Dude, You're a Fag

Masculinity and Sexuality in High School

C. J. Pascoe

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

Berkeley Los Angeles London

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 Percle 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."[3] 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 formation 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. Macallister (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." 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 lisping, 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 curried 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 hitter,* 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 superlatives 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[7] 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.