

## “Fag Tourette’s” and Adolescent Masculinity

Boys in American high schools are called and call each other “fag,” “homo,” “queer” and myriad permutations of these sexualized insults every day. The recent spate of school shootings demonstrates that this “teasing” can have deadly results (Kimmel 2003). Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, the two gunman at Columbine High school had been tormented by and thus focused their murder spree on the “jocks” who had repeatedly harassed them for being “faggots” and “gay,” although neither boy identified as homosexual. While the media framed Columbine as an issue of either broken homes, violent music or gun availability this tragedy is actually one about gendered and sexualized power.

The desperation and rage is inspired by sort of sexualized teasing because the specter of the “fag” actually constitutes what it means to be masculine in adolescence. Adolescent boys become masculine through the repudiation of the faggot. In this article I document how the trope of the fag shapes an adolescent masculinity. I first cover first *what* a fag is, how it has both sexual and non-sexual meanings. Whether deployed to as a *sexualized* or *non-sexualized* epithet, the fag trope is always *gendered*. I then show that the fag trope is a primary disciplinary mechanism for masculinity in adolescence through what I call a “Fag Tourette’s Syndrome.” I then demonstrate that the fag trope does not attach itself permanently to one boy’s body, but instead is a fluid identity which boys struggle to avoid having mapped on to their bodies. Finally I illustrate how the fag trope is, in part, a racialized trope, that it takes on different meanings and salience in various racialized social groups.

## **Adolescence, Homophobia and Masculinity**

Researchers of masculinity have noted the centrality of homophobia to current constructions of masculinity. As a historically contingent social construct masculinity takes on different definitions at different times. Masculinity, in recent American history, has been defined more by what it is not than what it is (Chodorow 1978). In fact the definition of masculinity by what it is not indicates that this history of American masculinity is a history of masculinity in crisis (Kimmel 1997). It is the very state of crisis in which masculinity continually is threatened by what it is not, which actually defines masculinity. Because masculinity must always be defended against what it is not, it is constantly threatened with destruction.

One of the ways masculinity’s contemporary crisis can be understood is as a crisis of sexuality which congeals around the threat of the faggot. Contemporary American adolescent masculinities, especially, are based on heterosexuality and homophobia (Lehne 1998; Kimmel 2001). The relationship between masculinity and sexuality is embedded in the discourse, the body, the symbol and the threat of the faggot. Leo Bersani argues that gay men, or in adolescent parlance, faggots, represent a penetrated masculinity in which “*to be penetrated is to abdicate power*” (Bersani 1987). Penetrated men represent a masculinity devoid of power, which, in its contradiction, threatens both psychic and social chaos. It is precisely this specter of penetrated masculinity that functions as a regulatory mechanism of desire and sexual identity for boys in high school. The fag exists in what Judith Butler calls a “domain of abject beings” which form the “constitutive outside to the domain of the subject” (Butler 1993). The fag trope is a particularly powerful because any boy *can become* a fag, regardless of his actual desire or self-perceived sexual orientation. A boy cannot prove that he is not a fag. This ambiguity infuses the

specter of the faggot with regulatory power. Because of this ambiguity, I argue that faggot is a key organizing principle of masculinity in adolescence.

Researchers have documented the centrality of homophobic insults and harassment to social interaction in middle schools, high schools (Wood 1984; Epstein 1994; Epstein; Smith 1998; Plummer 2001) and college (Burn 2000). These authors claim that boys are more homophobic than girls and that boys primarily direct their homophobia toward gay boys, not lesbians. They argue that homophobic harassment and orientation constitute in part, a dominant masculinity in adolescence and early adulthood, and that, for the most part, anti-gay slurs are primarily directed at gay students. This article both expands on and challenges these accounts of relationships between homophobia and masculinity. I build on the argument by these writers that the repudiation of the fag is a central mechanism in the making of masculinity both on an individual and institutional level; renouncing the faggot in effect produces masculinity and provides a basis from which to enact a masculinized hyper-heterosexuality. Most of this research links a homosexual body to the idea of the fag. However, using insights from queer theory I argue that heterosexual is an invisible and unstable category out of which anyone can be thrown (Halley 1993).

In addition to building on earlier accounts, I challenge them in three ways. First, I argue that homophobia is too facile a term with which to describe the deployment of “fag” or other anti-gay slurs. By calling the use of the word fag homophobia, previous research obscures the gendered nature of sexualized insults (Plummer 2001). Using the word “homophobia” to describe the ways in which boys harass each other overlooks the powerful relationship between masculinity and this sort of insult. Instead it seems incidental that girls don’t harass each other and aren’t harassed in this same manner. This framing naturalizes the relationship between

masculinity and homophobia, thus obscuring the centrality of anti-gay interactions between boys to the formation of a masculine identity in a way that it is not to the formation of a feminine identity.

Second, I argue that the fag is not a static identity attached to a particular (gay) boy, but rather I assert that fag functions as a *trope* that boys, teachers and school rituals deploy order to discipline each other and themselves through joking relationships. By arguing that any boy can become a fag in a given social space or interaction I am not disputing that boys who identify as or are perceived to be gay, aren’t subject to intense harassment. Rather I am arguing that the fact that any boy can (temporarily) become a fag at any given moment, is what makes the fag trope a powerful disciplinary mechanism. The fag is a dynamic and relational creation rather than a stable social role attached to a given boy by virtue of his (perceived) sexual desire. Because the fag identity does not *necessarily* attach permanently to a single boy, at a given point any boy may find himself positioned as a fag, but he may also find himself framed as a recognizably masculine (heterosexual) guy in the next moment. Taking a lead from Arlene Stein and Ken Plummer (Stein and Plummer 1994) who suggest that classic sociological texts would be radically altered were sociologists to start from a queer perspective (which, among other things, recognizes that (hetero)sexuality is embedded in all social institutions, interactions and identities through which power works), this article does not look to establish that there are homosexual boys and heterosexual boys and the homosexual ones are marginalized. Rather I will demonstrate that homosexual (fag) and heterosexual (masculine) identities are contested, and that they are identities through which power works, but which are not necessarily specific identities which attach themselves solely to particular boys’ bodies.

Lastly I argue that the “fag” trope is a racialized one. That is the fag trope attaches itself to white male bodies in different ways than it attaches to black male bodies. Certain behaviors put all boys at risk for becoming temporarily a fag. However, some behaviors can be enacted by African-American boys without putting them at risk for being labeled a fag. I argue that looking at the racialized meanings of the fag trope indicates that calling this disciplinary device simple homophobia obscures some important ways that power works through racialized and gendered selves.

## **Method**

This research combines interviews and ethnographic field work with teenagers from a public high school in northern California. Participants range from 14 to 18 years in age. I conducted this research in a public school because schools are one of the major socializing agents of childhood (Perry 2002) and a school environment is one of the few places a researcher can observe a population of students from different backgrounds, religions, ethnicities etc. River High is a 50 year old school attended by children of both working and middle class families.

I chose participant observation as my research method so that I might get to know the teens on “their own turf.” I attempted to “carve out a neutral identity” for myself such that I could talk to a wide range of students in different social groups (Kinney 1993). Being a part of the daily life of the school allowed me to map out the teenagers’ social worlds and group relations. Based on initial interviews with students and preliminary observations, I narrowed my observation to 3 specific sites based upon their sexualized/gendered nature. I observed a “neutral” site - a senior government classroom; two “fag sites” – a drama class and the Gay Straight Alliance; and two “masculine” sites - auto-shop and weightlifting. This theoretically

driven method allows me to document a geography of sexualities in adolescence in high school.

I also observe at lunch time, school assemblies, dances and athletic events to see how students, faculty and administrators negotiate, regulate and resist meanings of gender and sexuality.

I utilized “ethnographic interviews” to examine issues that are salient to the teens (Eder, Evans et al. 1995). For instance, I asked students about school rituals such as the “Mr. Cougar” elections, in which students vote to elect the most popular boy in the school as that year’s Mr. Cougar<sup>1</sup>. Participant observation helped me situate and modify interview topics according to what I had seen in my observations.

### **What is a Fag? Gendered Meanings**

A fag is the worst thing a guy can be. “Since you were little boys you’ve been told, ‘hey, don’t be a little faggot,’” explained Darnell, an African-American football player, as we sat on a bench next to the athletic field. While the exact definition of the word “fag” either as a sexual identity, as a guy who is unmasculine or as a generic insult, is often unclear, boys readily acknowledge that a fag is something they should not be. What is embodied in the fag, regardless of the specific meaning, is a lack of masculinity. Because American masculinity is a shifting and unstable identity more defined, historically, by what it is not than what it is, the fag trope, in its stability as the ultimate not-masculine position, actually constitutes masculinity.

Typical guys hate fags. In interviews boys asserted that being homophobic was just part of what it means to be a “typical guy.” Erik, a white, sturdily built, dark haired, senior, proud of his Italian heritage, explains a “typical guy” by using an example from prom in which Jamie, a gay male senior, danced with his boyfriend:

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<sup>1</sup> The cougar is the school mascot.

One kid, he was like ‘Did you see Jamie getting down? Hey man, you want to be gay? It’s fine. Just don’t do it in front of me. Kissing. I don’t want to see it.’ He’s a typical guy.

“Typical guys” not only don’t like fags, they go out of their way to make sure others know they don’t like fags. This gendered homophobia constitutes, in part, what it means to be a “typical guy.” What this means is that if a boy doesn’t pronounce loudly and often that he doesn’t like fags, then he is no longer a “typical guy,” and might even be a fag himself.

Fag is a gendered insult. Regardless of some boys’ assertions that fag doesn’t “mean anything,” unlike the word “gay,” fag is a gender specific insult. Looking at when and how girls use the word fag and how it compares in its deployment to the use of the word “gay” reveals, indeed, that fag functions as a gendered slur. Girls rarely used the word fag and are almost never called a fag. When girls referred to each other as fags it was a linguistic anomaly. I recorded girls using the term only three times during my research period at River High. When girls did use it they intended it a social slight. Only one time did I hear a girl call a guy a fag. Angela, a Latina, senior, cheerleader and homecoming princess, teased Jeremy, a well-liked white senior involved in student government, for not ditching school to go with her to the Hillside<sup>2</sup> Homecoming Assembly saying, “You wouldn’t ‘cause you’re a faggot.” Girls didn’t use this word as part of their regular lexicon because it simply does not make cognitive sense. Even though fag doesn’t necessarily indicate overt same-sex desire, the word’s power depends on that underlying meaning for definitional clarity.

Highlighting the difference between the deployment of gay and fag as insults highlights the gendered nature of homophobia found in the fag trope. It is not simply that girls are not homophobic and boys are. Rather the “fag” trop is a unique symbol of the way in which

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<sup>2</sup> Hillside is River High’s rival school.

masculinity is defined by a publicly enacted heterosexuality. Most high school kids, boys and girls, use “gay” as an insult directed at either gender. Gay is a fairly common synonym for stupid for the kids at River High. While certainly this word shares the sexual origins of “fag,” it doesn’t have the skew of gender loaded meaning. In the world of River High, girls and boys often used “gay” as an adjective referring to inanimate objects and male or female people, whereas they used fag as a noun which denoted only un-masculine males. Fag has to refer to a male someone whereas gay can denote any sort of thing or person as stupid or undesirable. Students used “gay” to describe anything from someone’s clothes to a new school rule that the students don’t like. For instance,

In auto-shop Arnie pulls out a large older version black laptop computer and, opening it, places it on his desk. Behind him Nick says “That’s a gay laptop! It’s five inches thick!” A laptop can be gay, a movie can be gay or a group of people can be gay. Fag, however, has a particular meaning that makes sense only when applied to a male person rather than a thing or a girl.

Fag, like gay, doesn’t necessarily mean homosexual. Fag has multiple meanings which don’t necessarily replace its meaning as a homophobic slur, but rather exist along-side it. A boy can get called a fag for exhibiting any sort of non-masculine behavior: being stupid, feminine, incompetent, dancing, caring too much about clothing, being too emotional, or being too touchy. I asked Ben, a quiet, white sophomore who wore heavy metal t-shirts to auto-shop each day, “What kind of things do guys get called a fag for?” Ben answered “Anything...literally, anything. Like you were trying to turn a wrench the wrong way or something, ‘oh dude, you’re such a fag.’ Even if a piece of meat drops out of your sandwich or something, ‘you fag!’” Each time Ben says “you fag” his voice deepens as if he is imitating a more masculine boy. Ben highlights the way in which fag is used as a generic insult for incompetence, which seems like a

gender neutral insult. However, the difference is fag is only directed towards other boys as an insult and often by boys who claim a more masculine status, as indicated by Ben’s lowering of his voice (which boys often did to indicate a hyper-masculine male).

The non-sexual meanings of faggot do not replace homophobic meanings, but rather exist along side of them. Boys certainly do get called a fag for expressing interest in other guys. For instance at River High’s performing arts showcase I stood next to two white seniors, Darren and Steve.

We watch the schools all female Jazz Dance team perform. Darren, asks Steve, “why are there no guys?” Steve answers with derision, “You’re such a fag.” In order to avoid being called a fag boys must studiously avoid showing interest, even seemingly non-sexualized interest, in other boys. Just about anything can cause a boy to call another a fag: improper turning of a wrench, messy eating habits, or asking a seemingly innocuous question about other guys.

Gay and fag are not only different in terms of the fact that one is exclusively a male insult, but also as a matter of degree. Being a fag is much worse than actually being gay. Gay is a legitimate, if marginalized, social identity. If a man is gay, there is still a chance he can be considered masculine by other men (Connell 1995). David a handsome white senior dressed smartly in kahki pants and a white button down shirt told me, “Being gay is just a lifestyle. It’s someone you choose to sleep with. You can still throw around a football and be gay.” In other words there is a possibility, however slight, that a boy can be gay and masculine. To be a fag is, by definition, the opposite of masculine, whether or not the word is deployed with sexualized or non sexualized meanings.

Boys sometimes explicitly differentiate a gay identity from a fag identity in their insults. In auto-shop a Brad, a white sophomore, called Jamie, a muscular Latino junior, “gay.” Jamie,

ever the class clown, responded with “I’m not gay, I’m *just* a fag!” The rest of the boys in the class exploded in laughter. Being gay is not necessarily antithetical to being masculine. To be a fag is to not be a man. Gay may be a marginalized social identity, but it is not necessarily un-masculine. Fag, however, is always un-masculine and is considered a lower social position than gay.

A gay identity retains an explicitly sexual, although not necessarily gendered meaning, whereas fag always involves a gendered meaning. In explaining this to me, Jamaal, an African-American junior, cites the explanation of popular rap artist, Eminem, “Although I don’t like Eminem, he had a good definition of it. It’s like taking away your title. In an interview they were like, ‘you’re always capping on gays, but then you sing with Elton John.’ He was like ‘I don’t mean gay as in gay.’” Ricci Wilchins in her column in the Advocate calls this the “Eminem Exception. Eminem explains that he doesn’t call people ‘faggot’ because of their sexual orientation but because they’re weak and unmanly.” This is precisely the way in which the boys tend to use faggot. While it is not necessarily acceptable to be gay, at least a man who is gay can do other things which render him somewhat masculine. A fag, by the very definition of the word, cannot be masculine.

This distinction between fag as an unmasculine and problematic identity and gay as a possibly masculine, although marginalized, sexual identity is not limited to a teenage lexicon, but is reflected in both psychological discourses and gay and lesbian activism. Eve Sedgwick (1993) argues that psychological literature devotes much of its concern toward the problem of the male homosexual, arguing that homosexuality is no longer a problem for men, so long as the homosexual man is of the right age and gender orientation. In the psychological literature a homosexual male must be an adult, and must be masculine. Gay male effeminacy is a

“pathology.” Again, it is the lack of masculinity which is the problem, not the sexual practice or orientation. Indeed the edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual that erased homosexuality as a diagnosis in the 1970s added a new diagnosis in its wake: Gender Identity Disorder. According to Sedgwick, the diagnosis for girls and boys using this criteria is different. Girls have to actually assert that they are a boy whereas boys merely need to display a preoccupation with female activities. This concern with boys’ gender orientation and policing a strict masculine identity for gay men is also reflected in gay culture itself. The war against fags as the specter of non-masculine manhood appears in gay male personal ads in which men look for “straight appearing, straight acting men.” This concern with both straight and gay men’s masculinity is not only a reflection of teenage boys’ obsession with a hyper-masculinity; it also points to the conflict at the heart of the contemporary “crisis of masculinity” being played out in popular, scientific and educational arenas.

### **Fag as Disciplinary Mechanism: Fag Tourette’s Syndrome**

“The ubiquity of the word faggot speaks to the reach of its discrediting capacity,” writes Ken Corbett as he discusses a boy in his clinical therapy practice who called him a fag. To Corbett’s assertion of the omnipresence of the word fag, I would add the compulsive element of its deployment. It’s almost as if boys cannot help but shout it out on a regular basis. Fag Tourette’s Syndrome is only way I can describe the ubiquitous and compulsively spontaneous that boys constantly yell out the word fag – in the hallway, in class, across campus as a greeting, or as a joke. Fag Tourette’s captures the way in which the fag trope is not invoked here and there to prove a point or produce a laugh, but rather the seemingly uncontrollable way boys shout it out. There was not day that passed during my time at River High in which I did not see or

hear, multiple times per day, an invocation of the fag trope either through boys’ speech or actions. The word fag seemed to pop almost uncontrollably out of boys’ mouths in any given situation. For instance:

Two boys walk out of the P.E. locker room and one yells “fucking faggot!” at no one in particular. None of the other kids milling around pay attention to this pronouncement. This spontaneous yelling out of a variation of fag seemingly apropos of nothing was repeated among boys throughout the school. Jayden, a strikingly handsome, white junior who was constantly in trouble, randomly yelled it out in auto-shop:

In seventh period auto-shop class none of the boys take note as Mr. Kellogg shows them a video on brakes and brake examination. As the boys continue to goof off, Mr. Kellogg warns ‘someone’s going to get hurt if you don’t pay attention.’ He looks at Jayden and Gabe, both of whom have their heads down on their desks with their eyes closed. Mr. Kellogg smacks the desk with the palm of his hand startling them to attention. Jayden’s head pops up and he quickly copies Mr. Kellogg’s smacking. The class cracks up. Jayden responds by gnawing the bottom of his McDonald’s cup filled with soda. In between gnaws he loudly announces ‘fag’ to no one in particular.

While it might seem that Jayden was calling Mr. Kellogg a fag, his relaxed stance and silly grin indicated that he wasn’t directing it at Mr. Kellogg. Rather fag was just something for Jayden to say, a space filler.

In addition to verbally invoking the fag this Fag Tourette’s also entails boys enacting the fag, continually and spontaneously. During one morning passing period as I was walking through the hallways I heard a group of boys yelling behind me. One screamed out in an exaggeratedly high pitched voice, as he “swished” down the hall, “I’m a homosexual and I’m proud!” This pronouncement was followed by bouts of male laughter. This Fag Tourette’s functions as a constant reiteration of the fag’s existence, affirming that the fag is out there, at any moment a boy can become a fag and at the same time reinforcing that the boy who is invoking the fag is *not* a fag. Fag Tourette’s maintains the threat of the fag as a constant presence. By

invoking it so often boys remind themselves and each other that at any point they can become fags if they aren’t sufficiently masculine.

### **Becoming a Fag: Fag Fluidity**

Fag Tourette’s positions the fag trope as central to boys’ joking relationships. Joking cements relationships between boys and indeed partially constitutes masculinity (Kehily and Nayak 1997; Lyman 1998). Boys’ joking relationships at River High primarily hinge on the fag trope. Boys make fun of the fag in two ways, discursively and performatively. Discursively, boys crack jokes about the fag and make fun of other boys transforming them, temporarily, into fags. Performatively, the boys act out the fag trope by donning a feminine demeanor, acting out an over-exaggerated femininity, and often pretending to sexually desire other boys. This enacted version of the fag joke is danger laden. If the boy doesn’t perform the fag correctly, or if he doesn’t have sufficient social standing to enact the fag, he will *become* the fag. Performative invocations of the fag indicate the fluidity of the fag trope, that a boy can be calling another boy a fag one minute and be called a fag the next. Joking, in terms of the fag trope, becomes a discursive contest in which boys strategically vie for the more masculine position by ensuring that they are not the fag and that others are.

Boys often imitate a fag to draw laughs from other students:

During the middle of class the teacher, Mr. Ryan, noise from outside. He looks up from his desk questioning. Several students yell out “it’s the boys playing basketball outside.” Mr. Ryan walks across the room to the open door saying “we’ll shut this unless anyone really wants to watch sweaty boys playing basketball.” Emir, a tall skinny boy, known for flirting and making jokes, lisps “I wanna watch the boys play!” Through imitating a fag boys assure others that they are not a fag by immediately becoming masculine again after the performance. They laugh at their own performed femininity and/or same-sex desire with other boys, thus assuring themselves and others that such an identity is one

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deserving of derisive laughter and not dignity. The fag identity in this instance is a fluid one, not attached to Emir’s body. Rather he can move in and out of such this “abject domain.”

In addition to imitating fags for laughs, boys often make fun of each other for being fags, thus claiming control over the fag trope.

Going through the trunk of a car which was filled with junk, Jay poked his head out and asks “Where are Craig and Brian?” Neil, responds with “I think they’re over there,” pointing, then thrusting his hips and pulling his arms back to indicate that Crag and Brian might be having sex. The boys in auto-shop laugh.

This is the sort of joke temporarily labels both Craig and Brian as faggots. Because the fag trope is so familiar, the other boys immediately understand that Neil is indicating that Craig and Brian were having sex. However these are not necessarily identities that stick. Nobody actually thinks Craig and Brian are homosexuals. Rather the fag trope is a fluid one, certainly one that no boy wants, but one that a boy can escape, usually by engaging in some sort of discursive contest to turn another boy into a fag. For instance, even though Brian was the one who was called a fag in the previous instance, in this following example he transforms Josh into a fag.

Brian initiates a round of a favorite game in auto-shop, the “cock game.” Brain quietly, looking at Josh, says, “Josh loves the cock,” then slightly louder, “Josh loves the cock.” He continues until he is yelling “JOSH LOVES THE COCK!” The rest of the boys laugh hysterically as Josh slinks away saying “I have a bigger dick than all you mother fuckers”

These two instances show how the fag trope can be mapped on, momentarily, to one boys’ body and how he, in turn, can attach it to another boy, thus deflecting it from himself. In the first instance we have Neil making fun of Craig and Brian for simply hanging out together. In the second instance Brian goes from being a fag to by making someone else into a fag, Josh, through the “cock game.” The fag trope is transferable. Boys move in and out of it by discursively creating another as a fag through joking interactions. They, somewhat ironically, can move in and out of the fag position themselves by transforming themselves, temporarily, into a fag, but

this has the effect of reaffirming their masculinity when they return to a heterosexual position after imitating the fag.

These sort of discursive maneuvers don’t just take place among the students, but in teacher student interactions as well. Male teachers frequently participate in fag jokes, making students or themselves into fags. Consider Mr. McNally’s interaction with Rob during his advanced drama class.

Rob walks to the stage preparing to perform his dramatic enactment of a song which was his assignment for that day. He wears a black tank top with cut off sleeves, jeans and dark black, wrap-around glasses. His hair is cropped short and spiked up. He looks like he has just stepped off the set of the movie the Matrix. Mr. McNally comments ‘Rob’s lookin’ sharp with those glasses.’ This comment is followed by a short pause as the class grew silent. Then Mr. McNally asks, raising his eyebrows suggestively, ‘What are you doing after class Rob?’ The class cracks up and so does Mr. McNally. In this instance Mr. McNally drew laughs by becoming the fag. He, in the students’ minds, is not actually gay, in fact his students know that he has a pregnant wife. Instead his joke cements a bond between himself and the students, showing that he too is not a fag and can participate in the male student’s fag discourse of masculinity, Fag Tourette’s.

In these instances the fag is a fluid identity. This is not to say that some students in the school are not permanently labeled as a fag. In the next section we will meet Ricky, an out gay student at River High and a permanent fag. What these examples do indicate is that fag is a trope invoked in a discursive struggle for boys to indicate that they know what a fag is and that they are not fags. This joking cements bonds between boys as they assure themselves and each other of their masculinity by these repeated repudiations of a non-masculine position.

### **Racing the Fag**

The fag trope is not deployed consistently or identically across social groups at River High. The trope takes on different meanings and disappears in certain social milieus. Looking

specifically at racialized definitions of masculinity indicates that the fag trope is not stable across various racialized groups. African American boys who participate in the hip-hop culture at River High often behave in ways that would cause a white boy who doesn’t enact a hip-hop identity, to be labeled a fag. Behaviors that would get white boys called a fag are often proof of masculinity for many African American boys. This racialization of the fag trope can be seen through boys’ attention to their clothes and attitudes toward dancing.

Racialized gender differences are reflected in the social hierarchy among the students. A given African American boy is much more likely to be popular than a given white boy. At River High black students, both boys and girls, are disproportionately visible and the boys are disproportionately popular. This in-school status conflicts with their social status in the extra-school world in which black men are disproportionately poor, jobless, and homeless. James Earl Davis describes this seeming contradiction as follows “Black males are both adored and loathed in American schools. They are on the vanguard of hip-hop culture and set the standards of athleticism. On the other hand, they experience disproportionate levels of punishment and academic marginality” (Davis 1999). African American boys move from the unjust disciplinary system of high school to an racist social and economic system. In response to this institutionalized racism some African American men have developed a coping strategy which deploys a symbolic power that is not reflected in actual structural positions of power. Richard Majors calls this a “cool pose” (Majors 2001). This “cool pose” consists of “unique, expressive and conspicuous styles of demeanor, speech, gesture, clothing, hairstyle, walk, stance and handshake” (Majors 2001). Because of institutional racism African American men turn to interpersonal and symbolic spheres in which to attain masculinity.

One of the ways this “cool pose” manifests itself at River High is through African American boys’ attention to appearance, specifically clothing. Hip hop clothing, while it influences most contemporary teen clothing styles, is distinct. Pants are usually several sizes too big, hanging low on a boys’ waist, held up with a precariously balanced belt, most of the time revealing a pair of boxers beneath. Shirts and sweaters are similarly oversized, often hanging down to a boy’s knees. The boys often wear large padded jackets which hang off of one shoulder. Tags are frequently left on baseball hats which are worn slightly askew and sit perched high on the head. Meticulously clean unlaced athletic shoes with rolled up socks under the tongue complete a typical hip hop outfit.

Clean, oversized, carefully put together clothing is central to a hip hop “cool pose” for African American boys. However, such attention and care given to clothing for most white boys would certainly jettison them into a fag position. If a white boy pays too much attention to his clothes then other boys might call him a fag. White boys are not supposed to appear to care about their clothes or appearance, because only fags care about how they look. Auto-shop is a telling example of this. Given that the boys spend two hours working with greasy car parts, they frequently end up smudged and rumpled by the end of class. While in the front of the classroom there is a room in which the students can change into mechanic overalls, most of them opt not to change out of their school clothes, with a few modifying their outfits by taking their shirts off and walking around in their white tank tops which go by the sexist nick-name: “beaters.” “Beater” is short for “wife-beater” a white, ribbed, undershirt style tank top. Most of the white boys (of which all but three in auto-shop are) simply wear their regular clothes, usually jeans and a t-shirt, not really appearing to worry about whether or not they got covered in grease or dirt. In fact boys make fun of boys who care about getting their clothes dirty.

Ben as walks in to the classroom from the parking lot where he had been working on a particularly oily engine. Grease stains cover his jeans. He looks down at them, makes a face and walks toward me waving his hands around with limp wrists, lisping in a in a high pitch sing-song voice “I got my good panths all dirty!” He laughs. For white boys to care about their clothing makes them a fag. In this sense, masculinity, for white boys, becomes the carefully crafted appearance of not caring about appearance.

However African American boys involved in hip hop culture talk frequently about whether or not their clothes, specifically their shoes, are dirty. Clean athletic shoes are central to the “cool pose.” Jace and Marcus, both African American boys on the junior varsity football team, tease each other about getting their shoes dirty.

In drama class both Jace and Marcus compare their white Adidas basketball shoes to each others’. They wear the exact same sneaker. Marcus’ shoe shows several black scuff marks. Jace mocks Marcus asking incredulously “Yours are a week old and they’re dirty?” He continues proudly, “I’ve had mine for a month and they’re not dirty!” Marcus makes a face and the two continue to joke back and forth. Unlike most white boys, for African American boys who participate in hip hop culture, masculinity is not dependent avoiding the fag trope through a lack of attention to clothing. Darnell, River High’s star football player echoes this concern about dirty shoes when looking at his fancy red shoes he had lent to his cousin to use as he played football in a game the week before:

Darnell sits on the bleachers waiting for Coach Guitierrez to take roll for weightlifting. He looks down at his shiny, red leather sneakers, turning them from side to side, tracing his finger over some scuff marks on them. I remark, noticing his concentration, “nice shoes.” Darnell says “Thanks” and shrugs his shoulders. He is frustrated by the scuff marks, he tells me saying he’s upset with his cousin because after using them his cousin gave him back the shoes the “shoes are hella scuffed up.” He continues to shake his head, disappointedly. Many African American boys brought two pairs of shoes to school, one to wear and one to play basketball in, taking care not to get dirt on their white basketball shoes.

Dancing is another arena which carries distinctly fag associated meanings for white boys and masculine meanings for African American boys who participate in hip hop culture. While

for both groups of boys dancing functions as an indicator of social status, for African American boys dancing talent serves to increase one’s status while for many white boys it can secure a fag position. Dances are distinctly coded as fag spaces for white boys who are not part of hip hop culture. White boys often jokingly dance together in order to diffuse the sexualized and feminized meanings embedded in dancing.

Lindy dances behind her date, Chris, rubbing her body against his. She moves her hands up and down his back and sides. He stands still while she danced. Chris’s friend, Matt, walked up and nudges Lindy aside, taking her place and imitating her dance moves behind Chris. She moves willingly, smiling as she watches Matt dance behind Chris. As Matt rubs his hands up and down Chris’s back, Chris turns around and jumps back startled to see Matt there instead of Lindy. All three of them burst into laughter. Dancing is closely associated with fags for white boys. So one of the ways they diffuse this tension at school sponsored dances is to enact the fag, much like they do in other instances. Boys repeatedly made fag jokes at dances to emphasize that indeed they aren’t fags.

However dancing does not carry this sort of sexualized gender meaning for all boys at River High. For white boys dancing is a gendered activity while for African American boys dancing demonstrates membership in a cultural community (Best 2000). African American boys frequently danced together in single sex groups, teaching each other the latest dance moves, showing off a particularly difficult move or making each other laugh with humorous dance moves. They gathered in these groups in between classes, at assemblies and at dances, regardless of whether or not music was playing at the time. And yet, with all this dancing, no one called any of the them a fag, nor do they call each other fags.

Looking at how students at River High talk about two boys who they consider the two best dancers in the school illuminates the racialized nature of the fag trope in terms of dancing. Students widely recognize Ricky and K.J. as the two most visible and talented dancers at the school, male or female. K.J. is a racially mixed (black and Filipino) sophomore who participates

in the hip hop culture of River High. He continually wore the latest hip hop fashions. One of his favorite outfits was a matching pair of oversized red and white plaid shorts which reached to mid-shin topped by a matching button down shirt with gleaming white athletic shoes and a white “do-rag” under which he sported his hair in cornrows. Ricky on the other hand is a tall, thin, white junior with shoulder length hair that constantly changes color. One day it was pink, the next black. Ricky often dressed in “club” clothes: wide leg pants, high heeled boots, tank tops and mesh shirts.

K.J. is extremely popular with girls and boys. Girls constantly holler his name as they walk down the hall and thrust urgently written love notes folded in complicated designs into his hands as he saunters to class. K.J. won first place in the talent show for dancing the past two years. When he dances at assemblies or in the talent show the room reverberates with screamed chants of “Go K.J.! Go K.J! Go K.J.!” Even Jayden, one of the most popular boys in the school walked up to K.J. and me at one point as I was interviewing K.J. and said, admiringly “Did he tell you he invented the Harlem Shake?” The Harlem Shake is a very difficult popular dance move that requires three different and simultaneous movements of a dancer’s shoulders. Jayden continued to expound on K.J.’s dancing ability that afternoon.

The students have quite a different reaction to Ricky’s dance moves. Like K.J. Ricky often dances at school wide events. Girls did not scream out his name as he walks down the hall. Boys avoided him completely. The difference in male students’ reactions to Ricky was striking in their almost violent disgust as he danced at the school’s annual Visual and Performing Arts Day.

The advanced dance troupe walks on stage wearing baggy pants and fitted tops. Ricky, the only boy in the group of female dancers is positioned at the front and center of the formation. As the troupe performed sexually explicit dance moves replete with hip thrusts and shoulder shimmies boys in the audience reacts visibly, recoiling at Ricky’s

performance. One of them, J.R., a hulking junior and captain of the football team, mutters under his breath and shakes his head, “That’s disgusting.” I asked him “What?” J.R. turns to me with his nose wrinkled in revulsion and responded, “That guy dancing, it’s just disgusting! Disgusting!” He again shakes his head as he walked off. As the troupe begins a routine to a second song, a well liked Britney Spears tune, Ricky, along with the rest of the dancers continues to provocatively thrust his hips and shake his behind while making sultry faces at the crowd. Nils and his group of friends to my left make faces and giggle as they stared at Ricky. Soon Nils turned to Malcom, and shaking his head, says “It’s like a car wreck, you just can’t look away.” Both shake their heads in dismay as they indeed continue to watch the “car wreck” with what can only be described as morbid absorption.

Boys’, white and black, reactions to Ricky’s dance moves are strikingly different than the reactions to K.J.’s dancing. I argue this is due to the “cool pose” enacted by African American boys. Because dancing for them places them within a tradition of masculinity they are not at risk for becoming a fag. Ricky on the other hand, is not a part of hip hop culture, so while he may dance to popular songs, some of which are hip hop, dancing for him is not a confirmation of a “cool pose” rather his dance moves imbue his identity with the fag trope.

For African American boys dancing and attention to clothes place them squarely in the middle of a hyper-heterosexualized hip hop culture. These actions are confirmations of their masculinity. However for white boys these same behaviors are more likely confirm status as a fag. However, sadly, none of this is to say that a hip hop identity is a less homophobic position than other masculine identities. Rather this analysis indicates that meanings of masculinity vary across racialized groups in terms what constitutes the fag.

## **Conclusion**

My findings confirm previous research conducted on masculinity and sexuality which positions homophobia as central to contemporary definitions of adolescent masculinity. To be a “regular guy” is to not like fags and to loudly and constantly assert this through what I call, “Fag Tourette’s.” “Fag Tourette’s” maintains the specter of the fag trope as a constant threat which

actually constitutes adolescent masculinity in its stability as the ultimate not-masculine position.

Using Kimmel’s model of masculinity as defined by a state of crisis, the fag trope can be considered at the center of the contemporary crisis of adolescent masculinity.

My findings extend previous research by looking at the fag not as a static sexual identity attached to a gay or feminized boy, but as a trope which can be mapped on to different boys’ bodies at different times. Looking at fag as a trope reveals that fag can be invested with different meanings in different social spaces and may attach to different boys’ bodies with varied impacts. When looking at the fag as a trope rather than as a permanent sexual identity it becomes clear that it is a dynamic rather than a static identity. Fag becomes a weapon with which to temporarily assert one’s masculinity by denying others of masculinity. Few boys are permanently identified as fags, most move in and out of fag positions. Thus fag becomes the symbol around which discursive contests of masculinity take place.

While these findings build on previous research which links definitions of adolescent masculinity to homophobia, I argue that it is not simple homophobia that is happening here. It is not just that these boys dislike gay men. What is at stake in the fag trope is not just homophobia, but rather gendered meanings. The fag trope when hurled at other boys may or may not have explicitly sexual meanings, but it always has gendered meanings. When a boy calls another boy a fag it means he is not a man, not necessarily that he is a homosexual. The boys in this study know that they are not supposed to call actual gay boys fags because that is mean and homophobic. This, then has been the limited success of the gay rights movement. The message absorbed by many teenage boys is that ‘gay men can be masculine, just like you.’ Instead of challenging gender inequality this discourse of gay-rights has re-inscribed it. Thus we need to

begin to think about how gay men may be in a unique position to challenge heteronormativity in the construction of masculinity.

Finally, this study indicates that researchers who look at the intersection of sexuality and masculinity need to attend to the way racialized identities affect how fag is deployed and what it means in various social situations. While certainly researchers have addressed the ways in which masculine identities are racialized (Connell 1995; Ross 1998; Bucholtz 1999; Davis 1999; Price 1999; Ferguson 2000; Majors 2001; Women 2001) they have not paid equal attention to the ways in which fag might be a racialized epithet. Looking at the fag as a trope rather than an a stable identity reveals the ways in which inequality is embedded in sexualized and racialized gender identities. It is important to look at when, where and with what meaning the fag trope is deployed in order to get at how masculinity is defined, contested, and invested in among the adolescent boys.

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