Survivor Shows and Caveman Masculinity

JARED CHAMPION

In the past decade, reality television focused on survivor skills and tactics has exploded in popularity. Programs like *Man vs. Wild*; *Man, Woman, Wild; Dual Survival, Naked and Afraid,* and *Survivorman* all depict men (sometimes paired with women) in staged survival situations. In fact, these shows have become so popular that they are among the top programs for a number of networks, especially the Discovery Channel. The genre merges a number of forms including reality television, documentary films, and how-to instructional programs. Each offers viewers the opportunity to see "experts" demonstrate methods and tips for surviving in tenuous situations, yet even a cursory examination reveals a carefully staged construction of survival narratives. In response, masculinity scholars have pointed to the rise of hypermasculinity, like versions found in survival television, as a type of manhood-reclamation for emasculated men through exaggerated survivor narratives. However, the hypermasculinity-as-reclamation thesis ignores the complexity and variations of masculinity, even in "hyper forms.[1]" In response, this essay interrogates the narrative

[1] Peter Tragos' "Monster Masculinity: Honey, I'll Be In The Garage Reasserting My Manhood" offers a compelling argument for the connection between hypermasculinity and reclaiming manhood, but it flattens all varieties of manhood into one cohesive narrative. Instead, I would suggest that hypermasculinity has begun to transform and adapt in two (possibly more) ways: first, traditionally hypermasculine spaces are becoming more open to homosexuality; take, for example, the recent support of gay football player Michael Sam's decision to come out of the closet. This is not to say homophobia has been defeated, merely to say that support of a gay athlete offers a complication to the flattened version of manhood into one cohesive narrative. And second, many of the depictions of hypermasculinity—Chuck Norris jokes or "the most

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 4, No. 1&2
Copyright © 2016

construction of reality programs geared toward survival and their representation of "caveman[2]" masculinity—marked by dangerous displays of physicality and powerfully carnivorous appetites—to explore a more complicated relationship between contemporary masculinity and a growing respect for women as partners and leaders, a push from homophobic to homoerotic representations of fraternity, and an incorporation of environmental sustainability into notions of mainstream manhood.

Scholars accepted the fictionality of reality or documentary-style television long ago.[3] Like all other reality or documentary forms, these depend heavily on pastiche to create a cohesive narrative complete with plot and resolution. While many scholars accept that reality narratives have been carefully constructed, average viewers are much less ready to accept collage-narratives when it comes to survival stories. In one famous example, the U.K Daily Mail challenged the authenticity of *Born Survivor* (called *Man vs. Wild* (*MVW*) in the U.S.) in an article titled "How Bear Grylls the Born Survivor roughed it – in hotels." This article prompted the producers to issue an apology, saying that, "We take any allegations of misleading our audiences seriously… but Born Survivor is not an observational documentary series but a 'how to' guide to basic survival techniques in extreme environments." But these make very poor how-to videos, often giving viewers dangerous advice. When examining the article more closely, it becomes glaringly apparent that Grylls's biggest offense was sleeping in a posh resort hotel complete with internet access,

interesting man in the world"—are meant to be hyperbolic satirizations of a silly and foolish manhood. I talk more about these later in the essay.

[2] I use the term "caveman masculinity" in an effort to connect this style of physical, carnivorous manhood with other emerging pieces of popular culture like the Paleo Diet, barefoot running, and mud runs like the increasingly popular Tough Mudder.

[3] For more on this, see John Corner's "Performing the Real: Documentary Diversions" and Susan Murray's "'I Think We Need a New Name for it': The Meeting of Documentary and Reality TV."

not his failure to offer a complete or authentic narrative of survival. Rather than pick the episodes apart for their infidelity to the documentary form or even “reality,” a more fruitful analysis happens by unpacking the connections between the various constructions of manhood.

These shows allow viewers a form of surrogate masculinity where manhood is asserted by proxy. Still, the point remains: these shows are obsessed with the role of men and questions of male value. The titles are the first indicator that these shows actually focus on manhood as a corollary for survival skill. Far from attacking survivor television for offering a constructed version of masculinity (which I believe to be obvious), the fictionalized narratives serve as an entry point to begin historicizing the increase in their popularity as part of a post-9/11 masculine anxiety; as will be shown, they also reveal a growing acceptance of women as partners and gay access to hypermasculinity. The men featured are all white, middle-aged, and straight. Nearly all connect the survival expertise to military training, and all use a knife as symbolic phallus. Finally, they work to connect masculinity with sustainability through notions of minimalism. While many versions of manhood rely on material products to establish worth—big houses, fast cars, expensive clothing—survivor shows work to reorient manhood within the body, a move that allows for men to be manly and “tree-huggers” simultaneously.

The reclaimed manhood argument does help explain masculinity in an increasingly urbanized global world, but this argument ignores the growing female presence on such programs—to say nothing of the numerous demonstrations of women’s expertise—and the counter-masculinities many depict. Rather than offer viewers a form of unified masculinity, survival programs rely on a few motifs of manhood ranging from the practical and cautious seen in *Survivorman* (*SM*) or characters in *Man, Woman, Wild* (*MWW) t*o the reckless and brave-to-the-point-of-foolish as seen in *Man vs. Wild* and *Dual Survival* (*DS*). The construction of manhood within the genre reveals the varieties of masculinity at work

and establishes that the there is, in fact, some level of revision to mainstream masculinity at work in the programs.

Staging manhood in a number of ways, fictionalized survival narratives most notably frame knowledge in particular and specialized ways. In an episode of *Survivorman* set in the Sierra Nevada mountains, host Les Stroud explains a common tendency for people in the early stages of being lost to actually accelerate pace, make poor decisions, and panic their way into even worse situations. This scene highlights perhaps the most important piece of information the hosts have that actual survivors do not: the hosts know they are headed into the wilderness with the intention of getting lost. This allows each of the hosts to carefully plan, pack, and research the areas where each episode is filmed. This, of course, is fairly obvious, and a genuine survival narrative would no doubt prove painfully boring; imagine the film *127 Hours* taking place over an actual 127 hours, for example. However, the hosts rarely if ever address the preparation they took before heading into the wilderness, and this omission frames the hosts' knowledge as significantly more extensive and based in experience rather than research.

Most episodes use a voice-over from either the hosts or an unseen narrator. Grylls of *MVW* and Hawke of *MWW* both do the majority of voice-over narration, but the other programs rely on unseen narrators with deep, raspy voices. The narration develops a sense of danger and drama, but more than this, it also fabricates a connection between manhood and knowledge. But not all narration is the same: survivor shows also disseminate this specialized, well-researched knowledge through unseen omniscient narrators, talking head soliloquys from the hosts, and through 3rd person commentary between the hosts. The genre presents a complicated relationship between knowledge and manhood, though, particularly through a decentering of expertise. Rather than offer one, comprehensive expert, survivor shows rely on a myriad of voices to relay techniques, advice, and relevant facts. So when these narrators bring in

very detailed information to explain situations that arise throughout filming, the voice-overs also challenge masculinity in two ways: first, *MWW*'s Ruth who often adds insight and interpretation through both voice-overs and talking head moments; and second, the narrator of *Naked and Afraid* consistently points out poor the male survivalist's poor decisions. The narrator rarely discusses poor decisions made by the female competitor, mostly because women tend to make smarter decisions like not drinking unfiltered water. In fact, one third of the men in the first season drink unfiltered water while their female teammates abstain. These men become violently ill as a result, and the narrator consistently points to this during the final evaluation of the contestants' mental strength (the men *never* score well in this category, in fact). In *NAA*'s "Island from Hell" episode, for example, Jonathan's main weakness is his inability to work with a partner, while Alison's only mental weakness listed is her inexperience working with "hardcore military types." More simply, Alison's only mental weakness is actually Jonathan's. Here, the argument about a reassertation of manhood falls short, particularly because the man in most episodes fails to actually assert his manhood.

Carnivores, Bears, and Foraging: Caveman Masculinity

The shows provide a sensationalized version of "survival," rife with ill-advised practices, overdramatized dangers, and staged futility. Many of these situations feature a caveman-style male who desires meat over foraged plants, hunting over gathering, and even hunted game over trapped animals; the problem, however, is that hunting defies actual survival training. In one particularly telling example from *Dual Survival*, the "Swamped" episode, Dave Cantebury separates from his partner Cody to go hunting in the swamp, only to return with an alligator. Granted, killing an alligator requires some modicum of skill, but it also defies core tenets of survival principals, namely to never separate from your group

and to not actively engage with danger. When Dave returns to camp, Cody chastises him for taking such a careless risk, but in the talking-heads moment stitched into the middle of their fight, Dave replies, "That's what we do here, brother: survival of the fittest." In fact, Dave often turns down food Cody forages because, as he puts it, he *needs* meat. The disagreement between Dave and Cody emphasizes the sensationalism at work. Even Bear Grylls abandons foraging in his "Sierra Nevada" episode in search of "real food," meaning meat. The carnivore-as-real-man motif offers very little sustenance for the viewer hungry for actual survival methods, but it feeds the audience that wants a rugged manhood on display.

In fact, *Man vs. Wild* and *Dual Survival* have more in common with even the *Jackass*[4] series than others dealing with survival, namely because they focus much more closely on primal (or downright foolish) displays of rugged manhood than actual survival techniques. More simply, they offer viewers scintillating narratives that leave a sense of wonder that any human would actually be brave or stupid enough take the risks, eat the foods, or attempt the stunts performed by the hosts. *Man vs. Wild* hardly makes any attempt to obscure this, either: almost every episode opens with Grylls jumping from an aircraft into his survival scenario. Season Two of *Man vs. Wild* even features an entire episode titled "Bear Eats" where the star is shown eating all manner of insect, reptile, arachnid, and amphibian. Here, the episode abandons almost all pretense of survival how-to in an effort to display extreme masculinity at work.

In addition to the reclamation argument, one might also interpret much of this caveman masculinity as an over-the-top critique of masculinity's

[4] The *Jackass* enterprise has received a great deal of critical attention in articles like Fintan Walsh's, "The Erotics and Politics of Masochistic Self-Abjection." Still, many of these articles—like Sean Brayton's, "MTV's *Jackass*: Transgression, Abjection and the Economy of White Masculinity"—fail to interrogate the complicated relationship between white men, homosociality, and agency. Simon Lindgren and Maxine Lelievre offer a more nuanced reading of the show in "In the Laboratory of Masculinity: Renegotiating Gender Subjectivities in MTV's *Jackass*."

decadence in the contemporary moment. Or, more simply, these shows offer a document of the kind of tough guy who has no place in a modern world. Rather than offer a how-to program, they might be understood as anthropological documentaries more like *Nanook of the North* or even the Chuck Norris jokes, Old Spice Commercials, or Ron Swanson. In this sense, the narratives tacitly criticize meatheads, jocks, and bros by presenting caveman masculinity as unnecessary. The narrative of *Man vs. Wild* in this framework follows an almost hilarious trajectory: "Here's how to survive when you fall out of a plane into the Sierra Nevada, or when you fall out of a plane into the Mojave desert, or when you fall out of a plane into the Everglades." More to the point, Bear Grylls even brought in Will Farrell as a guest host for an episode filmed in Antarctica, and a considerable portion of the episode centered on Farrell's decision to eat a Twinkie without sharing ("The Will Farrell Special"). Survivor shows, especially those engaging with caveman masculinity, function as visual spectacle and do not expect the audience to take the scenes seriously.

The programs sensationalize the different characters' bravery even more by playing up the danger presented by bears, especially black bears, such as how Edward Michael Grylls uses the nickname "Bear." The irony is that black bears pose a dramatically lower threat to humans in the wild than insects like ticks or hantavirus, a disease spread by mouse droppings. In fact, Alaska's Department of Fish and Game literature tells visitors to Admiralty Island to *always* fight back in the event of a black bear attack ("Close Encounters: What to Do"). The "expert" hosts undoubtedly know enough about black bears to offer a more realistic strategy for dealing with bear danger, yet they dress up the threat in order to bolster audience perception of their bravery. In one episode of *MWW* set in Great Smokey Mountains National Park (GSMNP), Mykel tells Ruth that their absolute first priority is to make spears to protect themselves in the event of a bear attack. There are a few problems with this idea, though: first, GSMNP has

one of the largest populations of black bears in the country but there are zero brown bears in the park; second, GSMNP welcomes more than 9 million visitors a year but very rarely is there an attack in the park. Still, the scene that builds a black-bear anxiety, of which almost every survivor series has some version, points to either a failure in expertise or need to establish a tougher-than-reality manhood. In other words: the tendency to sensationalize the dangers presented by black bears reveals a contradiction to the construction of expertise that aims to align manhood with stereotypical gender role of physical dominance.

One such example, *Man, Woman, Wild*, offers what appears at first to be a textbook example of a standard gendered dynamic at work in survival reality television, but *MWW* rewrites much of the narrative as the show continues; or as one internet blogger puts it, "these shows are not about survival; they are about relationships" (Fenzel). During the introduction, Mykel explains to the audience that "[his] military skills will go a long way, but there's no field manual for surviving with a spouse." The line could be read in two ways: either as Mykel teasing Ruth or as his way to emphasize the challenges of working with his wife *as a partner*. Mykel does infantilize Ruth on numerous occasions, but the dynamic between the two is much more complicated than the male host's sexism. Ruth, in many ways, can be viewed as the voice of reason; practical, sensible, and knowledgeable, her character serves as a much more rational foil to Mykel's reckless caveman masculinity.

Dual Survival also plays up a version of reinterpreted gender norms. The series pairs a former Army Ranger, Dave Canterbury, from the mountains of southeast Ohio, with a primitive survival expert, Cody Lundin, from the Arizona desert. More simply, *DS* offers a tough-guy military man and his foil, a long haired hippy who refuses to wear shoes. The series works to align each of the hosts with antiquated gender norms in two ways: first, it draws on a homosocial relationship between the men that borders on romantic, and second, it allows space for a non-normative

model of masculinity. Cody, complete with braided pigtails, plays the voice of reason as a foil to Dave's reckless, caveman masculinity. Of course, Cody also participates in the trope of the caveman through his decision to not wear shoes. His hope, as he repeats throughout the series, is to build up the strength of his mitochondria and even claims that shoes would make him feel like a "fucking ballerina" ("Failed Ascent"). Through his attempt to develop super-mitochondria, Cody literally attempts to become a caveman. He often warns the audience against any attempts to replicate his stunts because they lack his physical uniqueness. While both men reinforce the trope of caveman masculinity, their partnership and disagreement-resolution offer a model of cooperation that complicates masculine independence.

Their different versions of caveman masculinity are further complicated through the ways *DS*'s episodes employ the same framework when Dave hunts for meat while Cody builds the shelter. Dave's carnivorous masculinity contrasts strongly with Cody's domestic masculinity. The homosexual undertones between the two peak during an episode that centers on two ranchers tucked away in the Wyoming wilderness not unlike the men in *Brokeback Mountain.*[5] After Cody builds the two men a new shelter, Dave explains that he is, "unfortunately, almost ready to snuggle." Before the two climb into the shelter, the men sit around a campfire drying their snow-soaked socks. Cody raises one sock to his lips and sucks the water from it. When Dave expresses mock disgust, Cody asks if Dave wants to, "suck my sock." The homophobic veneer draws thin and the two laugh to a near giggle with the next scene features them climbing into their shelter together. The obvious homophobic jokes pair with a more subtle homoeroticism, especially because the very next scene depicts the two men climbing into a shelter

[5] Fran Pheasant-Kelly offers a particularly important analysis of landscape and sexual desire in *Brokeback Mountain* in "Spaces of Desire: Liminality and Abjection in *Brokeback Mountain*."

for the night. Scenes like this reveal the *DS*'s growing acceptance that homosexuality and normative masculinity might not be diametrically opposed. If nothing else, the series also opens space for multiple versions of masculinity, especially because Dave—who aligns closest with normative masculinity—often cedes to Cody's expertise.

The Travel Narrative and Survival

Nearly every survival series produced in the past decade relies heavily on the main character discovering he (or they)[6] is lost and then moving from his initial location. While this narrative makes for better television, it actually breaks the cardinal rule of being lost in the wilderness: stay put. Moving while lost significantly decreases the likelihood that search teams will be able to make a rescue. The travel narrative form establishes another layer to the construction of masculinity that stems from what Eric Leed labels "spermatic travel" (221). According to Leed, spermatic travel references a style of travel that accomplishes the work of gendering, particularly by establishing a contrasting sessile feminine (221). Under this rubric, when women do travel, it either happens in secret or through a masculine counterpart; Ruth, in *MWW*, depends on Mykel's expertise through much of the series, for example.

One show, *Naked and Afraid*, challenges the spermatic travel narrative of the others, most notably by shirking much of the travel narrative and replacing it with a static narrative. The series places two survival experts, one man and one woman, in a remote landscape and requires them to build a home. The two protagonists stay in one place for three weeks, so the teamwork, or lack thereof, pushes the narrative forward. While this still falls short of being entirely progressive in its depiction of women, one

[6] I use the phrase "he or they" here because only one of the mainstream survival shows present a woman on her own—*NAA* when the male character leaves the show for an illness.

should note that women fare significantly better in a number—maybe even a majority—of the episodes because they spend decidedly less time proving themselves to be cavemen. In the "Island From Hell" episode, the two characters are dropped on the island and the man, Jonathan Klay, suffers a scorching sunburn almost immediately. Meanwhile, the woman, Alison Teal, begins weaving a hat from palm fronds. The hat she weaves, however, proves to be a lifesaver: Alison never suffers a sunburn at all and Jonathan even uses some of her weaved items later in the episode. In one particularly telling juxtaposition of scenes, Alison explains to the camera that she plans to collect coconuts because of their qualities beneficial to hydration. The next scene presents Klay as he expresses frustration about Alison's obsession with coconuts because, as he puts it, "I could care less about the coconuts; I think fresh water is more important." Shortly thereafter, Klay drinks unfiltered water from a trench, which renders him ill with diarrhea; Alison, who sticks solely to coconut water, avoids this fate. This is, of course, another example of a carefully assembled narrative, but the point remains that survivor narratives have begun to challenge the caveman masculinity in lieu of more practical and arguably feminine versions of survivalists.

Even more than this, *Naked and Afraid* actually challenges the validity of hypermasculinity by de-romanticizing independence and replacing it with an idealized domestic masculinity. The first episode, "The Jungle Curse," pairs a woman, Kim, with Shane, a ragingly angry and aggressive chauvinist who spends most of his on-air time pontificating about the failures of younger generations; his sound bytes emphasize his maladjustment and particular distaste for young women. *NAA* challenges the construction of masculine surrogacy, especially because very few people would actually want to be like Shane. Also, because *NAA* teams work to construct makeshift domestic spaces, the narrative reworks the escape fantasy of the survival genre. Rather than offer mountain vistas, *NAA* transitions from scene to scene with close ups of spiders, snakes, and

other menacing creatures. Even though the program presents two people considered to be survival experts, the narrative is one of frustration, failure, and suffering. The combination of threat and suffering with expertise and toughness inverts the escape fantasy so watching television comfortably in the home actually becomes its own escape (i.e. the masculine escape *becomes* domestic).

NAA dramatizes the gender dynamics, but does so by displaying the ways antiquated notions of gender work against the aims of survival. Episode after episode tells of men who mistreat their female partners all to their mutual peril. More than this, the series highlights male pigheadedness by juxtaposing contrasting comments about the roles of men and women. One particularly sexist contestant, E.J., even calls his partner "Squirrel" like he's the lead in an Ibsen play ("Terror in Tanzania"). The episodes all open with a "Primitive Survival Rating" (PSR) which gives experts' assessments of the two contestants' survival ability based on mental, experiential, and technical levels. E.J.'s most sexist comments—that men think logically and women are guided by emotion—are followed by the PSR scene, which tells the audience that E.J.'s partner Kellie actually outranks him. If paired survival shows are about relationships, then *NAA* calls for the death of caveman masculinity.

Though I am hesitant to label *NAA* a feminist series, it is difficult to ignore the show's deconstruction of masculinity. Where other programs offer a nostalgic picture of pre-urban and pre-industrial manhood, *NAA* challenges this narrative by demonstrating the value of women as partners and as leaders. The subtext, of course, is that misogyny only makes life more difficult, especially for men. As a result, most episodes follow a fairly static trajectory where the men quickly expose their own sexism, the women demonstrate expertise, and the show ends when the male figure's misogyny is overcome by accepting the woman's leadership and status as a partner. As the first season progresses, the men also begin the challenges by accepting their female partner more and more equally. In the first

episode, Shane often launches into unabashed woman-hating rants. The second, third, and fourth episodes all show men who believe strongly in either essential male/female difference or at least in separate spheres for men and women. The final two episodes, however, offer men who start the challenge with much more egalitarian comments. For example, the male character from "Breaking Borneo," Puma, explains that he hopes his partner can pick up slack to complement his weakness. The two actually thrive together for nearly the first two weeks of the challenge until Puma drinks unfiltered water, which causes him an illness so debilitating that the producers pull him from the jungle. The final episode, "Beware the Bayou," presents Billy Berger and Ky Furneaux who both begin with hopes of working collaboratively with their partners. This is the only episode where both partners work collectively from the beginning and last the entire three weeks without any major disagreements, just a few minor tantrums from Berger. Unlike the other men, Berger does not direct his frustration toward his partner, though. Throughout the narrative arch of the individual episodes and within the trajectory of the entire first season, the message is clear: men who see women as partners fare decidedly better than those who have yet to make this realization.

The Male Gaze and Spectacle of Survival

As the name implies, *Naked and Afraid* plays into the erotics of the male gaze, but the other shows do, as well. *Man, Woman, Wild* often presents the male star, Mykel Hawke, shirtless and sporting a nipple-piercing. The series also alludes to the sex the couple on *MWW* have during filmings, not to mention the many scenes picturing Ruth's undergarments or other items of clothing hanging from their makeshift shelter. In fact, the series sexualizes both hosts together, further reinforcing the idea that this genre speaks to a growing sense of women as partners. The *MWW* example challenges the existing framework of caveman masculinity through Ruth's

character and her engagement with the gaze, though. For one, Ruth often performs much of the gruesome work that connects figures like Bear Grylls to the previously mentioned caveman masculinity: she drinks urine, eats grubs, and butchers animals. The show fails to be entirely progressive, however: the couple are referenced often as "the Hawkes" despite the fact that Ruth's last name is actually "England," the narrative still builds on her desire for Mykel's approval, and the series occasionally relies on her fear to drive the narrative forward. Still, *MWW* complicates notions of the male gaze by focusing heavily Mykel's body and downplaying Ruth's as sites of objectification. Even the inclusion of the word "woman" in the title is remarkable for a program of this type; Discovery also features another series titled *Yukon Men* about subsistence trappers in remote Alaska—which, ironically, often features women hunting, fishing, and working all without men present. This, of course, is not to excuse the sexism in *MWW*, but is merely to explain that the title helps understand a change in gendered presentations within the context of reality television.

The other programs also engage with the male gaze in unique ways, but almost all rely on a reinterpretation of representation Susan Bordo labels "face-off masculinity." In this version of masculinity, the subject of the gaze refuses to be a passive recipient of the gaze. Rather than welcome the gaze, the subject of the gaze challenges the viewer. In the cover art for Season 6, for instance, Grylls's image engages with the gaze with an aggressive, confident face, but Bordo's explanation of face-off masculinity and subjectivity helps unpack another layer to the notion of surrogacy:

Never reveal weakness. Pretend to be confident even though you may be scared. Act like a rock even when you feel shaky. Dare others to challenge your position. (188)

The genre's popularity speaks more to male fear and anxiety than a sense of strength. These shows offer something more, though: there are two different types of engagement with the male gaze, both of which are unaffected yet aware of the gaze. In the cover art for *Survivorman* Season

2, Stroud poses with his face looking toward a knife affixed to the end of a stick to make a spear. The symbolic phallus is obvious, but rather than create a sense of challenge, the knife adds more to a sense of surrogacy or even homoeroticism, a point reinforced by a Stroud's firm grip on the spear. The image offers some sense that he is aware of the audience, yet he does not welcome the gaze nor does he challenge it. Likewise, the engagement with the gaze on the cover of *MWW* actually offers an example where traditional gender norms break down. Here, the two characters are presented paddling a ramshackle raft through the swamp. This image challenges even John Berger's idea that "men act, women appear." Berger's point, more simply, is that visual depictions of men typically frame the man doing something (an active participant), whereas depictions of women usually display the woman posing (a passive recipient of the male gaze). In the cover art for *MWW*, the photo depicts Ruth paddling, aware of the audience but not objectified or welcoming to the gaze, per se. The image even leaves it unclear as to whether or not Mykel is looking at Ruth or beyond her. If one were to read Mykel's gaze as directed at Ruth, then the meaning is still complicated by the fact that Ruth is *acting*, not appearing, for his gaze. In other words: the male gaze points to her masculinization. More than this, Ruth and Mykel are presented working in tandem to paddle the raft; while it is true that the person in the rear of the raft typically steers, the person in the front provides the bulk of the power. Even though the image still contains echoes of patriarchal control, Ruth's position as *act-er* positions her more as partner and powerhouse than subordinate.

Similarly, *Survivorman* challenges notions of the male gaze because, more than any of the others, it offers a less sensationalized presentation of manhood. This is especially true because the host who hauls all of his own camera equipment films the majority of the footage. The self-filmed narrative is one of Stroud's particular innovations to the survivor show genre, but this also builds credibility and an imagined connection between

the audience and host. Far from an aggressive face-off with the audience, Stroud coaches his viewers through his monologues. Stroud's self-presentation draws on both feminine and masculine subjects of the male gaze: he simultaneously plays the passive recipient as well as the masculine expert.

The face-off masculinity of survival television goes beyond visual representation; it also engages with the audience through narrative face-offs. This happens often when the survival experts explain their next task by explaining how little the audience would want to do the same. More simply, the hosts will use second-person phrases like, "you don't want to be lost here," "you don't want to be in this situation," or "you don't want to have to do what I am about to do." These statements speak to the very appeal of the programs, especially as they reflect Jane Tompkins's claim about the appeal of Westerns, which is actually quite pertinent to the survival genre, is that the popularity of representations of men stems from the fact that most men do not actually want to take the place of the male protagonist (16). Survival narratives, much like Westerns according to Tompkins, offer a form of surrogate masculinity where viewers see depictions of men dominating nature, which opens a space for a fantasy of essential male difference. Viewers never have to prove themselves as men because the storylines speak to a collective anxiety about the role of men in an urbanized, post-industrial world, so the men portrayed offer assurance that men and male bodies are still unique, necessary, and masculine.

Beyond the obvious articulation of masculinity, these programs reveal a growing anxiety about the perceived loss of male control over agency[7] and masculinity in the age of sustainability and economic recession. In Les Stroud's documentary about developing a subsistence lifestyle, *Off the*

[7] Gender scholars have discussed the perceived loss of male agency at length. For more, see Susan Faludi's *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* and David Savran's *Taking it Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture.*

Grid, he talks about the ways modern life constricts the modern man. He explains, “Your water, your electricity, your heat, even the way you walk your dog: everything is controlled by someone else.” In a moment when excess (big houses, fast cars, flashy clothes, etc.) often codes for masculinity, Stroud’s minimalism pairs with his skill and knowledge to assure men that masculinity and sustainable living can coexist. This idea, of course, is naturally less sensational, so his following is but a fraction of Grylls’s. In the documentary, Stroud suggests that sustainable living is a form of taking control of one’s own destiny. This form of narrative reflects a complex understanding and construction of masculinity.

Ultimately, survivor programs fragment and refigure masculinity than they reassert male dominance. Rather than assume a brutish masculinity offers “more of the same,” scholarship needs to begin considering the ways male representations respond to a broader cultural, social, and political network. Masculinity, as seen in the phenomenon of survival television represents masculinity as a site of gender reconfiguration. Power dynamics built on homophobia, racism, and sexism prove to be much more tangled than the reassertation argument allows. The next step for scholarship is to abandon tired arguments about masculinity in lieu of a more nuanced qualitative analysis of gender revision in an uncharted historical moment.

Works Cited

Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing.* London: Penguin, 1972.

Bordo, Susan. *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and in Private.* New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000. Print.

Dual Survival. Discovery Channel. 2014-16. Netflix.

Fenzel. “Dual Survival, Man Woman Wild, and Surviving a Semi-Scripted Relationship.”

Overthinking It. Jan. 4, 2012 http://www.overthinkingit.com/2012/01/04/dual-survival-man-woman-wild/

“How Bear Grylls the Born Survivor Roughed it—in Hotels.” U.K. Daily Mail. http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-470155/How-Bear-Grylls-Born Survivor-roughed--hotels.html. 26 February 2014. Online.

Leed, Eric. *The Mind of the Traveler: From Gilgamesh to Global Tourism*. New York: Basic, 1993.

Man Vs. Wild. Discovery Channel. 2006-11. Netflix.

Man, Woman, Wild. Discovery Channel. 2010-2014. Netflix.

Naked and Afraid. Discovery Channel. 2013-2014. iTunes.

Off the Grid. Dir. Les Stroud. YouTube.

Survivorman. Discovery Channel. 2004-2014. Netflix.

The Essentials for Traveling in Bear Country. “Close Encounters: What to Do.”http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=livingwithbears.bear country

Tompkins, Jane. *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns.* New York: Oxford UP, 1993. Print.

Steinke, Jocelyn. “Cultural Representations of Gender and Science Portrayals of Female Scientists and Engineers in Popular Films.” *Science Communication* 27.1 (2005): 27-63. Print.

United States. Dept of Education. *“D*egrees in computer and information sciences conferred by degree-granting institutions, by level of degree and sex of student: 1970-71 through 2010-11.” Digest of Education Statistics, 2012. Web. 11 Jun. 2015.

Valian, Virginia. "Interests, Gender, and Science." *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 9.2 (2014): 225-230. Print.