

that sexuality is not just a set of behaviors studied by researchers but is part of the very research process itself in that it mediates, complicates, and illuminates researcher-respondent interactions. This chapter shows how masculinizing processes in adolescence do not just take place between peers but also occur between a female researcher and male respondents (Arendell 1997). As a female researcher I was drawn into a set of objectifying and sexualizing rituals through which boys constructed their identities and certain school spaces as masculine. In the end I was not just studying their sexual identities, but I also became part of the very process through which they constructed these identities.

In researching how teenage boys positioned themselves and others as masculine, I found that boys created masculine identities through tandem processes of repudiating homosexuality and femininity and enacting a sexist heterosexuality (Eder, Evans, and Parker 1995; Epstein 1997; Hird and Jackson 2001; Kehily 2000). They demonstrated heterosexuality through sexual rituals such as talking about their sexual desires, engaging in storytelling contests about their sexual histories, and verbally or physically demonstrating their physical dominance through sexualized interactions with girls.

River High boys directed these rituals at their female peers and occasionally at me. In response, I tried to manage this use of me as a masculinity resource by creating a "least-gendered identity," positioning myself as a woman who possessed some masculine "cultural capital" (Bourdieu 1977). I carefully crafted my identity and interactional style to show that I was a woman who knew about "guy" topics and could engage in the verbal on-upmanship so common among boys at River High. That said, at times I accepted their use of me as a potential sexual partner or sexual object in order to maintain rapport, as I did when Don said he wanted to "hit on" me. At other times, I responded differently to the boys by establishing an insider/outside position in terms of age, gender, and sexuality. This liminal stance, and specifically my attempts to create a least-gendered identity, allowed me to maintain a good relationship with the boys. This relationship yielded more information than I would have gathered had I reacted like an offended, judgmental adult or a giggly, smiling teenage girl. However, this strategy stopped short of actually challenging the sexist practices in which boys engaged to craft masculine identities.

Chapter 9

"What If a Guy Hits on You?" *Intersections of Gender, Sexuality, and Age in Fieldwork with Adolescents*

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"Yeah, she's writing a book on River guys," said sixteen-year-old Ray as he introduced me to a few of his friends in River High School's bustling main hallway. Don, a tall, lanky basketball player, leaned casually against the stone pillar next to me. "Damn," he said, smiling down at me, "I was gonna hit on you." Six months into my research I had grown more accustomed to, although certainly not comfortable with, this sort of response from boys at River High School. During my time in the field I often heard similar comments from boys interested in dating me, my advice on their sexual adventures, or information about my own sex life. In this chapter I discuss the unique challenges encountered by female researchers when studying adolescent boys. I focus particularly on how the boys infuse our interactions with sexual content and how I manage these interactions so as to maintain rapport while simultaneously enforcing a professional distance (and maintaining my own dignity) through the creation of what I call a "least-gendered identity."

The role of sexuality is understudied in ethnographic research in general, and thoughtful analysis of the role of sexuality in methodological discussions of ethnographic research among youth is nearly absent. Although teenagers are almost obsessively studied as sexual actors, most research focuses on sex education, "at-risk" behaviors, or nonnormative sexual identities (Kulkin, Chauvin, and Perle 2000; Medrano 1994; Strunin 1994; Waldner-Haugrud and Magruder 1996), rather than on the ways in which sexuality constructs daily lives. In researching teenage boys I have found

Project

This chapter is drawn from a project entitled “‘Dude, You’re a Fag’: Masculinity, Sexuality, and Adolescence,” in which I argue that masculinity is recognized by students at River High School as the exercise of sexualized will, either by male or female youth. I conducted fieldwork for this project at a suburban high school in north-central California, which I call River High. River High is a working-class, suburban fifty-year-old high school located in a town called Riverton. With the exception of the median household income and racial diversity (both of which are elevated due to Riverton’s location in California), the town mirrors national averages in the percentage of white-collar workers, rate of college attendance and marriage, and age composition (according to the 2000 census). It is a politically moderate to conservative, religious community. Most of the students’ parents commute to surrounding cities for work.

On average, Riverton is a middle-class community. However, students at River are likely to refer to the town as two communities: “Old Riverton” and “New Riverton.” A busy highway and railroad tracks bisect the town into these two sections. River High is literally on the “wrong side of the tracks,” in Old Riverton. Exiting the freeway, heading north to Old Riverton, one sees a mix of fifties-era ranch-style homes, some with neatly trimmed lawns and tidy gardens, others with yards strewn with various car parts, lawn chairs, and appliances. Old Riverton is visually bounded by smoke-puffing factories. On the other side of the freeway, New Riverton is characterized by wide sidewalk-lined streets and new walled-in home developments. Instead of smokestacks, a forested mountain, home to a state park, rises majestically in the background. The teens from these homes attend Hillside High, River’s rival.

River High is attended by two thousand students. Its racial/ethnic breakdown roughly represents California at large: 50 percent white, 9 percent African American, 28 percent Latino, and 6 percent Asian (as compared to California’s 46, 6, 32, and 11 percents, respectively, according to census data and school records). The students at River High are primarily working class. Lauren Carter, the guidance counselor, described the school as an archetypical American high school with its focus on tradition, sports, and community. She illustrated this focus by telling me of the centrality of football to the social life of both Riverton and River High. The principal, Mr. Hobart, had played on the football team when he had

attended River. “There’s all these old-timers who come out to the football games. Which I think is pretty funny. It’s like Iowa. This school could be straight out of Iowa.” Lauren told me that Mr. Hobart’s career path was a common one: “You go to River. You go to Carrington State for college. You come back to River and teach.” She also told me that the historically industry-based economy of Riverton was faltering, and thus poverty rates were rising.

I gathered data using the qualitative method of ethnographic research. I spent a year and a half conducting observations, formally interviewing forty-nine students at River High (thirty-six boys and thirteen girls) and one male student from Hillside High, and conducting countless informal interviews with students, faculty, and administrators. I concentrated on one school because I wanted to explore the richness rather than the breadth of data (for other examples of this method see Bettie 2003; Eder, Evans, and Parker 1995; Ferguson 2000; MacLeod 1987; Willis 1981).

The initial interviews I conducted helped me to map a gendered and sexualized geography of the school, from which I chose my observation sites. I observed a “neutral” site—a senior government classroom, where sexualized meanings were subdued. I observed three sites that students marked as “fag” sites—two drama classes and the Gay/Straight Alliance. I also observed two normatively “masculine” sites—auto shop and weight lifting. I took daily field notes focusing on how students, faculty, and administrators negotiated, regulated, and resisted particular meanings of gender and sexuality. I attended major school rituals such as Winter Ball, school rallies, plays, dances, and lunches. I would also occasionally “ride along” with Mr. Johnson (Mr. J.), the school’s security guard, on his battery-powered golf cart to watch who, how, and when students were disciplined.

Given the importance of appearance in high school, I gave some thought as to how I would present myself, deciding to both blend in and set myself apart from the students. In order to blend in I wore my standard graduate student gear—comfortable, baggy cargo pants, a black T-shirt or sweater, and tennis shoes. To set myself apart I carried a messenger bag instead of a backpack, wore no makeup, and spoke slightly differently than the students by using some slang but refraining from uttering the ubiquitous “hecka” and “hella.” I took my rainbow sticker off my car because I was afraid of ruining my fieldwork or being asked to leave the school because I was gay.

Going Back to School: Negotiating Intersections of Age and Gender

The first methodological challenge I encountered when researching adolescents was not exactly what I had expected: going back to high school. I had assumed that since I had already researched adolescents, it would be simple to do the same for this project. However, I had not anticipated the difference between interviewing and actually existing among teenagers in their social worlds. I realized that this project was going to be different the first day I walked onto the River campus to begin conducting research at 8:00 a.m. on a warm Monday morning. I walked out of the office in front of the school, having just signed in to the guest log and grabbed my visitor pass. The visitor pass, a blue and white rectangle sporting my name and visitor across the top, was supposed to be worn in a conspicuous location. Not wanting to highlight my temporary and outsider status, and possibly feeling some of that high school pressure to "fit in," I stuck it in my bag. Striding down the open-air hallway to my first classroom observation I heard a deep voice booming out behind me, "Hey You! Hey! Hey You! You! Who are you?!" Frozen, having sudden flashbacks to my own high school experience, and remembering narrow escapes while ditching classes and enduring threats of detention, I turned around. A fifty-something African American gentleman built like a linebacker loomed over me, looking down through his glasses, asking, "Who are you?" Recovering quickly and remembering that I was finishing up my twenties, not my teens, I looked up, smiled, and, in a way I hoped was charming, said, "I'm C. J., a researcher here." I showed him my slip, and he said "Okay, as long as you have that with you." He explained to me that he was the school's security guard. His name was George Johnson, but I soon called him Mr. J., just like the rest of the kids at River did. Later, as I became a more familiar sight at the school, Mr. J. engaged in many of the same sexualizing practices as the boys did, often saying flirtatious things to me like "Well, my day suddenly got much brighter since *you* got here!" followed with a wink.

That moment of misidentification was the first of many: teachers thought I was a student, students thought I was a new student, a teacher, or worse, a parole officer. Early in my research as I sat in the back row of the auto-shop class, a tall, lanky blond boy with spiky hair and a relaxed demeanor turned to me as the rest of the boys in the class zinged from one side of the room to the other and asked, "You new here?" I laughed and

The importance of the ethnographic process in gathering data for this sort of project cannot be overstated. I had gathered my previous data through interviews. These were one-on-one situations with teenage boys, interactions that, while relaxed, were more formal than the rough-and-tumble ones I found myself involved in while gathering data in the high school itself. When recruiting for interviewees during an earlier project, I presented my research and asked for interview volunteers during class time with a teacher present. The students remained in their seats, politely raising their hands to ask questions or comment on the research. I was recognized by them and by the school authorities as, and I felt myself to be, a researcher from a respected educational institution, coded as an adult, an authority, and, in some ways, an expert. My method of gathering personal information furthered the impression of my role as objective, detached social scientist when I requested that they fill out their names, phone numbers, ages, and parent signatures on special permission forms. I continued to present myself as a detached social scientist as I asked questions from an official sheet of paper on a clipboard when interviewing the boys. These research practices served to reinforce identities of researcher and the researched—physically, intellectually, and temporally. Regardless of this sort of hierarchical, sterile, traditional scientific approach to research, I had assumed that the information I was getting from the boys in my interviews told me what they thought masculinity was. From their words, and not from our interactions, I drew conclusions about definitions of contemporary American adolescent masculinity.

But listening to boys talk in a formal interview setting about gendered norms, expectations, and practices was very different from engaging with them as they lived these norms, expectations, and practices. I experienced this change as I began to engage in participant observation for this project. I was no longer a detached, scientific questioner. I was a live, flesh-and-blood girl, sitting next to them in their classes, waving "hi" across campus, lurking around the edges of the dance floor, and lending them money for sodas at lunch. Through these sorts of interactions I became part of the boys' masculinizing processes by engaging in and responding to their treatment of me as a masculinity resource. In the fifty interviews I conducted while I engaged in this participant observation, I never saw or heard the same sort of behavior or treatment of me as a potential sexual conquest or a less-gendered outsider that I experienced during interacting with boys during my observations.

book on River, and he looked a little surprised. He took me over to another group of boys, three of them, one with a skateboard. The one with the skateboard looked at me and asked, "Who are you?" I responded by asking, "Who do you think I am?" He said, "P.O." I immediately thought "participant observer" and laughed to myself. In explanation, he offered "parole officer." I laughed out loud at this point. "No, I would probably make more money being a parole officer. Do they really come around here?" "Yeah, all the time," he answered.

I finally settled on telling the students I was "almost thirty." I tried to make it seem that I was an adult but not too much older than they were, more of a mediator between the adult world and their world. I negotiated a "least-adult" identity (Mandell 1988), in which I was simultaneously like and not like the teens I was researching. Barrie Thorne, in her research on elementary-school children, provides vivid examples of how to enact a least-adult identity across generational lines (Thorne 1993).

In establishing and maintaining a least-adult identity, I had to repeatedly promise the boys that they would not get in trouble for the things they told me. J.W., for instance, walked out of the weight room to ask what I was writing down in my notebook. I said I took notes on everything they do. He asked if I wrote about a fight that had occurred the day before. I said yes and asked him if he was worried that he was going to get in trouble. He nodded. I told him that everything I wrote down was confidential, that I could not get him in trouble at all. He said he was worried that I was going to tell his teacher. I told him, "No, I don't tell teachers about stuff that I saw that could get kids in trouble." I continued by saying that maybe if "I were in the middle of a fight or got hurt then I might tell somebody." J.W. asked, "What if a guy hits on you?" I laughed and said that I did not tell teachers about that either. J.W., in this early interaction, began to lay the groundwork for later comments he would make about my body and sexuality, by ensuring that he would not get in trouble for saying them.

Once the boys got used to the fact that I was going to be hanging around and writing about them, they took pains to make sure I was writing down what they thought was important. It took them a while to realize that I would not tattle on them. They tested me on this claim by breaking the rules in front of me and then looking at me to see if I disapproved. One day I proved my mettle by refusing to tattle on them as they monkeyed around on the cable machine in the weight room. Mike, J.W., and Josh set the pin to lift the heaviest weights on the cable machine. This meant that the cables were so heavy that none of them had the strength

said, "Sort of. How old do you think I am?" "Uh, seventeen?" he answered. I laughed, explaining, "No, I'm a researcher. I'm almost thirty. I'm writing a book on you guys." He told me he hoped it was a good book.

The students often could not decide whether I was a new student, someone's mother, a teacher, or a parole officer. Soon after that tall, lanky blond thought I was a new student, I found myself standing at a table with the "High School Democrats" as they tried to recruit students to their club. I stood next to the vice president, Trevor, as he summoned David, the president, over to introduce me. David looked at me quizzically as he walked over, and I, responding to his questioning look, said, "Who do you think I am?" David paused, looked at Trevor, and said, "His mom?" I burst out laughing, as did Trevor. Somehow I had gone from late teens to late thirties in a matter of hours. I told him no, I was a researcher from Berkeley, and I was writing a book on boys in his school.

I found I was anxious not to let the students know my actual age, fearing that I would lose some of the cachet inherent in my role as a Berkeley researcher. My concern about age reflected in my clothing choices as well. I did not want to dress like their teachers because I did not want to be seen as an authority figure. However, because I did not wear the extremely low-slung pants that the girls tended to wear and possibly because I walked with more confidence than did most teenage girls, students often mistook me for a teacher. Even though I wore baggy pants and a black T-shirt, one day as I was walking down the hallway one of two boys who had been joking around and using swear words looked at the other and said, "Shhhh! She's a teacher."

Like these two boys, other students were wary of me, thinking I was there to report on their behavior. I spent one afternoon early in my fieldwork hanging out at Bob's, a small, yellow burger shack around the corner from school, where kids ordered their food from a window and congregated around the eight picnic tables separated from the sidewalk by a tall wrought-iron black fence. The "bad" kids hung out here. Most dressed in dark, baggy clothing, and many smoked. Frankly, some of them with their spiky hair and multiple piercings intimidated me. I had never hung out with these sorts of "bad" kids when I was in high school and still felt like I might be punished for associating with them. Thinking about this fear of punishment, I asked a large white boy in a red and black plaid shirt and baggy pants, with earrings and a slight mustache, if kids ever got in trouble for smoking. He said, "No. Every once in a while the cops would come by and tell us to put it out, but not usually." I told him I was writing a

individually to pull the weights off the ground. As Billy and I watched, Mike, J.W., and Josh all tried to perform chest flies with this absurd amount of weight. They aided each other by holding the lifter's arms in place while another boy placed the handle on the lifter's arm. As they tried out the cables, they discovered, much to their delight, that the weight was so heavy that if a boy kept ahold of the cables, he would be lifted off the ground. When J.W. tried to perform a chest fly, he lost the battle with the weights, allowed the cables to pull him up, and executed a back flip as they did so. As he performed more flips, the boys in the class gathered in a half circle around him, urging him on.

I asked Jeff what he thought this gymnastic/weight-lifting performance was all about. He told me, "Proving masculinity. They're only doing it because they're guys and they're around other guys. They prove how strong they are, and then when everyone sees how strong they are, they don't mess with them." As if realizing that he did not want to be messed with either, soon after making this pronouncement Jeff walked over to join in. By this time the crowd was so large that they kept looking to make sure Coach Ramirez was not paying attention. A group of boys helped Jeff grab on to the cable handles, and he tried desperately to hold on to them. The weights yanked the diminutive Jeff quickly into the air as he easily performed a back flip. He kept trying to do a front flip, which no boy had yet performed, but when he was unable to complete it, he let the weights fly down as he let go. They clanked down so hard that the pin snapped in half. The boys scattered, yelling, "He broke it! He broke it!" Josh, standing next to me, started laughing, "Write it down! Write about guys doing dumb stuff!" Instead of fearing that I would tattle on them to Coach Ramirez, they wanted me to document their misdeeds. Thankfully teachers never put me in the position to report on student behavior either, with the exception of one teacher who left me in charge of her class while she left for half an hour.

Many of the boys in auto shop and the weight room came to pride themselves on their status as research subjects. Brook took a look at my big pad of paper, which I happened to be carrying that day because I had filled up the small one I usually carried with me. He cried, "She came in with the big notebook today!" Darren chimed in, "She knows we do too much to put in the small one!" Arnie said, amazed, "I can't believe you filled up a whole notebook." I said, "Yeah, *they're* really bad." The boys frequently lifting." Arnie replied, "Yeah, *they're* really bad." The boys frequently equated "badness" with masculinity. They knew I was there to study mas-

culinity and as a result thought that what I wrote down was "bad" stuff. For instance, Ryan said to me, "Your book is a lot today." I said, "Yeah, lots of good stuff." To which he responded, "About Josh?" Josh was pegged as one of the most masculine boys, because he was one of the "baddest"; thus, Ryan assumed that I wrote more on the days he acted up.

This constant documentation helped to define me as an outsider, albeit a privileged outsider, an expert, someone who knew more about the boys than they knew about themselves. The boys highlighted my outsider status in auto shop when a substitute was engaging in futile attempts to calm the class down. The substitute, Mr. Brown, stated, for the tenth time, "Okay guys and girls. Settle down guys and girls." Brook responded, "Uh, it's all guys." Jeff said, looking at me, "except for her." Brook countered, "She's an outsider. She takes notes." Both looked at me, and we laughed. Brook and Jeff highlighted my liminal status—I wasn't *really* a girl because I was an outsider. All of these instances show that negotiating age and authority differences are important when studying adolescents. I had to leave my "adulthood" behind and refrain from admonishing them for behaving like teens. Their impressions of me were in themselves a source of data, as boys projected onto me adulthood, femaleness, and the ability to punish them.

Creating a Least-Gendered Identity

Although I did not lift weights with the boys or work on cars with them, I did engage in gender practices that marked me as less like the girls in their peer groups. I was not easily categorized, creating what I thought of as a "least-gendered identity." Establishing a least-gendered identity required drawing on masculine cultural capital such as bodily comportment, living in a tough area, and displaying athleticism, an inability to be offended, and a competitive joking interactional style.

I first attempted to create a least-gendered identity by dressing and carrying myself differently than teenaged girls. Most girls at River High wore tight, fitted pants baring their hips or navels. I, on the other hand, routinely wore low-slung baggy jeans or cargo pants (pants with multiple large pockets), black T-shirts or sweaters, and the puffy vests or jackets favored by those who identify with hip-hop culture. Similarly, I "camped up" my sexuality. I performed what might be identified as a soft-butch lesbian demeanor. I walked with a swagger in my shoulders, rather than in my hips (Esterberg 1996). I stood strong-legged instead of shifting my

Although boys did not come running to me for advice, I did tease them about their form (which, more often than not, was horrible), and we were able to joke back and forth about it, thus establishing rapport. This sort of masculine cultural capital—both the teasing, a hallmark of masculinity (Kehily and Nayak 1997; Lyman 1998), and the knowledge—allowed me to attain somewhat of an inside outsider status.

Sharing my address with boys at River High also bolstered my least-gendered status. I lived off a main thoroughfare in Oakland, California, famous for drug deals, prostitution, and gang fights. Indeed during the time of my research a man was gunned down on the street outside my apartment. This actually helped entrée with some groups of boys, especially African American boys, who were slightly less willing to talk with me, regarding me as just another white member of the administration who could discover their real addresses and send them back to the "bad" school in the nearby "Chicago" school district. Once, when I was standing outside the weight room watching a bunch of boys I had not spoken with yet, J.W. turned to them to introduce me, saying, "She lives in East Oakland." A chorus of "ooohs," "aaahs," and "no ways!" followed this announcement. One of the boys in that group, Mike, later introduced me to a group of his friends, all African American boys, by pointing at me and saying, "She live in East Oakland." One of the boys in the group said, looking over short, blond, female me, "No she don't." Mike challenged him, "Ask her." So Dax did, in disbelief, "You live in East Oakland?" I smiled and said, "Yeah, between East 18th and East 14th." Talking about a recent murder, Rakim said, "She lives two blocks from where that guy was killed." The boys still look skeptical. I asked Dax, "Why don't you believe that I live in Oakland?" "Cause it's ghetto," he replied. I agreed, "Yes, it is ghetto." They all laughed uproariously as I said the word "ghetto." Then they clamored, asking where I was *really* from. I told them that I was born in Orange County, a famously white, conservative area in Southern California. This seemed to make much more sense to them. They seemed to be picking up on a raced and classed ethnicity—a whiteness that was at odds with my residence in such a tough neighborhood. Much as the boys perceived badness as masculinity, my living and surviving in a "bad" area helped me to establish credibility with them. From this point on, this group of African American boys was much more likely to let me into their circles. Again, this sort of knowledge allowed me to be an insider in multiple ways, in terms of street credibility, racial identity, and age.

As I established a least-gendered identity, I disrupted the common

weight from one leg to the other. I used little flourish in my hand motions, instead using my arms in a traditionally masculine way—hands wide with stiff wrists. I smiled less. I also sat with my legs wide apart or crossed ankle over knee, rather than knee over knee.

This appearance allowed my difference to be less marked, and I was let in to boys' worlds and conversations, if not as an honorary guy, then at least as some sort of neutered observer who would not be offended. For instance, in auto shop, Jay bragged about how he was going to turn eighteen soon and lamented that he would not be able to "have sex with girls under eighteen then. Statutory rape. Younger girls, they lie. Stupid little bitches." He laughed menacingly and then said, "God, I hate girls." At this point he saw the female teacher's aide on the other side of the classroom and said loudly enough so that she could hear, "They're only good for making sandwiches and cleaning house. They don't even do that up to speed!" She looked at him and shook her head. Jay started throwing lice-ice at her and yelling, "I agree, her sister is a lot hotter than her! Make me a sandwich!" It was as if it did not occur to him that I, the only other "girl" in the room, might be offended by such a pronouncement. Although Jay seemed to quickly forget my gender status, other boys never forgot my outsider status. As soon as Jay finished insulting the classroom aide, Brook quickly looked at me and said, "Write that down!"

My athletic ability and interests also contributed to my least-gendered status. Boys and I often spoke of mountain biking and the numerous injuries I had sustained during my mountain-biking adventures. We would sometimes get into injury-comparison contests, trying to one-up each other with the grossest and most outlandish sporting incident—me talking about my concussions and revealing my scars, boys showing their stitches and scabs. The weight-room teacher, Coach Rodriguez, inadvertently helped establish my sporting identity when introducing me to his weight-lifting class. We had spoken on the phone before I had come to observe his class, and during our discussion we talked about lifting weights, something I did on a regular basis. This helped me establish rapport with him because he was passionate about weight lifting and strength training. When he introduced me to the class, he told the boys I was a "weight lifter from U.C. Berkeley who has some things she wants to talk to you about." He encouraged them to ask me questions about weight lifting and form. I think this gave the boys the impression that I was a weight lifter from Berkeley in some official capacity, as opposed to a graduate student who went to the gym several times a week and lifted weights in order to stay fit.

understanding of sex/gender correspondence. Like many women who gain access to all-male domains, I distanced myself from more conventional forms of femininity (Herbert 1998). I purposefully distinguished myself from the other women in these boys' lives: mothers, teachers, and, most importantly, other teenage girls. I did not wear makeup or tight clothing or giggle. I also purposefully selectively shared information about myself, emphasizing attributes such as mountain biking, weight lifting, guitar playing, and bragging about injuries. I intentionally left out topics that would align me with femininity, such as my love of cooking, my feminism, and my excitement about my upcoming commitment ceremony. Like the boys, I distanced myself from femininity; however, I did not, like the boys, actively demean femininity. In this sense, creating a least-gendered identity involved a deliberately gendered research strategy.

Negotiating Sexuality

I was not consistently successful in maintaining this least-gendered identity. Some boys insisted on positioning me as a potential sexual partner by drawing me into the sexualizing and objectifying rituals central to the maintenance of a masculine identity at River High. Being used as an identity resource in this way left me feeling objectified, scared, angry, and unsettled. As a strong, assertive woman who socializes primarily with other feminists, it was disconcerting to have boys leer at me and ask invasive questions about my sex life. Despite my efforts to create a least-gendered identity, some of the boys set up a heterosexual dynamic between us, trying to transform me into a girl their age who may or may not be a future sexual conquest. It was as if, by making me concretely feminine, they could assert their masculinity as a socially dominant identity. I had power over the boys in a variety of ways—my age, my knowledge about them, my economic status—and by emphasizing my sexual availability boys were able to assert their control over me as a female outsider (Horowitz 1986).¹

The first time that this happened I was startled, and looking back at how I described the incident in my field notes, I now have a hard time describing why I knew that I was being positioned as a sexual object. During my second day of research at River High, I had presented my research to the auto-shop class, saying to a room full of boys,

Hey, you're probably all wondering what I'm doing here. I'm writing a book on teenage guys. And I'm researching the guys at your school. I'm gonna be a doctor in two years; that's what this book is for. I'm gonna be at your football games, dances, and lunch and school etc. . . . for the next year. And I'll probably want to interview some of you.

A bunch of boys in the back of the room yelled out, "Rodriguez will do it! Rodriguez will do it!" Rodriguez said lasciviously with a leer, "Yeah I *totally* will." His comment served as a warning. I felt warned that these boys were in a process of building dominant identities and that I, as a woman, was central to this process. As a result, I knew early in my research that I would have to figure out ways to deal with this sort of treatment by the boys while maintaining my rapport with them.

On a few occasions I felt physically intimidated by the boys, as they invaded my space with their sheer size and manipulated my body with their strength. At one point during the junior prom, David ran up and started "freaking" me. Freaking is a popular dance move in which students grind their pelvises together in time to the music as if to simulate sex. David was probably six feet tall (as compared to my five feet and two inches) and the size of a grown man, not a wiry adolescent. I had never been grabbed by a man in such a way and responded with a bit of panic. I tried to step back from him, but he wrapped his arms around me so that I could not escape his frantic grinding. I put my arms on his shoulders and gently pushed back, laughing nervously, saying I hoped he had a good night. I was desperately hoping no administrators saw it because I did not want to get in trouble for sexually accosting one of the students. Researching teens requires maintaining rapport with two groups that often have different interests: students and administrators. I needed administrators to see me as a responsible (and thus nonsexual) adult while simultaneously appearing accessible, but not too much so, to the teens on the dance floor. Similarly, at another dance a boy I did not even recognize ran up to me, tightly grabbed both my wrists, and pulled me toward the dancing throng, saying, "Come on! You want to dance!" as a statement, not as a question. Again, I tried to hide my fear and exit the situation by laughing, but I had to struggle to pull my wrists out of his grip.

Other boys were even more physically aggressive, especially in all-male spaces. In auto shop, Stan, Reggie, and J.W. kept grabbing each others' crotches and then hurriedly placing their hands in a protective cup over

their own, while giggling. After watching them for a while I finally asked J.W. what they were doing. He explained, "It's cup check. Wanna play?" I must have looked shocked as he extended his hand toward my own crotch. Trying to maintain my calm, I said, "no thanks." Looking slyly at me, he tried again, saying, "Wanna play titties?" and suddenly showing his hands toward my chest and twisting them around. I shook my head, dumfounded. He turned and walked away as Stan and Reggie defensively put their hands over their genitals. I felt especially violated because he did not just ask, "Want to play cup check?" He followed this question with a specifically gendered proposal, reaching for my breasts. In order to protect myself from their violating touches, while at the same time maintaining a relationship with them, I laughed to mitigate discomfort and quietly exited the situation. In these instances I found no way to maintain some sort of least-gendered identity but, rather, tried to escape their sexualizing and objectifying processes without looking offended or flattered.

Josh was one of the boys whose actions I found most troubling. He often stood too close to me, eyed me lasciviously, and constantly adjusted his crotch when he was around me. He was constantly seeking masculine positioning by talking about women's bodies in sexist ways. I had forged a decent relationship with his off-again/on-again girlfriend, Jessica, a striking blonde. She came up to me one morning in drama class to tell me that she and Josh had been talking about me on the phone the previous night. I looked surprised as she continued, saying that he told her how he liked older women and that he would like to "bang" me. After hearing this, I felt exceedingly awkward and, frankly, quite vulnerable. It had not occurred to me that conversations about me were going on in my absence. I also realized that I was in a vulnerable position, not just in terms of sexual advances but also in terms of any stories these boys might choose to tell about me. Throughout my research, Josh continued to make allusions to me as his sexual partner. In auto shop one day, I rose from my seat to use the restroom in the school office. Josh yelled out, "You leaving already?" I looked at him and said, "Bathroom." He pointed to the grimy bathroom/ changing room the boys used and said, "There's one here." I replied, "I don't think so." As I walked away, Josh looked around, adjusted his crotch, and followed me out, saying, "I'll be back fellas," implying that he was going to follow me and that something sexual was going to happen. Of course, he had adjusted his crotch with a greasy hand; so, falling back, he said, "My nuts are greasy!" and stopped following me. Using the strategy I had by that time perfected, I just ignored him.

When I could not escape or ignore my involvement in these sexualizing and objectifying processes, I sometimes tried to respond as neutrally as possible, while encouraging boys to continue to talk about their feelings. One day in the weight room, J.W. was looking pensive, sheepish, or moping—I could not tell which. He finally sidled up to me and asked, in a saccharine, bashful voice, "Can I ask you a personal question?" Of course, this question always gave me pause. I had been asking them all sorts of personal questions and following their every word and deed. As a result, I felt that I should reciprocate, to a certain extent, with information about myself. I responded, "Sure," thinking I could talk myself out of inappropriate questions about whether or not I was married or single, gay or straight, which was usually the vein these types of questions were in. Instead he surprised me with a question I did not fully understand but knew was inappropriate: "Have you ever had your walls ripped?" Frantically, I thought, "I must stall for time," as I figured out how to respond to what I knew must be a lewd question. I assumed, given the context of the boys' previous discussions about making girlfriends bleed by "ripping" their walls, that it had something to do with their penises being so large that they ripped bloody tears in their girlfriends' vaginal walls. I tried to respond with a relatively neutral answer, asking, "What do you mean, walls ripped?" J.W. stammered a nonsensical answer, looking around desperately for help, asking other guys to help him define it. Since it was not really possible to rip a girls' walls as often and as harshly as they bragged, none of them really explained what it meant. The boys all looked at him as if to say, "You've gotten yourself into your own mess this time," and laughed at him as they shook their heads no. Finally, unable to continue to embarrass him and feeling incredibly awkward myself, I said, "I know what it means. Why do you want to know?" He responded, "Cuz I like to know if girls are freaky or not. I like freaky girls." I felt awkward at this point because it seemed that I was being categorized as a potential sexual conquest. Instead of following that line of talk, I redirected the question and asked him, "Have you ever ripped a girl's walls?" J.W. responded proudly, "Hell yeah." So I asked him, "How does it make you feel?" He spread his legs and looked down between them, gesturing, "I feel hella bad because they are bleeding and crying. It hurts them." This strategy of redirecting the offensive statement back toward the boys had the effect of producing rich data. While trying not to reveal information about myself or appear offended, I furthered the discussion by trying to get J.W. to talk about his feelings, which he did to the extent that he was able.

By the end of my research, I frequently copied some of the boys' masculinizing strategies in my interactions with them, specifically the ways in which boys established themselves as masculine through discursive battles for dominance in which they jokingly insulted one another (Kehily and Nayak 1997; Lyman 1998). These battles usually took the form of a "fag discourse" (Pascoe 2005), in which boys insulted one another by calling each other fags. I began to engage in a similar strategy when the boys would begin to make sexualized comments to me. Although I did not invoke the "fag discourse," I tried to verbally spar with them in a way that was both humorous and slightly insulting. For example, in auto shop, Brook asked me for some grease to lubricate an engine part. In response, Josh looked at me and commented lewdly, "I got white grease, baby." Fed up with Josh's incessant comments and no longer needing to establish rapport, I mimicked the boys' interactional style. I looked at him and said scathingly, "What does that mean, Josh?" The surrounding boys looked stunned and then burst out laughing. Brook looked down at me and said, "I'm startin' to like you. You're okay!" Josh, angry, ran across the yard yelling, "Fag-gots!!! I'm not talking to any of you!!!" I had "won" this exchange and the respect of some of the boys by interacting in their masculinized manner. Josh did not stay angry at me, but he actually did tone down his comments during the remainder of my time at River.

As with Josh, I finally became so weary of J.W.'s continual propositions that I responded to him with a similar sort of verbal insult. In the weight room, I tried to walk past J.W. to get to the back of the room. Looking at me, he put his leg up on a weight bench to prevent me from walking past. I said, without a smile, "Very funny J.W.," and turned to walk around him. Quickly he put his other leg up. I was now trapped between both of his legs. I felt harassed and ensnared. He looked at me and smiled as if he expected me to smile back. I tried my usual strategy of invoking humor and challenged him: "But can you put both legs up like that at the same time?" He said, loudly for the entire class to hear, "You'd like that wouldn't you?!" Ticked off and embarrassed that my approach had not worked, I said, wittingly, "You know, I was a teenager once, and I dated teenage boys then. They weren't impressive then, and they aren't now." The other boys laughed loudly, jumping in with their own insults. J.W. hung his head in embarrassment. I felt that I had linguistically wrested sexual and gendered control of the situation from his grasp.

With both of these boys, I engaged in the sort of verbal sexual one-upmanship that boys engaged in with one another. They tried to pull me

into their objectifying rituals, but I had to deny them that control without raising my voice, condemning the sex talk, or revealing my own sexual preferences. Instead, I had to either highlight the illogic of what they were saying, as I did with Josh, or make it clear that they were immature. I refused to engage in the feminizing verbal war of the "fag discourse" that the boys used to define themselves as masculine. As a result, I had few other options with which to encourage their respect and avoid becoming a victimized girl, appearing flattered by their obscene overtures, or looking like an authority figure by scolding them. Deploying this competitive joking strategy worked when my least-gendered identity failed and I was pulled into their objectifying rituals.

A Feminist Challenge in Adolescent Masculinity Research

Crafting a researcher identity when researching teens is difficult because adolescence is such a chaotic life period. When conducting research with adults, a researcher most likely has a general sense of the ways in which he or she is defined. Interacting with adults, even in social worlds very different from one's own, usually involves age-defined shared categorizations, ways of interacting, and manners. Although doing fieldwork across lines of difference can lead to misunderstandings and unintended interactions in any setting, age differences bring up a unique set of issues (Baker 1983; Weber, Miracle, and Skehan 1994).

In adulthood, the self is relatively settled. It is not so in adolescence. The self is so much in flux during the teenage years that psychologist Erik Erikson called adolescence a time of "normative crisis" (Erikson 1980 [1959]). An adolescent's task, according to developmental theorists like Erikson, is "identity consolidation." This task requires that teens they figure out "who they are." As teens categorize themselves, they categorize others as well. The researcher, in this setting, becomes part of their meaning-making systems and identity work. As a researcher, I was not necessarily perceived by them according to the way I tried to present myself, which is generally the way I am perceived by adults. Rather, I became one of the resources they mobilized to create identity and make meaning.

When I simply performed interviews, as opposed to gathering data through observations, less identity negotiation was required of me. My identity was more or less firm. I was a researcher, tied to a prestigious university. However, as I spent much of the boys' daily lives with them, they

challenged my own assumptions about my identity, and I had to meet those challenges with my own identity strategies. During my time with them, my identity was ever shifting, and I had to adapt to different identities. However, I was not always in control of my own researcher identity. As Ruth Horowitz documents, a researcher's identity, especially in a setting that allows for very few identities, is actively negotiated between the respondents and the researcher (Horowitz 1986). Sometimes these identities suited my purpose, but other times I was stuck in a role I did not want. I was alternatively a teacher, a mother, a girl, an outsider, a note taker, an author, a student, a potential sexual partner, or a confidante.

Being mobilized as an identity resource was quite jarring. As boys positioned me as a potential sexual partner, none of them seemed concerned about my thoughts or desires about my own sexual availability. In trying to create a least-gendered identity or responding by copying their joking strategy, I was able to maintain rapport with them, maintain my own self-respect, and earn some of theirs. I distanced myself both in terms of gender and age from being a "girl" or a "boy" by refraining from the giggling and squealing commonly associated with teenage girls joining in boys' objectification of girls, a strategy that would not likely have worked for me. I also distanced myself from recognizably adult behaviors by refraining from expressing disapproval of dirty talk, expressing offense, or disciplining them. Instead, I struck a balance by not joining in with this sort of talk and not reporting it to school faculty. By occupying a less-gendered and less-age-defined position I was able to maintain rapport with the boys while also unfortunately helping to preserve some of the more troubling aspects of gender inequalities in this school.

Using the masculine capital I had at my disposal often meant that I did not challenge the sexist and homophobic behavior among the teenage boys. This is a challenge for feminist research into adolescent masculinity: maintaining rapport with boys while not necessarily validating their belief systems and gender prejudices. I walked a tightrope in managing my feminist allegiance to teenage girls and the need to gather data from the boys who mock them. When I could, I used masculine joking strategies to best other boys, without simultaneously invoking feminizing or homophobic insults. Similarly, I had to maintain a balance between distancing myself from femininity and not belittling it. Although I may have challenged gender stereotypes by decoupling sex and gender in utilizing masculine interactional strategies and cultural capital, this research approach failed to challenge the sexist underpinnings of masculine identities at River High.

Researchers' own subjectivities are central to ethnographic research, as feminist methodologists have long demonstrated (Arendell 1997; Borland 1991; Harding 1987). Paying attention to my own feelings and desires as the boys drew me into their objectifying and sexualizing rituals helped me to recognize processes of masculinity I otherwise may have missed. In this way, my own feelings and experiences were central to the data I gathered. My own horror at being involved in these processes led to a gendered identity strategy that both elicited information from the boys and frequently stopped short of challenging their sexism.

NOTES

1. Horowitz (1986) documents a similar phenomenon in her research with Chicano gang members in Chicago. The members initially saw her as a desexualized "lady," but as her research continued and her knowledge of them deepened they recast her as a "chick." In this way they tried to counter what they saw as her threatening presence in their organization.

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