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Constructions of Masculinity in Adult Swim's *The Venture Bros.*

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Dedication

For the memory of my grandfather, José Perfecto Martínez García.

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Abstract

Constructions of Masculinity in Adult Swim's *The Venture Bros.*

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The increasingly popular Adult Swim series, *The Venture Bros.* (2003-present), created by Doc Hammer and Jackson Publick, is an animated series that interrogates established paradigms of masculinity. Combining narrative elements that are easily attributed to American action films with those of adventure cartoons, the creators of *The Venture Bros.* create a world where comic book and fantasy adventures coexist. The scope of this thesis narrows and focuses on the ways in which representations of masculinity are constructed and function within the series. What are the various types of masculinity represented in the series? Are the representations of masculinity reproductions of hegemonic masculinity? How is an awareness of dominant representations of masculinity and maleness expressed in *The Venture Bros.*? This thesis explores how previous scholarship on discourses of dominant representations of male masculinity sheds light on ways to analyze the various masculinities in *The Venture Bros.*

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Introduction

Images of masculinity in U.S. popular culture represent many different types of gender performance. In recent years, there has been a strong impulse in media to reclaim a masculinity that, at some point, had been lost. For instance, advertising campaigns for the soft drink Dr. Pepper “Ten” assure men their ten-calorie cola is “not for women,” while armor-clad pitchmen drive off-road vehicles in the jungle, equipped with machine guns and dodging explosions. In their most recent ad campaign, Dos Equis beer implies if you (the male viewer) drink their product, you will have at least one thing in common with “the most interesting man in the world,” whose many accomplishments prove how truly manly he is compared to the average, lesser-beer drinking man. Of course, these commercials appear to be in jest, and though there is a strong correlation in these advertisements between their product and hypermasculinity, what they suggest is masculinity — without the help of the beer or the soda — does not occur naturally.

In contemporary U.S. cinema, masculinity can be represented in various ways, the most prominent of which, within the action genre, is that of the muscle-bound hero. The Dr. Pepper commercials refer directly to this genre and mode of masculinity with the explosions and the “Catchphrase!” exclamation with an implied wink to the camera — perhaps a reference to the numerous catchphrases and one-liners present in the films of U.S. action stars like Arnold Schwarzenegger. Representations in film and media at large work to naturalize images of the muscle-bound body. For example, in many action films (with the exception of such sports films as *Rocky* and the more recent *Warrior*), the

muscular male body is presented without any questions of how it came to be. This type of representation of muscular, male bodies can lend itself to readings that imply the naturalness of the built body, rather than addressing the amount of work and levels of dedication necessary to build — or construct — such a body, a topic to be explored in subsequent chapters of this thesis.

In the world of animation, bodies can be exaggerated to a greater extent than in live-action texts. To some extent corporeal exaggeration exists in live-action media, but animation functions on a completely different plane, allowing for animators to create sequences that are only limited by their imagination. Without the confines of a living human body, the possibilities are limitless. What's fascinating about most animation, however, is the self-awareness of being untethered to the limitations of the real world. For instance, a character will be shown to fall off of a cliff only to be wearing a bandage in the next scene. While the muscular — and therefore masculine — body can be exaggerated in animated texts to a level that prevents the suspension of disbelief, the images of men are still drawn from an ideology established in popular culture that promotes the idea of what a masculine body looks like: large, muscular, and, if on the “right side,” white.

The increasingly popular Adult Swim series, *The Venture Bros.* (2003-present), created by Doc Hammer and Jackson Publick, is an animated series that interrogates established paradigms of masculinity. Combining narrative elements that are easily attributed to American action films, such as the *Rambo*, *Die Hard*, and *Terminator* franchises, with those of adventure cartoons (fight sequences, explosions, the brawny

hero, exotic locations, and mystery), such as *Jonny Quest* (1964-1965), the creators of *The Venture Bros.* construct a world where comic book and fantasy adventures coexist. While the show often straddles the line between science fiction and reality, there exists a tongue-in-cheek understanding between the creators and the audience that these characters operate in a world with constraints and realities similar to our real world (aging, death, etc.).

The male representation in *The Venture Bros.* follows many tropes of action cinema, upon which I will elaborate in the first chapter. For example, like many preceding action films, *The Venture Bros.* is almost completely absent of women, with the exception of a few supporting characters and objects of the male leads' affection. What sets this series apart from other action films and TV series is how masculinity is constructed and, in some cases, subverted.

My scope narrows and focuses on the ways in which representations of masculinity are constructed and function within *The Venture Bros.* What are the various types of masculinity represented in the series? Are the representations of masculinity mere reproductions of hegemonic masculinity (discussed below)? How is an awareness of dominant representations of masculinity and maleness expressed in *The Venture Bros.*? In the following sections and subsequent chapters, I will explore how previous scholarship on discourses of dominant representations of male masculinity sheds light on ways to analyze the various masculinities in *The Venture Bros.*

For the purposes of this work, I will focus on a small group of characters that demonstrate different modes of masculinity that operate in direct relation to each other.

The Venture Bros. contains four significant masculinities: the muscle-bound action hero, the feminized man, the masculinized woman, and, finally, the post-adolescent nerd. Brock Samson, the bodyguard of the titular Venture family, represents the muscle-bound action hero. Brock Samson is large, muscular, and has the most masculine agency of the featured male characters. Dr. Thaddeus Venture is the feminized man, whose masculinity is subordinated by Brock's superior physique. The masculinized woman is portrayed through Dr. Girlfriend, one of the scarcely represented women in the series. Dr. Girlfriend literally has the voice of a man, performed by co-creator Doc Hammer, but offsets her masculinity with signs of femininity, such as wardrobe and sexuality. The post-adolescent nerd exists in the series through three characters: the titular Venture brothers, Hank and Dean, as well as Henchman 21. Hank and 21 both demonstrate masculine growth in season four, while Dean is just beginning that phase of his life by the end of that season.

By focusing on these specific masculinities in *The Venture Bros.*, I will address how hegemonic masculinity is reproduced and subverted in the series, and in doing so I hope to demonstrate how the series is a text that interrogates hegemonic representations of masculinity.

ADULT SWIM, *THE VENTURE BROS.*, & GENDER

Cartoon Network's Adult Swim programming block, originally made popular with such recontextualized classics as *Space Ghost: Coast to Coast* (1994-2004), *Sealab: 2021* (2000-2005), and *Harvey Birdman: Attorney at Law* (2001-2007), is known for its late-night, adult-oriented series. These programs took a cost-efficient approach to

producing low budget television by recycling old footage from retro cartoons, re-cutting, and inserting voiceovers to create new narratives. By 2003, when the pilot of *The Venture Bros.* first aired, original series (most in the fifteen-minute format)¹ became a more prominent fixture of Adult Swim. With the exception of weekend anime programming (*Toonami*) and *Home Movies*, Adult Swim stuck to short-form animation until the re-airing of Fox's *Family Guy* in 2003. In the same year, Adult Swim aired the pilot of *The Venture Bros.* Since its 2003 premiere, *The Venture Bros.* has grown almost exponentially in popularity. As of January 2011, after season four finale aired, *The Venture Bros.* experienced a giant surge of male viewers in the 18 to 49 demographic (Gorman). The growth in variety of Adult Swim's programming plays an important role in the target audience reception of *The Venture Bros.*

According to *New York Times* columnist Mark Glassman, the mid-2000s saw an exodus of television viewers between the ages of 18 and 34 from broadcast television to late-night cable (Glassman). The increase of late-night cable programming at this time attracted many viewers who were part of this much coveted demographic due to their presumed affinity for absurdist and satirical humor that network television was not offering — at least to the same extent as humor offered by Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* or *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*. Indeed, the late-night programming of Adult Swim and Comedy Central appealed to a much younger audience than the late-night talk shows of David Letterman or Jay Leno on network television.

¹ *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* (2001), *Robot Chicken* (2005), *Moral Orel* (2005-2008), and *Metacalypse* (2006).

The success of late-night cable also indicates a cultural shift, or at least an expansion of interest. Young men, once drawn to David Letterman's stupid pet tricks and the conventional comedy skits on "Saturday Night Live," are now also tuning in to more absurdist parodies and satires on cable. (Ibid.)

The shorter format of the Adult Swim late-night programming block caters to the short attention spans of modern youth, while more lenient decency standards allow for a less refined comedy that may appeal to young males (Glassman). Since 2005, Adult Swim has gained momentum, and now regularly dominates basic cable in prime time ratings (Bibel).

The popularity of *The Venture Bros.* in the hyper-male landscape of Adult Swim is important to consider after understanding how varying masculinities are illustrated in the series. Many of the featured animated texts on Adult Swim reflect the postmodern consciousness of the creators. Yet, although these series' creators include self-referential jabs, such as the characters being shown to acknowledge their existence in an animated world, they miss the opportunity to interrogate themes of gender in such a manner as *The Venture Bros.* The widespread reception by male viewers of Adult Swim programming and *The Venture Bros.* suggests the significance of this study to interrogate representations of masculinity in this thesis.

The Venture Bros. follows the adventures of Dr. Thaddeus "Rusty" Venture from the point of view of his two sons, Hank and Dean. Constantly by their side is Brock Samson, the bodyguard and special agent, who protects the family at all costs, and frequently displays violent rage and (hetero)sexual proclivity. Dr. Venture's arch-enemy,

The Monarch, constantly harasses him along with the assistance of Dr. Girlfriend and Henchman 21.

In the first three seasons of *The Venture Bros.*, Hank and Dean display a very common trope found in animation: they are shown wearing the same clothes every episode and show no physical growth. This is explained, however, through a very unusual plot device that is not revealed until the premiere of the second season. The finale of season one ended with the death of Hank and Dean during a road trip. Due to poor timing, a rough patch on the highway, and a sensitive trigger on a high-powered rifle, Henchman 21 and his best friend, Henchman 24, accidentally killed Hank and Dean. The brothers are not in their traditional form in the first episode; instead, they are seemingly reanimated versions of themselves aimlessly wandering the Venture compound. Dr. Venture reveals at the end of this episode that the moaning bodies aimlessly circling the house are not zombies; instead, they are Hank and Dean, who have been clones for a number of years. The reanimated bodies of Hank and Dean are actually clones that have not finished incubating. The brothers whom the audience had come to know by the end of the first season were not even the first versions, rather, they had been rebooted over ten times by that point. This is an important detail because season three culminates with The Monarch killing the entire stock of backup clones. By season four, Hank and Dean are allowed to grow and change for the first time. The ability granted to the brothers to develop into adults is not at all a common trope of animated characters.

The Venture Bros. stands out from most shows on Adult Swim through the ways in which the creators take the opportunity to confront and subvert dominant

representations of masculinity as demonstrated in its characters. While some characters in the series reproduce various masculine tropes demonstrated in popular action cinema, *The Venture Bros.* also features characters who complicate these tropes: The traditional alpha-male is demonstrated through Brock Samson, the feminized man through Dr. Rusty Venture, and nerdy, fanboy masculinity combined with the muscular body of the action hero (previously seen in superhero comic books) through Hank Venture and Henchman 21, the lead henchman who works for Dr. Venture's arch-nemesis, The Monarch. Female representation is rather minimal within the series; however, the most notable female character is Dr. Girlfriend. Dr. Girlfriend is a complicated figure within the text. She is heavily masculinized, speaks in a deep, raspy voice, and is characterized by her superior intellect and savvy when it comes to performing her duties as an arch nemesis. Dr. Girlfriend's motivations, however, are tied to those of her husband, The Monarch.

Through parodic critique, the characters of *The Venture Bros.* are able to further interrogate popular representations of masculinity found in contemporary action film. The series functions in such a way that the creators are practically paying homage to cinema history while flaunting their mastery of genre. The creators of the series utilize homage and mimicry for comedic purposes, emphasizing through these reproductions of signs the hegemonic masculinity present in the master texts.

First, Brock's exaggerated strength "[reaffirms] the object" in question, which in this instance is the muscular body and strength of the action hero (Harries 284). Brock's strength overpowers the weak henchman he fights on a regular basis to such a degree that he is not challenged in the slightest. Additionally, parody in *The Venture Bros.* also

functions as a “master map,” to borrow Dan Harries’ term, of a particular genre, such as action or film noir (286). “Parody flaunts its command over the genre’s codes and therefore becomes a form of authority on the targeted genre” (Ibid.). However, parody still requires the privilege of knowing the conventions of genres in order to be in on the joke.

With these various characters, *The Venture Bros.* contributes to contemporary discourses of masculinity. Drawing from tropes of masculinity in action films, *The Venture Bros.* simultaneously reinforces and interrogates themes of hegemonic masculinity that run rampant in cinematic and televisual texts within the action genre and adventure cartoons.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Previous scholarship proposes the performed nature of gender as well as its social construction (Butler, 1990; West and Zimmerman, 1987). Although I will be supporting much of my analysis with these theories, it is necessary to understand where they fall into the larger study of gender performance. While many previous theories of gender naturalize the biological assignment of gender, Butler, West, and Zimmerman’s studies argue that sex is socially constructed, neither biological nor natural. “Sex is a determination made through the application of socially agreed upon biological criteria for classifying persons as males or females” (West & Zimmerman 127). Butler complicates this argument: “[The] production of sex in a prediscursive domain ought to be understood as the effect of the apparatus of cultural construction designated by *gender*” (10). In other

words, the performance of gender works to produce the social categories that create sex binaries.

Raewyn Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity (1995) is perhaps one of the most influential theories in the field of masculinity studies (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). Hegemonic masculinity is defined as the "configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell 77).

Connell describes hegemonic masculinity as occurring through the "bureaucratic institutionalization of violence," for instance, the fascist "reassertion of male supremacy in societies that had been moving towards equality for women" (Connell 1995: 192); American expansion and tales of the frontiersman, such as "the novels of James Fenimore Cooper and the Wild West show of Buffalo Bill Cody" (194); and discourses of feminization, such as the Boy Scouts of America's development to correct the feminization that some thought would occur if boys received too much exposure to women (195). The (re)assertion of male dominance in this regard can be associated with a masculine panic — institutional and individual — as it is related to increasing equality for women, female influence on boys and "the potential for homoerotic pleasure," again leading to the formation of social organizations, such as The Boy Scouts of America, and the heterosexual requirement for "manliness" (192-195). The foundational idea behind hegemonic masculinity is that masculinity (and gender more broadly) is not fixed; in fact, the historical evolution of hegemonic masculinity demonstrates the ever-changing nature

of this concept. “[M]asculinities come into existence at particular times and places, and are always subject to change” (185). The fluidity of masculinity, then, is another example of the social construction of gender as it relates to socio-historical contexts.

In her chapter on the masculine body, Connell argues that contrary bodily experience is what divides female from male classification and speaks to an institutional assignment of gender roles and functions of the body (Connell 1995: 52). The manifestation of male physicality through sports “embeds definite social relations: competition and hierarchy among men [and] exclusion or domination of women” (54). Connell suggests, “in our culture at least the physical sense of maleness and femaleness is central to the culture interpretation of gender” (52). Indeed, sports can function, according to Connell, as symbolic and social proof of men’s physical superiority, thus granting the right to rule (Ibid.). What threatens hegemonic masculinity is the inability of the male body to perform sport, and the disabled male body undermines corporeal masculinity. If the body cannot perform, male or female, it is marked as vulnerable within the social relations of sport.

The correlation between the body and masculinity is inescapable, as Connell asserts, but the properties of a masculine body are not fixed (56). Adhering to the concept of unfixated masculinity, a key detail in the maintenance of a body is Connell’s argument that a body is an ever-changing entity. According to Connell, the maintenance of a strong body, laboring or athletic, requires day-to-day work and concentration. The muscular body represents the strength of will to achieve a higher degree of physical strength, and in this way, can be used to assert masculine dominance in different contexts.

The hard body stands as a symbolic portrayal of masculine dominance and physical evidence of the right to rule. One particular arena that suggests a connection between muscles and hypermasculinity is the field of professional bodybuilding. Professional bodybuilding has historically been the venue for the display of built male bodies. In *Spectacular Bodies* (1993), Yvonne Tasker contributes to the critique of muscularity in bodybuilding. Bodybuilding can be attached to notions of narcissism that are “inappropriate to familiar definitions of manhood” (78). The body in action, however, negates the narcissism and implicit homoeroticism of the male obsession with the male body. Stars of 1980s action films, such as Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger, demonstrate a “[performance] of the masculine, drawing attention to masculinity and the male body by acting out an excessive caricature of cultural expectations” (Ibid.).

In action films that privilege male power, the superior masculine body is marked by its muscularity, and the focus on the hardness of the male body is often associated with hegemonic masculinity (Tasker, 1993: 77). Early studies of the bodies of 1980s action heroes rely heavily on the context of the Cold War, including the post-Vietnam emasculation of the American body politic (Jeffords: 1989, 1994), and demonstrate the subsequent “remasculinization” of American bodies in action films. The example Jeffords uses is Sylvester Stallone’s iconic character, John Rambo. The first three films in the *Rambo* series, according to Jeffords, parallel the recovery of the American veteran from the loss of Vietnam through the Reagan administration’s macho handling of the conflict between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union (1979-1989).

More contemporary scholarship addresses the post-Vietnam “crisis” in masculinity, as well as subsequent productions in American cinema and popular culture (Niva, 1998; Faludi, 1999; Malin, 2005; Gallagher, 2006). The social realignment of gender roles since the Vietnam War following the civil rights, feminist, and gay liberation movements contributed greatly to this feeling of a masculine crisis. The correlation of popular representations of muscularity and masculinity with American foreign policy seems almost inextricable from contemporary analyses of maleness and masculine performance. Tasker and Jeffords’ scholarship presents a parallel of cinematic representations of masculine bodies with shifts in national identity as they are related to political milestones, such as war.

In *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (1999), Susan Faludi investigates the growing media discourse of a “male crisis” that was rampant in the United States during the 1990s. Faludi argues that “ornamental culture” (35) has robbed men of classic masculine virtues. The glorification of the celebrity, especially the action star, had strong influence on the performance of masculinity in daily life. “[T]he culture reshapes [the American man’s] most basic sense of manhood by telling him as much as it tells the celebrity that masculinity is something to drape over the body” rather than something to be drawn from internal qualities (ibid). Faludi attributes this shift in masculinity to the change of the “masculine journey” in the wake of the Vietnam War and onwards. The “enemy” no longer has a face, “the remote-control methods of a military-industrial economy [and] the feminization of an onrushing celebrity culture...eluded direct confrontation” (306). Faludi’s observations were reinforced with the release of *Fight*

Club, “a dark fantasy of male empowerment through bare-knuckle brawling,” just six weeks after the release of *Stiffed* (Gallagher 1).

The sociopolitical environment of the 1990s shifted when the first Bush administration proclaimed the end of “the Vietnam Syndrome,” or emasculation through US foreign policy due to less intervention in foreign conflicts (Niva 110). Technological advancements during the Gulf War, according to Steve Niva, aided in the United States’ ability to recover from the Vietnam Syndrome, but not completely unscathed. A “new paradigm of masculinity” emerged from the Gulf War “that combined toughness and aggressiveness with some tenderness and compassion” (111). Wartime rhetoric was met not only with extreme militaristic aggression, but also with an “articulated sense of manly vulnerability and human compassion... reinforced by the proliferating yellow ribbons draped over houses and street signs” (118). This paradoxical masculine hybrid mentioned above was extended through Gulf War discourse of the Bush era.

Scholarship covering masculinity and cartoons is still in its developing stage, and the closest avenue of study that involves themes of masculine hybridity is scholarship about comic book masculinity. While not the only medium to explore the dualism of masculine identity, superhero comics offer a prime opportunity to analyze the opposing masculinities mentioned above. In his work on comic book masculinity, Jeffrey Brown states, “[t]he male identity in the twentieth century is perceived in extremes: man or mouse, He-man or 98-lb weakling” (Brown 25). Indeed, the superhero comic allows these two identities to work together “defining each other in mutual opposition” (Ibid.). To navigate between the superhuman and human identities, characters often engage in the

act of masquerade (Weltzien 230). The superhero masquerade allows for a convergence of opposing masculinities; however, wardrobe can work to convey heightened and inferior masculinities also. A strong example of which can be found in the *Superman* comics: Superman, an otherworldly figure, dresses as Clark Kent to hide his hypermasculinity in plain sight (Weltzien 232). “The mechanism of masculinity in the genre rests on this double origin signified in different costumes: the clumsy nerd on one side, the exceptional hero on the other, and the ability to change between both identities at will” (Ibid.).

Just as important as the hypermasculine hero in the study of hybrid masculinities is the role of the nerd. Much like the superhero movies that became popular in the 2000s,² *The Venture Bros.* explores dichotomous masculine bodies: the weak body and the hard (superhuman) body. Coinciding with the growing popularity of superhero films in the 2000s, the emergence of the nerd as the new leading man in (non-comic book) Hollywood movies, such as *Superbad* (2007) or *Scott Pilgrim vs. the Universe* (2010), presents an alternative representation of hegemonic masculinity. The nerd in popular culture traverses liminal territory with regard to masculinity, possessing hypermasculine attributes through “intellect, rejection of sartorial display [and] lack of ‘feminine’ social skills” as well as occupying a feminized space through the “lack of sports ability, small body size, [and] a lack of [heteronormative] sexual relationships” (Kendall 264). The nerd figure fits into Connell’s classification of “subordinated masculinity” that includes homosexuals, wimps, turkeys, sissies, yellowbellies, candy-asses, and many other

² *X-Men* (2000), *Spider-man* (2002), *The Punisher* (2004), *Batman Begins* (2005), etc.

subjectivities whose stereotypical names are invoked as a paralyzing mechanism amongst boys on the playground (Connell, 1995: 79). What's interesting, however, is although the male nerd inhabits a liminal space between hegemonic masculinity and femininity, he still does not possess the body of the hypermasculine agent. Feats of intellectualism do not result in the same physical rewards as feats of strength and sport. The distinction between nerds and jocks (men and boys) has been a prevailing representation of dual masculinities in film and television.

These studies interrogate the role of hegemonic masculinity in American society and culture. Building upon this scholarship, I will examine representations of hegemonic masculinity in *The Venture Bros.* while focusing on the role of the hypermasculine, muscular body, as well as subordinated masculinities, in reproducing, and possibly subverting, traditional patriarchal representations. I will draw from each of these theories when analyzing *The Venture Bros.*, especially when discussing how each of the primary characters relates to their body and performs their gender.

CHAPTERS

To address the role of gender performance as it relates to masculinity in *The Venture Bros.*, I will examine six significant characters that represent the various forms of masculinity in the series.

First, in Chapter 1, I will focus on the hypermasculine, hypermuscular Brock Samson as he relates to traditional representations of hegemonic masculinity. As I will demonstrate in my first chapter, Brock Samson is positioned within the series as the dominant masculine figure with the most physical agency. Brock's body hearkens back to

such 1980s action stars as Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger; however, unlike the heroic bodies in action cinema, his body is not presented as naturally-occurring, by which I mean the work put into building and maintaining his muscular body is shown in the series. Brock Samson's strength, while undeniable within *The Venture Bros.*, is not necessarily a direct result of his muscles when looked at through a critical lens. In bodybuilding, the key focus is on muscles rather than strength; therefore, the body possessed by Brock and his muscle-bound predecessors only appears to be strong. In this regard, Brock's strength is an illusion constructed to symbolize hegemonic masculinity in *The Venture Bros.*

Chapter 2 will focus on Dr. Thaddeus Venture and Dr. Girlfriend, the most notable female character in the series. Dr. Venture stands in contrast to Brock Samson as a feminized male character who is lacking in physical and, therefore, masculine agency. Dr. Girlfriend is closely tethered to Dr. Venture's rival, The Monarch. Both doctors employ strategies associated with drag culture to perform their respective genders. Dr. Venture is heavily feminized and, when shown performing his idea of dominant masculinity, (which he refers to as a "speedsuit") he invokes outdated images of manhood, such as a leisure suit when he decides to go out on the town. Dr. Girlfriend, perhaps the most competent character in the *Venture* mythos (with the exception of Brock Samson), performs her femininity through wardrobe, but her gender is constantly questioned by other male characters in the series due to prominent masculine characteristics, most notably, her voice. In this chapter, I will explore how traditional

notions of hegemonic masculinity are reified through the constructed gender identities of Dr. Venture and Dr. Girlfriend.

My final chapter will focus on three primary characters: the titular brothers Hank and Dean Venture, and Henchman 21. Not coincidentally, the authors of *The Venture Bros.* prominently feature characters that embody the masculine dualism found in the comic book superhero genre. Hank Venture's navigation of his masculinity through the narrative arc in the first four seasons of *The Venture Bros.* is particularly interesting and worthy of analysis because of his development from a naïve, weakling to a savvy, go-getter well on his way to becoming a dominant masculine figure, though he remains somewhat innocent. In early seasons, Hank idolizes Batman, but more importantly tries his best to emulate Brock Samson. In season four, Hank experiences substantial growth and is able to straddle the line between adolescence and manhood. Dean Venture emulates his father more than Hank does. More timid and arguably less ambitious than Hank, Dean is forced, by the fourth season, into a life of super-science. Dean is behind Hank in his masculine development, but begins his search of individualism as well. Henchman 21, in the first three seasons, is positioned as the nerdy collector who happens to be a henchman for the Monarch, Dr. Venture's arch nemesis. But by season four, 21 undergoes a substantial transformation that is more abrupt than Hank's. Season four presents 21 as a trained fighter who has a body more similar to Brock Samson's than it had been in previous seasons, but he maintains his nerdy/fanboy tendencies as an alpha-henchman under the command of The Monarch. I propose that *The Venture Bros.* deconstructs popular representations of masculinity at this point in the run of the show.

But how do these hybrid identities subvert traditional notions of masculinity in *The Venture Bros.*?

In the following chapters, I will perform close readings of select episodes of *The Venture Bros.* to demonstrate how gender construction is a key element of the series. Semiotic and narrative analysis will be helpful in exploring how the various masculinities in *The Venture Bros.* are positioned in relation to each other. By incorporating gender theory with narrative and semiotic analysis, I will be able to identify the various tropes of masculinity present within the series while interrogating the ways in which these aesthetic representations complicate hegemonic masculinity.

CONCLUSION

The Venture Bros. both reinforces and subverts dominant representations of masculinity found in the contemporary media. The authors present the viewer with a text that is aware of the social reproductions of hegemonic masculinity. It is important to focus on *The Venture Bros.* because, unlike many of the other popular Adult Swim programs, this text seizes the opportunity to subvert and complicate patriarchal representations, thereby breaking the cycle of reproduction of oppressive symbols of manliness. Although *The Venture Bros.* is not completely subversive (for example, the female characters are virtually invisible in the series), I hope to illuminate the importance of the series to the discourses of gender and masculinity.

Chapter 1

Constructing Brock Samson's Masculinity

Brock Samson is the character that establishes the hegemonically masculine paradigm within *The Venture Bros.* As the bodyguard of the Venture family, Brock has the most physical agency. On the surface, Brock Samson is a typical action hero: muscle-bound, brooding, and confident; all traits that comprise his masculinity. In the *Venture* world, he is a man to be respected and feared, a hero akin to the muscular heroes of the 1980s, such as Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger. Like the previous action stars in American action cinema, Brock Samson's body is often prominently displayed, frequently shirtless, and sometimes nude.

Brock is often depicted with familiar symbols of hegemonic masculinity (e.g., a 1969 Dodge Charger and hunting knife) to reinforce his masculine agency in contrast to Dr. Venture and The Monarch, who are feminized, as well as the brothers, Hank and Dean, who are still teenagers and have not yet developed a sense of manhood or independence in the show's earlier seasons. These material representations of Brock's masculinity supplement his physical symbols of masculinity. In this chapter, I will focus on Brock Samson's physical performance of masculinity as it is manifested through his muscles, excessive violence, and sexuality.

HISTORICIZING THE DISPLAYED MALE BODY IN THE U.S.

The display of the muscular, male body in the United States is deeply rooted in the Vaudevillian tradition. The most prominent (and perhaps earliest) example of the

sensationalized male figure is Eugene Sandow, a strongman whose stardom persisted from the end of the nineteenth century through the earlier twentieth century (Kasson 2001). The “father of modern bodybuilding” (7), Sandow’s career positioned him as “the most brilliant performer of manhood of the 1890s,” a time when the United States was undergoing an extreme economic depression that “threatened the sense of independence and control once enjoyed by men” resulting in the “[creation of Sandow] out of the cultural demands of his time” (23). Sandow’s body became the new symbol of physical and masculine perfection, and reflects a point in Western history when the white, male body became the subject of the public’s gaze.

Before Eugene Sandow’s popularity, the unclad male body was not necessarily regarded as an empowering image. As Kasson writes:

Images of male muscular development and bodily perfection have both a distinguished lineage and a troubled history in Western culture. Though securely established in classical Greece and Rome, their position afterward became highly precarious, particularly in the context of a Christian pursuit of spiritual perfection that denied the body [...] Still, even in the late nineteenth century, to display the unclad figure [...] was to risk falling from the lofty plane of the nude to the shameful one of the merely naked. (21)

Displaying the nearly nude body of a male as simply human was not acceptable before the late 19th century, and the unclad body of Eugene Sandow became the object of scrutiny. In order to justify this display of implied male nudity, Sandow had to be beyond ordinary; in fact, he could only be perfect. Perfection, in this instance, required remarkable muscle tone similar to classic sculptures of male bodies. Thus, Sandow was known as “the perfect man” in the public consciousness (23).

Strongman performance is not so much about strength as it is about the spectacle of overcoming obstacles. Performances by strongmen like Sandow were “accomplished [...] far less through strength than through showmanship, deception, and special equipment that blurred the line between strongman and magician” (35). The illusion of strength was the result of physical hypermasculinity, as demonstrated in modern action films or professional wrestling. Sandow’s body, however, still represented “strength, development, control, and proportion” regardless of actual physical strength he may or may not have possessed (36). What is important is how strong the strongman’s body appears to be, and Sandow’s body appeared to be (and was marketed in the United States as) the strongest on Earth.

Sandow “turned his body into a commercial spectacle and a commodity whose image was widely reproduced and sold” (29). Similarly, modern male bodybuilders utilize the spectacle of muscularity to win international contests and “sell’ their bodies, first to the contest judges, then to a burgeoning group of bodybuilding entrepreneurs who promote a vast array of products” (Holmlund 18).

Just as Eugene Sandow stood out in early-American popular culture, bodybuilders also fall outside of the boundaries of normalcy. As Chris Holmlund writes regarding the bodybuilding documentary *Pumping Iron* (1977), “it would seem from the very start that the bodies we see are *not* natural [...] [T]hey are clearly the products of individual obsession, created with great effort in the gym, through dieting and even drugs” (18). However, in the realm of competitive bodybuilding, where the built body — male or female — is on display, “bodies [are] representative of ‘Body’ with a capital B, a natural

and God-given essence” (Ibid.). The display of built bodies, however, provides a more complicated interrogation of masculinity as related to muscularity.

An inherent contradiction lies in the display of the male bodybuilder. In her analysis of Richard Dyer’s work on bodybuilding, Yvonne Tasker explains that “Dyer’s analysis draws attention to the way in which any display of the male body needs to be compensated for by the suggestion of action” as a way to reject any femininity implied by the passivity of posing (77). For instance, bodybuilders depicted on the cover of *Muscle & Fitness Magazine* were often framed as though in motion in classic Olympic track poses (javelin or shot put) or flexing as in competition. Tasker’s analysis of bodybuilders addresses the narcissism of the athletes as “a narcissism that is inappropriate to familiar definitions of manhood.” However, the continuously reaffirmed heterosexuality of the bodybuilders in *Pumping Iron* works “as a more general sign of ‘normality’, denying the supposed perversity of a man’s interest in male flesh” (78). Taking bodybuilding and the built bodies of American action stars into consideration, muscles are a physical manifestation of performed masculinity. In the context of *The Venture Bros.*, Brock Samson’s built body engages in the full display that characterizes bodybuilding while engaging in exaggerated action and (hetero)sexual encounters, almost to excess. While some of his actions may be read as homoerotic (e.g., naked killing sprees and the appearance of sexual pleasure through the penetration of other men), the consistent reaffirmation of his heterosexual dominance offsets any suggested obsession Brock may have with his appearance.

Existing within an animated context, Brock Samson's muscularity is a simulation. This simulation, then, allows the advantage of a fixed masculinity within the *Venture* world, although, he is occasionally depicted engaging in exercise to maintain his physique. A common characteristic of cartoons is that the characters appear the same week to week., and where *The Venture Bros.* stands out by depicting the work involved in maintaining a fit, or championed, physique. However, animation provides the perfect setting for representing illusions of strength. The animated world does not adhere to principles of physics or biology that constrain humans in the real world, and where a stunt double may have to step in for an action star, the animated character is not burdened by such matters. However, his image evokes the imagery consistent with not only male action stars of the 1980s, but also a tradition of displaying the male body familiar in competitive bodybuilding with, according to Kasson, roots in the Vaudevillian tradition made popular by Eugene Sandow.

In the following section, I will analyze how Brock Samson's masculine performance is manifested through muscularity, violence, and sexuality.

BROCK'S PHYSICAL DOMINANCE IN *THE VENTURE BROS.*

In the opening scene from "Dia de los Dangerous," the first episode of the first season of *The Venture Bros.*, Brock Samson is positioned at a poker table opposite a Spanish-speaking antagonist. The camera tilts down from the smoke-filled ceiling. The antagonist is shrouded in darkness with only his cigarette visible. Flamboyant, oversized *luchadores*, or Mexican wrestlers, overlook the table as the antagonist, presumably the Mexican ringleader of this gang of *luchadores*, chides Brock for returning to Mexico

after scarring his face. Brock is revealed shirtless, smoking, and expressionless. The ringleader is in possession of Brock's signature weapon — a blatantly large hunting knife — removing him of his phallus, thereby challenging his masculine agency.

As the scene progresses, Brock shows his cards and reveals a full house — a winning hand and indication of his intellectual power — but the ringleader, revealing a bum hand, asserts, “We play by Tijuana rules, no? And, as you know, in Tijuana, I make the rules!” He forces Brock to remove his final article of clothing, a pair of briefs, threatening Brock with the vulnerability tied to nudity. The naked body often symbolically represents vulnerability in a multitude of artistic media (Dyer 146). But Brock Samson is a direct reflection of the 1980s muscle star, and his nudity represents a power unfamiliar to the soft bodies of the *luchadores*. Brock Samson's agency is attached to his physicality.

“You're not so tough without your big knife, are you, Mr. Samson?” Attempting to threaten him, the ringleader challenges Brock's masculinity, suggesting castration by removing the phallus from his grasp. Upon removing his briefs, Brock's bare buttocks are centered in the frame — whiter than the rest of his tanned body. The ringleader and his *luchadores* gaze in awe at the front of Brock's naked body. The spaghetti Western-inspired score pauses, substituted by the sound of a spring, which accompanies the gaze of the *luchadores* on Brock's penis. His nude body and the men's gazes upon it demonstrate the tension between homoeroticism and homosociality in this male space. Following the gasps of awe, a lone *luchador* claps in admiration. Slouched, childlike, and fat, with breasts that hang out of his leotard, the envious *luchador* is positioned against

Brock Samson's anatomical superiority. In his nudity, Brock is positioned as the dominant male in the Mexican gang's space.

Obviously caught in a card game he isn't going to win, Brock defuses the situation with his bare hands. Without a traditional weapon, Brock defeats the entire room of *luchadores* using his champion body (a weapon in its own right). One fighter attempts to break a chair on Samson's back to no avail. Samson's body is a superior body, unbreakable, and he is a resourceful warrior. The next shot shows the ill-fated *luchador* wrapped up in the chair unable to break Samson's back. After incapacitating a garage full of *luchadores*, Samson shifts his attention to the ringleader of the gang, who is feeble by comparison, and surrenders. "Okay, enough! I will give you the part. That was for a '69 Charger, no?" the ringleader pleads with Brock to end the fight, which apparently was over a part for Brock's muscle car. Semi-clothed, wearing only pants, Samson leaves the garage only to be stopped by the envious *luchador*. "Take me with you," he pleads. Reminiscent of the 1979 "Mean" Joe Green Coca-Cola ad,³ Samson throws the *luchador* his t-shirt and exits, further infantilizing him. The *luchador* smells the shirt in rapture, another potentially feminizing and homoerotic moment. Although this is the first time the audience has witnessed Brock Samson in action, it is clear that this is not the first battle he has won, and it certainly will not be the last.

³ In the 1979 Coca-Cola advertisement, "Mean" Joe Green is shown limping to the locker room, presumably in the middle of a football game. A boy is waiting in the hallway holding a bottle of Coca-Cola. He interrupts Green's walk of defeat by telling him that he "thinks he's the greatest." Green shakes his head and says, "Thanks." The boy insists Green take his Coca-Cola. Green reluctantly accepts. Upon sipping the soda, Green smiles. The boy walks off, but Green stops him and throws the child his football jersey, ending the commercial with a smile captured by a freeze-frame shot.

This scene in *The Venture Bros.* captures a moment where Brock Samson is able to assert his masculine dominance through physical confrontation. His body is placed in direct contrast to the bodies of the *luchadores* in the garage. Within the diegesis of *The Venture Bros.*, Brock Samson represents hegemonic masculinity as it is demonstrated in the popular action films of the 1980s. He functions within the text as the most competent character, a characteristic that directly results from his physical prowess. How, then, does Brock revive the notion of the powerful, masculine American man? The creators of *The Venture Bros.* use Brock's body to simultaneously reinforce and parody the ubiquitous tropes of hegemonic masculinity present in American action films. The Tijuana garage scene centers the white body as the most powerful: Brock dominates the soft, feminized bodies of the Mexican *luchadores* and takes what is seemingly rightfully his, the carburetor for a 1969 Dodge Charger, a nostalgic nod to the former industrial ingenuity of the United States, the loss of some American industry to Mexico, as well as muscle cars driven by older action heroes.⁴

Brock's body denotes his manhood through his relationship with violence, his competence, and sexuality. He functions — at least in the first three seasons — as a man whose masculinity and body are both fixed. Very little happens in the span of three seasons to change his body. What this stasis suggests is the natural occurrence of a masculine, muscular male body for at least one character. What I find interesting about the occurrence of Brock's masculinity in *The Venture Bros.* is not that it is a naturalized

⁴ The most notable example of an American muscle car in action cinema is Steve McQueen's 1968 Ford Mustang in *Bullit* (1968).

depiction of muscularity, but instead, how it can be considered a performed masculinity with respect to cultures of displayed male bodies.

Violence is a key component of Brock Samson's identity. First and foremost, he is the bodyguard of the titular brothers, Hank and Dean, as well as Dr. Venture. Upon first glance, his motivations seem tied to their well-being. If a henchman tries to harm or kidnap the Venture brothers or their father, Brock responds with immediate, excessive force that often results in the death of a henchman. While he is, in fact, invested in the lives of the brothers and their father, with each killing, a sense of pleasure is indicated by Brock's use of excessive force and, in some cases, his smile.

Brock Samson's weapon of choice, the hunting knife, alludes to the blade wielded by Sylvester Stallone in the *Rambo* series. Indeed, the knife is Brock's phallus, and when used in the series it functions as the ultimate assertion of his masculinity, and even disrupts his position as the most heterosexually masculine man in *The Venture Bros.* Most episodes in the first season include Brock Samson exiting a scene to have sex with various women, random or familiar; however, the pleasure he derives from killing men lends itself to a homoerotic reading. Each time the blade penetrates a male henchman, he achieves a level of intimacy and pleasure only implied with each encounter with a woman.

In the opening scene of "Dia de los Dangerous," discussed above, Brock Samson simply incapacitates the *luchadores* in the auto garage, but much later in the episode, he strangles the Monarch's rookie henchman to death. In this scene, the Monarch's costumed henchmen are sent into Tijuana to observe Dr. Venture. Speedy, the rookie

henchman, is assigned to lead the team despite not having his “wings” like all of the more experienced men who are dressed as butterflies with utility belts. During the observational mission, Speedy becomes too ambitious and orders the others to kidnap Hank and Dean; he is presumably unaware of the existence of Brock. As the henchmen quickly shove the Venture brothers into the trunk of their vehicle, Brock does his best to save them, running towards the henchmen as they are firing poison darts into his arms, legs, and torso. Multiple poison darts are not enough to take down a man like Brock Samson, and he is able to grab Speedy by the throat before the other henchmen are able to knock him out by hitting him with their truck. Unfortunately for Speedy, even while unconscious, Brock’s grip-strength exceeds that of the other henchmen, who are unable to pry his hand from Speedy’s throat. A fellow henchman fires a single dart into Speedy’s neck, silencing his gasps for air. The camera cranes outward as Speedy dies. “Wow. That sucked!” the henchman exclaims over the guitar and harmonica score, evoking the atmosphere of classic Spaghetti Westerns.

In this rare instance, Brock Samson is temporarily taken down by the Monarch’s henchman; however, as Brock’s strength and masculinity are established in the opening scene, this takedown makes the viewer question the sustainability of Brock Samson the action hero. Any concerns for Brock’s well-being are resolved in the final act of the episode when he emerges from a grave (having been buried alive by the Monarch’s henchman), Speedy’s withered corpse still attached to his grip. To redeem his failure, Brock returns to the Monarch’s hideout by crashing his ’69 Dodge Charger through the

ceiling of the “cocoon,” landing in the center of the prison where Hank and Dean were being held. The Monarch promptly sics his henchman on the Charger.

As an assertion of his brutality (as well as an equivalent payback to being hit by their truck), Brock, eyelids twitching, proceeds to drive fast and furiously inside of the prison striking each henchman. The montage that ensues features quick cuts between close-up shots of Brock’s face, gearshift, car, and suffering henchmen as they are dragged under the car and thrown over the hood. A brief close-up of Brock’s tongue licking his lips reveals the pleasure he experiences as he commits multiple counts of vehicular homicide. In this scene, where his muscles do not perform, his muscle car assumes responsibility for the violence inflicted upon the almost helpless henchmen.

In a world comprised of a blatant male majority, Brock Samson is centered as the alpha-male in the first three seasons of *The Venture Bros*. Samson’s physical prowess is juxtaposed with the feminized male characters in the series, as well as the “dark others.” This positioning grants Samson the authority to dominate and, in most cases, kill any perceived threat. However, losing this authority to inflict violence on other “lesser” bodies in an official, government-sanctioned capacity complicates Samson’s masculine agency and suggests his power is natural.

In “Mid-Life Chrysalis,” episode Brock Samson is enlisted by Dr. Venture, who is going through a mid-life crisis, to accompany him for a “guy’s night out.” Samson’s Office of Secret Intelligence (a fictional government agency akin to the CIA) “license to kill” has just expired. This episode identifies where Brock Samson derives his agency. Upon losing his license to kill, and subsequent castration (removal of knife), Samson is

unable to perform sexually, as demonstrated via his lack of engagement with a stripper clothed in an American flag bikini. Samson's inability to be satisfied by the stripper (due to his inability to kill) is not only a let down to the woman and his libido, but to his duty to the country as a special agent.

Samson, in order to renew his license and thereby restore his position as the alpha-male in the series, begins studying for an exam. The physical portion is where he excels. An extensive workout montage, in the style of the *Rocky* movies, shows Samson achieving superior build, re-establishing his masculine identity — even refusing a 1980s-style aerobics class because of its perceived femininity (illustrated with Hank and Dean in pastel leotards). During the scene depicting the actual test, Samson scores exceptionally well in the firing range, despite turning down a firearm, using his expertise with the hunting knife. Brock Samson reunites with his phallus (knife), creates havoc, and aces the test. The proctor salutes him as an American hero. “My father is General Treister, you saved his life, and the man spoke of you as a god [...] You did not disappoint.” In reestablishing his dominant masculinity, Brock Samson is reborn.

While Brock's Samson's sexual agency is displayed from episode to episode by his jaunts with hookers and strippers, his character maintains only one consistent love interest: Molotov Cocktease, who is introduced in the fourth episode of season one. Molotov is a hypersexualized Russian mercenary who is modeled after Marvel's Black Widow, a similarly cat-suited Russian assassin with exposed cleavage. Her name, while a play on the Molotov cocktail, is also a nod to provocatively named Bond girls, such as

Pussy Galore, Plenty O'Toole, or Holly Goodhead. It is rarely made clear whose side Molotov is on; however, she holds Brock Samson in high regard.

Molotov acts as a foil to Brock Samson through their almost sadomasochistic relationship and her consistent denial of his sexual advances due to a chastity belt she wears, as it was her father's dying wish to remain celibate. It remains unclear whether or not Molotov is a virgin as she is depicted as having sexual agency through her control of Brock. Since Brock cannot have sex with Molotov, they have an extremely violent relationship. Molotov Cocktease threatens his masculinity by denying his control over her body.

In many ways, Molotov is Brock's equal, as she is also a ruthless killer. Brock's inability to incapacitate her physically is just as damaging to his ego as his inability to break through her chastity belt. In "The Incredible Mr. Brisby," Brock's masculinity is reaffirmed at the end of his fight with Molotov. Without having sex, Brock's erection, sheathed under a white towel, is revealed as a punchline to the interaction. The revelation confirms what is implied through other phallic symbols; however, the muscle cars and oversized knives may suggest what Brock does not possess, functioning as compensatory tools. Seeing Brock's erection only confirms what these symbols represent, and there is no mystery to his body. Unlike famous bodybuilders, whose genitalia are not given attention at the risk of "[revealing] too much or too little," Brock's body apparently possesses all of the characteristics of a man (Holmlund 25).

During season two, Brock Samson goes on a nude killing spree inside of his house. In the episode entitled, "Victor, Echo, November," the Guild of Calamitous Intent,

a union for the super-villains of the series, has issued an order to wipeout the Venture family. As the family's bodyguard, Brock is defending the house. Dr. Venture, who is sitting alone in the living room notices Brock's nudity and asks, "Why are you naked?" "To prey on their fear. Move like an animal. To feel the kill," Brock answers while holding a disembodied head with a terrified face, as he is covered in blood.

In the next sequence, Brock, from behind, surprises a Guild agent in the dark, stabbing him immediately in the lower back. Holding the agent down on the ground, knife still in his side, Brock whispers in his ear, "Strange. You almost can't feel it [...] Don't move. The knife is still in you." In this sequence, Brock is predatory, and goes beyond what is necessary to inflict pain and death on the intruding agents in his house. In this moment, like the vehicular rampage discussed previously, Brock's pleasure in killing is palpable. If he derives physical pleasure through sex, it remains off-screen.

The peculiarity of Brock's nudity is not lost on the other characters in the episode. His naked body is the first observation made by the Venture family. When Brock appears naked in front of the Venture brothers, who are framed between Brock's legs in a shot similar to the famous shot through Mrs. Robinson's legs in *The Graduate* (1967), Dean blankly stares at Brock and simply states, "Naked," before he and Hank exit the men's room (where they had been for the duration of the kill order). Brock then confronts The Monarch, who is not the threat in this episode, and interrogates him about who issued the kill order on the Venture family. As Brock exits, The Monarch quips, "Nice ass, Samson." Finally, Brock enters a stall with another villain, Phantom Limb, who was responsible for the kill order. Phantom Limb questions Brock's sexuality immediately,

“Do you always hang out, naked, in the men’s bathroom?” Though Brock does not kill anybody in this sequence, his nudity stands out as unusual, and, if he were not actively killing members of the Guild, would work to offset his masculine agency. As in the tradition of the bodybuilders discussed previously, Brock’s displayed body in action reinforces his masculinity.

CONCLUSION

Brock Samson functions as the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity in *The Venture Bros.*, but his exaggerated characteristics do, in turn, parody the role of the muscle-bound hero in the action genre. The historical ties to a tradition in bodybuilding and the built body in American action cinema complicate Brock Samson’s role as his body is on display; however, any implicit feminization is offset by extreme violence, the illusion of strength, and sexual agency. In Chapter Two, I will focus on bodies that do not meet the criteria required of the muscle-bound hero.

Chapter 2

Drag & Masquerade: Constructing the Doctors

The construction of gender is a key thematic element of *The Venture Bros.* As discussed in the previous chapter, Brock Samson is a figure whose masculinity is constructed through extreme violence and sexual promiscuity, and the physical domination over bodies of color, as well as feminized and female bodies. This is just one example of how masculinity is represented and performed by the characters of *The Venture Bros.* What do other bodies look like when they aren't constructed similarly to Brock Samson's body? To whom do these bodies belong? How is masculinity performed without a champion body? To answer these questions, I shift my focus in this chapter to one primary character and one secondary character: Dr. Venture and Dr. Girlfriend.

Dr. Rusty Venture is positioned within the text as a failure, unable to escape his famous father's shadow and pursuing his career in super-science despite his utter lack of success within the field. His body is thin and fragile; his head is hairless, symbolizing his lost hope of a career in super-science, and compromised masculinity. Dr. Girlfriend, on the other hand, possesses a striking female body that evokes the curves of a 1960's pinup. In addition, she (in earlier seasons) wears a pink dress and pill-box hat, reminiscent of Jackie Kennedy's pink suit, and has a deep, raspy voice. Both Dr. Venture and Dr. Girlfriend's bodies appear in contrast to a body like Brock Samson's. Dr. Venture performs his masculinity using technology as a substitute for his weak body, while Dr.

Girlfriend, whose body is given physical and sexual agency, is heavily feminized to offset her masculinity.

Like Brock, both characters navigate within heteronormative boundaries with regards to their sexual proclivities; however, their respective gender performances serve different purposes with different outcomes. Dr. Venture performs his masculinity to prove his value in the field of super-science. His attachment to technology, especially instruments of his own creation, makes up for what he lacks in physical strength, but he still remains trapped within his inferior manliness, unable to progress into the territory Brock inhabits. In many cases, Dr. Venture's failed attempts at appearing masculine result in possible readings of him as feminine or homosexual.

Dr. Girlfriend's femininity is constructed and complicated within a male majority. Like Dr. Venture, who appears to perform his masculinity as an attempt to stand out amongst the other men, Dr. Girlfriend's performed femininity operates in a similar manner. Despite her efforts at a femme performance of her gender, in earlier seasons, characters suggest that, perhaps, she is, or was at one point, a man. In contrast to the speculation by peripheral characters, Dr. Girlfriend's constructed femme identity offsets her very male-sounding voice. By using dress and sex appeal, Dr. Girlfriend's femininity distances her from accusations of manliness.

The primary focal point of this chapter is how Dr. Venture and Dr. Girlfriend's respective gender identities are navigated with dress and sexuality using established symbols of masculinity and femininity and how their performances operate within the parameters of hegemonic masculinity.

DR. VENTURE'S MASCULINITY

Dr. Thaddeus “Rusty” Venture’s masculinity is performed in relation to the memory of his father, Dr. Jonas Venture, who was a prominent and successful super-scientist. Rusty lives in the shadow of his father’s 1960s fame and does not garner nearly as much respect as the senior Venture commanded at his peak fifty years in the past. In the series, Rusty tries his best to set his career apart from his father’s, although, he occupies spaces that belonged to the senior Venture: his home, workspace, and transportation (a space-age jet invented by the senior Dr. Venture).

Rusty is the patriarch of the Venture family as viewers have come to know them, though he lacks any masculine agency outside of the boundaries of single fatherhood. Dr. Venture often chides his sons for teenage back talk, while forcing Dean, the more timid of the Venture brothers, into the “family business.” Hank, as I mentioned previously, is far more interested in pursuing a life similar to Brock Samson’s and lists “Batman” as one of his “dream jobs.” Dean reluctantly obeys his father’s orders due to his shy nature, though he remains visibly unhappy and inept. The brothers’ rejection of their father runs parallel to Dr. Venture’s rejection of himself in favor of his father.

The domestic hierarchy in the Venture compound is complicated. Dr. Venture, as patriarch, is at the top, though Brock Samson is the physical alpha within the compound and the series. Brock is, however, at the behest of Dr. Venture, and, even more so, the State (through the Office of Secret Intelligence). With the help of their house robot, H.E.L.P.E.R., Brock also performs more nurturing duties for the brothers, Hank and Dean, than their father (a practice traditionally assigned to women).

The male body is typically inscribed with power, and the physically powerless men, like Dr. Venture, rely on external apparatuses to generate the strength typically associated with physical agency. Although it can be argued that Brock does the same through his knife and car, Dr. Venture's reliance on technology, or his "technophallus," as Steve Waksman suggests, "produces the appearance of male potency," by extending his power beyond his physical capabilities (Waksman, 1999: 247). The knife and car simply enhance Brock's power rather than simulating it. Unfortunately, the biological limitations of Dr. Venture's body are still not corrected by his use of technology.

Technology and science play important roles in Dr. Venture's masculinity as he facilitates his duties as a father. Each member of the family, including Brock, wears a video communication watch, a common gadget in texts associated with the science fiction and spy genres such as the James Bond films, *Dick Tracy*, and even *The Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers*. Hank and Dean, in lieu of public schooling, sleep in "learning beds," a recycled invention of Dr. Jonas that features nightly videos of him teaching the ins and outs of science and assembly line labor. In addition to Brock's caretaking of the brothers, H.E.L.P.E.R. is Dr. Venture's answer to the absence of their mother (whose identity will be discussed later in this chapter) in the household. Finally, the very existence of Hank and Dean, who I mentioned are the product of a cloning experiment, is rooted in Dr. Venture's obsession with super-science and, perhaps, carrying on the Venture name. Arguably, the clones are his most successful creation, yet they are simply a burden to the doctor.

Compared to Brock Samson, Dr. Venture has very little sexual agency. In the four-season span of the series, Dr. Venture has been known to have sex only twice. The circumstances of the two sexual encounters suggest Dr. Venture is not the most careful love-maker. Both sexual encounters are explained in flashbacks, which returns viewers to the days when Dr. Venture was not a doctor, but simply “Rusty.”

The first of his sexual escapades with Myra Brandish, Dr. Venture’s bodyguard in the 1980s, allegedly results in the conception of Hank and Dean, though whether or not this is true was never confirmed. In “I Know Why the Caged Bird Kills,” the tenth episode of season two, Myra is introduced as a woman obsessed with the Venture brothers as she kidnaps them and declares her motherhood repeatedly. Dr. Venture establishes that she was, in fact, his bodyguard in the wake of his father’s death. Myra towered over Dr. Venture, the female near-equivalent of Brock Samson. As with Hank and Dean, she had an obsessive motherly demeanor with “Rusty,” carrying him in her arms like a child after an attempted assassination. In the heat of the moment, the two of them had sex in the backseat of a car on the front lawn of the Venture compound. Of course, her obsession with him became increasingly unhealthy, which resulted in her firing. Myra periodically shows up to kidnap Hank and Dean; though, “Caged Bird” is the only episode in which she’s featured.

The second, and final, admission of Dr. Venture’s sexual activity occurs in season four, “Everybody’s Coming to Hank’s,” also in flashback form. This episode is centered on the mystery of the father of Hank’s friend, Dermot. Hank believes Dermot’s father is Brock Samson, and speculation throughout season four had built up to that conclusion.

The twist in the episode reveals that not only is Dr. Venture Dermot's father, not Brock, but Dermot's mother is the woman he previously believed to be his sister, Nikki (a reference to Roman Polanski's *Chinatown*). As revealed in flashback, at the age of fifteen, Nikki served as president of the Rusty Venture fan club, a remnant of the time when he was a famous boy adventurer. Dr. Venture, whose look is reminiscent of Woody Allen in this era, is arguing with Nikki's mother, who remains nameless in this episode, over his responsibilities now that he has impregnated her teenage daughter. Nikki's mother (Dermot's grandmother) raised Dermot as her own under the falsehood that Brock was the biological father. Nikki, like Myra, shared the obsession with "Rusty" that resulted in the consummation of their relationship and, subsequently, Dermot.

In both of these relationships, Dr. Venture engages in sex with people who are obsessed with a childlike memory of Rusty Venture. Myra, it appears, took advantage of the fragility of Rusty after a traumatic moment (the attempted assassination). Nikki, on the other hand, is still a child in love with her childhood hero Rusty, and was taken advantage of by Dr. Venture. Dr. Venture is unable to truly engage sexually with a woman who is of sound mind; and in order to remain in a dominant male position he resorted to copulating with an impressionable teenager. Dr. Venture does not have the same allure that someone with the masculine mystique of Brock Samson. In order to feel like an attractive, libidinous man, Dr. Venture sleeps with characters without mental agency.

Dr. Venture appears to feel more in command of himself and his sexuality when handling his inventions. For example, in "Fallen Arches," Dr. Venture feels jealous of his

next-door neighbor who is holding auditions for an archenemy. Seeing the long line of super-villains through the window, Dr. Venture can think of asserting his dominance (and therefore masculinity) as a worthy arch-nemesis only by demonstrating that he owns a weapon known as a “walking eye.” The walking eye is a reference to a machine used in the *Jonny Quest* episode “The Robot Spy,” which aired in 1964. Although the walking eye in *Jonny Quest* was used for surveillance, Dr. Venture never specifies the exact capabilities of the walking eye, nor does he seem to know — in fact, he presumably built it based on what he saw in *Jonny Quest*. As he trots out with his walking eye, he begins to wash it with a sponge. The soap and water splash his body as he licks his lips. This scene, the gender reversal of an iconic scene in *Cool Hand Luke* (1967), demonstrates Dr. Venture’s fetishization of technology to the point of deriving sexual pleasure from his technological creations. In this scene, Dr. Venture’s performance works against his previous efforts at seeming masculine. The performance he gives the line of super-villains in his front yard works against the more traditional attributes of masculinity.

Dr. Venture can be read in different way, however. In the following section, I will analyze how Dr. Venture’s representation is consistent with drag-king performance, and how a queer reading can inform the viewer of the complex relationship he has with his masculinity.

HALBERSTAM’S FEMALE MASCULINITY

Quite possibly Judith Halberstam’s most notable body of work to date, *Female Masculinity* examines constructions of masculinity that do not adhere to the characteristics of, as she states, “heroic masculinities” (1998: 1). Much like Connell’s

hegemonic masculinity, heroic masculinities are forms of masculinity typically attributed to heterosexual men. These are masculinities that “we know and trust” that “depend on the subordination of alternative masculinities” (Ibid.). However, Halberstam argues “heroic masculinities” are in fact produced by both male and female bodies (2). Many studies of dominant masculinities, Halberstam claims, center their attention on masculinities of white, middle-class male bodies. By identifying the sites where masculinities no longer occur through the male body, but instead are performed through the female body, Halberstam demonstrates how the construction of masculine gender identity then becomes more apparent, and argues “the shapes and forms of modern masculinity are best showcased within female masculinity” (2-3). Halberstam’s project is to detach masculinity from maleness; however, I have found that her analysis of drag kings can be applied to Dr. Venture’s performance of masculinity, as well.

How does the theory of female masculinity work within the *Venture Bros.* text? The series relies on deconstructing and subverting tropes of hegemonic masculinity, as evidenced through the parody of 1980s action films through the body of Brock Samson. As gender is constructed through social relationships, Dr. Venture’s body is consistent with Connell’s subordinated masculinity, under which female masculinity could be included. Dr. Venture flaunts his gadgets, which range from weaponry to highly advanced transportation, as a measure of his manhood. As I mentioned previously, his identity relies heavily on the use of these objects in place of actual physical strength. As I will discuss below, Dr. Venture also performs his masculinity through dress.

King Comedies and Vulnerable Masculinity

Halberstam's work on drag king culture and "king comedies" highlights how common modes of masculinity are deconstructed within drag culture. King comedies, a term used by Halberstam in reference to such notable features as *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* and *The Full Monty*, use the frailty of male bodies as a comedic device. Whereas the action genre exploits the strength of a dominant male body, king comedies exploit the vulnerable male body at the expense of the protagonist. In doing so, "king comedies also capitalize on the humor that comes from revealing the derivative nature of dominant masculinities, and so they tread heavily in the tropes of doubling, disguise, and impersonation" (2001: 426). Unlike camp, which Halberstam describes as "[reading] dominant culture at a slant and [mimicking] dominant forms of femininity in order to produce and ratify alternative drag femininities that revel in irony, sarcasm, inversion, and insult" (428), king comedies take this approach in a different direction. By using strategies found in drag king performances, king comedies complicates the masculinity of the male characters by addressing the constructed nature of gender. "[K]inging reads dominant masculinity and explodes its effects through exaggeration, parody, and earnest mimicry" (ibid). Halberstam also delineates three strategies employed by drag kings that are also present in king comedies: *de-authentication*, *masculine supplementarity*, and *indexical representation* (428-433).

The first strategy, de-authentication, constantly challenges the viewers perception of "authentic" masculinity in the provided text. While an image may include dominant

tropes of masculinity (in the photo Halberstam analyzes, the drag-king performance includes a sports jersey and flexing), it may also contain opposing images that negate the elements that assert such a dominant masculinity, such as the presence of breasts under the sports jersey.

Second, the strategy of masculine supplementarity couples the drag king with a drag queen or “bio-woman” (428). In the case described by Halberstam, the two bodies of the drag king and bio-woman stand in contrast to each other. The woman’s breasts emphasize that she is, in fact, a woman, thereby highlighting the drag king’s masculinity. However, in this specific case study, the bio-woman’s larger size compared to the drag king’s “allows for a non-male reading” of the masculinized subject (ibid). Citing *Austin Powers*, Halberstam elaborates on the juxtaposed bodies of the lead characters: “[Austin Powers] anxiously announces and emphasizes his masculinity even as [Vanessa Kensington] towers over him and makes visible his masculine lack” (429). The contrasting coupling involved in masculine supplementarity draws attention to the performative aspects of masculinity.

Finally, indexical representation, the moment of representation when “the naked body of the male is both on display and under construction, is often employed to obscure the gender of a drag king while still suggesting a phallic and reading of the body” (433). Halberstam illustrates this point with the famous scene in *Austin Powers* where the titular character is shown walking around a hotel room in the nude. For comedic effect, objects in the room strategically cover (or enlarge) his genitals. In obscuring the genitals and replacing with a prosthetic on the naked male (or king) body, indexing can be used to

“[suggest] that masculinity and indeed maleness are no less constructed on the body than in the clothing” (433). Whereas masculine supplementarity focuses on a relational performance of masculinity, indexical representation refers to the construction of the masculine body, another mode of performance.

Using this framework, I will focus on aspects of *The Venture Bros.* that can be classified under the king comedy category. How are modes of masculinity performed and complicated through the characters of Dr. Venture and Dr. Girlfriend?

Halberstam’s analysis of king comedies involves films that present an abject English masculinity; however, I argue that Dr. Rusty Venture can be classified under the category of subordinated masculinity as it relates to Halberstam’s study. Dr. Venture’s masculinity is constructed in a manner consistent with Halberstam’s analysis of drag king strategies and king comedies. *The Venture Bros.* is not necessarily a Halberstamian king comedy, but the series touches on some of her key points. In king comedies, as Halberstam asserts, the male protagonist, “[c]onfronted by the failure of the masculine ideal, must accept the economic and emotional disappointment and learn to live with the consequences of a shift of power that has subtly but completely removed him from the center of the universe” (436). This is precisely the facet of the king comedy I wish to explore in my analysis of Dr. Rusty Venture.

“Mid-Life Chrysalis” and Dr. Venture’s Masculine Drag

In episode eight of season one, “Mid-Life Chrysalis,” Dr. Venture is forced to confront his lost masculinity, ultimately attempting to regain control of his failing body and libido. Recovering from just being called “grandpa” by a federal agent, Dr. Venture

is evaluating his body in front of a full-length mirror lamenting the loss of any favorable aesthetic qualities. “Crap, who am I kidding? My looks are going down the toilet faster than an unwanted pregnancy on prom night.” Dr. Venture, despite the reality of his professional situation, believes he is the best at what he does, but since everything he owns is inherited from his father — including his scientific endeavors — none of his achievements are his own. His life is built upon leftover privilege from the 1960s. Dr. Venture is not only an economic failure, he is a failure of the masculine ideal. To combat his admitted deterioration, Dr. Venture plans a night on the town, dons a vintage 1970s plaid suit, a toupee, and shows up in the garage of the Venture compound mimicking (poorly) the dominant masculinity of Brock Samson with a newly acquired muscle car. In this specific episode, Dr. Venture employs the three strategies of drag king performance: de-authentication, masculine supplementarity, and indexical representation.

In this instance, Dr. Venture dresses in drag to pass as an agent of ideal masculinity. He constructs his masculinity through his wardrobe and with a prosthesis — though, in this case, his prosthesis is a full head of hair. With his bodyguard, Brock, the two head out to the bar, which also happens to be a strip club. “I’m driving,” Brock declares as he takes the driver’s seat of the newly acquired muscle car. Brock still maintains control even as Dr. Venture is asserting his youthful masculine agency. Brock Samson’s actual body and his physical actions (seizing control of the car) undermine the efforts by Dr. Venture to perform masculinity effectively in the series. Perhaps because Brock is in control, he and Rusty end up at a rundown strip club — not an ideal setting for anyone to meet a potential partner.

As the scene progresses, there is a woman sitting at the bar of the club with whom Dr. Venture successfully flirts. Unbeknownst to him, she is Dr. Girlfriend (in disguise as “Charlene”) sent by the Monarch presumably to kill Dr. Venture. Dr. Girlfriend, who will be discussed more thoroughly later in this chapter, is dressed in a kimono-style dress with chopsticks in her hair (her attempt at “exotic” sensuality, which could indeed be meant to attract Dr. Venture more easily). His viewing of her body through the eyes of a colonizer could possibly encourage his confidence further.

In the strip club, Dr. Venture is in deep denial of his inability to woo. While he is strutting at the bar, he has to constantly adjust his clothing, his rings, oversized necklace, and even his hair. His projected discomfort in this clothing, as well as the instability of the toupee on his head, is examples of Halberstam’s strategy of de-authentication. The suit, the wig, the car, and even Dr. Venture’s attempts at a more defined sexual agency are signs of masculinity. However, the fact that he’s unable to maintain a consistent, or even contemporary, construction of his own virile manhood destabilizes his appearance as a truly masculine entity.

Further destabilization of Dr. Venture’s masculinity can be read through his interaction with Dr. Girlfriend, or Charlene. During their flirtation at the bar, Dr. Venture feels very in control of the situation, though the audience is shown the extent to which the Monarch is actually in control of the situation while he is channeling commands through Dr. Girlfriend’s earpiece. The illusion of control on Dr. Venture’s part reassures him that his performance is convincing; however, the relationship between “Charlene” and Dr. Venture relies on Halberstam’s strategy of masculine supplementarity. Since they are

both dressed in drag, their relationship is complicated, though “Charlene’s” femininity reinforces Dr. Venture’s masculinity. Her modern geisha outfit contrasts with Dr. Venture’s attempt at dominant white masculinity. However, “Charlene’s” deep, raspy, male voice, as well as her sexual power, offsets their dynamic and further undermines Dr. Venture’s heterosexual masculinity. Because she is following orders from The Monarch, however, she responds to Dr. Venture’s passes and seems to affirm his masculinity.

In Dr. Venture’s bedroom, as “Charlene” and Dr. Venture are engaging in foreplay, which amounts to little more than kissing, he is injected by Dr. Girlfriend with a mystery serum and passes out. In the morning, “Charlene,” now as Dr. Girlfriend, escapes through the window. Dr. Venture, under the assumption that he had sex, is glowing and all but bragging to Brock and his sons, Hank and Dean, who are aloof and indifferent to the concept of Dr. Venture’s existing sex life. Dr. Venture calls “Charlene,” and, as he is depicted doing so, he is laying on his stomach in his bedroom, kicking his feet behind him (a scene popular in movies, television shows, and in magazines featuring teen girls). This depiction therefore allows for a feminine reading of Dr. Venture.

Unbeknownst to Dr. Venture, he had been injected by Dr. Girlfriend (as Charlene) with a serum capable of transforming humans into caterpillars and, presumably, butterflies (once the full metamorphosis takes place). Alone in his bedroom, Dr. Venture screams, noticing that his body has shed its original skin. He is now a giant caterpillar; though he still has his original face and glasses — a clever sight-gag that makes Dr. Venture appear as though he’s wearing a large caterpillar suit with his glasses affixed with tape. In this scene, the shedding of the skin represents Dr. Venture’s loss of identity,

highlighting the performativity of his gender. The revelation of the naked body provides an example of indexing, or indexical representation. Dr. Venture's shed body is covered with a small black bar over the genitals, obscuring what may or may not be a penis. Dr. Venture, unsure of his masculine agency, relies on the construction of his gender down to his skin. While Dr. Venture is indeed coded as male with such signifiers as a goatee and fatherhood, the hiding of his genitalia — as well as the illustration of a small (albeit covered) penis on the shed body — questions, and even negates, the existence of male sex organs.

DR. GIRLFRIEND

The most prominently featured female character in *The Venture Bros.* is Dr. Girlfriend. A key character in the previously discussed episode, "Mid-Life Chrysalis," Dr. Girlfriend stands second in command of the Monarch's gang, The Fluttering Horde. Appearing in a pink dress in the first two seasons, Dr. Girlfriend is a strong female secondary character in an otherwise all-male universe. Even though she may be subservient to The Monarch, Dr. Girlfriend is most definitely a prominent figure in his operation, and it is demonstrated in the series that his cocoon would not be afloat without her.

Despite her position as a gendered minority in the *Venture Bros.* mythos, Dr. Girlfriend stands out for various reasons. First, she is one of the few featured female leads in the series. There are other recurring female characters (such as Molotov Cocktease and Lady Hitler), and certainly plenty of female extras that are often scantily clad and used as Brock Samson's sex objects. And much like many of the recurring

female characters Dr. Girlfriend's motivations are still tied to her male counterpart, The Monarch. Her competence is shrouded by The Monarch's inept narcissism, as he is unable to give credit where credit is due. Dr. Girlfriend's progression from a secondary character to a featured lead by the end of the first season contributes to her importance in the series.

Second, Dr. Girlfriend is hypersexualized. The bedroom scene is often featured in Monarch/Dr. Girlfriend plotlines that proudly display's her body in lingerie. This strategy exaggerates Dr. Girlfriend's female body in an effort to overcompensate for the lack of female characters. In a world of mostly male characters, the primary female character is shown perform her femininity in a manner similar to the men. What Connell calls "emphasized femininity," refers to the way in which a woman constructs her gender in contrast to hegemonic masculinity that is "oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men" (1987: 183). Dr. Girlfriend's hierarchical position beneath The Monarch's suggests her "compliance" in subordination to him, and the restriction of her leadership to the private sphere (inside of the base as "mother" of the henchmen) is a manifestation of emphasized femininity.

Third, and most apparent, is Dr. Girlfriend's raspy, male voice. Voiced by co-creator Doc Hammer, Dr. Girlfriend has a strong Brooklyn accent with hints of a two-pack-a-day smoking habit. This voice is undoubtedly male and works to negate Dr. Girlfriend's overwhelmingly feminized body. Throughout the series, Dr. Girlfriend's gender is called into question. Is she a man in drag or a transsexual? The season two finale ended with a cliffhanger suggesting that, after their wedding, Dr. Girlfriend

confessed her bodily secrets to The Monarch. The viewer doesn't hear the confession, only the build up, and from outside of their escape ship, The Monarch exclaiming, "What?!" Dr. Girlfriend's complicated representation challenges the naturalness of gender and highlights the performative aspects of her femininity.

Dr. Girlfriend's Dress

The most popular image of Dr. Girlfriend consists of her costumed in her pink dress. The pink dress assigns Dr. Girlfriend a certain commanding agency while simultaneously gendering her feminine within the male ranks of the Fluttering Horde, as they are known. She is second in command, but it is made very clear that she is certainly running the show while The Monarch pursues his deluded obsession with the Venture family.

The pink dress is not Dr. Girlfriend's only costume throughout the series. Due to a shift of allegiances (and boyfriends) by the end of the first season, Dr. Girlfriend wears a very revealing dress that showcases her nearly nude body. In an attempt to begin a career as a solo villain, Dr. Girlfriend briefly became Lady Au Pair. Dressed in a fashion similar to Mary Poppins, Lady Au Pair had two henchman known as the Murderous Moppets: two little men dressed as Victorian children's sailor outfits. Lady Au Pair was short-lived due to the Guild of Calamitous Intent's implicit unwillingness to take her seriously as a main villain.

Dr. Girlfriend's fourth, and final, outfit is thematically appropriate for her career with the Monarch. After their marriage at the end of season two, Dr. Girlfriend became Dr. Mrs. The Monarch (though, for the sake of clarity, she will remain Dr. Girlfriend

throughout this chapter as that is her most popular incarnation). This new outfit is a leotard with wings that do not jut out like the Monarch's or the henchman's; instead, she wears a cape and a crown.

Like most of the characters in the *Venture* universe, Dr. Girlfriend's gender can be read in various ways. The pink dress is important to the gendered performance of Dr. Girlfriend for two potentially contradictory reasons. First, the dress can be seen as a manifestation of Dr. Girlfriend's performed femininity. Dr. Girlfriend engages in masquerade to hide any hint of masculinity, with the exception of her voice. This "mask of womanliness" guards Dr. Girlfriend from any potential "anxiety [or] retribution feared from men" (Riviere 35). According to Joan Riviere (1929), after a woman's "intellectual performance," the performance (or masquerade) of womanliness was apparent in subsequent flirting with male colleagues "as an unconscious attempt to ward off the anxiety which would ensue on account of the reprisals she anticipated" (37). In Dr. Girlfriend's case, the dress works to counteract any male intimidation that may result from her leadership and competence, as well as to distract from her seemingly male qualities, however, that does not seem to put questions of her gender to rest.

Dr. Girlfriend's dress could also represent her true power as a key leadership figure. Dr. Girlfriend's dress is similar to "power suits" popularized in the 1980s. In *Working Girls* (1998), Yvonne Tasker addresses how the evolution of wardrobe in the 1980s for working women "continue[d] to involve the negotiation of images and ideologies of gender and class" (35). Increasing female visibility in the workplace led to the development of a new image of the woman that conflated masculinity with the female

body, most commonly the short haircut and suit with shoulder pads. In this regard, Dr. Girlfriend's wardrobe can suggest a female masculinity that is commanded by the "power suit." Tasker's analysis of the "New Woman" aligns the masquerade with a "lesbianism which displaces the centrality of the male subject" (36). Her strict "put-togetherness" juxtaposes her with the costumed tomfoolery and feminization of her spandex-clad male partner.

Given this series, whose world is dominated by male representation to the point that there are only a small handful of female characters, I entertain the idea of calling into question the performative femininity of Dr. Venture and Dr. Girlfriend. While there is no explicit example of a man in the series being questioned for his gender, Dr. Girlfriend's gender is consistently challenged. Considering this, it is no wonder that her choice in wardrobe is so recognizably feminine. Like Dr. Venture, Dr. Girlfriend is illustrated with symbols of femininity, such as her pink dress, to represent her femaleness more explicitly. Her competence within the series threatens the established structures of patriarchy, and the construction of her femininity despite accusations of masculinity, and even maleness, stands in contrast to her voice.

CONCLUSION

Dr. Venture and Dr. Girlfriend exist in opposition to bodies like Brock Samson's; however, the ways in which they are constructed in the series work in direct relation to hegemonic masculinity. Dr. Venture's performance is consistent with Halberstam's analysis of "king comedies," comedies that emphasize the corporeal vulnerability of the adult man. Three strategies similar to drag king performance are employed while Dr.

Venture is shown attempting to give off a reading of being a strong, masculine man. Dr. Girlfriend's femininity is also constructed through dress. While in the series, her gender is constantly the object of debate, and operating in a universe primarily made up of men, it is no wonder there is doubt of her femaleness. To combat this, Dr. Girlfriend is illustrated in a way that emphasizes her female body and femininity, even if her voice isn't consistent with that image. The construction of the respective gender identities of Dr. Venture and Dr. Girlfriend are examples of how subordinated masculinity and emphasized femininity are developed within a hegemonic structure. These constructions, while working within hegemonic masculinity, are examples of the unfixed nature of gender within the series. In the final chapter, I will analyze the ways in which the titular brothers and Henchman 21 transition from subordinated masculinity to a hybridized masculinity, combining nerdiness with strength and sexual agency.

Chapter 3

The Hybrid Masculinities of the Venture Brothers and Henchman 21

The *Venture* universe is a predominantly male space, as discussed in previous chapters, so one's navigation through the characters' masculine identities is determined by the existing symbols of masculinity present in their lives. The titular brothers, Hank and Dean, appear to perform their masculinity as they are influenced respectively by their father, Dr. Venture, and guardian, Brock Samson; Hank being more attached to the strength and power of Brock, and Dean reluctantly follows in his father's footsteps. The brothers, as well as Henchman 21, who will also be discussed in this chapter, are shown to derive influence from popular culture, drawing primarily from comic books, films, and adventure books to construct their gender identities.

Hank and Henchman 21's respective narrative arcs focus on their navigation from post-adolescent masculinity to manhood, while Dean's agency does not begin to develop until the final episode of season four. With Hank and Dean, the journey from teen to man varies between the two brothers. Each brother is paired with a different mentor: Dean is under the direct guidance of his father, Dr. Venture, and Hank sees Brock Samson as a surrogate father in some ways. Hank rejects Dr. Venture as a role model as Hank tends to appropriate characteristics of Brock. Dean is less assertive than Hank and reluctantly accepts his father's guidance toward a career in super-science. Henchman 21, on the other hand, spends the first season as a faceless character with very little agency. His allegiances are inexplicably tied to the Monarch, and he is paired with a counterpart,

Henchman 24. The death of 24 at the end of the third season, however, liberates Henchman 21, who then finds his identity, or at least begins working toward becoming his true self: Gary.

The three characters I will be analyzing in this chapter — Hank and Dean Venture, and Henchman 21— all possess identities that combine qualities of adolescent masculinity (a type of subordinated masculinity) and hegemonic masculinity. Henchman 21 and Hank follow a similar path that combines the muscular, heroic masculinity of Brock Samson with a masculinity rooted in late adolescence and fandom. Dean is given less agency than Hank and Gary, and therefore can be categorized under adolescent masculinity, characterized by his youth, passivity, and naïveté. Despite the different categories the three fall under, they all work within the same male homosocial space. There is very little female influence in the lives of these *Venture Bros.* characters, but distinct lines are drawn between their male identities, and each character uses existing constructions of masculinity to define his position in this patriarchal system. What role do these three characters play in the series? How do they express and achieve adult masculinity, if at all? Do these characters resolve the problematic representation of hegemonic masculinity? Working within the confines of their gendered space, Hank, Dean, and Henchman 21 simultaneously reinforce the traditional characteristics of hegemonic masculinity while creating a hybridized masculinity that incorporates characteristics of the marginalized nerd.

MASQUERADE AND SYMBOLS OF MANLINESS

A key term in my analysis of Hank, Dean, and HENCHMAN 21 is “masquerade” (Butler 1990; Weltzien 2005). Masquerade (and drag) is a key component in how gender is constructed in *The Venture Bros.* Hank Venture and HENCHMAN 21 literally employ the tactic of masculine masquerade to navigate their masculinity (in early seasons for HENCHMAN 21, and throughout the entire series for Hank). To streamline my analysis of the construction of Hank, Dean, and HENCHMAN 21’s respective masculinities, I will draw from theories of gender that address the social construction of gender.

Judith Butler’s analysis of the “masquerade” provides profound insight to the concept. Suggesting that masquerade is contradictory by nature, Butler adds, speaking of female bodies specifically,

On the other hand, masquerade suggests that there is a “being” or ontological specification of femininity *prior to* the masquerade, a feminine desire or demand that is masked and capable of disclosure, that, indeed, might promise an eventual disruption and displacement of the phallogocentric signifying economy. (63-4)

Gender, in the context of *The Venture Bros.*, does function as a “play of appearances,” as the male characters perform their masculinity using symbols in their daily lives and in popular culture established as characteristically masculine. Butler adds:

If the “being,” the ontological specification of the Phallus, is masquerade, then it would appear to reduce all being to a form of appearing, the appearance of being, with the consequence that all gender is reducible to the play of appearances. (63)

Taking this point into consideration, I am interrogating how these concepts relate to the younger male characters in *The Venture Bros.*. The development of Hank, Dean, and HENCHMAN 21 is particularly interesting in this regard because their bodies are not fixed

to their established youthful, masculine identities from the beginning of the series. Their gender is based on appearance rather than biological assignment.

Early in their development, boys construct gendered bodies through their parents and siblings (Connell, 1995: 147). Relationships and identities are learned through the patriarchal hierarchies in the domestic sphere, and boys can perform their gender in ways to resist “adults and established authority” (Ibid.). In *The Venture Bros.*, this resistance is demonstrated through Hank Venture who, in opposition to his father, acts out a general idea of hypermasculinity by emulating what he sees in Brock Samson. Dean, however, is not depicted in this manner, and is obedient to Dr. Venture even if he is unhappy with his guidance.

Frederich Weltzien, in his study of changing dress in the superhero genre (2005) examines the importance of the wardrobe in the performance of masculinity. The most common trope of the superhero genre is the apparent split personality of the hero between the mild-mannered geek and the superhuman strongman. Referring to Superman, Spiderman, and Batman, Weltzien indicates “[t]hese two identities — and there are only two — are clearly different from each other, and the transformation from one to the other is always indicated by the change of clothes” (232). This change of clothing is indicative of a personality change “tied to specific abilities” that do not correspond with a normal, day-to-day behavior (233); instead, this transformation heightens the abilities of the mild-mannered identity. The superhero genre, however, often provides the reader with a character, with the exception of Batman, whose change is instigated by either a freak

accident (Spiderman) or otherworldly reaction to the Earth's sun (Superman); rarely is any physical work involved in creating a superhuman body.

While, according to Butler, gender performance creates social categories, and West & Zimmerman argue that gender is performed based on social constructions, in the superhero genre, the dialectic relationship of these masculine identities offers a different reading altogether. Instead of constructing a social boundary between "male" and "female," the gender boundary exists within the "single male hero" (Weltzien 242). "The power of definition is not based in the difference between the self and the other but between two equitable and interchangeable identities" (Ibid.). In the case of Hank Venture and Henchman 21, the two identities at stake are their true selves and "masked" selves.

THE MASCULINITIES OF HANK AND DEAN VENTURE

Hank and Dean, follow a common cartoon trope in early seasons: their physical attributes remain the same episode to episode. They wear the same clothes, stay the same age, show zero signs of personal maturity, and do not seem to be getting much smarter. Traditionally, this is a common occurrence in animated texts; however, by the beginning of season two, their fixed identities are explained with a very clever plot device that can function as a refresh button of sorts. In the first season finale, "Return to Spider Skull Island," the Monarch's henchmen, 21 and 24, accidentally murder Hank and Dean. The scene, homage to *Easy Rider* (1969), explicitly shows the slain brothers' corpses. To resolve the death of the titular characters, the season two premiere reveals that the brothers are, in fact, clones due to their proneness to dying. By the end of season three,

the brothers are allowed to grow after the entire flock of their clones die in the battle at the season's end.

With the clones dead, Hank and Dean are now able to grow and develop in their final teenage years. An unprecedented move in the history of *The Venture Bros.*, as well as being rare within comics and cartoons, the creators are now able to develop the titular characters further by moving away from the crutch of the clone plot device. It is unclear how many times in the narrative the brothers were actually respawned, but that remains a running gag in the series. Season four begins with the brothers' new look: they are both taller, Hank's hair has grown out (it was kept closely cropped for the first three seasons), and Dean is sporting a thin, teenager's mustache. The difference of appearance of the two brothers is significant because it demonstrates forward mobility not only for the show, but also for the characters.

Dean Venture's Passive Masculinity

Dean Venture is a figure of stunted growth. Though he displays physical growth through his fourth-season height increase and the emergence of a thin, teenage mustache, Dean does not demonstrate confidence in same way as Hank. Dean is timid and passive. Unlike Hank, however, Dean demonstrates an interest in girls throughout the series. For example, from the beginning of the series until the final moment of season four, Dean is shown to have a paralyzing crush on his next-door neighbor, Triana Orpheus. Dean has very little masculine agency, or he has yet to develop his own sense of agency. In contrast to Hank, Dean is not rife with references to pop culture, he does not act on his impulses, and he is often overcome with self-doubt. My analysis of Dean will focus on his position

in the series as the less masculine Venture brother. He does not embody the hybridized masculinity that I find present in the characters of Hank and Henschman 21.

Often the butt of humiliating jokes of the writers of *The Venture Bros.*, Dean is regularly emasculated in the series, perhaps as a method of equating him as the heir to Dr. Venture's role in super-science. Similar to Rusty's comparison to teenage girls mentioned in the previous chapter, in "Are You There, God? It's Me, Dean," a reference to the Judy Blume novel *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret* (1970) where a pre-teen girl (Margaret) is in search of a single religion and deals with issues of the body (such as her first period), Dean Venture develops a spontaneous case of testicular torsion. Testicular torsion, as the show addresses in a post-credit public service announcement, is no laughing matter, and it certainly was a point of embarrassment for Dean. To fight the condition, Dean has to undergo surgery from his father's college friends, Billy Quizboy and Peter White. Dean, who must remove his pants and underwear in front of these family friends, as well as shave the region has to undergo further humiliation and emasculation by removing his freshly sprouted pubic hair. "Do you have to shave it? I just grew those," Dean laments. Any indication of puberty, and thus any signs of manhood (hair, for instance) are removed or impaired (testicles). Post-surgery, Dean is on display in his bandages, which are basically a large diaper. To add insult to injury, Triana sees Dean in his emasculating recovery and asks "So, this is like the most embarrassing moment of your life, right?"

Dean Venture is not quite as fortunate as Hank by season four. In fact, he does not reach a point of true growth until the final moment of the season finale, in which he

exclaims, “Fuck you!” to his crush’s stepfather for telling him to move on to another girl. Like Hank, Dean is extremely naïve when it comes to social interactions; but unlike Hank, Dean seems unwilling to take the occasional risk. For instance, in the companion episode to Hank’s romp through film noir, “Bright Lights, Dean City,” Dean takes a trip to New York City to intern for Impossible Industries, a super-science corporation whose building took the place of the old Venture Industries skyscraper in Midtown Manhattan. For the entire episode, Dean is suffering from ennui due to not only his lack of interest in the field, but also because of the duties that are expected of him. He is not working in a lab; rather, he is fetching coffees and working reception. At this point, he is afraid to assert himself and express how much he resents his position. This is where he and Hank differ.

Hank Venture’s Journey into Manhood

Hank Venture always expressed a desire to be almost superhuman in the first three seasons — much like his role model, Brock Samson — and in the latest season, he is able to explore an adult masculine identity. Indeed, Hank Venture is poised as the more masculine of the two Venture brothers. Unlike Dean, Hank performs his masculinity in a very specific way: through the imitation of his role models Batman and Brock Samson. In seasons one through three, whether he is going out on a date or on an adventure Hank takes every opportunity he can get to don the cape and mask of the Dark Knight. To Hank, Batman is the only figure more masculine than his real-life role model, Brock Samson. When posing as Batman, Hank feels more confident, and in some instances

indestructible, as depicted in episode one of season two where a dark-knighted Hank clone accidentally takes his own life by jumping off the roof with an umbrella.

Whether he is dressed as Batman, donning Brock's bomber jacket, or sporting a three-piece suit and fedora, Hank Venture expresses his masculinity through dress. How this differs from his father, however, is that Hank's masculine construction and performance draws inspiration from much more achieved (muscular) bodies. In earlier seasons, Hank wore the garb of the "Caped Crusader" because, to him, the only way to be a man was by being a superhero, a symbol of seemingly impenetrable power.

What is different in this situation is that by the fourth season of the show, Hank Venture, though he has not quite reached the point of physicality that Brock has, begins the process that will lead him to a champion body. The masculinities of Dr. Venture and Brock Samson, in this world, are quite fixed, as they present a uniform construction of their masculinity within the series. However, Hank's masculinity is more malleable and remains a "work in progress."

In "Victor. Echo. November," Hank and Dean are set up on a double date with their neighbor, Triana Orpheus (daughter of Dr. Orpheus, the necromancer) and her friend, Kim. In the episode, titled "Victor. Echo. November," the boys are shown in their separate spaces — Hank in the bedroom, Dean in the bathroom — getting ready for their dates. The shots of Hank are tight and the music is suspenseful as he dons a cape, boots, and utility belt. Hank's intense preparation is juxtaposed with Dean in his father's bathroom covering his entire face with shaving cream and using his father's "Daisy," a pink, ladies' razor. Upon discovery that Hank is, in fact, wearing a Batman costume,

Dean immediately informs Brock (not Dr. Venture). “What? You said put on your best outfit!” Hank exclaims. In order to get Hank in a more presentable outfit, Brock threatens him with letting Dean drive the Charger, his muscle car. Hank responds by dressing up as quickly as he can.

Hank uses the Batman costume to express his desire to be a superior masculine agent in numerous episodes, but he also draws influence from other sources to express his manhood. In “Mid-Life Chrysalis,” Hank helps Brock Samson train for an evaluation with the Office of Secret Intelligence. At the beginning of the episode, Brock’s “license to kill” is revealed to have expired. This revelation leads Brock down a path of depression that only regaining the ability to (legally) kill will remedy. To help him train for his examination for his license renewal, Hank adopts a trainer persona similar to Mickey from the *Rocky* (1976) franchise as well as Sergeant Foley from *An Officer and a Gentleman* (1982). Appropriating the training styles of Mickey and Sgt. Foley, Hank helps Brock to train hard in treacherous conditions using insults as motivators. It is apparent in this sequence, which employs the famous training montage technique featured in the *Rocky* films, that Brock is humoring Hank, whose help has very little impact on the difficulty of the workouts. While Brock is performing pushups in the mud, Hank, with his foot on Brock’s back, yells, “You’re nothing! You’re weak! Why do you even want to be a secret agent, *boy*?! You think you’re good enough?!” Annoyed, Brock looks up at Hank and softly threatens, “Hank, seriously, when I get my license back I’m allowed to kill you.” Hank promptly removes his foot from Brock’s back and apologizes.

The trainer is simply another intertextual persona appropriated by Hank to assert a sense of masculinity that is beyond his physical capabilities.

Hank takes his most apparent step into manhood during the season four episode, “Everybody Comes to Hank’s,” a direct homage to *Casablanca*.⁵ In this episode, Hank is pressured by his father to get a job since the brothers have completed their schooling. So Hank starts his own business: HankCo. HankCo (which was featured in a season one episode as a sandwich stand) is a makeshift shopping center in his family’s abandoned garage that includes a general store (though the entire stock is made up of stolen household items), notary, and detective agency. The detective agency sets up the plot of the episode, which is a mystery in the style of film noir.

What is interesting about Hank’s masculine pursuit is that, in this episode, he straddles the line between masculinity similar to Brock’s and his original adolescent masculinity. By donning the fedora, or “detective’s hat,” Hank masquerades an entirely new person, speaking like a character out of a Dashiell Hammett story. Throughout the series, Hank makes references to his knowledge of classic noir through speech,⁶ so it is no surprise that he actually embodies a 1930s gumshoe in his pursuit of adult masculinity. This performance runs parallel to the wardrobe changes seen in superhero comics. Wardrobe is used to illustrate the change from Teenage-Hank to Detective Hank. Teenage-Hank is unsure of how to navigate in a world of men, and how to talk to women,

⁵ *Casablanca* is a film based on the play titled *Everybody Comes to Rick’s*.

⁶ In episode twelve of season one, referring to the professionalism of a group of assassins, Hank remarks, “And they kill clean. Don’t let dames get in the way.” Of course, his remark is immediately shot down by Brock Samson, who responds, “Honestly, Hank, where do you pick that stuff up? I never see you read.” It is never explained where he picked up this speech; although, Hank makes many references to contemporary cinema throughout the series.

but the act of wearing the hat gives Hank a new persona and tangible sense of masculine agency, just as the Batman costume did in earlier episodes. In this case, “[t]he mechanism of masculinity [...] rests on this double origin signified in different costumes: the clumsy nerd on one side, the exceptional hero on the other, and the ability to change between both identities at will” (Weltzien 232). Although Hank does not possess superpowers, he appears aware of the spike in masculine agency the hat gives him, and is able to jump in and out of each role. This method of masquerade is used to construct his masculinity, but the events of the episode allow Hank to move away from the practice in subsequent episodes.

A key moment in “Everybody Comes to Hank’s” occurs when Hank, as the detective, loses his virginity after a sexual rendezvous with Nikki, Dermot’s alleged sister (and secret biological mother). His masquerade results in Hank gaining sexual agency, and therefore is one step closer to Brock Samson, the archetypal alpha-male. And even though Hank does not possess the champion body like Brock, he is able to negotiate adolescence and manhood through his masquerade. Hank’s lost virginity becomes a moment when Hank first discovers his body (Connell 60). Connell suggests that the practice of (hetero)sexual intercourse is a practice of “social conduct” that further highlights bodily difference between men and women. With this discovery, then, Hank can release himself from the practice of masquerade as he now understands himself as masculine.

HENCHMAN 21 AND THE ACHIEVEMENT OF A CHAMPION BODY

A similar example of the “masculine journey” can be seen in the narrative arc of the Monarch’s henchman, Henchman 21. Also referred to as Gary, 21 was introduced in season one as a post-adolescent nerd who presumably still lived in his mother’s basement and possessed the common traits of a stereotypical comic book fanboy. Gary is rotund and constantly makes references to popular science fiction franchises, most notably *Star Wars*. Throughout his narrative arc, 21 is shown to use his knowledge as a key component of his masculine identity where “variable relations between knowledge and mastery help to generate the range of masculine identity formations which circulate within popular culture” (Straw 7). Indeed, 21 “wears” his knowledge and mastery of these popular subjects in many episodes, often as non-sequitur humor. For instance, in “Are You There, God? It’s Me, Dean,” 21 and 24 are passionately debating whether or not the Smurfs are mammals or a “species that lays eggs.” In the following episode, Henchman 21 becomes a more featured character, as opposed to a background extra.

“Tag Sale, You’re It!” is an important episode for Henchman 21 because it is the first time he confronts Brock Samson. Set at a tag sale (a New England term for yard sale or garage sale) at the Venture compound, with many of the Guild’s most nefarious members (and villains of the Venture family) in attendance, Monarch’s henchmen are browsing a number of Dr. Venture’s scrap inventions and gadgetry. At one of the merchandise tables, Henchman 21 finds a working lightsaber, similar to the Jedi’s weapon of choice in the *Star Wars* franchise. The novelty of the find immediately causes Henchman 21 to purchase the weapon on impulse. Instead of accepting a bag, 21 attaches

the lightsaber to his belt and wears it as an accessory. Due to the inclusion of the worst villains in the *Venture* universe, the tag sale ultimately goes awry, and a riot ensues. In the midst of this, Henchman 21 runs into Brock Samson. “Brock Samson, at last we meet,” Henchman 21 calmly declares in a fashion similar to the showdown between Darth Vader and Obi-Wan Kenobi in *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977). “Umm, do I know you?” Brock asks, acknowledging the anonymity of Henchman 21, who at this point is clumsily dancing around with the lightsaber. Once 21 finally reaches Brock and takes a swing at him, he realizes the lightsaber is simply a replica. This moment is laughable to Brock, who leans in and says, “Boo,” lightly causing Henchman 21 and 24 to run for their lives. The performance of masculinity through his knowledge of popular American texts, such as *Star Wars*, clearly marks Henchman 21 as a “nerd,” as his mastery of subjects in the comic and science fiction realm “are of little use in navigating the terrains of social intercourse” (8), and the fighting skills he acquired by passively consuming popular cinematic texts certainly are of no help in the field.

The initial face-off with Brock is a significant moment because of the physical arc 21 will follow by season four. Between the bookend seasons, one and four, Henchman 21 is tied to 24. The two are rarely apart, and their rapport provides ample pop references with comedic value. At the end of season three, in the same episode the *Venture* clones are eviscerated, Henchman 24 is killed in a freak explosion. The creators of the show are not afraid to shift character dynamics, and the loss of 24 provides the opportunity to further develop Henchman 21.

Before he lost his best friend, Henchman 21 was faceless, nameless, and a “soft-body.” When he is reintroduced in the fourth season, Henchman 21 has undergone considerable training. His body is larger, though still chubby, and he is far more muscular than in previous seasons. The larger body is a more realistic strong body, with more “functional” muscles rather than vanity muscles, which is to suggest he does not possess the body of a professional bodybuilder, but rather that of a strongman.

By the fourth season, 21 is able to challenge Brock to a rematch since he has undergone considerable training since their last physical confrontation in “Tag Sale! You’re It!” This scene occurs in the second act of the season four episode “Pinstripes and Poltergeists.” Composed and scripted similarly to their first meeting in “Tag Sale,” a more muscular and confident 21 approaches Brock on the lawn of the Venture compound. “This is like Christmas, my first BMX bike, and meeting the cast of *Firefly* all in one!” 21 asserts after throwing the first successful punch that draws blood from Brock’s lip. “Ah, very nice. Somebody’s been training,” Brock responds to the punch with a paternal satisfaction. Henchman 21’s equating of this fight with two of his favorite childhood memories, as well as meeting the cast of a Joss Whedon series with a strong cult following, exemplifies his almost childish disposition while still competently challenging the alpha-male of the series in hand-to-hand combat.

CONCLUSION

Hank, Dean, and Henchman 21 are important to this study because they lend themselves to readings of hybrid masculinity. Although Dean does not begin to develop a stronger masculine identity until the final moment of the season four finale, he is on a

similar trajectory as Hank and 21 with regards to personal growth. Functioning in a space where characteristics of masculinity are defined in relation to each other, Hank and 21 rely on masquerade jumpstart their respective paths to adult manliness. Where the two differ, however, is in their age. Henchman 21 is navigating through adulthood and able to achieve masculinity comparable to the hegemonic norm (Brock Samson). Hank, on the other hand, is navigating through his final teen years where he is still mimicking his closest role model (also Brock) and symbols of masculinity that can be found in popular comic books (Batman) and film (the noir detective). Both characters also operate in a liminal space between their true selves and their ideal selves: the teenager and the hero for Hank, and the nerd and the strongman for Henchman 21. Hank, Dean, and 21 are significant to the subversion of hegemonic masculinity because elements of subordinated masculinities are used in constructing their masculine identities.

Conclusion

Adult Swim's current lineup contains many texts that are worthy of analysis in the field of gender studies. To me, however, *The Venture Bros.* contains the largest variety of elements from which to choose and study. *The Venture Bros.*, as I have addressed throughout this project, occurs inside of a very male universe with very little female influence. Although this is not a characteristic exclusive to the series, what piqued my interest was how the creators, Doc Hammer and Jackson Publick, nuance their characters and complicate representations of hegemonic masculinity present in texts throughout American film and television.

During the research process, I noticed very little has been written by scholars about American televised animation — especially Adult Swim programming — and it is the intent of this project to contribute to the growing scholarship on masculinity and television studies. As the popularity of animated programming for adults continues to increase, the importance for the analysis of these programs also grows. What is important to highlight about this project is the contribution my scholarship makes to the fields of Gender Studies, Cartoon Studies, and Television Studies.

First, Gender Studies is the primary field from which I frame my arguments about the representations and performances of gender in *The Venture Bros.* This project contributes to the field by addressing how the series functions within the socially constructed parameters of gender, then works as a subversive text via the many complicated representations of gendered bodies present throughout the series. More

important, using theories of gendered performance to study the construction of masculinities in *The Venture Bros.* is beneficial to interrogating overwhelming patriarchal symbols and structures in film and television. I contend that *The Venture Bros.* is beneficial to a critical reading of hegemonic masculinity because of the way in which the creators interrogate the construction of gender through their characters, thereby contributing significantly to the field of Masculinity Studies.

The field of Cartoon Studies is still very small, but, as I demonstrate in this project, animated texts are ripe for analysis. What is particularly interesting about studying animated texts, especially with regards to the human body, is how the constraints of science and reality do not apply to the representation and fictional lives of the characters. Although the characters are written with agency in *The Venture Bros.*, their animated nature complicates that since there are no actors who physically perform in cartoons and cannot inform potential readings of the characters beyond their voices. The physical actions of cartoon characters are at the disposal of the writers and animators. Perhaps something similar could be said about characters in any fiction text; however, animation provides an environment with limitless possibilities. The resources available to producers of television and film limit how much of the human imagination can be manifested on screen in live action texts. Animation makes it possible to circumvent these limitations. As I discussed in Chapter One, Brock Samson's exaggerated strength can be attributed to the lack of physical boundaries in an animated context. Unlike live-action, which requires the use of stunt doubles and creative editing to simulate action and strength, Brock (and other characters) can be depicted in full frame,

as well as in a single shot, performing feats of strength and agility. Additionally, *The Venture Bros.* contains many battle set-pieces that would not be financially feasible in a live-action series with a comparably low budget.

Finally, studying *The Venture Bros.* is important to the field of Television Studies, as well as Cartoon Studies. Primetime animation, though popular in the 1960s at the time of *The Flintstones*, had mostly been relegated to Saturday mornings, with some afternoon programming to sate children when they got home from school. Since 1990, with the popularity of *The Simpsons*, prime-time animation has become a ubiquitous source of entertainment for adults. Additionally, television has been in homes for well over half a century, and, if we are to consider animated texts since *The Simpsons* worthy of scholarship, considerably less scholarship exists compared to a field as established as Film Studies, for instance. It is my hope that this thesis helps to open the doors of Cartoon Studies, especially when many important animated texts, such as *Metacalypse*, *Robot Chicken*, and *Boondocks*, are being aired on the Adult Swim Network.

While this thesis contributes to the fields of Gender Studies, Masculinity Studies, Cartoon Studies, and Television Studies, *The Venture Bros.* presents the opportunity to be analyzed through other various discursive lenses. In the following section, I will outline some potential areas of study that could not be covered in this thesis due to such reasons as time and thematic scope.

ADDITIONAL AREAS OF ANALYSIS

Over the course of this project, I grappled with narrowing my thematic focus on *The Venture Bros.* When I was in the proposal stage, I attempted to pursue too many

avenues that could have easily branched off into three chapters all their own. Due to time restrictions and the requirements of a thesis, I chose to narrow my focus to a single theme: masculine performance. Below, I will address themes I was not able to address in this project, and encourage scholars to draw upon these ideas and participate in the *Venture Bros.* scholarship.

An obstacle I faced over the course of this project was including critical race theory in my analysis of *The Venture Bros.* Just as the series is very male, it is also very white. While I presuppose that hegemonic masculinity contains an inherent whiteness, I do not elaborate on how race is a component of the series. While there is definitely plenty to consider with regards to race and class, for the purposes of this thesis, masculinity and gender construction were a more ideal area of focus. Of the characters I analyze, Brock Samson is the only character that is positioned in direct opposition to bodies of color. Hank, Dean, Dr. Venture, and Dr. Girlfriend only encounter racial otherness peripherally.

All of the masculinities explored in this series are, in fact, white masculinities. The series offers very little in terms of black, Latino, Arab, or Asian masculinity. While there are a number of ethnically ambiguous characters — such as the Alchemist, who appears to be a modernized version of a medieval monk — there are only two featured black, male characters; however, there are a number of voiceless black extras in the background in many episodes. The most featured black character in *The Venture Bros.* is Jefferson Twilight, the Blacula hunter. Jefferson Twilight is a conflation of the lead character of the famous blaxploitation film, *Shaft*, with the kitana-wielding vampire hunter, Blade. Removed from Twilight's character, however, is the defining characteristic

of blaxploitation cinema of the 1970s: heavy political subtext. Blaxploitation films were intended to address “Hollywood’s insistence on stunting the development of a black political voice and emancipated consciousness” (Guerrero qtd. in Henry 115); however, Jefferson Twilight’s character functions outside of that framework, and political blackness is not present. One scene in particular explores Twilight’s exhaustion with more “politically correct” descriptors of blackness. While he is interviewing arch-villain candidates with the Alchemist and Dr. Orpheus (the tenant in the backyard apartment of the Venture compound, and necromancer), the candidate questions the nature of Twilight’s occupation:

JEFFERSON TWILIGHT: Yes, I only hunt blaculas.

GUILD CANDIDATE: Oh, so you only hunt African-American vampires?

JT: No, sometimes I hunt British vampires. They don’t have “African-Americans” in England!

GC: Oh yeah, huh. Good point.

JT: So I hunt blaculas

GF: I was just trying to be —

JT: Man, I specialize in hunting black vampires. I don’t know what the P.C. name for that is!

Jefferson Twilight possibly represents the failure of the concept of post-racism, the notion that “America [has] essentially contained the evil of racism to the point at which [is] no longer a serious barrier to black advancement” (Steele). Would a character

true to the politics of the blaxploitation genre be welcome in the world of *The Venture Bros.*? With the exception of his “blood-eye,” which helps him identify blaculas in hiding, compared to his two counterparts, Jefferson Twilight is powerless and often the odd man out when fighting otherworldly demons in parallel dimensions. Just as maleness is naturalized in *The Venture Bros.*, so is whiteness, and in this case the most featured black character possesses less agency than his white teammates. This is only one example of how blackness operates in *The Venture Bros.*, but there are plenty of opportunities to address the racial dynamics of the series.

In future scholarship of *The Venture Bros.*, as well as other programs with similar themes of action, adventure, and masculinity, a postcolonial approach could be used to analyze how temporality is used in the series. For instance, anachronistic space, a concept popularized in the mid-1990s, which refers to geographies without histories inhabited by the colonized other, can be found in the first episode of *The Venture Bros.*, for example, in the Tijuana garage scene discussed in Chapter One (McClintock 1995). Often, a white hero is placed against a timeless backdrop, such as Rambo in the jungle, and his power is demonstrated through the juxtaposition of his body from the bodies of “natives” (Dyer 1997). This occurs in *The Venture Bros.* frequently. The use of a colonial backdrop in *The Venture Bros.* parodies these action texts. Dyer studies and conflates the colonial backdrop with the use of anachronistic space, and in the *Jonny Quest* series foreign spaces are depicted as uncivilized. Depictions of otherness in *The Venture Bros.*, however, often deviate from the postcolonial template presented in texts such as *Jonny Quest*. Frequently, when otherness is depicted against Brock or the Venture family, the

family is being held hostage or terrorized by indigenous men, which is typical of previous representations. What is interesting about the representations of otherness in these instances is the indigenous men are revealed to either speak fluent English (in American accents) or have more agency than indigenous characters in older series are given.

In “Escape to the House of the Mummies part 2,” Dr. Venture and Brock are shown in a seemingly clever ploy to rescue Hank and Dean from an Egyptian-style cult. In this scene, the shirtless cult members, wearing headdresses akin to popular depictions of ancient Egyptian soldiers and shot from the waist up, are holding Hank and Dean in captivity. Dr. Venture and Brock are disguised as a god in a fashion that directly references *The Princess Bride* (1987): Dr. Venture atop Brock’s shoulders cloaked in a large robe so as to appear giant. “I command you to release them! Drop to your knees you ignorant savages!” Dr. Venture begins to wave a flashlight as he declares to the captors, “I am your giant, four-armed god. And I make light from one of my two slightly smaller hands!” As Dr. Venture laughs maniacally, one of the captors replies, “It’s just a flashlight. Kill them!” This moment suggests that the captors are neither ignorant nor “savage,” while the American accent implies the captors share nationality with the Venture family and the location may, in fact, be in the United States.

“Dr. Quymm, Medicine Woman,” begins more typically, but reveals the agency of the indigenous people of the Amazon in the post-credit stinger. The “headhunters” are chasing Dr. Venture with their spears held high. The doctor, holding what appears to be a gold idol, is knocked out by the headhunters’ blow darts. Dr. Venture is saved by the titular Dr. Quymm and recovers in her camp. Throughout the episode, in what appears to

be a plot that combines elements of *Scooby-Doo* and *Jonny Quest*, Hank and Dean are trying to solve a mystery of a “wereodile,” a portmanteau word combining “werewolf” and “crocodile.” The wereodile is said by one of the tribesmen to be haunting the Venture family because Dr. Venture stole the tribe’s idol. Even though Hank and Dean never actually solve the mystery of the wereodile, its origins are revealed at the end of the episode. Two tribesmen wearing wereodile costumes are shown in their hut, furnished with mid-century couches, a lamp, and a large, flatscreen television. “I thought those fucking people would never leave. Where the hell were you?” one tribesman says to the other while removing his mask. This scene reveals the tribesmen, while still a problematic portrayal of otherness through their trickery and gibberish language, have a well-established Western and consumption-oriented culture.

The postmodern elements of *The Venture Bros.* can provide plenty of content for an entirely different thesis. As I mentioned in previous sections, the series is an abundant source of U.S. pop culture references. In the comments sections of *The AV Club*’s episode reviews of *The Venture Bros.*, much time is spent simply identifying each reference, an interesting fan-developed game that the creators of the series welcome. The postmodern excess of *The Venture Bros.* is rooted in the series’ self-aware intertextuality. The series’ references to figures from science fiction, comic books, and even popular music create a world where all of these characters co-exist. Creator Jackson Publick asks in a 2007 interview, “...Batman and James Bond, so why wouldn’t they be friends?” (Weigel). Dr. Venture was in college in the 1970s; of course, it makes sense that he has a strong love for progressive rock. Brock Samson is a well-established secret agent, so it

makes sense he would have trained and fought alongside Race Bannon (Jonny Quest's bodyguard).

Another area of potential study of *The Venture Bros.* is of the series' fans. The series' positive reception has garnered a cult following, and spurred a culture devoted to the creators of the series. What is most important in the positive reception of the series is how much of a personal endeavor it is for Doc Hammer and Jackson Publick. Hammer and Publick are regular fixtures at popular conventions across the country, such as the San Diego ComicCon, Atlanta's DragonCon, and the New York ComicCon, where they participate in question and answer forums with devoted fans, most of whom are committed to *Venture* cosplay, an act of fandom where fans attend conventions elaborately dressed as their favorite characters (Ohanesian 2010).

Hammer and Publick appear on convention panels to speak solely to fans, a population they value because the series lacks any kind of traditional promotion or marketing. The creators take a very DIY approach to updating fans about the progress of production via their personal blogs, but the fans themselves handle substantial promotion. Most of the news of the show spreads through fan-curated websites (Ibid.). The most prominent fansites devoted to the series are *The Venture Bros. Blog* and *The Mantis-Eye Experiment*, which function as typical newsblogs, only centered on all things Venture.

What I find particularly interesting, despite all of Adult Swim's efforts to capture the male 18 to 49 demographic, are the female-run *Venture Bros.* critique sites. For example, *Very Venture Vodcast* is formatted like a video blog, recapping each episode. Each young woman provides insight into the narrative of the episode, and each vodcast is

accompanied by a blog entry. Another female-run fansite is *Go VentuRadio! GVR* is similar to the *VVV*, but this female blogging/vlogging duo focus more time on their video reviews. The final example of a female-run fansite is *Hench 4 Life*, a weekly podcast where two female fans provide insight to each episode.

While their show operates in a predominantly male universe, the creators of *The Venture Bros.* have created a text that speaks to a generation of both male and female viewers. Masculine performance in *The Venture Bros.* may operate on a level consistent with dominant elements of hegemonic masculinity; however, the interrogation of hegemonic and hybrid masculinities in the series can be seen to appeal to a wider audience, resulting in the creation of a following that surpasses the limitations of advertisers; in other words, not just men between the ages of eighteen and forty-nine. *The Venture Bros.* has inspired a generation of writers and female producers, and despite the boys' club nature of the Venture universe, the series is able to positively affect viewers across socially constructed gender lines, reinforcing the idea that the series is not just for men.

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