



DUDE  
YOU'RE  
A  
FAG

MASCULINITY AND SEXUALITY IN HIGH SCHOOL

C. J. Pascoe

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in High School*

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## 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 As music played, the boys started dancing, flailing around comically in bad renditions of outdated dance moves like the Running Man and the Roger Rabbit.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.<sup>1</sup>

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.



## 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 identity~~

~~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 nonsuspect 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, ‘Yeeeahhh.’ ‘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."<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

#### 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.

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 "sailorness" 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.

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.

## NOTES

### CHAPTER 1

1. This is not to say that women don't possess this sort of subjectivity, but these qualities are what students at River High associate with masculinity.

2. While trying to retain the insight that there are multiple masculinities that vary by time and place, I self-consciously use the singular *masculinity* in this text because students at River talk about masculinity as a singular identity that involves practices and discourses of sexualized power and mastery.

3. I make this claim on the basis of the administrators' opinions and my respondents' descriptions of their parents' jobs.

### CHAPTER 2

1. That said, gender identities and sexual norms are not simply unidirectional socialization processes. Youth also contribute to and reconfigure "official" teachings about gender and sexuality. They contribute their own knowledge and contest official school norms and teachings (Trudell 1993). I address these challenges to authority and received wisdom in later chapters.

2. Other authors call this the "hidden curriculum" (Campbell and Sanders 2002; Letts and Sears 1999; J. Martin 1976). I choose to use Trudell's term because I think what is going on in high school is less about uncovering the hidden than it is about the informal way teachers and students structure sexuality by drawing on popular and shared definitions.

3. While I never initiated conversations about “sexual identity development” in my interviews, students talked about sex all the time in both formal and informal settings. So much of this book is composed of these discussions.

4. There always seemed to be tension over the dress code. It was continually experienced by students as an infringement on their right to free expression.

5. River High was not unique in establishing policies that encouraged a gender-differentiated heterosexuality; indeed, social policy frequently constitutes heterosexuality as both normal and natural (Carabine 1998).

6. They called it the “Wrestling World” after a real event that happened each spring at River High. The sports director was a former pro wrestler. He invited his current pro-wrestler colleagues to come to River to put on a show for the community, an immensely popular event that sold out quickly.

7. Ricky was one of the few “out” gay boys at the school. Ironically, he played a hyperheterosexualized role in this dance routine. This may have something to do with why the administrators allowed him to dance so sensually. However, a white boy and girl danced together in one other routine that included extensive cross-gender touching.

8. While none of the students I asked could tell me *why* they were frustrated about being called the Pep Squad, my guess is the connotations of the name were problematic. *Pep squad* invokes a bunch of smiling *white* girls with blond pony-tails performing for the student body. This group of black students adopted a name that deployed the hip-hop vernacular of “da bomb,” meaning something really great, to connote a tougher, more streetwise, more legitimate club name.

9. The term *sexual and gender regimes* in the title of this section is a modification of R. W. Connell’s (1996) idea of “gender regimes,” which he uses to refer to the sum of gender relations in a given school.

### CHAPTER 3

1. In fact, two of my colleagues, both psychotherapists, suggested that the boys exhibited what we could think of as a sort of “Fag Tourette’s Syndrome.”

2. Though River was not a particularly violent school, it may have seemed like that to Ricky because sexuality-based harassment increases with grade level as gender differentiation becomes more intense. As youth move from childhood into adolescence there is less flexibility in terms of gender identity and self-presentation (Shakib 2003).

3. There were two other gay boys at the school. One, Corey, I learned about

after a year of fieldwork. While he wasn't "closeted," he was not well known at the school and kept a low profile. The other out gay boy at the school was Brady. While he didn't engage in the masculinity rituals of the other boys at River High, he didn't cross-dress or engage in feminine-coded activities as did Ricky. As such, when boys talked about fags, they referenced Ricky, not Brady or Corey.

## CHAPTER 4

1. This is not to say that similar enactments of dominance and control don't occur among gay men. But such behavior is out of the scope of this study, since there were not enough self-identified gay boys at this school from which to draw conclusions about the way sexual discussions and practices interacted with masculinity for gay boys.

2. I am also indebted to Michael Kimmel's (1987) argument that masculinity itself must be compulsively expressed and constantly proven, something he calls "compulsive masculinity."

3. Chris Rock is a popular comedian. This routine is a fictionalized account in which he both plays himself and imitates Michael Jackson. The "Neverland" Chris Rock refers to is Michael Jackson's whimsical ranch in California.

4. Heath's behavior is a good illustration of how a boy's engagement with the "fag discourse" might vary by context. While in drama performances neither he nor Graham engaged in the fag discourse, outside that context both of them did.

5. That said, if anyone called this sort of behavior sexual harassment, it would more likely be girls than boys, since women are more likely than men to label so-called flirtatious behaviors as harassment (Quinn 2002).

6. *Whore*, however, is equivalent to *fag* only in that both boys and girls agree it is the worst insult one can direct toward a girl, much as *fag* is for a boy. That said, girls do not frantically lob the insult *whore* at one another in order to shore up a feminine identity the way boys do with *fag* regarding a masculine identity. Both *fag* and *whore*, however, do invoke someone who has been penetrated, which is a powerless position.

7. Muscles, in many boys' interviews, were central to understandings of oneself and others as masculine. Later in the chapter we see that boys are obsessed with size; in just about every realm, bigger is better.

8. Transitional periods are the time when students are most at risk for harassment and bullying (N. Stein 2002).

9. Jack Daniels, a relatively inexpensive whiskey.