken for granted by the society and only questioned by unreasonable people and outsiders. Interrogating such categories becomes an exercise of the absurd, yet, as Thomas Lacquer (1990) reveals, the division of sex into separate categories of male and female is itself an invention that replaced the previously dominant and commonsensical “one sex model.” As the implications of his work suggest, revealing the artificiality of such categories helps undermine their unquestionable and “arhetorical” status. Thus “troubled,” in Butler’s (1990) use of the term, the previously fixed organization schemes open into potential sites for transformation of social norms.

Television, through the content of shows it airs, directs attention to particular topics and privileges ways of seeing. But critics can also alter viewers’ orientations by bringing attention to the overlooked and pointing out the less obvious. Changes in content and critical perspective sustain each other, and both contribute to a growing awareness of how contemporary spectacles impact ableist and heterosexist attitudes. In an increasingly visual culture where “to know” is “to see”—or where “seeing is believing”—one of the most important steps in uniting queer and disability theory is to make the benefits of doing so visible.

In this article we suggest the unique possibilities of employing a combination of queer and disability theory as a basis for critique. An analysis of *FNL* using only one or the other body of theory alone would not reveal how Street’s disability affects the erotic triangles of his

relationships. A disability theory approach would call attention to how Street becomes medicalized, emasculated, and motivated to rehabilitate his masculinity after the onset of quadriplegia. The queer theory of the homosocial erotic triangle identifies how his relational status shifts from being Tim's rival over Lyla to become the conduit for Tim's rivalry with Lyla, and the subsequent homoerotic developments. By putting these positions together we demonstrate how Street's disability works to obscure the potentially homoerotic images, as the medical context affiliated with his recovery masks the transition. As we noted at the outset, bringing queer and disability theory holds the promise of shared support and allegiance between groups seeking emancipation from compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness, but it also crafts new ways to critically examine media depictions of disability, masculinity, and sport.

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Notes

¹ Some noteworthy examples of films that portray high school football in this way include *All the Right Moves* (1983), *Johnny Be Good* (1988), *Remember the Titans* (2000), *Varsity Blues* (1999), and *Wildcats* (1986).

² In our emphasis on ableism and heterosexism we do not wish to suggest the absence—or relative unimportance—of racism and classism in the *Friday Night Lights* book, film, and television series. Bissinger's book deals extensively with the racial and class dynamics of the high school football scene in Texas. His chapter "Black and White" describes the explicitly racial divides that have historically shaped the town and its local football teams, and several of the stories involve class issues. For example, the Permian Panthers become a locus of hope for Odessa as it struggles with the decimated economy of the oil industry in the late 1980s, and several of the players' families live in impoverished communities. Generally race and class play an enormous role in both contemporary masculinity and sport, and substantial scholarship illuminates these relationships. Some noteworthy examples include Susan Birrell and Mary G. McDonald's collection *Reading Sport* (2000), William C. Rhoden's *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete* (2007), Earl Smith's *Race, Sport, and the American Dream* (2009), and the essays of Thomas P. Oates (2007) and his collaboration with Meenakshi Gigi Durham (2004). In our present paper we direct our attention to the less examined relationships of disability, sport, and masculinity, and we hope that our research will add to and support the body of work that engages hegemony and oppression in various forms.

³ The setting should not be confused with the nonfictional town of Dillon, Texas, which has not appeared on highway maps since the 1930s (Jennings, 2011). Like Bissinger's nonfiction

book, the film version of the narrative was also set in Odessa, but like the television series it is a work of fiction.

⁴ Echoing Bissinger's unvarnished depiction of high school football, the mis-en-scene of the show presents a gritty realism. Hand held camera shots, realistic sets, and backdrops displaying everyday locations conveyed the impression that the show provided an accurate glimpse into the life of a working-class mid-sized town in Texas.

⁵ Although we emphasize *FNL*'s homosocial and homoerotic aspects, we maintain that the term "queer" does not necessarily imply "gay" or "homosexual." We embrace queer theory to challenge compulsory heteronormativity by exposing its links to compulsory able-bodiedness. In this context, "queer" identifies critical orientations that generate non-normative readings to interrogate these compulsory systems. Such orientations include even the "queer heterosexual" positions that embrace non-(hetero)normative perspectives and undermine hegemonic masculinity.

⁶ Equipment designed to protect players forms a notable exception, particularly in contact sports such as football and hockey. But accepting this technology as a necessary part of the game enacts an ableist logic that makes exceptions to the general rule so as to prevent disabling injury. Players in some contact sports, quad rugby for example, eschew protective helmets and padding, rejecting this ableist logic and accepting their identity as disabled athletes (Lindemann & Cherney, 2008).

As an example of the range of arguments made against use of prostheses, consider the recent case of South African sprinter Oscar Pistorius, who unsuccessfully appealed for the right to use his prosthetic legs and compete in the 2008 Summer Olympics (see Jones & Wilson, 2009;

Swartz & Watermeyer, 2008). Similarly, the legal battle over whether professional golfer Casey Martin should be allowed to use a golf cart in PGA Tour events contained many of the standard arguments against assistive devices (Cherney, 2003).

⁷ In other work the first author examines the rhetoric of “normal is natural” in more depth (Cherney, 2011). In general, the rhetorical construction of “normal” obscures its artificiality by treating it as a “natural” category. When views of and assumptions about normalcy become naturalized, they resist recognition as extensions of ableist discrimination.

⁸ The roots of “rehabilitation” are the Latin *re* (“again”) and *habitare* (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, “Rehabilitation,” n.d.). As *habitare* can be translated as “to dwell,” or “to be fit,” Latin ties the concepts of dwelling and fitness to location. Hence the English word “habitat”—literally the third person singular present indicative of *habitare*—which names the place where an organism is best adapted to live (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, “Habitat,” n.d.).

⁹ We argue that the disabled figure who loses his masculinity should be considered *emasculated* instead of *feminized*. Our position holds that using the latter term risks associating weakness and passivity with a feminine position, and we wish to resist this connotation. In our view, associating emasculation and femininity rests on the problematic division of gender into only two categories (i.e. masculine and feminine). Queer and feminist theorists have made a strong case for more complex gender systems (e.g. Fausto-Sterling, 1993) which have begun to gain institutional support (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2010). These latter systems create a conceptual space for someone to lose masculinity but not necessarily gain femininity.

¹⁰ This shot was among the handful chosen to be the background for the opening credit sequence used in each episode of the second season of *FNL*, which suggests its iconic significance in the series.

¹¹ The two triangles we examine develop simultaneously in the television show, narratively reinforcing their connection. Additionally, this makes our examination of each in turn asynchronous, and many of the events described below happen before those described above.

¹² In a classic scene in the boldly feminist film (for the time) *Thelma and Louise* (1991), the two protagonists pass a gasoline tanker truck bearing these flaps while driving on the highway. They vent their disgust of the misogynist image and the harassment it implies by forcing the truck to leave the road, ridiculing and humiliating the driver, and then firing at the tank causing it to explode. The violent and total destruction of the vehicle marked by this sexist symbol testifies to the latter's hypermasculine connotations. Certainly, the mudflap girl icon can be argued to operate primarily in the culture of *white* heteromascularity, and its connection with the "good ol' boy" network of truckers reinforces this. As noted above, the racial and class dynamics in *FNL* are highly developed and complex. See note 2.

¹³ In both contexts, the users display the icon as a "pink herring," (Morris, 2002) suggesting that—on some level—both Herc and the truckers fear they might be labeled as gay. In the truckers' case, this potential may arise from the nature of the job; the predominantly male profession is known for drivers' fraternal association via citizens band (CB) radios, working conditions that take them away from their wives or girlfriends for extended periods of time, and the common practice of pairing experienced male drivers with neophyte male apprentices.

¹⁴ For example, the series differs from mainstream (ableist) shows by portraying a paraplegic character who does not conform to conventional stereotypes of disability (Longmore, 1987; Norden, 1994). Additionally, the show frequently referenced scenes appearing in Jeffrey Mandel, Henry Alex Rubin, and Dana Adam Shapiro's Academy Award Nominated documentary *Murderball* (2005). Mark Zupan, the star of that documentary, even made a brief cameo appearance in the second episode of the second season of *FNL*. In earlier work, we discussed the ways that this film challenges ableist perspectives and ways of seeing (Cherney & Lindemann, 2009). While the content of several *FNL* scenes replicated *Murderball*, many of its innovative cinematic devices and its unconventional gaze remain unique to the documentary film.