

"Us Boys Like to Read Football and Boy Stuff": Reading Masculinities, Performing Boyhood

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In this qualitative study, I explore how one group of fifth grade African American boys performed masculinity through classroom reading practices. I focus on two aspects of boys' experiences with masculinity: first, how reading practices made visible some of the ways that masculinities were performed in the classroom, particularly how boys defined themselves in relation to each other and to girls; and, second, how boys' performances of masculinity were disrupted through a particular reading experience in which they were required to read texts that they had previously rejected on the basis of gender. Interest in masculinity has recently increased, both in literacy and other humanities and social science fields. Yet, few studies have examined the intersection of masculinity and literacy in classrooms, particularly for boys of color. This study grounds boys' practices of masculinity and reading in recent discussions of masculinity in the popular press and theories of performance, critical and poststructuralist theories and scholarship on the intersections of race and gender. Drawing on interviews, fieldnotes, and transcripts of small group discussions, I show how the boys' performances of masculinity, particularly the relationship between dominant and subordinated masculinities and dichotomous notions of masculine/feminine, both shaped and were shaped by boys' choices of what to read and their conversations about books. These boys' experiences point to the complexities and possibilities of engaging masculinities in literacy classrooms and encouraging boys to adopt a different discourse of masculinity that is less reliant on defining itself in opposition to femininity and other masculinities.

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Anthony, Ray, Lavell, Corey, Junius, and Kenneth jostled each other as they approached the front of the classroom. Several of their 5th grade classmates were already beginning to giggle as the boys assembled in a nervous knot facing their peers. Their teacher, Anna, shushed the class

and asked the boys if they were ready to begin. Anna's class had just finished reading and discussing the book, *Circle of Gold*, a story of a girl's struggles following the death of her father. Now, in groups of six, the children were required to perform a skit based on the book. The children had chosen their own groups and the groups were completely gender segregated. In response to Anna's prompt, Ray took a deep breath and answered, "O.K., here we go." Lavell began to titter, hiding his face behind his hands. The other five boys squirmed and grinned self-consciously as Ray explained, "We are doing a skit of *Circle of Gold*. Anthony's Mattie. (giggles erupt from the class) Corey's Toni. (someone lets out of whoop of laughter; Anna quiets the class) I (he smiles big) the Mama. Lavell is Felicia. Junius is Matt, and Kenneth's the narrator." At Anna's insistence all laughter stopped and the boys began to play their roles, all but one of them female. The boys spoke their lines in high, exaggerated voices. But, soon they settled into their roles and did a fine job of representing a scene from the novel. Then, as they took their bows, Ray struck a body-builders' pose and Kenneth and Junius followed his lead. The class laughed. The boys took their seats.

The laughter, the anxiety, and the posing were all based on the boys being required to perform as females. Yet, even as they literally performed female roles, performances of masculinity were also on display. Issues of masculinity were showcased in several ways. Both the boys and their classmates used laughter to acknowledge that these boys were doing something out of the ordinary. The boys displayed enough resistance to show that they took on female personae with some reluctance. Their exaggerated voices marked the feminine characters as very different from themselves. Finally, posing with muscles flexed reinforced their identification with masculinity, even if performed facetiously. The dynamics of this performance were particular to this group of boys, the socially dominant boys in the class. They were well-liked, some were leaders in the class, and all were athletes. It was safer for them to take on female roles in this skit than it would have been for JJ or Keith, two other boys in the class. No one in the class would dare ridicule these 6 boys (and for the most part, would not wish to). Only fond laughter greeted their performance. They embodied masculinities that protected them and allowed them some freedom to "play" with gender roles, a freedom that other boys did not have.

Although this story involves a literal performance, some theories of gender argue that all masculinities (like femininities) are performative, acted out according to the discursive tools available and/or desirable to particular boys or men in particular local and historical contexts (Butler, 1990; 1993). Here I explore how one group of fifth-grade African American boys performed masculinity through classroom reading practices. I will focus on two aspects of boys' experiences with masculinity. First, I explore how reading practices made visible some of the ways that masculinities were performed in this classroom, particularly how boys defined themselves in relation to each other and to girls. Second, I examine how boys' performances of masculinity began to be disrupted through a

particular reading experience in which they were required to read texts that they had previously rejected on the basis of gender.

Compared to the number of studies on girls' gendered literacy practices, we know little about the intersection between literacy and masculinities, particularly for boys of color. Because gender is a primary means by which power is organized in society, it is crucial to understand how gender functions in classroom contexts and affects children's experiences and opportunities. Literacy practices, as discursive tools, provide a context in which to observe the performance of gender subjectivities (Gee, 1992; Street, 1984). As research in gender and literacy has shown, literacy practices both shape and are shaped by gender subjectivities (Cherland, 1994; Davies, 1989, 1993; Gilbert, 1989). Researchers have recently begun to investigate the role of masculinities in boys' literacy experiences both in and out of traditional classrooms (e.g., Davies, 1997; MacGillivray & Martinez, 1998; Young, 2000). As Connell (1996) argues, ethnographic work that looks at masculinities in action is necessary if we are to understand the multiple ways that boys live masculinities in schools.

The "reading" in the title of this paper has multiple meanings. It refers to the boys' reading of and talk around fiction. Reading (and interactions around reading), as a social and cultural practice (e.g., Davies, 1993; Gee, 1992; Street, 1984), provides an important lens for viewing the ongoing performances of masculinities in classrooms. The title also refers to my own "reading" of particular classroom episodes and conversations for what they reveal about these boys' performances of masculinities. In addition, it points to the ways that these boys are "read" through current discourses about masculinity in general and African American masculinity in particular. Using the boys' reading practices as a lens through which to view masculinities at work allows me to inquire into masculinities and reading practices specifically (i.e., how can literacy practices reveal and disrupt gendered discourses?) and about how boys live the contested field of masculinity within and through particular practices.

Masculinity has very different connotations and consequences for these working-class African American boys than for white, middle-class boys. As African American scholars and cultural critics have emphasized, young African American males are consistently portrayed in American media and popular culture as dangerous and deviant (e.g., Belton, 1995). Further, positive images of young Black men are almost always limited to athletics or the entertainment industry (Dyson, 1997; Kelley, 1997). I write as a white, middle-class woman, aware that I cannot know what it means to live as a boy, let alone a working-class boy, let alone a working-class boy of color attending a segregated school. I write, as well, as someone who cares deeply about these boys, having built relationships with them across the school year. Therefore, my view of these boys' lives in the classroom is necessarily partial, in both senses of the word.

I begin by mapping out a theoretical terrain that introduces the current discourse of boys in crisis; examines masculinity as multiple, performative, and integrated with race; and discusses recent work on masculinity in the field of literacy. I then present stories and transcripts from the boys I worked with to explore how this group of boys "did" masculinity through their reading practices in one classroom. Boys' actions and discussions around book choice reveal the various forms of masculinity in the classroom and how masculinities interact with one another and with femininity. I also describe boys' responses to an experience that required them to read "girls'" books that they had previously vehemently rejected. Finally, I suggest some implications of their experiences for classroom practices.

Performing Boyhood

The Current "Boy Crisis"

The nation is awash in contradictory stories about boys. Recently, worries about boys have been increasingly aired in both the popular media and in academic conversations. The concerns range from boys' academic performance relative to girls to their role in school violence. Recent discussions of this issue in the media show the stark contrasts in how adult observers frame the issues. Although the concerns expressed about boys are often similar, the explanations for the concern and the suggested solutions vary widely among authors. Also important is the lack of attention to race and class in these arguments. These arguments involve seemingly generic boys who are not often located in a social and cultural context, but whom, through descriptions and visuals (such as the photographs on book covers), appear to be primarily white and middle-class. The boys I describe here, therefore, are largely left out of these popular notions of boyhood. Yet, because these are the current ideas of boyhood in the popular press, I believe they have implications for how these boys will be "read" by others. Some authors currently writing about boys root their concerns in boys' biological needs and propensities. A high profile example is Christina Hoff-Sommer's (2000) recent book, *The War Against Boys*, in which she argues that "although boys are not morally inferior to girls, they are certainly more physically aggressive, more prone to violence, and less risk averse" (p. 186). Others worry that boys' troubles stem from their struggles to deal with society's unhealthy expectations for them. For instance, William Pollack (1999) whose books about the "myths of masculinity" have been New York Times bestsellers in the past few years, argues that "without being aware of doing so, society is judging the behavior of boys against outmoded ideas about masculinity and about what it takes for a boy to become a man" (p. xxiv).

According to these and other recent accounts, boys face a "crisis of masculinity." As Connell (1996) points out, this concern with boys' experiences is not new in the United States. For instance, in the 1960s concerns were raised about the feminization of the curriculum and its impact on the development of boys. Literacy curricula and classroom

practices in literacy are directly implicated in the current version of these debates. For instance, Hoff-Sommers (2000) praises some British schools that "are again allowing gender stereotypes in their educational materials" (p. 16) by encouraging boys to read books with stereotypically masculine themes. Young and Brozo (2001) shared conversations in which they debated their responses to boys' purported struggles on measures of reading achievement. Arguing from a self-described "essentialist" position, Brozo, convinced by recent statistics that boys are indeed experiencing increased struggles in reading, argues that boys will be more motivated to read if they are provided with books with stereotypically masculine themes. Young, arguing from a feminist social constructivist position, disputes both the fact of a boys' crisis in reading and Brozo's proposed solution, believing instead that it is crucial for boys to critically question the very stereotypes embedded in the book choices Brozo would recommend. Because the kinds of interventions recommended by Hoff-Sommers and Brozo are most likely to be implemented in schools where boys are perceived to be struggling in reading, boys of color might conceivably be among the first to have their reading limited to appropriately "masculine" themes (see Epstein, Elwood, Hey, & Maw, 1998). The book choices in well-performing middle-class schools will likely be left alone.

Fundamental to these debates are theories of gender: what does it mean for a boy to "be" a boy? Many scholars of gender have refuted arguments that root masculinity exclusively in biology (see Connell, 1995, for a review of this literature). The theories that guide my work with boys assume that gender is socially constructed and, therefore, that the workings of gender in individual lives and in society can, and oftentimes should, be altered toward the goal of social justice. In addition, I draw on performance theory that argues that gender subjectivities do not exist apart from the ways that they are performed, or acted out, in the world. To disrupt the performance of gender, therefore, is to alter subjectivity.

Gender, Race and Masculinity

Berger, Wallis and Watson (1995) describe masculinity as a "vexed term, variously inflected, multiply defined, not limited to straightforward descriptions of maleness" (p. 2). A primary assumption guiding my analysis is that "who we are is shaped by historical circumstances and social discourses, and not primarily random biology" (p. 3). Poststructuralist theories posit that social subjectivities are not singular or unitary, but multiple, taken up by individuals as they assume various positions within the discourses available to them. As Allan Luke (1995) explains, "available positions and discourses offer possibilities for difference, for multiple and hybrid subjectivities that human subjects actively make and remake through their textual constructions, interpretations, and practices" (p. 14). It is not my intention to fix on one notion of masculinity as I relate my experiences with some of the boys in this fifth grade classroom. As recent research in masculinity has emphasized, an important goal of inquiries into boys' and men's experiences

is to trouble fixed notions of "masculinity" (Clatterbaugh, 1997; Kimbrell, 1995; Miedzian, 1991). In this classroom, these boys' reading practices demonstrated some of the complex ways that gender discourses intersect with discourses of race and class.

The shape of the masculinity narrative shifts radically when race and class are taken into account (Stecopoulos & Uebel, 1997). Some of the negative attributes attached to masculinity in general are further magnified and distorted when attached to black masculinity. Don Belton (1995) writes that "historically, the black male body has been scapegoated in the cultural imagination to represent the violence we fear as a nation" (p. 2). As historian Robin Kelley (1995) puts it, "it is an established fact that our culture links manhood to terror and power, and that black men are frequently imaged as the ultimate in hyper-masculinity" (p. 15).

Trey Ellis (1995) begins an essay with a rhetorical question posed by W.E.B. DuBois to himself as a black man, "How does it feel to be a problem?" (p. 9). As Ellis explains, "Black men are this nation's outlaw celebrities. It doesn't matter what other modifiers also describe our individual essences – mechanic, police officer, left-handed, Virginian, kind, gangbanger, tall – 'black man' overrides them all and makes us all, equally, desperadoes" (p. 9). Unfortunately, many of the current national stories about boys rely on the fiction of a generic "boy" to whom general concerns can be applied. By default, the generic boy in the national discourse is constructed as primarily white and middle-class. Corey, Lavell, Junius, Kenneth, Ray, Anthony, JJ and Keith fall outside the notion of "generic boy," but also embody the "problem boy" or "safe black boy" of other discourses. For instance, Ray, Kenneth, and Junius were often in trouble for fighting or name-calling; they were aware that other kids found them intimidating and they used this to their advantage. On the surface, they might fit racist assumptions of young black men as aggressive and intimidating. Corey and Lavell, on the other hand, were invested in sports like Kenneth, Ray, and Junius but were very rarely in trouble and were not aggressive toward peers. They did well in school but were not labeled "nerds." They fit well with Robin Kelley's (1995) description of himself as a "safe" black man. Corey and Lavell were "cool" but unthreatening. They were boys whom, in Kelley's words, white folks could feel good about (1995).

Masculinities in Relation

As multiple as masculinity may be, it can only be understood in relation to femininity. As Davies explains, "Gender is constructed, through language, as two binary categories hierarchically arranged in relation to each other" (1997, p. 9). A large part of what it means to be a boy is to be other than a girl. Certainly, as I'll show, the boys in this study defined themselves in part through rejection of what they deemed feminine. Masculinities, however, being multiple, are also defined in relation to each other. A key concept in the field of the "new research on masculinity" (Connell, 1995) is the idea of

hegemonic masculinity. Masculinity takes many forms. At any given historical moment many versions of masculinity will be in "play" simultaneously, but one version will hold a position of authority. "Hegemonic" refers to that position of cultural authority. In some sense, the hegemonic masculinity within, say, a classroom, is the masculinity by which other forms of masculinity are measured. Other masculinities are lived in relation to the hegemonic masculinity. Because the most "highly visible" form of masculinity in any given context is likely to be noted by the casual observer (Connell, 1996), the concept of hegemonic masculinity was useful as I observed boys' interactions with one another in the classroom. It was clear that certain boys – those performing the dominant hegemonic masculinity – held more "social capital" (Bourdieu, 1977) and were, therefore, able to make certain reading choices or respond to particular texts in ways that would have been far more socially risky for boys whose masculinity was not perceived to be hegemonic.

Most gender scholars work from the assumption that gender subjectivities are socially constructed. They are, in addition, constructed in relation to texts with which we engage and that we reject. As the feminist historian Joan Scott (1988) points out, gender as a category of analysis "becomes a way of denoting 'cultural constructions' – the entirely social creation of ideas about appropriate roles for women and men" (p. 32). Feminist literary critic Diana Fuss (1989) explains that reliance on fixed categories results in the idea that gender is made up of "transhistorical, eternal, immutable essences" (p. 2). As Scott explains, insisting on differences within gendered categories challenges the tendency toward essentialist arguments of gender roles and subjectivities. Although this approach does not deny that gender differences exist, it does suggest that gender always operates in relation to particular constructions, through particular discourses, and within specific contexts.

Guided by these theories, I conducted this study with an assumption of differences within the category "boy reader," differences that will vary not just in the context of the particular classroom setting or in the particular school or community in which the children live, but in the individual social contexts embodied in each child. For example, both Junius and JJ were 10-year-old African American boys attending a segregated elementary school in a working-class neighborhood. Yet, when asked to describe themselves the boys told very different stories. JJ said that he was smart, liked to read, and wanted to be a doctor when he grew up. Junius said that he was good at basketball and wanted to play in the NBA someday. JJ consistently received the weekly reward that Anna gave for classroom behavior; Junius was frequently in trouble for fighting on the playground. JJ read every assigned book from cover to cover, whether or not he was engaged by the topic. Junius may have completed as few as two of the novels assigned during the year. As I'll describe, both boys performed masculinity through their reading practices but with very different nuances and consequences.

Following Judith Butler (1990, 1993), I argue that gender subjectivities unfold in a series of performances that express the complex ways that gender operates in our daily lives – the choices we make, our conceptions of self, our negotiations with the norms of gendered behavior (see also Berger, et. al. 1995). Butler's notion of the performative nature of gender is useful as I examine the ways that some of the boys "did" masculinity in the classroom and how they seemed to alter initial ways of doing masculinity in response to being required to read books that they had previously rejected. Butler emphasizes that individuals' performances of gender subjectivities illuminate the normative standards that are difficult to escape, even as they showcase the various ways that those norms may be defied. Rather than viewing gender as the cultural inscription of "masculinities" and "femininities" on a pre-existing binary of male and female-sexed bodies, Butler emphasizes the "performativity" of gender. Thus, I focus on the practices through which children (often unconsciously) reinforce or challenge gendered subjectivities in relation to particular "gender hegemonies" (Butler, 1990). As Connell (1995) writes, "gender is a social practice that constantly refers to bodies and what bodies do, it is not social practice reduced to the body" (p. 71). Gender here is not a given, immutably inscribed in individuals, but is rather a "surface politics of the body" that allows for resistance and play within fixed, hegemonic notions of what gender looks like (Butler, 1990). The boys I worked with began to disrupt a particular hegemonic performance of masculinity in a conversation about texts that they had initially resisted. This different way of performing masculinity was circumscribed, however, as some boys attempted to restore hegemonic performances of masculinity to the group.

Many popular discourses about boys rely on assumptions about the innate differences between boys and girls: boys are more active; girls are better at forming and maintaining relationships; boys don't express emotions easily; girls are more sensitive. These assumptions are certainly on display when boys talk about their reading preferences. For instance, Kenneth told me, "They like to be [reading], like, girl stuff. Not to talk about you all, but girls like to read girl stuff and us boys like to read football and boy stuff." The grain of truth in many of these assumptions (for they are just the normative, hard-to-escape, standards to which Butler refers) makes them difficult to challenge. Kenneth did, indeed, see many girls reading popular series books that are marketed exclusively to girls. Challenging those assumptions, however, is crucial if boys are to see wider visions of how they and others can be in the world.

Boys and Masculinities in Literacy Research

Research on gender and literacy practices has tended to focus on girls' experiences (Cherland, 1994; Christian-Smith, 1990; Finders, 1997; Gilbert & Taylor (1991). This research has demonstrated that literacy practices play a role in girls' negotiations of who they are and hope to be. Girls also use literacy to display their subjectivities, including, at times, their resistance to how they are positioned as girls in the world (Cherland,

1994). Building from this work on the relationship between literacy and girls' subjectivities, researchers' gazes increasingly turn to boys' literacy practices and the intersections between literacy practices and masculinity.

Bronwyn Davies (1989, 1993) has written for more than a decade on boys' and girls' gender subjectivities as revealed in their literacy practices. In her book, *Shards of Glass* (1993), she analyzes discussions in which children are encouraged to recognize and deconstruct the male/female dichotomy found in texts. Davies (1997) more recently has written specifically about boys and the role of classroom practices in helping boys to take a critical stance toward discourses of masculinity. She is interested in what happens when masculinity – either explicitly or implicitly – becomes part of classroom conversation. She analyzes transcripts from a male primary teacher's classroom in which the teacher, through choice of topic, responses to questions, and ways of guiding the discussion, allows boys to identify and take up a range of masculinities. For instance, she finds that one boy embodies each of the following ways of being masculine in this classroom: "mates with the teacher, one who knows and learns from books, one who plays football dangerously, one who knows about war and killing, one who considers moral and philosophical issues and emotional issues, and one who can speak about these" (p. 25). Davies argues that providing this range is important, but insufficient, as boys also need "the kind of reflexive knowledge that would allow them to see what is happening and to critique the various discourses that are made available to them" (p. 25).

Young (2000) studied how her two sons and two other boys confronted masculinities through local, institutional, and societal contexts. In a home schooling context, she provided the boys with tools to critique masculinities in literature and to connect those critiques to the contexts above. The boys resisted some of her attempts, but they did become aware that multiple masculinities exist and that some ways of being masculine are subordinate to others. Young's study illustrates some of the ways that these four boys' performances of masculinity shifted depending on context and power relations. For instance, each was more willing to admit to non stereotypical masculine behavior (such as admitting he wasn't always brave) in individual conversations with her than with the other boys present.

One way that children perform gender is through their choices of reading material. Hall and Coles (1997) used a survey of close to 8000 junior high children's reading choices to discuss the need to teach boys to be critical readers and to examine the implications of their reading choices. Writing from England, they focused primarily on boys' reading practices due to a national concern on boys underachievement in reading (concerns similar to those in the U.S. Epstein, et.al., 1998). They find clear gender patterns in children's reported reading choices. For instance, soccer which is known as football in England was one of the most popular topics of reading material across age groups. They also found that boys primarily read narrative fiction. Hall and Coles argue that schools should

acknowledge boys' reading interests as valid by schools and that boys should be encouraged to think critically about how their reading interests are constructed. This combination would lead, they argue, to children's tastes being taken more seriously and to boys becoming critical readers who will potentially deconstruct "current highly gendered reading profiles" (p. 67).

Learning in the Field of Boys and Reading

In the following section I introduce the boys who participated in this research, their school and classroom, and the methods I used to learn from them.

The Boys and Their School

The data analyzed for this paper were gathered as part of a year long, classroom-based, study of boys' and girls' gendered reading of popular fiction (2000). Anna, an African American woman who has been teaching for more than twenty years, agreed to share her fifth grade classroom with me for two to three days a week. A colleague who knew of my interest in children's choice reading and discussion of literature introduced me to Anna. This colleague, a professional development consultant for several local districts, had worked with Anna in a literacy project and admired her teaching. Anna's use of popular fiction for a portion of her literature curriculum and her investment in literature circles suggested that we had interests in common. Anna and I talked over the summer and arranged to begin working together in the fall. Anna expressed interest in having an additional adult in the classroom who was familiar with literature circle curriculum and could help to facilitate. I wanted an opportunity to observe and talk with children about their reading. My goal was to be as helpful as possible to Anna in the hours I spent in her classroom; she, in turn, welcomed me and my research paraphernalia into the room and helped to find times and spaces for me to talk with the children.

The children who participated in the larger study were 26 African American fifth-grade students, 14 girls and 12 boys, at a predominantly African American suburban elementary school in the midwest United States. Most of the children in Anna's class came from working-class families, though a few were middle-class and several lived in poverty. The school was considered high poverty, with seventy-eight percent of the children qualifying for free or reduced lunch. My choice of a school that was not socioeconomically privileged was purposeful. I believed that non-white, non-middle class children were not well-represented in the literature on gender. Further, I thought it important to show the complexity of literacy interactions in the literacy lives of children who, as a group, are often labeled "at risk" of failure in reading.

From my conversations with Anna and an article about the school that appeared in the local paper that year, I learned that this school had experienced massive white flight in the few years prior to my work there. Anna described her class as changing from an equal

percentage of African American and white students five years previously to 100 percent African American children the year we worked together on this study. At a nearby school, the white student population increased by 30 percent over the same period. Although my original intent had been to work in a racially diverse classroom, after meeting the children the first day of school, I began to reframe the study to make more central the race and class positions occupied by these children.

This paper focuses primarily on eight boys: Corey, Lavell, Anthony, Kenneth, Ray, Keith, JJ, and Junius. These boys were active participants in book club discussions and represented a wide range of reading abilities and interests. (Two of the four boys not included in this paper were in the resource center during literature circle time; one boy returned his consent form too late in the year, and the other boy, David, was not an active participant in two of the illustrative episodes I present in this analysis, though he does appear in one.) I introduce the eight boys below, focusing primarily on their social ties to other boys in the class and their reading achievement, based on my observations, Anna's evaluation of their class work, and a district assessment:

Corey was a very successful student both academically and socially. Lavell was his best friend, but he seemed to have comfortable relationships with all of the boys in class. He played sports each recess with Ray, Anthony, Kenneth, Junius, and Lavell.

Junius struggled academically, particularly in reading. He often dressed in basketball shorts and jerseys and always played sports at recess. His closest friends were Anthony, Ray, and Kenneth.

Lavell was a strong reader, scoring just above grade level on the district reading assessment. He played sports with the same group of boys as Corey, but he wasn't as socially connected with them off the playing field.

Anthony was reading at grade level, according to the district assessment. His closest friends were Ray, Kenneth, Junius, and Corey. He always played sports with his friends at recesses.

Ray assessed at slightly below grade level in reading. He did well on the classroom assignments that he completed, but he didn't always finish his work. He was a leader in the classroom. He always played sports at recess. He interacted with everyone, but his closest friends were Anthony, Junius, and Kenneth.

Kenneth scored at grade-level on the district reading assessment. He seemed most invested in his friendships with Ray and Anthony. He was usually very enthusiastic about literature discussions and joined as many book clubs as possible.

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JJ was a very engaged reader and read above grade level according to the district assessment. Keith was his best friend and they spent their recesses together, often playing kickball with the girls in the class.

Keith also read above grade level. It was rare to see him without JJ at his side. He did not interact with the other boys on the playground, but he enjoyed reading sports novels.

This group of boys represented a wide range of academic success. Regardless of friendship group, certain boys were positioned as academically successful and others as struggling. Although Junius was the only boy in this group to score very low on a reading assessment, Ray and Kenneth were sometimes positioned as struggling due to their classroom behavior. By the end of the year, Kenneth was leaving his role sheets blank, and he was often moved to an isolated seat in the back of the room for disruptive behavior. Ray would sometimes get so angry (due to altercations with other boys on the playground or in the classroom) that he would rip up his role sheets or refuse to complete them.

Classroom Context

Among many goals, Anna had an explicit commitment to two areas of her children's literary study: that the children read many books by and about African Americans and that they read books of "high interest." Thus, she included some popular fiction in her formal literacy curriculum. With one exception, she did not attempt to combine these goals (she used "Addy," the one African American girl in the American Girl series). As a genre, popular series fiction is not racially diverse and focuses primarily on the lives and adventures of middle-class white children. However, because these books were very popular with the children in Anna's classroom she integrated them into her formal curriculum twice during the school year. Her primary focus, however, was on books by well-respected African American authors about African American characters (e.g., Virginia Hamilton, Christopher Paul Curtis, Mildred Taylor, Jacqueline Woodson).

Of the popular fiction referenced in this article, three series of books were represented in Anna's formal curriculum – *Addy Learns a Lesson* from the American Girl series; *The Team that Couldn't Lose* from Matt Christopher's sports series; and *Karen's Big Sister*, a title from a spin-off series of *The Babysitters Club* series. I introduced the *Goosebumps* series and other titles from the three other series through a "book club" experience. Interestingly, I had chosen these four series before meeting Anna or knowing anything about her literature curriculum. We each arrived at our choices of "kid favorites" based on our observations of and conversations with children.

Anna's reading curriculum consisted of two primary activities. On Mondays and Tuesdays the children read from their district's adopted basal series. They read selections

independently or in small groups with Anna and answered comprehension questions included at the end of each selection. They also completed worksheets and writing assignments designed to increase vocabulary and comprehension skills. I was not involved in this part of the reading curriculum.

The children spent each Wednesday through Friday preparing for and meeting in literature circles. Anna used the literature circle curriculum designed by Daniels (1994). The children were divided into groups of 5 or 6. Sometimes the children chose novels for literature circles. Anna would put sets of books on the front table (5 titles, 6 books per title) and, one at a time, children would choose the book they wished to read. Other times the entire class would read the same novel and Anna would either divide the children into groups or allow them to choose their own groups. On Wednesdays and Thursdays the children were assigned pages to read from their novel. They were to read silently at their seats and then complete a "role sheet." In Daniels' curriculum, each child in a literature circle group is assigned a particular role. In Anna's class, these roles include: writing discussion questions and leading discussion, summarizing the text, connecting the text to personal experience or to other texts, drawing a picture in response to text, marking passages that are of particular interest, and finding and defining words that might be new or particularly challenging. Anna and I kept track of roles so that each child could rotate through them.

The children wrote responses to their reading in reading journals each Wednesday and Thursday. On Fridays the literature circles met for discussions. Children brought their role sheets and reading journals to share with the group; this sharing, along with the discussion director's questions, provided the structure and content for the discussions. When the children finished a novel (usually after 2-3 weeks), each group planned and presented to the class a response to their book (visual art, dramatic skit, puppet show, song, etc.). In addition to reading novels for literature circles, the children also had 30 minutes of Sustained Silent Reading each day after lunch during which they could read books or magazines of their choice.

It is important to acknowledge my positioning as a middle-class white woman in this classroom. For half of the year I was one of two white people in the room, and when a boy in the class moved in the middle of the year, I became the only white person in this classroom. These children were certainly used to white teachers as Anna was one of only two African American teachers in the school (all of the other classroom teachers were white). The children acknowledged my position as a white woman. For instance, Anthony and Keith were talking about one of their book choices, and Anthony described a book as, "you know, the one with a white girl." He glanced over and saw me standing nearby and said, "Oh, sorry." I said, "You don't need to be sorry; she is a white girl." He just smiled a bit self-consciously. This was just one of many examples of the children displaying their awareness of race. These moments seem illustrative of what W.E.B. DuBois

(1921) called "double consciousness." The children were very much aware of how their talk to each other about race differed from the talk they would engage in with me; they spoke with a consciousness of both their own and my racial point of view. In Du Bois's words, they viewed me from unusual points of vantage; they experienced the "sense of always looking at [themselves] through the eyes of [another]" (1921, 214-215; as quoted in Searls, 1997).

I have often wondered how the children and/or Anna tempered their discussions of some of the racial themes they encountered in the novels because of my presence. Anna and I talked about race and racism and the role these factors played, for instance, in the shifting demographics of the school district. The trust that seemed to be present between us certainly stemmed initially from Anna's trust in the colleague who brought us together but also grew through our shared classroom experience. We never explicitly spoke of our racial positioning in relation to each other, however or how that might have affected what was said or left unsaid in the classroom. When issues of race and racism arose in book club discussions, the children criticized white racism but almost always with an aside that exonerated me. Race was certainly only one factor in my relationship with Anna and the children, but it was an important one, as it positioned us differently in relation to each other and to the books that we read together. Therefore, issues of representation were very important in both the researching and writing of this study. I turned to scholars who have written about the complex issue of researching the "other." For instance, in an essay entitled, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," Linda Alcoff (1995) suggests that whenever a researcher engages with an "other" it is necessary to listen to others, be explicit about one's own social locations, and interrogate the privileged position of writer. Done well, she argues, these steps can change a writer's stance from a harmful "speaking for" to a potentially helpful "speaking with" or "speaking to". Similarly, Gayatri Spivak (1988) suggests that writing about those whose experiences differ from one's own can reveal aspects of a particular relationship, but it can never legitimately speak for the other. I attempted to keep these ideas always in mind as I worked with these boys and wrote of their experiences.

Data Collection and Analysis

The traditions of feminist, critical, and poststructuralist research guided my inquiry. These traditions are distinct, yet it is not uncommon for researchers to draw on them together to examine social and cultural issues in text and/or human experience (e.g., Lather, 1991; St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000). I locate this study at the intersection of these traditions. A poststructural approach requires the researcher to find ways past the taken-for-granted in language and interactions – to undermine, as Kincheloe and McLaren (1998) explain, "what appears natural" and to question "what appears obvious" (p. 293). For instance, children so often define themselves in contrast to the "other" gender, that this talk often goes unnoticed. Talk and actions that create often invisible boundaries

between genders permeate schools and classrooms (Dutro, 2001/2002; Thorne, 1993). One of my goals was to "see" this language in children's interactions with and around books. In critiquing ways that children perform gender in relation to reading, I use the binary terms "girl" and "boy". This complicates my calling this analysis "poststructuralist." Poststructuralists might argue that by using these binary terms I reify them rather than challenge their reification. I rely on static notions of identity in order to talk about how children might begin to challenge those very ideas. I often feel a version of the "confusion" expressed by Patti Lather (1991) as she discusses trying to reconcile the tenets of poststructuralism and feminism: "For the present, what it means to de-center the self within the context of a feminism devoted to women's self-knowledge and self-possession continues to confuse me" (p. 82). Poststructuralist ideas are crucial to this work, but I draw on other traditions in ways that complicate poststructuralist critique.

Both feminist and critical traditions recognize that understandings of the social world are necessarily contingent, yet take on the critical project of working toward emancipatory goals (Lather, 1991). In my case, that goal is to work toward less hierarchical gender relationships. This emancipatory goal, together with my focus on gender as the primary lens of analysis and my attempts to recognize my own social positioning within the inquiry, locate the study within a feminist tradition of qualitative research (Fonow & Cook, 1991).

As many researchers have emphasized, no consensus exists on what constitutes appropriate methods or criteria for judgement of analyses within feminist, critical, or poststructuralist frameworks (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1998; Olesen, 1998). I based my decisions on two criteria that met the research purpose and were true to the frameworks that situated the study: first, that I find ways to see the workings of masculinity and embedded power relations in situations that constitute the routine "stuff" of life in the literature classroom; second, that I keep my own frames of reference and assumptions as visible as possible.

I used primarily ethnographic methods to collect data in the classroom. I was a participant observer in the classroom, weighed more heavily toward participant. I observed children reading fiction (both assigned and chosen), helped to facilitate the literature circle curriculum, and organized and led book club discussions with children in which small groups of children met informally with me over lunch to discuss our reading of a popular series novel. I kept field notes of classroom observations and informal interactions. Since I was very involved in classroom activities, most of these notes began as "jottings," which I expanded upon each day after I had left the school (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). I also audiotaped student-led literature discussions, researcher-led book club discussions of popular series fiction, and semi-structured interviews with children (Kvale, 1996). The interviews focused on their reading preferences, the reasons for those

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preferences, and out-of-school hobbies and activities. In addition, I collected samples of the children's literature-related written work, including response journals.

I used the tools of grounded theory throughout the study to ensure my continual immersion in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As I read and reread transcripts and fieldnotes, I began to identify, then hone and revise, themes that became codes for analysis: gendered boundaries in reading practices (talk or actions that seemed to draw dichotomies between "boy books" and "girl books"); hierarchies of masculinity (including hegemonic masculinity); boys' social relationships; resistance to particular reading experiences; challenges to assumptions about gender boundaries; boys talking about self in relation to others; talk about self in relation to text; and my role in boys' talk or actions (instances where it seemed that my own talk or actions visibly altered the boys' own; I assume this goes on invisibly at all times in any research undertaking of this sort). The themes became sites to examine what was happening in this classroom in relation to theories of gender and racial subjectivity and performance. I also attempted to relate themes to questions of how social locations, particularly locations within and across masculinities and femininities and of race, are implicated in distributions of power, both locally in this classroom and in the wider culture.

Critical discourse analysis allowed close examination of instances in the transcripts that confirmed or challenged emerging themes (Fairclough, 1995; Gee, 1998; Luke, 1995). Specifically, I considered the transcript in the context of observations recorded in my fieldnotes and my ongoing understandings of these boys. I attempted to understand how the specific conversations among or with the boys in Anna's class related to larger issues of how African American masculinities function and are perceived in U.S. culture. The questions that guided this part of the analysis are primarily from Gee (1998);

- What social languages are relevant (and irrelevant) in the situation? How are they made relevant (and irrelevant), and in what ways?
- What are the situated meanings of some of the words and phrases that seem important in the situation?
- What situated meanings and values seem to be attached to places, times, bodies, objects, artifacts, and institutions relevant in this situation?
- What cultural models or networks of models (master models) seem to be at play in connecting and integrating these situated meanings to each other?
- What institutions or Discourses are being (re-) produced in this situation and how are they being stabilized or transformed in the act?
- What is the larger or main activity (or set of activities) going on in the situation?
- What sub-activities compose this activity?

- What relationships and identities (roles, positions), with their concomitant personal, social, and cultural knowledge and beliefs, feelings, and values, seem to be relevant to the situation?
- How are these relationships and identities stabilized or transformed in the situation?
- In terms of identities, activities and relationships, what Discourses are relevant (and irrelevant) in the situation? How are they made relevant (and irrelevant), and in what ways?
- What social goods (particularly in terms of gender in context of race and class) are relevant and irrelevant in this situation? How are they made relevant (and irrelevant), and in what ways?
- How are these social goods connected to the cultural models and Discourses operative in this situation?
- What sorts of connections are made within and across the interaction?
- What sorts of connections are made to previous or future interactions, to other people, ideas, texts, things, institutions, and discourses outside the current situation?

I shared my evolving interpretations with Anna, who provided an insider perspective through which to check and re-examine some of my understandings. In particular, Anna provided insight into aspects of the children's lives outside of the classroom and of their strengths and challenges in reading. For instance, I had wondered if the anger and frustration Kenneth seemed to be feeling at the end of the year was due to his conflicts with Ray. Anna told me that she believed it had much more to do with tensions at home between his mother and her longtime boyfriend. She also shared the children's assessment results (both informal and formal) with me. In addition, I shared my emerging analyses with colleagues outside of the research context, whose questions and comments worked as a check on my understandings and pushed me to more deeply contextualize my emerging findings. I also kept a journal in which I reflected on both the process of the research and my emerging interpretations. My journal traced some of the very personal ways that I grappled with all that I was learning from the children.

Drawing on these data sources and methods of analysis, I chose to focus on two "stories" for this manuscript. The first story – the book-choosing episode – illuminates many of the issues around masculinity and reading practices that appeared in the data across the year. I use this story as a frame to discuss instances from fieldnotes and transcripts that illustrate how boys performed masculinities through reading practices. The other story – the American Girl Experience – draws on analyses of fieldnotes and transcripts to present a key experience in which boys were required, as a group, to disrupt an entrenched reading practice, in this case, the public rejection of "girl books."

Throughout this manuscript, I refer to "reading practices," rather than just "reading," because I analyzed more than the boys' actual reading. Reading practices include the choices children make around the act of reading and their actions and talk in relation to books and reading. In this paper, I am less interested in the meanings of the texts with which the boys engaged than in how those texts functioned for the boys. As Grosz (1994) writes, instead of asking about the meaning of a text, "one must ask what it does, how it connects with other things (including its reader, its author, its literary and non-literary context)" (p. 199). In this case I was most interested in learning how reading practices worked to reveal masculinities as lived by these boys within larger discursive ideas about boyhood and masculinity.

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These boys revealed their lived masculinities in ways subtle and not so subtle through their reading choices and their interactions around books. This particular "book-choosing episode" is one of many that occurred across the school year and represents the ways that these events consistently showcased performances of gender around books.

The Book-Choosing Episode

It is time to choose new books for next week's literature circles. Anna sets four piles of books on the table. From their desks, the children watch her closely – they are quiet, expectant, many are on the edge of their seats. Anna then sits at her desk, ready to pull the children's names out of a can one at a time to signal their turn to choose a book. The choices are: *Karen's Big Sister* – a Babysitters Club Little Sisters book, *Addy Learns a Lesson* – an American Girl book, *Super Hoops* – a book about basketball, and *Live From Fifth Grade* – a book about the school adventures of a group of girls and boys. As Anna begins to pull names from the can, the tension level in the room begins to rise. The tension is especially great at a table of six boys in the front of the room. The boys at this table are Anthony, Ray, David, Junius, Corey and Kenneth. It soon becomes clear that gender is at the center of their tension. As names are called, most of the girls go straight to either the American Girl book or the Babysitters Club book. Three girls in a row, however, walk deliberately to the front of the room and, throwing smug smiles at the boys at the front table, choose the basketball book. As the pile of basketball books grows shorter the boys' anxiety levels rise. They start squirming in their seats and whispering to each other, "Oh man, I can't believe she took that book." As Keith, JJ, and Matthew – who are less popular and less athletic – approach the table of books, a few of the boys at the front table whisper threateningly to them under their breath, "You better not pick that basketball book boy; you better not do it." It works. Not one of those boys

chooses the sports book, even though I am sure that Keith, at least, would have liked to. Instead, these boys each choose the least gendered book of the bunch – *Live From Fifth Grade*. As it becomes clear that not all of the boys at the front table are going to be able to choose the basketball book – or even *Live From Fifth Grade* for that matter – they begin to negotiate with each other. Anthony, David and Ray form a plan. They will all choose The Babysitters Club book – there is safety in numbers. David's name is drawn first. He walks to the table and stands there for several long moments. His hand approaches The Babysitters Club book and then he quickly grabs a copy of *Live From Fifth Grade*, glancing apologetically at his friends as they groan and roll their eyes. Anthony is chosen next. He goes to the table, looks at the books, looks back at Ray. He reaches toward the last copy of *Live From Fifth Grade*, and Ray groans loudly and puts his head on his desk. Then Anthony pulls his hand back and Ray perks up; Anthony reaches for The Babysitters Club, then pulls his hand back; Ray is in agony. Finally, Anthony darts out his hand and grabs The Babysitters Club. Ray breathes a loud sigh of relief and his whole body relaxes in his chair for the first time since the basketball books had disappeared from the table. Ray also chooses The Babysitters Club and the two boys join three girls in that literature circle. The group that reads *Live From Fifth Grade* is all boys, including Lavell, Keith and JJ (Junius and Corey both managed to get *Super Hoops*). Aside from the three girls who chose the sports book, the girls have all chosen either the American Girl book or The Babysitters Club.

Performing Masculinities in Relation to Each Other

It was clear from the start that one book represented the first choice of the boys at the front table – *Super Hoops*. The boys who were most into this and other sports books were, for the most part, the boys who were most consumed with sports in general. These were the boys who often talked about sports teams, players, and the highlights from the previous day's games. They were also the boys who played football or basketball at every recess and talked about the community league basketball games they played after school and on weekends. This group included Corey, Anthony, Junius, and Kenneth. As the book-choosing episode illustrates, a hierarchy of masculinity existed in this classroom. Junius, Ray, and Kenneth whispered threats to JJ and Keith as they approached the table. I could hear them; Anna could not. The threats worked, which is unsurprising given that all three of the intimidators regularly got into trouble in the classroom and had been known to fight on the playground. In contrast, the thought of either JJ or Keith being involved in a physical altercation was laughably absurd. The other boys in the socially dominant group – Anthony, Corey, and Lavell – never participated in intimidating behavior.

In addition to their reputations as "tough guys," Junius, Ray, and Kenneth also wielded a social capital in the classroom that JJ and Keith did not share. Their status was due in

large part to their displays of what was the dominant masculinity in this classroom – they were athletic, confident, the embodiment of “cool.” In Connell’s terms (1996, 1995), a “gender order” was at play. Connell argues that at any given time and within particular contexts, various masculinities are present, whether hegemonic, marginalized, or stigmatized. In this classroom, JJ and Keith embodied masculinities that were subordinated to the masculinities of Kenneth, Corey, Anthony, Lavell, Junius, and Ray.

A few of the boys in this class, including Ray and Junius, explicitly linked their futures to professional sports. Ray and Junius often talked about futures as professional sports figures. Junius nodded, smiled, and said “Me too!” as Ray told me, “When I grow up I’m going to play in the NBA and be rich.” Ray had written a story in which the lead character, a poor boy from “the projects,” grows up to be a millionaire basketball star. Junius again nodded when his friend explained that the story illustrated what he wanted to happen to him, “Except I’m not from the projects.” And, one day in a conversation with two female classmates, about what they wanted to be when they grew up, Junius said he was “going to play in the NBA.” No one commented on the relative difficulty that Junius faced in accomplishing his goal.

This focus on sports served these boys well in the social life of the classroom, yet it is potentially a far less positive focus in terms of their future. As several African American scholars have pointed out, the wealthy, successful African American men that are most visible in the popular culture are professional athletes, musicians, and movie and television stars (Gates, 1992; Kelley, 1997; Rose, 1994). Further, the many stories, like Ray’s fictional one, of poor, Black youth “making it” through sports can create unrealistic expectations for boys of the role that sports might play in building successful futures. This issue seemed particularly salient for Ray and Junius (and, to a lesser extent, Kenneth) because sports appeared to be a primary focus of their identities, or how they defined themselves in the social space of the classroom and playground. Corey, Lavell, and Anthony, though also active participants in sports talk and play, defined themselves consistently as “good students” in addition to identifying as “athletes.”

JJ and Keith did not engage in the same kind of sports talk and play. These two boys played kickball with a group of girls during recesses. I never observed them being teased for their playground choices, but they were never invited, nor did they ask, to play with the other group of boys. It is unclear whether JJ’s and Keith’s playground choices were circumscribed by their social status. JJ never showed any personal interest in sports, but Keith did. He read Matt Christopher sports books for leisure reading and eagerly asked to read *The Basket Counts*, a book about basketball, for book club. These two boys did not choose or feel able to choose sports books for literature circles. Their choices in reading, and possibly other areas, were limited by other boys’ intimidations.

Late in the year, I saw that the kinds of threats that Ray, Junius, and Kenneth made to JJ and Keith were not limited to the sports books. One day in April, when the class was choosing among American Girl books for literature circles, Junius decided that he wanted to read *Molly Learns a Lesson* and he tried to intimidate other boys from choosing it. That day, he glared at Keith and hissed quietly and ominously, "You'd better not pick Molly if you know what's good for you." Keith hesitated, wouldn't look Junius in the eye, and breathed in audibly and nervously. Then JJ said to Keith, loud enough so Junius could hear, "You choose whatever book you want to." Junius responded with a grave shake of his head that expressed both his shock at having been challenged and the sense that the challenge could hold dire consequences. As I later recorded in my journal, "JJ just looked straight ahead with what I saw as a gleam of self-pride in his eyes." I had not observed JJ (or almost anyone, for that matter) stand up to Junius prior to this.

This was a bold move for JJ in the context of his positioning in the classroom. He had made himself vulnerable on his very first day of school. He started in Anna's room a few days after the school year started. On his first day Anna told his table that they could not be dismissed for lunch because they had been talking. JJ had not participated in the chatting and as he watched Anna lead the rest of the class out of the room, large tears began to roll down his cheeks. Tia let out a whoop and asked tauntingly, "Are you crying? He crying!" Another girl, Sese, quickly stepped in and told Tia to be quiet. She asked JJ what was wrong and he sobbed softly, "I'm hungry and now I can't eat lunch." "Oh," Sese told him, "she'll let us eat, don't worry." Anna walked back into the room and Sese told her, "He's crying cause he thinks he won't get to eat." Anna told him firmly that there was no need to cry, he would get to eat his lunch, and he needed to proceed to the lunchroom. He dried his eyes and complied. Although some of the children in this class did live in poverty, JJ was not one of them. He did not qualify for free lunch and brought a well-stocked sack lunch to school each day. I'm sure he was hungry that day – it had been a few hours since breakfast – but I read his tears as much more a sign of sensitivity and uncertainty in a new situation than of desperate hunger. Anna appeared to read his tears in this way as well and, by her firm response, sent a message to JJ that she did not consider the situation something worth crying about. I wrote in my field journal that day of my own relief that JJ had not shed those tears in front of the dominant boys in the class.

JJ was not the only boy to shed tears, though. Over the course of the year, I saw most of the boys cry, including Ray, Junius, Kenneth, and Lavell. So, what made the difference between the intimidators and the intimidatees in the book-choosing episode? What made Corey, who, like JJ and Keith, was a model student, immune from intimidation? Part of the explanation may lie in friendship groups – Corey was friends with Ray, Junius, Kenneth, and Lavell; JJ and Keith were not. But, I think it also had to do with the degree

to which each boy embodied accepted and expected notions of masculinity. Certainly within both groups there were multiple masculinities at play, but one key factor – sports – seemed to play a large role in marking and maintaining the former group's status as definers of hegemonic masculinity in this particular space.

Along with being a part of the dominant group came a particular style of dress, an assumption of knowledge of sports teams, players, scores, and expected participation in sports activities on the playground (football in winter, basketball in spring). Most of these boys also played sports in community leagues outside of school. The popular culture they talked about most often was sports related, including professional wrestling, televised athletics, and movies (especially "He Got Game," the Spike Lee movie). I am not arguing that sports defined these boys' subjectivities; however, I believe that sports was key to how they formed and maintained relationships to one another. Therefore, the boys who did not participate in activity and discourse around sports were also excluded from certain social relationships in this classroom. Vocally and publicly displaying preferences for books about sports would be an important move in maintaining that subjectivity.

Complicated Masculinities

The socially dominant boys did not always display stereotypically "tough" or "macho" behaviors. Junius begins to sound macho in my description, yet he was among the most affectionate towards me, greeting me unselfconsciously with hugs in front of his friends. The same was true of Kenneth. In a book club discussion, Ray, who was the leader of the dominant group, initiated a discussion about the trauma that teasing can cause, citing examples of classmates who had been marginalized by others. His friends were soon empathetically sharing their own stories of children who had been hurt by teasing. Although these boys showed vulnerability, their social status protected them from the ridicule that could have resulted. Ray and Anthony's social status, for instance, allowed them to choose *The Babysitters' Club* book in the book-choosing episode. Rather than being socially humiliated, the boys' choice elicited fond laughter from their classmates. The laughter made it clear that they had crossed a boundary, but for these boys it was a safe passage. The consequences of that choice for JJ or Keith would have been socially devastating.

JJ and Keith did not have the same space to play with boundaries between femininity and masculinity. Their own positions within the "gender order" seemed to require that they, at least initially, draw explicit lines between themselves and femininities in their reading practices. They were the most adamant among the boys that they did not want to read books with female protagonists because they were, as JJ put it, "for girls. I don't like girl books." JJ also said that he didn't like girl books because they "don't have exciting plots. I like adventure." Keith was among the most vocal resisters when the class was required to read books about girls, even writing resistant responses in his journal

for the first few days: "I didn't like this book because it is for girls." "They can make me read it, but they can't make me like it." Ray and Anthony, in contrast, never admitted, in group or individual conversations, that they didn't want to read a girls' book (even though their behavior in the book-choosing episode suggested otherwise). In other words, JJ and Keith displayed more stereotypically macho attitudes about the gender boundaries they drew around their reading than most of the other boys in the class.

Performing Maculinities in Relation to Femininity

All of the boys in this group defined themselves in part by contrasting themselves with girls and things associated with girls. This tendency was clear throughout the year in boys' talk and actions around books. In conversations about reading choices, the boys often talked in terms of fixed categories of "boys" and "girls" even in the face of evidence from both their own choices and, particularly, of girls' (like the three in the book-choosing episode) that did not "fit" in those defined categories. The boys described "boys' books" as "adventurous," "scary," and sports-centered. The following example is from a Fall conversation with Lavell, Keith, Kenneth, Corey, and Larry (who left in the middle of the year). I asked, "I noticed that every student who chose to read *The Team That Couldn't Lose* (a Matt Christopher book) was a boy. And, every student who chose to read the one about Addy (An American Girl book) was a girl. Why do you think that is?" In response to my question, the boys started sharing their opinions about girls' preferences. Lavell said, "Because the girls don't get into football." Keith agreed, "The girls don't like football." "And they like to be like girl stuff. Not to talk about you all, but they like to read girl stuff and us boys like to read football and boy stuff," replied Kenneth.

Lavell and Keith agreed that the reason the girls didn't choose *The Team that Couldn't Lose* was because girls don't like football, even though these boys had witnessed girls deliberately choosing books about sports during at least one book-choosing episode. Kenneth's comment began to address the issue of gendered reading choices more generally. He included me in the female "they" he talked about, apologizing – "Not to talk about you all, but. . ." – in case I might interpret it as criticism. Kenneth drew clear boundaries between what he perceived as girls' preferences "to read girl stuff" and boys' "to read football and boy stuff."

Kenneth then led the group into a discussion of boys reading preferences.

Kenneth: Boys like to read football, basketball.

Lavell: Baseball, WWF (World Wrestling Federation) magazines.

Kenneth: Nitro.

Lavell: Thunder.

Keith: Thunder.

Kenneth: We like to read comic books like Thor.

The boys perform masculinities through their talk about their own and girls' reading preferences. All of their stated preferences center on sports and super-hero comics (Nitro and Thunder are the names of WWF wrestlers). When I asked them what girls like to read, the books they mentioned were "books about Barbies," The Babysitters Club, American Girl series, and the Boxcar Children series. Except for the Boxcar Children all of these series are highly gendered.

The boys' sharply drawn contrast between their reading choices as opposed to girls' emphasizes the point that "masculinity and femininity are inherently relational concepts, which have meaning in relation to each other, as a social demarcation and a cultural opposition. . . Masculinity as an object of knowledge is always masculinity-in-relation" (Connell, 1995, p. 44). Sorting reading choices into fixed categories makes sense from the boys' point of view. Not only does it fit within the dichotomized thinking about gender that dominates in U.S. culture, it provides them with a stable set of characteristics through which and against which to define themselves as boys (Davies, 1993). However, allowing those fixed categories to remain unchallenged precludes any possibility of disrupting received notions of what it means to be a boy in their context; it makes it more difficult to engage in play with and against masculinities, as these particular boys perform them.

Disrupting Performances: The American Girl Experience

Having watched the book-choosing episode and other instances of highly gendered fiction working as a stage for revealing performances of gender, I began to wonder what would happen if all of the boys were required to read books that were explicitly marked as female (i.e., not just books with female protagonists, but well-known series books that were marketed exclusively to girls). I remember the spring day I whispered my idea to Anna as the kids worked quietly around us. She smiled and nodded. The next week I brought in six books each of 4 titles in the American Girl series. The protagonists were Samantha, wealthy white orphan girl of the Victorian era; Josephina, a Latina living in the Southwest of the late 1800s; Molly, a middle-class white girl experiencing World War II; and, Addy, an African American girl who escaped slavery and fled with her mother to Pennsylvania during the Civil War.

When Anna and I announced the new literature circle choices, the girls cheered and the boys looked at us in shocked disbelief. There were groans, angry mutterings, and stunned laughter. I heard Keith mutter, "You can't make me read that." Anthony mouthed, "this sucks," across the room to Ray. I briefly introduced each book and then the book-choosing commenced. Although the boys were not happy, they quickly began to plan their book choices with friends. This is when Junius made his threat to Keith,

warning him not to choose Molly. The class got on with the business of choosing, reading, writing about, and discussing their literature circle books. Below, I focus on one conversation with a group of boys that explored their initial experience reading these books.

The class had experienced one reading of American Girl books for literature circles and was in the midst of another when I met with a group of boys. Each boy had read, or was in the process of reading, two of the following books: *Addy Learns a Lesson*, *Molly Learns a Lesson*, *Samantha Learns a Lesson*, and *Josefina Learns a Lesson*. I asked Corey, Ray, Kenneth, Anthony, JJ, and Junius if they would talk to me as a group about The American Girl books, and they agreed. This 45 minute conversation focused on the plots of the books the boys had read. It was evident from this discussion that the boys had read and comprehended the books. The discussion below, however, focuses on episodes from the conversation that are particularly revealing of how the boys performed masculinity through their American Girl experience and this particular opportunity to talk about that experience.

Initial Resistance

Junius was the first to respond to my initial question to the group: "Do you like The American Girl books?" His response surprised me. But first, some context.

It appeared to me that Junius was enjoying the American Girl books. I wrote in my field journal: "Junius is absorbed in *Josefina Learns a Lesson*. This is the most engaged I've seen him in one of the literature circle books." In an interview, a girl in the class referred to Junius, who sat across from her, as an example of a boy who really enjoyed reading the books. She said, "Well, I think Junius likes [Josefina]. Yeah, because he reads all of his pages. He sits there. I mean, it takes him about probably 15 minutes just to read one page, but he reads it."

So, Junius was the first to answer me. He said, "I like, I kind of liked Josefina." I asked him, "Why do you like Josefina?" He hesitated and grinned. Anthony laughed and said that Junius liked Josefina "because she looks good, that's what you said." All of the boys tittered. Corey said, "He did." Junius just grinned. I asked him again why he liked Josefina. He kept grinning. Anthony said, "I wasn't kidding." Junius grinned and nodded.

Interestingly, Junius did not talk in this exchange. Anthony talked for him, yet Junius seemed to acknowledge that he did say that Josefina "looked good." It had not occurred to me that the boys might position the books and their characters in this way – as objects of sexual attraction. It made sense, though. It seemed a safe move to make in an initial discussion of these books in front of peers. However, I remain convinced that this book had genuinely captivated Junius. Based on my observations of his reading, I am certain that his interest extended far beyond Josephina's physical appearance. As the above exchange unfolded, I wondered if more of the boys would follow Junius' lead.

However, the next few comments were negative. Anthony said, "I don't like them books at all. I just don't like them because they don't make sense really." He complained, "Josefina is just stupid cause all it really talks about in the beginning was her making her dress and all that." Anthony does not explicitly say that he found Josefina "stupid" because sewing is a girl's activity, but it could be implied; at the very least, he defines the making of the dress as an inherently boring activity. Based on my observations, I was convinced that most of the boys were enjoying the books, but it was not safe for them to indicate this.

A Turning Point

After Anthony's criticism of Josefina, Corey began to say something about Addy: "Well, I think that Addy. . .". He was cut off short, though, by Kenneth who forthrightly announced, "I like Molly." We all sat through one or two beats of silence after Kenneth's words, and I felt the tone of the discussion shift. Lavell said to Kenneth, "Oh, I never read that one." Corey cleared his throat and said, "Addy's just bunk. . .". Anthony said, "No way. That's the best book out of all of them." Corey shook his head, "uh huh." I asked the group, "Which one is the best?" JJ, Kenneth, Anthony, and Lavell all answered at once: "Addy." "Molly." "Addy." "Addy." Corey said, "Wait a minute. I liked Samantha. I liked that book better." Kenneth's comment appeared to clear a safe space for positive talk about the books. Even Anthony who claimed to dislike the books, jumped into the conversation to defend his favorite character.

After Kenneth helped to create a space for the boys to include positive talk about these books, the conversation turned to the books in more detail. The boys discussed the plots of the books. Throughout this part of the conversation, their talk was directed at each other, not at me.

Resistance Returns

About halfway through the discussion, Corey quietly got up from the table, walked to his desk, and came back with a copy of Christopher's book, *The Basket Counts*. He interrupted the conversation, saying "I want to read one of these books next," and turned to the back of the book to a list of Christopher's athlete biographies. He pointed at the title *Grant Hill*, "I want to read this one next." I watched as the other boys' attention was drawn to Corey and the book. Kenneth said, "I want to read *Michael Jordan*." "Michael's writing his own book right now," Anthony replied. Lavell said, "Grant Hill." "They're talking too much about him now, and that Michael Jordan movie was weak," said Corey. Anthony asked, "Did you watch that." "Yeah, I did," said Kenneth, "I want to read *Michael Jordan* and *Grant Hill*."

I interpreted Corey's actions as an attempt to turn the conversation to safer, more familiar territory. Let's be clear, his actions say, that I may be willing to tell you what I think

of the American Girl books, but they are not my first choice. JJ was excluded from the conversation about the Christopher books. He did not join in, yet was an active participant in conversations about the American Girl books. With minimal effort I was able to steer the conversation back to the American Girl books, but Corey's move was significant. It brought the hegemonic masculinities of the classroom explicitly into play in this conversation, a conversation that had led the boys to eschew one of the primary ways that they had each, in varying ways, performed their masculinity in the classroom – defining themselves against feminine fiction.

Resistance Denied

Indeed, from the moment Kenneth had first announced that he "liked" the books, none of the boys had made a negative comment. I wanted to give them opportunities to express misgivings, so I presented them with the following scenario: "If you went to the library and there was the next Addy book, or Molly book, or the next Samantha book, sitting right there on the shelf and you could choose it and check it out if you wanted to, would you do it?" They all jumped in immediately:

Corey: Yeah.

Kenneth: Yeah, because=

Lavell: I would because I want to see what happened about her mom and what happened to her.

Corey: I would because they write a whole bunch of points and they're good.

JJ: I would too because I want to see if her [Addy's] father and Sam, if her father and her brother Sam ever come back.

Corey: Cause Sam might come back rich.

Keith: I want to see about Molly.

Elizabeth: Anthony, did you say you would?

Anthony: Yeah.

Elizabeth: Okay. I just want to remind you that when we started the conversation you said you didn't like them at all.

Anthony: Well, I meant to say except for Addy.

The conversation shifted dramatically from beginning to end. By the end, it was safe not only to admit liking the books, but also to claim that they would freely choose to read

further in the series. Even Anthony now chose to revise his negative statements from earlier in the conversation, claiming that they did not apply to his favorite character. Whether or not the boys would actually risk such a public choice outside of the classroom, it marked a significant change for these boys to talk positively, among male peers, about books that they had previously ridiculed.

Perhaps the boys' positive comments were expressed for my benefit. Anna and I had manipulated their choices for literature circles in a more overt way than usual. That is, they could have read Anna's previous choices for book selection as "neutral" – books that she happened to have on hand or books that she thought were good for kids to read. In contrast, our introduction of the American Girl books implied ulterior motives. The boys knew of my interest in their reading choices; they knew that girls had been reading American Girl books with me for book club. Because I was part of the social context of the classroom, all of the boys' gender performances were influenced by my presence (just as they influenced and were influenced by the presence of every other person in the room). The boys' stances toward the books in this conversation were gender performances, whatever their motives. The talk and actions around that table included both resistance and acceptance. It would be a mistake to ascribe too much meaning to the boys' positive talk. However, these boys had not bothered to hide their disdain for "girls books" from me previously. Therefore, it could be that given the opportunity and, importantly, Kenneth's willingness to risk a positive stance toward the books, the boys were beginning to revise their assumptions about what constituted appropriate choices for boys and, therefore, to play with one aspect of what it meant to perform masculinity in this classroom.

Performing Boyhood in the Literacy Classroom

Butler's (1995) theory of performance is helpful in providing ways of "seeing" enacted gender subjectivities as a "surface politics of the body," rather than an immutable state of being. Even as the reiteration of gender performance creates recognizable ways of being male, it is just this "repeated process, an iterable process," that allows for agency (p. 135). The stereotyped ideas we hold about what masculinity means are based on the continual reiteration of performances of gender that eventually result in making masculinity recognizable. However, "that the subject must be constituted again and again implies that it is open to formations that are not fully constrained in advance" (Butler, 1995, p. 135). Performances of masculinity can be disrupted, therefore making possible the reconstituting of subjectivities.

Conventional notions of gender may constrict individual choices, however, viewing these choices as performances, rather than as inevitable or natural, does not erase their consequences. Gender is constructed, and performed, and it is also a primary means around which power relationships are organized (Alcoff, 1988). Removing

gender from the exclusive realm of the biological and locating it in the realms of human performance and agency in no way denies that gendered categories ascribe power, but instead negates any simplified notions about how and for whom and against whom those power relations work (Foucault, 1980). Below I discuss some of the lessons I learned from these boys' performances of masculinities and the implications of those lessons for the literacy classroom.

Masculinities Revealed Through Reading Practices

These boys demonstrated the possibility of disrupting boys' performances of their own notions of appropriately masculine practices. Their experience suggests that safe spaces can be made for boys to play with gender roles, to perform gender differently, and to adopt a different discourse of masculinity that is less reliant on defining itself in opposition to femininity and other masculinities. This idea of safe space is an important one. All of the boys were required to read books that they would not have freely chosen in the public space of the classroom. The required nature of this reading itself offered safety, as it allowed for play without the potential stigma of public choice. This small move of requiring reading that altered an established performance of masculinity seemed to begin to challenge the boys' own assumptions about what was appropriate reading for them. This move was certainly more tentative for some than for others and, as Junius's experience with the Josephina story illustrates, it was a complicated move (for instance, it could potentially result in the further objectification of girls). It did, though, allow boys to step into a previously unfamiliar space through which to question dichotomies that are often left unexamined (I emphasize that I am talking about a public space here. I have heard many anecdotal examples of boys reading "girls' fiction" in private spaces). The creation of a safe space to play with gendered reading practices seems particularly important for the boys who performed more marginalized masculinities. Although Anthony's and Ray's social status protected them from ridicule, JJ and Keith could not have publicly read "girls' books" without risking ridicule.

Reading practices reveal something about how children see themselves as gendered. As I learned from these boys, the performances of masculinities and the consequences of those performances varied both between and within the groups of boys; however, all of them performed reading practices in ways that defined themselves in relation to femininities and in relation to other boys. Their reading practices generally revealed a reliance on the boy/girl dichotomy to express and perform their own subjectivities as both readers and as boys. Even when their talk about books appeared to refute such dichotomies, their actions tended to reinforce it. For instance, both Anthony and Ray told me that they would gladly choose books about girls, yet their actions in both the

book-choosing episode and their initial response to the American Girl experience contradicted their assertions.

The boys' talk and actions around popular fiction also often reinforced the "gender order" (Connell, 1995), or hierarchy, of masculinities in the classroom. For instance, Ray, Kenneth, and Junius used their social status and their reputations as tough guys to intimidate JJ and Keith. The three boys used public book-choosing to reassert their dominance over more marginalized boys. Although the boys in the socially dominant group were very different in terms of academic success and classroom behavior, they all shared an active and vocal affiliation with sports. In contrast, when talk turned to sports, JJ in particular was silenced. He and Keith either chose not to engage, or were not allowed to engage, in those conversations. Perhaps because of JJ's and Keith's social positions, their exclusion from what constituted hegemonic masculinity in this classroom, they were adamant in their initial rejection of "girls' books." This rejection can be read as one of the few ways they had, in this particular context, of asserting their masculinity in highly visible ways. Because they did not participate in some of the activities and behaviors that defined masculinity in this classroom (particularly sports), their masculinity was, arguably, open to question.

This was not the case for the other six boys. However, their dominant position depended on the marginalized position of the other two. In order to maintain their status, the boys in the dominant group needed to police the boundaries between themselves and other boys. They did this, in part, through talk and actions around books. Even though only three of the six participated in intimidating JJ and Keith (to my knowledge), all six enjoyed the benefits of the hierarchy that was reinforced through those actions.

Although the boys in the dominant group shared both friendship and social status, they were positioned very differently from one another in relation to school and their potential for success in the classroom. Junius might be sensitive and affectionate, as well as sometimes aggressive, but his tendency to be disciplined often and his struggles with reading may hold academic consequences different from someone like Corey, whose performances of masculinity were equally complex and yet positioned him as extremely successful both academically and socially. Further, although JJ's and Keith's performed masculinities were marginalized, their long-term prospects could be seen as brighter due to their academic success and their views of themselves as good students. Indeed, JJ never appeared to desire affiliation with the more dominant boys. Although he couldn't have enjoyed their intimidation, he seemed very satisfied with the social space that he had created for himself.

Implications for the Literacy Classroom

Viewing reading practices as gender performances provides opportunities for adults and children to see these too often invisible ways of reiterating gender norms and opportunities to encourage children to "do" gender differently. This "seeing" also reveals the many ways in which adults' routine and seemingly neutral classroom decisions are extremely complicated and ripe with consequences for children's experiences. The book-choosing episode provided Anna and me ways of "seeing" gender at work in reading practices that led us to take more proactive stances (e.g., the American Girl experience). However, that and other similar episodes revealed the fraught nature of both the act of public book choice and our own roles in creating those "opportunities" to choose. *

The idea of allowing children to choose their books is key to the philosophy of the literature-circle curriculum. Children, in theory, are allowed a certain amount of autonomy to choose books that interest them; making their own choices is motivating, it acknowledges and honors their individuality, and it helps them to take ownership of their own learning (Daniels, 1994). However, some of the children in Anna's room had very little choice because of intimidation by others. The book choosing created opportunity for some boys to exert power over others. When presented with choices friendship groups will likely do what they can to ensure that they end up in the same group. As a result, children who are marginalized are likely to be further excluded. Any attempts to provide children with choice in reading need to be closely examined, for what looks like choice on the surface may in fact be something else entirely.

Our attempts to create particular reading experiences for children become even more complicated when the social positions of the adults and children are taken into account, particularly when these positions differ in significant ways. How would I – and, more importantly, the boys – have felt about the "American Girl Experience" if I had not had Anna as collaborator? What did it mean for me, a white, middle-class woman, to require working-class African American boys to read these popular books, particularly those about privileged white girls? I asked them to challenge and therefore, risk performances of masculinity that were serving a particular purpose for them. I believed in the potential of challenging those performances, yet I can't know what consequences that challenge holds for a working-class African American boy. Anna's interest in watching the boys experience this reading made a difference. The children trusted her and, further, I trusted that she would look out for the children's interests including those interests to which I might inadvertently be blind because of white privilege. Does this mean that teachers differently positioned from students should not attempt to disrupt gendered reading performances? I don't think so. But teachers should tread carefully, being conscious of

how their own often privileged race and/or class positions influence their choices and carefully examining the consequences of those choices for their students. The cautions discussed earlier, that Alcoff (1995) and Spivak (1988) raise for researchers engaging with the "other" provide important guidance for teachers as well.

I also discovered how the nature of conversations about books shifts in response to a focus on the intersection of reading and gender performance. Because my questions to the children often focused on choices and preferences, the children often talked about reading practices in our conversations rather than just about individual texts. Talking about reading as a set of practices or performances – of what, where, and how one chooses to read – seems crucial to the goal of encouraging children to question gender dichotomies. If children have opportunities to talk about their reading choices and what lies behind those decisions, they might begin to see the extent to which their choices are shaped by multiple factors, a primary one being gender. They might begin to see, for instance, how the relationship between their own talk and actions around books and the marketing strategies used to sell many of their favorite books contributes to the gender boundaries they often perceive in their reading. As Davies's (1989, 1993) work has also shown, children can be encouraged to deconstruct the male/female binary and recognize its role in text. However, this is a complicated move to make in public school classrooms, both politically and logistically. Future work should further explore the possibilities, as well as the inherent complexities and risks, in bringing more explicit critical conversations into the literacy classroom about the role of masculinities in texts and in boys' reading practices.

Finally, although adults can help to create spaces for boys to question and "play" with gender performance, children's own agency is key in disrupting normative performances of gender. For instance, the requirement to read American Girl books was not sufficient to encourage boys to talk about them in positive ways. Although my observations indicated that they were engaged in the books, it took Kenneth's initial words in the group discussion to initiate positive talk.

Conclusion

These boys' reading practices reveal both how masculinity functions in their classroom and the potential of disrupting those established ways of performing gender. Their experiences provide just one example of how we might address "the pressing need to extend [boys] beyond this kind of hegemonic masculine literacy, and to disrupt usual assumptions about power and the illusions and fictions that hold it in place" (Davies, 1997, p. 15). Paying attention to reading practices and the subjectivities that shape and are shaped by them can potentially serve, in Butler's (1993) terms, to make gender categories sites of openness and re-signification. Reading practices can provide a lens

through which boys can learn to see the often-invisible ways that masculinity is performed in their lives. Because some of those unconscious performances of masculinity devalue femininity or subordinate masculinities, they need to be challenged. Further, they must be challenged because they may constrain the choices and activities of the boys who enact them.

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Transcript key: underlined speech – overlapping talk; '=' following speech – interruption; [] – words added by author for clarification; () – non-verbal interaction