Chapter 26

It's Not How Regular Boys Are Supposed to Act
The Nonnormative Sexual Practices of Black Boys in All-Male Public Schools

Freden Oeur

Introduction

The number of single-sex public schools in the United States has risen sharply in the past decade (Fergus & Noguera, 2010). This unique schooling option has been particularly attractive to school reformers who seek ways of addressing the academic and social challenges facing Black boys (Salomone, 2003). Researchers who study boys (Martino, Mills, & Lingard, 2005; McCready, 2009), however, have expressed concern over whether these schools can be inclusive spaces for gender-nonconforming boys. This is a legitimate concern, given the homophobic sentiments that can dominate male homosocial spaces (Bird, 1996; Lyman, 1987). Indeed, by highlighting perceived differences between boys and girls through the act of physical separation, all-male schools may entrench gender stereotypes (Datnow, Hubbard, & Woody, 2001; Woody, 2002).

While the limited research on all-boys public schools has shown high levels of antigay sentiment among boys (Woody, 2001), few studies have examined the experiences of queer and gender-nonconforming students themselves in these learning environments. In this chapter, I draw on eleven months of fieldwork and interviews at an all-male, public high school to examine the experiences of Black boys who identify as gay or bisexual in a typically obsessively heteronormative environment. I map a particular configuration of masculinities and sexualities at the school. Insights from feminist theories of intersectionality (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991) will provide traction on boys’ social positioning at the nexus of categories of identity—race, social class, gender, sexuality, and the important, but often hidden, category of age—as those categories take the form of processes within and across institutions (Glenn, 1999), and as those categories highlight differences among individuals, including those typically hidden in dominant discourses (Choo & Ferree, 2010).
Children, Sexuality, and Black Masculinity

Male youth and sexuality in schools

While a rich scholarship has explored how youth participate actively in creating their gender identities, studies of sexuality as everyday practice in the lives of young people lag behind. While late-modern societies are assumed to be sexually liberal, sexuality remains an “extra-ordinary” category for children (Jackson & Scott, 2004). This implies that sexuality must be the domain of adults, and when sexuality does impact young people, it is normally cast as deviant and dangerous (Renold, 2005). These various depictions continue to reinforce the image of childhood as an innocent period in life (Thorne, 1993).

Feminist poststructuralism has encouraged researchers to interrogate normative gender categories and how they conceal the multiple and contradictory ways in which individuals experience gender (Renold, 2005; Weedon, 1997). Queer theorists have built on this work in order to problematize the taken-for-granted ways that heterosexuality organizes relations in all domains of social life, often in ways that marginalize nonheterosexual individuals (Stein & Plummer, 1996). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth often face harassment and discrimination in schools as a result of their sexual orientation (Shakeshaft, 2002). And not only peers, but adults are influential for teens’ gender and sexual identity formation during adolescence. High school boys confirm their heterosexuality by treating girls as objects, and by teasing one another for failed expressions of masculinity, embodied in an abject “fag” (more often a fantasized specter than a particular boy) (Pascoe, 2007). Boys were quick to point out transgressive gender performances in ways that reinforced rather than challenged dominant gender norms. While Elisabeth Woody (2001) did not interview any students who identified as gay in her study of an all-boys public school, she found that boys feared being perceived as gay for attending their school.

A small but growing literature has examined how non-straight Black boys experience schools. Lance McCready (2010) has shown that schools can lack supportive spaces for queer and gender-nonconforming Black male students. This research is notable for working within a framework inspired by Black feminist theories of intersectionality (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991) that examine the social positioning of marginalized groups as a site of multiple forms of oppression. McCready argued that these theories are particularly useful because urban education discourses normally focus on race, class, and political economy, and less on gender and sexual oppression. A “systemic-level model” of intersectionality (Glenn, 1999; Peterson, 2005) moves beyond group-level identities to examine how processes (e.g., racism, sexism, heteronormativism) organize power relationships within and between institutions. Finally, more research is needed that adopts an intersectional approach to exposing how LGBT Black youth, who already face a “double containment” of racism and heterosexism (Collins, 2005; Hunter, 2010), experience—and are oppressed by—sexuality in different ways than adults. Here, age and youth form an important axis of difference, highlighting the particular vulnerabilities of children (A. Best, 2007).

This chapter will contribute to a tradition of research linking boyhood practices to sexuality inside schools (Connell, 1989; Ferguson, 2001; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Pascoe, 2007). At Perry High School, articulations of sexuality and race interacted to empower one dominant
masculinity and to subordinate other configurations of belief and practice. The school’s “gender regime” (Connell, 1987) was organized through a hierarchy of masculinities, with a dominant form of masculinity upheld by boys who practiced sexual dominance over girls and repudiated “fags,” the most emasculated gender identity. The boys felt that their school had a reputation as “the gay school.” The boys who drew on the dominant discourse of masculinity exerted power over two marginalized kinds of masculinity. One group of boys identified as gay or bisexual. A third group of “trades” identified and attempted to pass as heterosexual in front of their peers, but had sexual relations with boys in private. This practice mirrored the “down low” practices of “Black men who secretly have sex with other men while maintaining heterosexual relationships with women and presenting themselves as masculine rather than feminine” (Phillips, 2005, p. 4).

Data and Methods

Data for this chapter was drawn from a larger study of all-boys high schools in a large East Coast city during the 2009–2010 school year. Perry High, the school that is the focus of this chapter, had approximately 450 students in grades 7–12, and converted from coed to single-sex model in 2004. The school had struggled for years with low student achievement and high staff turnover. The student population was 99% African American and largely class-disadvantaged, with 89% of the students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch.

I observed all facets of daily life at Perry during my eleven months of participant observation there. I supplemented my observations with semistructured interviews. This chapter will draw on my interviews with 25 students aged 11 to 19, as well as 43 adults (teachers, staff members, and parents). I got to know most of the boys personally before I interviewed them (for example, by going to Gay-Straight Alliance meetings, or hanging out with the boys in class or after school), though a few boys came recommended to me by adults in the building. In keeping with the call from feminist methodologists for self-reflexivity in ethnographic research and interviewing (Arendell, 1997), I tried to be attentive to how my own biases and experiences might have affected the ability of my interviewees to speak openly. I was further influenced by the work of contemporary scholars of children and youth (A. Best, 2007; Lareau, 2003; Perry, 2002; Thorne, 1993) who view children as active subjects, and not as passive recipients of culture. I was attentive to how teenagers actively shape their relationships with peers and adults, which are often complex and highly consequential, given the chaotic nature of adolescence (Pascoe, 2007).

Perry High School

Dominant masculinity

Perry’s unique history had inscribed the dominant masculinity practices at the school with particular racialized and sexualized meanings. The students often remarked that Perry was an “institution,” a large, impersonal space that resembled a prison, with its gray stone exterior and the antiviolence “technological apparatus” (Devine, 1996), including security guards, metal detectors, X-ray scanning machine, and bars on the windows. Moreover, Perry, like
prisons, housed only Black male bodies in uniforms. (The school had a uniform policy of a white, button-up shirt and black pants.) Furthermore, prison rhetoric was common in the school. The school staff frequently warned the boys that they were likely to end up a “statistic”—a teen father, in prison, or dead at a young age—and a daylong assembly reminded the boys to choose “education over incarceration” and “Yale over jail.”

The depictions of Perry as a prison further fueled the boys’ anxieties about male-on-male sexual violence, which the boys appeared to believe was a practice inside of prisons. They feared that young people outside the school perceived that they were gay for being in an all-male school, which many boys frequently referred to as “the gay school.” Many boys seemed even more worried that the school would actually, as 11th-grader Jamie told me, “turn boys into faggots.” The fear behind being sexually dominated by another boy was not necessarily rooted in a concern over homosexual behavior, but over being completely emasculated. Sexual violence against weak, male prisoners represented a gross power imbalance where “[m]en who are treated as if they were women...are feminized and become less manly men, their masculinity severed, equated with castration” (Collins, 2006).

The fear that being at an all-male school could turn them gay supports Elisabeth Woody’s (2001) research on single-sex schools. Ms. Channing, a math teacher at Perry, recalled explaining to her students that a gay identity was “not airborne,” and that they would not “pick it up” from an effeminate student in class. The boys viewed gay identity as contagious, and as something to be avoided. Many young men tried to avoid stereotypically effeminate characteristics. At Perry, students, and particularly gay students, referred to the most effeminate boys as “cunts,” a crude term for female genitalia. As Antoine, a 12th-grader told me, a “cunt person just means you a boy who act like a girl. You got feminine ways’ like “walking around with pocket books.”

Dominant sexual practices at Perry involved treating girls as objects and “fags,” emasculated and powerless identities, or as abject (Pascoe, 2007). “Shop talk” jokes and stories were part of the everyday grammar inside the school. One day, two friends, Isaiah and Thomas, walked down the hallway and heard the popular 1990s song, Weak, by R&B group SWV, pouring out of a classroom. They mocked the singing, changing the first line of the chorus—“I get so weak in the knees”—to “I get so weak in the MEAT,” yelling the last word (a stand-in for penis) for added emphasis.

Without girls present, the boys could not manipulate girls’ bodies, and they therefore relied on bragging about getting and “bagging” girls. The stories were often Lewd. The boys teased each other as much as they boasted. One day, Xavier joked with his good friend, Asad, about not having sex with girls and having to watch pornography: “You in a drought! You been watching all them DVDs!” The names they used to tease each other were frequently explicitly sexual, such as “dickeater” and “cocksucker.”

Hegemonic masculinity is perpetuated through competition and the sexual objectification of women (Bird, 1996). At Perry, these practices merged, as the objectification of women and girls and the repudiation of fags were the main forms of public displays of competition among the boys. Bragging and teasing was a kind of currency in the competition for male dominance, and when these were directed at homosexuality, the boys were able to draw a line between homosexual identity and homosocial male bonds, or nonssexual
attractions among boys (Bird, 1996; Lyman, 1987). Boys were also able to stand apart from
the fag identity by imitating and mocking it, and then dropping the “fag act” (Pascoe, 2007).
One day in English class, a student read a passage about a rabbit aloud from a book. Robert
interrupted in a mockingly effeminate tone, “silly rabbit, dicks are for chicks!” (a variation
on “silly rabbit, Trix are for kids!” from the popular cereal advertisement). He then dropped
the fag act, which confirmed to the other boys that he was straight.

Queer Black boys

While I observed only one instance of this, members of the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA)
told me that they were accustomed to other boys giving them dirty looks or calling them
names. Jabari, an 11th-grader, stood out in school with his stylish glasses, slicked-back
hair, and the tight vest he wore most days. The other GSA members considered Jabari the
group’s unofficial leader. He was one of five boys I interviewed at Perry who identified as
gay (three of them were regular members of the GSA). Jabari told me that boys frequently
said “stuff like ‘gay,’ ‘faggot,’” but he mostly brushed those comments off. He added that
“not everybody in the group feels that way, and so that’s why we talk about it because some
people, their feelings do get hurt at times.” Jabari’s friend, Randy, who identified as bisexual,
stressed that he was the target of “verbal assaults.”

Randy and Jabari emphasized that they received support from some adults in the build-
ing. The boys identified teachers who had welcomed them into their classrooms after
school, and who frequently checked in with them. Mr. Morreti, one of the school’s guidance
counselors, reached out to several of the queer students in the building. He knew he had a
unique opportunity to address boys’ antigay sentiments because he worked with boys from
different grade levels. He frequently told the boys to “exult with their differences.” Several
people told me that Mr. Morreti was particularly instrumental in making the school safer
and more comfortable for Malik, a 10th-grader who identified himself as “bi and fem.” Mal-
lik regularly left the lunchroom to eat with Mr. Morreti, and other boys may have refrained
from harassing Malik out of respect for Mr. Morreti.

Mr. Bradley, the school’s principal, had approached Mr. Gardner, a social worker, about
starting up the GSA. Mr. Gardner himself was surprised to hear that the GSA had the
backing of the administration, because his previous school was hostile to the idea of a GSA,
given “issues with homophobia” and “backlash from parents.” Mr. Gardner added that he
assumed “that being in an all-male environment…there probably are some students who
would like to have some level of support.” Randy, Jabari, and Malik praised Mr. Bradley for
urging staff members to take part in the GSA and for providing the boys with resources so
they could put on a dance and fashion show. Yet, while they understood that there would
likely be a backlash from many boys, they were concerned that Mr. Bradley never attempted
to address homophobia with the student body. As Jabari told me,
The Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) struggled some in its first year, but it provided a space for gender-nonconforming boys to talk through serious issues around sexuality. GSAs are clubs that bring together LGBT students and heterosexual students in order to promote sexual justice and to create a safer and more supportive climate for LGBT students (Fetner & Kush, 2008). Sometimes Mr. Gardner scheduled activities, like when the group watched The Laramie Project, a played based on the high-profile murder of Matthew Shepard, and then discussed what constitutes a hate crime. Other times the structure was loose, and the boys had an opportunity to talk candidly about a range of issues.

Parents also played an important role in the boys' development of their sexual identities. This first struck me when the GSA boys told me what they thought was the cause of other boys' "ignorance." As Jabari said, they "haven't had enough parenting, I guess, and they don't seem like they have any home training." Randy invoked "fear" as the trigger for antigay sentiment among many boys, and equated it with a lack of understanding rooted in a lack of adult guidance:

Mostly throughout history, if you didn't understand certain people, you attack and try to get rid of them because you didn't understand them and you were afraid of them. You don't understand why a boy could like boys, and you fear that. But that's not something you can overcome on your own. You need someone at home to help you understand that you don't need to fear someone that's different.

Randy's comments indicated that many boys feared queer students because they felt threatened, and also because they were worried that they could be rendered emasculated. His and Jabari's comments also underscored the important role that parents play in shaping their children's attitudes on matters of sexuality (Taylor, Jackson, & Chatters, 1997). But as Jabari's earlier comments reveal, he was largely able to stand his ground among his peers—and not "care" about the name-calling—because he himself had (he thought) been raised well at home. He emphasized that his mother has been "very supportive" of him after coming out as gay early in high school, doing everything from supporting him in his decision to wear dresses at a school fashion show, to helping Jabari's father to accept that his son was gay.

Not all parents felt the same as Jabari's mother. The mother of 11th-grader, Chris, had a difficult time understanding that her son had expressed sexual interest in girls and boys. She expressed a concern shared by other parents that the school's all-boys environment was promoting gay behavior:

I had heard that there's a lot of gay situations and I feared that would have rubbed off because that's what you're being exposed to. And if you're not really exposed to the other like that, you're going to go with the one that you're most exposed to. And I didn't care for it.

While the nonheterosexual boys at the school and their allies believed that one is born with a sexual identity, adults (like Chris's mother) and those who expressed antigay sentiments told me that people are not born gay but can become gay under unnatural circumstances such as all-boys environments. While these two mothers felt differently about their sons' sexual identities, they expressed a shared belief that sexual orientation was not, or should not be, the defining characteristic of their sons' identities. Instead, they stressed that
their boys would be forced to reconcile what Marcus Hunter (2010) called an “up-down” identity, or one that emphasizes one facet of identity or another—in this case, racial identity over sexual identity. While vectors of identity interlock to create qualitatively different experiences for different groups (Choo & Ferree, 2010)—which, indeed, was the case for the nonheterosexual boys at Perry—the mothers of Chris and Jabari framed their sons’ identities in reference to non-Blacks, rather than casting their sons’ nonheterosexual identities vis-à-vis straights.

**Trades on the down low**

While 12th-grader, Antoine, mostly kept to himself, he seemed to have earned the respect of his peers as well as that of his teachers, as Antoine worked diligently in class. He recently became attracted to boys, and identified as bisexual, and had started “messing around” with boys for the time being, but he was open to one day dating women again. According to Antoine and other boys I interviewed at Perry, a subset of boys had sexual relations with other boys, but may have still considered themselves straight. Antoine and his friend, Darrelle, however, were the only two boys who revealed this identity to me. The sexual practices of these boys, referred to as “trades,” mirror those of Black men on the “down low” or “DL.” Research on men who have sex with men (“MSM”) (Martinez & Hosek, 2005) has shown how Black men use “DL” and “trade” interchangeably—as in “the trade” being the process of being on the DL—but the boys in this study used the term to refer to a person on the DL.

Young men could find each other online or hook up at parties, while maintaining the appearance of being heterosexual. But Darrelle, Antoine, and others assured me that DL practices also sometimes occurred at school, as boys would discreetly engage in sexual relations in the bathroom and elsewhere. Interestingly, staff members told me that one rationale for separating boys and girls was because they distracted each other from their schoolwork. They said that when Perry was a mixed-sex school, boys and girls had been caught having sexual relations in bathrooms. Despite the administrators’ good intentions, they were likely far less concerned that sexual distractions could persist in a homosocial environment. Instead, the “third hidden curriculum” (R. Best, 1983) of sexual learning continued to thrive at Perry after young women had left the building.

Darrelle and Antoine told me that trades at the school continually took part in what they called “readin’,” or close observations of boys’ sexual tendencies, as a way of figuring out which boys might be interested in having discreet, same-sex relations. This third, hidden curriculum of sexual learning enabled boys to explore sexual relations as part of their everyday experiences in school. As Darrelle explained, a boy might first befriend another boy for months:

Some trades, they’ll like you from the beginning of the year and then they’ll build your trust through the middle, through the whole year. And say like it’s May or June...that’s when [they] tell you, “I’m gay. I liked you through the whole year but I couldn’t trust....I had to build my trust.”
Darrelle’s comments reveal one important distinction among boys who are on the DL. While the definition, “men who have sex with men,” has been used to identify men who do not identify as gay, the boys identified two groups: boys who identified as straight in public and maintained their heterosexual identity in private (the widely recognized definition), and boys who passed as straight in public but actually considered themselves gay or bisexual. This latter group of boys may have “normalized” (subjectively accepted) but not yet “routinized” (socially integrated) their sexual identities (Seidman, Meeks, & Traschen, 1999); they remained closeted, perhaps out of fear of repercussions for coming out. Antoine explained that trades went to great lengths to hide their private relations. As a young man on the DL, Darrelle was in a vulnerable and potentially dangerous situation. He was only 17, and having to maintain discreet sexual relations with other men could have had negative repercussions. Darrelle needed to both hide his trade identity before his peers while also negotiating a private identity with a man who could have easily exploited the relationship.

Antoine found that he could bolster his public identity as a way of protecting his trade identity. He felt it was important that he be able to defend himself against boys who might otherwise tease his relative shyness and effeminate behavior (he was particularly conscious about what people thought of his high-pitched voice). He described how he had shocked other students the previous year when he “snapped and went off,” coming to the defense of a friend by pummeling the attacker, and thereby earning the respect of those who witnessed the fight. He prided himself on being a fierce fighter. Paramount for young African American men was respect, and answering the call to fight was one way of earning it (Anderson, 1999). His reputation as a fighter buoyed his status among his peers, and enabled him to fend off any suspicions about his sexual identity.

Discussion

While more and more single-sex schools have opened up in recent years, little is known about how students experience them, and even less about how Black boys do, who increasingly make up a significant percentage of students in these schools nationwide. My findings contribute to this literature by describing the dynamics of a particular, institutionally situated hierarchy of masculinities at an all-male, public high school. More specifically, these findings build on research (McCready, 2010) on the experiences of gender-nonconforming Black boys in urban schools. Perry’s local-level gender regimes—schools with particularly at-risk populations of class-disadvantaged African American boys—must be placed in a larger “matrix of domination” (Collins, 2000). Since emerging as a theory for studying inequality, intersectionality has provided scholars with a way of locating various groups’ standpoints within a structure of power (Choo & Ferree, 2010). In particular, situating Perry in a larger, multi-institutional setting is an example of system-level intersectionality, and demonstrates that coconstructing axes of race, class, gender, and sexuality (Glenn, 1999) marginalizes Black boys in specific ways. At Perry, joking appeared to be laced with particular sexual anxieties that emerged from the school’s reputation as “the gay school.” Since the school resembled a prison—an institution that is extremely racialized, given the disproportionately large percentage of Black men who are incarcerated (Alexander, 2012)—the new, all-boys environment resulted in boys becoming particularly aware of the same-sex
threats inside prisons (Collins, 2006), and boys expressed the fear that their school could make them gay.

The schooling environment was not only heteronormative, but threatened to marginalize queer boys inside the school. At Perry, the fag discourse (Pascoe, 2007) was a normal part of everyday talk. For boys who are institutionally powerless and lack access to other forms of masculine capital, hegemonic masculine practices may be particularly important and harmful in their consequences. My study also shows how effeminate behavior and sexual orientation are ambiguously entangled in the meanings of “fag.” While Pascoe (2007) found that African American boys were less likely than their White peers to engage in the fag discourse, I found that Black boys at Perry engaged obsessively in the fag discourse, and calling one another “fag” was one of two common forms of insulting. Since the student body at Perry was almost entirely African American (unlike the school Pascoe studied, which was racially mixed), the “white” epithet most likely lacked currency, and so the boys regularly called one another “gay” and “fag.” Moreover, I never observed the staff discipline any boys for making jokes about fags or calling other boys fags. Clearly, boys’ interactions—what they say about girls and fags—with one another are constrained by institutional practices; adults may reprimand boys or do nothing at all, thereby tacitly approving of those behaviors (Pascoe, 2007) and reproducing the “pecking order” of masculinities within these environments (McCready, 2007).

This chapter also fills voids in knowledge of nondominant masculinities in all-male public schools. By unpacking the sociocultural differences among Black boys, this chapter attempts, to use Lance McCready’s (2010) phrase, to make space for diverse masculinities. At Perry and Urban Charter, two marginalized masculinities—embodied by boys who identified as gay or bisexual, and another group of “trades” who identified as straight in public (or tried to pass as straight) while having sexual relations with boys—were configured in specific ways into each school’s gender regime. Queer students at Perry articulated a certain “situated knowledge” (Hartsock, 1983) of how power was distributed in the hierarchy of masculinities at their school. These boys told me that obsessive heteronormative behavior was a sign of “ignorance,” and also symptomatic of a “fear” of an identity that the boys perceived as emasculated and therefore powerless.

Scholars have shown the negative effects that students face when bullied for being a sexual minority in school, and how being called gay, irrespective of the victim’s sexual orientation, can impair a boy’s psychosocial development and result in negative perceptions of the school environment (Swearer, Turner, Givens, & Pollack, 2008). The impact on the boys in this study could be especially harmful, as their disadvantaged backgrounds made them a particularly vulnerable population (Ferguson, 2001; hooks, 2004; Reich, 2010). While queer students occasionally faced verbal harassment at Perry, they felt that they had the support of some adults in the building, even if it was done outside of the school’s formal curriculum. And since the administration failed to address the issue of homophobia with the students in a formal way—at an assembly, or enforcing school-wide rules against antigay speech and behaviors—the fag discourse continued largely unabated. The school therefore fell short of promoting a progressive Black gender ideology that promotes sexual
justice and is not based on the subordination of others (Collins, 2005; Mutua, 2006). Parents were also integral figures in the development of gender-nonconforming boys.

Trades comprised a group who were in a precarious position in the hierarchy of masculinities at school. While I only interviewed two boys who revealed to me that they were trades, in interviews boys shared their knowledge of trade practices. As “intelligible genders” are assumed to be heterosexual (Butler, 1990), trade practices complicate dominant heteronormativity. While trade practices reaffirm hegemonic masculinity, as trades are forced to pass as straight in public, same-sex relations also subvert the dominant notion of what it means to be a Black man (Martinez & Hosek, 2005). Boys who feared coming out before their peers are restricted by a discourse that constructs Black masculinity as hyper-heterosexual, and Whites as the source of homosexuality (Collins, 2005). I found that some boys relied on other masculine resources to avoid suspicions about their true sexual identity. Young men like Antoine used fighting to “do masculinity” appropriately in front of their peers in school (West & Fenstermaker, 1995).

An “inclusion-centered” approach to intersectionality (Choo & Ferree, 2010) helps to capture and explain the various experiences of boys who struggle to protect their private identities. This approach gives voice to a group hidden from view. Down-low practices problematize the meanings behind “gay” by highlighting the different experiences of same-sex behavior. But given concerns over potential health risks in the population of MSM (Ford, Whetten, Hall, Kaufman, & Thrasher, 2007), more research is needed on how trades are marginalized inside schools and in their communities. This research should examine the complex ways that trades self-identify, as boys who secretly identify as gay in private but pass as heterosexual in public, or who may continue to self-identify as heterosexual while they have sexual relations with other boys in private.

Many, including the media, health organizations, and religious groups, have called the down-low phenomenon a crisis of the Black community. Down-low men play into the tropes of Black men as an endangered species, a population that is not marriageable in the eyes of Black women. Furthermore, when down-low practices are linked to the spread of HIV/AIDS, the trope of Black men as sexual predators is evoked (Phillips, 2005). These images, however, gloss over the priority these young men give to sexual responsibility:

Conclusion

At Perry High School, most boys sought to reach the standards of a dominant masculinity characterized by sexual dominance over women and the repudiation of emasculated “fag” gender identities. Gay and bisexual boys comprised a marginalized masculinity, and occasionally faced harassment, but they received support from some caring adults. At Perry High, a group of young people and adults were committed to creating a supportive, safe space for nonheterosexual students, and to reaching out and finding allies for their Gay-Straight Alliance. While they made up a small subset of my respondents, a third group of boys was precariously positioned in the school’s gender regime, appearing straight among their peers while privately having or seeking sexual relations with boys outside of the school. More research is needed in particular on these trades who, by virtue of their relative invisibility, form a vulnerable population. Scholars of childhood and gender should extend the
findings in this chapter and consider how young people—who are quite variable in age, body size, and maturity—form and resist masculine and sexual identities across different institutional arrangements in schools, which can vary as much as the young people within them.

Notes

1. There is no official list of single-sex public schools nationwide, but perhaps the most comprehensive attempt to identify these schools was undertaken by the Feminist Majority Foundation (Klein, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c). The organization identified 646 coeducational public schools with some single-sex academic classrooms, 82 of which were either completely all-boys or all-girls.

2. All proper and place names are pseudonyms.

3. Historically, the term has been used to refer to an economically disadvantaged straight man who enters into sexual relations with a wealthy man in order to secure economic benefits.

4. The other two being the official academic curriculum and the hidden gender curriculum.

5. Antoine, for example, described the efforts he takes to practice safe sex, and discussed plans to help the school improve its health classes by creating informative lessons on safe sex. Jabari scheduled an appointment at a local health clinic for members of the GSA to get tested for sexually transmitted diseases.

References


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