

Talia Mayden x *Blue 42*

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Blue 42

I. Introduction

Blue 42 is a music video set to an original song on the epidemic of sexual assault in football and the expectations of masculinity in America today. I have investigated the tension between the celebrity and camaraderie of football and its dark underbelly that is riddled with corruption and a culture of sexual assault. At the core of this piece is the inner narrative of “I love men but they scare me”.

My understanding about this topic stems from experience. Growing up in Nashville, Tennessee, football ruled our lives: the rivalries were perennial, the players inviolable, the coaches omnipotent. On National Signing Day, my friends hovered their hands over hats boasting Rebels, Tide, Longhorns, Volunteers, and Commodores before placing one of the hats on their head to signify their selection of school with cameras flashing in our school’s theater. By the next February, one of those friends, Cory, was on the front page of the local newspaper. He had raped a young woman, it was caught on video, and he was going to jail. I remember visiting my high school a few months after the news broke and talking to a former teacher about it. We talked about how shocked we were, how Cory was always such a nice guy, and how devastated his mom must

be. What she said next has always stuck with and haunted me: “there’s just something about football”.

In the years since Cory’s arrest, I have kept an eye out for college athletes in the headlines for sexual assault— from accusations against Heisman-winner Jameis Winston and “Michigan Man” Taylor Lewan. Unlike Cory’s case, neither accusation resulted in so much as a court date. Schools such as Florida State and Michigan go great lengths to cover up these scandals, as is explored in the documentary film “The Hunting Ground”. I want Blue 42 to address this taboo topic explicitly and clearly—to scream what is often shushed, and to ask why in the face of unquestioned tradition. I hope viewers will leave asking themselves why they’ve never questioned the culture of dominance off the field, and will finally acknowledge the price of such a violent and heralded sport.

Blue 42 isn’t about vilifying football—in fact, at first glance, it might even appear to glorify the game and its culture. But that’s just it. I love football. I love the way The White Stripes boom and bounce across a stadium. I love when a crowd cheers so loud I can feel it in my chest. I love the exaggerated proportions of the uniform, the bellow of the quarterback, the childlike celebrations in the end zone. And yes, I love the way my heart rate picks up with the crash of the helmets. But deep down I know, from experience and instinct alike, that there is something sordid about this game.

II. Contextual Discussion

History of Football

The first college football game was on November 6th, 1869 between Rutgers and Princeton (Anonymous, 1869 College Football Season). Helmets were flimsy, rules were malleable, and safety regulations were negligible. The game spread to other campuses that are now recognized as the elite Ivy League and found popularity at Harvard, before Harvard was a coeducational institution. Football games would take place on sparse muddy fields and often times turn into full-out brawls. The timing makes sense—America was fresh off of the Industrial Revolution, and thus, the American male was cut off from the physical demands of the everyday life of yesteryear. Traditional masculine traits (woodworking, baling hay, building a home), no longer held the same weight or meaning. Therefore, football became the “compensating validation of manhood” (Almond, 4). Young men across the Ivy Leagues showed the strength of their bodies not by building, but by taking each other down.

Among the excited spectators at Harvard watching young men duke it out on the field was Teddy Roosevelt, who attended Harvard from 1876 to 1880 (Zezima, 1). Roosevelt’s son followed in his Ivy League footsteps, and during Roosevelt’s presidency, sustained a gory injury to the eye.

Roosevelt’s son was lucky. From 1900 to 1905, at least 45 college football players died, many from internal injuries, broken necks, concussions, broken

backs, and what we now know as numerous sub-concussive hits (Almond, 15). Nonetheless, his son's injury is what it took for then-President Roosevelt to assemble a committee to "minimize the danger" of football, though not enough to be "on too ladylike a basis" (Almond, 12) After all, Roosevelt is quoted saying, "I believe in...rough, manly sports. I do not feel any particular sympathy for the person who gets battered about a good deal so long as it is not fatal" (Almond, 9).

America's Game

Football is the most watched sport in America, often referred to as America's Game. As America's military conflicts moved to faraway lands and the majority of Americans were removed from the visceral experience of war, football stepped in to fill the place of ritualized combat. Football is, after all, the only major sport that mimics marches into enemy territory. As Steve Almond puts it, it is the "athletic equivalent of manifest destiny" (Almond, 12). And football will not let you forget its American roots. Before every game, the National Anthem is sung, and for many college and most NFL games, Blue Angels soar over the stadium, the roar of the jets rumbling in the chests of the spectators. While Roosevelt was obviously a proponent of the game, George H.W. Bush initiated the overt collaboration between the NFL and the military. During the 1991 Super Bowl, images of soldiers in the desert were on display during the pregame show, and President Bush addressed the nation at halftime, describing the Gulf War as his Super

Bowl. It's hard not to get swept up in the hype. Former NFL player Paul "Tank" Younger perhaps said it best: "My inspirational speech was when they played the National Anthem. That really got me fired up. It always fired me up and I wanted to go hit somebody. Shit, when they sang *o'er the land of the free and the home of the brave*, I'm ready to go knock the hell out of somebody".

The overt collaboration between the NFL and the military is why I chose to include scenes of war and interviews with My Lai veterans in *Blue 42*. In *Blue 42*, My Lai veterans talk casually about the havoc they wreaked across the village, musing "there were killings, rapes at time" and "there was a woman running, so they'd shoot her down", among other excerpts. As football players are projected over a woman's naked torso, a veteran says with a smile, "they looked like they were having a good time!" (see Figure 1). Just as NFL players train and train to refine their savagery on the field, military men are trained to kill. As one My Lai veteran put it, "the training came to me, the programming to kill. And I just started killing" (see Figure 2). Unfortunately, the My Lai vs. football comparison is not a stretch—take this NFL veteran Michael Strahan quote, for example: "it's the most perfect feeling in the world to know you've hit a guy just right, that you've maximized the physical pain he can feel...You feel the life just go out of him".



Figure 1: My Lai Veteran as seen in Blue 42

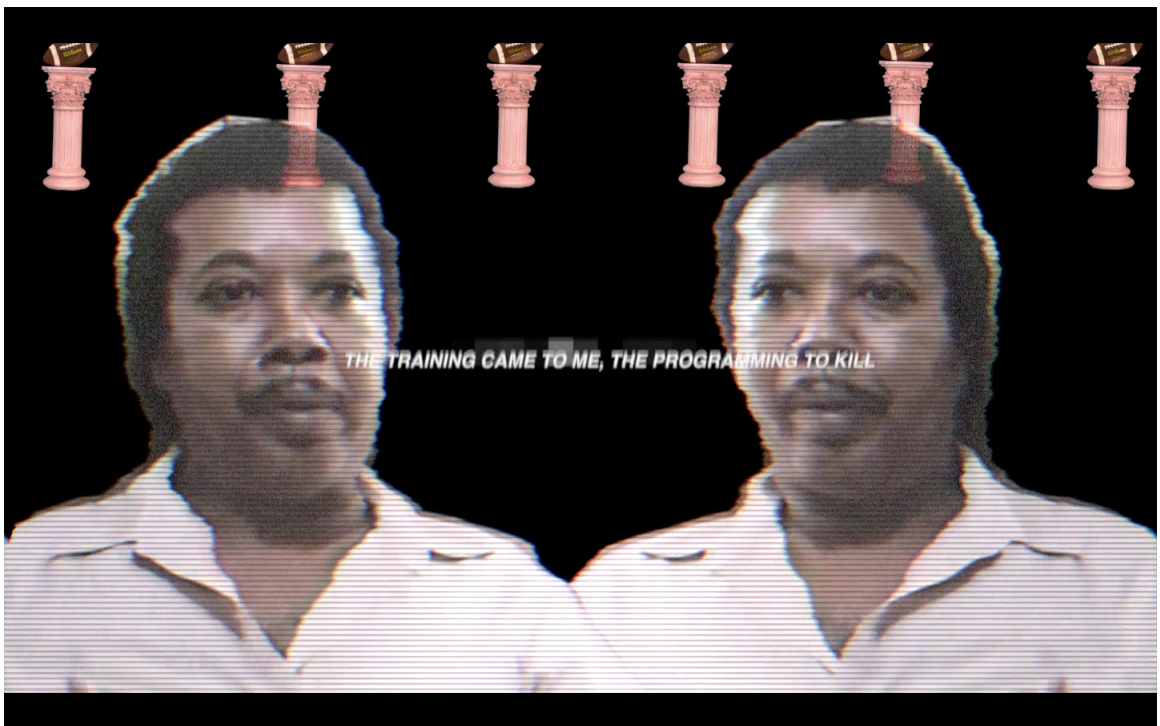


Figure 2: My Lai Veteran as seen in Blue 42

Sexy Violence

We know football is violent. Yet, we watch it. Football players know the game is violent, yet, they play it. Violence in the game of football has become romanticized and even sexualized. This is perhaps due to the fact that it is relatively controlled violence—there is a strategy to the game, brains behind the brawn, and necessary self-control. Because it is controlled, it gets a pass from the American people. There is a certain choreography to that primal release, so it's ok.

The beautification of violence was reinforced by the introduction of instant replays in 1963 (Almond, 19). This new technology allowed viewers to see the big hits, the helmets crunching, as many times as their hearts desired and at a higher frame rate. As *End Zone's* Don DeLillo put it, "In slow motion the game's violence became almost tender, a series of lovely and sensual assaults. The camera held on fallen men, on men about to be hit, on those who did the hitting. It was a loving relationship with just a trace of mockery; the camera lingered a bit too long, making poetic sport of the wounded".

Furthermore, with instant replays came highlight reels. Highlight reels are essentially football propaganda, formalized by the NFL in 1965 with the creation of NFL Films (Almond, 17). Highlight reels (nowadays often referred to as "hype videos") feature bloody linemen, frozen breath, and big hits perfectly timed to a thumping baseline. Even the most prim, uninterested, anti-fan would feel their heart rate increase at these videos. They tap into your psyche. They are essentially football porn.

That's what I wanted to accomplish here. I wanted to make a video that would pump the viewer up, that would make them almost bloodthirsty, and juxtapose that excitement with dark images of sexual assaults, vulnerable women, and grizzly men. Blue 42 is basically a dark, twisted parody of a hype video.

Stadium Anthems

In 2003, ESPN released "ESPN Presents: Stadium Anthems: Music For The Fans. The idea was to compile a playlist that is the essence of attending a football game—the kind of music played in stadiums to get the crowd excited, to carry the hype up into the atmosphere. Stadium Anthems was a first of its kind. The playlist includes titles such as "We Will Rock You", "Because We Can", "Who Let The Dogs Out", "Get Loose", "Bodyrock" and "Gonna Make You Sweat". It's not a stretch of the imagination to see how these titles perpetuate themes of dominance, violence, primal release, and sex. Thus, in making my twisted hype video, it was a natural decision to remix a song from Stadium Anthems. With the help of producer Stephen Crabtree, I created and sang the music and lyrics for Blue 42.

Visual References

I was inspired by raw Youtube amateur-style hype videos such as [Michigan Football Hype Video 2016: The Rise](#) and [NFL 2016-2017 Season Hype II Centuries](#). Videos such as these collage high-quality professional footage, fan footage, and vintage footage with dramatic music. The key to the success of these videos is the “drop”. This is where the bass starts to boom and the visuals are equally impactful. Typically, the drop is accompanied by footage of a massive hit, players running as a herd out of a tunnel, or a Hail Mary completion. In Blue 42, I chose to show a lone woman at the drop (see Figure 3). In hype videos, the drop is the turning point, where things get really exciting. Therefore, the lead up to the drop in Blue 42 was typical highlight-reel type footage. By giving the viewer an image of a woman at the drop, I surprised the viewer and set the tone for the rest of the video.

I was also inspired by the music video for the [Party Monster](#) by The Weeknd, directed by BRTHR. The song, a critique on party and drug culture, uses static effects and rapid-fire imagery to displace the viewer from the scene. Moreover, the prism effect used gives much of the video a vintage feel, reminiscent of watching a bad homemade VHS tape. I employed these techniques in Blue 42 to subtly rattle the viewer, and to give a sense of glitch, or a sense of “something is not right here”.



Figure 3: Lone woman at the "drop" of Blue 42

III. Methodology

In September, I set out with the goal of making a documentary about sexual assault in college football. There were roadblocks—I couldn't get interviews with football players for obvious reasons, my access to victims was limited, and mostly, I was bored. I found the documentary medium limiting in that I felt creatively stifled and without the resources to make a professional piece. Moreover, I felt it had already been done. *The Hunting Ground* already covered those bases. I took to extensive research. I watched footage of my friend Cory's trial from start to finish. I read coaching manuals. I watched *The Hunting Ground*. Three times. I read *Missoula*, *End Zone*, and *Against Football*. I spoke to my friends who play or played college football (Jalen Ramsey, Anthony Batey, Corn Elder, Andrew Bowers, Antonio Richardson, Connor McDermott, KP McDermott).

I recorded our conversations and saved the weightiest quotes. I wrote Cory in jail. I watched about 150 highlight reels on YouTube and identified every song used.

I landed on this conclusion: I would create 42 “breathing” footballs (footballs that inflate and deflate automatically) (see Figure 4). I would place the footballs on Grecian-style pedestals to allude to their celebrity and voila—I would have a sculpture installation. The footballs were to breathe to the beat of a woman’s breath. The concept was that we so rarely think about the consequences of this violent sport and how the violence bleeds into player’s life off the field, and so often women are the victims of that violence. By bringing these footballs to life and juxtaposing them with the vulnerability of a woman’s breath, the viewer would be forced to relate football and women (ie: a culture of sexual violence).

With the help of Michael Rodemer, I set to work. Using solenoid valves, a vacuum pump, an air compressor, 8 feet of tubing, and 4 hose barbs, I made a football breathe (see Figure 5-8). With the help of Jacques Merseau in the Duderstadt Library, my breathing football was filmed against a green screen. In

December, I presented my progress to a panel of professors. It did not go well.

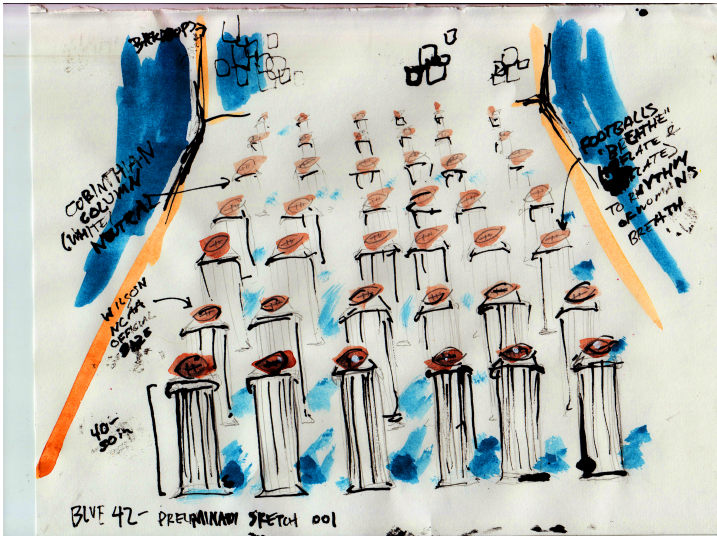


Figure 4: Blue 42 Rough Sketch

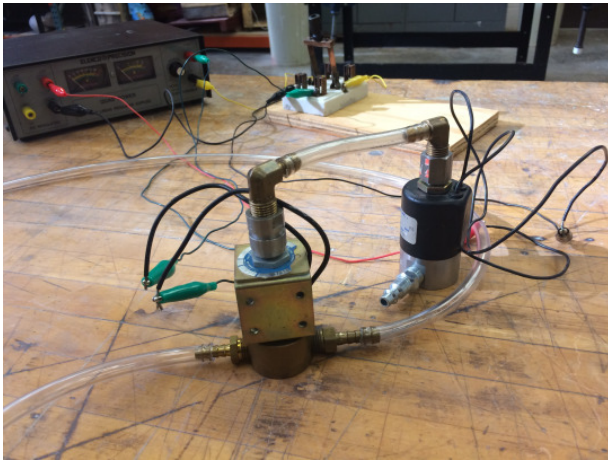


Figure 5: solenoid valves and tubing



Figure 6: Unlaced football about to be outfitting with hose

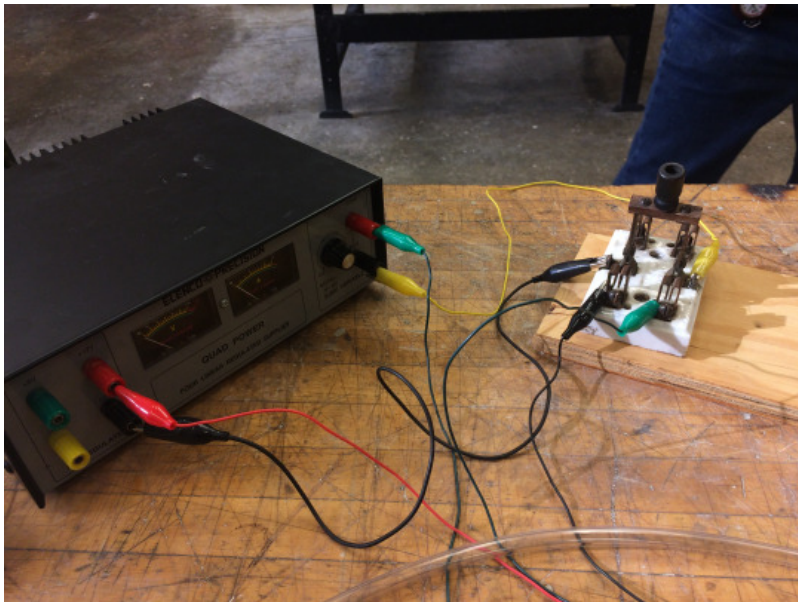


Figure 7: Electric box and switch controller that activated the solenoid valves



Figure 8: <https://vimeo.com/194878264> . Password: testshoot

I was told I “missed the mark entirely”. This was not necessarily helpful feedback. What was helpful, however, was the panel’s confusion over my media of choice. I am not a sculpture artist. Why was I putting all my eggs into this sculpture installation basket? Why don’t I play to my strengths? Moreover, the panel expressed concern that I had done all this research but failed to synthesize it into my work. I agreed that while I found the breathing footballs interesting and even evocative, they did not directly address violence and sexual assault as effectively as I hoped they would.

It was around this time that I received a direct message on Instagram from Cory’s cousin. In short, it was an informal cease and desist letter. In it, she told me that she found my letter to Cory especially inappropriate as I “don’t even know him”.

This stung. I did know Cory. Cory and I used to be friends. We went to school together for years. I painted with Cory. I did math homework with Cory. Did he not remember me? Had he gotten too big, too famous, too much of a football player at his short time at Vanderbilt to already forget me?

With these questions burning in my mind, I set to work. Per critique feedback, I decided to this time choose a media that I knew. I wanted to make something that showed the omnipotence of football—the grandeur and the appeal. I wanted to show how football players are so big in so many ways that they become gods and we remain mere mortals. I couldn't pretend that all footballs players are bad or that I can't stomach football or that I'm even anti-football. I find football players sexy. I find the game sexy. I love the music. I love the roar of the crowd. Even though, deep down, I know what Cory did. And I know he is not an anomaly. While he acted on his own volition, I believe he was influenced by the culture in which he practiced, played, and partied. I was going to make a hype video.

IV. Creative work

Blue 42 debuted at The Michigan Theater on April 13th, 2017. Blue 42 was presented as a music video set to an original piece by the same name. The video opens with the sound of a woman's breath over the image of the breathing footballs described above. Next, the viewer hears the NFL player Ray Lewis's signature trash-talk: "This is a man's game tonight, now, you know that? This is a man's game tonight". This plays over security footage from the Vanderbilt dorm in which Corey and his teammates assaulted their victim. The footage shows the men carry and drag their victim's unconscious body into Brandon Vandenburg's

dorm room. Brandon Vandenburg was dating the victim at the time. The next approximately thirty seconds play out like a typical football hype video, with movements timed to the thumping music. At 35 seconds, the central theme is introduced: "I LOVE MEN BUT THEY SCARE ME". The words "they scare me" are emphasized by a shake and censor effect. After the aforementioned drop, the military aspect is introduced. Excerpts from interviews with My Lai veterans are interspersed with scenes of big football plays and celebrations, as well as shots of the central female character, me. The lyrics, "this is a man's game, are you not entertained" mimic the "found footage" concept from the visuals of the video: "this is a man's game" comes from Ray Lewis's trash talk, and "are you not entertained" is a line from the movie *Gladiator*. *Gladiator* came to me as an obvious source of inspiration. The ancient tradition explored in the movie is brought up in the holy grail of research for Blue 42, Steve Almond's *Against Football*. In it, Almond muses, "We worship players for bravery and excoriate them for vulnerability because we wish to see masculine ideals on display. But I think here also of Cicero, who speculated that the loathing for timid gladiators wasn't a function of their diminished entertainment value but the fact they forced spectators to confront the profound heartlessness of the game. (Almond, 53). Moreover, I wanted to pose a question to the viewer, not tell them how they should feel. The viewer sees the upsetting security footage from Cory's case, they see the massive hits that end in concussions, they see the smug look of the My Lai veteran as he recounts the horrors of that day, yet the viewer continues to

consume, and even nod along or tap their feet to the music. Are you not entertained?

At 1:27, security footage from Cory's case is spliced with footage of screaming football fans, ostensibly cheering the men on. The viewer once again sees Cory and Brandon and a few other teammates dragging the victim's lifeless body, then sees her taken into Brandon's room, Brandon covering his head and the security camera with a towel, and Brandon letting more teammates in the front door. Over this footage, legendary Michigan football coach Bo Schembechler's famed "the team" speech plays. "The team, the team, the team" is the oft-quoted excerpt from the speech—"Nothing is more important than the team," says Bo, "No man is more important than the team. The team, the team, the team". The viewer then sees Brandon, Cory, and their teammates congregating outside the dorm room in their boxers.

The following footage is taken from Cory's trial. A teammate recounts what he saw in one of the videos taken the night of the assault: "what you saw was an unconscious female on the ground, um, and then there was, uh, three men around her, and then um, one more, um, videotaping". Are you not entertained?

From there, men accused of sexual assault who were not held accountable flash over the screen: Jameis Winston, Taylor Lewan, OJ Simpson, among others. Moreover, the viewer gets a glimpse at the letter I sent Cory and the message I received in response from his cousin (see Figure 9 and 10, respectively). I felt it important to include these letters because they anchor the

video home to its original source of inspiration. The original letter I wrote to Cory can be seen in Figure 11 and Figure 12.

The footage gets increasingly chaotic and dark, with images of Blue Angels soaring above stadiums, phallic trophies, Cory's face, My Lai veterans, and my eyes coming together to the beat of the ever-thumping tune (.

You can watch Blue 42 [here](#). The password is Blue42.

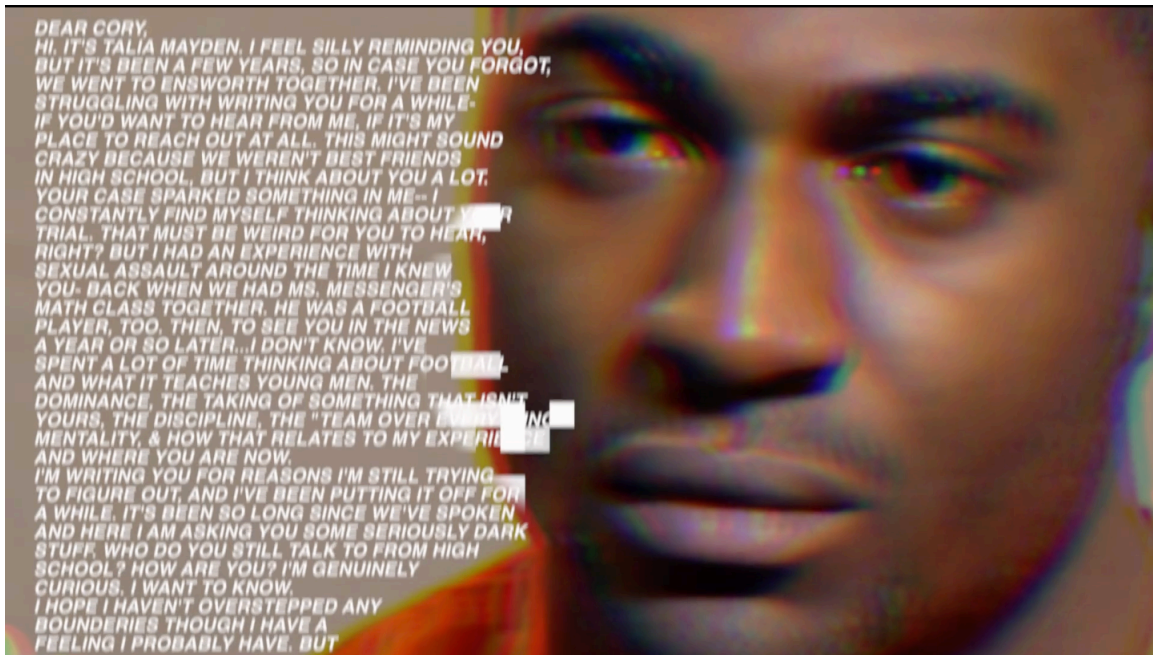


Figure 9: My letter to Cory, as shown in Blue 42



Figure 10: A response from Cory's cousin, as shown in Blue 42

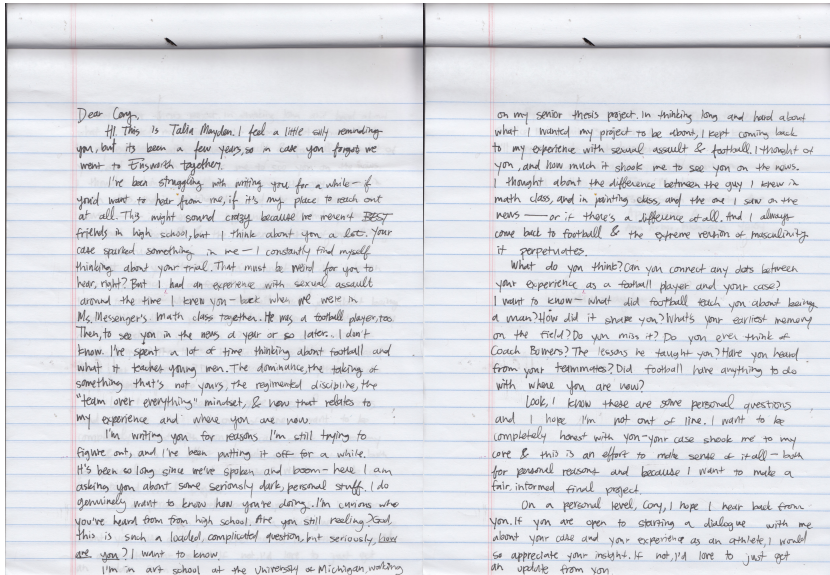


Figure 11: Letter to Cory, page 1

Figure 12: Letter to Cory, page 2

V. Conclusion

The goal of Blue 42 was to ask hard questions about our culture’s consumption of football. Why do we continue to watch, nay, *consume* it when we are all well aware of its dark underbelly? Why does that darkness exist? Do we watch in spite of it, or because of it? Blue 42 succeeded in posing these questions without giving answers. After all, I don’t know the answer. But through the process of tackling the issue of sexual assault in football, I learned that sometimes just asking the question is enough. In fact, sometimes it is all you can do.

I am confident in Blue 42's success because of the feedback I heard as a fly on the wall in the projection room. I heard murmurs of "wow" and "somebody needed to say it". I also saw people covering their eyes and grimacing as well as smiling and tapping their toe to the beat in the same showing.

I want Blue 42 to be seen by as many people as possible. Because of its digital format, dissemination is easy. As well as plastering the video all over social media platforms, I hope to find larger arts and culture platforms to discuss my work. I will pitch Blue 42 to Vice, NPR, BuzzFeed, Lens Blog, Huffington Post, Salon, Jezebel, and more.

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