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## **Masculine Failure and Male Violence in Noah Hawley's *Fargo***

By J. T. Weisser<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

'Quality' television drama is drama marketed as being filmic and boundary-pushing, yet it tackles the concept of masculinity in highly normative ways. Scholars argue that many quality television shows feature narratives of men struggling against emasculation at the hands of contemporary society before using violence to assert their masculinity by force. However, this interpretation is limited, assuming that all quality television shows which engage with violent masculinities root this violence in normative, 'aggressive' masculinity. In many cases, the violent masculinities of quality television are anything *but* normatively masculine: they are inescapably queer and othered. Using a queer theoretical framework, this essay explores an illustrative example: Season One of Noah Hawley's anthology series *Fargo* (2014–). Within this season, male violence is an expression of queer masculinities, offering a transgressive space which questions the coherence of the masculine body and exposes its vulnerabilities. While threats of violence are a way to demonstrate and approximate normative masculinity, these normatively masculine performances can be conquered by direct acts of violence, which are positioned as being queerly ambiguous. Violence between men functions as an erotic transgression of bodily boundaries: weapons allow men to 'penetrate' other men, to act on violent desire in a sexualised context. Men can also weaponise their emasculation, violently embracing their 'failure' to perform normative masculinity rather than struggling against it, which allows them to access the danger of 'failed' masculinity and othered femininity. This queer form of violence allows men to claim power over other men, in contrast to the idea that 'failed' masculinities are necessarily physically weak and non-violent. The show's most brutal acts of male violence are not in conflict with the unattainability of normative masculinity, but instead expressions of 'othered', maligned masculinities. The show thus reinforces normative masculinity through the othering and villainisation of queer masculinities.

*Keywords:* Queer theory, masculinity, quality television, violence, embodiment

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## Introduction

‘Quality’ television, or television which is marketed as being filmic, boundary-pushing and ‘high-quality’, has attracted considerable attention from scholars interested in cultural representations of masculinity.<sup>2</sup> These scholars suggest that quality television frequently features narratives in which a male character is emasculated by contemporary society and uses violence to assert a normative form of masculinity.<sup>3</sup> The overarching assumption of this scholarship is that violent masculinities are inherently normative and symptomatic of associations between masculinity and aggression. This essay analyses an example of quality television which challenges this assumption and attends to the nuances of male violence in detail. I argue that within the first season of Noah Hawley’s *Fargo* (FX 2014–), male violence and weaponry is expressive of non-normative, queer masculinities, which has the effect of challenging the so-called ‘integrity’ of masculine identity.<sup>4</sup> I first establish my critical framework, diverging from existing scholarly reception to *Fargo* and approaching masculinity and male desire from a Queer Studies perspective. I then explore men who negotiate their masculinity through phallic weaponry which queerly transgresses bodily boundaries. Finally, I suggest that when men accept their own emasculation and express it through violence, they can access the ‘danger’ of femininity and use it for themselves. I conclude that the most brutal violence from Season One of *Fargo* comes from specifically queered, othered masculinities.

Before continuing, I will define key terms and clarify some of the more counterintuitive ideas of my argument. Throughout this paper I use ‘queer’ as a descriptor for acts which transcend and transgress gendered/sexual paradigms. I use ‘homoeroticism’ to indicate desire that is erotic and shared between people of the same gender, while using ‘homosexuality’ to refer to sexual acts and sexual/romantic attraction between those of the same gender. The show is cisnormative and conflates sex and gender in its narrative parameters; thus, within this paper I necessarily attend to issues of sex (such as sexed bodily characteristics) when exploring gender. I work from the starting point that the male figures I explore are likely to be cisgender (e.g. their assigned sex matches their gender). In light of this, I read phallic and yonic symbols as respectively male and female (and masculine and feminine), but this is not to say that these symbols cannot have alternative gendered connotations.

## Transformation and Transcendence

At the time of writing, every published scholarly work on *Fargo* has focused on the show’s adaptational innovations. Hawley translates Joel and Ethan Coen’s film *Fargo* (1996) (and elements of the Coen brothers’ wider filmography) into a new context and narrative each season. Julie Grossman suggests that Hawley does not simply appropriate his source material, but intertextually builds on his own work; each season expands the *Fargo* universe (194). These approaches ascribe academic value to Hawley’s adaptational process and claim that this process decentres the idea of a source text, yet they never fully analyse his text as a standalone work to demonstrate this: in fact, their readings are governed by references and parallels to the film to the point of reductionism. The show’s other contexts of production have gone ignored, such as its

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<sup>2</sup> Examples of this scholarship include Michael Mario Albrecht’s *Masculinity in Contemporary Quality Television* (2017), and Amanda D. Lotz’s *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the Twenty-First Century* (2014).

<sup>3</sup> See Parunov (111).

<sup>4</sup> All subsequent references to *Fargo* are to the television show. References to the Coen brothers’ film *Fargo* (1996) will be differentiated by including the date in parentheses.

context as a quality television drama, which is particularly crucial for understanding its representation of violence and masculinity.

Hawley's depiction of violence draws as much from the conventions of 'quality' television drama as it does from *Fargo* (1996). U.S. television drama described as 'quality' is often marketed as being complex in narrative, cinematic in presentation, and more willing to take risks than other television shows. Michael Albrecht suggests that this form of marketing (particularly the nebulous descriptor of 'narrative complexity') is inherently gendered and indicates a male target audience (7). 'Quality' television series therefore feature distinctly 'male' narratives, with explorations of what it means to be a man, what 'masculinity' means and how it has changed over time (Albrecht 2). *Fargo* scholarship does acknowledge that the show explores masculinity: Grossman suggests that Jerry Lundegaard (William H. Macy) from the film and Lester Nygaard (Martin Freeman) from the show are paralleled as they both feel a "need to assert their masculinity, resulting in violent crime" (199). However, the "masculinity" described in Grossman's analysis is not defined or clarified, and the complexities of the masculinities within Lester's narrative go ignored. To explore the show's masculinities fully, and to compare it against other works of quality television, a deeper analysis is required.

I use a queer lens to achieve this, demonstrating that Lester almost never asserts or performs a normative masculinity, but instead articulates a queer masculinity through violence. His violence demonstrates not a disavowal of feminised and/or 'dangerously' non-heteronormative traits, but instead an *embrace* of these traits. Other characters adjacent to him — including Lorne Malvo (Billy Bob Thornton) — use violence to develop transgressive relationships with men that blur the lines between the homosocial and the homoerotic. These homosocial masculinities do not have anything to 'insure' against queer connotations, as Parunov suggests is common within quality television narratives, but instead embrace that potential (114). The violence of Lester and Lorne reinforces a normative masculinity, but does so by being *not* normatively masculine, by being aberrant, unhealthy and unmistakably queer.

While I explore characters who perform violently queer masculinities comparing them against the violent yet normatively masculine men with whom they interact, the show distinguishes queer masculinity from gay coding. The assassins Mr. Wrench and Mr. Numbers (Adam Goldberg) are gay-coded but do not express queer masculinity through their violence.<sup>5</sup> As examples of their gay coding, they face homophobia from Lenny (Paul Braunstein) who suggests they are out of place at a strip club for "dicks who like pussies, [and] not pussies who like dick" ("The Rooster Prince").<sup>6</sup> Harvard and Goldberg were instructed to play them like "an old married couple", and they refer to each other ambiguously as "partners" (Fienberg).<sup>7</sup> Wrench and Numbers are aligned with an intimacy which may well involve men, but this intimacy is rendered separately from their professional lives. Their violence is not an articulation of their gay-coded identity but rather separated from it as far as possible: they are professionals, described as "assets" by their superiors and given code-names which reflect blank objecthood ("Buridan's Ass"). While being coded as gay, they and their violence are rendered separately — and more sympathetically — than the characters discussed here, whose queerness is directly linked to their violent acts.

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<sup>5</sup> There is one borderline case, in which Wrench is offered an opportunity to avenge the murder of Mr. Numbers, his 'partner', but he does not take it; in fact, after he is offered the opportunity, he never appears again in Season One.

<sup>6</sup> This quotation and all subsequent quotations from the show's dialogue are taken from my own transcriptions, with episode titles provided in parentheses.

<sup>7</sup> The duo's costuming also references Ratso and Joe from the film *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), about a male prostitute who has sex with male clients and struggles with his own sexual identity.

Through examining Lester's narrative and adjacent narratives, I demonstrate that Season One of *Fargo* depicts masculinities that are violently queer. At the time of writing [May 9 2019], this has been ignored in all scholarly literature on the show, bar perhaps one phrase from Grossman, describing Lorne as he encourages Lester to commit vindictive revenge: "Malvo seduces Lester" (199). The queer masculinities of Lorne and Lester allow them to engage in male homosocial relationships which are driven by desires that blur the lines between sex and violence, and which frequently cross into the homoerotic. Their queerness highlights the social construction and impossibility of performing 'masculinity', while their violent acts expose the weaknesses and incoherence of the masculine body. To investigate this in more depth, I mobilise a critical framework based in queer and masculinity theory.

### **Doing and Queering Masculinity**

In order to explore how violence might express queer masculinity, a consistent definition of 'queer masculinity' is required. This poses some methodological problems, as 'masculinity' is a relative and unstable construct which resists rigid definition. Haywood et al. suggest that it is extremely difficult to theorise masculinity holistically. Many theories fail to acknowledge non-male masculinities, rigidly rely on a universalised, non-generalisable idea of patriarchal power, and/or suggest that queer and other non-normative masculinities are inherently feminine (Haywood et al. 122–143). To avoid the problems of focusing on masculinity as an abstract concept, I will define masculinity by drawing from Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity, rooting my analysis in how men 'do' masculinity.<sup>8</sup> Masculinity is a category assigned to gender performances typically associated with the male gender. (Being indistinct and fluid as a category, masculinity often overlaps with 'maleness'/having a 'male identity'.) Both 'masculinity' and 'being male' are socially constructed, but are reified as constituting an innate, coherent identity (Butler 23). However, this identity is made 'real' through social performance, or repeated bodily acts which serve to externalise and emulate a particular gender identity or presentation (Butler 185). It is not so much that gender identity is not 'real' and does not contribute to lived experience, but rather that identity is necessarily embodied, structured by the body's actions and relations to the social world. Under this definition, masculine performances can be described as 'queer' when they destabilise a sense of a stable 'masculine identity', which may involve confounding particular gendered and sexual paradigms, blurring the boundaries between masculine/feminine and heterosexual/homosexual. For the purpose of this analysis, then, a 'queer masculinity' does not entail a consciously radical performance which undermines gendered ideology and hegemony, but rather one which challenges the coherency of masculine gendered performance. *Masculinity* may be deconstructed while patriarchal gender relations still remain intact.

When discussing how certain masculinities can deconstruct others, I advance from R. W. Connell's suggestion that masculinity is plural; when speaking about any concept of masculinity, it is necessary to speak of a multiplicity of "masculinities" which encapsulate a variety of subject positions (76). These masculinities are structured by their relation to 'hegemonic masculinity', a culturally relative form of normative masculinity, "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy" (Connell 77). Hegemonic masculinity is self-contradictory and impossible for anyone to experience or live

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<sup>8</sup> Because this essay focuses on the experiences of men using violence to perform masculinity, this section necessarily focuses on male performances of masculinity, although non-male performances are certainly possible.

out fully.<sup>9</sup> However, the concept of hegemonic masculinity still structures other masculinities into homosocial male hierarchies (Connell 78). This idea of masculine hierarchies is useful for my analysis, but I use the term more flexibly than Connell, whose descriptions of masculine structures are too rigidly set out in spite of her leaning towards poststructuralist ideas. She suggests, for example, that “homosexual masculinities” occupy “the bottom of a gender hierarchy among men” (Connell 78).<sup>10</sup> Her claims limit the potential for homosexual and queer masculinities to occupy a more ambiguous (indeed, a queerer) position in relation to other masculinities. However, Connell’s concepts emphasise the relativity and instability of the concept of masculinity, that hegemonic masculinity is upheld by men through homosocial relations, and that lived-out masculinities cannot replicate their socially constructed ‘ideal’.

The instability of hegemonic masculinity is often captured by the notion of a ‘crisis of masculinity’, the idea that hegemonic masculinity and the goalposts for achieving it are shifting to accommodate divergent (and often, less aggressive) forms of masculinity (Haywood et al. 35). Albrecht suggests that crises of masculinity “purport to identify an ontologically stable problem”, reifying the idea of hegemonic masculinity as an intrinsic, objective concept being threatened by the increased visibility of non-normative masculinities (9). Claims that masculinity is in ‘crisis’ therefore inadvertently undermine hegemonic masculinity, highlighting the impossibility of performing a concept that is constantly being culturally redefined. Jonathan Allan suggests that masculinity is defined by this impossibility: no man can fulfill the hegemonically masculine ideal, so masculinity is a vulnerable, fragile condition (181). Masculinity is a “cruel optimism” in that despite this inevitable failure, men are socially compelled to cyclically perform an approximation of hegemonic masculinity in order to appear masculine before other men (Allan 181). To do otherwise is to be shamed for lacking masculinity (which is often equated to ‘being feminine’) (Allan 178). This essay interrogates the validity of these ideas — the idea that queer masculinities are intrinsically ‘failed’, ‘feminine’ masculinities, and the idea that these masculinities are always at the bottom of male homosocial hierarchies, always vulnerable to attack by other, more hegemonically masculine men. Certainly, the queerly masculine men in *Fargo* seem to exist outside of these structures, being able to claim higher hierarchical positions by violent force.

Having examined theory into masculinity, it is clear that existing scholarship into *Fargo* and quality television has not interrogated masculinity extensively enough. There is often no explanation of what makes certain objects and acts ‘masculine’, or how masculine hierarchies can be negotiated through gendered acts. There is also often an assumption that male expressions of violence are always a performance of (or even an attempt to perform) hegemonic masculinity.<sup>11</sup> Some of these factors are a consequence of the inconsistencies of ‘masculinity’ as a concept, but

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<sup>9</sup> Consequently, when I refer to ‘hegemonically masculine men’ I refer to men performing an *approximation* of hegemonic masculinity.

<sup>10</sup> When describing ‘homosexual masculinities’ Connell is describing a variety of behaviours and bodily acts coded as ‘gay’ and/or ‘feminine’ and therefore “symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity”, rather than someone who is both masculine and gay (78). In this regard, my definition of ‘queer masculinities’ and her definition of ‘homosexual masculinities’ have some overlap.

<sup>11</sup> Mia Consalvo demonstrates that this is not the case, studying the news media coverage immediately after the Columbine massacre. The Columbine shooters were cast as “monsters” rather than “gendered creatures, male or otherwise”, and their failure to perform a normative masculinity was implicitly deemed the true cause of their crimes (Consalvo 35; 36). I diverge from Consalvo’s suggestion that fictional media will typically reinforce an ideal, violent and heroic masculinity (31), but her analysis is particularly useful for understanding the threat that queer masculinity poses to the stability of hegemonic masculinity, and hence why it would be represented in popular media as being violent and abnormal.

these inconsistencies have not always been acknowledged. By contrast, this paper directly engages with these tensions: that masculinities are difficult to quantify is at the centre of *Fargo*'s concerns. The permeability of masculinity as a concept is externalised and dramatised through a narrative in which queerly masculine men compromise hegemonically masculine ideals through violent bodily acts. The following sections show that within Season One of *Fargo*, queerly violent masculinities highlight the ambiguities and inconsistencies of hegemonic masculinity, disrupting its claim to coherence and dominance.

### **Penetrative Threats**

This section explores male homosocial violence as negotiated through weaponry. By weapons, I refer not only to instruments designed to harm/kill (such as guns) but also to improvised weapons. Within *Fargo*, weapons are used to define masculinities, yet the usage of weaponry is often queerly ambivalent.<sup>12</sup> Men who use 'symbolic weaponry' (weaponry which is brandished but not used, or is threatened/hypothetical) do so to assert their place in homosocial masculine hierarchies, as a performance of hegemonic masculinity. However, this is no match for actual weaponry, which cuts short embodied performances of masculinity, confounds the coherence of the body, and allows queer masculinities to take power.

Symbolic weaponry is used to create a sense of masculine identity, and to demonstrate the triumph of this masculinity over 'weaker' models of masculinity. I read the 'body-as-weapon' as a form of symbolic weaponry: in Sam Hess (Kevin O'Grady)'s case, turning one's body into a weapon is an attempt to solidify a stable masculine identity. Sam reminisces about bullying Lester to his sons: "I ever tell you how I used to beat this little guy up in high school? I'd write my name on my fist in Sharpie 'fore I'd punch him, so everyone else would know who did it" ("The Crocodile's Dilemma"). Sam's ritual is a means of repetitively asserting a violent identity which involves the domination of "little guy[s]". Sam inscribes violence upon his body through writing: he pre-empts his own punching Lester, and his fist and identity becomes solely defined by their capacity to do harm. The reduction of Sam's identity to his violence/body-as-weapon is reinforced by the cinematography, in a shot occurring shortly after the above quotation: Sam raises his fist, asks Lester, "Remember?", and brings his fist closer to Lester's face ("The Crocodile's Dilemma"). A medium close-up of Sam racks focus to his fist as it approaches the camera, blurring out Sam. In the following shot, Sam's fist edges closer to Lester, but the rest of Sam is edged out of the frame: the camera pans right so all that is visible is his outstretched arm and fist (see Figures 1 and 2 below). Sam does not need to be fully, or clearly, in the frame himself: his fist perpetuates his dominance over Lester. Sam successfully writes over his own body and turns it into a symbolic weapon in order to continually perform a violent masculine identity, dominating weaker masculinities.

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<sup>12</sup> The characters I analyse here are, of course, not the only ones who use weapons within the narrative. I have consciously excluded law enforcement as well as men acting in self-defence, as the scope of this paper is on male, non-state-ordained violence.



**Figure 1: Shot of Sam's fist within "The Crocodile's Dilemma"**



**Figure 2: Shot of Sam's fist within "The Crocodile's Dilemma", consecutive to the shot in Figure 1**

Sam's performed 'masculine identity' appears to hold claim to stability in that it creates real, physical effects, long after the original performance of masculinity (through brandishing or using the weapon) is over. The violent consequences of Sam's public performance of masculinity is



shown to last decades after the fact, alluded to via the permanence of “Sharpie” ink. While Sam does not threaten Lester with his *Sharpied* fist here, his fist alone is enough to inspire anticipation of further violence. Jeff Russo’s score evokes a feeling of anxious repetition, using a motif of echoing sleigh bells alongside a repeated bass note. The repetition and ‘echoing’ of the score emphasises the repetitive nature of performing masculine identity, and the ways in which it can perpetuate itself after the fact. After making the threat, Sam drops his fist and laughs. Then, while Lester is off-guard, he performs a feint punch and Lester flinches, turning and slamming into the window behind him. Lester replicates the effect that was established while they were in high school: that of him being beaten by Sam. His symbolic body-as-weapon ensures that direct acts of violence are no longer needed to perpetuate his domination over weaker men.

Sam also uses symbolic weaponry to compensate for threats to his masculinity. When Lorne insults the intelligence of Sam’s sons (Mickey, Atticus Mitchell, and Moe, Liam Green), Sam responds with a weaponised threat:

LORNE. I was just talking to your boys. I think the younger one’s a little dim.

SAM. What did you say?

LORNE. His IQ seems low, I’m saying. Have you had him tested?

[...]

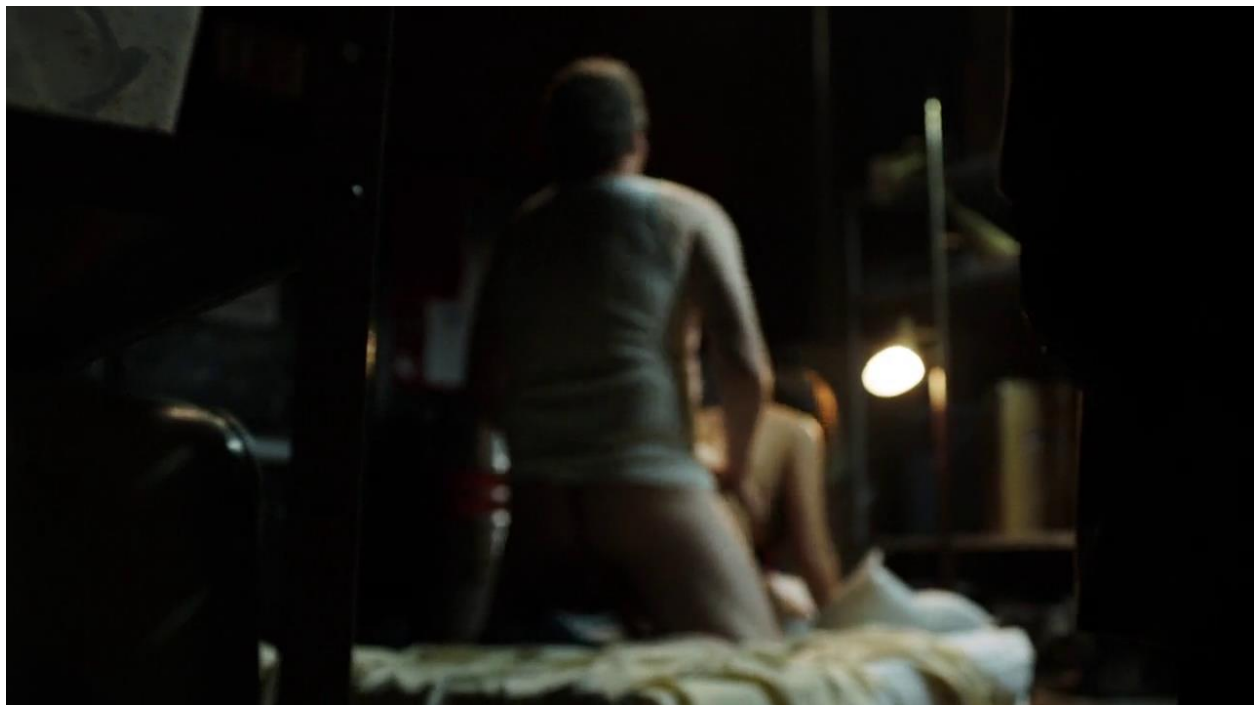
SAM. I’m gonna restrain myself, you know, on account of you got an obvious head injury, and not beat you to death with a tire iron. But I’m gonna ask you again: what the heck do you want? (“The Crocodile’s Dilemma”).

Previously, Sam has used his sons as a kind of masculine status symbol: Sam draws strength from numbers, as demonstrated by the framing of this scene, with Sam almost always being accompanied in the frame by one or more men. While threatening Lester, Sam draws strength from his boys; throughout the scene they are almost exclusively filmed in tight two- and three-shots, with Figures 1 and 2 above showing how even Sam’s fist is accompanied by one of the boys in the midground. Sam and his sons visually meld into each other, creating a sense of increased size and strength. Lorne undermines this strength by questioning the innate intelligence of Sam’s son Moe, insulting Sam’s seed and thereby his virility. In response, Sam uses the language of weaponry to reassert his masculine dominance, and specifically invokes a long, straight, phallic object. Weaponry (or even the invocation of imaginary weaponry) becomes a way to shield one’s own masculinity from scrutiny.

Because phallic symbolic weapons require investment in arbitrary symbols of masculinity, they are unable to match up to actual phallic weapons, which disrupt the so-called ‘integrity’ of masculine performance by disrupting the body itself. Sam might threaten to beat Lorne to death, but Lorne ultimately triumphs over Sam, killing him in a later scene. My reading of this scene draws from Judith Butler, who suggests that the body is reified as being perfectly impermeable, having a clearly definable interior and exterior, with the skin marking the boundary between the two (182). This reification establishes which bodily acts are acceptable and which are taboo, allowing for the “social regulation and control” of the body (Butler 182). However, the body itself “[confounds]” the interior/exterior division because bodily expulsions cross bodily boundaries; they require that inner substances “[become] outer” (Butler 182). In this case, weapons not only mark the social transgression of non-state-ordained violence, but they penetrate and damage the body’s skin and surface, making the interior (blood, viscera, so on) exterior. In combination with a narrative that continually draws attention to the sexual and gendered dimensions of violence,

weaponised violence between men becomes a queer act of quasi-sexual transgression, an act of bodily penetration, which allows for alternative masculinities to forcibly claim a higher place in homosocial hierarchies.

Lorne's violence against other men has a transgressive and queerly sexual dimension as a result of its breaching the male body and emphasising its vulnerability. He penetrates other men with weapons, with the stabbing of Sam Hess emphasising how easily a hegemonically masculine performance can be rendered vulnerable, and how a queer masculinity can claim dominance through violence. The murder takes place in the backroom of a strip club, while Sam is having sex with a dancer, Paprika (Lori Ravensborg). Prior to the stabbing, Sam's bodily vulnerability is emphasised. The backroom scene's opening shot shows Sam's blurred-out naked buttocks shortly before Lorne's shadowed form enters the frame, in focus. Lorne is wearing as many layers as possible, and due to his being in low-key lighting, he blends into the shadows of the foreground (see Figure 3). Compared to Lorne, Sam is bare, vulnerable and visible. The lighting choices also indicate this: Paprika is outshone by a bright light which puts her in shadow, while Sam is lit to be more visible, emphasising his erect nipples and sweating face (see Figures 4 and 5). Paprika becomes obscured while Sam's body is open for a voyeuristic gaze; he is rendered naked by the cinematography and lighting. Despite him being positioned above Paprika, penetrating her, it is *his* body which is shown to be vulnerable. With Sam's sexual vulnerability being even more marked than the dancer he penetrates, he becomes an equivalent of her for Lorne to penetrate.



**Figure 3: Shot which shows Sam and Paprika copulating while Lorne looms to the side, fully clothed (“The Crocodile’s Dilemma”)**



**Figure 4: Sam is lit to be visible and vulnerable (“The Crocodile’s Dilemma”)**



**Figure 5: The light behind Paprika puts her in shadow, making her less visible than Sam (“The Crocodile’s Dilemma”)**

Sam’s hegemonically masculine performance of heterosexuality is aborted by the knife attack; the sexual act is redirected onto an act of male homosocial and homoerotic violence. Not only is the act a penetration, but it also includes an ejaculation of sorts; Sam vomits blood onto Paprika after

being stabbed. After collapsing dead, his eyes remain open, looking off-screen in the direction where Lorne was positioned in the first shot of the scene. The sexual exchange, climax and aftermath thus occurs between Lorne and Sam, not Paprika. Even Sam's corpse falls in a position where he is able to 'see' Lorne. Paprika, on the other hand, does not get the same opportunity: a few scenes later, Molly expositively states that Paprika "didn't get a good look" at Lorne "on account of all the blood in her eyes" ("The Crocodile's Dilemma"). Sam's blood literally blinds her to the third participant in the intercourse. Paprika (and her intercourse with Sam) is decentred while the sexual/violent dominance of Lorne over Sam is amplified; Lorne's act overrides Sam's performance of heterosexuality, forcing him to 'ejaculate' for him and then look in his direction. The murder becomes an intimate (though sexually violent) act of bodily transgression that challenges the coherence of hegemonically, heteronormatively masculine identity.

Lorne also 'penetrates' Lester, 'impregnating' him by giving him a shotgun wound from a pellet which passes through Police Chief Thurman (Shawn Doyle)'s body and lodges in Lester's hand. The wound emphasises Lorne's comparatively 'disembodied' state, which is paradoxically achieved, given that Lorne does not attempt to deny his own permeable boundaries.<sup>13</sup> Immediately after giving Lester this wound, Lorne slips into Lester's basement and disappears; he is missing when Lester follows him down to attempt to construct an alibi. His lack of physical presence contrasts to Lester's vulnerable physicality, amplified by his wound, which continually reminds him of his abjection by comparison, his open, permeable bodily boundaries.<sup>14</sup> Lester spends consecutive episodes trying to keep his boundaries shut. In three separate scenes (in "The Rooster Prince", "A Muddy Road", and "Eating the Blame") he is nagged by the pain of the pellet, squeezing pus from the wound and wrapping it up with bandages that become more bloodied and dirtied with each episode. Whenever attention is drawn to his wound, this coincides with him being questioned about his involvement in the murders, either by Molly or by Mr. Numbers and Mr. Wrench. In all cases he denies his knowledge of Lorne's involvement in the murders, denying Lorne's physical presence (including within his own body). Eventually, he is arrested, sharing a jail cell with Numbers and Wrench, who interrogate him. After they press down on his wound, he expels Lorne's name violently, and after they are bailed out, Lester immediately vomits. After the expulsion, Lester goes into sepsis, unable to keep his ailment contained: while delirious and being rushed to hospital, he confesses further details of the murders to Molly, denying that he paid Lorne to kill Sam Hess, but not that they conspired. Lester 'gives birth' by acknowledging Lorne's embodied existence, and by having the pellet removed, his infection treated. This occurs simultaneously with another character being treated at the hospital: Ida Thurman (Julie Ann Emery), wife of the late Chief, about to give birth to their child. This parallel is no coincidence: Lester's shotgun wound acts as a figurative impregnation by Lorne, making Lester painfully aware of his own abjection and masculine failure. It is only after Lester 'gives birth' that he is able to violently assert himself.

Within Season One of *Fargo*, weaponry allows men to assert and perform 'hegemonic' masculinity, yet, counterintuitively, only if the weaponry is not used to harm. Hawley makes a distinction between what it means to threaten violence and what it means to do violence. Threatening violence by using symbolic weapons is a means of asserting one's position in

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<sup>13</sup> One example of Lorne penetrating his own boundaries to maintain his hierarchical position is part of a combat strategy in "Buridan's Ass", where he cuts his hand and uses the blood to lure his assailants into a trap.

<sup>14</sup> I draw this definition of abjection from Jane M. Ussher. Ussher revises Kristeva's approach to abjection and emphasises that in hegemonic discourses, the pregnant body's expulsions evidence its lack of boundaries between the internal and external, and therefore its lack of bodily coherence and integrity (6).

masculine hierarchies, perpetuating the illusion of a stable masculine identity. On the other hand, *doing* male homosocial violence reveals the permeability of masculine identity and hierarchies. When men use penetrative weapons on other men, this opens up the possibility of new bodily entrances and transgressions, making it difficult if not impossible to disentangle violence from sexuality, and therefore from homoeroticism. Penetrating the body destabilises embodied performances of hegemonic masculinity, allowing for queer masculinities to take hierarchical power by force. Penetrative weapons allow bodily performances of hegemonic masculinity to be overwritten and queered.

### **Weaponising Masculine Failure**

This section focuses on Lester's narrative as told by his engagement with weaponry, both symbolic and actual. My reading of Lester's 'impregnation' sets the tone for my reading of Lester's engagement with weapons and bodies: his subject position is liminal and abject, and his violent acts continually cross gendered boundaries. Julie Grossman suggests that Lester "asserts agency only within the spheres of brutal masculinity and animalistic self-preservation", and that his "masculinity ris[es]" after Lorne kills Sam for him (199). However, while Lester's masculinity may be violent, it is certainly not hegemonic. His brutal agency is often entirely based in a *failure* to perform hegemonic masculinity and masculine violence 'correctly'. This prevents his engagement with symbolic weaponry and with phallic weaponry, but not with other, more ambiguously gendered weapons. He draws strength from and weaponises his emasculation, using it to claim victory over hegemonically masculine men. As I will show with a reading of the narrative's finale, his abjection is the price he pays for weaponising his own bodily vulnerability.

Lester's failure to correctly engage with masculine symbolic weaponry becomes a failure to correctly perform hegemonic masculinity. In the first episode, Lester is invited to his brother Chazz (Joshua Close)'s garage, where he shows off his machine gun. After Chazz offers to let Lester hold the gun, Lester accidentally drops it on the floor, dismantling the weapon. This exchange occurs in the aftermath:

LESTER. Oh. Oh jeez. You should've told me it was so heavy. Is... is it okay?  
CHAZZ. No, Lester! It's not okay! You— [...] You broke the darn— why are you such a G. D. screw-up? Ever since we were... ("The Crocodile's Dilemma").

The end of Chazz's sentence is left unsaid, but the implication of "[e]ver since" is that Lester's nature as a "G. D. screw-up" is a long-established character trait. Lester's failure to hold the gun, to handle symbolic weaponry, becomes extrapolated onto an innate failure at performing a 'successful' masculine identity. As though reflecting Chazz's words, Lester continues to fumble with guns throughout the series, just as much as he fumbles with a hegemonically masculine identity. In a flashback, Lester is unable to successfully haggle for some "irregular" socks, "half of them ladies", at which point the shopkeeper (Greg Lawson) persuades him to buy the shotgun he almost uses in the first episode ("The Six Ungraspables"). Lester is unable to assert himself and settle on a price for the ambiguously gendered socks, and is offered the 'helping hand' of the gun to help him symbolically assert a successful masculinity. However, he is only further ambiguously gendered by the lack of agency in his purchase. When Lester takes the shotgun home, his wife Pearl (Kelly Holden Bashar) warns him to be careful, as "if anyone could shoot themselves in the face with an unloaded firearm, it's you" ("The Six Ungraspables"). Pearl recognises Lester's

incompetence with specifically *unloaded* weapons, in that, so long as they are unloaded, they remain a symbolic signifier of hegemonic masculinity. Lester cannot successfully use guns as symbolic weaponry because they are too intrinsically tied to the hegemonically masculine.

Instead, Lester commits acts of violence with weaponry which, in the context of its usage, is more ambiguously gendered. He asserts himself more easily with improvised weapons; he literally improvises with the tools of his own emasculation. He bludgeons Pearl to death with a hammer, perhaps the most masculine (and phallic) of all his improvised weapons, given associations between masculinity and DIY projects. He does this, however, after he has broken their washing machine attempting to fix it. Lester's success with using this weapon is rooted in his capacity to *break* things with tools rather than fix them; thus, the weaponised hammer becomes emblematic of Lester's masculine failure. This occurs again when Gina Hess (Kate Walsh) attempts to retrieve the money from Sam's lapsed life insurance policy. She uses her sons to intimidate Lester, and Lester successfully subdues them by attacking them with a stapler. The weapon he chooses is reminiscent of the insult Sam says twice to Lester in the first episode: "pencil-dick" ("The Crocodile's Dilemma"). By weaponising a piece of stationery and using it against Sam's sons, he successfully turns the insult on its head, yet there is no intrinsic denial of the insult's implications. His articulation of violence here is one which involves both literal and figurative small tools. One of the only improvised weapons that fails to work for him is an 'Insurance Salesman of the Year' award, with which he tries and fails to knock Lorne out. He cannot weaponise an award which recognises him as a success, or as a man. Lester's usage of improvised weapons shows that his *successfully* violent masculinity is rooted in his failure to meet the demands of hegemonic masculinity.

At Lorne and Lester's final confrontation in "Morton's Fork", Lester's success at reclaiming and weaponising masculine failure becomes most apparent. Lester lures Lorne into a bear trap (originally his brother Chazz's, before Lester frames him for Pearl's murder), a symbol of the *vagina dentata*. Barbara Creed suggests that imagery of the *vagina dentata* relates to an anxiety around (cisgender) women as "castrators" but highlights that men can be both "castrated and [...] agents of castration" (152). Men are frequently figured within Creed's analysis as genderless; maleness and masculinity are suggested to be the 'default' position against which femaleness and femininity diverge, yet this quotation is particularly evocative of the possibilities of men using violence to occupy a space *beyond* that 'default', beyond binaristic gender relations. These possibilities are illustrated by the contrast between Lester and Chazz's usage of the bear trap. Chazz keeps the bear trap hung up on his wall, on display, with its 'teeth' spread open (see Figure 6). Like much of Chazz's garage, the weapons and hunting equipment are put on display to demonstrate a masculine competence in an 'acceptable' form of violence; the bear trap having its 'legs' spread is a claim to masculine authority, a triumph over a dangerous and vaginal symbol, while its potential to do harm has been elevated and prevented. By contrast, after Lester inherits Chazz's hunting paraphernalia, he stores the bear trap in a box in his basement (see Figure 7). Compared with Chazz's garage, Lester's basement is grey and empty, lacking any blatant claims to hegemonically masculine authority. Lester keeps the trap contained within a box, hidden from view entirely. Lester contains and hides the castrating threat of the bear trap but ensures that it is ready to be used. As a symbolic masculine fetish, the bear trap's danger is neutralised and denied, while in use, it becomes a queerly ambiguous feminine threat.



**Figure 6: Shot of Chazz's garage where the bear trap is on display ("The Crocodile's Dilemma")**



**Figure 7: Shot of Lester's basement, with Lester reaching into a box of Chazz's hunting paraphernalia to retrieve the bear trap ("Morton's Fork")**

Lester accesses the yonic danger of the bear trap, the culmination of his using his emasculation as a weapon. Lorne is lured to Lester's en-suite bedroom — the site of the trap — by the sound of



Lester pretending to call the police from the adjacent bathroom: “Please just hurry up. I’m upstairs in the bathroom; there’s no lock on the door. Oh, God, you’ve gotta hurry” (“Morton’s Fork”). By this point, Lorne has already ‘penetrated’ into Lester’s house with a knife, the same method by which he penetrates Sam. Reading the knife as phallic, the break-in is symbolically a sexual violation which is then cut short by the castratory power of the bear trap. One of the penetrating tools, Lorne’s leg, is horribly mangled, while his capacity to penetrate Lester’s body (through further weaponised violence) is limited. While Lorne has penetrated other male bodies, here Lester is able to transgress *Lorne’s* bodily boundaries: he asserts his corporeal and sexual dominance over another man using a weapon that, here, symbolises femininity. Queer masculinities do not need to use phallic penetrative weaponry in order to claim dominance over other men: they can also draw their threat from the permeability and ‘openness’ of the body, the very reason for the futility of attempting to embody masculinity.

The conclusion of this scene is Lester embracing an abject, liminal state. However, Lester is unable to capture or kill Lorne. Lester tries to shoot the trapped Lorne, but his gun jams, another instance of abortive engagement with ‘masculine’ weaponry. Lorne throws Lester’s ‘Salesman of the Year’ award at him in retaliation, breaking Lester’s nose. The injury symbolises Lester’s unsteady reclamation of masculine dominance through weaponising his own emasculation: his bodily vulnerability can be a source of threat, but it can still leave him open to exploitation by other men. The evidence of his broken nose from episode one was little more than bruising and a bloodied shirt, while in the broken nose of episode ten, the blood drenches the lower half of his face, running down his chest. He hides in the bathroom until Lorne leaves; his prior performance of an emasculated man in hiding becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. While he has survived his encounter with Lorne, his queerly liminal position has not changed — if anything, he has *devolved* as a man. Having attempted to weaponise his masculine failure, his bodily boundaries are even less stable than before.

Lester has an abject failure of a masculine identity, but he draws strength from his failure. His failures highlight the unreasonable demands of hegemonic masculinity and the impossibility of performing it; accepting his failure is accepting the ‘danger’ involved in exposing the vulnerabilities of the performatively masculine body. Consequently, his violent, emasculated acts come at personal risk to him as well as to others. Through Lester’s narrative of personal transformation, the show demonstrates the unstable yet powerful potential of violently rejecting hegemonic masculinity — and potentially rejecting *all* masculinities, given Lester’s usage of feminine weaponry. The consequence, however, is that Lester is othered; his violent behaviours are characterised by a lack of masculinity, a failure to be hegemonically masculine.

## Conclusion

Quality television narratives about ‘crises of masculinity’ often feature men using violence to assert a hegemonically masculine identity. However, Season One of *Fargo* presents violent men who reject hegemonic masculinity altogether. Queerly and non-normatively masculine men are able to use violence to transcend masculine hierarchies: the sexually charged nature of the violence creates the conditions for a queer deconstruction of masculine performance, as the body is exposed as vulnerable and unable to sustain the impossible ideal of hegemonic masculinity. Violence between men is a queer, homoerotic transgression of bodily boundaries that is negotiated through phallic, penetrative objects. The violence of Lester is rooted in his failure to perform normative



masculinity, rather than the impossible standards of masculinity which created the parameters for him to fail.

Within the narrative, the most brutal and unconscionable acts of violence are committed by men whose masculinities are maligned and queer. These are not men who are desperately attempting to assert their masculinity against a hegemonic standard, but instead, in the words of Chazz Nygaard, they are men who have been deemed to have “something missing”, lacking the compulsion to abide by social codes and consistently perform a ‘successful’ masculinity (“Buridan’s Ass”). For these queerly masculine men, violence is liberatory, a transgressive act that allows them to rest outside of society, develop intimate (albeit violent) desires for other men, and temporarily reign dominant over hegemonically masculine men. However, these men are undoubtedly scapegoated: queer masculinities reveal the socially constructed status of masculinity, so they are rendered as being unable to fully articulate their presence without the abuse of other bodies. Within the narratives of *Fargo* and other works of quality television, they are villainised for failing to leave masculinity ‘intact’. These queer masculinities are the collateral damage of narratives of masculinity in crisis, and they demand and deserve further scholarly attention.

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