

## Masculine Compensation and Masculine Balance

# Masculine Compensation and Masculine Balance: Notes on the Hawaiian Cockfight

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This article poses a framework for considering the social processes that drive masculinity's enactment, including men's presentation of gender, masculinity's intersituational flexibility, and the persistence of gender inequality. I draw on ethnographic observation and in-depth interviews conducted in a small cockfighting community in Hawaii. On the surface, my findings are surprisingly counter-Geertzian: within Hawaiian cockfighting's uncontestedly masculine and almost exclusively male context, fighters carry out behaviors they consider "feminine" in other areas of their lives, such as caretaking, nurturing, and overt emotional expression. I draw on existing theoretical frameworks, including hybrid masculinities, to use Hawaiian cockfighting as a vehicle for elaborating our understanding of the sociology of masculinity. I argue that rather than approximating an archetypal masculinity, "ideal" masculine performance incorporates a balance of masculinized and feminized traits. This tempered incarnation of masculinity is enacted in particular localized contexts to deliberately fall "short" of archetypal masculinity. I introduce the term "masculine undercompensation" to describe the mechanism through which subordinate masculinities are incorporated to create a tempered, locally contingent masculine performance. The processes I identify strengthen and contextualize the growing literature documenting how hybridization can contribute to the maintenance of unequal gender relations.

## Introduction

Geertz's essay on Balinese cockfighting tethers the activity to our notions of masculinity. As Geertz famously described, a Balinese fighter's status as a man in the community is at stake in the cockfighting pit; a match between two roosters "simulat[es] the social matrix" (1971), in which roosters serve as avatars for masculinity. The few other studies to take up cockfighting in various locales have echoed Geertz's findings (e.g., Marvin 1984).

In Hawaii, too, cockfighting is culturally considered a very "masculine" activity, and is sometimes termed "the sport of kings." On the activity's surface—certainly

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within the semi-public arena of the cockfighting ring—it is consistent with the displays of masculinity Geertz described. But the few minutes they spend in the cockfighting ring are a very small part of these men’s existence as cockfighters. This article uses a wider ethnographic lens to understand the role cockfighting plays in their lives, and suggests that understanding this role can advance social scientific theory about how masculinity is enacted from one social milieu to the next.

Outside the cockfighting context—interacting with their friends, going to work, and spending time with their family—cockfighters’ performances of masculinity mirror those of their peers, which are consistent with sociological literature on masculine identity and masculine performance in working-class men. The uncontestedly masculine endeavor of cockfighting would seem to offer an opportunity for practiced approximation of a normative masculine ideal. However, Hawaiian cockfighters instead appropriate “feminine” behaviors in that context, resulting in a softened, or “tempered,” masculinity. This tempered masculinity does not require men to surrender, even temporarily, their superior social position to women, nor to adopt unconventional beliefs about gender in their broader social lives. Instead, the maintenance of a highly flexible, locally specific balance works to demonstrate and solidify their social role.

I draw on Connell’s notion of hegemonic masculinity and gender relations, as well as the more recent literature on hybrid masculinities, gender capital, and masculine overcompensation, to make an overarching theoretical argument about how masculinity works in practice, and to describe the process of “masculine undercompensation,” through which an “ideal” state I term “masculine balance” can be achieved.

The kinds of hybrid masculinities described in the existing literature are useful to understanding how masculinity is enacted in practice, but concentrate primarily on men who embody social privilege. Expanding the lens to include a situation where men who *lack* many aspects of social privilege enact feminized behaviors allows us to understand hybrid masculinities that maintain race- and class-based privilege as a subset of masculine undercompensation that works to achieve balanced masculinity.

## Sociological Understandings of Masculine Performance

### *Hegemonic Masculinity*

Long considered the dominant theoretical framework for understanding masculinity, hegemonic masculinity did the bulk of the theoretical heavy lifting for more than a quarter of a century (Carrigan, Connell, and Lee 1985; Connell 1987). The term was introduced as a challenge to sex role theory and describes a set of relations between men and women that allows men to retain a higher relative status position, perpetuating a patriarchal system (Carrigan, Connell, and Lee 1985; Connell 1987). As Connell notes, hegemonic masculinity is not a description of an actual, flesh-and-blood man. Rather, it describes a configuration of hierarchically organized gender projects, practices, and performances; it

is “the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable” (Connell 1995).

Connell conceives gender as a social structure we can understand through dimensions of gender relations, and specifically the substructures of emotional, economic, power, and symbolic relations. Hegemonic masculinity is a cultural “ideal” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). It can be “understood as the currently accepted strategy or conglomeration of practices, that works to both legitimate patriarchy and ensure hierarchies between men and women and among men” (Diefendorf 2015; Connell 1995).

Because hegemonic masculinity is not a catalog of stagnant traits, and because the social structure of gender is configured and performed at multiple levels—for example, through an overarching gender order as well as local instantiations of gender regimes—the set of behaviors and relations that emerge as dominant vary with time and place, and the practices that construct masculinities vary with factors such as geographic location, generation, culture, time, and social class (Segal 1993; Cooper 2000; Alexander 2003; Gonzalez-Lopez 2004). Masculinity is not monolithic: “Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Gender is “done” through projects, practices, and performances. It is constantly built and configured—as West and Zimmerman wrote, gender is “an accomplishment, an achieved property of situated conduct” (1987).

The manifestation of gendered practices in social situations can lead men to define themselves not just as men, but as “not-women.” “In this way, hegemonic beliefs act as the implicit rules of the gender game in public contexts” (Ridgeway and Correll 2004). For example, Henson and Rogers’s ethnography of clerical workers found that men who enter a traditionally female environment emphasize their masculinity to distinguish themselves from female counterparts (2001). In Schacht’s study of men’s rugby teams at two universities, he found that one prominent theme was the “relational rejection of the feminine” (1996). The specter of femininity was invoked to taunt men who were considered “wimpy” or unskilled. Similar invocations have embodied this oppositional understanding of masculinity, including coaches’ motivational speeches (Schacht 1996) and training at the Citadel (Kimmel 2000). In every social setting, masculinity is “constructed within a gender order that defines masculinity in opposition to femininity, and in so doing, sustains a power relation between men and women as groups” (Connell 1990).

### ***Hybrid Masculinities and Gender Capital***

Demetriou incorporates Gramscian notions of hegemony, asserting that Connell treats hegemonic masculinity and alternative masculinities as if the former relates to the latter only through the exercise of power, inadequately accounting for masculinity’s multifaceted nature. According to Demetriou, “for Connell the existence of non-white or non-heterosexual elements in hegemonic masculinity is a sign of contradiction and weakness” (2001). He suggests that gay masculinities exemplify the complicated relationship between dominant masculinities and

alternative or subordinate ones. Despite homosexuality's subordinate status, aspects of gay male masculinity are appropriated and incorporated into the mainstream masculine cultural ideal, which actually makes masculine hegemony more robust: "[I]t is precisely [the] diversified and hybrid nature [of masculinities] that makes the hegemonic bloc dynamic and flexible. It is its constant hybridization, its constant appropriation of diverse elements from various masculinities that makes the hegemonic bloc capable of reconfiguring itself and adapting to the specificities of new historical conjunctures" (Demetriou 2001). This flexibility enables men to reproduce dominance over women through "new, hybrid configurations of gender practice" (2001). Demetriou suggests that many heterosexual men welcome these elements of gay masculinity "because they provided a masquerade behind which women's subordination could be masked" (2001). It is easy, Demetriou says, to start believing "that patriarchy has disappeared simply because heterosexual men have worn earrings" (2001).

Since Demetriou, researchers have complicated and elaborated upon the idea of hybridization, documenting numerous instances of "hybrid masculinities," wherein men's gender performance and identity draws upon and incorporates femininities or subordinate masculinities (e.g., Bridges and Pascoe 2014; Arxer 2011). These hybridizations have been documented most frequently among cis men who are white, college educated, and middle and upper middle class—typically straight men (Bridges 2014; de Casanova, Wetzel, and Speice 2016; Wilkins 2009), but gay men as well (Sumerau 2012; Yeung et al. 2006).

Some scholars have argued that the incorporation of "softer" or more feminine behaviors heralds the arrival of an "inclusive masculinity" that bespeaks a decline in gender inequality, patriarchal norms, and heterosexism (Anderson 2009; Anderson and McGuire 2010; McCormack 2011, 2012). But most have emphasized that although, for example, men who play college sports may now "act in ways once associated with homosexuality with less threat to [their] public identit[ies] as heterosexual" (Anderson 2009), hybridization conceals various shades of privilege (Bridges and Pascoe 2014; Bridges 2014; Diefendorf 2015), allowing men to distance themselves from women while simultaneously distancing themselves from "overly macho" behaviors that they associate with men whose social class or other traits are inferior to their own.

Hybrid masculinities have been observed in a wide variety of situations, such as men working in white-collar jobs who visit beauty salons that cater primarily to women (Barber 2008), men's navigation of "masculine" sexual norms (Arxer 2011), gay men's involvement in an LGBT Christian church (Sumerau 2012), and politically active college men who identify as feminist (Bridges 2014). And although this line of scholarship primarily attends to hybrid masculinities as means of concealing and perpetuating privilege, it also suggests (sometimes explicitly, sometimes not) that hybrid masculinities *result* from existing structures of privilege. In his discussion of three groups of mostly white, young, college-educated heterosexual men, Bridges writes: "That these changes have primarily emerged among groups of young, heterosexual, white men speaks to the flexibility of identity afforded privileged groups" (2014). Some environments seem to act as a "safe haven" for the expression of softer masculinities, relatively

untouched by the social need for overcompensation. For example, Messner writes about organized sports' potential to facilitate the complication of boys' masculinities: "The rule-bound, competitive, hierarchical world of sport offers boys an attractive means of establishing an emotionally distant (and thus 'safe') connection with others" (Messner 1990).

To explain masculinity's intersituational flexibility, Bridges introduces the term "gender capital," an elaboration on Connell that theorizes gender capital as a form of social capital. Bridges writes, "Gender capital refers to the value afforded contextually relevant presentations of gendered selves. It is interactionally defined and negotiated" (2009). Building on Connell and Messerschmidt's assertion that "local factors" affect hegemonic masculinity's constitutive processes from one context to the next (2005), Bridges writes that "gender capital—similar to both cultural capital and hegemonic masculinity—is in a state of continuous (though often subtle) transformation" (Bridges 2009).

In a related discussion, Pascoe describes a "jock insurance" phenomenon among teenaged boys (2003). Being an athlete—particularly a talented athlete in a popular sport—can "earn" boys enough masculine credibility that they can display feminized behaviors without being labeled a "fag" or "gay." Pascoe points out that too often, discussion of hegemonic masculinity is reductive—*theoretically* understood as "fluid and conflictual," but more often simply used "to construct static and reified typologies" (2003). Instead of showing that "jocks," "skaters," and so on are different flavors of masculinity, Pascoe shows how each boy "works with the dominant tropes of masculinity" (as embodied in the prototypical jock ideal) in nuanced ways that allow each boy to claim masculinity through reference to the jock "lexicon" of enacted behaviors and professed attitudes (Pascoe 2003). Wilkins discusses masculinity in similar terms, explaining that in "crafting masculinity projects out of available cultural resources," the groups of Christian and goth men she studied used "high-status masculine traits as bargaining chips that allow them to also exhibit lower status traits" (2009; see also McGuffey and Rich [1999]).

The ideas of gender capital, jock insurance, and masculinity "bargaining chips" are closely interrelated and integral to understanding hybrid and alternative masculinities not as stagnant types, but as malleable, constantly negotiated lived social realities. It is worth noting, however, that in addition to focusing primarily on privileged groups, they tend to leave open a question of mechanism. Are feminine traits secreted within men, eagerly awaiting to emerge, and only doing so when enough privilege counterbalances the potential social harm? Under what conditions do non-white, non-middle-class men display these behaviors and characteristics? What are the social processes that account for how masculinity manifests differently in rural Louisiana from metropolitan Seattle? What explains the contradictions between the masculine archetypes of "rock star," "corporate executive," and "construction worker"? And although different kinds of masculine performances have occasionally been documented among the same men in different contexts, providing some insight about localized or circumscribed instantiations of hybrid masculinity (for example, Bridges's [2009] study of men bodybuilders), less theorization exists about the conditions under which hybrid masculinities are likely to emerge, particularly among men who lack privilege along the lines of race, class, and education.

## ***Masculine Overcompensation***

The masculine overcompensation hypothesis draws on hegemonic masculinity and social identity theory to predict men's behaviors upon encountering threats to their masculinity. It holds that for a man to maintain his identity as a masculine individual, he meets threats to his masculinity with compensatory increases in culturally masculine behavior. When men received fictitious feedback on a gender identity survey (telling them their score was on the “feminine” end of the spectrum), they expressed attitudes more closely associated with hegemonic masculinity (e.g., more pro-war and homophobic beliefs) (Willer et al. 2013). Social identity threat in men has also been linked to aggression and violence (Bosson et al. 2009; Cohn, Seibert, and Zeichner 2009), sexual harassment of women (Maass et al. 2003), and infidelity (Munsch 2015). The masculine overcompensation literature observes that when their masculinity is threatened, men tend to distance themselves both from femininity and from subordinate masculinities (Bird 1996). As one of Messner's subjects explained, “A woman can do the same job as I can do—maybe even be my boss. But I'll be damned if she can go out on the football field and take a hit from Ronnie Lott.” As Messner points out, most men are comparably incapable of taking a hit from an eight-time all-pro defensive back. Nonetheless, grouping his own body with Lott's allows the interviewee to assert his masculine power over women as a group (1989).

To date, it is unclear whether a feminine counterpart to masculine overcompensation exists; some evidence suggests that when a woman's feminine identity is threatened, she does not appear to express attitudes more closely associated with a feminine archetype (Willer et al. 2013; but cf. Munsch and Willer 2012). This supports Connell's supposition that masculinity is a more fragile and precarious identity than femininity, and that men may have more motivation to police masculinity than women do to police femininity. But the parameters of masculine overcompensation are less clear. When men “overcompensate” in response to a threat, what are they subconsciously hoping to reach? A hegemonic masculine ideal? Some baseline level of masculinity? More work is needed to clarify this, and to explain the identity maintenance process through which masculine overcompensation occurs.

Moreover, previous research has not adequately bridged the sociological, Gramscian slant on hegemonic masculinity with social psychological phenomena such as masculinity threat and masculine overcompensation. If privileged white, straight men can so wholeheartedly welcome the incorporation of “effeminate” elements into masculinity, why are challenges to their own enactment of the hegemonic masculine ideal met with reinforced demonstrations of “ideal” masculinity (e.g., Maass et al. 2003; Munsch and Willer 2012)?

## ***The Importance of the Hawaiian Context***

Colonial domination is closely related to the idea of masculinity—the “virile” conqueror who “civilizes” or “tames” Native peoples, who are highly feminized and highly racialized (Bederman 1996). As Patil writes, we see modern echoes of

the connection between masculinity and colonization in contemporary economic globalization, including the racialization of economically subjugated people (2009). Hawaii's history of colonization is not only one of the disease and dispossession that the arrival of the British brought to Native Hawaiians, although that is one crux. In the early 1900s, a militarized "American" masculinity was explicitly taught to Native Hawaiian boys in school in an attempt to "assimilate" them (Tengan 2008)—a somewhat paradigmatic illustration of Enloe's argument that nationhood and masculinity are inextricably interwoven (1990). Interestingly, Native Hawaiian tradition had previously allotted women significant power and access to land. Women chiefs were common, and high-ranking women were important social and political figures in Native Hawaiian culture (Linnekin 1990). While men were disempowered as well, increasing Western influence and the adoption of Western norms contributed particularly to a decline in Native Hawaiian women's status (Silva 2004).

Hawaii's plantation past adds another layer to colonial subjugation. The ethnic and racial groups enticed to Hawaii by the promise of agricultural jobs, and the importance of racial categorization to plantation life (Takaki 1983), creates a history of subjugation and economic exploitation that affected Hawaii's diverse populations in manifold ways. In today's Hawaii, the racialization Bederman describes is present, but less clear-cut. Another layer of subjugation is present, and assumes more of a cultural hue that does not fit neatly into the racial discourse in the rest of the United States (Yamamoto 1979; Osorio 2002; Young 2004; Miyares 2008), and which is highly contested (Trask 1999). "Locals" (some of whom have Native Hawaiian ancestors and some of whom do not) speak a pidgin dialect that has historically been viewed as a marker of ignorance, and also tend to occupy economically and educationally subordinate positions (Carroll 2000; Young 2016). Hawaii's history and the current transnational economic context are important in situating the cockfighters' social reality.

In this article, I use Hawaiian cockfighting to advance our theoretical understanding of masculinity. Understanding local identity is an important piece of this understanding. I describe men who embody several dimensions of unprivileged status in their larger community. The majority are non-white, working class, and have not attended college. They also occupy a subordinate social status, part of which is a subordinate cultural identity ("local"). I examine these men's lives both inside and outside the cockfighting ring. Cockfighting, compared to their wider social world, is more homogeneous in terms of social class and cultural status, allowing me to observe how masculinity is negotiated differently between social settings where men's level of relative privilege fluctuates.

Instead of focusing on the forms masculinity takes, it is productive to look at the processes through which manhood is enacted, and through which gender inequality is reproduced. In this article, I use the context of Hawaiian cockfighting to pose an elaboration of existing masculinity theory that fills a gap in the literature about the social mechanisms through which everyday masculinity is enacted from one setting to another. I argue that just as men are compelled to "overcompensate" in certain settings, they are compelled to "undercompensate"

in others. Performances of masculinity that are sub-“ideal” in an archetypal sense may be quite ideal in a more applied or functional one, contingent upon local context. I conceive “masculine undercompensation” as a kind of theoretical counterpart to the literature on masculine overcompensation, and as a mechanism through which archetypal masculinity is selectively tempered. I suggest it is through this mechanism that phenomena such as gender capital, jock insurance, and masculine overcompensation operate to enact and negotiate masculinities that achieve an ideal “masculine balance” within specific social contexts. I also suggest that more attention to diverse contexts is crucial to fully understanding how masculinity is performed.

## Methodology

For two months, I lived on one of Hawaii’s islands with a Portuguese-American cockfighter named Vincent and his adult son, Vinnie. Attending various cockfighting events with both men afforded me the opportunity to meet their acquaintances, including men from their own cockfighting gang and from other gangs. Snowball sampling led me to social relationships with dozens of fighters in seven different cockfighting gangs. Establishing strong relationships with these men was crucial to data collection; given cockfighting’s illegality and “underground” profile, virtually all of the fighters I met were unwilling to speak with anyone they did not trust. I forged this trust by becoming a part of these men’s social circles, attending cockfighting events and other social events, by repeatedly eschewing any connection or communication with the police, and by asking fighters who knew me to “vouch” for me. One particularly important friendship was with Pat, a Filipino-American man in his sixties who was in charge of the largest cockfighting events on the island. After learning of some commonalities between us (for example, we had both worked in cafés and both loved to read), Pat seemed to take a liking to me. He loaned me cockfighting magazines, delighted in explaining his training strategies, and invited me to attend “friends-only” cockfighting events at his own farm. I suspect that Pat’s and Vincent’s displays of trust significantly facilitated my entry into the community.

I used ethnographic observations and in-depth interviews in the field. As a participant-observer, I attended dozens of cockfights, including hundreds of individual matches, and spent several hundred hours in informal conversations with cockfighters and their friends and families. These interactions took place inside and outside the cockfighting context: at cockfights, at fighters’ farms while they trained their birds, and at a wide array of social gatherings, including baby showers, family meals, parties, visits to bars, and trips to feed stores. I took extensive field notes at my earliest opportunity during or following cockfights, conversations, and other interactions, making jottings while in the field, then typing detailed notes in a private location later the same day.

In addition, I conducted formal, semistructured interviews of 23 subjects. Interviewees ranged widely in age, with six in their twenties, four in their thirties, five in their forties, one on his fifties, five in their sixties, one in his seventies, and one in his eighties. The average age of interviewees was 45 years. Subjects were



all employed in, or had retired from, working-class occupations, including airport baggage handler, mover, construction worker, and grocery store clerk. Twenty-two of the 23 were working class, and the one man who was not working class was widely considered an aberration (see Young 2014). When I asked fighters what “kinds of men” tended to be cockfighters, their answers were consistent with my observations—for example, “working men,” “family men,” “not doctors or lawyers,” and “working people, not rich people.”

Interviewees’ racial diversity reflected the diversity of the local population. Six of the 23 appeared white, and four of these six identified themselves as partly or entirely Portuguese-American. More than half identified as mixed race (again, reflecting the racial composition of the local population), and the most common backgrounds they listed were Filipino, Japanese, Portuguese, and Hawaiian. While I do not suggest that race or ethnicity was directly related to the performance of masculinity, it is worth briefly discussing the racial composition of the island’s cockfighting community, which reflects some of the ways Hawaii’s racial makeup and interracial relations differ from the rest of the United States’ (see Jung 1999; Weinstein et al. 1990). The large portion of Filipino-Americans at the hack fights reflects both the large portion of Filipino-Americans in the local population and the prevalence of cockfighting in the Philippines (Young 2016). During Hawaii’s plantation days, the activity was popular among Filipino agricultural workers, but soon became popular among other ethnic groups as well, remaining a favorite local activity even after most of Hawaii’s plantations had closed (Boyd 1996). My observations suggested that cockfighters’ friendships did not generally fall along racial lines, and cockfighters’ discussions of race accorded with past research on dialogue about race in Hawaii more generally (Jung 1999). (Interestingly, even in regions of the United States plagued with more racial strife, some research suggests that race may be less salient in the cockfighting context [Maunula 2007].)

All 23 interviewees identified themselves as “locals”—meaning they were born and raised in Hawaii (Young 2014). In requesting interviews, I told prospective participants I wanted to learn more about cockfighting in Hawaii. If they asked what I was interested in more specifically, I would say something vague but accurate, such as “the culture of cockfighting.” Once they had determined that they could trust me, cockfighters were typically enthusiastic to talk. A few times, I was asked if I thought cockfighting should be legal, or if I would be willing to write a letter to a local newspaper arguing that it should be legalized. In these instances, I just shrugged and said I had no interest in “taking sides,” because I just wanted to learn. This explanation appeared to satisfy inquirers. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to over three hours, with the average interview lasting 90 minutes. Information I gathered during an initial research trip revealed that this group of informants would perceive monetary compensation for their time as insulting; I was told by multiple informants that such an offer would imply that the men could not afford to spend an hour or two simply having a conversation with a new acquaintance. Being compensated for something that did not seem like “work” would feel like a “handout.” For this reason, I did not compensate interviewees. Instead, consistent with local

custom, if I conducted an interview at their house, I sometimes brought a small gift, such as bread or fruit.

I handwrote my interview notes rather than audiotaping because the cockfighters were not comfortable discussing their illegal activity on tape. For this reason, my verbatim quotations of fighters here is limited to my handwriting speed. My written notes used aliases for all people and places. I obscured the physical locations of illegal activity and fighters' homes, and altered or omitted non-material information that could identify anyone. I use the same strategies herein. Of course, given cockfighting's illegal nature, some subjects refused formal interviews, even if they were happy to chat informally at social events. Of those who granted interviews, several agreed to speak only on the condition that I would not talk to local police, even to interview them. I honored this condition.

My raw data comprised approximately 350 typed pages. After returning to the mainland, I coded these notes thematically, using an open coding system with 249 codes, which I managed using the software Atlas.ti. I was particularly attuned to codes related to legality, law, localism, and the police, but erred on the side of overinclusion, creating a code for every theme I detected, including types of social interactions, specific aspects of cockfighting, feelings people expressed, places they mentioned, ideas they talked about, and so on. This inclusive approach minimized the chance that I would impose my preexisting beliefs and ideas onto the data, and allowed me to find unexpected themes and patterns, including those I discuss herein. Once I completed initial coding, I grouped codes into nine thematic code families, which included "land and place," "law," and "gender." The largest code family, in terms of the sheer number of codes it encompassed, was called "cockfighting practices," which included 82 codes, including "matchups," "knife-tying," "sparring," "camps," "referee," and "cheating." Some codes fell into more than one family. I extracted the data associated with each family and analyzed it separately. These methods are consistent with a modified grounded theory approach (McDermott 2006).

My gender did not prevent me from connecting with cockfighters, and may have offered a few advantages. For one, as a woman, I was seen as an unlikely police officer. (A few men joked that if police sent an undercover officer to investigate the cockfights, a white woman was the last person they would send.) Perhaps more importantly, my gender exempted me from pressure to take part in the fights. Since no women ever tied knives on birds' feet, arranged matches, or handled a bird in the ring, my lack of participation went unquestioned. Had I been a man, I almost certainly would have been invited, even encouraged, to participate. Refusing to do so could have had implications for my own masculinity or social ties in the cockfighting community. Finally, an added advantage of my gender was that cockfighters' female partners and female family members sometimes approached me and chatted informally.

I am not suggesting that being a woman was somehow crucial or necessary to this research. On the contrary, I am certain that being a man would have held advantages as well. But it is important to point out that being a female in a predominantly male environment was not an "impediment" or a deficit; differences, as well as similarities, can be useful to qualitative researchers. Nor would I claim

that my gender posed no obstacles. Most notably, many fighters assumed women were squeamish. Particularly in the beginning of my work, many cockfighters studied me carefully to see if I flinched during fights. When I asked them why they seemed to be watching me, they explained that women were “squeamish” and could be “weaker” in a cockfighting situation. Several agreed to talk to me only after I had “proven myself” and they were convinced that I was not overly sympathetic to the roosters. They believed that excessive sympathy would render me unable to appreciate the sport. Since I did, in fact, feel a great deal of sympathy for the roosters, pretending indifference required great effort.

In conducting my interviews, it was also important to be constantly mindful of interviewees’ “masculine selves,” and I employed many of the strategies suggested by Schwalbe and Wolkomir, such as shifting focus to the environment and prefacing questions in ways that yielded status to the informant (2001). Additionally, prior to entering the field, I deliberately constructed a specific gender expression. In addition to wearing a wedding ring to indicate that I was unavailable romantically, I presented a physically feminine but socially “least gendered” self, similar to Pascoe’s management of herself “as a masculinity resource by creating a ‘least-gendered identity,’ positioning [her]self as a woman who possessed masculine cultural capital” (2007). I wore women’s jeans, men’s or women’s T-shirts, and boots or sneakers. Apart from the fights, I engaged in “masculine” activities (e.g., going to bars with informants to watch ultimate fighting matches), as well as “feminine” activities (e.g., attending a baby shower or visiting a mall with other women). I wanted to be perceived as a “tomboy,” but not as gender “deviant.” I wore makeup, earrings, and long hair, which I flat-ironed to match local women. I also opted for contact lenses, since few local women wore eyeglasses. My married status also seemed to remove questions about my sexual orientation, which could have proven difficult, as I heard fighters make anti-gay remarks in various contexts.

Also helpful in preparation for my research was my status as a partial insider in local culture. My own family background includes many working-class longtime residents of Hawaii, and since I am partly of Portuguese descent, I was seen as a “Haole” but also as a “Portagee” (Geschwender et al. 1988). The customs (and importantly, the foods) common to working-class Hawaii were very familiar to me. I also have a basic knowledge of Hawaiian Pidgin, which is spoken by many Hawaii locals, including all of the cockfighters I encountered. This familiarity allowed people to speak to me with minimal adjustments to their usual informal speech patterns; they could talk and be understood just as they would in any other casual social setting. It is hard to overstate the usefulness of my own background in forging the connections that allowed me to conduct this research.

## Results

### *An Overview of the Cockfights*

There are three types of cockfights in Hawaii: backyard fights, derbies, and hack fights. Hack fights are day-long events, and are the best known, and best

attended, type of fight. On this particular island, they are held weekly in a secret location on private land adjacent to a pineapple field. A maze of craggy, unmarked dirt roads leads from the highway to the plantation. Fighters and spectators park their cars on the roadside and walk to the clearing that separates the vast stretch of farmland from the cockfights. Inside the clearing, the cockfighting pit is the center of activity. A four-foot-high fence, fashioned from chicken wire and scrap lumber, surrounds the pit, and in its center is a fluorescent orange square, two feet by two feet, spray-painted in the center to designate the roosters' starting lines.

At noon on a typical Sunday, over 200 people are present. Over nine-tenths are men, ranging from teenagers to elderly men, and roughly a third are Filipino-American. The 15 or 20 women at the hack fight are working at concession stands or on the arms of boyfriends or husbands. If no fight is taking place, the chairs around the pit are mostly empty, and the betting table 20 yards away is the center of activity. Men cluster around it, smoking, talking in Tagalog or Hawaiian Pidgin English. If a man wants to find a match for his bird, he takes it to the betting table and waits. If someone wants to propose a match, he offers a bet. The minimum at most of the hack fights is \$1,000. A fighter's wager is generally pooled with several other members of his gang; if he wins, they share the proceeds. To accept a challenge to his bird at the betting table, a fighter says, "Go." His opponent replies, "Go." They lift their birds toward each other and nod. This means the match is set.

Back at his "camp," where he sits with his gang, a fighter begins the ritual of securing the razor-sharp, three-inch steel knife to the bird's left foot. The process may take as long as 20 or 30 minutes, and may be performed by the fighter himself or by a member of his gang. When both parties to a match are ready, word quickly circulates that a fight is on, and the crowd rushes to surround the pit. Within a minute or two, the seats are full, people are packed in closely, and the tension is palpable.

All gambling is illegal in Hawaii, but as soon as both handlers enter the ring, the betting starts. The shouts are cacophonous, ending only when the referee counts, "One, two, three." Then the fighters place their birds at opposite sides of the orange square, and the fight begins. In the instant before the birds "break"—that is, before they fly at each other for the first time—the crowd is silent, drawing in a collective breath against the flapping of wings. It is no trick getting the roosters to fight; roosters fight in the wild, and this instinct is immediately evident. A well-tied knife perfectly mimics the location of the rooster's natural spur, so the quick, punching kicks delivered to the opposing bird are placed as they would be in the wild, but made deadlier by the sharp, three-inch steel knife. When one bird pins the other for a count of three, the ref calls "handle!" The men pull their roosters apart and set them back down a foot from each other, re-releasing them when the referee counts again. Fights are to the death, and limited to ten minutes, but rarely last that long. Before the end, both birds often have blood running down their feathers, and sometimes both are mortally wounded. The match continues until one of the birds no longer "shows bite"—that is, until so much life has drained from its body that it no longer has the strength even to peck at its opponent.

## ***Gender in the Cockfighters' Broader Social World***

To provide social context for the observations that follow, it is useful to briefly characterize the role of gender in cockfighters' everyday world outside cockfighting. My ethnographic work included observations of fighters' behavior and interactions in numerous areas of their social lives: at home, at parties, and in other informal settings. All the men held either gender-neutral jobs or—more frequently—“men’s” jobs in fields such as construction and security (see [Beggs and Doolittle 1993](#)). Household labor divisions fell along gender lines, with women doing the bulk of childcare and cleaning and men mostly doing “outside” jobs, such as taking the trash out and mowing the lawn. No women or men with whom I spoke regarded the division as rigid, abnormal, or problematic. Instead, it was regarded as simply “the way things are.”

In the rare instances when they were called upon to depart from these from traditional norms, the deviation was seen by both men and women as noteworthy. For example, I attended a baby shower for a cockfighter's sister. The 60 invitees were female, but several of their husbands (about half of whom were cockfighters) were recruited to stand behind the large pans of food and serve the women. The men either wore sheepish grins or acted playfully, with exaggerated subservience, making it clear that serving food to women was not something they usually did. Several women joked, “It’s about time they have to serve *us* for once!” The source of humor was the “absurdity” of the atypical enactment of gender. The attitudes of both the women and the men resembled the attitudes Bridges documents at “Walk a Mile in Her Shoes” marches, in which men walk for a mile in high heels to raise awareness about domestic violence. Bridges describes “elaborate performances of discomfort” in which men perform masculinity by displaying how physically uncomfortable they find it to walk in heels. There, “Drag was used to position the men’s presentations and performances of gender as temporary and inauthentic” ([Bridges 2010](#)). At the baby shower I attended, the men’s exaggerated subservience while placing food on women’s plates served a comparable function. It was a “ritual of reversal” ([Foley 1990](#)) that they explained in terms of heterosexuality—the need to “keep women happy.” This echoes statements by men and boys in other studies, who have described their “softer” traits and behaviors in terms of contributing to their cachet as heterosexual males (e.g., [Pascoe 2003](#); [Wilkins 2009](#)). So, too, did the cockfighters; outside the cockfighting context, they tended to construe participation in feminized behaviors as part of their role as heterosexual men.

Gender norms were also reinforced in casual conversation, with non-conventional behavior pointed out immediately and equated with homosexuality, which—to the extent that cockfighters and their families talked about it at all—was considered deviant and inferior. For example, while I was at a shopping mall with June, a cockfighter's aunt, we encountered the son of one of her friends. We said hello and continued on our way. June asked what I thought of him. I said that he seemed nice. She pointed out that he had a pink cell phone case and was “a little funny”—a phrase she paired with a limp flip of her wrist that I interpreted as a cultural signal that he was gay. A moment later, she

speculated aloud that he had probably “turned” gay because he had been molested as a child. While the “spectre” of homosexuality did not arise frequently, on the occasions it did, cockfighters talked about it disparagingly. For example, on the way to one hack fight, Vincent mentioned that a mainland friend’s son had recently come out as gay. Vincent shook his head, reiterated that he still cared about the young man, but added that it was “sad,” and that he did not believe that non-heterosexual people should be able to hold public office because they did not “understand family.” Among cockfighters, I saw no evidence of the decreased homophobia that Anderson and McGuire have documented in some other groups of straight men (specifically white, college-educated, middle-class men) (2010).

Nor did the cockfighters subscribe to, or act in accordance with, the kinds of “alternative” gender beliefs contemplated by Ridgeway and Correll (2004). Among the cockfighters and their families, gender differences were discussed in ways consistent with essentialist gender norms, lamenting their struggles to understand “female” attributes (illogicality, squeamishness, the desire to “manipulate” men). For example, Rick told me (in the presence of his sister, who did not object) that women played mental games, concluding that “Women can really screw up a guy’s mind.” Josie and Dennis both told me women did not handle birds in the ring because they disliked the sight of blood and would be “scared” of the three-inch knife. Similar beliefs surfaced in cockfighters’ discussions of women’s physical bodies, which was an occasional topic of conversation between men. For example, at one backyard fight, Pat and Vincent were discussing a mutual acquaintance they disliked. Pat said the man had good birds and a wife who had once been “well-built” and attractive, but looked “like [a] cow now.” Vincent asked, “What’s he been feeding her?” and Ernie, Pat, and the other fighters laughed. Pat then recalled a trip he had taken to Tennessee, and he said that the women there were “all fat.” Vincent said that this was because they were “corn fed,” and the men laughed again.

Of course, the foregoing description merely characterizes the cockfighters’ *prevailing* attitudes toward gender. It is impossible to discuss these kinds of patterns without generalizing. In understanding the somewhat essentialist—and, by many standards, sexist and heterosexist—ideas about gender that pervaded cockfighters’ everyday lives, it is important to remember that gendered acts are fluid, contradictory, performative, and situationally dependent. As complicated, multifaceted individuals, the cockfighters constantly create and negotiate gender in specific situations. The beliefs and behaviors I have described characterize *modal* behaviors and stated attitudes with regard to gender; they do not indicate a complete dearth of deviation from these patterns. I am emphatically *not* suggesting that the cockfighters with whom I spent time are woodenly or hyperbolically masculine. And it would be inaccurate to suggest that I *never* saw them show tenderness toward children, or that they *never* cooked breakfast for their wives, or that they *never* cleaned the bathroom. For example, Rhett often comforts his young daughter when she is upset (sometimes explaining that she is a “daddy’s girl” while his wife, Josie, rolls her eyes at his indulgence of their daughter’s moods), Vincent often cooks exquisite meals (in which I was very

grateful to partake), and as I will describe, men's voices could become choked with tears when they talked about their families. But these characteristics and behaviors (with the exception of Vincent's cooking) were viewed as deviations or isolated acts. That is, even though Rhett comforted his daughter if she exhibited crankiness, when his wife was out and he was taking care of his children, both spouses referred to it as "babysitting," signifying that Rhett was not the primary caretaker, or an equal caretaker, but a secondary or "backup" caretaker. This was true for other men as well, who would refer to their caretaking of their children as giving a wife or girlfriend "time off"—signifying that in general, caretaking was the woman partner's job. As I have suggested, these kinds of feminized behaviors tended to be discussed in terms of "keeping the wife happy" or "women liking a man who can clean"—that is, explicitly reinterpreted as affirming the man's heterosexuality (see Bridges 2010; Wilkins 2009; Pascoe 2003), which is consistent with other literature on working-class masculinities (e.g., Bird 1996).

### ***Cockfighters' Emotional Connection to Roosters and Cockfighting***

Cockfighters described a close psychological and emotional connection to their birds. One way this manifested was the close, even corporeal, connection men felt to their roosters. "You get to know these roosters like it's part of your [own] body," Fred explained. Like many fighters, Fred owned hundreds of birds, and could describe the individual habits, appearance, and temperament of each. Rhett told me that he refuses to sell his birds to other cockfighters, because then he might end up facing them in the ring someday, which would be like "fighting against [him]self." To help prepare his roosters for matches, Rhett withholds food for 24 hours before a fight—but he withholds it for himself, too, to maintain "solidarity" with them. A corporeal closeness between man and bird was evident in the ring as well. During fights, a handler would often press his lips to an injury, blowing warm air into the wounds to improve blood circulation. Or, since internal injuries can cause birds to bleed from the mouth, a fighter might put a rooster's beak in his mouth and suck the blood out. By the end of a fight, a handler's hands and mouth might be covered with a bird's blood. Vincent explained that by taking care of an injured rooster like this, a handler could "bring his bird back to life."

The connection between roosters and cockfighters also took the form of a synergistic emotional or psychic relationship. For example, Ernie said, "[A] bird will tell you when he's ready to fight." If you "knew" your rooster, you could "feel" or "sense" when he was in peak form. Some fighters' connection to a rooster persists even after the animal's death. Lucas had one favorite rooster who won several fights, was "retired," and eventually died of old age. A few months later, Lucas got a picture of that specific rooster tattooed prominently on his calf because he missed it so much that he wanted it to "always be with [him]."

Fighters were emotionally open about their connection to their roosters. During interviews, several fighters talked about cockfighting's central role in

their own identity and their family's history. Some became emotionally overwhelmed during this part of the interview and cried while talking about cockfighting's importance to their families. Though they tried not to cry in front of other men, nowhere else in their social lives did I witness similar displays of emotional vulnerability. This is not to say that such feelings didn't exist elsewhere—I'm sure that most, if not all, of these men would cry if their wife or child suffered serious harm—but the behaviors they displayed semi-publicly in the cockfighting context represented very different displays from the behaviors they displayed outside it. In short, cockfighting was a rare place where they allowed themselves to display emotion on a consistent basis. One example was a conversation I had with Dennis, a fighter in his mid-sixties. Dennis would sometimes drop by Vincent's house in the morning, and the three of us would "talk story"—a Pidgin phrase similar to "shooting the breeze"—and smoke cigars. On one of these occasions, Dennis told me that when he was in his early twenties, his mother passed away, sending his father into a deep depression. Months passed with no improvement, and eventually Dennis asked his father to accompany him to the rooster fights "like old times." Dennis told me, "I said either he was going to go or I was going to carry him ... So we went to the fights, and it rejuvenated him. It brought him back!" Dennis considered cockfights a way to connect to his past. He went on to describe the festive atmosphere of plantation camp cockfights as a "big party" every weekend, where friends and families came together to eat and talk story. His mother sold food at the fights, and saved the proceeds to pay for Dennis's and his siblings' Catholic school tuition. Dennis said that when he attended the fights now, it allowed him to recreate the atmosphere of inclusion he felt growing up on the plantation. One of Dennis's sisters (his only sibling to attend college) now opposes cockfighting. Dennis said that her opposition means that she has forgotten what gave her educational opportunities in the first place. For him, rejecting cockfighting was a betrayal tantamount to rejecting his family's history.

Dennis's story was not atypical. Many local men described cockfighting as a means of connecting with their past, and often talked about this connection wistfully, full of emotion. This was most evident in stories about how cockfighting had allowed them to form a connection with other family members. Ernie said that by mastering the Filipino betting strategies his father had taught him, he earned his father's respect. Vincent told me that although his stepfather had introduced him to cockfighting at an early age, throughout his teens Vincent remained only a spectator. He moved from Hawaii to the mainland at 20, and after a few years, became involved with cockfighting in California. He grew skilled at knife-tying, and on several occasions drove over 100 miles each way to learn techniques from a friend. When he returned to the island, Vincent tied knives for his stepfather, and they won six fights in a row. Vincent beamed as he told me this, and said, "Dad was so, so proud! That was really something." In each case, cockfighting was associated with specific cultural or personal memories. It held meaning as a way for cockfighters to keep these connections central to their lives.



## ***Cockfighters as Nurturers, Roosters as Children***

Nurturing, caretaking, and other behaviors culturally associated with femininity (Grbich 1997) were common in the cockfighting context. Men expressed a great deal of affection toward their birds, doting on them and preening them. At the betting table, for instance, fighters are very attentive to their rooster's appearance, stroking its head, cooing, and picking off dust or stray feathers. After matches, fighters openly express gratitude to winning birds. Following one close fight, Rhett took his bird back to the camp, kissed it on the head and beak, fed it bananas—that rooster's favorite food—and told it, "You're going to be a breed cock now!" Even Pat, whose stoicism was usually unparalleled, told me, "When a good bird wins for me, you won't be surprised to see me kissing the bird." He explained that even though he knows the bird is "just an animal," he can't help but become "emotional."

Another indicator of fighters' nurturing posture toward their birds was the repeated analogizing of roosters to children. Norbert said it was most important for a fighter to be "gentle"—to handle a rooster in the fights "like you're handling a baby." Benjamin said, "If you're going to raise a bird, you raise it like a kid. From the bottom up ... start[ing] at day one." When I asked Fred to name his favorite part of cockfighting, he replied, "[W]atching them grow up since they hatched, throughout the stages of life." Greg echoed this: "You watch them grow up ... [and you think], that came from *me*." The analogy to children persisted even when the birds reached fighting age. Vincent told me, "[I]f you see your son out there excelling on [a baseball] team, and he shines, it's a wonderful feeling. Likewise rooster fighting." Seth described how he felt when one of his roosters was killed in a fight: "It's sickening. It's like losing your frickin'—I don't know—your son. You get so attached to your chicken, and your chicken gets so attached to you." The analogy was used with equal frequency regardless of whether a man was a father himself. Fred, Vincent, and Rhett all had children; Norbert, Seth, and Greg did not. It was common to overhear fighters declare, "I *love* my chickens."

## ***"Real" Rooster Men and Devotion to the "Keep"***

In Hawaii, cockfighting brings masculine honor to all dedicated participants, not just to the winners. In fact, fighters tend not to know each other's win-loss records, nor to keep track of their own. But nearly every fighter with whom I spoke had strong opinions about what a "real rooster man" was, and most of these definitions had little to do with winning. Instead, one fighter judges another by assessing how well he takes care of his birds. A "rooster man" prioritizes his birds over other areas of his life, save landmark events such as a friend's wedding or the birth of a child.

Connection to the birds and dedication to the "keep" (the birds' diet, health, cleanliness, exercise, and beauty) were two of the most socially admirable qualities a cockfighter could possess. On the rare occasions that men boasted about their cockfighting abilities, it usually took the form of orientation to details regarding the birds' caretaking. Vincent, for example, proudly related something a friend had told him: "He said, 'No one raises chickens better than you ... You're

a good cocker.” At this, Vincent looked at me with pride and grinned. “No one’s more particular about his [birds’ keep] than me.” Several fighters boasted of not “shooting” their birds—never injecting them with steroids, strychnine, or other chemicals. “Shooting” is against House rules, and at first I hypothesized that this was the reason fighters didn’t use performance-enhancing drugs on their birds. But fighters seemed unconcerned about the rule itself, since violations were almost impossible to detect. Instead, they explained that artificial substances are bad for roosters; “shooting” could lead to more wins, but was detrimental to a rooster’s long-term health and would “hurt the bird.” To an outsider, concern about harming birds who are about to be sent into a ring to fight to the death might seem absurd. But for fighters, hurting one’s own roosters was regarded as cruel or unnatural.

When I asked cockfighters to describe the contemporaries they respected most, they distinguished between “rooster men” and “gamblers.” A “real rooster man” did not simply buy birds and fight them, but was involved in their care and breeding, and spent a great deal of time learning effective bird-rearing techniques. A “gambler,” on the other hand, cared little about the birds. He would buy grown roosters instead of raising his own, and saw cockfights as a moneymaking endeavor (although no one, “rooster men” or “gamblers,” reported making a living from cockfighting). The “gambler” approach was strongly disfavored by those who saw themselves as more dedicated fighters, some of whom only attended backyard invitationals that exclusively comprised fighters they considered “real rooster men.” Others refused to compete against fighters they believed were poor caregivers. Rhett said that although he knew his birds would beat the unhealthy ones, letting them fighting against inferior roosters dishonored his birds and defeated “the point” of the fights: “[to] see who can feed better, handle the roosters better, whose bird is more healthy.”

Sacrifices a cockfighter makes for the sport, and the emotional, physical, and financial resources he devotes, enhance his reputation as a rooster man. The fighters I interviewed took pride in having made sacrifices for their birds. Many had elaborate rituals for feeding and exercise, and would not depart from these rituals even if it meant arriving late to work. Several fighters, including Fred and Vincent, never went on overnight trips because they did not want anyone else to take care of their birds. Some men had chosen an occupation specifically for its compatibility with cockfighting. For example, one fighter worked as a security guard so he could work the night shift and be with his birds during the day. Another fighter worked as a veterinary technician even though the pay was low, because it gave him access to medicine for his birds and taught him more about how to keep them healthy. This pride in the degree of sacrifice one makes echoes studies of dedication to other sports where a man’s commitment is measured partly by the degree to which it is all-consuming (Robinson 2008).

### ***Love and Death: Cockfighting’s Paradox***

Cockfighting is a brutal undertaking. Fighters strap razor-sharp three-inch knives onto their roosters’ feet and send them into bloody battles that nearly always

result in the death of one bird, sometimes both. This brutality can seem paradoxical, given the nurturing, caretaking relationships and emotional connectedness cockfighters show toward their birds, but these aspects of cockfighting go hand in hand.

I asked fighters if it was difficult to lose a bird they loved. Most said it was, though they found it easier to lose a bird who had “given its all” in the ring, because it had done what it was “born to do.” Still, this required a certain amount of emotional distance, and was an obstacle the men had to overcome if they wanted to continue fighting. Ernie related a time when his grown son-in-law had cried over a bird’s death in the pit: “I said, ‘Frank, don’t get too close to the bird. It’s the name of the game ... It might be your favorite, but one day he’s gonna die in the pit—you’ve got to learn to accept it.’” Fighters also explained that breeding involved killing sick or deformed birds, and that this aspect was difficult. Fred confided that when he needs to kill a rooster, he usually cannot bring himself to do it. Instead, he calls a friend to come over and kill it.

Some fighters described dealing with an animal’s death as a rite of passage—a difficult, but necessary, part of becoming a fighter. If Vincent decides to kill one of his birds (if it is deformed or deathly ill), it requires “pumping [him]self up” and “mak[ing] [him]self tough.” In explaining this process of animal-killing as a rite of passage, Vincent told me about his earliest memory of killing an animal:

*Growing up I wanted to be like my Uncle Charlie. He was a hunter... So I'm a teenager out hunting with my buddy and I shot a huge sheep or maybe a goat, right in the hindquarters, right? I ran up, but it wasn't dead. It looked at me with these big eyes and went [here, he imitated a sad bleat] and I thought, "Oh shit." I could see it was scared of me and I started getting tears in my eyes. My friend yelled, "Cut the damn throat or shoot it in the head!" I was crying, tears running down my face. I shot it in the head. The moment before I shot it I was thinking, "Do you want to be like Uncle Charlie? If you do, you'll shoot it." So I shot it. After that I hardened myself somewhat to killing animals.*

Vincent’s account recalls some of the literature’s most iconic discussions of manhood, wherein being “able to close one’s eyes to the potential pain” is a way in which manhood is enacted and actualized (Sattel 1976). For the cockfighters, quintessential masculinity is embodying this paradox: being able to fully love your rooster *and* being able to kill it.

Not all fighters showed remorse when their birds died, and two reported no trouble killing deformed birds. A few even walked out of the ring holding a near-dead bird by the legs as casually as they might hold a bag of apples. But this nonchalance was the exception. And this “tough” indifference leads other fighters to view these men as “mere gamblers.” That is, the emotional indifference that would be seen as “ideally” masculine is, in fact, socially sanctioned within this context. Because the birds are seen as “warriors,” and because most will eventually die in a fight, tender caretaking and emotional connection makes a fighter seem stronger, not weaker, to his peers. Despite his great love for the bird, he straps a sharp knife to the animal’s foot and puts it in the ring. If a

cockfighter is not truly attached to a bird, the only thing he loses when a rooster dies is money, which means he is not a “real rooster man.”

## Discussion

### *The Balancing Mechanism*

We might think of “ideal” or archetypal masculinity as a platonic conception of masculinity that exists as cultural knowledge and embodies masculinity’s most dominant, recognizable form—the “currently accepted strategy, or conglomeration of practices, that works to both legitimate patriarchy and ensure hierarchies between men and women and among men” (Diefendorf 2015). At the same time, it is not socially ideal for a man to perform or embody this archetype in all situations (Bridges 2010). Instead, suppose that in any given setting there is a normatively optimal range, or balance, of culturally masculinized versus culturally feminized or subordinated characteristics that men might perform. This precise constitution of this ideal balance will change intersituationally. We might imagine countless variations, but when it comes to local instantiations of masculinity, tempered masculinity nearly always falls short of the archetypal masculine form. Loosely, we might think of balanced masculinity as a ratio: (idealized masculine behaviors)/(feminine or subordinate masculine behaviors) = balanced masculinity. If the balance is to remain in a roughly consistent range within a given setting, idealized masculine behaviors and feminine/subordinate behaviors will be directly related. One version of this is demonstrated through the literature on masculine overcompensation (Willer et al. 2013). If a man’s level of femininity is raised (and thus, his masculinity threatened), he will raise his “masculinity” quotient to compensate.

I theorize that the reverse may be true as well. Masculinity’s tendency to remain balanced implies that if a man’s behaviors or characteristics begin to align more closely with ideal masculinity, his feminine or subordinate masculine behaviors or characteristics may increase. We can think of this as the reverse of masculine overcompensation—as a kind of “masculine undercompensation” that contributes to maintenance of a relatively consistent “net level” of masculinity.

I am not suggesting that men consciously balance their masculinity, but rather that instantiations of masculinity remain roughly “balanced” from one locally specific situation to the next partly through the mechanisms of masculine overcompensation and undercompensation. This theoretical construction builds on several strands of previous research. Significantly, gender capital, jock insurance, and masculinity “bargaining chips” all embody the notion of masculinity as a phenomenon that is not only fluid, but can be expressed in terms of “levels”—for example, jocks can “save up” their masculinity to display sensitivity later without being called “fags” (Pascoe 2003). In negotiating masculinity from one situation to the next, the key mechanism involves the achievement of a highly situational (Bridges 2010), culturally contingent balance. Its ever-changing nature makes masculinity a precarious identity. A similar tendency toward

balance is consistent with evidence that men working in stereotypically “female” professions tend to gravitate toward masculinized specialties within those professions (Snyder and Green 2008), and “do” masculinity in the workplace based partly on the degree to which masculinity is embattled (Dellinger 2004).

Before delving into the specifics of masculine balance in the context of Hawaiian cockfighting, we might ask whether masculine undercompensation results from the social desirability of “balancing” masculinity or merely from the provision of a “safe haven.” In other words, is it possible that what matters is not some situationally specific ratio of conventionally masculine to conventionally feminine behaviors, but that for men engaged in conventionally masculine behaviors, so-called feminine behaviors are expressed simply because they *can* be expressed? Perhaps. But I see this explanation as problematically psychoanalytic; it assumes that men have an inherent desire to express particular traits, that everyday life is somehow tamping down the behaviors associated with these traits, and that these behaviors are simply “waiting” for a safe context. Some research is certainly consistent with this explanation (e.g., Risman 1987). But consider, too, the correlative explanation in the case of the masculine overcompensation hypothesis: do men have a latent desire to express hypermasculine traits that are simply “waiting” for a more socially feminizing context to surface? Do women possess these latent, gendered “impulses” too? It is more reasonable, I think, to see all gendered behaviors as socially constructed, not as innate psychological imperatives.

### ***Privilege, Homogeneity, and the Absence of Threats***

The difference in how masculinity is performed inside versus outside the cockfighting context is striking. Whether training a new rooster, strapping a knife onto a bird, or standing in the fighting ring, cockfighters’ behavior *while* cockfighting echoes the kinds of hybrid masculinities described in recent literature—in which men incorporate feminized traits as part of their own creation and enactment of their masculine selves. In many ways, these displays of caretaking, nurturing, and even intellectual prowess are reminiscent of the hybrid masculinities among the feminist men Bridges describes (2014), the goth and Christian men Wilkins describes (2009), the “well-coiffed” white-collar men Barber describes (2008), or even Demetriou’s earringed heterosexuals (2001). Yet these examples all arise partly from intersections of privilege, such as whiteness, education, and socioeconomic status. As Bridges writes, “That these changes have primarily emerged among groups of young, heterosexual, white men speaks to the flexibility of identity afforded privileged groups” (2014). Even though navigating one’s masculinity is always complicated, even for “jocks” (Pascoe 2003), the groups in which hybrid masculinities have been documented tend to be the same groups whose identities are not subordinated along other dimensions of privilege (Bridges 2014).

Masculinity researchers have interpreted hybrid masculinities as a means of concealing privilege (Bridges 2014) and distancing men from other, subordinate masculinities, particularly on the basis of social class (Barber 2008). And while

hybridization no doubt serves this function, cockfighters' incorporation of feminized behaviors is distinct—not only are they more circumscribed, but I found no evidence that they served to mask privilege.

As I have described, Hawaiian cockfighters lack many dimensions of privilege. They are mostly non-white, have not attended college, are employed in working-class jobs, and even occupy a subordinate cultural status—*except* in the world of cockfighting, which on the Hawaiian island where I observed it is largely homogeneous in terms of class, culture, and gender (Young 2016). For most cockfighters, it is the only context in which they are solely around other local men. Unlike other parts of their lives (and unlike the Balinese cockfighters in Geertz's iconic account), Hawaiian cockfighters rarely occupy a social status subordinate to the social status of other participants. Hawaiian cockfighting culture is completely sectioned off from their larger social worlds. It is a place where *only* locals venture, only men fight, and everyone's social status is similar. In a way, cockfighting creates a social setting for local Hawaiian men that mirrors, in at least one significant way, the social experience that straight, white, educated, well-off men have most of the time—a context in which their masculinity is not significantly challenged by those who occupy a higher status position. Notably, as I have described, it is only within the limited context of cockfighting that we see the emergence of the kinds of hybrid masculine behaviors or feminized traits that, as the hybridization literature details, occupy a much larger space in the lives of many privileged men.

It is significant that Hawaiian cockfighting's brutality and violence exist in a local context where a participant's masculinity is *not* a socially precarious identity—where, in general, he experiences more status homogeneity than he experiences elsewhere. Partly because cockfighters share a social status and a cultural identity as locals, their masculinity is not “at issue” within the cockfights. While the cockfighters have no “rule” that women aren't allowed to enter the cockfighting ring, women simply *don't* enter it, and this is described in terms of traits ascribed to women, such as fear, squeamishness, or a low tolerance for violence. The masculine cachet of Hawaiian cockfighting is uncontested. Only in this most archetypically masculine context did the fighters perform archetypically feminine behaviors—that is, in a context where a man's “level” of masculinity was already, *per se*, substantial.

As I have described elsewhere, Hawaiian cockfighting allows participants unity to resist economic and cultural changes that they fear and dislike, and a chance to assert an identity as competent, intelligent local men (Young 2016). At the same time, the cockfighters' place in the broader social hierarchy of the island was subordinate. They are “locals”—mostly non-white, working-class men who perceive their economic and geographic position as under threat (Young 2014, 2016). Identity and resistance are two sides of the same coin, and both are means of resisting exploitation and subjugation, which is particularly important given Hawaii's history and the connection between colonialism and emasculation (Bederman 1996; Patil 2009; Takaki 1983; Tengan 2008). Illegality is also a key aspect of this resistance (Young 2014, 2016).

Not only do nurturing and caretaking in the context of cockfighting pose no threat to fighters' status, but their incorporation—their mediation of cockfighting's more extreme embodiments of ideal masculinity—is even seen as a mark of a “real rooster man,” in much the same way that hybrid masculinities have been documented in a broader social context among white, straight, educated, middle-class men. Just as with Bridges's college feminist men (2014) or Barber's well-coiffed white-collar workers (2008), feminized traits are deployed as part of “doing gender” in a way that can actually confer status by contributing to a locally specific, ideally balanced masculinity. The tendency toward masculine “balance”—the ideal performance of masculinity demanded of a particular man in a particular situation in order to maintain masculine hegemony—means that in the cockfighting context, we not only see behaviors that would be considered “softer” or “too feminine” elsewhere in these men's lives, but we see that the cockfighters who evince a more “balanced” masculinity actually have *more* social status than others. *They* are the real rooster men. Thus, I suggest that hybrid masculine forms do not just illustrate the transformative potential of inequality—although they certainly do—but that they emerge as a way to confer status. Caretaking is seen as a sign of maturity and competence, distinguishing “real” rooster men from those who celebrated the fights in “macho” ways, bragged about their birds' prowess, or were “gamblers” who saw cockfighting mainly as a means of economic gain.

The unquestioned masculine nature of cockfighting has another important component: roosters' violent, bloody deaths permit—perhaps even compel—fighters' closeness to their birds. As in other sports, nearness to death heightens emotional involvement (Robinson 2008). The same is true in military service, especially during wartime, when the prospect of death can create a close, emotionally intense bond between fellow soldiers (see, e.g., Verweij 2007; Kaplan 2006, 95). In Hawaiian cockfighting, the salience of death and violence creates “space” for displays of affection and emotion that, in a different context, might otherwise be associated with femininity. Tellingly, the cockfighters who do *not* engage in this “balancing” or “undercompensation” aren't considered *extra* masculine, as we might expect if no undercompensation was taking place. Instead, the reverse is true; these non-caretaking cockfighters lose respect, and are not considered “real rooster men.”

### ***Further Implications and Inequality's Resilience***

The masculine undercompensation hypothesis would also suggest that while performing activities that are culturally endowed with significant masculine cachet, but where participants' masculinity is put at issue *within* the activity, we would see very different behaviors from those in Hawaiian cockfighting, where competency and masculine prowess do not come from prevailing in the ring. And indeed, in descriptions of southern dogfighting, where a man's prowess *as* a man is at stake in the fights (as it is in Geertz's description of Balinese cockfighting, where participants' social status is highly heterogeneous), researchers have documented displays of machismo and exaggerated masculinity before and at

matches (Evans et al. 1998). Additionally, those researchers describe no particular affection or “connection” between the men and their dogs; by all accounts, the dogs are treated more as masculinity avatars. This large difference between southern dogfighting and Hawaiian cockfighting as “masculinity contests” may owe in large part to the composition of the fighters. Hawaiian cockfights are homogeneous with respect to social status; with almost no exceptions, cockfighters are drawn from working-class backgrounds, share a cultural identity as island “locals,” and have similar educational backgrounds. Dogfighters, on the other hand, are drawn from a mix of social classes, with heterogeneous social statuses outside the fighting arena, and dogfighting is considered a contest of “Southern honor” (Evans et al. 1998). To coddle a dog—at least in front of other dogfighters—might risk putting a chink in the masculine armor that the activity already makes vulnerable.

We might turn to mainstream examples as well. It is accepted practice for male football, baseball, and basketball players to slap each other on the backside to show encouragement. This norm is absent among members of male chess teams. Similarly, a wealthy male Chief Financial Officer has the “leeway” to wear a lavender shirt without coworkers looking askance; a male factory worker does not. Furthermore, if the “balance” hypothesis is correct, the male CFO may be seen as *more* masculine, powerful, and desirable if he sports a lavender shirt than if he sports a cowboy hat. The willingness to temper one’s masculinity is viewed as a sign of confidence, but masculine undercompensation only “works” where masculinity is not threatened or precarious, just as masculine *over*compensation only tends to surface in situations where a man’s masculinity is threatened.

It is partly through the mechanism I have described that we can understand the phenomenon of metamorphosis without evolution. That is, as others have noted, the palette of “acceptable” behaviors for men may change without any significant increase in gender equality (Demetriou 2001; Bridges 2014; Bridges and Pascoe 2014; Barber 2008). There is a normalization effect, too: whatever instantiation of masculinity people consider “normal” in a given local context necessarily falls short of archetypal masculinity, making these everyday manifestations seem tempered and unremarkable. Just as the incorporation of hybrid and alternative masculinities can coexist with the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity, masculine undercompensation may *hamper* social change. Indeed, this explanation helps account for the stubborn persistence of gender inequalities, such as the gender-wage gap, even as “softer” performances of masculinity gain social acceptance. To take one example, while male “metrosexuality” may be acceptable for partners at major law firms, the proportion of women partners—18 percent—has scarcely budged in the past decade and a half, and remains even smaller for equity partners (see, e.g., Boucher and Silver 2013; ABA Commission on Women 2000, 2014). Even in settings where “softer” masculinities predominate, no trend has been documented wherein men as a group are likely to surrender their status quo dominance relative to women. Indeed, some researchers have suggested the opposite (Henson and Rogers 2001; Johnson and Samdahl 2004). Flexible, resilient masculinities may contribute to the perception that men’s



dominance of women is inevitable, as opposed to socially constructed and capable of change. In this way, as Bridges and others suggest, a smokescreen of apparent “progress” has the power to quietly and powerfully mask the maintenance of hegemony.

## Conclusion

As others have noted, no one social mechanism dictates how masculinity is performed in every situation, by every man. So, too, with masculine undercompensation. As Sherman (2009) and others have illuminated, flexible gender identities may come with tangible benefits, and the expression of masculinity varies by local context. But as a theoretical proposition, an elaboration on the hybrid masculinities literature, and a counterpart to masculine overcompensation, understanding masculine balance through the lens of masculine undercompensation has the potential not only to broaden our understanding of how gender is performed and enacted as “an accomplishment, an achieved property of situated conduct” (West and Zimmerman 1987), but also to bridge theoretical divides in the sociological literature on masculinity.

Hawaiian cockfighting offers one in-depth examination of how the abstract masculine ideal differs from masculinity’s tempered enactment. Future masculinity work will tell us more about the scope and shape of masculine undercompensation as a social mechanism in constructing gender performance, and experimental work may be particularly well suited to this task. One key issue, to which this article and the hybrid masculinity literature provides only a partial answer, is: what, precisely, is the social function of masculine undercompensation? We might suppose that if hegemonic masculinity theory accurately describes a system of unequal gender relations, that system would be more effectively maintained through behavioral approximation of a masculine ideal, as opposed to selective adoptions of what I’ve termed “tempered” masculinity. But as Demetriou, Pascoe, Bridges, Barber, and others have pointed out, this may not be so. As Connell herself writes, *truly* “ideal” masculinity is whatever most effectively maintains the status quo of unequal gender relations. I have argued that hegemony’s perpetuation may be accomplished most effectively *not* through masculine archetypes, but via a balanced masculinity that references a masculine paragon but “falls short” by adopting and referencing softer iterations. Hybrid masculinities, I have argued, are one instantiation of locally specific masculine balances, and illustrate the idea that a more versatile, flexible masculinity is quite robust in maintaining various kinds of dominance, in part because it *is* so distinct from archetypal masculinity. Indeed, it may even cause a particular level of masculinity—the minimum level required for effective dominance—to seem normal, natural, or inevitable.

The local specificity of this masculine undercompensation ensures that not only privileged men are able to contribute to hegemonic masculinity’s perpetuation. Some groups of men might occupy a subordinate position to other men, but this does not mean that they occupy a subordinate position to women within their social group. Balanced masculinity, maintained through masculine

undercompensation, may facilitate the dominance of men as a group over women as a group by naturalizing a variety of gender performances that make change seem apparent while the underlying masculine hegemony continues to prevail—a process consistent with Connell’s theory of gender relations. Inequality is at its most invidious when it seems unavoidable: when differences between groups of people appear to be an outgrowth of inherent traits rather than a product (and cause) of social construction. Additional research might examine gendered practices and behaviors in broader situational contexts to understand what work they do in sustaining the gender hierarchy. A focus on social practices is particularly crucial (see Hoang 2014).

This work also highlights the importance of social context in understanding how masculinity in general, and hybrid masculinities in particular, manifest among men whose race, class, or other characteristics exclude them from various dimensions of privilege in society at large. The case of Hawaiian cockfighting suggests that it is not only privileged groups who construct hybrid masculine selves to distance themselves from their apparent privilege, but that a larger social mechanism may be at work, and that under the right conditions, different social groupings of men may construct, interpret, and enact masculine projects that embody “softer” traits in order to create a locally specific, flexible, and situationally ideal masculine balance.

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