

Dude, You're a Fag

*Masculinity and Sexuality
in High School*

C. J. Pascoe



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Finally, I'd like to thank the youth at River High for putting up with my constant lurking and questioning. You were all just trying to have a good time in high school, and there I was, sticking my nose in the middle of it. I will be forever inspired by some of you—Ricky, Lacy, Genevieve, Riley, Jessie, Rebeca, Michelle, and Valerie. This book is dedicated to you. Thank you for working to make this world a better place for all of us.

CHAPTER ONE

Making Masculinity

Adolescence, Identity, and High School

REVENGE OF THE NERDS

Cheering students filled River High's gymnasium. Packed tightly in the bleachers, they sang, hollered, and danced to loud hip-hop music. Over their heads hung banners celebrating fifty years of River High's sports victories. The yearly assembly in which the student body voted for the most popular senior boy in the school to be crowned Mr. Cougar was under way, featuring six candidates performing a series of skits to earn student votes.

Two candidates, Brent and Greg, both handsome, blond, "all-American" water polo players, entered the stage dressed like "nerds" to perform their skit, "Revenge of the Nerds." They wore matching outfits: yellow button-down shirts; tight brown pants about five inches too short, with the waistbands pulled up clownishly high by black suspenders; black shoes with white kneesocks; and thick black-rimmed glasses held together with white tape. As music played, the boys started dancing, flailing around comically in bad renditions of outdated dance moves like the Running Man and the Roger Rabbit. The crowd roared in laughter when Brent and Greg rubbed their rear ends together in time to the music. Two girls with long straight hair and matching miniskirts

and black tank tops, presumably the nerds' girlfriends, ran out to dance with Brent and Greg.

Suddenly a group of white male "gangstas" sporting bandannas, baggy pants, sports jerseys, and oversized gold jewelry walked, or, more correctly, gangsta-limped, onto the stage. They proceeded to shove Brent and Greg, who looked at them fearfully and fled the stage without their girlfriends. The gangstas encircled the two girls, then "kidnapped" them by forcing them off the stage. After peering timidly around the corner of the stage, Brent and Greg reentered. The crowd roared as Brent opened his mouth and, in a high-pitched feminine voice, cried, "We have to get our women!"

Soon a girl dressed in a sweat suit and wearing a whistle around her neck carried barbells and weight benches onto the stage. Greg and Brent emerged from behind a screen, having replaced their nerd gear with matching black and white sweat pants and T-shirts. The female coach tossed the barbells around with ease, lifting one with a single hand. The audience hooted in laughter as the nerds struggled to lift even the smallest weight. Brent and Greg continued to work out until they could finally lift the weights. They ran up to the crowd to flex their newfound muscles as the audience cheered. To underscore how strong they had become, Brent and Greg ripped off their pants. The crowd was in hysterics as the boys revealed, not muscled legs, but matching red miniskirts. At first Greg and Brent looked embarrassed; then they triumphantly dropped the skirts, revealing matching shorts, and the audience cheered.

Brent and Greg ran off stage as stagehands unfurled a large cloth sign reading "Gangstas' Hideout." Some of the gangstas who had kidnapped the girlfriends sat around a table playing poker, while other gangstas gambled with dice. The nerds, who had changed into black suits accented with ties and fedoras, strode confidently into the hideout. They threw the card table in the air, causing the gangstas to jump back as the cards and chips scattered. Looking frightened at the nerds' newfound strength, the gangstas scrambled out of their hideout. After the gangstas had fled, the two miniskirted girlfriends ran up to Brent and Greg, hugging them

gratefully. Several African American boys, also dressed in suits and fedoras, ran onto the stage, dancing while the former nerds stood behind them with their arms folded. After the dance, the victorious nerds walked off stage hand in hand with their rescued girlfriends.

I open with this scene to highlight the themes of masculinity I saw during a year and a half of fieldwork at River High School. The Mr. Cougar competition clearly illuminates the intersecting dynamics of sexuality, gender, social class, race, bodies, and institutional practices that constitute adolescent masculinity in this setting. Craig and Brent are transformed from unmasculine nerds who cannot protect their girlfriends into heterosexual, muscular men. This masculinizing process happens through a transformation of bodies, the assertion of racial privilege, and a shoring up of heterosexuality.

The story line of the skit—Brent and Craig's quest to confirm their heterosexuality by rescuing their girlfriends—posits heterosexuality as central to masculinity. Brent and Craig's inability to protect "their women" marks their physical inadequacy. Their appearance—tight, ill-fitting, outdated clothes—codes them as unmasculine. Their weakness and their high-pitched voices cast them as feminine. Their homoerotic dance moves position them as homosexual. By working out, the boys shed their weak, effeminate, and possibly homosexual identities. Just in case they didn't get their message across by bench-pressing heavy weights, the boys shed their last remnants of femininity by ripping off their matching miniskirts. They become so physically imposing that they don't even have to fight the gangstas, who flee in terror at the mere hint of the nerds' strength.

This skit lays bare the ways racialized notions of masculinity may be enacted through sexualized tropes. The gangstas symbolize failed and at the same time wildly successful men in their heterosexual claim on the nerds' women. Their "do-rags," baggy pants, shirts bearing sports team insignias, and limping walks are designed to invoke a hardened inner-city

gangsta style, one portrayed on television and in movies, as a specifically black cultural style. In representing black men, the gangstas symbolize hypersexuality and invoke a thinly veiled imagery of the black rapist (A. Davis 1981), who threatens white men's control over white women. But in the end, the gangstas are vanquished by the white, middle-class legitimacy of the nerds, turned masculine with their newfound strength. The skit also portrays black men as slightly feminized in that they act as cheerleaders and relieve the white heroes of the unmasculine practice of dancing.

Markers of femininity such as high voices and skirts symbolize emasculation when associated with male bodies. The girlfriends also signal a relationship between femininity and helplessness, since they are unable to save themselves from the gangstas. However, the female coach symbolizes strength, a sign of masculinity the nerds initially lack. The students in the audience cheer her as she engages in a masculinized practice, lifting weights with ease, and they laugh at the boys who can't do this. Male femininity, in this instance, is coded as humorous, while female masculinity is cheered.

Drawing on phenomena at River High such as the Mr. Cougar Assembly, the goal of this study is to explain how teenagers, teachers, and the institutional logics of schooling construct adolescent masculinity through idioms of sexuality. This book investigates the relationships between gender and sexuality as embedded in a major socializing institution of modern youth: high school. I ask how heteronormative and homophobic discourses, practices, and interactions in an American high school produce masculine identities. To examine the construction of masculinity in adolescence, I follow the deployment of, resistance to, and practices surrounding sexuality and gender in high school. I focus on the gender and sexuality practices of students, teachers, and administrators, with an emphasis on school rituals.

My findings illustrate that masculinity is not a homogenous category that any boy possesses by virtue of being male. Rather, masculinity—as constituted and understood in the social world I studied—is a configuration of practices and discourses that different youths (boys and girls) may embody in different ways and to different degrees. Masculinity, in this sense, is associated with, but not reduced or solely equivalent to, the male body. I argue that adolescent masculinity is understood in this setting as a form of dominance usually expressed through sexualized discourses.¹

Through extensive fieldwork and interviewing I discovered that, for boys, achieving a masculine identity entails the repeated repudiation of the specter of failed masculinity. Boys lay claim to masculine identities by lobbing homophobic epithets at one another. They also assert masculine selves by engaging in heterosexist discussions of girls' bodies and their own sexual experiences. Both of these phenomena intersect with racialized identities in that they are organized somewhat differently by and for African American boys and white boys. From what I saw during my research, African American boys were more likely to be punished by school authorities for engaging in these masculinizing practices. Though homophobic taunts and assertion of heterosexuality shore up a masculine identity for boys, the relationship between sexuality and masculinity looks different when masculinity occurs outside male bodies. For girls, challenging heterosexual identities often solidifies a more masculine identity. These gendering processes are encoded at multiple levels: institutional, interactional, and individual.

To explore and theorize these patterns, this book integrates queer theory, feminist theory, and sociological research on masculinities. In this chapter I address the current state of sociological research on masculinity. Then, using feminist theories and theories of sexuality, I rework some of the insights of the sociology of masculinity literature. I conclude by suggesting that close attention to sexuality highlights masculinity as a process rather than a social identity associated with specific bodies.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY MASCULINITY?

Sociologists have approached masculinity as a multiplicity of gender practices (regardless of their content) enacted by men whose bodies are assumed to be biologically male. Early in the twentieth century, when fears of feminization pervaded just about every sphere of social life, psychologists became increasingly concerned with differentiating men from women (Kimmel 1996). As a result, part of the definition of a psychologically "normal" adult came to involve proper adjustment to one's "gender role" (Pleck 1987). Talcott Parsons (1954), the first sociologist to really address masculinity as such, argued that men's "instrumental" role and women's "expressive" role were central to the functioning of a well-ordered society. Deviations from women's role as maternal caretakers or men's role as breadwinners would result in "role strain" and "role competition," weakening families and ultimately society.

With the advent of the women's movement, feminist gender theorists examined how power is embedded in these seemingly neutral (not to mention natural) "gender roles" (Hartmann 1976; Jaggar 1983; Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974; Rubin 1984). Psychoanalytic feminist theorists explicitly addressed masculinity as an identity formation constituted by inequality. Both Dorothy Dinnerstein (1976) and Nancy Chodorow (1978) argued that masculinity, as we recognize it, is the result of a family system in which women mother. Identification with a mother as the primary caregiver proves much more problematic in the formation of a gender identity for a boy than for a girl child, producing a self we understand as masculine characterized by defensive ego boundaries and repudiation of femininity. Feminist psychoanalytic theorists equate contemporary masculinity with a quest for autonomy and separation, an approach that influences my own analysis of masculinity.

Recognizing the changes wrought for women by feminist movements, sociologists of masculinity realized that feminism had radical implications for men (Carrigan, Connell, and Lee 1987). Frustrated with the paucity of non-normative approaches to masculinity, and what they

saw (a bit defensively) as feminist characterizations of masculinity as "unrelieved villainy and all men as agents of the patriarchy in more or less the same degree" (64), these sociologists attempted to carve out new models of gendered analysis in which individual men or men collectively were not all framed as equal agents of patriarchal oppression.

The emergent sociology of masculinity became a "critical study of men, their behaviors, practices, values and perspectives" (Whitehead and Barrett 2001, 14). These new sociologists of masculinity positioned themselves in opposition to earlier Parsonian theories of masculinity, proffering, not a single masculine "role," but rather the idea that masculinity is understandable only in a model of "multiple masculinities" (Connell 1995). Instead of focusing on masculinity as the male role, this model asserts that there are a variety of masculinities, which make sense only in hierarchical and contested relations with one another. R. W. Connell argues that men enact and embody different configurations of masculinity depending on their positions within a social hierarchy of power. *Hegemonic masculinity*, the type of gender practice that, in a given space and time, supports gender inequality, is at the top of this hierarchy. *Complicit masculinity* describes men who benefit from hegemonic masculinity but do not enact it; *subordinated masculinity* describes men who are oppressed by definitions of hegemonic masculinity, primarily gay men; *marginalized masculinity* describes men who may be positioned powerfully in terms of gender but not in terms of class or race. Connell, importantly, emphasizes that the content of these configurations of gender practice is not always and everywhere the same. Very few men, if any, are actually hegemonically masculine, but all men do benefit, to different extents, from this sort of definition of masculinity, a form of benefit Connell (1995) calls the "patriarchal dividend" (41).

This model of multiple masculinities has been enormously influential, inspiring countless studies that detail the ways different configurations of masculinity are promoted, challenged, or reinforced in given social situations. This research on how men do masculinity has provided insight into practices of masculinity in a wide range of social institutions, such

as families (Coltrane 2001), schools (Francis and Skelton 2001; Gilbert 1998; Mac an Ghail 1996; Parker 1996), the workplace (Connell 1998; Cooper 2000), the media (Craig 1992; Davies 1995), and sports (Curry 2004; Edley and Wetherell 1997; Majors 2001; Messner 2002). This focus on masculinity as what men do has spawned an industry of cataloguing "types" of masculinity: gay, black, Chicano, working class, middle class, Asian, gay black, gay Chicano, white working class, militarized, transnational business, New Man, negotiated, versatile, healthy, toxic, counter, and cool masculinities, among others (Messner 2004b).

While Connell intends this model of masculinities to be understood as fluid and conflictual, the multiple masculinities model is more often used to construct static and reified typologies such as the ones listed by Michael Messner. These descriptions of masculinity are intended to highlight patterns of practice in which structure meets with identity and action, but they have the effect of slotting men into masculinity categories: a hegemonic man, a complicit man, a resistant man (or the multitude of ever-increasing types of masculinities catalogued above). While these masculinities may be posited as ideal types, they are sometimes difficult to use analytically without lapsing into a simplistic categorical analysis. Because of the emphasis on masculinities in the plural, a set of types some men can seemingly step in and out of at will, this model runs the risk of collapsing into an analysis of styles of masculinity, thereby deflecting attention from structural inequalities between men and women. In other words, we must always pay attention to power relations when we think in pluralities and diversities; otherwise we are simply left with a list of differences (Zinn and Dill 1996). Additionally, the category of "hegemonic masculinity" is so rife with contradictions it is small wonder that no man actually embodies it (Donaldson 1993). According to this model both a rich, slim, soft-spoken businessman and a poor, muscular, violent gang member might be described as hegemonically masculine. At the same time neither of them would really be hegemonically masculine, since the businessman would not be physically powerful and the poor gang member would lack claims on institutional gendered power. Be-

cause of some of these deployment problems, those studying masculinities have for some time called for a more sophisticated analysis of masculinity (Messner 1993; Morgan 1992).

To refine approaches to masculinity, researchers need to think more clearly about the implications of defining masculinity as what men or boys do. This definition conflates masculinity with the actions of those who have male bodies. Defining masculinity as "what men do" reifies biologized categories of male and female that are problematic and not necessarily discrete categories to begin with (Fausto-Sterling 1995). In the end, masculinity is framed as a social category based on an assumed biological difference that in itself is constituted by the very social category it purports to underlie. This is not to say that sociologists of masculinity are biological determinists, but by assuming that the male body is the location of masculinity their theories reify the assumed biological basis of gender. Recognizing that masculinizing discourses and practices extend beyond male bodies, this book traces the various ways masculinity is produced and manifested in relation to a multiplicity of bodies, spaces, and objects. That is, this book looks at masculinity as a variety of practices and discourses that can be mobilized by and applied to both boys and girls.

BRINGING IN SEXUALITY

Heeding the admonition of Carrigan, Connell, and Lee (1987) that "analysis of masculinity needs to be related as well to other currents in feminism" (64), I turn to interdisciplinary theorizing about the role of sexuality in the construction of gender identities. Building on studies of sexuality that demonstrate that sexuality is an organizing principle of social life, this book highlights intersections of masculinizing and sexualizing practices and discourses at River High.

Thinking about sexuality as an organizing principle of social life means that it is not just the property of individuals. Sexuality, in this sense, doesn't just indicate a person's sexual identity, whether he or she

is gay or straight. Rather, sexuality is itself a form of power that exists regardless of an individual's sexual identity. Thinking about sexuality this way can be initially quite jarring. After all, usually we discuss sexuality as a personal identity or a set of private practices. However, researchers and theorists have increasingly argued that sexuality is a quite public part of social life (Foucault 1990). Though sexuality was initially studied as a set of private acts, and eventually identities, by physicians and other medical professionals intent on discerning normal from abnormal sexuality, social theorists are now documenting the ways institutions, identities, and discourses interact with, are regulated by, and produce sexual meanings.

In this sense, *sexuality* refers to sex acts and sexual identities, but it also encompasses a range of meanings associated with these acts and identities. The meanings that vary by social class, location, and gender identity (Mahay, Laumann, and Michaels 2005) may be more important than the acts themselves (Weeks 1996). A good example of this is heterosexuality. While heterosexual desires or identities might feel private and personal, contemporary meanings of heterosexuality also confer upon heterosexual individuals all sorts of citizenship rights, so that heterosexuality is not just a private matter but one that links a person to certain state benefits. Similarly contemporary meanings of sexuality, particularly heterosexuality, for instance, eroticize male dominance and female submission (Jeffreys 1996, 75). In this way what seems like a private desire is part of the mechanisms through which the microprocesses of daily life actually foster inequality.

Interdisciplinary theorizing about sexuality has primarily taken the form of "queer theory." Like sociology, queer theory destabilizes the assumed naturalness of the social order (Lemert 1996). Queer theory moves the deconstructive project of sociology into new areas by examining much of what sociology sometimes takes for granted: "deviant" sexualities, sexual identities, sexual practices, sexual discourses, and sexual norms (Seidman 1996). In making the taken-for-granted explicit, queer theorists examine sexual power as it is embedded in different areas of social life and interrogate areas of the social world not usually seen as sex-

uality—such as the ways heterosexuality confers upon an individual a variety of citizenship rights (A. Stein and Plummer 1994). The logic of sexuality not only regulates intimate relations but also infuses social relations and social structures (S. Epstein 1994; Warner 1993).

This book uses queer theory to frame bodies, desires, sexualities, and identities in a way that isn't necessarily or solely about the oppression or liberation of the homosexual subject but rather about how institutional and interactional practices organize sexual life and produce sexual knowledge (Seidman 1996). Queer theory draws on a postmodern approach to studying society that moves beyond traditional categories such as male/female, masculine/feminine, and straight/gay to focus instead on the instability of these categories. That is, we might think of "heterosexual" and "homosexual" as stable, opposing, and discrete identities, but really they are fraught with internal contradictions (Halley 1993). To this end, queer theory emphasizes multiple identities and multiplicity in general. Instead of creating knowledge about categories of sexual identity, queer theorists look to see how those categories themselves are created, sustained, and undone.

One of the ways a queer theory approach can bring studies of masculinity in line with other feminist theorizing is to uncouple the male body from definitions of masculinity. The masculinities literature, while attending to very real inequalities between gay and straight men, tends to look at sexuality as inherent in static identities attached to male bodies, not as a major organizing principle of social life (S. Epstein 1994; Warner 1993). As part of its deconstructive project, queer theory often points to disjunctures between pairings thought of as natural and inevitable. In doing so queer theorists may implicitly question some of the assumptions of the multiple masculinities model—specifically the assumption that masculinity is defined by the bodily practices of boys and men—by placing sexuality at the center of analysis. Eve Sedgwick (1995), one of the few theorists to address the problematic assumption of the centrality of the male body to academic discussions of masculinity, argues that sometimes masculinity has nothing to do with men and that men

don't necessarily have anything to do with masculinity. As a result "it is important to drive a wedge in, early and often and if possible conclusively, between the two topics, masculinity and men, whose relation to one another it is so difficult not to presume" (12).

Assuming that masculinity is only about men weakens inquiries into masculinity. Therefore it is important to look at masculinizing processes outside the male body, not to catalogue a new type of masculinity, but to identify practices, rituals, and discourses that constitute masculinity. Doing so indicates the centrality of sexualized meanings to masculinity in relation to both male and female bodies.

Dislodging masculinity from a biological location is a productive way to highlight the social constructedness of masculinity and may even expose a latent sexism within the sociological literature in its assumption that masculinity, as a powerful social identity, is only the domain of men. Judith Kegan Gardiner (2003) points out in her review of gender and masculinity textbooks "the very different investments that men, including masculinity scholars, appear to have in preserving masculinity as some intelligible and coherent grounding of identity in comparison to the skepticism and distance shown by feminists towards femininity" (153). Indeed, gender scholars who study women have not been nearly as interested in femininity as scholars of men have been in masculinity.

It is not that bodies are unimportant. They are. Bodies are the vehicles through which we express gendered selves; they are also the matter through which social norms are made concrete. What is problematic is the unreflexive assumption of an embodied location for gender that echoes throughout the masculinities literature. Looking at masculinity as discourses and practices that can be mobilized by female bodies undermines the conflation of masculinity with an embodied state of maleness (Califia 1994; Halberstam 1998; Paechter 2006). Instead, this approach looks at masculinity as a recognizable configuration of gender practices and discourses.

Placing sexuality at the center of analysis highlights the "routinely unquestioned heteronormative expectations and proscriptions that exist as

background context in contemporary U.S. culture," assumptions that "emerge when traditional normative gender boundaries are crossed" (Neilsen, Walden, and Kunkel 2000, 292). Examining these heteronormative structures and how masculine girls and feminine boys challenge them gets at contemporary constructions of masculinity in adolescence. Studying gender transgressions in adolescence provides empirical evidence to bolster and extend some of the claims of queer theory, an approach that often relies on literary or artistic examples for its data (Gamson and Moon 2004, 49).

RETHINKING MASCULINITY, SEXUALITY, AND BODIES

Attending to sexuality and its centrality to gendered identities opens insight into masculinity both as a process (Bederman 1995) and as a field through which power is articulated (Scott 1999) rather than as a never-ending list of configurations of practice enacted by specific bodies. My research indicates that masculinity is an identity that respondents think of as related to the male body but as not necessarily specific to the male body. Interviews with and observations of students at River High indicate that they recognize masculinity as an identity expressed through sexual discourses and practices that indicate dominance and control.²

As scholars of gender have demonstrated, gender is accomplished through day-to-day interactions (G. Fine 1989; Hochschild 1989; Thorne 2002; West and Zimmerman 1991). In this sense gender is the "activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category" (West and Zimmerman 1991, 127). People are supposed to act in ways that line up with their presumed sex. That is, we expect people we think are females to act like women and males to act like men. People hold other people accountable for "doing gender" correctly.

The queer theorist Judith Butler (1999) builds on this interactionist approach to gender, arguing that gender is something people accomplish

through "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (43). That is, gender is not just natural, or something one is, but rather something we all produce through our actions. By repeatedly acting "feminine" or "masculine" we actually create those categories. Becoming gendered, becoming masculine or feminine, is a process.

Butler argues that gendered beings are created through processes of repeated invocation and repudiation. People constantly reference or invoke a gendered norm, thus making the norm seem like a timeless truth. Similarly, people continually repudiate a "constitutive outside" (Butler 1993, 3) in which is contained all that is cast out of a socially recognizable gender category. The "constitutive outside" is inhabited by what she calls "abject identities," unrecognizably and unacceptably gendered selves. The interactional accomplishment of gender in a Butlerian model consists, in part, of the continual iteration and repudiation of an abject identity. The abject identity must be constantly named to remind individuals of its power. Similarly, it must be constantly repudiated by individuals or groups so that they can continually affirm their identities as normal and as culturally intelligible. Gender, in this sense, is "constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, 'inside' the subject as its own founding repudiation" (Butler 1993, 3). This repudiation creates and reaffirms a "threatening specter" (3) of failed gender, the existence of which must be continually repudiated through interactional processes.

Informed by this interactionist approach to gender, in which gender is not just a quality of an individual but the result of interactional processes, this study examines masculinity as sexualized processes of confirmation and repudiation through which individuals demonstrate mastery over others. Building on the insights of the multiple masculinities literature, I emphasize that this definition of masculinity is not universal but local, age limited, and institutional and that other definitions of masculinity may be found in different locales and different times. Examining masculinity

using Butler's theory of interactional accomplishment of gender indicates that the "fag" position is an "abject" position and, as such, is a "threatening specter" constituting contemporary American adolescent masculinity at River High. Similarly, drawing on Butler's concept of the constitution of gender through "repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame" elucidates how seemingly "normal" daily interactions of male adolescence are actually ritualized interactions constituting masculinity. These repeated acts involve demonstrating sexual mastery and the denial of girls' subjectivity. The school itself sets the groundwork for boys' interactional rituals of repudiation and confirmation, like those illustrated in the opening vignette.

Butler also suggests ways to challenge an unequal gender order. Individuals who deliberately engage in gender practices that render them culturally unintelligible, such as practices that are at odds with their apparent sex category, challenge the naturalness and inevitability of a rigid gender order. Some girls at River High engage in precisely this sort of resistance by engaging in masculinizing processes. While challenging an unequal gender order at the level of interactions does not necessarily address larger structural inequalities, it is an important component of social change. That said, doing gender differently by engaging in gender practices not "appropriate" for one's sex category, such as drag, also runs the risk of reifying binary categories of gender. Resistance, in this model, is fraught with danger, since it is both an investment in gender norms and a subversion of them. Sometimes it challenges the gender order and sometimes it seems to bolster it.

METHODOLOGY

Adolescence as a Social Category

Because of the intense identity work that occurs during adolescence, it is a particularly fruitful site for illuminating and developing these theoretical issues. In contemporary Western societies the teenage years are often ones in which youths explore and consolidate identity (Erikson 1959/1980).

The issue of whether adolescence is a universal developmental stage or a creation of modernity has been debated in historical, psychological, and sociological literatures (Suransky 1982; Tait 2000). Regardless of its universal, timeless, localized, or temporal features, adolescence is currently constructed as a time in which teenagers work to create identity and make the transition from childhood to adulthood. It is also constructed as a turbulent time psychologically, biologically, and socially.

Since the "invention" of the adolescent in the United States in the early twentieth century (Ben-Amos 1995), teen cultures have emerged as a unique cultural formation where varied forms are characterized by gender differentiation and sexuality. In fact, G. Stanley Hall, the psychologist who created and popularized the concept of adolescence, described it as a time when boys engage in masculinizing activities that set them apart from girls (Kimmel 1996). One of the primary ways teen cultures evolved was through heterosexual rituals such as courtship, which became enshrined and ritualized through the emergence of large public high schools (Modell 1989). Such rituals began with the popularization of the private automobile and continued to be set up as a cultural norm through school yearbooks, school newspapers, and the organization of school activities encouraging heterosexual pairings, such as dances and proms. Given the historical tie between adolescence, sexuality, and gender, it seems a fitting life phase in which to study the formation of gendered identities.

Levels of Analysis

To explore masculinity as a process, I attend to multiple levels of analysis, including individual investments in and experiences of gendered and sexualized identities, institutional discourses, and collective gender practices.

Social processes can be understood through the experiences of individuals who live them (Chodorow 2000). Social processes and cultural categories are also instantiated at the level of personal meanings, which are created in a "tangle of experience" (Briggs 1998, 2). Although gendered meanings are often contradictory, gender is also experienced and

talked about as a real and stable category. Gender is personally created, understood, and negotiated through individual biography, fantasy, and projection (Chodorow 1995). To get at individual meanings of masculinity, I pay attention to teens' voices in one-on-one interviews where they discuss the role of masculinity in their lives.

However, looking at masculinity in adolescence without paying attention to larger structural patterns results in overly individualized and psychologized analyses that distort larger issues of inequality. Recently a spate of psychological books have called for more attention to be paid to the "real" victims of the so-called "gender wars." These authors claim that boys are forced by families, peer groups, schools, and the media to hide their "true" emotions and develop a hard emotional shell that is what we know as masculinity (Kindlon and Thompson 1999; Pollack 1998; Sommers 2000). William Pollack's book rightly encourages parents and other caregivers to listen to the "boy code" in order to hear boys' emotions and struggles. Sommers and Kindlon and Thompson, among others, either overtly or tacitly treat gender as a zero-sum game in which gains for girls must equal losses for boys, an assumption that has been critiqued by gender researchers (American Association of University Women [AAUW] 2001; Kimmel 1999). None of these volumes address larger issues of gender and power in adolescence and childhood; instead, they focus on the idea that boys and girls are naturally different and that boys are the ones suffering from discrimination, not girls.

To avoid this sort of emphasis on individual and idiosyncratic experiences, I examine relational and institutional gender processes, emphasizing how gender happens in groups. Friendships, peer groups, and cliques are exceedingly important to the formation of identity in adolescence (Bettie 2003; Hallinan and Williams 1990; Kinney 1993). Attending to gender as a relational process is important, since peer cultures trump or at least compete with parental influence in terms of setting up conceptions of gender (Risman and Myers 1997). As a result, masculinity processes look very different in groups than they do when teens discuss their own experiences around masculinity.

At the level of the institution, schools are a primary institution for identity formation, development, and solidification for contemporary American youth. They are important sites for the construction of race, class, and gender inequalities as well as pivotal locations of social change in challenging these inequalities (Tyack and Hansot 1990). Social groups in schools, such as cliques, provide one of the ways that youth begin to identify and position themselves by social class (Eckert 1989; Willis 1981), gender (AAUW 2001; Adler, Kless, and Adler 1992; Eder, Evans, and Parker 1995; Thorne 1993), and race (Eckert 1989; Eder, Evans, and Parker 1995; Perry 2002; Price 1999). The categories most salient to students have varied historically and regionally—cowboys and preps may be salient in one school, whereas jocks and goths may be organizing groups in another. Furthermore, schools play a part in structuring adolescent selves through the setting up of institutional gender orders, or the totality of gender arrangements in a given school—including relations of power, labor, emotion, and symbolism (Connell 1996; Heward 1990; Skelton 1996; Spade 2001). This book examines the way gendered and sexualized identifications and the institutional ordering of these identifications in a California high school both reinforce and challenge inequality among students.

Research Site

I conducted fieldwork at a suburban high school that I call River High. (Names of places and people have been changed.) River High is a suburban, working-class, fifty-year-old high school in a town I call Riverton in north central California. With the exception of median household income and racial diversity (both of which are higher than the national average due to Riverton's location in California), the town mirrors national averages in the proportion of those who have attended college, marriage rates, and age distribution. Riverton's approximately one hundred thousand residents are over half white and about a quarter Latino or Hispanic. The rest identify in relatively equal numbers as African American

or Asian (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000). It is a moderate to conservative religious community. Most of the churches are Baptist, Pentecostal, Evangelical, or nondenominational. Many residents commute to surrounding cities for work. The major employers in Riverton are the school district, the city itself, medical centers, and large discount retailers such as Wal-Mart or Target.

On average Riverton is a middle-class community. However, residents are likely to refer to the town as two communities: "Old Riverton" and "New Riverton." A busy highway and railroad tracks bisect the town into these two sections. River High is literally on the "wrong side of the tracks," in Old Riverton. Exiting the freeway and heading north into Old Riverton, one sees a mix of old ranch-style homes, their yards strewn with various car parts, lawn chairs, appliances, and sometimes chickens surrounded by chain-link fences. Old Riverton is visually bounded on the west and east by smoke-puffing factories. While effort has clearly been made to revitalize the downtown, as revealed by recently repainted storefronts, it appears sad and forlorn, with half of its shops sitting empty.

Driving south under the freeway and over a rise, one encounters New Riverton. The streets widen and sidewalks appear. Instead of a backdrop of smokestacks, a forested mountain rises majestically in the background. Instead of old run-down single-story houses with sheets hanging in the windows for curtains, either side of the street is lined with walled-off new home developments composed of identical stucco two-story homes with perfectly manicured lawns. The teens from these homes attend Hillside High School, the other high school in the Riverton district.

River High looks like many American high schools. It is made up of several one-story buildings connected by open-air walkways, though the students cram into closed hallways to find their lockers in between classes. Like many schools unable to afford new buildings to accommodate their burgeoning student populations, River relies on mobile classrooms, which are continually encroaching on the basketball courts. It is an open campus where students can come and go as they please, though they can't get far in this suburban community without a car. Many of the

students stay on campus to eat and socialize in one of the two main “quads” made up of grass, concrete, and benches, or in the noisy and overcrowded cafeteria.

Roughly two thousand students attended River High during my time there. Its racial/ethnic breakdown roughly represented California at large: 49 percent white, 28 percent Latino, 10 percent African American, and 6 percent Asian (as compared to California’s 59, 32, 7, and 11 percents respectively) (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000). The students at River High were primarily working class, though there were middle-class and poor students.³ Lauren Carter, the guidance counselor, described it as an archetypical American high school emphasizing tradition, sports, and community. She illustrated this focus by telling me of the centrality of football to the social life of both Riverton and River High. “There’s all these old-timers who come out to the football games. Which I think is pretty funny. It’s like Iowa. This school could be straight out of Iowa.” The principal, Mr. Hobart, had played on the football team when he had attended River. Lauren told me that Mr. Hobart’s career path was a common one: “You go to River. You go to Carrington State for college. You come back to River and teach.” She also told me that the historically industry-based economy of Riverton (which had manufactured a variety of chemical, oil, metal, and paper products) was faltering and that consequently poverty rates were rising. In fact, only one of the factories that had historically provided jobs for residents was still in operation.

Research

I gathered data using the qualitative method of ethnographic research. I spent a year and a half conducting fieldwork in the school and connected sites; I formally interviewed fifty students (forty-nine from River High and one from Hillside), and I informally interviewed countless students, faculty, and administrators.

I recruited students for interviews through formal classroom presentations and through informal networks among students. I conducted pre-

sentations in a range of classes (English, auto shop, drama, history, social studies, weight lifting, stagecraft, bowling, and economics) and clubs (Asian Club, the Gay/Straight Alliance, and Student Government). I also hung around at lunch, before school, after school, and at various school events talking to various students about my research, which I presented as “writing a book about guys.” The Appendix includes a detailed discussion of my experiences conducting research at River High.

The interviews usually took place at school, either after school hours or during class time. Students with a car sometimes met me at one of the local fast-food restaurants, where I treated them to a meal. The interviews usually lasted forty-five minutes to an hour and a half. I tape-recorded them.

The initial interviews I conducted helped me map a gendered and sexualized geography of the school from which I chose my observation sites. In the tradition of Michael Messner (2004a) and Barrie Thorne (1993), I focused on highly salient gendered moments by attending major school rituals such as Winter Ball, school rallies, plays, dances, and lunches. In addition to these schoolwide rituals I conducted most of my research in three areas: a gender-“neutral” site (a senior government classroom, where sexualized meanings were subdued); three sites that students marked as fag (drama classes and the Gay/Straight Alliance); and two normatively “masculine” sites (auto shop and weight lifting). I took daily field notes focusing on how students, faculty, and administrators negotiated, regulated, and resisted particular meanings of gender and sexuality. I would also occasionally ride along with Mr. Johnson (Mr. J.), the head of the school’s disciplinary system, in his battery-powered golf cart to watch which and how and when students were disciplined.

Given the importance of appearance in high school, I gave some thought to how I would present myself to the students at River High. I wore my standard graduate student gear—comfortable, baggy cargo pants, a black T-shirt or sweater, and tennis shoes. I carried a messenger bag instead of a backpack. I didn’t wear makeup. Because I look young, both students and faculty sometimes asked me if I was a new student.

More than a few times teachers or security personnel whom I hadn't yet met reprimanded me for walking around the halls during class time. I did not try to pass as or fit in with the students in my interactional style. I spoke differently than the students, using just enough slang so that I didn't seem like a teacher but asking them to explain themselves frequently enough to indicate that I was not one of them. See the Appendix for a more extensive discussion of the unique difficulties of conducting research in a high school as well as the challenges and benefits of being a woman conducting research on male and female adolescents.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Analyzing interactions between teachers, school rules, and students, chapter 2 continues to draw upon the Mr. Cougar competition as a metaphor for masculinity at River High. This chapter begins to paint a picture of River High—its flavor, traditions, students, teachers, and administration. It focuses on how sexuality is embedded in the daily life of the school and how sexual discourses interact with definitions of masculinity. Heteronormative practices, those that affirm that boy-girl pairings are natural and preferable to same-sex pairings, are entrenched in official and unofficial school rules, school rituals, and pedagogical practices.

In chapter 3, I continue to link meanings of sexuality to definitions of masculinity. Specifically I examine how a fag identity is continually used to discipline boys into heterosexually masculine positions. The *fag* epithet has both sexual and nonsexual meanings that always draw on notions of gender. Examining the use of the word *fag* as a trope reveals that it is not necessarily a static identity that attaches permanently to a certain (gay) boy's body; rather, it is a fluid identity that boys struggle to avoid, often by lobbing the insult at others. I conclude by showing that the fag identity is, in part, racialized, taking on different meanings and salience in various social groups.

Chapter 4 discusses complicated relationships between heterosexual-

ity and masculinity in adolescence. Discussions about teenage boys are riddled with clichés concerning hormone-driven behavior. This chapter moves beyond these trite characterizations of testosterone-fueled locker-room talk by reframing it as “compulsive heterosexuality,” in which these sorts of practices are ritualized demonstrations of mastery over girls' bodies, not necessarily indicators of sexual desire. Compulsive heterosexuality plays a central role in boys' thoughts, actions, and discussions at River High. Through rituals of “getting girls,” cross-gender touching, and engaging in “sex talk” with one another, some boys continually demonstrate to themselves and others that they are indeed masculine. Defining masculinity as mastery builds on the definitions of masculinity elaborated in chapter 3, in which boys make it clear that the most un-masculine position is a fag position, in which a boy is weak, penetrated, and lacking in mastery over his and others' bodies. In the Appendix, I discuss how these masculinizing processes in adolescence don't just take place among peers but also happen between a female researcher and (primarily) male respondents. I focus particularly on the ways the boys infused our interactions with sexual content and the ways I managed these interactions so as to maintain rapport while simultaneously enforcing a professional distance and preserving my dignity.

Chapter 5 challenges the dominant mode of thinking in the sociology of masculinity literature that treats masculinity as, more or less, whatever male bodies do. Three cases of girls who act like guys reveal the different ways non-normative sexual identities interact with gender identity and social status. These case studies indicate that masculine girls occupy higher-status social positions than do feminine boys. They also indicate that doing gender differently can, but doesn't always, challenge gender inequality.

The concluding chapter revisits topics discussed in the substantive chapters and lays out the theoretical significance of the project. It raises questions about how adolescent gender and sexual identities can be re-configured to be less homophobic and sexist. In this discussion I make

connections between homophobia, sexuality, and inequality. I conceptualize the teasing and bullying that goes on in adolescence as a socialization process in which all youth—boys and girls, straight and gay, feminine and masculine—suffer. This chapter provides specific recommendations about the creation of antihomophobia programs and structural support for gay and non-normatively gendered students.

CHAPTER TWO

Becoming Mr. Cougar

Institutionalizing Heterosexuality and Masculinity at River High

Before Brent and Greg took the stage to perform their “Revenge of the Nerds” sketch, they, like the other Mr. Cougar candidates, paraded around the gym while students cheered in what looked a lot like a marriage ceremony. As Brent’s name was announced, a female student emerged from the back of the gym holding up a poster board sign decorated with his name and his water polo number. Behind her, Brent, dressed in a tuxedo and flanked by his mother and a formally attired female escort, stepped out into the auditorium of raucous students. The quartet proceeded around the gym, pausing at each of three sets of bleachers so the students could applaud as Brent and his escort waved to their friends. His mother beamed as she held tightly to his arm. Brent stopped at the third set of bleachers to deposit her in a row of chairs specially designated for the mothers of the Mr. Cougar candidates (no seats were provided for fathers or other relatives, who presumably sat behind them in the bleachers). Brent planted a kiss on her cheek and proceeded around the remainder of the gym with his teenage escort. After all members of the “Top Six” (the six candidates who had received the most votes in the Mr. Cougar contest) had engaged in this procession, they disappeared behind a screen to ready themselves for their skits.

Like a wedding, this popularity ritual marks a transition to adulthood (Modell 1989). The Top Six are handed off from an opposite-sex parent to an age- and gender-appropriate escort. In this case, the mother's relinquishing of her son to a female date while receiving a chaste but sexualized sign of goodbye, the kiss, symbolizes the way certain heterosexual practices denote adulthood. As in a wedding ritual, the starring couple is dressed up in costume, cheered by others, and posed for pictures so that the two remain linked in students' minds for years to come.

Though teenagers and sexuality are almost redundant concepts, schools are not necessarily thought of as sexual institutions. Rather, teens themselves are seen as hypersexual and adults are charged with containing this sexuality. Life markers such as a teen's first kiss, "going steady," and loss of virginity all function as recognizable tropes of adolescent sexuality. Teen sexuality occupies an ambivalent cultural space, marking a maturation process and denoting danger and chaos because teens' sexual practices are seen as unsafe and out of control (Tait 2000). Researchers tend to focus on dangerous aspects of teen sexual activity such as sexually transmitted diseases, date rape, and pregnancy (Medrano 1994; Strunin 1994). Researchers who do examine sexualized adolescent identities rather than practices tend to focus on non-normative identities such as gay and lesbian teenagers (Kulkin, Chauvin, and Perle 2000; Waldner-Haugrud and Magruder 1996).

This chapter takes a slightly different approach to teenage sexuality. Rather than address individual sexual practices or identities of teenagers, I look at the school itself as an organizer of sexual practices, identities, and meanings. Beginning in elementary school, students participate in a "heterosexualizing process" (Renold 2000) in which children present themselves as "normal" girls or boys through discourses of heterosexuality (see also Kehily 2000; K. Robinson 2005). Schools that convey and regulate sexual meanings are often organized in ways that are heteronormative and homophobic (Walford 2000; Walters and Hayes 1998; Wood 1984). The ordering of sexuality from elementary school through high school is inseparable from the institutional ordering of gendered

identities. The heterosexualizing process organized by educational institutions cannot be separated from, and in fact is central to, the development of masculine identities.

While school rituals such as Mr. Cougar are a prime site for the affirmation and definition of normative sexual and gender identities, seemingly neutral areas of academic instruction also draw upon and reinforce normative definitions of heterosexuality (Letts and Sears 1999). For instance, at one elementary school a teacher invoked imagery of a heterosexual wedding to teach children rules of grammar (Ingraham 1999). The class put on a mock wedding between the letters "Q" (the groom) and "U" (the bride), to illustrate the common coupling of the two letters. Similar heteronormative discourses permeate sex education curricula, which often feature a heterosexual married couple as the model for teen sexuality (Moran 2000; Trudell 1993), and biology classes, in which gendered metaphors are used to explain the fertilization process (E. Martin 1997).¹

Building on this insight that schools are sexualized and gendered institutions, this chapter investigates River High's "informal sexuality curriculum" (Trudell 1993),² or the way sexuality is constructed at the level of the institution through disciplinary practices, student-teacher relationships, and school events. Looking at the structure of sexuality at school is important because masculinity and femininity are forged through a "heterosexual matrix" (Butler 1995) that involves the public ordering of masculinity and femininity through meanings and practices of sexuality. Both the formal and informal sexuality curricula at River High encouraged students to craft normative sexual and gendered identities, in which masculinity and femininity were defined by heterosexuality (Neilsen, Walden, and Kunkel 2000). Through these institutional practices of heterosexuality River High provided the scaffolding for an adolescent masculinity constituted by interactional rituals of heterosexism and homophobia. Through school rituals, pedagogical practices, and disciplinary procedures, River High set up formal and informal sexual practices that reflected definitions of masculinity and femininity as op-

posite, complementary, unequal, and heterosexual (Butler 1993). Thus sexuality, in this sense, cannot be looked at as separate from gender. Heterosexuality both depends upon and produces gendered identities, meanings, and practices. This informal and formal institutional ordering of gender and sexuality sets the stage for the rest of the book, in which I document how boys and girls engage in interactional rituals to achieve masculine identities, which are, in large part, based in similar homophobic and heterosexualizing processes.

RIVER HIGH'S GENDER AND SEXUALITY CURRICULUM

River High's official policies about sexual matters reflected an ambivalence about adolescent sexuality. Administrators strove to protect students from exposure to sexualized topics and at the same time were exceedingly interested in students' sexual practices, expressions, and identities. While River High's administration was wary of any official discussion of sexuality, informal discussions happened all the time, many of them instigated by or occurring within earshot of teachers or other school officials.

I first experienced River High's ambivalent stance about students and sexuality when I was trying to secure the school as a research site. Following the instructions of Mr. Hobart, the principal of River High, I wrote a letter to the school district office outlining my research plans and requesting permission to conduct interviews with students. In the letter I outlined eight interview topics I planned to cover: families, self-image, adolescence, friends, pastimes, the future, and gender. When Principal Hobart e-mailed me to discuss the project he told me that the school board was concerned with the "gender" subheading and questions I might ask about "sexual identity development." None of the other proposed topics concerned them. Lauren Carter, River High's guidance specialist, underscored this point when she later told me that the school had recently been contacted to participate in a survey of students' "at-risk"

behavior. The organization sponsoring the study had offered the school a much-needed \$10,000 for participating. Lauren laughed as she explained that there was "no way" the school would allow people to ask students about sex. Her comment and the school board's wariness echoed larger social anxieties about kids and sexual behavior. Because, in the United States, adults interpret adolescent sexuality as problematic and disruptive, as opposed to a normal part of the life course, they try to avoid inspiring sexual behavior by refusing to talk about it (Schalet 2000). American schools' reliance on abstinence-only sex education programs (Trudell 1993) and River High's suspicion of researchers reflect this sort of approach to teen sexuality. They reflect the twin assumptions that American teens are too innocent to know about sexuality and too sexual to be trusted with information.

River High's administrators, while concerned with researchers talking to students about sex, were keenly interested in students' sexual behaviors. During a meeting with Lauren on my first day of research, she talked about a recent incident in which several football players had raped a female student. She explained that this scandal was one of the reasons the administration found my research so interesting. While administrators didn't want adults actually talking to students about sex, they did want to know about students' sexual behavior, and they understood that a focus on teen sex and sexuality would address some very serious social problems, like rape. As a result administrators at River High found themselves in an odd position in which they both regulated and encouraged discussions of sex, sexuality, and sexual practices.

Official policies about sexuality were also policies about gender. River High's dress code emphasized gender difference through its clothing policies. At the beginning of each year a dress code published in a student planner was distributed to students during fall registration. The year I was there, it detailed that girls were not allowed to wear clothes that showed their midriff or tank tops with thin straps.⁴ Boys were not allowed to wear what students referred to as "beaters," short for "wife beaters." These are thin, white, ribbed tank tops usually worn underneath an

unbuttoned, oversized button-down shirt. Girls, much to the consternation of many boys, were allowed to wear these, though most opted not to. The principal published an article in the school paper outlining the school's dress code:

For the young women of River High, that means you should dress in clothes that cover your bodies ensuring that personal portions of your torso are not exposed. This includes ensuring that belly buttons are covered. For the gentlemen of RHS you need to ensure that your pants remain at the waistline and that your underclothes and/or skin are not exposed.

The dress code clearly prevented both boys and girls from revealing certain parts of their bodies. However, the genders were charged with slightly different prohibitions. Even though the school dress code prohibited both boys and girls from showing certain parts of bare skin, Principal Hobart emphasized gender differentiation. According to this dress code a boy could show a belly button and a girl could wear pants below her waistline. In a similar spirit of gender differentiation through dress, boys and girls were assigned different-colored graduation robes. In fact, each year River held an assembly to display the yellow and black graduation robes, modeled by a girl and a boy respectively. Accompanied by loud music and an emcee, a boy wearing a black robe and a girl wearing a yellow robe strutted across the gym floor in front of throngs of screaming seniors, who were encouraged to order their robes as soon as possible.

In addition to emphasizing gender difference, official school policies encouraged sexual abstinence and discouraged homosexuality.⁵ River Unified School District policies dictated that in sex education courses, which were given from sixth to twelfth grade, abstinence be taught as the best practice. However, River High, like many schools in California, expressed some official, if reluctant, tolerance for "alternative" sexualities and gender expressions. Students were not suspended for wearing opposite-gender clothing (assuming it stayed within the boundaries dictated by the dress code). The administration (after a student threatened a lawsuit) allowed the for-

mation of a Gay/Straight Alliance (although, to be fair, it also allowed the formation of a White Heritage Club, a thinly veiled racist group). While the sex education standards did emphasize abstinence, they also emphasized recognition of different lifestyles as part of the curriculum. In the end, the school's official sexuality curriculum, while somewhat problematic, also indicated a willingness to change if that change was initiated by persistent students. Given the conservative area of California in which River High is located, this sort of flexibility about moral issues was impressive.

PEDAGOGY: THE UNOFFICIAL GENDER AND SEXUALITY CURRICULUM

The junior and senior social science classroom belonging to Ms. Macalister (whom students affectionately called Ms. Mac) was a shrine to heterosexuality. Ms. Mac was one of the most popular and effective teachers at River High. Short in stature, sporting high heels and an enormous personality, Ms. Mac infused the learning process with life and laughter. During my research at River, I always enjoyed my time in her classroom because she reminded me of some of my favorite high school teachers. River graduates often returned to visit her, and current students frequently popped their heads in her colorful classroom just to say "hi." Walking into her room, students saw a row of floor-to-ceiling cabinets decorated with long laminated ribbons designed to look like film from a movie reel. Down the center of these film rolls ran pictures of River students from proms and Winter Balls of years past. While a senior picture or two occasionally interrupted the parade of formal dresses and tuxes, the vast majority of the pictures showed boy-girl pairs dressed in their formal best. This had the effect of creating an environment in which a gender-differentiated heterosexuality was celebrated and made a focal point.

Ms. Mac established a comfortable rapport with her students through lighthearted teasing. Much of this teasing revolved around students' romantic relationships. One morning, as usual, friends Jeremy and Angela

walked in late, chatting amiably. Ms. Mac looked at them and shook her head, sighing, "Ah, the couple of the year coming in late." Jeremy and Angela rolled their eyes and laughed as they took their seats. Ms. Mac's comment effectively transformed a cross-gender friendship into a heterosexualized pairing. In commenting on Jeremy and Angela this way, she turned them into a pair who would fit right in with the normative images on her wall.

Like other teachers, Ms. Mac frequently drew on and reinforced concepts of heterosexuality in her teaching. One day, she was trying to explain to the students the "full faith and credit clause" of the Constitution, which states that one state has to honor another state's laws. Using marriage as an example, Ms. Mac explained, "If a state makes a law that twelve-year-olds can get married without their parents' permission . . ." Cathy interrupted her, shouting, "That's disgusting! Does that mean a twelve-year-old can marry a thirty-year-old?" Calvin and Rich yelled, "Oooh, gross!" Ignoring them, Ms. Mac continued to teach: "We have different state laws about marriage. If something happened they decided to live elsewhere and they had children . . ." Again several students yelled, "Eewww!" Brett helpfully added, "It would be damn near impossible for a twelve-year-old to do his deed."

Ms. Mac presumably used marriage as an example to which all the students could relate because of its assumed universality and ahistorical nature. However, she could have drawn on timely, social justice-oriented examples such as the Defense of Marriage Act and movements for gay marriage. She instead reinforced, with the help of the students, a narrative of heterosexuality that depends on a similar age of the two partners, involves the state sanction of that relationship, and encourages procreation as central to such a relationship. Brett built on this discourse by stating that it would "be damn near impossible for a twelve-year-old to do his deed." By saying this he linked sexual development and masculinity and referenced a definition of sexuality predicated on a man's ejaculatory abilities. This comment drew on narratives of masculinity that see sexuality as an important part of a movement from boyhood into manhood.

Like the administrators, teachers at River High often felt the need to control a potentially out-of-control sexuality in the classroom, even though they drew on imagery of this same sexuality in their pedagogical practices. Invoking sexual examples and metaphors was a useful pedagogical tool that allowed teachers to communicate with students and hold their attention; but because teen sexuality was perceived as potentially explosive teachers constantly sought to corral these same discussions. In doing so, teachers directed their energies primarily at the boys. Ms. Mac, for instance, walked this delicate line as she managed a class project in which the students were supposed to create a political party. The students needed to outline a platform, design campaign goals, and develop fundraising strategies. Student groups created parties ranging from those that addressed serious issues, such as the Civil Rights Party and the Environmental Party, to fanciful parties such as the Party Party (devoted to what else—partying) or the Man Party, dedicated to ending women's suffrage. The boys told me with relish, and the girls with anger, how the members of this party walked around school with clipboards to gather signatures from students supporting the termination of women's suffrage. The boys laughed as they explained that most of the girls thought that *suffrage* meant suffering.

The members of the Safer Sex Party, Jenni, Stephanie, and Arturo, planned to encourage condom use by handing out free condoms they had picked up at the local Planned Parenthood office. Jenny, to illustrate their point, held up a paper bag from which she withdrew a handful of multicolored condoms to show me. When the Safer Sex Party presented their project the next day, Ms. Mac panicked as they began to pass out condoms taped to pieces of paper with their party's slogan on them. Ms. Mac cried, "Oh, my goodness!" and looked at me, wide eyed. I said, "I knew this was coming." She responded, half seriously, half joking, "I could have used a warning!" Arturo read their statement of purpose, saying they had formed their party to "prevent HIV and AIDS." Chaos swept the class as students laughed and made jokes about the condoms. Ms. Mac sighed dramatically and repeatedly, mut-

tering, "No, no no no no." Alan, mocking her, started repeating, "No no no no no." Chad asked, "Can we have an example of safe sex?" Students laughed. Ms. Mac announced, with a note of pain, "Ladies and gentlemen, I'm just a little bit shocked by this. I could get fired. School board policy prevents distribution of them. I'm going to have to collect these afterwards." Alan, trying to keep his condom, challenged, "What if when you get them back one is missing?" Ms. Mac, starting to collect them, responded, "All you guys who put them in your wallets, give them back." After she had collected the condoms, the class had settled down, and other groups had presented, Ms. Mac looked over at Brett's bag and saw a condom in it. She picked it up and slipped it in her pocket. Alan, seeing that his friend was caught, reluctantly handed over the condom he had hidden earlier. Then Alan looked at Arturo, one of the Safer Sex Party members, and nodded at him with a knowing look, motioning that he'd get more from Arturo later. This incident so rattled Ms. Mac that for weeks afterward she teased me about not warning her.

In this instance the condom served as a symbol around which social anxieties about teen sexuality cohered. The condom was a "cultural object," or something that tells a story about the culture in which it is found (Griswold 1994). It represented students' real or potential sexual practices. While Ms. Mac certainly followed the school board's edict in her concern about the condom distribution, the panic in her voice belied a concern about students' sexual behavior and reflected the River High administration's general anxiety about it. This panic around the condom was ironic, as the students were acting, in this instance, as responsible sexual agents. Their political party was dedicated to promoting safer sex practices and stemming the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. With this goal they challenged River High's orthodoxy that students were not responsible enough to control their own sexual behavior by asserting that, in spite of their sex education curriculum, they did know about condoms and actually cared about their and other students' sexual health.

The condom, as a cultural object, also illustrated the importance of

heterosexual activity to masculine identities. While the girls tittered and laughed, it was the boys in the class for whom the link with sexual activity was important. For boys the condoms served as evidence of masculinity in that they were a proxy for heterosexual success. The boys were the ones who held on to the condoms instead of handing them back, made sure other students knew they held on to them, and attempted to gather more condoms. Chad also demonstrated his heterosexuality, in a way that no girl did, by requesting an example of "safe sex." Even Ms. Mac acknowledged the importance of condoms as symbols of virility when she specifically addressed the boys in the classroom as she tried to manage condom distribution frenzy—"so all you guys who put them in your wallets, give them back." The condoms became concrete symbols of masculinity through their signification of heterosexual activity. The condoms both threatened the stability of the classroom (in the minds of the teachers and the school administrators) and symbolized masculinity by indicating sexual activity.

In addition to teaching practices built on shared understandings of heterosexuality, mild discourses of homophobia permeated student-teacher interactions. Homophobic jokes between teachers and students, usually boys, figured prominently in River High's unofficial sexuality curriculum. Such interactions were especially frequent in mostly male spaces such as the weight room or the auto shop classroom. While Ms. Mac worried about the potential sexual activity of the boys in her class (and seemingly ignored the sexism of the boys who formed the Man Party), other teachers teased boys for an obvious lack of heterosexual experience. Huey, a large, white junior who sported an outdated high-top haircut and walked with an oafish loping gate, was a regular recipient of these sorts of homophobic taunts. His unfashionable clothing and sluggish interactional style marked him as an outcast. He wore his pants high on his waist, as opposed to the low-slung style favored by most boys, and tight-fitting shirts tucked into his pants, cinched by a belt. Other boys usually wore oversized shirts and certainly didn't tuck them neatly into their pants. Looking for approval from the other boys in auto shop, Huey

continually pulled stunts of stunning stupidity, usually at the urging of other boys. One day when I walked into auto shop, the entire class was in an uproar, screaming about how Huey had run and dived headfirst into the hood of the old Volvo that sat in the center of the room. The boys frequently joked about Huey's hypothetical girlfriend.

Mr. Ford, the art teacher, and Mr. Kellogg, the auto shop teacher, also teased Huey about his lack of heterosexual success. One afternoon, after school let out, Mr. Ford walked across the quad from the art room to stand with Mr. Kellogg in front of the auto shop room. He pointed across the quad at Huey, who was slowly loping toward them. Mr. Ford turned to Mr. Kellogg, saying, "I had to teach him a lesson. I turned around and caught Huey flipping me off. I said, 'You should be doing that to girls, not to me.'" Both Mr. Kellogg and Mr. Ford laughed as Mr. Kellogg said, "I don't even know if Huey knows what that is yet! But I'm sure somebody has told him." Although, like most gestures, flipping someone off or giving someone "the finger" has multiple meanings and generally means one is simply disregarding another, in this instance Mr. Ford invoked its literal meaning—"fuck you." In doing so Mr. Ford invoked commonsense notions of masculinity in which, because Huey was a boy, he should be "fucking" girls, not Mr. Ford. This sort of interaction reaffirmed that, as a boy, Huey should be participating in masculine behavior such as engaging in sexual activities with girls. The comment also drew on a mild homophobia by reminding Huey that he should be "fucking" girls, not men.

Teachers commonly turned a deaf ear to boys' homophobic and sexist comments. Ignoring or passively watching boys' sexist and homophobic comments often occurred in primarily male spaces where, if a teacher were to address every offensive comment students uttered, very little learning would take place. Mr. Kellogg, the auto shop teacher who had teased Huey, primarily ignored the boys' off-color comments about sexuality. One hot afternoon he sent the students out to disassemble lawn mowers as a way to practice dismantling car engines. A group of boys grabbed rubber mallets and began pounding away at the tires and other

parts of the mowers instead of quietly dismantling them with screwdrivers the way they had been instructed to do the previous week. Presumably this wouldn't be the way they would actually dismantle car engines. I laughed along with the boys, who had formed a circle around those who were ferociously beating a lawn mower. Colin, standing next to me in the circle, said, "We have a whole class of retards who hit like girls." Surprisingly, this was one of the few times I heard a boy insult another by comparing him to a girl (or to someone who was developmentally disabled). Before each hit, the boy wielding the mallet yelled out in a deep affected voice, "One time!" to indicate that he would remove a given piece of the lawn mower by hitting it only one time instead of requiring multiple tries. Sufficient destruction with one hit indicated a given boy's strength and competence. As Jayden positioned himself to swing the mallet, Mr. Kellogg, who stood next to me and rolled his eyes, gently reminded Jayden to move his ankle away from the mallet so that he wouldn't shatter it. After yelling "One time!" Jayden hit the lawn mower, but apparently not to his satisfaction. So he turned around, switched hitting hands, and cried in a high-pitched voice, "I'm a switch hitter." The circled audience laughed and chanted, "Switch hitter! Switch hitter!" Swishing his hips and lisp, Jayden continued, "I'll show you a switch hitter!" Josh yelled, "I bet you will!" The session concluded as Josh, disgusted and surprised, yelled, "Dude, you hit like a girl!" The boys in auto shop drew on images of both femininity—"you hit like a girl!"—and bisexuality—"I'll show you a switch hitter." (A bisexual man was often referred to as a "switch hitter" or as someone who "played for both teams.") Mr. Kellogg not only ignored these comments but seemingly wrote them off to "boys will be boys" behavior, for he shook his head and laughed at their antics.

None of this is to say that Mr. Kellogg meant to be homophobic. Rather, this sort of collective affirmation of masculinity provided one of the few ways teachers could build rapport with their students, though it replicated definitions of masculinity as homophobic and sexist. Joking about sexuality was a way for teachers to cross generational boundaries,

illustrating to their students that they were not rendered completely irrelevant by their age. In this way teachers in both mixed and single-sex classrooms carried boys' favor by catering to their senses of humor, often at the expense of girls' dignity.

While teachers must have heard students use derogatory words such as *fag*, *gay*, *dyke*, or, as in the previous instance, *switch bitter*, with one exception I never heard any reprimands. Mr. McNally, the drama teacher and the exception, instructed his students not to call things they thought were stupid "gay," comparing it to calling a pair of shoes they didn't like "Mexican." When I was explaining my research to his class, they asked me what sorts of things I took notes about. Among other things, I said that I took notes on situations in which it looked like "guys were being not guy enough." A slight male sophomore to my left asked, "You mean gay, like homosexual?" Mr. McNally piped in with

That's something we haven't talked about in this class yet. You guys have been really good and I haven't seen the need to talk about this, but we might as well, since we're on the subject. You know how people use the word *gay* and they're usually calling something stupid, right? Well I have a lot of friends who are gay and they aren't stupid. So when you call something gay and mean stupid, you're really calling my friends stupid! It's not like I go around saying, "Oh, that's so Italian" or "Oh, that's so Mexican" or "Oh, that's so people-who-wear-blue-shirts!" So that sort of language is really not acceptable in this class, okay?

The students laughed at Mr. McNally's comparisons and seemed to receive this admonition seriously. Mr. McNally was the only teacher I saw specifically address this issue in or out of the classroom.

But even Mr. McNally, who prided himself on creating a classroom environment in which homophobic slurs were not tolerated, let pass boys' sexualized insults and sometimes participated in these jokes. Consider Mr. McNally's interaction with Rob during his advanced drama class. Rob walked to the stage preparing to perform that day's assignment, a dramatic enactment of a song. He wore a black tank top, jeans, and black wrap-around glasses. His hair was cropped short and spiked up.

He looked as if he had just stepped off the set of the movie *The Matrix*. Mr. McNally commented, "Rob's lookin' sharp with those glasses." This comment was followed by a short pause as the class grew silent. Then Mr. McNally asked, raising his eyebrows suggestively, "What are you doing after class, Rob?" The class cracked up. "It was on everybody else's mind!" Mr. McNally defended himself, laughing along with them. Although Mr. McNally had previously lectured the class on the inappropriateness of homophobic insults, he easily participated in a masculinized homophobic ritual in which he pretended to hit on Rob in order to make the class laugh, as if to remind them they should laugh at men who hit on other men.

Heterosexist and homophobic discourses about masculinity permeated the educational process at River High. Heterosexual discourses were embedded in the physical environment of the classroom, teachers' instructional practices, and students' classroom behavior. Teachers used these discourses to illustrate instructional concepts in ways that presumably resonated with male students. The same sort of balancing act maintained by the administration between knowing about student sexual practices and discouraging any acknowledgment of such practices was reflected in these interactions between teachers and students, in which teachers used sexually loaded discussions to relate to students while simultaneously discouraging sexual activity. These sorts of practices primarily centered on boys; thus messages about sexuality were simultaneously messages about gender.

SCHOOL RITUALS: PERFORMING AND POLICING GENDER AND SEXUALITY

As most students at River High would report, the major rituals of the school year were the Homecoming Assembly and football game, the Winter Ball, the Mr. Cougar Assembly, and prom. Whether students loved them, hated them, or professed indifference, these rituals shaped and organized much of their school-based social lives. The centrality of

ritual to social life in high school is little different from the centrality of ritual to social life in general. Sociologists and anthropologists have long noted that ritual is key to the formation and continuation of society (Durkheim 1995; Turner 1966). Through rituals members of a society reaffirm shared morality and values. School rituals are symbolic, bodily performances that affirm in- and out-groups, the normal and the abnormal (Light 2000; Quantz 1999), reproducing dominant understandings of race, gender, and class (Foley 1990). School rituals don't just reflect heteronormative gender difference; they actually affirm its value and centrality to social life.

At River High the majority of the important school rituals involved upperclassmen, especially seniors. Because part of the function of ritual is to contain anxiety and foster the transition from one social state to another, it makes sense that the most important school rituals would focus on seniors' transitions from adolescence to adulthood. The senior photographs in the yearbook provide a telling example of the ways sexuality and gender intersected as students undertook this transition. Unlike the sophomores and juniors, who could wear whatever they liked for their yearbook photos, seniors at River High wore prescribed costumes. The senior boys wore tuxedos and the girls wore off-the-shoulder, strapless, black wraps, some accented with a feather boa. The girls' pictures were cropped suggestively just below the top of the black wrap, often revealing a bit of cleavage. Boys were not only covered but excessively covered, with their tuxedo collars reaching high up their necks. It was as if students graduating into adulthood also moved into more highly dichotomized and sexualized gender difference. The time for individual gender expression had been in childhood, when the ninth, tenth, and eleventh graders chose their own outfits. But as seniors, they were pressed by outside conventions to emphasize sexualized gender difference.

The yearbook was an important social document in that it provided visual representations of the cultural and social life of River High. In this way the "superlatives" sections throughout the book emphasized male-female pairings as natural and necessary. Each grade featured a superla-

tives section that highlighted "best of" categories for girls and boys in each grade. Pictured here were boy-girl pairings for categories like "best dressed," "biggest flake," "best smile," "best looking," and "best couple." These pairings framed the heterosexual coupling as an important way of organizing students, reflecting larger understandings of the heterosexual dyad as a fundamental human pairing (Warner 1993).

Other school rituals at River High also highlighted gender difference and naturalized heterosexual pairings. Dances and student assemblies, the main rituals at River, were talked about for months in advance, covered in the school newspaper, and talked about for years afterward as the stories about assembly content, after-dance parties, and who drank how much grew larger and more outrageous with the passing of time. Students saved up money, bought special clothes, and had formal pictures taken of these events.

Dances were one of the few school events where students were not differentiated by grade. As in the senior yearbook photos, girls were usually excessively uncovered for these events, wearing short skirts, tight pants, or slinky dresses. Boys, on the other hand, sported baggy pants and equally baggy shirts. Generally dance sound tracks were filled with popular hip-hop songs featuring sexist lyrics about women's bodies. The students, especially the female students, eagerly sang along with these lyrics. At the Winter Ball the DJ played a song by the popular rap artist Nelly. Nelly rapped the chorus of the song, "It's gettin' hot in here / So take off all your clothes." The girls screamed along with the all-female chorus, "I am gettin' so hot / I wanna take my clothes off." This song was followed with a tune by the now-deceased Tupac Shakur that included the chorus "No matter where I go / I see the same ho." When the chorus reached the word *ho* the DJ turned down the speaker volume so that all the students could scream "ho" at the top of their lungs. While the school administrators and teachers tried to contain students' sexual behavior, there were instances, such as at dances, where students were able to behave in more sexually explicit ways. These sexually explicit lyrics centered on girls' sexual availability—such as girls taking off their

clothes, being sexually promiscuous, or being instructed by men to get naked.

These school rituals were a time of emphasized heterosexuality and also a time of increased school control of sexual activity. Dances were especially charged with sexual meanings. As bodily school rituals, they mobilized adult concern about controlling students' desires and practices. A campus supervisor, Betty, a thirtyish white woman with bleached blonde hair and copious makeup, expressed concern about students' dancing habits when I asked her about the Halloween Dance. She rolled her eyes and looked at me slowly, shaking her head: "I wouldn't even call it dancing, what those kids do. Mr. J. told us ahead of time to keep our eyes on the chairs." Surprised, I asked her, "Why the chairs?" She explained, "Boys like to sit on the chairs and then the girls stand up and dance for them." Betty made motions indicating that the girls were doing something like lap dancing. "We were pulling chairs out of the middle of the dance floor all night long." While girls could scream that they wanted to take their clothes off and boys and girls alike could refer to women as "hos," the administration drew the line at lap-dance simulations. It appears that the administrators weren't as concerned with sexism or the creation of a hostile environment as they were about the potential for sexual activity.

Before each dance, students were warned about dancing inappropriately, although what constituted inappropriate dancing was up for debate. The first rule listed on a sheet detailing the dance rules handed to students when they bought their tickets read: "Inappropriate dancing or unruly behavior will result in your removal from the dance and parents will be called." Only one teacher, Mr. Hoffman, told me that he had actually escorted a student from the dance for dancing inappropriately. He went out of his way one day in the hallway to ask me, "What did you think of the dancing at the dance? Can you believe the way they dance?" Without really waiting for an answer, he told me that last year a girl had pinned a boy against a wall, backed up into him, and bent all the way over, rubbing her behind into the boy's groin. He demonstrated this himself

in the middle of the student-filled hallway. He said that after the girl had performed this same dance move three times, he finally asked her to leave the dance.

While school administrators worried about students' potential for sexual activity, they also encouraged students' heterosexual relationships with each other, especially at these sexually charged events. For instance, when two students, a boy and a girl, were leaving Winter Ball early, two of the vice principals joked with them, "You two going to a hotel or what?" The two students turned around and laughed. So, while the staff were concerned with students' sexuality, they also, to some extent, encouraged it through sponsoring these types of rituals and joking with students about sexual activity. The gender inequality fostered by such heterosexuality never seemed to be of concern to school officials.

Performing Masculinity and Heterosexuality: Mr. Cougar

Years in advance, Mr. Cougar hopefuls talked about the election. John, a junior, spoke with me extensively about becoming Mr. Cougar. "It's neat," he told me with a smile on his face. "You wait for it all through high school. When you are a freshman you wait till you are a senior just to do it." Eric emphasized that Mr. Cougar was a "popularity contest." He expressed his frustration that he didn't qualify for the "Top Six," saying, "People want to be Mr. Cougar. Yeah, I wanted to be Mr. Cougar. But all it is is a popularity contest based on sports figures." This dual attitude toward the ritual echoed most boys' approaches to Mr. Cougar. They both wanted to become Mr. Cougar and rejected the whole endeavor because of its impossible standards.

The Mr. Cougar ritual began toward the end of the basketball season when each student received a list including the names of every senior boy. Over the next few weeks through a series of votes the list was whittled down to the six candidates referred to as the Top Six. From their freshman year on, students talked about the Top Six. Many set achieving

membership in the Top Six as a goal early on in high school. During the weeks before the Mr. Cougar Assembly, candidates were featured prominently around school, with the Mr. Cougar nominees competing in lunchtime games. The day of the final election an assembly was held in which all the candidates participated in skits in front of the entire student body. A panel of four teachers judged the skits. After the assembly the students voted for Mr. Cougar. That night the winning skit and the winner of the Mr. Cougar title were revealed at the basketball game.

Mr. Cougar skits, such as the "Revenge of the Nerds" skit that opened the book, illustrate the relationships between heterosexuality and masculinity, with girls often framed as a reward for masculine feats of strength. Randy Green and Freddy Martinez squared off in a similarly masculinized contest in their skit, "Wrestling World."⁶ The skit began with two boys carrying out a sign reading "Wrestling World, River High School 7:00 November 5." Loud music blared and four boys emerged, sparring, onto the stage. Randy mouthed as a deep voice boomed over the speakers, "You ready to do this?" Freddy answered with an equally deep voice, "I'm totally ready." Two other wrestlers, wearing turquoise and white to indicate that they were from River's rival high school, Hillside, responded in high-pitched female voices, "Let's do this!" The student body laughed at the whiny "girl" voices. As in the "Revenge of the Nerds" skit, male imitations of seemingly female behavior drew laughter and derision from the audience.

Twenty girls ran out on stage to dance a choreographed routine while the wrestlers changed offstage. The girls' shirts indicated which team they supported, with the River supporters in gold and the Hillside supporters in turquoise. Freddy and Randy emerged in loose-fitting white T-shirts and gym shorts. They warmed up by jumping rope, performing push-ups, and sparring with each other. Their Hillside opponents appeared, not in workout clothes, but in red long johns, cowboy boots, and cowboy hats, riding broomstick "ponies." They performed "girl" push-ups from their knees rather than their feet and made a big show of not being able to jump rope, instead tangling themselves up in the short rope. They concluded

this fantastic display of incompetence and femininity by slapping each other in a manner students referred to as "girl-fighting," rather than sparring with each other like real boxers, as Freddy and Randy did.

As soon as the boys finished their warm-ups, the chorus to the disco hit "It's Raining Men" played over the speakers. Presumably leaving their competition aside, the boys from each team threw their arms over each other's shoulders and proceeded to high-kick together like a line of Rockettes. The crowd roared in laughter at this imitation of femininity. Suddenly the music switched to the theme song from the movie *Rocky* as stagehands set up a wrestling ring. The wrestlers ran behind a screen to change into their outfits. Freddy and Randy emerged in sweats stuffed to make them appear huge and well-muscled. As the music changed from the Rocky anthem to the "Oompah Loompah" chorus from the movie *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, the Hillside team emerged skipping instead of strutting, and wearing bathrobes instead of sweat suits. They soon dropped the bathrobes, revealing tiny tight spandex wrestling singlets, at which point the audience laughed.

As the match began, surprisingly, the weaklings from Hillside High began to beat the River team. The crowd laughed hysterically as the supposed underdogs started to win the match. However, the River team soon recovered, and the match ended as Freddy picked up the skinniest Hillside wrestler and swung him around before tossing him out of the ring. After this sound defeat, Queen's "We Are the Champions" started to play. The dancing girls reappeared, and those wearing turquoise shirts ripped them off revealing gold shirts, thus indicating that they were now aligned with the winning team from River. They ran up to Freddy and danced around him to a song repeating the lyric "What does it take to be number one?"

Much like the "Revenge of the Nerds" skit, "Wrestling World" tells a story of masculinity and heterosexuality at River High. The skit fostered and encouraged masculinity as heterosexual, with women as rewards for a job well done. Like Brent and Craig, Freddy and Randy showed that they were men deserving of the Mr. Cougar crown through their deep voices, their physical strength, and their rejection of femininity. More

importantly, "hicks" from Hillside were held up as an object lesson. The audience was supposed to, and did, laugh at them for their "hick" (read poor) clothing, their lack of physical strength, and their high-pitched voices. Additionally the audience was encouraged to laugh at all displays of male femininity when the boys threw their arms over one another's shoulders to perform high kicks as if they were Rockettes. School officials vetted these skits, so presumably they encouraged, agreed with, or at least saw as unproblematic these definitions of masculinity. By providing the space and institutional support for such rituals, the school, in effect, endorsed normative masculinity as heterosexual and dominant.

Policing Gender and Sexuality

While, in dealing with the Mr. Cougar skits, the school administrators seemingly turned a blind eye to overt displays of heterosexuality, they didn't do this in all situations. While expressions of sexuality were often encouraged or at least tolerated for white boys, for certain groups of students, especially African American boys, they were especially discouraged. Later in the book I will talk about how the administrators policed sexuality by punishing public and political endorsements of homosexuality.

At River High African American students, both boys and girls, were disproportionately visible and the boys were disproportionately popular. This in-school status conflicted with their social status in the outside world, in which black men are disproportionately poor, jobless, and homeless. As James Earl Davis (1999) describes this seeming contradiction, "Black males are both adored and loathed in American schools. They are on the vanguard of hip-hop culture and set the standards of athleticism. On the other hand, they experience disproportionate levels of punishment and academic marginality" (49). African American boys move from the unjust disciplinary system of high school to a racist social and economic system. They are frequently under stricter disciplinary scrutiny than their white counterparts (Ferguson 2000; Majors 2001; Price 1999). Black men in America are consistently seen as hypersexual

and hypermasculine (Ross 1998). Accordingly at River High differential treatment often coalesced around African American boys' sexualized behaviors. The reclaiming of white women from the clutches of the gangstas in the Mr. Cougar sketch illustrates the assumed destructive potential of black male sexuality. This fear of black male heterosexuality is also revealed in the informal disciplinary regimes deployed around school rituals.

Each year River High School put on a dance show. During my fieldwork the show "Music Brings the People All Together," consisted of twenty-four different dance routines, some by individuals, most by groups, and a grand finale featuring the entire cast. Many of the dances were rather sexual. The dance show started off with a "cancan" routine in which a line of girls dressed in period costume rapidly and repeatedly flipped up their skirts in the front and back, showing their underwear. It seemed that the entire point of the routine was to show their underwear as many times as possible.

The last routine was an ensemble piece (one of seven mixed-gender dance routines) to "I've Had the Time of My Life," the theme song to the movie *Dirty Dancing*. The routine drew from the story line of the movie, in which teenagers at an upscale resort in the 1950s are prohibited from dancing "dirty." Dancing in such a way that one's pelvis meets with another's in a grinding motion is forbidden. In the end of the movie the teenagers triumph at the resort's annual talent show in which the male lead, Johnny, and female lead, Baby, rebel against their parents' stodgy ways to dance "dirty" to the song "I've Had the Time of My Life."

In the beginning of this routine, Ricky and Samantha stood in the middle of the stage facing each other and staring intently into each other's eyes, as do Baby and Johnny in the movie. Also, as in the movie, Ricky's hands ran seductively up and down Samantha's arms and sides as they began to gyrate their hips simultaneously in time to the music. The two continued to perform sexually evocative moves accompanied by sexually charged looks. Several minutes into the song all of the performers joined them to execute a final group dance, spilling out onto the floor of the theater in a celebration of "dirty dancing."

However, not all students were given free reign to dance this seductively. The eighteenth dance number was put on by the Pep Club, the name given to a group of primarily African American students, much to their frustration, by the school administration. The Pep Club, or Bomb Squad,⁸ as they renamed themselves, had formed to give black students a presence at school assemblies and games. The cheerleading squads, as at other schools, were primarily composed of white girls (Adams and Bettis 2003). There were no African American members during my time there. African American girls at River were keenly aware of this, frequently noting the whiteness of the cheer squad as they performed at assemblies. One particular group of African American girls, many of whom were on the Bomb Squad, danced and sang through many of the assemblies. As the mostly white cheerleading team took the floor at the Fall Sports Assembly, one of these girls, Trisha, yelled out, "I don't see no black cheerleaders!" She was right, there were no black cheerleaders. They were mostly white and Asian, and a smattering of Latina girls. At another time I heard a white cheerleader make a similar comment when Sarah told me that African American girls who were talented dancers tried out for cheerleading but never made the squad.

The Bomb Squad had similar problems appearing on stage at school events. According to the Bomb Squad members, they often had trouble getting the school administration to let them perform at rallies and assemblies, even though the student body went wild as they performed their high-energy dance, step, and chanting routines.

The Bomb Squad's performance to an initially slow hip-hop song that picked up tempo as it continued opened with the six boys sitting in chairs and the girls dancing in front of them, gyrating their bottoms in front of the boys' faces. The boys eventually stood up to dance behind the girls, rotating their hips, but never touching the girls. At the end of the song the group ran off the stage, the boys high-fiving and hugging each other, each yelling over the others, "I didn't touch her!" "I didn't either!" K. J. stopped to explain to me, "We'd get suspended if we touched the girls."

The next day in weight lifting, several of the boys explained to me that before the dance show several of the vice principals had come to watch the dances in order to give them official approval. While three of the dances were relatively sexual—the cancan, the "dirty dancing" finale, and this routine—only the African American boys were singled out and given strict instructions not to touch the girls. The dancers in the finale were white, and in the cancan there were no boys. So while sexuality was certainly on display and approved of in the dance show, it was the relationship between race, gender, and sexuality that rendered black boys so potentially dangerous to the delicate balance of the (hetero)sexual order established by the school.

The problem here is not heterosexuality but a particularly racialized and gendered heterosexuality. Teenagers are seen as inherently sexual and black men are seen as extremely sexual. So the sexual behavior of African American teenage boys is taken much more seriously than that of white boys. In her study of sixth-grade African American boys, Ann Ferguson (2000) argued that teachers and administrators attributed an intentionality to African American boys' misbehavior that they did not attribute to white boys' misdeeds. When white boys misbehaved, teachers excused them with a resigned "boys will be boys" response. However, when African American boys joked, spoke out, or otherwise misbehaved in the classroom or schoolyard, adults at the school Ferguson studied assumed that they were doing so on purpose. This assumption of an adult intentionality results in harsher punishments for African American boys. By setting up a logic of institutionalized racism, this sort of treatment stunts their educational development. When white boys danced sexually with (usually white) girls, the administration didn't take note of it, possibly regarding it as a normal teenage behavior. It is likely that, much like the adults at the school Ferguson studied, the administrators at River saw African American boys' sexual behavior as adult and intentional. African American boys embodied contradictions in that they were both profoundly threatening and profoundly disempowered in the world of River High.

GENDER AND SEXUALITY REGIMES

The social space of River High was a complex cultural arena in which students, teachers, and administrators invested in and reproduced larger cultural meanings around gender and sexuality.⁹ Because of that, River High's structuring of gender and sexuality was, in the end, unremarkable but important because it provided the context in which boys and girls forged gendered and sexual identities. As teachers and administrators told me when I first entered the school, it indeed felt like a school out of middle America. It wasn't just that the school was objectively average, it was that the students and administrators saw it that way. Students often spoke of "Cougar Pride" or "tradition" without embarrassment. I expected to hear sarcasm, but instead I heard an earnest passion in their voices as they talked about what they liked about River. Some even talked about returning to teach at River like Mr. McNally, the drama teacher, or Mr. Hobart, the principal. Their ordering of the heterosexual matrix was interesting precisely because it was the stuff of everyday life. In time-honored high school rituals, masculinity and femininity were produced as opposite and unequal identities primarily through heterosexual practices, metaphors, and jokes.

River High's administrators, like many parents and policy makers, were wary of teens' burgeoning sexuality. They feared that too much information or too much discussion of sex might encourage the students to engage in all sorts of irresponsible behaviors. In a nation that views teenage pregnancy rates as a sign of its moral worth, refuses to provide single and unemployed mothers with sufficient financial support, and is deeply divided about abortion, sex is indeed a scary subject. Ms. Mac's terror about the loss of her job in the face of students' distribution of condoms illustrates how seriously school boards, parents, and some teachers take the issue of teen sex. However, teachers must also navigate the everyday educational process. They somehow must engage students in learning about things that seem foreign to their own lives, such as the Interstate Commerce Act or the Fourteenth Amendment. To this end, Ms.

Mac took a path several other teachers do: she used examples about sex. That way she could forge rapport with students by catching their attention (wow—my teacher is talking about sex!) and relating a seemingly esoteric subject to topics that permeated much of student life—sex and romantic relationships. But the way she deployed sexual talk in her pedagogy was not neutral. That is, her sex talk was directed primarily at boys—assuming, for instance, that they were the ones interested in condoms. It seemed that girls' subjectivity was tangential to course work—as when a group of boys formed the Man Party, literally dedicated to rolling back women's citizenship rights, with no repercussions. Similarly male teachers curried boys' attention by allowing sexist and homophobic conversations and practices to go unchecked.

River High's school rituals mirrored society's expectations of a dominant, white heterosexual masculinity and a sexually available femininity. Boys were represented in these rituals as heterosexually successful and physically dominant over girls and over weaker boys. They repeatedly emphasized their masculinity by losing their feminine voices, beating other boys into submission, and validating their heterosexuality by "winning" girls. Girls, conversely, were represented as sexually available in both the yearbook pictures and the homecoming skits. The administration, for all of its fear about teen sexuality, organized and funded school rituals that fostered a sexist heterosexuality, with girls as sexual objects or rewards.

It seemed that the administrators, the teachers, and the kids were trying to accomplish the task of education and socialization in the best way they knew. This task and the way these students were taught to become adult men and women illustrate not just the particularities at River High but the ambivalence and anxieties we, as a society, feel about issues of gender, sexuality, and race. In the next chapter I continue to explore the centrality of sexuality to definitions of masculinity at River High by focusing on a particular sort of interactional process through which boys affirm to themselves and each other that they are straight: engaging with the threatening specter of the faggot.

CHAPTER THREE

Dude, You're a Fag

Adolescent Male Homophobia

The sun shone bright and clear over River High's annual Creative and Performing Arts Happening, or CAPA. During CAPA the school's various art programs displayed students' work in a fairlike atmosphere. The front quad sported student-generated computer programs. Colorful and ornate chalk art covered the cement sidewalks. Tables lined with student-crafted pottery were set up on the grass. Tall displays of students' paintings divided the rear quad. To the left of the paintings a television blared student-directed music videos. At the rear of the back quad, a square, roped-off area of cement served as a makeshift stage for drama, choir, and dance performances. Teachers released students from class to wander around the quads, watch performances, and look at the art. This freedom from class time lent the day an air of excitement because students were rarely allowed to roam the campus without a hall pass, an office summons, or a parent/faculty escort. In honor of CAPA, the school district bussed in elementary school students from the surrounding grammar schools to participate in the day's festivities.

Running through the rear quad, Brian, a senior, yelled to a group of boys visiting from the elementary schools, "There's a faggot over there! There's a faggot over there! Come look!" Following Brian, the ten-year-olds dashed down a hallway. At the end of the hallway Brian's friend Dan

pursed his lips and began sashaying toward the little boys. As he minced, he swung his hips exaggeratedly and wildly waved his arms. To the boys Brian yelled, "Look at the faggot! Watch out! He'll get you!" In response, the ten-year-olds raced back down the hallway screaming in terror. Brian and Dan repeated this drama throughout the following half hour, each time with a new group of young boys.

Making jokes like these about faggots was central to social life at River High. Indeed, boys learned long before adolescence that faggots were simultaneously predatory and passive and that they were, at all costs, to be avoided. Older boys repeatedly impressed upon younger ones through these types of homophobic rituals that whatever they did, whatever they became, however they talked, they had to avoid becoming a faggot.

Feminist scholars of masculinity have documented the centrality of homophobic insults and attitudes to masculinity (Kimmel 2001; Lehne 1998), especially in school settings (Burn 2000; Kimmel 2003; Messner 2005; Plummer 2001; G. Smith 1998; Wood 1984). They argue that homophobic teasing often characterizes masculinity in adolescence and early adulthood and that antigay slurs tend to be directed primarily at gay boys. This chapter both expands on and challenges these accounts of relationships between homophobia and masculinity. Homophobia is indeed a central mechanism in the making of contemporary American adolescent masculinity. A close analysis of the way boys at River High invoke the faggot as a disciplinary mechanism makes clear that something more than simple homophobia is at play in adolescent masculinity. The use of the word *fag* by boys at River High points to the limits of an argument that focuses centrally on homophobia. Fag is not only an identity linked to homosexual boys but an identity that can temporarily adhere to heterosexual boys as well. The fag trope is also a racialized disciplinary mechanism.

Homophobia is too facile a term with which to describe the deployment of *fag* as an epithet. By calling the use of the word *fag* homophobia—and letting the argument stop there—previous research has obscured the gendered nature of sexualized insults (Plummer 2001). Invoking homo-

phobia to describe the ways boys aggressively tease each other overlooks the powerful relationship between masculinity and this sort of insult. Instead, it seems incidental, in this conventional line of argument, that girls do not harass each other and are not harassed in this same manner. This framing naturalizes the relationship between masculinity and homophobia, thus obscuring that such harassment is central to the formation of a gendered identity for boys in a way that it is not for girls.

Fag is not necessarily a static identity attached to a particular (homosexual) boy. Fag talk and fag imitations serve as a discourse with which boys discipline themselves and each other through joking relationships. Any boy can temporarily become a fag in a given social space or interaction. This does not mean that boys who identify as or are perceived to be homosexual aren't subject to intense harassment. Many are. But becoming a fag has as much to do with failing at the masculine tasks of competence, heterosexual prowess, and strength or in any way revealing weakness or femininity as it does with a sexual identity. This fluidity of the fag identity is what makes the specter of the fag such a powerful disciplinary mechanism. It is fluid enough that boys police their behaviors out of fear of having the fag identity permanently adhere and definitive enough so that boys recognize a fag behavior and strive to avoid it.

An analysis of the fag discourse also indicates ways in which gendered power works through racialized selves. The fag discourse is invoked differently by and in relation to white boys' bodies than it is by and in relation to African American boys' bodies. While certain behaviors put all boys at risk for becoming temporarily a fag, some behaviors can be enacted by African American boys without putting them at risk of receiving the label. The racialized meanings of the fag discourse suggest that something more than simple homophobia is involved in these sorts of interactions. It is not that gendered homophobia does not exist in African American communities. Indeed, making fun of "negro faggotry seems to be a rite of passage among contemporary black male rappers and filmmakers" (Riggs 1991, 253). However, the fact that "white women and men, gay and straight, have more or less colonized cultural debates about

sexual representation" (Julien and Mercer 1991, 167) obscures varied systems of sexualized meanings among different racialized ethnic groups (Almaguer 1991). Thus far male homophobia has primarily been written about as a racially neutral phenomenon. However, as D. L. King's (2004) recent work on African American men and same-sex desire pointed out, homophobia is characterized by racial identities as well as sexual and gendered ones.

WHAT IS A FAG? GENDERED MEANINGS

"Since you were little boys you've been told, 'Hey, don't be a little faggot,'" explained Darnell, a football player of mixed African American and white heritage, as we sat on a bench next to the athletic field. Indeed, both the boys and girls I interviewed told me that *fag* was the worst epithet one guy could direct at another. Jeff, a slight white sophomore, explained to me that boys call each other fag because "gay people aren't really liked over here and stuff." Jeremy, a Latino junior, told me that this insult literally reduced a boy to nothing, "To call someone *gay* or *fag* is like the lowest thing you can call someone. Because that's like saying that you're nothing."

Most guys explained their or others' dislike of fags by claiming that homophobia was synonymous with being a guy. For instance, Keith, a white soccer-playing senior, explained, "I think guys are just homophobic." However, boys were not equal-opportunity homophobes. Several students told me that these homophobic insults applied only to boys and not to girls. For example, while Jake, a handsome white senior, told me that he didn't like gay people, he quickly added, "Lesbians, okay, that's *good*." Similarly Cathy, a popular white cheerleader, told me, "Being a lesbian is accepted because guys think, 'Oh that's cool.'" Darnell, after telling me that boys were warned about becoming faggots, said, "They [guys] are fine with girls. I think it's the guy part that they're like ewwww." In this sense it was not strictly homophobia but a gendered homophobia that constituted adolescent masculinity in the culture of River

High. It is clear, according to these comments, that lesbians were “good” because of their place in heterosexual male fantasy, not necessarily because of some enlightened approach to same-sex relationships. A popular trope in heterosexual pornography depicts two women engaging in sexual acts for the purpose of male titillation. The boys at River High are not unique in making this distinction; adolescent boys in general dislike gay men more than they dislike lesbians (Baker and Fishbein 1998). The fetishizing of sex acts between women indicates that using only the term *homophobia* to describe boys’ repeated use of the word *fag* might be a bit simplistic and misleading.

Girls at River High rarely deployed the word *fag* and were never called fags. I recorded girls uttering *fag* only three times during my research. In one instance, Angela, a Latina cheerleader, teased Jeremy, a well-liked white senior involved in student government, for not ditching school with her: “You wouldn’t ’cause you’re a faggot.” However, girls did not use this word as part of their regular lexicon. The sort of gendered homophobia that constituted adolescent masculinity did not constitute adolescent femininity. Girls were not called dykes or lesbians in any sort of regular or systematic way. Students did tell me that *slut* was the worst thing a girl could be called. However, my field notes indicate that the word *slut* (or its synonym *ho*) appeared one time for every eight times the word *fag* appeared.

Highlighting the difference between the deployment of *gay* and *fag* as insults brings the gendered nature of this homophobia into focus. For boys and girls at River High *gay* was a fairly common synonym for “stupid.” While this word shared the sexual origins of *fag*, it didn’t consistently have the skew of gender-loaded meaning. Girls and boys often used *gay* as an adjective referring to inanimate objects and male or female people, whereas they used *fag* as a noun that denoted only unmasculine males. Students used *gay* to describe anything from someone’s clothes to a new school rule that they didn’t like. For instance, one day in auto shop, Arnie pulled out a large older version of a black laptop computer and placed it on his desk. Behind him Nick cried, “That’s a gay laptop! It’s five inches

thick!” The rest of the boys in the class laughed at Arnie’s outdated laptop. A laptop can be gay, a movie can be gay, or a group of people can be gay. Boys used *gay* and *fag* interchangeably when they referred to other boys, but *fag* didn’t have the gender-neutral attributes that *gay* frequently invoked.

Surprisingly, some boys took pains to say that the term *fag* did not imply sexuality. Darnell told me, “It doesn’t even have anything to do with being gay.” Similarly, J. L., a white sophomore at Hillside High (River High’s cross-town rival), asserted, “*Fag*, seriously, it has nothing to do with sexual preference at all. You could just be calling somebody an idiot, you know?” I asked Ben, a quiet, white sophomore who wore heavy-metal T-shirts to auto shop each day, “What kind of things do guys get called a fag for?” Ben answered, “Anything . . . literally, anything. Like you were trying to turn a wrench the wrong way, ‘Dude, you’re a fag.’ Even if a piece of meat drops out of your sandwich, ‘You fag!’ ” Each time Ben said, “You fag,” his voice deepened as if he were imitating a more masculine boy. While Ben might rightly *feel* that a guy could be called a fag for “anything . . . literally, anything,” there were actually specific behaviors that, when enacted by most boys, could render them more vulnerable to a *fag* epithet. In this instance Ben’s comment highlights the use of *fag* as a generic insult for incompetence, which in the world of River High, was central to a masculine identity. A boy could get called a fag for exhibiting any sort of behavior defined as unmasculine (although not necessarily behaviors aligned with femininity): being stupid or incompetent, dancing, caring too much about clothing, being too emotional, or expressing interest (sexual or platonic) in other guys. However, given the extent of its deployment and the laundry list of behaviors that could get a boy in trouble, it is no wonder that Ben felt a boy could be called fag for “anything.” These nonsexual meanings didn’t replace sexual meanings but rather existed alongside them.

One-third (thirteen) of the boys I interviewed told me that, while they might liberally insult each other with the term, they would not direct it at a homosexual peer. Jabes, a Filipino senior, told me, “I actually say it

[*fag*] quite a lot, except for when I'm in the company of an actual homosexual person. Then I try not to say it at all. But when I'm just hanging out with my friends I'll be like, 'Shut up, I don't want you hear you any more, you stupid fag.' " Similarly J. L. compared homosexuality to a disability, saying there was "no way" he'd call an actually gay guy a fag because "there's people who are the retarded people who nobody wants to associate with. I'll be so nice to those guys, and I hate it when people make fun of them. It's like, 'Bro do you realize that they can't help that?' And then there's gay people. They were born that way." According to this group of boys, gay was a legitimate, or at least biological, identity.

There was a possibility, however slight, that a boy could be gay and masculine (Connell 1995). David, a handsome white senior dressed smartly in khaki pants and a white button-down shirt, told me, "Being gay is just a lifestyle. It's someone you choose to sleep with. You can still throw around a football and be gay." It was as if David was justifying the use of the word *fag* by arguing that gay men could be men if they tried but that if they failed at it (i.e., if they couldn't throw a football) then they deserved to be called a fag. In other words, to be a fag was, by definition, the opposite of masculine, whether the word was deployed with sexualized or nonsexualized meanings. In explaining this to me, Jamaal, an African American junior, cited the explanation of the popular rap artist Eminem: "Although I don't like Eminem, he had a good definition of it. It's like taking away your title. In an interview they were like, 'You're always capping on gays, but then you sing with Elton John.' He was like 'I don't mean gay as in gay.'" This is what Riki Wilchins (2003) calls the "Eminem Exception. Eminem explains that he doesn't call people 'faggot' because of their sexual orientation but because they're weak and unmanly" (72). This is precisely the way boys at River High used the term *faggot*. While it was not necessarily acceptable to be gay, at least a man who was gay could do other things that would render him acceptably masculine. A fag, by the very definition of the word, could not be masculine.

This distinction between fag as an unmasculine and problematic identity and gay as a possibly masculine, although marginalized, sexual iden-

tity is not limited to a teenage lexicon; it is reflected in both psychological discourses and gay and lesbian activism. Eve Sedgwick (1995) argues that in contemporary psychological literature homosexuality is no longer a problem for men so long as the homosexual man is of the right age and gender orientation. In this literature a homosexual male must be an adult and must be masculine. Male homosexuality is not pathologized, but gay male *effeminacy* is. The lack of masculinity is the problem, not the sexual practice or orientation. Indeed, the edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (a key document in the mental health field) that erased homosexuality as a diagnosis in the 1970s added a new diagnosis in its wake: Gender Identity Disorder. According to Sedgwick, the criteria for diagnosis are different for girls and boys. A girl has to actually assert that she is a boy, indicating a psychotic disconnection with reality, whereas a boy need only display a preoccupation with female activities. The policing of boys' gender orientation and of a strict masculine identity for gay men is also reflected in gay culture itself. The war against fags as the specter of unmasculine manhood appears in gay male personal ads in which men look for "straight-appearing, straight-acting men." This concern with both straight and gay men's masculinity not only reflects teenage boys' obsession with hypermasculinity but also points to the conflict at the heart of the contemporary "crisis of masculinity" being played out in popular, scientific, and educational arenas.

BECOMING A FAG: FAG FLUIDITY

"The ubiquity of the word *faggot* speaks to the reach of its discrediting capacity" (Corbett 2001, 4). It's almost as if boys cannot help shouting it out on a regular basis—in the hallway, in class, or across campus as a greeting. In my fieldwork I was amazed by the way the word seemed to pop uncontrollably out of boys' mouths in all kinds of situations.¹ To quote just one of many instances from my field notes: two boys walked out of the PE locker room, and one yelled, "Fucking faggot!" at no one in particular. None of the other students paid them any mind, since this

sort of thing happened so frequently. Similar spontaneous yelling of some variation of the word *fag*, seemingly apropos of nothing, happened repeatedly among boys throughout the school. This and repeated imitations of fags constitute what I refer to as a “fag discourse.”

Fag discourse is central to boys' joking relationships. Joking cements relationships among boys (Kehily and Nayak 1997; Lyman 1998) and helps to manage anxiety and discomfort (Freud 1905). Boys both connect with one another and manage the anxiety around this sort of relationship through joking about fags. Boys invoked the specter of the fag in two ways: through humorous imitation and through lobbing the epithet at one another. Boys at River High imitated the fag by acting out an exaggerated “femininity” and/or by pretending to sexually desire other boys. As indicated by the introductory vignette in which an older boy imitated a predatory fag to threaten little boys, male students at River High linked these performative scenarios with a fag identity. They also lobbed the *fag* epithet at each other in a verbal game of hot potato, each careful to deflect the insult quickly by hurling it toward someone else. These games and imitations made up a fag discourse that highlighted the fag not as a static but rather as a fluid identity that boys constantly struggled to avoid.

In imitative performances the fag discourse functioned as a constant reiteration of the fag's existence, affirming that the fag was out there; boys reminded themselves and each other that at any moment they could become fags if they were not sufficiently masculine. At the same time these performances demonstrated that the boy who was invoking the fag was *not* a fag. Emir, a tall, thin African American boy, frequently imitated fags to draw laughs from other students in his introductory drama class. One day Mr. McNally, the drama teacher, disturbed by the noise outside the classroom, turned to the open door, saying, “We'll shut this unless anyone really wants to watch sweaty boys playing basketball.” Emir lisped, “I wanna watch the boys play!” The rest of the class cracked up at his imitation. No one in the class actually thought Emir was gay, as he purposefully mocked both same-sex sexual desire (through pretending to admire the boys playing basketball) and an effeminate gender identity

(through speaking with a lisp and in a high-pitched voice). Had he said this in all seriousness, the class most likely would have responded in stunned silence. Instead, Emir reminded them he was masculine by immediately dropping the fag act. After imitating a fag, boys assure others that they are not a fag by instantly becoming masculine again after the performance. They mock their own performed femininity and/or same-sex desire, assuring themselves and others that such an identity deserves derisive laughter.

Boys consistently tried to force others into the fag position by lobbing the *fag* epithet at each other. One day in auto shop, Jay was rummaging through a junk-filled car in the parking lot. He poked his head out of the trunk and asked, “Where are Craig and Brian?” Neil responded with “I think they're over there,” pointing, then thrusting his hips and pulling his arms back and forth to indicate that Craig and Brian might be having sex. The boys in auto shop laughed. This sort of joke temporarily labeled both Craig and Brian as faggots. Because the fag discourse was so familiar, the other boys immediately understood that Neil was indicating that Craig and Brian were having sex. However, these were not necessarily identities that stuck. Nobody actually thought Craig and Brian were homosexuals. Rather, the fag identity was fluid—certainly an identity that no boy wanted but that most boys could escape, usually by engaging in some sort of discursive contest to turn another boy into a fag.

In this way the fag became a hot potato that no boy wanted to be left holding. One of the best ways to move out of the fag position was to thrust another boy into that position. For instance, soon after Neil made the joke about Brian having sex with Craig, Brian lobbed the *fag* epithet at someone else, deflecting it from himself, by initiating a round of a favorite game in auto shop, the “cock game.” Brian said quietly, looking at Josh, “Josh loves the cock,” then slightly louder, “Josh loves the cock.” He continued saying this until he was yelling, “JOSH LOVES THE COCK!” The rest of the boys laughed hysterically as Josh slunk away, saying, “I have a bigger dick than all you motherfuckers!” These two in-

stances show how the fag could be mapped, for a moment, onto one boy's body and how he, in turn, could attach it to another boy, thus deflecting it from himself. In the first instance Neil made fun of Craig and Brian for simply hanging out together. In the second instance Brian went from being a fag to making Josh into a fag through the "cock game." Through joking interactions boys moved in and out of the fag identity by discursively creating another as a fag.

Given the pervasiveness of fag jokes and the fluidity of the fag identity, it is difficult for boys to consistently avoid the brand. As Ben stated, it almost seemed that a boy could get called a fag for "anything." But most readily acknowledged that there were spaces, behaviors, and bodily compartments that made one more likely to be subject to the fag discourse, such as bodily practices involving clothing and dancing.

According to boys at River, fags cared about the style of their clothes, wore tighter clothes, and cared about cleanliness. Nils explained to me that he could tell that a guy was a fag by the way he dressed: "Most guys wear loose-fitting clothing, just kind of baggy. They [fags] wear more tight clothes. More fashionable, I guess." Similarly, nonfags were not supposed to care about dirtying their clothes. Auto shop was a telling example of this. Given that the boys spent two hours working with greasy car parts, they frequently ended up smudged and rumped by the end of class. While in the front of the classroom there was a room boys could change in, most of them opted not to change out of their school clothes, with a few modifying their outfits by taking their shirts off and walking around in their "beaters." These tank tops were banned at River High because of their association with gang membership. Auto shop was the one place on campus where boys could wear them with impunity. Like most of the boys in auto shop, Ben never changed out of his jeans or heavy-metal T-shirts. After working on a particularly oily engine he walked in to the classroom with grease stains covering his pants. He looked down at them, made a face, and walked toward me laughing, waving his hands around with limp wrists, and lisping in a high-pitched sing-song voice, "I got my good panths all dirty!" Ben's imitation indicated

that only a fag would actually care about getting his clothes dirty. "Real" guys didn't care about their appearance; thus it didn't matter if they were covered in grease stains. Of course, to not care about one's clothes, or to make fun of those who care about their clothes, ironically, is to also care about one's appearance. In this sense, masculinity became the carefully crafted appearance of not caring about appearance.

Indeed, the boys' approach to clothing and cleanliness mirrored trends in larger society and the ascendance of the "metrosexual." *Metrosexual* is the recently coined label for straight men who care about their appearance, meticulously piecing together outfits, using product in their hair, and even making manicure appointments (for clear polish, of course). Because these sorts of grooming practices are associated with gay men, straight men developed a new moniker to differentiate themselves from other straight men and from gay men.

Dancing was another practice that put a boy at risk of being labeled a fag. Often boys would jokingly dance together to diffuse the sexualized and feminized meanings embedded in dancing. At dances white boys frequently held their female dates tightly, locking their hips together. The boys never danced with one another unless they were joking or trying to embarrass one another. The examples of boys jokingly dancing together are too numerous to discuss, but the following example was particularly memorable. Lindy danced behind her date, Chris. Chris's friend Matt walked up and nudged Lindy aside, imitating her dance moves behind Chris. As Matt rubbed his hands up and down Chris's back, Chris turned around and jumped back, startled to see Matt there instead of Lindy. Matt cracked up as Chris turned red and swore at his friend.

A similar thing happened at CAPA as two of the boys from the band listened to another band play swing music. These two boys walked toward each other and began to ballroom-dance. Within a second or two they keeled over in laughter, hitting each other and moving away. This ritualized dance, moving closer and then apart, happened again and again when music played at River High. Boys participated in this ritualized exchange to emphasize that indeed they weren't fags.

When boys were forced to dance with one another, as in classroom activities, this sort of joking escalated. In the drama class Mr. McNally walked the students through an exercise that required them to stand so close to each other that most parts of their bodies touched. He instructed the students to stand in two circles on the stage, with each person on the outer circle directly behind someone in the inner circle. He began to play a haunting instrumental song with no vocals. As the song continued Mr. McNally told the students in the inner circle to close their eyes and let their bodies go limp, while still standing. He instructed the students in the outer circle to move the person in front through an interpretive dance, following his lead as he moved the student in front of him. As the music continued, most of the students in the outer circle watched Mr. McNally's movements intently, trying their best to mirror his actions. The result was an intimate and beautiful puppet-and-puppeteer-like dance with the student in back moving the student in front through slow, fluid poses. Instead of following Mr. McNally's movements like the rest of the class, one pair of white sophomores, Liam and Jacob, barely touched. Jacob stood in back of Liam and, instead of gently holding Liam's wrist with their full arms touching as the other students did, picked up Liam's wrist with two fingers as if picking up something repulsive and flung Liam's hand to its destination. He made jokes with Liam's arm, repeatedly flinging it up against Liam's chest in a movement that indicated Liam was "retarded." The jokes continued as the students switched places, so that the inner circle became the outer circle, with Liam now "in control" of Jacob. Liam placed Jacob's hand against his forehead as if saluting, made his arms flap like birds, and used Jacob's finger to poke at his eyes, all the while, unlike the other students, never letting the majority of his body touch Jacob's. At the end of the exercise Mr. McNally asked for the students' feedback. One of the girls said, a little embarrassed, "I hate to say it, but it was almost sexual." To which Mr. McNally responded, "Yeah, it's full physical contact," at which point Liam and Jacob took two steps apart from one another. Even though the entire class was assigned to touch one another simultaneously, Jacob and

Liam had a hard time following the instructions because it was so dangerous to actually "dance" together like this. Even in a class situation, in the most unsuspect of interactions, the fag discourse ran deep, forbidding boys to touch one another.

The constant threat of the fag regulated boys' attitudes toward their bodies in terms of clothing, dancing, and touching. Boys constantly engaged in repudiatory rituals to avoid permanently inhabiting the fag position. Boys' interactions were composed of competitive joking through which they interactionally created the constitutive outside and affirmed their positions as subjects.

EMBODYING THE FAG: RICKY'S STORY

Through verbal jockeying, most boys at River continually moved in and out of the fag position. For the one boy who permanently inhabited the fag position, life at River High was not easy. I heard about Ricky long before I met him. As soon as I talked to any student involved with drama, the choir, or the Gay/Straight Alliance, they told me I had to meet Ricky. Ricky, a lithe, white junior with a shy smile and downcast eyes, frequently sported multicolored hair extensions, mascara, and sometimes a skirt. An extremely talented dancer, he often starred in the school's dance shows and choreographed assemblies. In fact, he was the male lead in "I've Had the Time of My Life," the final number in the dance show. Given how important other students thought it was that I speak to him, I was surprised that I had to wait for nearly a year before he granted me an interview. His friends had warned me that he was "heterophobic" and as a result was reluctant to talk to authority figures he perceived were heterosexual. After I heard his stories of past and present abuse at the hands of negligent adults, cruel teenagers, and indifferent school administrators, I understood why he would be leery of folks asking questions about his feelings, experiences, and opinions. While other boys at River High engaged in continual repudiatory rituals around the fag identity, Ricky embodied the fag because of his homosexuality and his less normative gender identification and self-presentation.

Ricky assumed (rightly so in this context) that other people immediately identified him with his sexuality. He told me that when he first met people, "they'll be like, 'Can I ask you a personal question?' And I'm like, 'Sure.' And they say, 'Are you gay?' And I'm like, 'Yeeeahh.' 'Okay, can I ask you another question?' And I'm like, 'Sure.' And they'll go, 'Does it hurt?' It always goes . . ." He rolled his eyes dismissively, telling me, "They go straight up to the most personal question! They skip everything else. They go straight to that. Sometimes I'll get the occasional 'Well, how did you know that you were [gay]?' " He answered with "For me it's just always been there. I knew from the time I could think for myself on. It was pretty obvious," he concluded gesturing to his thin frame and tight-fitting tank top with a flourish.

Ricky lived at the margins of school, student social life, and society in general. His mother died when he was young. After her death, he moved around California and Nevada, alternately living with his drug-addicted father, a boyfriend's family, his aunt, his sister, and his homophobic grandmother (who forbade him to wear nail polish or makeup). The resulting discontinuities in his education proved difficult in terms of both academics and socialization:

It's really hard to go to a school for a period of time and get used to their system and everything's okay. Then when all of a sudden you have to pick up and move the next week, get into a new environment you have no idea about, you don't know how the kids are gonna react to you. You don't know what the teachers are like and you don't know what their system is. So this entire time I have not been able to get used to their system and get used to the environment at all. That's why I had to say, "Fuck it," cause for so long I've been going back and going back and reviewing things I did in like fifth grade. I'm at a fourth-grade math level. I am math illiterate, let me tell you.

In addition to the continual educational disruptions, Ricky had to contend with intense harassment. Figuring out the social map of the school was central to Ricky's survival. Homophobic harassment at the hands of teachers and students characterized his educational experience. When he

was beat up in a middle school PE class, the teacher didn't help but rather fostered this sort of treatment:

They gave them a two-day suspension and they kind of kept an eye on me. That's all they could do. The PE coach was very racist and very homophobic. He was just like "faggot this" and "faggot that." I did not feel comfortable in the locker room and I asked him if I could go somewhere else to change, and he said, "No, you can change here."

Sadly, by the time Ricky had reached River High he had become accustomed to the violence.

In a weird sense, in a weird way, I'm comfortable with it because it's just what I've known for as long as I can remember. I mean, in elementary school, I'm talking like sixth grade, I started being called a fag. Fifth grade I was called a fag. Third grade I was called a fag. I have the paperwork, 'cause my mom kept everything, I still have them, of kids harassing me, saying "Gaylord," at that time it was "Gaylord."

Contrary to the protestations of boys earlier in the chapter that they would never call someone who was gay a fag, Ricky experienced this harassment on a regular basis, probably because he couldn't draw on identifiably masculine markers such as athletic ability or other forms of dominance to bolster some sort of claim on masculinity.

Hypermasculine environments such as sporting events continued to be venues of intense harassment at River High. "I've had water balloons thrown at me at a football game. Like, we [his friends Genevieve and Lacy] couldn't have stayed at the homecoming game. We had to go." The persecution began immediately at the biggest football game of the year. When he entered with his friend Lacy, "Two guys that started walking up to get tickets said, 'There's the fucking fag.' " When Ricky responded with "Excuse me?" the boy shot back, "Don't talk to me like you know me." The boy and his friends started to threaten Ricky. Ricky said, "He started getting into my face, and his friends started saying, 'Come on, man, come on, man' " as if they were about to hit Ricky. Ricky felt frustrated that "the ticket people are sitting there not doing a damn thing.

This is right in front of them!" He found Ms. Chesney, the vice principal, after the boys finally left. While Ms. Chesney told him, "We'll take care of it," Ricky said he never heard about the incident again. Later at the game he and Lacy had water bottles thrown at them by young boys yelling, "Oh look, it's a fag!" He said that this sentiment echoed as they tried to sit in the bleachers to watch the half-time show, which he had choreographed: "Left and right, 'What the fuck is that fag doing here?' 'That fag has no right to be here.' Blah blah blah. That's all I heard. I tried to ignore it. And after a while I couldn't take it and then we just went home." While many of the boys I interviewed said they would not actually harass a gay boy, that was not Ricky's experience. He was driven out of the event he had choreographed because of the intense homophobic harassment.

Ricky endured similar torment at CAPA, the event at which Brian and Dan socialized the young boys to fear faggots by chasing them. Boys reacted with revulsion to Ricky's dance performances while simultaneously objectifying the girls dancing on the stage. The rear quad served as the stage for CAPA's dancers. The student body clustered around the stage to watch the all-female beginning jazz dance class perform. Mitch, a white senior, whose shirt read, "One of us is thinking about sex. It must be me," muttered, "This is so gay" and began to walk away. Jackson yelled after him, "Where are you going, *fag*?" As Mitch walked away, Jackson turned back to the dancing girls, who now had their backs to the boys, gyrating their behinds in time to the music, and shouted, "Shake that ass!" Jackson reached in his pocket to grab his glasses. Pablo commented, "He's putting on his glasses so he can see her shake her ass better." Watching the girls' behinds, Jackson replied, as he pointed to one of them, "She's got a *huge* ass." Mitch turned to Pablo and asked, seriously, "Why are there no guys?" Pablo responded, "You're such a fag."

The advanced dance troupe took the stage with Ricky in the center. Again, all the dancers sported black outfits, but this time the pants were baggy and the shirts fitted. Ricky wore the same outfit as the girls. He danced in the "lead" position, in the front and the center of the dance for-

mation. He executed the same dance moves as the girls, which is uncommon in mixed-gender dance troupes. Usually the boys in a mixed-gender dance troupe perform the more "physical" moves such as flips, holding up the girls, and spinning them around. Ricky, instead, performed all the sexually suggestive hip swivels, leg lifts, arm flares, and spins that the girls did.

Nils and his group of white male friends made faces and giggled as they stared at Ricky. Soon Nils turned to Malcolm and said, "It's like a car wreck, you just can't look away." Both shook their heads in dismay as they continued to watch the "car wreck" with what can only be described as morbid absorption. Other boys around the stage reacted visibly, recoiling at Ricky's performance. One of them, J. R., a hulking junior and captain of the football team, shook his head and muttered under his breath, "That's disgusting." I asked him, "What?" J. R. turned to me with his nose wrinkled in revulsion and responded, "That guy dancing, it's just disgusting! Disgusting!" He again shook his head as he walked off. Soon afterward an African American boy turned to his friend and admiringly said of Ricky, "He's a better dancer than all the girls! That takes talent!" He turned to me and said, "Can I wiggle my hips that fast?" and laughed as he tried. The white boys' revulsion bordering on violence was common for boys when talking about Ricky and his dancing. More surprising was the African American boys' admiration, if tinged with humor, of these skills. In these moments boys faced a terrifying, embodied abject, not just some specter of a fag.

Even though dancing was the most important thing in his life, Ricky told me he didn't attend school dances because he didn't like to "watch my back" the whole time. Meanings of sexuality and masculinity were deeply embedded in dancing and high school dances. Several boys at the school told me that they wouldn't even attend a dance if they knew Ricky was going to be there. In auto shop, Brad, a white sophomore, said, "I heard Ricky is going in a skirt. It's a hella short one!" Chad responded, "I wouldn't even go if he's there." Topping Chad's response, Brad claimed, "I'd probably beat him up outside." K. J. agreed: "He'd proba-

bly get jumped by a bunch of kids who don't like him." Chad said, "If I were a gay guy I wouldn't go around telling everyone." All of them agreed on this. Surprised and somewhat disturbed by this discussion, I asked incredulously, "Would you really not go to prom because a gay guy would be in the same room as you all?" They looked at me like I had two heads and said again that of course they wouldn't. Ricky's presentation of both sexual preference and gender identity was so profoundly threatening that boys claimed they would be driven to violence.

Ricky developed different strategies to deal with the fag discourse, given that he was not just *a* fag but *the* fag. While other boys lobbed the epithet at one another with implied threats of violence (you are not a man and I am, so watch out), for Ricky that violence was more a reality than a threat. As a result, learning the unwritten rules of a particular school and mapping out its social and physical landscape was literally a matter of survival. He found River High to be one of the most homophobic schools he had attended: "It's the most violent school I think that I've seen so far. With all the schools the verbal part about, you know the slang, 'the fag,' the 'fuckin' freak,' 'fucking fag,' all that stuff is all the same. But this is the only school that throws water bottles, throws rocks, and throws food, ketchup, sandwiches, anything of that nature."²

While there is a law in California protecting students from discrimination based on sexual identity, when Ricky requested help from school authorities he was ignored, much as in his interaction with the vice principal at the homecoming game. Ricky responded to this sort of treatment with several evasion strategies. He walked with his eyes downcast to avoid meeting other guys' eyes, fearing that they would regard eye contact as a challenge or an invitation to a fight. Similarly he varied his route to and from school:

I had to change paths about three different times walking to school. The same people who drive the same route know, 'cause I guess they leave at the same time, so they're always checking something out. But I'm always prepared with a rock just in case. I have a rock in my hand so if anything happens I just chuck one back. I always walk with something like that.

Indeed, when I was driving him home from the interview that day, boys on the sidewalk glared at him and made comments I couldn't hear. He also, with the exception of the homecoming football game, avoided highly sexualized or masculinized school events where he might be subject to violence.

Soon after my research ended, Ricky dropped out of River High and moved to a nearby city to perform in local drag shows. While other boys moved in and out of the fag position, Ricky's gendered practices and sexual orientation forced him to bear all that the other boys cast out of masculinity. His double transgression of sexual and gender identity made his position at River High simply unlivable. The lack of protection from the administration meant facing torture on a daily basis. The abuse that was heaped on him was more than one person, certainly more than one parentless, undereducated, sweet, artistic adolescent, could bear.³

RACIALIZING THE FAG

While all groups of boys, with the exception of the Mormon boys, used the word *fag* or fag imagery in their interactions, the fag discourse was not deployed consistently or identically across social groups at River High. Differences between white boys' and African American boys' meaning making, particularly around appearance and dancing, reveal ways the specter of the fag was racialized. The specter of the fag, these invocations reveal, was consistently white. Additionally, African American boys simply did not deploy it with the same frequency as white boys. For both groups of boys, the *fag* insult entailed meanings of emasculation, as evidenced by Darnell's earlier comment. However, African American boys were much more likely to tease one another for being white than for being a fag. Precisely because African American men are so hypersexualized in the United States, white men are, by default, feminized, so *white* was a stand-in for *fag* among many of the African American boys at River High. Two of the behaviors that put a white boy at risk for being labeled a fag didn't function in the same way for African American boys.

Perhaps because they are, by necessity, more invested in symbolic forms of power related to appearance (much like adolescent girls), a given African American boy's status is not lowered but enhanced by paying attention to clothing or dancing. Clean, oversized, carefully put together clothing is central to a hip-hop identity for African American boys who identify with hip-hop culture. Richard Majors (2001) calls this presentation of self a "cool pose" consisting of "unique, expressive and conspicuous styles of demeanor, speech, gesture, clothing, hairstyle, walk, stance and handshake," developed by African American men as a symbolic response to institutionalized racism (211). Pants are usually several sizes too big, hanging low on the hips, often revealing a pair of boxers beneath. Shirts and sweaters are similarly oversized, sometimes hanging down to a boy's knees. Tags are frequently left on baseball hats worn slightly askew and perched high on the head. Meticulously clean, unlaced athletic shoes with rolled-up socks under the tongue complete a typical hip-hop outfit. In fact, African American men can, without risking a fag identity, sport styles of self and interaction frequently associated with femininity for whites, such as wearing curlers (Kelley 2004). These symbols, at River High, constituted a "cool pose."

The amount of attention and care given to clothing for white boys not identified with hip-hop culture (that is, most of the white boys at River High) would certainly cast them into an abject, fag position, as Ben indicated when he cried, jokingly, "I got my good panths all dirty!" White boys were not supposed to appear to care about their clothes or appearance because only fags cared about how they looked. However African American boys involved in hip-hop culture talked frequently about whether their clothes, specifically their shoes, were dirty. In drama class both Darnell and Marc compared their white Adidas basketball shoes. Darnell mocked Marc because black scuff marks covered his shoes, asking incredulously, "Yours are a week old and they're dirty, I've had mine for a month and they're not dirty!" Both laughed. Monte, River High's star football player, echoed this concern about dirty shoes. Looking at the fancy red shoes he had lent to his cousin the week before, he told me

he was frustrated because after his cousin used them the "shoes are hella scuffed up." Clothing, for these boys, did not indicate a fag position but rather defined membership in a certain cultural and racial group (Perry 2002). Especially for poor African American boys (as most were at River High), clean clothing was an indicator of class status. If one had enough money to have clean shoes one was not "ghetto," in the parlance of the students at River.

As in many places in the United States, racial divisions in Riverton line up relatively easily with class divisions. Darnell grabbed me at lunch one day to point this out to me, using school geography as an example. He sauntered up and whispered in my ear, "Notice the separation? There's the people who hang out in there (pointing toward the cafeteria), the people who hang out in the quad. And then the people who leave." He smashed one hand against the other in frustration: "I talk to these people in class. Outside we all separate into our groups. We don't talk to each other. Rich people are not here. They got cars and they go out." He told me that the "ball players" sat in the cafeteria. And he was right: there were two tables at the rear of the cafeteria populated by African American boys on the basketball and football teams, the guys whom Darnell described to me as his "friends." He said there were "people who leave, people who stay and the people over there [in the quad]. The people who stay are ghetto." He added, "*Ghetto* come to mean 'niggerish.' That reflects people who are poor or urban."

Carl and his friend James, both African American basketball players, were also clear about the ways race lined up with class at River: "White people always take us to lunch cause black people don't have cars." Because African American boys lacked other indicators of class such as cars and the ability to leave campus during lunch, clean expensive basketball shoes took on added symbolic status.

Dancing was another arena that carried distinctly fag-associated meanings for white boys but masculine meanings for African American boys who participated in hip-hop culture. White boys often associated dancing with fags. However, dancing did not carry this sort of sexualized

gender meaning for all boys at River High. For African American boys dancing demonstrates membership in a cultural community (Best 2000). At River, African American boys frequently danced together in single-sex groups, teaching each other the latest dance moves, showing off a particularly difficult move, or making each other laugh with humorous dance moves. In fact, while in drama class Liam and Jacob hit each other and joked through the entire dancing exercise, Darnell and Marc seemed very comfortable touching one another. They stood close to one another, heel to toe, as they were supposed to. Their bodies touched, and they gently and gracefully moved the other's arms and head in a way that was tender, not at all like the flailing of the two white boys.

Dancing ability actually increased an African American boy's social status. Students recognized K. J., along with Ricky, as the most talented dancer at the school. K. J. was a sophomore of mixed racial descent, originally from the Philippines, who participated in the hip-hop culture of River High. He continually wore the latest hip-hop fashions. His dark complexion and identification with hip-hop culture aligned him with many of the African American boys at River High. Girls hollered his name as they walked down the hall and thrust love notes folded in complicated designs into his hands as he sauntered to class. For the past two years K. J. had won first place in the talent show for dancing. When he danced at assemblies the auditorium reverberated with screamed chants of "Go K. J.! Go K. J.! Go K. J.!" Because dancing for boys of color, especially African American boys, placed them within a tradition of masculinity, they were not at risk of being labeled a fag for engaging in this particular gendered practice. Nobody called K. J. a fag. In fact, in several of my interviews boys of multiple racial/ethnic backgrounds spoke admiringly of K. J.'s dancing abilities. Marco, a troublemaking white senior, said of K. J., "Did you know he invented the Harlem Shake?" referring to a popular and difficult dance move. Like Ricky, K. J. often choreographed assembly dance routines. But unlike Ricky, he frequently starred in them at the homecoming and Mr. Cougar rallies.

None of this is to say that participation in dancing made boys less ho-

mophobic. K. J. himself was deeply homophobic. But like the other boys, it was a gendered homophobia that had to do with masculine gender transgressions as much as sexuality. His sister, for instance, identified as a lesbian, and he looked up to and liked her. But he loathed Ricky. Because of their involvement with dance, the two came into contact relatively frequently. Stylistically, they mirrored one another. Both sported long hair: K. J.'s in cornrows and Ricky's lengthened with highlighted extensions. Both wore elaborate outfits: K. J. favored oversized matching red and white checked shorts and a button-down shirt over a white tank top, while Ricky sported baggy black pants, combat boots, and a white tank top. Both were thin with delicate facial features and little facial hair. But the meanings associated with what might seem like gender transgressions by both of them were mediated by their racial and sexual identities, leading to K. J.'s popularity and Ricky's debasement. K. J.'s appearance identified his style as hip-hop, a black, masculine cultural style, whereas Ricky's style identified him as gender transgressive and feminine.

Not surprisingly, K. J. and Ricky were the stars of the dance show at River High. As the day of the show arrived, K. J. asked me for what must have been the hundredth time if I was planning to attend. He said, "Everyone is sayin' that Ricky is my competition, but I don't think so. He's not my competition." K. J. continued to tell me that he was very upset with Ricky because the night before at the dress rehearsal Ricky had walked up to him, saying, "Hey, K. J., awesome dance." Ricky had put his hand on K. J.'s back when he said this. Angry and red, K. J. said to me, "I wanted to hit him hella bad! Then he came up *again*. I was like 'Oh My God!' Ugh!" Trying to identify exactly who Ricky was, another boy said, "I think that's the same guy who is in our history class. The guy who looks like a girl?" K. J., wanting to make sure the other boys knew how repulsive Ricky was, said, "You know how you look at girls like they are hella fine? That's how he looks at guys, dude! He could be looking at you!" All the boys groaned. K. J. expressed relief that he was "safe," saying Ricky "only checks out white guys." K. J. took pains to differentiate himself from Ricky by saying that Ricky wasn't his competition and that Ricky

didn't even look at him as a sexual object because of his race. The respect K. J. commanded at River was certainly different from the treatment Ricky received because the meanings associated with African American boys and dancing were not the same as the ones associated with white boys and dancing. K. J.'s dancing ability and carefully crafted outfits bolstered his popularity with both boys and girls, while Ricky's similar ability and just as carefully chosen outfits placed him, permanently, in a fag position.

None of this is to say that the sexuality of boys of color wasn't policed. In fact, because African American boys were regarded as so hypersexual, in the few instances I documented in which boys were punished for engaging in the fag discourse, African American boys were policed more stringently than white boys. It was as if when they engaged in the fag discourse the gendered insult took on actual combative overtones, unlike the harmless sparring associated with white boys' deployments. The intentionality attributed to African American boys in their sexual interactions with girls seemed to occur as well in their deployment of the fag discourse. One morning as I waited with the boys on the asphalt outside the weight room for Coach Ramirez to arrive, I chatted with Kevin and Darrell. The all-male, all-white wrestling team walked by, wearing gold and black singlets. Kevin, an African American sophomore, yelled out, "Why are you wearing those faggot outfits? Do you wear those tights with your balls hanging out?" The weight-lifting students stopped their fidgeting and turned to watch the scene unfold. The eight or so members of the wrestling team stopped at their SUV and turned to Kevin. A small redhead whipped around and yelled aggressively, "Who said that?!" Fingers from wrestling team members quickly pointed toward Kevin. Kevin, angrily jumping around, yelled back as he thrust his chest out, "Talk about jumping me, nigger?" He strutted over, advancing toward the small redhead. A large wrestler sporting a cowboy hat tried to block Kevin's approach. The redhead meanwhile began to jump up and down, as if warming up for a fight. Finally the boy in the cowboy hat pushed Kevin away from the team and they climbed in the truck, while Kevin strutted back to his classmates, muttering, "All they know how to do is pick somebody

up. Talk about jumping me . . . weak-ass wrestling team. My little bro could wrestle better than any of those motherfuckers."

It would seem, based on the fag discourse scenarios I've described thus far, that this was, in a sense, a fairly routine deployment of the sexualized and gendered epithet. However, at no other time did I see this insult almost cause a fight. Members of the white wrestling team presumably took it so seriously that they reported the incident to school authorities. This in itself is stunning. Boys called each other fag so frequently in everyday discussion that if it were always reported most boys in the school would be suspended or at least in detention on a regular basis. This was the only time I saw school authorities take action based on what they saw as a sexualized insult. As a result Mr. J. explained that somebody from the wrestling team told him that Kevin was "harassing" them. Mr. J. pulled Kevin out of weight-lifting class to discuss the incident. According to him, Kevin "kept mouthing off" and it wasn't the first time he had been in trouble, so they decided to expel him and send him to Hillside.

While Kevin apparently had multiple disciplinary problems and this interaction was part of a larger picture, it is important that this was the only time that I heard any boy (apart from Ricky) tattle on another boy for calling him gay or fag. Similarly it was the only time I saw punishment meted out by the administration. So it seems that, much as in the instance of the Bomb Squad at the Dance Show, intentionality was more frequently attributed to African American boys. They weren't just engaging in the homophobic bantering to which teachers like Mr. Kellogg turned a blind eye or in which Mr. McNally participated. Rather, they were seen as engaging in actual struggles for dominance by attacking others. Because they were in a precarious economic and social position, the ramifications for African American boys for engaging in the fag discourse were more serious. Precisely because some of them were supposed to be attending, not River High, but the "bad" school, Chicago, in the neighboring school district, when they did encounter trouble their punishment was more severe.

WHERE THE FAG DISAPPEARS:
 DRAMA PERFORMANCES

While, for the most part, a boy's day at River entailed running a gauntlet of competitive and ritualized sexual insults, there were two spaces of escape—the Gay/Straight Alliance and drama performances. Theater productions were not the same as the drama classroom, where I have already indicated that Mr. McNally sometimes drew upon the fag discourse for laughs and to forge rapport with male students. Drama performances typically didn't involve all of the students in drama classes. Rather, students who were involved were ones who identified as drama students and cared about the theater; some of them envisioned trying to make a career out of it. Drama is notoriously a fag space in high schools. The ironic result of this connection is that the insult disappears. Not only does the insult disappear, but drama becomes a space where male students can enact a variety of gender practices.

The opening night of the yearly spring musical illustrates how the *fag* insult disappeared and male students enacted a variety of gender practices without negative ramifications. Drama students ran around in various stages of costuming and undress in the backstage area of the River High auditorium as they prepared for the opening night of the spring musical, *Carousel*. As the balmy spring air blew through the stage door, I smiled as I thought back to my high school days and felt that same nervous energy as we prepped for choir concerts and musicals like *Fiddler on the Roof*. Squealing, giggling, and singing, students frantically searched for spare props, costume parts, and makeup. Students flew past me in clouds of hairspray, carrying parasols or sailor paraphernalia as they readied themselves to perform this relatively dark musical about romantic betrayal, domestic violence, and murder.

I leaned against the wall outside the dressing rooms as students costumed themselves and each other. Girls quickly and carefully applied makeup under the bright yellow bulbs. Boys lined up waiting for an available girl to apply makeup. I waited for the inevitable fag comment as the

girls plastered rouge, lip gloss, and eye shadow on the boys' faces. Surprisingly, even though all but one of the boys (Brady) participating in this musical were straight, I heard not a one. Instead Trevor, the handsome blond lead, and the other boys checked out the girls' handiwork in the surrounding mirrors, suggesting slight changes or thanking them for their help. Squealing with delight at their new look, the boys ran back into the beehive of noise and activity that constituted the backstage area outside the dressing rooms. That reaction and their impromptu singing surprised me as much their pride in sporting makeup. The normally tough and competitive exterior that they displayed in the rest of the school disappeared, and the boys showed as much excitement as the girls did, smiling and giggling as they anticipated their performance.

Soon the backstage area quieted down as students took their marks and the orchestra, really a group of four musicians, played the opening bars. Students danced around the stage, depicting a picnic, a fair, and other tableaux of small-town American life in the 1900s. Remarkably, all the students watched or sang a musical number entitled "You're a Queer One, Julie Jordan" without cracking a single joke about fags or homosexuality. This refusal to engage in insults, homophobic comments, or sexist joking continued throughout the evening. Conditioned as I was at this point to hearing the fag discourse, I was stunned at the myriad opportunities to levy the epithet and the seeming refusal by all of these boys, gay and straight, to invoke it.

The most striking example of this refusal occurred midway through the play as eight boys dressed as sailors tumbled over each other as they prepared to go on stage. They joked about their lack of "sailoriness" as they waited excitedly in the wings. Brady, surveying his fellow soldiers, admonished the boys laughingly to "act like sailors, men!" Jake laughed back in a loud whisper, "Oh yeah, right!" Randy sarcastically said, "We look sooo much like sailors," puffing out his chest and mock-strutting across the stage. The boys all giggled at this performance. They soon gathered around Brady, who, as part of his effort to appear like a tough sailor, had had his friend draw a temporary tattoo on his hairy bicep. It

was a truly sailorlike tattoo, a mermaid. But this mermaid was more a visual pun than anything else because she was not a sultry, buxom siren but Ariel from the Disney movie *The Little Mermaid*. Brady beamed as he showed it off to everyone. The other boys admired the artwork and remarked, with a tinge of jealousy, that it was a great tattoo. They heard their cue and strutted on stage, eventually forming a semicircle and singing: "Blow high, blow low / Away then we will go / We'll go away in the sailin' away / Away we'll go / Blow me high an' low." During the song, boys took their turns performing a short solo dance. Some performed typically masculine moves such as flips or swaggers, while others performed pirouettes or delicate twirls.

Sailors, in the contemporary United States, are already laden with all sorts of gay innuendo. From the sailor member of the famous gay disco group the Village People to actual sailors stuck on ships with all-male crews, to jokes about "sea men," sailors represent a subtext of same-sex desire. So a bunch of sailors jumping around singing a song that relies upon the repeated lyrics "blow me" is pretty funny. However, the boys took an approach to this that was, more than anything, simply playful.

Watching this scene unfold, I was surprised that given all of the fag iconography in this moment—sailors, dancing, Disney cartoons, and the repeated singing of the word *blow* (which by itself can get boys joking for hours)—I didn't hear a single invocation of the fag discourse. At the end of the night I turned to David and asked why no one uttered the word *fag* the entire night. He explained, "That's cause we're drama freaks." In a sense, because these boys were near the bottom of the social hierarchy at River High, they were, by default, fags. But I think the lack of the fag discourse during that evening was a more complicated story.

The boys had fun with the double entendres and played with masculinity. Brady's tattoo functioned as a sort of queering of masculinity in which he visually punned by drawing a mermaid who was not so much sexy as a singing heroine for little girls. The theater is a place for all sorts of experimentation, so why not a metaphorical and physical space for

gender and sexual experimentation? After watching what boys endured daily at River High, I found this dramatic performance a space of liberation and relaxation. The boys were able to try on gender identities, integrating masculine and feminine gender practices, without fear of being teased. Instead of constantly policing their own and others' gender displays, they were able to be playful, emotional, and creative. It was as if, because they were in a space where they were all coded as fags anyway and couldn't be any lower socially, it didn't matter what they did. Such is the liberatory potential of the theater. These boys had nothing left to lose socially, which meant that, ironically, they were free from the pressures of adolescent masculinity, at least temporarily (though it should be noted here that the boys involved in drama productions weren't among the most ardent users of the fag discourse, even outside dramatic performances). What they weren't able to do, however, was to engage in these sorts of playful practices around gender outside the drama performance space.

REFRAMING HOMOPHOBIA

Homophobia is central to contemporary definitions of adolescent masculinity. Unpacking multilayered meanings that boys deploy through their uses of homophobic language and joking rituals makes clear that it is not just homophobia but a gendered and racialized homophobia. By attending to these meanings, I reframe the discussion as a fag discourse rather than simply labeling it as homophobia. The fag is an "abject" (Butler 1993) position, a position outside masculinity that actually constitutes masculinity. Thus masculinity, in part, becomes the daily interactional work of repudiating the threatening specter of the fag.

The fag extends beyond a static sexual identity attached to a gay boy. Few boys are permanently identified as fags; most move in and out of fag positions. Looking at fag as a discourse in addition to a static identity re-

veals that the term can be invested with different meanings in different social spaces. *Fag* may be used as a weapon with which to temporarily assert one's masculinity by denying it to others. Thus the fag becomes a symbol around which contests of masculinity take place.

Researchers who look at the intersection of sexuality and masculinity need to attend to how racialized identities may affect how *fag* is deployed and what it means in various social situations. While researchers have addressed the ways in which masculine identities are racialized (Bucholtz 1999; Connell 1995; J. Davis 1999; Ferguson 2000; Majors 2001; Price 1999; Ross 1998), they have not paid equal attention to the ways *fag* might be a racialized epithet. Looking at when, where, and with what meaning *fag* is deployed provides insight into the processes through which masculinity is defined, contested, and invested in among adolescent boys.

Ricky demonstrates that the fag identity can, but doesn't have to, inhere in a single body. But it seems that he needed to meet two criteria—breaking both gendered and sexual norms—to be constituted as a fag. He was simultaneously the penetrated fag who threatened psychic chaos (Bersani 1987) and the man who couldn't "throw a football around." Not only could he not "throw a football," but he actively flaunted his unmasculine gender identification by dancing provocatively at school events and wearing cross-gendered clothing. Through his gender practices Ricky embodied the threatening specter of the fag. He bore the weight of the fears and anxieties of the boys in the school who frantically lobbed the *fag* epithet at one another.

① The *fag* epithet, when hurled at other boys, may or may not have explicit sexual meanings, but it always has gendered meanings. When a boy calls another boy a fag, it means he is not a man but not necessarily that he is a homosexual. The boys at River High knew that they were not supposed to call homosexual boys fags because that was mean. This, then, has been the limited success of the mainstream gay rights movement. The message absorbed by some of these teenage boys was that "gay men can be masculine, just like you." Instead of challenging gender inequal-

ity, this particular discourse of gay rights has reinscribed it. Thus we need to begin to think about how gay men may be in a unique position to challenge gendered as well as sexual norms. The boys in the drama performances show an alternative way to be teenage boys, which is about playing with gender, not just enforcing gender duality based on sexual meanings.