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## Texting Gender and Body as a Distant/ced Memory: *An Autobiographical Account of Bodies, Masculinities, and Schooling*

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### *Introduction—Problematising Autobiography*

There is always a tendency to identify historical breaks and to say 'this begins there,' 'this ends here,' while the scene keeps on recurring, as unchangeable as change itself. (Trinh 1992, p.56)

Researchers, many of whom have come from a feminist perspective, have used autobiographical approaches to highlight issues of inequity and to centre the experiences of women where historically such experiences have been absent or not viewed as 'legitimate.' This article, taken from doctoral research (Davison, 2003), employs critical autobiographical reflections as a tool to examine the complexities of the researcher's subjective experiences and how they are implicated in the research process itself. Usher states:

As researchers we all have an individual trajectory which shapes the research we do, the questions we ask and the way we do it. But as researchers we are also socio-culturally located, we have a social autobiography, and this has an equally, if not more important, part to play in shaping our research and directing the kinds of reflexive questions which need to be asked but rarely are. (1996a, p.32)

Despite the reflexive intentions, autobiography is often seen as suspicious within research due to its subjective closeness to the researcher. There is an assumption that memories of personal histories are untrustworthy and unreliable as a research tools. Haug explains:

It is commonly argued that the lack of objective validity in subjective experience arises from an individual propensity to twist and turn, reinterpret and falsify, forget and repress events, pursuing what is in fact no more than an ideological construction of individuality, giving oneself an identity for the present to which the contents of the past are subordinated. It is therefore assumed that individuals' accounts of

themselves and their analysis of the world are not to be trusted; they are coloured by subjectivity. (1987, p.40)

However, Haug counters this argument against autobiographical memory work by pointing out that autobiography “represents the sum total of all the social judgements and prejudices, semi-scientific theories, everyday opinions and so on we carry around in our heads and which serve—usually implicitly—as models for our interpretation of the world today” (1987, p.47). Notwithstanding the critique of subjectivity, such stories are reflective and revealing of the particular discourses which inform the text and, as a result, help to situate the text within the researcher’s own history.

In texting my own autobiographical positioning I am cautious of using this approach for, as a male researcher, there “is a danger in focusing on men and masculinities, even within critical work, in a way that reexcludes women and ‘femininities’” (Hearn & Collinson 1994, p.98). Autobiographical reflexivity written by a male researcher has the potential to recentre the privileged and dominant male experience over that of marginalised Others. As Solomon-Godeau asks: “It is all very well and good for male scholars and theorists to problematize their penises, or their relations to them, but is this so very different from a postmodern *mal de siècle* in which, once again, it is male subjectivity that becomes the privileged term?” (1995, p.76). In order to resist repositioning male subjectivity at the centre and displacing other marginalised experiences, this autobiographical account will offer a *critical* analysis of masculinities and schooling, and will highlight particular incidences/events which *disrupt* or *challenge* hegemonic masculinities.

For “if autobiographies are to question rather than endorse dominant ideologies, then personal histories cannot just be unanalytically confessional but they have to be integrated into a critical frame that excites and provokes an engaged questioning in the reader” (Jackson 1990, p.4). The reflexive autobiographical practice employed will attempt to avoid slipping into what Van Maanen (1988) calls “vanity ethnography” that simply replicates dominant ideologies. Pinar explains: “Problematizing what it means to ‘be’ a teacher or student or researcher or woman cannot occur by ‘telling my story’ if that story repeats or reinscribes already normalised identity categories” (1998, p.42). Trinh asks: “How do you inscribe difference without bursting into a series of euphoric narcissistic accounts of yourself and your own kind? Without indulging in a marketable romanticism or naïve whining about your own condition?” (1989, p.28). There needs to be a critical awareness of the content of the story told, for as Rushdie has noted: “[e]very story one chooses to tell is a kind of censorship, it prevents the telling of other tales” (1983, p.68). Thus, not only is it important to be critical of the story itself but also aware of how particular stories *block* others in the very act of telling. Grumet explains that “[e]very telling is a partial prevarication [...] autobiographical consciousness and autobiography never coincide” (1987, p.322).

The story I tell is infused with the available theory about bodies and masculinities in school in order to counter the ease with which many personal narratives are

viewed, uncritically, as 'truth.' "'Autobiography' and 'lived experience' are themselves terms that need to be problematised. Not to do so is to see lived experience as 'presence,' a pure, unmediated and authentic knowledgeability, and autobiography as a kind of true and direct 'speech' of the autonomous self-present person" (Usher 1996b, p.36). Furthermore, autobiography, through its truth-telling, can easily work against the postmodern positioning of this account for as "a mode of truth production the confession [...] grants the autobiographer a kind of authority derived from a confessor's proximity to 'truth'" (Gilmore 1994, p.56).

Additionally, it can be difficult to be critical of intimate individual testimonials. Grounded in personal experiences, these accounts do not always leave room for others to engage such narratives. However, I have attempted to construct this partial autobiography in such a way to allow critical engagement. For as Haug points out regarding memory work, it must "contain an element of practical questioning; it is not concerned purely and simply with a search for new insights" (1987, p.69). No matter how personal, it would be naïve to assume that the autobiography somehow speaks (for) itself.

If research is a textual practice, a textualising of the world through the production and consumption of authoritative knowledge claims in the form of texts, then these always have a 'con-text,' in the sense of that which is *with* the text. What is 'with' the text in this sense is the situated autobiography of the researcher/reader. (Usher 1996b, p.45)

Therefore, these autobiographical details will not only serve as a tool of reflexivity, but will also be reflexive of itself. Theories of the postmodern, which highlight multiplicity, fluidity and fragmentation often create tensions between identity and language. This poses some problems for the recounting of autobiographical details. Jameson explains:

Personal identity is itself the effect of a certain temporal unification of past and future with the present before me; and [...] such an active temporal unification is itself an effect of language. [...] If we are unable to unify the past, present and future of the sentence, then we are similarly unable to unify the past, present, and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life. (1991, p.222)

Autobiographical tales most often are told from the position of a unified self - there is always an 'I' which confesses a history. "Autobiographical voices are often thought of as deeply singular attempts to inscribe an individual identity" (Fischer 1994, p.79). Yet, as Smith (1994) points out: "The autobiographer's specific body is the site of multiple solicitations multiple markings, multiple invocations of subject positions. It is not one culturally charged, unified, stable, finite, or final" (pp.270-271). Therefore, I will attempt to resist unifying accounts of 'what *really* happened' in favour of fragmented moments which may disrupt 'traditional' narrative autobiographical accounts with critical, reflexive, multi-subjective, and counter-hegemonic examples of personal experiences of bodies and masculinities in schools. "By

encouraging an educator to examine disjunctures, ruptures, break-ups, and fractures in the 'normal school' version of the unified life-subject and her own and others' educational practices, autobiography can function to 'queer' or to make theory, practice, *and* the self *unfamiliar*" (Miller 1998, p.370 emphasis in original).

As memories, confessions, and stories, the accounts below (as with all accounts in the postmodern) can only offer partial truths, or perhaps, partial fictions. "Because the subject of autobiography is a self representation and not the autobiographer her/himself, most contemporary critics describe this 'self' as a fiction" (Gilmore 1994, p.68). Thus, while autobiographical accounts are usually considered modernist tales (Van Maanen 1988) the acknowledgement of authorial fiction in autobiography is in line with the greater postmodernist acknowledgement that *all* texts, including this research text, are part fiction and part truth. "The very complexity of this experientially based history can be used to challenge, disturb, and displace neat categorizations (and fragmentation or unification) of bodies" (Smith 1994, pp.271). Thus, I hope that a critical and 'queer' reading of my autobiographical tale of bodies and masculinities in school may help to provide the 'con-text' to the contemporary debate regarding masculinities and schooling and will, in turn, resist unified projections/assumptions of 'boys' or 'masculinity' as unified categories.

### *Memories of Masculinities, Bodies, and Schooling*

#### *i. Background*

The starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. (Antonio Gramsci cited in Jackson 1990, p.1)

Despite the modernist slant to Gramsci's statement above, regarding knowing what one 'really is', the passage points to the multiple possibilities of each individual identity absent of an "inventory" which might organise historical "deposits". Like the concepts of archeology and genealogy developed by Foucault, the process of 'knowing thyself' rarely follows a linear sequence, but instead involves the interrogation of various and multiple interconnecting discourses (Foucault 1977, 1980b). Thus, a non-linear autobiographic account need not begin at the beginning.

Most of the autobiographical details below occurred when I was attending junior high school in the mid-1980s. In remembering critical moments of masculinities and bodies in school, it seemed that bodies and gendered expectations were much more important in junior high school during the onset of puberty and the pressures of heterosexual rituals. "People grow between the ages of 11 and 18. These 'tweenage' years are distinctive in the making of masculinities and femininities, since not only does the body change, but bodymeanings and the image repertoire of bodies become, in contradictory ways, 'available'" (Corrigan 1991, p.206). That is not to say that

elementary education did not leave traces of gendered and embodied lessons, only that such lessons felt more *urgent* in junior high school. Students seemed to have an investment in both gender and bodies. While the degree of investment may have been different for each individual student, students would also play a role in ‘policing’ gendered and bodily performances of each other (Martino 2000).

Between the ages of nine and nineteen I grew up in the suburbs of Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. I was raised in a mixed-class family environment with middle-class expectations of my mother and working-class expectations of my stepfather and siblings. My family seemed to be working-class and middle-class at the same time. For the most part, higher education was not seen as a life-goal for which any of my siblings were expected to attain. Politics and world events were not dinner-time conversation, nor any-time conversation. Occupying our carport were many used cars: bought, repaired and sold at regular intervals. My mother worked as a dental assistant and later, in a hospital as a sterile supplies technician. My stepfather worked as a ‘handyman,’ painting and repairing the houses of other people. I have one biological brother, two step-brothers and two step-sisters. Two brothers and one sister did not graduate from high school. My sister obtained her grade twelve equivalency at a later date, and went on to receive a certificate from the Ontario College of Art. Other siblings obtained more technical qualifications such as brick laying, transport driving, heavy engine repair, and recreational therapy. The family income was not substantial but it was enough to maintain a home in a middle-class neighbourhood. Due to the middle-class background of my mother, there seemed to be an unstated understanding that, after high school, I would pursue higher education. However, my family was not able to provide the financial support needed, so I worked full-time while I attended classes and undertook research for my Bachelor, Master, and Doctoral degrees. These historic class details, or ‘deposits,’ played an important role in how I came to understand and work within the education discipline.

I attended elementary school in a predominantly working-class neighbourhood, while my junior and senior high schools were mixed-class environments. That is, I remember students who lived in large family houses adjacent to horse stables, while other peers lived in low-income rental housing. Because of my own family class background, I often negotiated my way between various classed expectations in school. George Orwell once wrote: “Probably the greatest cruelty one can inflict upon a child is to send it to school among children richer than itself” (1936, p.53). Of course, Orwell’s comment arises from his own class history and his history of attending a British boarding school; however, his comment hints at the daily difficulties of negotiating social class in school. At the time, I may not have articulated my school identity performances in terms of social class, but I was able to recognise and negotiate that, in some contexts, it was important to resist schooling and publicly present an anti-school, anti-learning identity, while in other contexts it was important to cultivate particular educational literacies that offer social, or cultural capital (Bourdieu 1990). Mac an Ghaill states: “school may be a potential

significant public site that enables individual young people to achieve a degree of social mobility in the labour market and in the development of non-traditional gender identities” (1994, p.9).

The shift from elementary school to junior high school seemed to highlight many more gendered divisions between myself and my male friends from elementary school. While I chose to take woodworking, metal shop, drafting and electronics over cooking and sewing electives, I soon learned that there was a degree of dedication involved in how boys were supposed to take up particular gendered subjects. My general lack of interest in auto mechanics and welding quickly separated me from male friends who had recognised the importance of investing identity in these electives. I remember this social, classed and gendered shift because it occurred at a time when the social seemed so paramount to the schooling ritual. At the same time, I negotiated identities that often clashed with dominant gendered ‘norms.’ I was interested in pop musicians of the 1980s, such as Boy George, Annie Lennox, and Grace Jones who challenged ‘traditional’ gendered expectations by their public and popular gender parodies. I found their playful gender performances welcoming at a time when conforming to ‘appropriate’ rigid gender identities were demanded by peers in school. Butler notes that:

gender identity might be reconceived as a personal/cultural history of received meanings subject to a set of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations and which, jointly, construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self or parody the mechanism of that construction. (1990, p.138)

Thus, gender identity ‘construction’ is seen as an historical and an imitative process based on a wide range of possible interpretations of gendered meaning, yet also work toward a taken-for-granted belief in a ‘true’ identity. “Students are active makers of sex/gender identities, in which they have complex social and psychic investments” (Mac an Ghaill 1994, p.90). These investments may be further limited by institutional obligations. Not having found the hyper-masculine environment of the automotive shop floor a comfortable place, I later chose to take art and drama electives. These spaces in the school seemed to offer a place for less-restrictive individual creativity and performance and assisted in my own negotiation of gender identities. Butler explains: “Consider gender, for instance, as a *corporeal style*, an ‘act,’ as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where ‘*performative*’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (1990, p.139).

While I would not characterize the way I expressed my understanding of gender as overly *dramatic*, it was quite performative. I wore gothic-style clothes with a mostly white-black colour variation, I grew my hair and bangs long, I grew my fingernails long, and I decorated my locker with popular gender-benders such as Grace Jones and Boy George. My meaning making was a public act and display of unconventional gender play. Haug points out that “our relationship to bodies is the product of a careful self-ordering...” (1987, p.30). My body, slim and unmuscular,



also conveyed particular gendered meanings. The “effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler 1990, p.140). There seemed to be an interplay between my body, bodily gestures and my style. Wienke (1998) has noted that men whose bodies do not confirm to the hegemonic standard often attempt to hide their bodies with their choice of clothing. “One way to express a reformulated understanding of the body is by marking the body through fashion, and thereby masking and surrounding the body by an expanding repertoire of floating signs, so as to inflect masculine bodily standards” (Wienke 1998, p.268). Wienke believes that the manipulation of clothing allows an individual more *control* over self-image (p.269). While in retrospect, I may have felt more in control, my highly cultivated, yet unpopular, fashion choices ended up drawing more attention *to* me rather than away from me and my body.

The combination of clothing, bodily presence, and locker imagery marked me as different, as an outsider among most peers. I was often asked about my choice of style. I was asked whether I was a ‘mod,’ whether I was a ‘prep,’ and whether I was a ‘fag.’ “The role of bodily practices as a signifier of a person’s sexuality is significant, where the way a male might walk, hold himself, sit, etc. provides a visual grammar of understanding” (Nayak & Kehily 1996, p.220). Such questions, I soon learned, were rhetorical and were meant to sort me, to mark me as Other, and worked to construct the very categories named.

These rhetorical devices operate in identifying individuals as homosexual whether they are so or not, or whether or not they realize they are. They enforce heterosexuality by selecting particular characteristics as documenting an underlying pattern of homosexual identity. They have to be learned and remembered. They are reproduced routinely in the everyday speech of students and are not reinvented every time they are used. (Smith 1998, p.317)

Smith points out that homophobic harassment is a repeated act of identifying the Other as different. “Students first learn how to identify ‘fags’ and how to treat them through the social organization of talk and text in school” (1998 p.321). Homophobia is institutionally sanctioned through silent complicity. While I might have obtained sympathy from some female teachers, I was never sure to whom I could turn when I felt unsafe. Seeking safety required that I (and others) publicly admit my implication in the naming process. Smith explains “[t]he language of harassment pulls [you] into the ideology through the dialogic of accusation and response” (1989, p.322).

I was called a ‘fag’ and verbally and physically abused based on the way I had been performing a public gendered style. Butler ponders:

And what if one were to compile all the names that one has ever been called? Would they not present a quandary for identity? Would some of them cancel the effect of others? Would one find oneself fundamentally dependent upon a competing array



of names to derive a sense of oneself? Would one find oneself alienated in language, finding oneself, as it were, in the names addressed from elsewhere? (1997, p.30)

I remember sorting through the contradictions of individualism and the tyranny of the necessity of conforming to hegemonic gendered practices and performances. I was aware that I was being named from elsewhere as I chose not to abandon the performances that brought me psychological and physical pain. The practice of naming, more specifically name-calling, is not a simple matter. “If we understand the force of the name to be an effect of its historicity, then that force is not the mere casual effect of an inflicted blow, but works in part through an encoded memory or trauma, one that lives in language and is carried in language” (Butler 1997a, p.36). In explaining the complex construction of identity Hall explains that identity is:

the meeting point, the point of suture, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to ‘interpellate,’ speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the process which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be ‘spoken.’ Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us. (1996, 6)

Thus, the particular *appellation* (Ronell 1989) embedded in various dominant discourses repeated over time is a call that carries a much greater destructive potential than is often acknowledged.

I found writing this autobiographical account brought back many disturbing memories and I had several nightmares about being harassed again. It is difficult to acknowledge that, as an adult, I am still afraid. While I am harassed much less often as an adult, when subtle harassment occurs, such as homophobic calls from strangers on the street, all the past fears return and invade my body. I am on guard and my body tenses up—for days. Even writing this is difficult; it seems so trivial, or distant. I am constantly censoring details. Foucault writes: “[s]ilences ... are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses (1980a, p.2). Homophobic harassment is meant to be shameful and humiliating and therefore contains a built-in silence that prevents extensive critical discussion and therefore tacitly supports discourses of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity. I feel as if I should have gotten over this by now, and that recalling the trauma of harassment amounts to complaining about petty boyhood ‘difficulties’ (I even couch it in ‘softer’ language). Although much of the harassment occurred in the past, the effects are very much present.

As I reflect back, I can recall particular moments where peers had given me precise instructions as to how to fit in, and to avoid further peer harassment. I remember having the back of my locked knee, which supported my weight, kicked from under me in a not so subtle acknowledgement of the obviousness of the weak spot in my posture(ing). Additionally, I was told directly by a male peer that I would not be picked on as much if I just cut my fingernails and stopped ‘dressing gay.’ In

retrospect, I think that there was a real concern on the part of some of my peers that somehow I had not understood the symbols of my 'oppression,' as it were. The peers who volunteered advice were often themselves marginalised in some way yet had found other ways to counter their particular marginalisation. My continued resistance, despite the implications, partly came from stubbornness and a naïve incredulity at being denied particular counter-hegemonic gendered expressions. At the same time, it seemed that my body played a role in the degree to which I could both resist and conform to 'acceptable' gendered behaviour. As Haug notes: "only at points of social marginalization is our attention diverted to the problem of our bodily otherness. Or conversely, it is the failure of the body to acquiesce in the power of the social average that carries social marginalization in its wake" (1990, p.118). It seemed like, despite, the choice of 'gay' clothes, long fingernails, and gendered performances, my body, *in school*, would give me away as Other.

## ii. *Schooling the Body*

The institutional location of the public school added to the way I understood, and performed gender and my body. "Thronged corridors and classrooms, palpable threats, should more readily remind us that the territory of education is the body, and education territorializes the body" (Kelly 1997, p.1). Arising out of the work of Foucault (1979), Kelly reminds her readers that: "The regulation of bodies has historically been a primary focus of the project of education" (1997, p.31). The institutional history of regulating and disciplining the body has produced particular hegemonic bodily ideals (Foucault 1979). That is not to say that the body has remained static, only that institutionalised education has played a significant role in the gendering of bodies. "The gendering of boys' bodies isn't just a 'natural' and 'normal' process but socially shaped through a great amount of time, energy and institutional support being spent on their development" (Salisbury & Jackson 1996, p.189). Nevertheless, relatively few educators have considered the body as a point of pedagogical enquiry. Corrigan states:

All I am trying to say is that bodies matter schooling. They/we are the subjects who are taught, disciplined, measured, evaluated, examined, passed (or not), assessed, graded, hurt, harmed, twisted, re-worked, applauded, praised, encouraged, enforced, coerced, condensed.... To have around volumes of educational theory (however radical) that never mentions bodies, and their differentiation, seems to me now, slightly stupid. (1991, p.210)

The absence of an examination of the interplay of bodies and education has left a gap in pedagogy and has worked to further enforce an institutional bodily standard which may be harmful to those students who are not able to 'measure up.' "It is by acknowledging such a fusion of politics and ethics that the body as a site of enfleshment takes on pedagogical importance" (McLaren 1991, p.156).

The Physical Education class (by name alone) is particularly ripe for the

exploration of the regulation of bodies (Davison 2000b). It seems almost cliché to recall some of the intersections of PE and bodily difference, such as the ‘sorting’ of bodies when students line up to pick teams, or the display of bodies when one team is designated as ‘shirts’ and the other ‘skins.’ I remember struggling to grasp many of the contradictions of hegemonic masculinity and Physical Education (Davison 2000a). For example, wrestling involved physical and sometimes intimate touching between boys ordinarily taboo in most contexts of hegemonic masculinity. Yet, in the act of wrestling, there seemed to be a strange blanket of homoeroticism coupled with the unspoken and unacknowledged ‘rule’ that such positionings of the body were *not* to be seen/felt as pleasurable. Wrestling in PE presented a strange display of sanctioned public intimacy between boys under the cover of athletics. The intersections and contradictions of athletics, bodies, and homoeroticism have been documented as an integral part of a greater history of shifting incarnations of hegemonic masculinity (see for example Drummond 2003; Pronger 1990; and Buchbinder 1998). Of course, not all boys enjoyed wrestling, and not all boys might have viewed wrestling as intimate or homoerotic, but wrestling in PE serves as one example of a clash between bodies and masculinities in an institutional setting.

Further, I remember ‘fitness testing’ which occurred three times a year in PE wherein students would run various athletic tests as an indication of athletic improvement. Such tests also involved a public measurement of muscle and body fat that seemed particularly humiliating for those students whose bodies were obese and/or unmuscular. As Corrigan explains: “the body is tightened, shaped, spaced, timed, and worded to *their* tunes and we carry the wounds for a long, long time” (1991, p.210 emphasis in original). Thus, the trauma inflicted on some bodies in the process of uncritical institutional regulation may exceed individual humiliating moments in PE. “To not shape up properly as a boy in competition with others causes pain, resentment, and anti-social behaviour in the form of truancy, disruptiveness and other attention grabbing devices” (Salisbury & Jackson 1996, p.32). One might view my cultivated style as an “attention grabbing device”—only the attention/reaction was most often negative. Some students, both boys and girls, developed various elaborate strategies of resistance to avoid the physicality and/or the humiliation of PE. I remember being envious of girls who were excused from PE due to their having their menstrual periods, or being envious of a friend who was regularly excused from PE because the exercise in PE worked particular muscles that hindered her when training her body for ballet. For a brief moment I weighed the advantages of taking ballet lessons against attending PE class. Salisbury and Jackson explain other resistance strategies of students:

Boys develop their own subtle strategies of non-compliance and resistance. They feign illness over a long period of time, lose their kit, ask if they can do some alternative activity, forge notes, invent excuses for not going to the shower, develop preferences for other sporting activities like field events in athletics, such as high jumping, putting the shot or throwing the javelin. There are also boys who

have the inner confidence (and sometimes the emotional bravery) not to pretend that they are harder than they look, who often refuse to fit in to manly expectations from sports teachers, fathers or other boys. (1996, p.206)

What is occurring in PE class that is so painful to some boys (as well as for some girls) that such elaborate excuses and escape fantasies are entertained? Physical Education class, as a part of mandatory institutionalised schooling, regulates and evaluates bodies and their ability to perform particular (often gendered) physical tasks (Fitzclarence, Hickey, & Matthews 1997, Hickey, Fitzclarence & Matthews 1998).

While student bodies were evaluated formally in Physical Education class, informal evaluation often occurred in the change room and the gang showers. At a time when boys' bodies are changing and growing with the onset of puberty, the public display of bodies in a school change room may be troubling for some boys.

For the adolescent, the changes in physique, a developing ability to think abstractly, and the subsequent capacity for self-reflection mark the beginning of a period of extreme physical and psychological self consciousness. At the same time as the adolescent male is attempting to integrate the somatic changes of puberty, he is trying to understand the meaning of becoming a man in our culture. (Kearney-Cooke & Steichen-Asch 1990, p.63)

I remember anxiety and insecurity regarding changing (both meanings implied) amongst my peers. As someone who was already marginalised due to my dress, gendered performances, and unathletic body, I felt particularly vulnerable and exposed. The PE change room did not offer privacy. Historically, this has to do with the policing of male bodies to ensure nothing 'queer' might occur within an intimate and homosocial environment (Bérubé 1990 also see Shlits 1993). The lack of privacy did indeed police the queer, which included those who were *different*. Jackson explains:

The rituals of male solidarity were most clearly seen in that most private and most intimidating place- the sport's changing room as a male preserve. It was one of those places that held power over regulating 'deviant' masculinities through fear of being publicly teased and ridiculed as 'girlish,' 'unmanly,' or physically inadequate. (1990, p.179)

The PE change room was a place where I felt *unable* to construct a particular gendered identity apart from my body because the body was so central to PE class and the change room. I often avoided showering after PE both to escape displaying my body to other boys and the vulnerability which that entails, but also to avoid confronting my *different* (unmuscular, 'skinny') body which somehow defined who I was. That is, there was a shame that involved the belief "that I *am* [...] what I am *seen* to be" (Bartky 1996, p.227 emphasis in original). Jackson in his own remembering of showering after PE class noted: "The showers were the most terrifying places for 'unmanly' boys like me. I used to position myself in the most secret corner of the changing room, protecting myself from being ogled or ridiculed"

(1990, p.179). I was not the only one who avoided the showers, during my three years in junior high school, I remember only one or two of the most athletic and muscular boys ever showered after PE classes, which may indicate that the bodily or gendered insecurity reached beyond a few insecure boys like me (Jain 1996).

Different rates of growth and development cause deep anxieties for many boys who see themselves as very small compared with their seemingly more grown up and developed peers. Boys who do not shape up to the group constructed ideal are filled with fundamental distrust of what they actually have which does not lead them to a positive acceptance of their own bodily resources. (Salisbury & Jackson 1996, p.192)

The daily PE, and change room ritual, which I never mastered, made me more and more insecure about my body and I came to hate my body for it seemed to represent a 'natural' and insurmountable failure of masculinity. My body was, however, male, which conferred particular privileges. While unathletic, unmuscular, and uncoordinated, I was not physically disabled, and that endowed me with a degree of body privilege, which at the time I was not able to recognise. However, it seemed as though my body was somehow responsible for my inability to 'measure up' to the expectations of hegemonic masculinity and as a result I developed an unhealthy relationship to my body. As Salisbury and Jackson explain: "This internal hatred of not shaping-up well enough leads to a self-imprisonment by the more vulnerable boys who are held by this ideal fantasy which holds the symbolic promise of the idealized self which will match the 'demands' of the cock group" (1996, p.194). My body-hatred was something I felt ashamed to talk about with friends, family or teachers. "Some boys' images of themselves are so full of self-hatred that they find it impossible to talk about" (Salisbury & Jackson 1996, p.193). Yúdice (1995) calls this "toxic shame" and describes it as "an unhealthy and self disempowering indulgence in self blame" (p.275). Thus, inappropriate gender performances were linked to and enforced by my body that, in turn, produced a dislike and resentment of my body that was silenced due to masculine gendered expectations. "Many boys go on denying their feelings and bodily experiences because they learn, very early on, that being concerned about the state of their bodies is seen as effeminate whinging and not to be encouraged" (Salisbury & Jackson 1996, p.220). This unhealthy relationship to my body was enforced by peers in the change room through verbal and physical taunting, perhaps to counter or transfer their own bodily or gendered insecurities. As a result, I developed a distrust of men. Kaufman notes that there is "a link between self-hatred and the problems that straight and many gay men face in friendships. Fear of other men can get turned against ourselves. The extent of male self-hatred is probably the most surprising thing about patriarchal culture" (Kaufman 1993, p.204). Hegemonic heterosexual masculinity (Frank 1987) demands solidarity to men while, at the same time, a systemic fear or hatred of a closeness of other men. Therefore, any counter-hegemonic enactment of masculine practices are seen as 'deviant,' unmasculine, and assumed gay. This is not surprising

since, as Smith explains: “[a] distinctive feature of the ideology of ‘fag’ is that it is basically the work of males” (1998, p.326).

### *iii. Homophobia, Marginalisation, and the Student Body*

The physical sense of maleness is not a simple thing. It involves size and shape, habits of posture and movement, particular physical skills and the lack of others, the image of one’s own body, the way it is presented to other people and the ways they respond to it, the way it operates at work and in sexual relations. (Connell 1987, p.84)

After a summer of sexual experimentation between grades nine and ten, I returned to school with a feeling of having knowledge of heterosexuality and heterosexual desires. However, because my relationship ended before school began, I was not able to publicly display and confirm my heterosexuality with bodily ‘evidence’—that is, literally, ‘a girl on my arm.’ Given my history of performing gender differently, I did not think students’ suspicions regarding my sexuality would be easily changed by simply bragging about a summer affair. My (hetero)sexuality was doubted partly due to my inability or unwillingness to enact masculinity in the required fashion. Biological sex (body), masculinity (gender), and (hetero)sexuality are interwoven. Britzman notes that “who one has sex with [...] ‘matters’. It matters so much that one’s imagined and real sexual practices become synonymous with one’s identity and with one’s gender” (1995, p.70). Gender and sexuality were, in my experience, sometimes used interchangeably in that my body shape and posturing and non-traditional gender performances cast doubt on my (hetero)sexuality, which then seemed to reflect back to my body and masculinity performances. I could not find a space/place, literally and figuratively, which was ‘safe’ to disengage from hegemonic heterosexual masculinity. As Frank explains: “alternatives to heterosexual masculine hegemony are seldom visible, let alone seen as acceptable by other people or by institutions such as schools” (1994, p.57). DesMarchelier adds: “Male students who are not homosexual [*sic*], but who are perceived to be so due to mannerisms or demeanour, become labeled as lesbian or gay, which places them in the invidious position of being unfairly marginalised but unable to repudiate the label or alter the body mannerisms” (1997, p.7).

Due to my inability to contest students’ assumptions about my sexuality and the inability to easily change my body to ‘fit’ a hegemonic body standard, I continued to perform gender in a way that challenged my peers’ standards of ‘acceptable’ masculinity. As a result, I continued to face homophobic harassment at school. I would avoid particular areas of the school that I felt were unsafe. I had negotiated and mapped a complex geography of the school based on safe spaces and times in order to avoid verbal and physical harassment. Corrigan recounts a similar experience of harassment from his own boyhood: “I developed a technique [...] I learned to make myself invisible; counter strategies are to *pick on* and *single out* those who try to hide” (1983, p.31 emphasis in original). Even off the school grounds I was

often chased, shouted at from passing cars, and had objects thrown at me in reaction to the way I publicly performed masculinity. Nayak and Kehily note that “physical demonstrations such as shouting are a part of a wider social repertoire of bodily male practices” (1996, p.218). Thus, reaction to my body and gender performance evoked a bodily and gendered response. Yet, the repeated harassment over several years made me even more resistant to conforming to a dominant masculine performance. The continual harassment has had both a psychic and physical impact on me for “one need only consider the way in which the history of having been called an injurious name is embodied, how the words enter the limbs, craft the gesture, bend the spine” (Butler 1997, p.159).

Once marked as ‘gay’ or ‘fag’ in school it is difficult to refute one’s Otherness, the name calling itself, and all acts associated with the so-named person further refines the category of ‘fag’ (Smith 1998). There was very little room to negotiate, discuss or defend my sexuality in school.

Homosexuality, within this paranoid metonymy, has become a paradigm for contagion. The self-descriptive utterance of ‘homosexuality’ becomes the very act of dangerous communication which, participating in a contemporary revaluation of that sacred scene, infects its listener—immaculately—through the ear. (Butler 1997, p.116)

It was very much like a junior high school version of the humiliating word game/dilemma children used to play in elementary school which involved the question: “Are you a homo?” If you denied it to preserve your hetero-privilege, the joke was on you as you were reminded that you had denied that you were a homo-*sapien*. If you then reversed your position and claimed that you were indeed a ‘homo,’ peers would titter at the public confession of homosexuality. In junior high school, as bodies changed with puberty, and as students became sexually active, there is a lot of tension regarding sexuality. “Male heterosexual identity is a highly fragile socially constructed phenomenon” (Mac an Ghaill 1994, p.9). The fragility Mac an Ghaill alludes to may refer to the extent to which young male heterosexuality needs to be ‘defended’ and ‘proved’ and how this usually involves positioning yourself apart from those on the margins. Mac an Ghaill adds: “male teachers and male students [collude] in constructing dominant forms of straight masculinity, which served to devalue, marginalize and threaten femininities and subordinated masculinities” (1994, p.163). I can recall many moments when both teachers and students alienated and humiliated others, or myself, to reinforce dominant forms of masculinity or heterosexuality.

Dominant discourses, specifically those of hegemonic masculinity, are a type of colonization where particular social ‘rules’ are imposed upon particular bodies, often against their will. These bodies conform and resist to hegemonic forces in various ways. While I was marginalised for not conforming to hegemonic masculinity, I remember that I was often able to use my whiteness or maleness against Others



to feel somewhat less marginalised. Fanon notes that: “The colonized man [*sic*] will first manifest [...] aggressiveness which has been deposited in his bones against his [*sic*] own people” (1963, p.42). I remember habitually joining in with peers to jeer a Chinese-Canadian student with racist slurs. I also remember a disabled friend of mine and I being particularly cruel to a female peer who did not conform to hegemonically feminine standards—she was not as slim or as attractive as other girls and she followed professional ice hockey better than most boys could (including myself and my disabled friend). My friend and I called her a ‘dog’ and barked greetings at her every chance we had. Fanon argues that the last resort of a colonized person in a “permanent state of tension” (1963, p. 42) will be to act aggressively or violently “to defend his personality *vis-à-vis* his brother [*sic*]” (p. 43). As Mac an Ghaill recounts regarding the students in his research: “They have developed a highly sophisticated understanding of the ambivalent misogyny which is endemic in male straight culture with its internal contradictions” (1994, p.164). My friend and I accepted personal harassment begrudgingly in part because we knew that we too could act in misogynistic and racist ways to solidify our own shallow corner of power. Smith explains that “the language of ‘girl jokes’ coordinates a particular set of gender relations and a particular form of male consciousness” (1998, p.325).

A less harmful way I remember feeling more powerful in light of daily harassment in school was through learning itself. While I disliked school for the social terrorism, I enjoyed learning and intellectual engagement with teachers. I was able to feel somewhat better than those who harassed me with the belief that I was smarter than they were; that I had a better chance to ‘succeed.’ Redman, in his own autobiographical account of heterosexual masculinity and schooling (1997) refers to his discovery of ‘intellectual muscularity’ to counter daily harassment. For me, the turn toward learning, over the social aspects of schooling, was partly a move to attempt to solidify a middle-class-ness in a mixed-class school and family. But by taking up a position of one who is interested in learning was not one wholly free from harassment or violence. From the position of working-class peers, this presented yet another reason to threaten me. Willis explains in his account of working class masculinities in the United Kingdom:

In violence there is the fullest if unspecified commitment to a blind or distorted form of revolt. It breaks the conventional tyranny of ‘the rule.’ It opposes it with machismo. It is the ultimate way of breaking the flow of meanings which are unsatisfactory, imposed from above, or limited by circumstances. It is one way to make the mundane suddenly *matter*. (1977, p.34 emphasis in original)

The violence directed at me for my attempt at ‘intellectual muscularity’ seemed to come from a working-class frustration. While I would not have named it in such terms when I was in junior high school, I was able to see that particular students, who were often in the ‘smoking pit,’ who worked in the automotive shop, whom I normally did not encounter on a regular basis, sought me out for harassment and

fights. “The fight is the moment when you are fully tested in the alternative culture. It is disastrous for your informal standing and masculine reputation if you refuse to fight, or perform very amateurishly” (Willis 1977, p.35). Knowing that fighting would most likely result in the latter, I chose the former which as Willis points out, acted to solidify my marginalised masculinity further, and confirm my commitment to middle-class privilege over working-class peers and family. Willis notes that:

the logic of class or group interests is different from the logic of individual interests. To the *individual* working class person mobility in this society may mean something. Some working class individuals do ‘make it’ and any particular individual may hope to be one of them. To the class or group at its own proper level, however, mobility means nothing at all. The only true mobility at this level would be the destruction of the whole class society. (1977, p.128 emphasis in original)

Class and gender privileges intersect and are interconnected in complex ways. In some respects I negotiated social situations in school with a degree of race and biological sex privilege and attempted to invoke a middle-class privilege. At the same time however, I did my best to avoid harassment, violence and humiliation from peers due to my inability to conform to gendered ‘norms.’ As Frank points out:

As boys, we have to be constantly on the alert to either confront or avoid physical violence. We have to be ready to defend ourselves. We are constantly on our guard with our speech and our bodies... Masculinity is never something we can feel at ease with. It is always something we have to be ready to prove and defend. (Frank 1994, p.47)

The manner in which bodies and masculinities *mattered* in school was a daily struggle for me, from negotiating the geographical space of the school to avoiding fights and regular humiliation. Often this involved alienating and humiliating others to feel safe, safe to learn, and, I hoped to rise above my tormentors. School was for me, as Corrigan states, “a theatre of regulated performances...” (1991, p.207)—class, gender, race, bodily ability were all *performed* in school, but it is as if all students came to the theatre/school, expecting a different production and rapidly learned that we were the actors.

## *Conclusion*

In this autobiographical account, I intended not only to situate myself as a researcher within the broader scholarship of masculinities, I also aimed to complicate the interplay of bodies, masculinities and schooling. “While the idea of the sexually neutral researcher might well be considered optimal in the tomes of methodology, in the performances of these imperfect behaviours joined together to be called social research, the body and sex may not always, easily, or reasonably, be disregarded” (Honeychurch 1998, pp.251-252). Thus, this social research highlights the complexities and contradictions of my own experience to illuminate how

bodies and masculinities are negotiated in and out of school. Kenway and Willis describe how many students view their experiences at school:

Students of all ages speak most frequently of 'toxic emotions': Nervousness, worry, anxiety, fear, and even dread. They fear 'being laughed at,' 'making a fool of myself,' 'being made to look stupid,' 'being stupid,' being teased and hurt, being alone and isolated and being betrayed by their friends or their teachers. They speak of panic, of being uncertain, uncomfortable, embarrassed, ashamed, intimidated, shy, lonely, and unhappy. They speak of feelings of frustration and bitterness, of annoyance, anger and hostility, of rivalry and jealousy. They also speak of boredom and the regular frustration of 'not being allowed.' (1998, p.139)

Often these feelings are not taken up by educators or are viewed as a routine part of schooling and growing up. Connell noted in 1995 that there "is surprisingly little discussion of the role of education in the transformation of masculinity" (Connell 1995, p.238). Since 1995 there has been more research into masculinity and schooling, yet only a small number of researchers suggest transformative practices (see for example Kenway and Fitzclarence 1997; Frank 1994, 1997; Davison 2000a; or Martino 1994). Practices of masculinity which are taken for granted as 'boys will be boys' behaviour is not only harmful to marginalised students but ultimately shapes the learning environment. "The ways youth use their bodies, language and culture to contest the mainstream adult world [...] suggests that they are engaging in a pedagogical enterprise to educate us—the teachers, the parents, all of us older ones" (Pinar 1998, p.23).

Yet there needs to be a greater interrogation of the social enactment of gender and bodies in schools. Meiners notes: "This queery-ing of theory points to the need to do more than perform deviance or queer disruptions and asks for a more rigorous and contextual assessment of the implications and constructions of identity positionings" (1998, p.129). That is, implications of identity both for individual students and the implications for schools.

My engagement with notions of identity, as partly recounted above, is meant to challenge more static understandings of what it means 'to be masculine' in schools, and to challenge the taken-for-granted-ness of bodies in relation to the project of schooling. Miller notes that: "...many current uses of autobiography in education work against any notion of 'permanent openness' of identity [...] normalised versions of autobiography serve to limit and close down rather than to create possibilities for constructing permanently open and resignifiable selves" (Miller 1998, p.367).

It is my hope that this fragment of an autobiographical account of schooling will illustrate both the need to reconsider bodies and masculinities in education and the opportunities for change. The complexities of gendered and corporeal identity alluded to here should begin to present possibilities for rethinking bodies and masculinities in new ways. In doing so, this work offers the possibility to undercut recent 'panics' regarding boys and schooling that rarely take into consideration the

plurality of masculinities in schools or critically question practices of masculinities that often fuel educational inequities (Frank & Davison, 2001).

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