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American Mythology and Ambivalent Rhetoric in Friday Night Lights

Michael Butterworth and Raymond I. Schuck

School of Communication Studies, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio, USA; Department of Humanities, Bowling Green State University Firelands, Huron, Ohio, USA

ABSTRACT

This article reads the television series Friday Night Lights as a rhetorical text that enacts and, at times, complicates the mythology of the American frontier. The analysis situates the show in the context of American political culture and focuses on images of masculine leadership and authority as embodied by quarterbacks and head coach Eric Taylor. The authors suggest that the show’s complexity shapes contemporary understandings of the “heartland” to create a rhetorical lens through which we may view contemporary contests over the meanings of the frontier. Friday Night Lights is neither wholly representative nor resistive to the frontier; rather, it is a vehicle of ambivalence through which Americans may continue to evaluate and revise their commitments to frontier mythology.

KEYWORDS

Football; heartland; masculinity; mythology; sport

During the 2012 U.S. presidential campaign, Republican Mitt Romney built on his “Believe in America” campaign slogan by invoking the line, “Clear eyes, full hearts, can’t lose,” made popular by the television show Friday Night Lights (Hunt, 2012). Politicians commonly appropriate popular culture in attempts to build relationships with their audiences, and, given the extent to which elections are understood to be a “game” (Dunaway & Lawrence, 2015), it hardly seems a stretch that a presidential candidate would invoke a football rallying cry to add energy to his campaign. Yet, Romney’s reference also carried rhetorical significance. Hailing the phrase’s symbolic meaning during a speech in Iowa, Romney pleaded, “This is something that we share in this country, men and women of clear eyes and full hearts and America can’t lose” (Hunt, 2012), thus envisioning the slogan—and by association, the television show—as an embodiment of prominent American mythologies, most explicitly the myth of American exceptionalism.

Yet, when candidates appropriate popular culture references, their overly simplified interpretations often open space for competing interpretations of cultural myths. Perhaps most illustrative is Ronald Reagan’s misguided assertion in 1984 that Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the USA” was a “message of hope” rather than a lament about the plight of the working class in post-Vietnam America (Rauch, 1988, p. 29). Much as Springsteen objected to Reagan’s claim, individuals affiliated with Friday Night Lights (hereafter, FNL) rejected association of the show with Romney. Creator Peter Berg criticized Romney’s political commitments, concluding in an open letter that they “are clearly not aligned with the themes we portrayed in our series” (Berg, 2012). Connie Britton, one of the principal actors from the show, further highlighted a divide she perceived between Romney’s values and those of the show. In a USA Today column she wrote, “And ‘Clear Eyes, Full Hearts, Can’t Lose’ wasn’t just about winning games. Rather, it was a rallying cry of hope and optimism in a community where everyone had a fair shot—no matter their background, no matter their parents, no matter their gender. And no matter their politics” (Britton & Aubrey, 2012). Berg’s and Britton’s...
comments suggest that *FNL* signified a much more complex set of meanings than Romney’s references articulate. Although there may be commonalities with themes Romney identifies, such as “hope,” the manifestations of those themes look very different from differing political perspectives.

At the very least, this demonstrates that *FNL* has appealed to both conservative and progressive political ideologies, which aligns with Johnson’s (2010) argument that *FNL* is most accurately defined not as “red” or “blue” but by its “purpleness—its overt challenges to ‘commonsense’ narratives about place and value” (Johnson, 2010, p. 64). Johnson connects the show’s “purpleness” to its articulation of the “heartland” mythology that has enjoyed prominence in the United States. Even as *FNL* reproduces the heartland myth, the show also contains elements that might simultaneously challenge the centrality of the myth. As such, the show’s “purpleness” provides a means for its contested political meaning, allowing Romney to claim the show for conservative ideological commitments while also allowing Britton and Berg to challenge Romney’s claim.

That purpleness was on display during the election in which Romney was participating, which continued a trend seen throughout the early twenty-first century in which elections have been closely contested—most famously with the 2000 Bush–Gore election—and the nation’s states have been coded as “red” and “blue.” This characterization reflects a larger cultural and political trend in the United States of significant conflict between conservative and progressive ideologies. Of course, conservative and progressive ideologies have inherent conflicts with one another; yet, in the opening years of the new millennium, these conflicts have involved particularly deep questions about American mythologies, including the heartland mythology. Manifestations of these conflicts are evident in foreign and domestic policy regarding issues such as the War on Terror and the War in Iraq, the Patriot Act, Enron, and other affiliated business scandals, and government responses to situations such as Hurricane Katrina. These features of the George W. Bush administration and its immediate aftermath have led to prominent questions about the American Dream, American exceptionalism, and other fundamental U.S. cultural myths. Romney’s use of *FNL*, with its connection to the myth of American exceptionalism, sought to reconfirm the legitimacy of those U.S. mythologies. While the responses by Britton and Berg did not necessarily question the mythologies—indeed, Britton herself writes of “hope” and equal opportunity in ways that invoke elements of the myth of the American Dream—the responses do demonstrate concerns about the paths Romney, Bush, and other conservatives took toward fulfilling those mythologies.

*FNL* offers depictions of life in the United States that both reconfirm American mythologies, in line with uses by Romney and other conservatives, and challenge America mythologies, in line with more progressive interests. The contestation exhibited by Romney and his critics appears to be a significant part of the show and its cultural and political meanings. However, we suggest that contestation does not sufficiently capture the show’s depiction of the state of American mythologies at the time of its airing. Rather, we argue that, as a rhetorical text, *FNL* offers a message of ambivalence regarding contemporary U.S. life and prominent American mythologies, hailing viewers not to choose one side or the other but to feel conflicted about how to think and feel about contemporary societal issues and the traditional mythologies those issues reflect.

This message, as Johnson (2008) suggests, articulates through the heartland myth, though in doing so it draws, as the heartland myth itself does, upon the myth of the frontier that has been so prominent throughout U.S. history. Meanwhile, the show connects these mythologies with additional American mythologies such as the myth of the American Dream and the myth of American exceptionalism that Romney invokes. Given the emphasis within the show on the character of Coach Eric Taylor and the continuing significance of Coach Taylor’s relationships with the quarterbacks on his football teams, these depictions of American mythologies channel prominently through the portrayals of masculine leadership and how that leadership is exercised through football. With that in mind, our analysis focuses on how the show portrays masculine leadership through Coach Taylor, the quarterbacks during the first three seasons of the show—Jason Street, John Saracen, and J. D. McCoy—and the relationships between Coach Taylor and these three individuals. Our interest
in this article is primarily with the first three seasons, during which Coach Taylor leads the Dillon Panthers and the series introduces its other central characters. Seasons 4 and 5 shift Taylor to East Dillon High School and introduce several new characters. These characters are compelling and add new complexities to the show’s narrative disposition; however, they also invite a more nuanced interpretation of other issues, including racial dynamics, which exceed the limits of our current study. We maintain that the series’ first three seasons provide the better lens for interpreting the show’s portrayal of the heartland, especially given the political landscape of the early twenty-first century and football’s traditional emphasis on masculinity and authoritarian leadership.

We argue that, while *FNL* appears to lay claim to the masculine imagery of American mythologies, it often does so in nuanced and contradictory ways that produce a message of ambivalence regarding the state of those elements of U.S. society in the early years of the twenty-first century. Additionally, we seek to further the argument that sport is central to the constitution of mythic identities in the United States. In his book about baseball during the “war on terror,” Butterworth (2010) argues that sport is “a rhetorical phenomenon that contributes to the construction of American interpretations of democracy, citizenship, and nationhood” (p. 2). *FNL* is only partly about sport in the sense of how football is played; however, the entire series is rooted in the centrality of sport to the fictional community of Dillon and, by extension, real communities across the nation. It is important, then, to assess the values associated with sport in *FNL*, for therein we can find additional challenges to the stability of traditional myth. We argue that the articulation of *FNL*’s message of ambivalence relies on the centrality of sport as a rhetorical form for the articulation of masculine leadership and its connection to American mythologies. Just as sports can affirm and challenge mythologies, *FNL* demonstrates how sport can serve as a vehicle for articulating ambivalence about mythologies. In our particular case, that ambivalence appears prominently through the depictions of masculine leadership offered through the quarterbacks, through Coach Taylor, and through the relationships among these characters—relationships that are central to the framing and development of the show.

**American mythology, masculinity, and sport**

As Johnson (2008) describes it, the heartland symbolizes a kind of “shared, national 'home'” (p. 18), a place where Americans may locate and reinvent the universal values that bind them together. More than simply constituting the “scene” of a film or television program, the heartland enacts a form of “rural, pastoral populism” that can be grafted onto other geographical regions that embody this regional mythology (p. 15). In *FNL* the television series, this mythology builds from its articulation in H. G. Bissinger’s (1990) nonfiction book of the same title that spawned a cinematic adaptation and provided the basis for the fictionalized television drama. Bissinger’s account chronicles the culture of high school football in Odessa, Texas, where “there seemed to be an opportunity ... to observe not simply the enormous effect of sports on American life, but other notions, for the values of Odessa were ones that firmly belong to a certain kind of America ... an America of factory towns and farm towns and steel towns and single-economy towns all trying to survive” (p. xiii). Although *FNL* is set in the fictional town of Dillon, it retains the attendant characteristics that animate Bissinger’s sentiments about real small towns in the United States. The opening images of the pilot episode, for example, capture a middle-American sensibility through fields, oil rigs, and picturesque sunsets, all while introducing the main characters, each of whom speaks with just enough of a rural and/or Southern accent to invite yet not alienate a range of viewers. This sequence evokes “a region of humility, guilelessness, and, above all, stout yeoman righteousness” (Frank, 2005, p. 16).

These characteristics embody the same kinds of rhetorical imagery as those associated with the frontier myth, which “tells the origin of how brave individuals contend with an unknown and hostile frontier, coming together as a community to forge a social covenant reflecting its cherished ideals” (Dorsey, 1995, p. 4). As Dorsey (2007) describes it, “The nation’s Frontier Myth, popularized in
movies, television shows, speeches, artwork, and a host of other texts, has become a fundamental expression of what constitutes an American. It lauds the ‘rugged individualism’ needed to survive on the frontier, but not at the expense of the social order” (p. 6). Although Rushing (1983) calls the frontier myth “the most enduring and characteristic American myth” (p. 15), she points out that the myth is a dynamic narrative that has evolved over time. In particular, it often presents values that are in tension with one another, an opposition that is “particularly vulnerable to change, given changing societal exigencies” (p. 17). In his study of the Alamo, Milford (2013) adds that myths may “provide a narrative model that is used to establish and regulate a community’s ideology” (p. 114). More importantly, “over time, social forces often turn the narrative away from its historical origins toward an ideologically appropriate message for the current social order” (Milford, 2013, p. 115). In other words, even as U.S. national identity consistently features the frontier myth, the specific dynamics that actualize the myth are subject to continuous contestation and revision. The heartland myth, particularly as Johnson has characterized it, in part provides a contemporary manifestation of the frontier myth that has been so central to U.S. identity. The heartland myth’s articulation of the frontier myth provides an important foundation for understanding American life, demonstrating both the prevailing power of the frontier myth as embodied through its contemporary rearticulations and the tensions that such rearticulations mediate.

Yet, for as much as these tensions can produce contestation, they also have the capacity to produce ambivalence. In the case of FNL, the show appeared on the television landscape at a moment of political transition in the United States. By the time FNL debuted in 2006, the fervent nationalism that gripped the nation after 9/11 had begun to wane, as had public confidence in the “war on terror” and the leadership of President George W. Bush. As Spielvogel (2005) details, Bush embraced a leadership style that mimicked an authoritarian parent, one that largely played upon traditional portrayals of the frontier (West & Carey, 2006), marking the United States as exceptional. In FNL’s initial seasons, then, Bush’s legacy came under scrutiny and the 2008 presidential election yielded two Democratic candidates—Senators Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama—who represented the first viable alternatives to white and/or masculine leadership. They also countered Bush’s mythological privileging of the American “individual avatar and not the relationship between the individual and the community” (Dorsey, 2008, p. 151). This was especially true of Obama, who grounded his candidacy in an articulation of the American Dream that re- emphasized community concerns over the individualistic needs celebrated by Bush (Rowland & Jones, 2007).

Obama’s successful election as president suggests that Americans were prepared to reconsider the defining features of their foundational myths. In 2012, when Mitt Romney ran against Obama, these same tensions remained, particularly as the prominent sentiment arose that the Obama administration had not lived up to the promises of hope and change around which the 2008 campaign had centered. The opportunity remained to rearticulate traditional American mythologies, and Romney’s campaign embodied some of that rearticulating process. Romney’s use of FNL invoked a depiction of the United States that echoed George W. Bush’s patriotic rhetoric emphasizing the myth of American exceptionalism. As a corporate leader known for, among other things, heading the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympic effort, Romney embodied the traditional masculine leadership style from which Bush had drawn, and, in doing so, Romney’s image signified values associated with the U.S. frontier.

Romney’s association with the Olympics may have been no accident, for perhaps no phenomenon more consistently celebrates the virtues of rugged individualism in the United States than sport, especially through its expression of “hegemonic masculinity.” As Connell (1990) defines it, hegemonic masculinity is “the culturally idealized form of masculine character” (p. 83). Although this idealized form remains fluid and subject to contestation (Miller, 2001), it is quite commonly defined by an emphasis on strength, aggression, control, and rugged individualism. Connell (1987) notes that images of masculinity “are constructed and promoted most systematically through competitive sport” (pp. 84–85).
Connell’s argument has been supported most persuasively by Trujillo (1991), whose study of baseball pitcher Nolan Ryan demonstrates the potency of frontier imagery in the mediated production of masculinity. As he explains, hegemonic masculinity in the United States contains five major features: “(1) physical force and control, (2) occupational achievement, (3) familial patriarchy, (4) frontiersmanship, and (5) heterosexuality” (p. 291). In more recent years, scholars in communication, media studies, and sociology have identified discourses at the intersection of media, myth, and masculinity that serve to “reinforce a form of hegemonic masculinity that closely articulates with the masculinist underpinnings of sport and its status as a male preserve” (Gee, 2009, p. 579). This is especially the case in leadership positions, such as quarterback (Berg & Harthcock, 2012; Sanderson et al., 2014) and coaches (Butterworth, 2013). Accordingly, our focus in this article is primarily on the role quarterbacks and the head coach play in the portrayal of masculinity in football.

As rhetorical critics, we are interested in the extent to which notions of masculinity in FNL invite an audience that might accept values that are at odds with hegemonic masculinity. In this way, we believe the show functions as a kind of “constitutive rhetoric” (Charland, 1987), wherein the mythic enactments of the frontier are rhetorical cues that induce particular attitudes. Constitutive rhetoric does not merely provide a means of identification for an audience; it also serves to direct audiences “towards political, social, and economic action in the material world and it is in this positioning that its ideological character becomes significant” (Charland, 1987, p. 141). Yet, the ideology of a given constitutive rhetoric is not fixed. As Dickinson (2005) notes, “Rhetoric as constitutive both creates and recreates the audience itself” (p. 273). This constitutive invitation is especially productive, we believe, because FNL’s setting offers what many would assume is a conventional representation of the heartland. For example, a preseason campfire is punctuated by fullback Tim Riggins’ motto “Texas forever.” Meanwhile, the small town/Southwestern backdrop situates the show in its frontier landscape. Yet, the show soon reveals characters who initially appear to be nothing more than stereotypes as people with depth and multifaceted personalities. At its best, FNL provides these characters with emotions and dialogue that complicate the overly simplified dramatizations of middle America we so often see.

Meanwhile, as FNL centers around football relationships, it relies on sport as its vehicle for conveying its messages. Rhetorical critics have shown that sport often provides a symbolic means for reaffirming American mythologies (Butterworth, 2007, 2010; Von Burg & Johnson, 2009), while sport can also provide a space for challenging mythologies and for publicly representing the contestation between mythologies and challenges to them (Grano, 2007). FNL is particularly significant in this regard because its use of sport articulates a message of ambivalence toward American mythologies and contemporary social, cultural, and political sentiments and concerns. The intersections of the lives of the show’s characters, occurring within a football context that brings the characters together, provide the basis for articulating ambivalence. The centrality of Coach Eric Taylor to the show and the prominence of Taylor’s relationships with his starting quarterbacks emphasize the importance of that football context—and thus the significance of sport—for conveying the larger theme of ambivalence.

With that in mind, we begin with an examination of three quarterbacks—Jason Street, Matt Saracen, and J. D. McCoy—each of whom dramatizes stark differences in the construction of middle-American identity. Given the leadership role of quarterbacks on the field, it makes sense that these three characters frame much of the show. In many ways, however, Coach Eric Taylor serves as FNL’s narrative anchor, and we, therefore, next turn to an assessment of his persona as it embodies hegemonic masculinity. Phillips (2014) suggests that one reason FNL struggled to draw consistent ratings was its willingness to complicate notions of masculinity and the frontier. In Phillips’ reading, “the show demonstrates that sports are neither an escape nor virtuous, but a reflection and, often, an exacerbator of problems already present in the everyday world of Americans” (p. 990). Although we agree that FNL offers opportunities for critical reflection, we also caution that it simultaneously serves to reinforce some of the very attributes it presumably questions. We contend that FNL offers both possibilities but does not side firmly with either, and,
while relationships within the show inevitably portray some of the conflicts between reinforcement and critical reflection, the show expresses ambivalence about how to think about and act upon the mythologies it articulates.

**Masculinity and “QB1”**

In the series’ pilot episode (Berg, 2006), among the characters introduced in the opening sequence is Jason Street, the handsome, confident, talented quarterback of the Dillon Panthers. The episode immediately positions Street as an elite but humble talent with a Notre Dame scout telling his parents, “Your son may be the best I’ve ever seen.” Despite the accolades, he is respectful in an interview with a local television reporter. Meanwhile, he has the love and support of Lyla Garrity, with whom he expects to share his future in college and beyond. In these opening moments, *FNL* constructs a narrative that appears cut from stereotypical cloth: high school quarterback and cheerleader as the ideal of middle-American adolescence. However, the show quickly complicates this narrative as, by the end of the pilot, Street suffers an on-field injury that leaves him paralyzed below the waist.

Throughout the first season of *FNL*, Jason must accept his injuries and come to terms with a life without football. Jason exemplifies hegemonic masculinity prior to the accident, but the deterioration of both his athletic career and his relationship with Lyla threaten that identity. He eventually begins steps toward acceptance by getting involved with wheelchair rugby. This sport, which is also known as quad rugby, received considerable attention in the year prior to *FNL*’s debut, mostly as a product of the 2005 documentary feature film *Murderball*. As a film that depicts athletes with disabilities without sentimentalizing or stereotyping them, *Murderball* “presents the point of view of the disabled athlete so that the audience views from a perspective that sees the players as powerful and heroic instead of lacking ability and pitiable” (Cherney & Lindemann, 2010, p. 207). *FNL*’s narrative is similarly affirmative and it simultaneously resembles any number of sports-based against-the-odds triumphs that reinforce the virtues of sport as a vehicle for redemption. At the same time, this storyline spotlights the fragility of life, particularly in the context of sport. The opening sequence in the pilot constructs Jason as the embodiment of perfection, thus foreshadowing what Coach Taylor articulates in a voiceover at the end of the episode: “We are all vulnerable. And we will all, at some point in our lives … fall” (Berg, 2006). While future episodes contain an inevitable story of redemption, *FNL* nevertheless cautions against the human propensity to seek perfection (Burke, 1984). Street, like all of us, is neither perfect nor invulnerable. Because the series begins with this premise, it immediately positions viewers to accept alternative visions of strength and leadership. In this way, *FNL* offers a more inclusive image of the heartland that challenges the frontier myth’s models of strength and leadership.

It is fair to note, however, that Street’s redemption also mimics some conventions of hegemonic masculinity. Although he shifts his attention from football to wheelchair rugby, he remains motivated by the intense and aggressive competition that characterizes conventional sport. Cherney and Lindemann (2010) make this point when they conclude that, despite *Murderball*’s ability “to display wheelchair rugby as a sport deserving acceptance within traditional masculinist and ableist value systems, it avoids challenging those systems’ discriminatory power” (p. 213). In a subsequent essay, Cherney and Lindemann (2014) also suggest that Street’s sexuality is a complication, for he “operates in the queered conceptual space of someone who has lost masculinity but not necessarily gained femininity” (pp. 16–17). Thus, even as *FNL* features a storyline that casts doubt on the stability of traditional masculine norms—in this case, heteronormativity—it also falls back on at least some of those norms in order to reinvent Street’s identity.

By the third season, *FNL* also challenges the location of sporting identity. In the eighth episode (Reiner & Ehrin, 2008), Street—who now has fathered a child with a woman who has relocated to New Jersey—decides that he must reinvent himself and leave Dillon. No longer chasing football glory at Notre Dame, a place embedded in middle-American mythology, he pursues a job as a sports agent...
in New York City. Even Jason’s best friend, Tim Riggins, recognizes that Street can no longer abide by their “Texas forever” declaration. Although Jason’s new career may be secured a bit too easily, it nevertheless provides the quintessential integration of “red” and “blue” state identities. Such an integration mirrors the more complicated political terrain that increasingly characterizes the American electorate. Thus, even as political media continue to favor the simplicity of a map painted in red and blue, this reduction of ideologies fails to account for apparent political contradictions such as the election of a lesbian mayor in Houston, Texas (McKinley, 2009) or the support for Governor Scott Walker’s antiunion policies in a historically progressive Wisconsin (Rago, 2014). Accordingly, by relocating one of the primary figures of “Texas forever” to New York City, FNL invites viewers to reconsider the worth of a fundamental distinction between South and East, between the frontier/heartland and the coasts. At the same time, Street’s inability to reinvent himself in Dillon may imply that the heartland retains some limitation, perhaps requiring that he move to a more “cosmopolitan” or “inclusive” environment. In this way, the Street storyline encapsulates the ambivalence of the heartland’s mythic identity and resists any attempt to provide narrative closure.

Meanwhile, perhaps nothing better illustrates the complexities of the heartland and the limits of rugged individualism than the emergence of Matt Saracen as the Dillon Panthers’ new starting quarterback. From the outset, Saracen embodies a familiar middle-American persona—humble, hard-working, and deferential (at least initially) to authority. In other words, he is an ideal team player/citizen. The opening sequence from the pilot episode (Berg, 2006) that introduces Street also introduces Saracen, and it clearly depicts Saracen as content with his role as the star quarterback’s back-up. Yet, Street’s injury thrusts Saracen into the spotlight, and Saracen promptly (if improbably) leads the Panthers to a come-from-behind victory in the fourth quarter. Saracen is young—just a sophomore during the first season—and undersized, and his status as starter (“QB1”) is constantly questioned throughout his career. As an illustration of the community’s skepticism about his ability, in the opening scene of the second episode, influential booster Buddy Garrity (Lyla’s father) asks Coach Taylor after church, “You think little Matt Saracen can get it done?” (Reiner & Katims, 2006). In the episodes that follow, Garrity recruits a blue-chip quarterback, Ray “Voodoo” Tatum, who has been displaced by Hurricane Katrina. Although Tatum comes to Dillon, he is unwilling to accommodate Coach Taylor’s expectations, and Saracen emerges as the team’s leader (Reiner & Katims, 2007b).

The show introduces the Tatum storyline as a critique of the unseemly practices that happen behind the scenes of major high school football programs. More than that, however, the storyline also facilitates the development of Saracen as arguably the most complex character on FNL. Despite his youth, he has little choice but to grow up quickly, not only because of Street’s injury but also because he lives at home with his grandmother while his father serves in Iraq. FNL dramatizes the burdens of such independence most clearly in the eleventh episode of the first season, during which Saracen’s grandmother shows increased signs of dementia and his father returns, for only a short time, from Iraq. Matt’s pride is evident when he eagerly introduces his father to Coach Taylor. That pride quickly turns to pain, however, when his dad says of his son’s football success, “I didn’t know he had it in him” (Pate & Heldens, 2007). This moment encapsulates the distinctions between preinjury Street and Saracen, and it invites viewers to identify with the young quarterback as a model of quiet, respectful leadership.

One might suggest that Matt Saracen is a classic underdog archetype, a central figure to sport, which has long celebrated mythologies of “Cinderella” and “David vs. Goliath.” Yet, such an interpretation would reduce Saracen to a one-dimensional figure, something he clearly is not. Matt is consistently FNL’s most thoughtful character. He asks questions of his father’s commitment in Iraq when he says, “There’s some people that think, you know, we should get everybody out of there and come home” (Pate & Heldens, 2007). He treats his girlfriend, Julie, with respect rather than as an object of conquest. Together they resolve Julie’s declaration in the first season, “I think we should have sex,” by acknowledging they are not ready for such intimacy and by playing a game of Twister instead (Liddi-Brown & Heldens, 2007). He also keeps football in perspective while he
concentrates on school and his interest in art. Meanwhile, he cares for his ailing grandmother and weathers the constant challenges to his status as QB1. Saracen symbolically echoes Coach Taylor, the reflective and quiet moral authority that embodies the frontier; however, Matt also challenges the conventions of hegemonic masculinity. He is not conventionally big and strong, he is aware of and sensitive to the feelings of the women in his life, and he often does not have control over his circumstances. Nevertheless, viewers are unlikely to see him as weak or nonmasculine, making FNL’s construction of Saracen’s character the primary vehicle of identification for those outside the heartland. He is sympathetic and easy to root for, not because he is reduced to a middle-American stereotype but because he expands the boundaries of the relationship between sport and middle-American life.

One of Saracen’s chief rivals provides one of the show’s sharpest critiques of hegemonic masculinity and the centrality of sport. In the third season, young J. D. McCoy moves to Dillon with his wealthy parents, and his father expects his son immediately to become the next star quarterback for the Panthers. As J. D. struggles to fit in with his teammates, his father, Joe, works the boosters to enlist support for his son, and his mother develops a friendship with Coach Taylor’s wife, Tami. Although J. D. has unusual talent, he is uncomfortable with the expectations that have been thrust upon him. The third episode of Season 3 dramatizes this when Matt and Julie wander into a room full of trophies during a party at the McCoys’ house. As they stare at the various decorations of the young quarterback’s success, J. D. walks in behind them. “You know, they, uh, actually bronzed my first diaper” (White, Massett, & Zinman, 2008), he tells them, keenly aware of the excessiveness of the attention he has received. The moment gives Matt and Julie pause, as they realize that perhaps J. D. is an unwilling player in someone else’s game.

Several episodes later, FNL develops what the trophy scene gestures toward, as J. D.’s father takes his obsession to further extremes. In the tenth episode of the third season, Joe McCoy convinces his son to avoid a girl, Madison, who likes him at school (Boyd & Heldens, 2008). Joe’s insistence on football as the young man’s only priority comes to a head in the final episodes of the third season, when J. D. defies his father’s wishes by continuing to see Madison and ignoring his father’s demands about how to play quarterback. Although J. D.’s independence results in a playoff victory for Dillon, Joe confronts his son in public and eventually strikes him (Waxman, Carpenter, Massett, & Zinman, 2008). This moment provides the narrative climax for the third season, as not only does it affect the McCoys but, because the Taylor family witnesses the incident, it threatens the stability of the Panther football community as a whole.

It is easy to read Joe McCoy’s actions as a commentary on the commonly reported excesses of parents who expect too much of their children involved in youth sports. This is an important interpretation, but we maintain that this plotline serves as a larger critique of the excessive influence of sport in the communities that Dillon, Texas, represents. In other words, Joe McCoy is not a pathological individual who loses control; rather, he is symptomatic of a sports culture that has lost its perspective. Meanwhile, throughout its first three seasons, FNL provides hints that an over-investment in football inevitably leads to problems. Thus, when Joe hits J. D., he enacts the outcome of a culture that leads to football players ignoring schoolwork, boosters illegally recruiting prized talents, and relationships being neglected in favor of a game. In this way, the Joe–J. D. confrontation provides a mechanism for questioning the centrality of sport and the rugged individualism of the frontier. It also questions the logical excesses of equating leadership with strength and achievement. Joe has clearly mastered the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity, evidenced by his wealth and his peers’ willingness to defer to him. Meanwhile, the violence of striking his own son undermines his hopes that J. D. will model his example, casting doubt upon the virtues of hegemonic masculinity in the first place. To the extent that the show invites viewers to reconsider these connections, FNL opens spaces to imagine sports in the heartland in new and perhaps more healthy and inclusive ways.
Masculinity and the coach

In the eleventh episode of the third season of *FNL*, Buddy Garrity says to Coach Taylor, “This is a whole lot bigger than you. This is about the Dillon Panthers. No one—not me, not Joe McCoy, not any other booster—is going to stand by and let the Dillon Panthers get dismantled because of some dang politics. I’ll tell you that right now. So, if you don’t want to know, don’t ask” (Waxman et al., 2008). Buddy is referring to Eric’s concern about boosters trying to gerrymander a school redistricting map to favor Dillon High. Yet, Buddy’s statement could represent the entire series, and the redistricting story arc could constitute a microcosm of the “dang politics” of the entire show. In this particular story arc, to gain greater state funding, the city has developed a plan to reopen East Dillon High School and split the town into two school districts. The school board’s plan would divide Dillon down the middle along centralized Collier Avenue. The Dillon High boosters, though, work to devise a complex map to keep the best players at Dillon. As this arc considers the appropriateness of basing school districts on football, it illustrates the willingness of *FNL* to address issues of significance in the world of sports in general and the world of high school football in particular. Yet, it also suggests that even as the show uses its quarterback characters to contest hegemonic masculinity, it nevertheless uses the ethos of the football coach to preserve it.

As much as *FNL* willingly addresses issues such as gerrymandering, performance-enhancing drugs, and questionable recruiting practices, the show also frequently depends on frontier mythology to re-center sport as a community’s moral anchor. Most often, this occurs through the character of head coach Eric Taylor, who features significantly in the majority of the show’s storylines. Such prominence embodies the tension between individualism and community that Rushing (1983) identifies as a central part of the frontier myth; in the case of Eric, *FNL* relies heavily on an authoritative individual who guides the broader community. The exchange between Buddy and Eric illustrates the centrality of football; as football coach Eric fills the position of the voice of morality, which he occupies in the series while also serving as a voice of reason, authority, and interpersonal compassion with whom *FNL* asks viewers to identify. Meanwhile, Eric also aligns with characteristics of hegemonic masculinity. He embodies occupational achievement through his success as a football coach, as evident in the victories and championships the Dillon Panthers attain under his leadership. His association with football conveys his aptitude for physical force, while his ability to maintain composure during many moments of stress that occur throughout the series demonstrates his ability to control his forcefulness. His heterosexuality shows through his status as a loyal husband, and the setting of his heterosexuality within a family contributes to his embodiment of familial patriarchy, which is also evident in Eric’s authoritative skills with his daughter and with his players. Finally, his association with Texas and his approach to situations with stoic quietness, evocative of the cowboy persona (Tompkins, 1992), convey his frontiersmanship. These qualities align readily with hegemonic masculinity and the characterization of the frontier hero as unassuming, loyal, and wholesome (Trujillo, 1991).

Such traits coalesce around the idea of the “good man”—a phrase Eric invokes with Jason Street in the second episode of the first season. When Jason chooses to give Eric thoughts on how to handle his replacement at quarterback rather than dwell on his own injury, with a voice of definitive authority, Eric tells Jason, “You’re a good man. You’re a good man. You’re what makes guys like me want to coach. You’re a good man” (Reiner & Katims, 2006). The show reinforces Eric’s judgment later in the first season as Jason’s family seeks damages from Eric and Dillon High School in connection with Jason’s injuries. In various episodes, Jason tells Eric that his family, not Jason himself, wants the lawsuit. In the twelfth episode, Jason says, “No matter what, you’ll always be my coach” (Boyd & Ehrin, 2007). Then, at the settlement hearing, Jason comes up with a settlement to which both sides can agree that pays the family’s bills without financially crippling the school. *FNL* has already positioned viewers to trust Jason’s judgment because Eric gave his blessing to Jason as a “good man” in the earlier episode. When the two sides agree to the settlement, Jason once again
receives Eric’s blessing as Eric points to Jason in a gesture seeming to convey both thanks and approval. These instances suggest that Eric possesses the authority to know what is good as well as the interpersonal compassion to know when to help a fellow human being recognize her or his own goodness. In this way, Eric embodies the “redeeming goodness” and “face-to-face community” (Johnson, 2008, p. 5) and the kind of “ordinary people” in a “close-knit community where things are eminently manageable” (Johnson, 2008, p. 205) that constitute the heartland myth.

Eric’s embodiment of the “good man” also prominently appears in the first few episodes of the second season. Eric takes a job at Texas Methodist University (TMU) in Austin and commutes back and forth between the job and his family, who have decided to remain in Dillon. Tami, Eric’s wife, has just given birth to a baby and struggles heavily with balancing the responsibilities of the family and the responsibilities of her job as a guidance counselor at Dillon High School. Additionally, the Taylors’ teenage daughter, Julie, continually challenges Tami’s authority and acts out in anger and frustration (Reiner & Katims, 2007a). Meanwhile, the Dillon Panthers football team breaks apart under Eric’s replacement, Coach McGregor, who works the players to physically excessive levels and lacks compassion when players cannot handle his techniques, most notably by kicking running back Tim Riggins off the team after previously having made Riggins run up and down stadium stairs until he vomited (Pate & Harris, 2007). Furthermore, Eric struggles at his new job to get players to listen to his tutelage—something he could take for granted much more fully back at Dillon. While this situation causes turmoil for Eric, and the show depicts his handling of it as less than perfect, the instance does portray Eric as the voice of reason and compassion, particularly in his handling of his family life. Although FNL had arguably previously developed some depth in the character of Tami and in the relationship between Tami and Eric, at this point it reduces Tami to the stereotype of a nagging, overly emotional, needy wife whom Eric must save from herself, from her inability to manage their teenage daughter, and, to some degree, from a potentially lecherous male coworker who helps her at school (Reiner & Heldens, 2007).

Eric’s boss and players at TMU embody what American popular culture often depicts as wrong with large urban (and, it should be noted, to a significant degree, African American) spaces, juxtaposed against the heartland sense of largely white rural places such as Dillon, which appears as “uniquely characterized by pre-modern Rockwellian American values of local continuity, ‘family values,’ a clear Protestant work ethic, and a corresponding staunch religious faith” (Johnson, 2008, p. 179). Players at TMU such as Antwone Beltraine, who Eric tries to advise, are stubbornly unreasonable and self-centered to the point of being unmanageable. Additionally, the show portrays TMU Coach Boyd as cold, heartless, and inconsiderate in his treatment of Eric, offering Eric little warm interpersonal support. When Eric proposes an exit transition back to Dillon, Boyd simply closes off all discussion and tells Eric that if he quits, he leaves right away without a transition. Through this depiction, FNL clearly offers a commentary on the state of college football, its status as a quasi-professional enterprise, and the ruthlessness of its coaches. When Eric leaves TMU to return to Dillon, however, the narrative quickly reminds viewers that, although college football may be corrupt, high school football offers a more authentic and principled version of the game. As Phillips (2014) argues in reference to the pilot episode, high school football players are often seen as symbols of a promising future, as the “idealized American Dream [that] teaches us that these are the people who succeed through hard work and determination” (p. 998).

While the show does not present Eric as having all of the answers from the beginning or as not having to overcome difficulties, amid the TMU situation FNL generally portrays him as reasoned, rational, and—at least when the situation dictates—compassionate in recognizing the value of close-knit interpersonal connections. Notably, in keeping with hegemonic masculinity’s characteristic control, Eric maintains composure as crises arise and situations require decisions, even as Tami and Julie do not. Additionally, Eric chooses to return to his family, to the Panthers, and to Dillon, thus reinforcing the “redeeming goodness” of the heartland. Yet, while FNL takes for granted Eric’s authority, rationality, and interpersonal compassion, plenty of instances provide bases to question that assumption. Eric does not have all of the answers, as evidenced by struggles with choosing
whether to leave Dillon for TMU and by the ethical investigation that occurs after he agrees to recruit “Voodoo” Tatum in the first season. Meanwhile, he is not always compassionate. At times, Eric pushes his players to what one might view as excess, as when, in the third episode of the first season, he collects the team late at night, takes them to a muddy field and makes them run up and down a hill while he yells at them until he thinks they’ve learned a lesson about what it means to be a “champion” (Reiner & Heldens, 2006).

Interestingly, Eric’s foil for pushing to excess, Coach McGregor, provides what might be the most compelling moment of questioning Eric’s centrality and character. At the end of the episode in which Eric returns to Dillon, McGregor, having just been fired, comes by the Taylors’ home to remind Eric that he (McGregor) has a family, too, and Eric’s decision to come back has affected them as well (Pate & Hudgins, 2007). Though this instance provides the possibility for viewers to reflect on Eric’s centrality, the show does not follow through. Rather than developing a story arc in which Eric questions his assumed privileged position, the show moves on, leaving this moment dangling without further development.埃里克·泰勒，然后，继续作为“好人”，作为一个优秀的高中足球教练，做正确的事情，用理由，教导成熟，和处罚来塑造性格。

One might even argue that Buddy Garrity is wrong; FNL is, at least mostly, about Eric Taylor. More deeply, though, Buddy is right; while mostly focusing on Eric, FNL revolves around his position as head football coach, placing the Dillon Panthers—and high school football in general—at the center of community and the center of the show. In doing so, FNL, like Buddy Garrity’s advice to Eric about the redistricting plans, suggests that viewers not ask about the deeper ideological significances of the heartland myth and the centrality of sport within it.

**Somewhat clear eyes, mostly full hearts**

In their essay about masculinity and disability, Cherney and Lindemann (2014) argue that, despite its affirmative presentation of quadriplegia, FNL often uses the sporting context to reaffirm hegemonic masculinity. In their words, “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” (Cherney & Lindemann, 2014, p. 4). Our analysis points to a similar tension, though we shift the context from the portrayal of disability to the mythological imagery that anchors the show. That imagery, rooted in America’s mythic past and a reliance on rugged individualism, anchors FNL’s use of American mythologies and serves as a rhetorical resource for those, such as presidential candidate Mitt Romney, who seek to evoke or embody the values these myths articulate. Yet, as should be clear, FNL’s use of these mythologies is nuanced in ways that invite us to reconsider how these values are defined. We therefore conclude by pointing to the ways FNL offers an ambivalent sentiment toward American mythologies.

Our reading of FNL’s quarterbacks suggests that the show provides viewers with alternative visions of hegemonic masculinity in connection with leadership and small-town identity. Although legitimate reconfigurations of and resistances to hegemonic masculinity and ideological components of the frontier develop in these portrayals, with little question, these representations do not challenge the importance of football itself as a constitutive element of the heartland myth or related American mythologies. Even when the vices of football are called into question—through the excessive competitiveness of the McCoy family, for example—the virtues of football—for example, its ability to unite a community and the opportunity for individuals to triumph over adversity—ultimately redeem the narrative. Thus, FNL does not hail an audience that questions sport’s significance as much as it invites that audience to direct its attention to sport’s more noble characteristics. Therefore, even as the depictions of quarterbacks challenge the boundaries of the heartland, they do not contest the premise of the myth itself or the alignment of that premise with the centrality of sport. Rather, they offer a sentiment of ambivalence toward
the heartland myth, other prominent American mythologies, and the significance of these mythologies in structuring people’s lives. Meanwhile, the reliance on Coach Taylor’s hegemonic masculine ethos allows FNL to elide a substantive critique in order to preserve the fundamental heartland myth. Yet, even as this broad mythology is reaffirmed, the show provides moments that contain the potential for more sustained and nuanced challenges of the limiting and marginalizing elements of the frontier and the alignment of those elements with the centrality of sport. Thus, even as we recognize the patterns of hegemonic masculinity embodied by Eric Taylor, we nevertheless contend that FNL exhibits enough moments of redefinition to enable a more inclusive conception of American mythologies.

In the end, our aim is not to characterize FNL as definitively “progressive” or “regressive.” Rather, we believe the show relies on a familiar mythological narrative but constitutes it in a way that reflects changing cultural norms. As Milford (2013) explains, “for myths to continue as vital rhetorical resources, they must preserve the familiar narrative structure that undergirds the community while at the same time remain pliable enough to account for changes in the operating environment” (p. 126). On the one hand, FNL presents sport as an organizing feature of communities, especially in ways that articulate with idealized notions of American mythologies. As such, the show’s portrayal of high school football in rural Texas rhetorically positions audiences to prioritize sport in their own communities as well. Substantial evidence suggests that a more robust critique is warranted, whether that evidence is the gang rape of a 16-year-old girl by high school football players in Steubenville, Ohio, the sexual abuse scandal revealed at Penn State University in 2011, or ongoing questions about domestic violence and chronic head trauma that shadow the National Football League. These incidents all came to light after the show went off the air, but the problems associated with them are not new. Ultimately, we also argue that FNL only minimally contests the core values of the heartland myth as it expresses ambivalence toward that mythology.

To suggest that a televised drama could destabilize some of the nation’s central mythologies would be unrealistic, however. With that in mind, we are more optimistic about the subtle challenges to hegemonic masculinity that FNL’s ambivalence can articulate with broader conversations taking place in American culture about gender, sexuality, and leadership. These “changes in the operating environment,” from evolving notions of who is fit to be elected to the presidency to diminished acceptance of violence against women to expanded boundaries of equality for nonheterosexual citizens, have opened spaces for models of manhood that do not conform to hegemonic masculinity. FNL asks its audience to accept the moral authority of Coach Taylor, but it also delivers Matt Saracen to that same audience as a competing masculine exemplar. Although we have contained our reading to the show’s first three seasons, it is worth noting that, when the series ends after Season 5, Matt lives in Chicago where art has replaced football in his life. In this way, FNL hints that sport may not always need to be central to our communities after all. In doing so, it reveals contours to American mythologies that add complexity to a narrative that too many have defined in simple terms. That complexity is central to the ambivalence that FNL expresses. The penultimate episode of the show’s five-season run is titled “Texas Whatever” (Chandler & Ehrin, 2011)—a sarcastic recasting of Tim Riggins’ “Texas Forever” motto that demonstrates not only the changes Riggins has experienced over five years but also the changes many of the show’s characters, including Matt Saracen, Jason Street, J. D. McCoy, and Eric Taylor, have experienced over that same time period. As our analysis suggests, the first three seasons of the show demonstrate that that title could expand to “America Whatever” to convey the ambivalence FNL offers regarding American mythologies and contemporary life in the United States, particularly as articulated through masculine leadership within football. This ambivalence may not answer questions about how to proceed with American mythologies, but it at least offers the potential for asking those questions, reflecting on how those questions bear significance in our contemporary lives, and analyzing the answers offered by Mitt Romney and other political and cultural leaders.
Notes

1. Barack Obama and his administration have not been immune from such problems. However, given that *FNL* emerged specifically in the late years of the Bush administration, our focus remains on the political context relative to that time.

2. As Johnson (2008) notes, the heartland myth is often conceptualized as “almost exclusively patriarchal, ‘straight,’ and white” (p. 18). Meanwhile, “hegemonic masculinity also implies an ideal of whiteness” (Butterworth, 2013, p. 288). Consistent with these observations, we believe a compelling analysis would follow from a focus on *FNL*’s depictions of race. However, we are convinced such attention would demand a separate study.

3. For example, Tim Riggins appears at first glance to be little more than the prototypical “dumb jock.” Although he is certainly not a good student and he lacks sophistication, Riggins supplies surprising moments of sensitivity and thoughtfulness. Tyra Collette, meanwhile, is first introduced as pretty but promiscuous and unambitious. As the show develops, she becomes more responsible and motivated. This is not to suggest that *FNL* eschews all stereotypes, of course; however, by the standards of network television, it provides viewers with characters of significant complexity.

4. At its worst, it abandons these principles in favor of sensational plotlines such as the killing of a stalker or numerous instances of promiscuous sex. Many of these moments occurred during the show’s second season, which, as Johnson (2010) explains, was promoted as being “not about football” in a clear effort to appeal to female viewers (p. 64, emphasis added). For this reason, we focus more heavily on the first and third seasons of the show.

5. Arguably, *FNL*’s greatest weakness is its portrayal of the football itself. Much of the game action is credible enough, but far too often the Dillon Panthers secure their victories in the final seconds of dramatic games. As appealing as these sports narratives can be, they lose impact when they are the rule rather than the exception.

6. Although we have restricted our analysis to the first three seasons of *FNL*, it is worth noting that J.D.’s behavior changes decidedly in the fourth season. For example, he shows hostility in his interactions with Saracen, demonstrating an arrogance and sense of entitlement that is less evident in the third season. This transformation does invite some reconsideration of whether or not J.D. challenges, rather than endorses, hegemonic masculinity.

7. Additionally, while this moment questions the centrality of Eric Taylor’s character, it remains couched within the centrality of sport along the same lines as Eric’s position in the show. The other coach, after all, is a football coach himself, and his appeal to family remains directly aligned with the values embedded in the frontier.

8. In the third-season premiere episode of *Inside Amy Schumer*, Schumer offers a comedic take on *FNL* that relies on connecting the show to the issues reflected in these contemporary cases. Schumer’s skit highlights some of the same themes—particularly the connection to hegemonic masculinity—that we address here (McFaul & Schumer, 2015).

References


