

chapter two

the punishing room

*Now, as I get to school, I hear the late bell ringing
Running through the hall, I hear the glee club singing
Get to the office, I can hardly speak
'Cause it's the third late pass that I got this week
So to my first class I run don't walk
All I hear are my sneakers and the scratching of chalk
And when I get to the room, I hear the teacher say
"Mr. Young, I'm happy that you could join us today."
I try to sit down so I can take some notes
But I can't read what the kid next to me wrote
And if that wasn't enough to make my morning complete
As I try to get up, I find there's gum on my seat
And with the seat stuck to me, I raise my hand
And say, "Excuse me, but can I go to the bathroom, ma'am."
The teacher got upset and she screamed out, "No
It's off to the principal's office you go."*

—YOUNG MC, "PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE"

"This Is What Alain Wrote"

I can hear laughter from the Punishing Room before I get to the door. A crumpled ball of paper sails by my face in the direction of a wastebasket as I enter. Five children—four boys and a girl, all African American—are in the Punishing Room this morning. Two are sitting with books and papers spread in front of them. The three standing in one corner across the room from the wastebasket appear to be the players in the improvised game of hoops. There is a feeling of excitement that is quickly shushed as I enter the room. There are several wads of paper on

the floor. Ten eyes fasten on me to see how I'm going to respond to the fact that they're out of their seats and not doing work.

The girl at the table decides to take charge and steer my attention to other matters. "Look what Alain did."

She directs my attention to the Formica-topped surface where something has been scribbled close by an open math book, some mimeographed worksheets, pencils, erasers, and lined notebook paper. As I fumble for my glasses in my purse, she begins to read aloud the words on the table. "Write 20 times. I will stop fucking 10 cent teachers and this five cent class. Fuck you. Ho! Ho! Yes Baby."

I have leaned over with a display of great interest to follow her finger as she traces the words penciled on the table in front of the boy. He is looking directly down onto his lap as she reads. The room is still as taboo words and deeds invade the silence. Five pairs of eyes filled with anticipation, awe, and suppressed giggles watch for my reaction. Now one of the boys takes over from her. Shaking his head in mock sorrow he begins to recite the words. I am saying, "Okay, okay, no need to repeat it. I can see for myself," when one of the student specialists enters the room. She is an older African American woman.

"Get to your seat," she orders the paper throwers, who quickly scramble to their places at the table. She turns to me. "You see the nasty words he wrote?" She scolds the seated boy who has been absolutely quiet since I came into the room. "You should be ashamed of yourself." He says nothing in response. He has a mournful expression on his face.

So the girl chimes in again, rapidly, with an expression of pure innocent indignation, to recite the boy's composition, this time by heart. The words and the girl's perfect act of righteousness cause all the children to start giggling. By the time she gets to "Ho! Ho! Yes Baby!" I am ready to howl with laughter myself.

The student specialist tells the girl to be quiet and get on with her work. But even she has a twinkle in her eye. She has brought another child into the Punishing Room with her, a boy who had clearly been crying on his way to the room, but who now seems to be cheering up considerably.

The student specialist moves over to the table and takes a seat at one of the child-sized chairs alongside the children. "I'm calling your parents," she says to the boy who has written the sentences on the table. To me she sighs, "What to do with these children nowadays!"

Now she proceeds to copy what the boy has written on the table

onto a piece of blank paper. This paper will go into his file. As she does so, the children are whispering the phrases to each other. More admonitions to be quiet, more giggles.

The student specialist calls the boy's house. She has the father on the line. He must have asked what the boy has written because now we can all hear her repeating the words written on the table. From her remarks, the father is not happy to be called and I gather feels the school should deal with the matter. The boy who is the center of attention is looking stoic.

The student specialist hangs up. "Your father is coming to take you home." She orders the boy to wipe the words off the table with a wet paper towel. He makes them disappear. But the forbidden sentences are kept alive and passed from child to child, and repeated in classes and play areas throughout the day.

The Punishing Room is the name I have given to the place to which children are sent by adults when they get in trouble. The room is one of the smallest spaces at Rosa Parks School. Just two doors down from the school's main office, the sign on the door identifies the room as the Student Specialists' Office, a designation that though unfamiliar, seems promising, yet totally mystifying since it gives nothing away about the function of the room or the role of the people in it. The visitor passing down the hallway can see that it is a space like other spaces in the school inhabited by both children and adults. It is clearly an educational space, not an administrative space; children work in this room because the visitor can see them sitting at a table writing. I had been doing fieldwork in the school for several months before I actually went in and discovered for myself the place that the room occupied in the school.

Alain's composition and the events that marked it as memorable, made visible something that I had begun to suspect: getting into trouble in school did not necessarily arouse fear and shame in children, nor induce a resolve to turn over a new leaf and be good. Getting in trouble and making a trip to the Punishing Room was, for some children, also the occasion for escaping from classroom conditions of work, for self-expression, for making a name for yourself, having fun, for both actively contesting adult rules and power, as well as for the sly subversion of adult prohibitions. The Punishing Room was not the perfect site of surveillance and order that I had assumed, but a social hub, a space in which children put prohibited discourses into circulation and

engaged adults in games of power in a series where wins and losses were chalked up on both sides.

Unlike the classroom where activity is routine, monotonous, highly predictable, and physically constrained, the Punishing Room is a place where the remarkable happens. It is never dull for long. In that space we witness major and minor dramas. Friends may be there or older children with “reputations” who you might never otherwise have a chance to sit next to. Note passing, bickering, whispering, and stories circulate around the table as children “do time” writing lines, copying the school rules, or finishing worksheets. As each new child enters and passes by to the inner office where the adults sit, the children acknowledge a potential new member with comments or a palpable silence. They openly eavesdrop to hear what has happened, standing with ears pressed to the closed door of the inner office, pulling up chairs to peer over the flimsy screening devices placed over the glass panels by staff as a gesture to confidentiality. They take advantage of the student specialist being fully occupied with the newcomer to play games, hurl accusations, and call each other names.

The Punishing Room is not a happy place of the type of creative activity that adults would like to think abound in schools; there is no pretense of that here. It is a place of drama, of tempers, of forbidden words, of witnessing others, both adult and child, behave outrageously, of scary enactment of adult power, of vivid tragedies with tears and of gut-wrenching comedy. For the children, it is a place of knowing that one is not alone. The child who gets in trouble is the norm. Identities and reputations are made and remade here. It is the space in the school in which everyone is like yourself—in trouble—and you are no longer different.

The Punishing Room is made up of a small rectangular antechamber with a door opening into a tiny office. The outer room is furnished with a low table flanked by child-sized chairs. The opposite wall is lined with shelves filled with the brightly colored uniforms and regalia of the children who act as the traffic guards before and after school. Children who have gotten in trouble as well as those who wear the colors of authority, who bear the symbols of order, find themselves in the same place. Many children in the school never pass into this small space at all.

The tiny inner office is the home of Faye and Rodney, the Punishing Room staff, or student specialists, their official job title. They are

both African American. Faye, who is in her midfifties, has been working at this job for fifteen years. Rodney, in his first year at the school, is a man in his early thirties. He is tall and powerfully built as if he works out with weights on a regular basis. He has a loud, powerful voice. He provides an imposing male presence in the most stereotypical way that masculinity denotes power—through physique and voice. On the other hand, Faye plays out her side of the gender coin—she fusses, exhorts, despairs, and chides.

Enormous windows take up almost the entire wall at the end. Faye and Rodney have a view of the entire playground from the desk. A narrow bulletin board between the windows is covered with snapshots of children, all black, who have passed through the school. They have been put there by Faye. The beaming faces that shine down from the bulletin board make me think of happy, healthy, successful kids whose futures are bright with promise. There are two dingy but comfortable-looking chairs parked next to the door to the outer room.

Directly across from the desk is a green filing cabinet. The top drawer holds a file on each child who has been officially referred by a school adult. Some children, usually first-time offenders, come in with no record kept of the visit. During the year that I observed in the discipline office, the student specialists opened files and began accumulating evidence on 250 children, almost half the total number of kids in the school.

In the files are the data, the evidence, the material proof of wrongdoing that the adults carefully preserve. Some folders are chock full of official referral forms with comments by teachers, scraps of paper that contain forbidden words, crumpled worksheets demonstrating fits of temper, pictures drawn of parts of the body and acts that those body parts engage in that are determined to be obscene and pornographic by the adults in charge. I found drawings of mouths engaged in kissing with tongues prominently touching and remembered how deliciously terrifying and exciting even the words, much less the depiction of the act of, “French kissing” are at a certain age. One budding cartoonist had left behind a graphically funny replica of an “asshole” that was likened to a member of the discipline staff. There were a few letters of apology, all written by girls, declaring why what they had done was wrong and promising that they would never do it again. There were also signed confessions such as this one handwritten (in cursive) and signed by Marvin, a black boy in the sixth grade:

Last night at the scout meeting me claude, reds and tyrone went to the forth grade wing and we we [*sic*] saw some candy we took it and we whent downstairs and whent to the scout meeting and we was running in the hallway and that was it.

At the end of the school year, as I am going through the files, I find Alain's folder with the piece of paper on which the student specialist had copied the words he had written inserted as hard evidence of his misdemeanor. At the top of the page, Faye had added the following notation: "This is what Alain wrote about his teacher and class."

In one of the lower file drawers, all the contraband confiscated from the children during the year is kept. From the Viewmaster that had pornographic slides to an array of weapons: toy guns that look real, brightly colored water pistols, a rubber knife painted silver, a wooden sword, a slingshot, one genuine pocket knife, some dice. All the accoutrements of adult masculinity that are the socially sanctioned toys for boys. On a bookshelf behind the one desk in the room is the large tome that Rodney calls their Bible. This is the huge manual of state laws governing minors.

The Punishing Room is the first tier of the disciplinary apparatus of the school. Like the courtroom, it is the place where stories are told, truth is determined, and judgment is passed. The children who get off lightly in the sentencing process are detained in the outer room, writing lines or copying school rules as their penalty. Sometimes they lose their recreation time as well and have to sit on the bench at recess.

The Jailhouse

There is another room in the school whose sole purpose is the experience of punishment. The boys who I talked to call this room the "Jailhouse" among themselves. The Jailhouse is where you go for after-school detention. It is also the place where you spend time when you are given an in-house suspension. This means that you are banished from your class for a specified period of time—from half a day to three days—and enter a state of suspension.

The Jailhouse is the most invisible room in the school. The ordinary visitor to the school would never even know that such a room exists. It is not a part of the tour on Back to School night. Few teachers ever go in there, and the few that do are there for only a few moments.

It was not easy for me to find the room, which appears to be part of the wall of the building on the ground level. The one door opens from the playground, but it is rarely ajar. A large window looks out on the playground; while occupants can see out, it is extremely hard to see in. This is why the room's existence, what goes on inside, the activities of its occupants remain obscure and forgotten by the other adults and children in the school.

The room itself is tiny, the small space entirely taken up by an adult desk and chair, a round table with child-sized chairs, and two children's desks, both facing the wall of the room. There are six children, all African American, five boys and one girl, the day that I spend observing in the room. The space feels crowded and is made suffocatingly warm by the morning sun streaming in through the window. Mr. Sobers says that sometimes he has as many as a dozen children in the room at a time and I wonder how they all fit in.

Mr. Sobers is in charge of the room. He presides over after-school detention as well as the in-house suspension. He is a tall African American man, with a poker face and a soft voice that is deep and quite gentle. I find out that he was a professional baseball player, a pitcher, until an injury forced him to stop playing. At first, he is extremely suspicious of me. All that I learn about his life and work I must discover slowly as he begins to feel less antagonistic about my project.

Our first meeting was difficult. He made me very uncomfortable. Later I learn from Faye that Sobers wasn't very pleased with my request to observe in the suspension room. He wonders if I am working for the district office. Certainly concerns about outsiders coming in and evaluating his job at a time of budget cuts must be on his mind; Faye's as well, or she probably would not have brought the matter up. In fact, none of the adults was all that easy about my presence at first.

Sobers was skeptical of the nature of my research: "So they want to categorize the kids now." His face tells me nothing of what he's thinking, but his tone reveals the depths of his disapproval.

I explain to him that I am trying to understand why the vast majority of children that he saw in after-school detention and suspension were black and male. He laughed a bitter laugh. "I'd like to know the answer to that question myself." Pause. Then, "When you find out the answer to that question, what are you going to do with it?" he wanted to know. "People are always coming and studying black people and it never once made things better around here."

I answer, carefully, because this is clearly a home run or strikeout moment, that I want to write something that would be not only meaningful to the people that I was writing about, but useful. In order to do this I wanted to draw on the knowledge of the community of people who worked with the children on a daily basis as well as talk to the boys themselves.

I must have at least connected with the ball creditably because when I finish explaining who I am and what I am up to, Sobers begins to stipulate the conditions under which I could observe in his room. "People have different ideas about discipline," he tells me,

and I don't want you coming in here and getting in the way of what I have to do. Don't come in and expect me to change my way of doing things. I come from the neighborhood, I know these kids and their families. I don't want someone leaning over my shoulder, observing me. That would make me very irritated.

I know without a doubt that Sobers is not a man that I would want to irritate and I am sure that the kids must sense this too. "Some days I'm going to be tense," he continues, "and not going to be as jovial as other times." I can't imagine what he would be like when jovial. He looks tough and pretty hard. But looking that way must certainly be the essential, though unwritten, requirement of his job description. I promise him that I will do none of the above but will help out with the kids—tutoring or just sitting quietly, whatever is needed. Later in the year, I asked Sobers if I could interview him. He refused me firmly. "Don't talk to me," he said.

I have no power in this school at all. I just do what I'm told. Talk to Mr. Russell [the vice principal]. Talk to Joyce [the principal]. Talk to the teachers. Ask *them* why 99 percent of the kids that they send to me are black. Talk to the men who went to school with me who live around here who don't have any jobs. You could learn something from them. Not from me.

We learn about each other in a series of short conversations. I discover that he grew up in the neighborhood and attended Rosa Parks School with a number of the parents of the very children who he has to deal with in detention and in-house suspension. He is divorced, has a

five-year-old daughter who lives with her mother and that he is so exhausted at the end of the school day that he goes home and falls asleep in front of the TV. I sense that he hates his job, but that it's reasonably secure. He also feels a commitment to the children of the neighborhood that he spends time with in his cramped room, day after day.

One of the things that I learn from Sobers is the importance of his mother in his life. "She's the one person I'm still afraid of. I knew that if I got in trouble that was it. She had the strongest backhand this side of the Mississippi. And you never knew when it was going to lash out and from where. The element of surprise was important. I give credit to her for what I am today."

Mothers and mothering in general, its present practice or as personal recollection, is an often-discussed topic in the ensemble of punishment rooms. In these discussions, mothers are key figures in the outcome of sons. The mothers of personal memories are credited with the successful attainment of manhood. The mothers of the boys who enter the room for punishment are blamed for their children's behavior.

Once I spend time in Sobers's domain, I realize that the minuscule size of the place, its physical layout, the nature of his job, and how this has structured his relationship with the children that he spends time with have provided concrete grounds for his stipulations to me. I can barely stand to spend the entire day in the room with Mr. Sobers and the six children who are there that day. The room is stuffy, airless, and we are all unceasingly in each other's presence. Unlike the classroom, unlike the Punishing Room upstairs, there is never a time or place for escaping surveillance through trips to the bathroom. There is no sociability, no relief from the boredom of schoolwork. The clichéd phrase, "Time seems to have stopped," becomes fresh with new meaning.

The timetable for the occupants of the room, both children and adults, for the punished and their keeper, is different than for the rest of the school. Our segregation from those who are good citizens is total. We have a recess and a lunch break, but at a different time than everyone else and for a much shorter period. We sit in the stifling room looking out at the playground wistfully. After the regular lunchtime is over, the children help clean tables in the cafeteria. This work is part of their punishment.

The children are supposed to do work assigned by their classroom teacher during suspension. On the day that I'm there, only one teacher

comes in to check on a student. Jewelle, the only girl, is reading *Roll of Thunder*, which she informs me is boring. She doesn't like reading at all, she tells me emphatically. She spends a lot of time looking at the wall until Sobers tells her to come over and read to him. Jewelle has been suspended for fighting.

Michael, a fourth-grade African American boy, is the only one who volunteers when Sobers asks if anyone would like Mrs. Ferguson to help them. He has a whole page of long division to do. He has spent the first half hour of our time in the room looking from the blank paper to the math book, the wall, at Jewelle, and back. He has avoided eye contact with me. I am glad to help him if only to have something to do.

It becomes clear that he doesn't yet understand the concept of "remainders." He knows his multiplication tables and he can add and subtract, so we go through four or five problems step by step. I do not have his full attention. It is easy to be distracted in such close quarters and he is paying more attention to one of the boys reading aloud for Sobers. Sobers spots Michael chewing gum and orders him to go and spit it out in the wastebasket. Grateful to get up and stretch, he makes much of the short journey across the room and spits the wad into the basket. When he returns, we work on a problem dividing packs of chewing gum among different numbers of kids.

Sobers spends a lot of time haranguing, urging, threatening the kids to get on with their work. The most he has to threaten with is that they will have a shorter playtime. But this is also punishing for him as well, as he must surely look forward to stretching his legs outside the room while they run around for a few minutes. One of the boys whom I interviewed, a frequent visitor to detention, tells me that he feels sorry for Mr. Sobers because he has to spend the whole day locked up with all the bad kids.

An even more severe form of punishment is suspension from school. Children can be suspended for up to five days. The state limits to twenty the total number of days a child can be suspended before a hearing is held. The hearing involves parents, school personnel, and representatives from the district office. The few boys who approached the twenty-day limit began to be given longer stints of in-house suspensions to avoid these hearings. One was sent home every day for half the day because "that's all we can take of him," the principal told me. The most drastic action the school can take is of course expulsion, though for a variety of reasons they avoid taking this course.

If the Punishing Room is indeed a place where children come to occupy a “free space” with less surveillance than in the classroom, then full suspension has the potential to be the freest space of all that children can win in a state of punishment. Significantly, it is, as far as school goes, the most invisible form. One of the younger boys described it to me as “lonely because you don’t have none of your friends. You watch TV.” It did not stop him however, on one of the days he was suspended, from circling the school on his bike throughout the school day, much to the disgust of the school staff and the interest of the other children. In general, there is little expectation that any schoolwork will be done on the part of the school, no monitoring procedures, and plenty of TV watching. Suspension also provides a “freeing up” space for the classroom teachers who have, for a short time anyway, gotten rid of some of the children they consider the most difficult students in the room.

Whenever a child has to stay for after-school detention or is being suspended, the student specialist calls their home. The moment when mother, sister, grandmother, and in rare cases, father, comes in to pick up a child or to have a conference about a child’s behavior is a traumatic one. Lamar’s aunt, called away from work, shouted threats all the way down the hall and out the front door. I hear, “You know better than to call me from work. You want me to lose my job. You *know* it’s going to be trouble now.” An older sister, bringing her own baby in a stroller, rebuked and exhorted Tyrone for his suspension when she came to pick him up. Tyrone had brought a “look-alike” gun to school—the kind of toy gun that can be purchased at any toy store—and had been caught. Having even a toy gun at school, I discovered then and there, was grounds for expulsion. The boy looks scared and pinched as he huddles beside his sister, waiting for the principal. The sister is saying to Tyrone over and over, “What is grandma going to do with you? She doing her damn best for you and look what you carrying on with. You want to kill her?”

The principal comes into the antechamber of the Punishing Room where we are sitting. She says that just a few weeks ago Tyrone had brought another toy gun to school and at that time she had talked to the district office and managed to get just a five-day suspension for him. This is the second time so she doesn’t know if she can do anything. She’ll have to call and see.

The principal is an Asian American woman who is always elegantly

dressed. She is unsmudged by childish hands and unwrinkled by events such as this. She has an unfriendly demeanor and a brisk manner. Sympathy is not one of her favorite expressions, and she doesn't show it now.

Tyrone looks bereft. The sister looks impassive but ready to hear the worst. She looks like she's only a few years older than Tyrone herself. She sits waiting with her young baby, Tyrone at her side. This is the day that I discover that a sixth-grader could be expelled from school. "What happens to him then? Where will he go? What will they do?" I ask Faye, who is looking grim. "Well, his family have to try and enroll him in a school in another district." In the end, Tyrone does not get expelled but is suspended for another five days at home.

Punishing Room as a Window

The Punishing Room is a window onto the disciplinary system of the school in which I am doing fieldwork, a lens through which to examine how the race/gender identities of preadolescent African American boys are constituted through punishment. It is a location from which to investigate the ways that contemporary discourses about black masculinity become authoritative resources for school adults in the construction of school identities of "bad" boys. The Punishing Room is also a site to explore how these boys negotiate individual identities and life histories in the collective experience of race/gender.

The disciplinary system comprises the physical spaces I have described, and the adults and children who come into them. It includes the rules, codes, rewards, and punishments prescribed by state laws, by custom, and by written and unwritten standards of social interaction. It embraces the manners and politeness that govern the relationships of adults and children. It is a key element backstage in the presentation of the educational process as a smoothly functioning machine. This view from inside gave me an insight into some of the more concealed, less presentable mechanisms and functions of schooling.

In the Punishing Room, school identities and reputations are constituted, negotiated, challenged, confirmed for African American youth in a process of categorization, reward and punishment, humiliation, and banishment. Children passing through the system are marked and categorized as they encounter state laws, school rules, tests and exams, psychological remedies, screening committees, penalties and punish-

ments, rewards and praise. Identities as worthy, hardworking, devious, or dangerous are proffered, assumed, or rejected.

The punishing system is supported by nothing less than the moral order of society—the prevailing ideology—which simultaneously produces and imposes a consensus about a broad spectrum of societal values, manners, presentation of self including style of dress, ways of standing, sitting, tone of voice, mode of eye contact, range of facial expressions. It is also assumed that the rules, codes, social relations, and behaviors adjudicated by a school's discipline system are about the transmission and enactment of a moral authority from adults, who are empowered to transmit and enact, to children, who are seen as lacking the essential values, social skills, and morality required of citizens. The state laws and the school rules that put them into effect are treated as if they are universal truths, blind and neutral to differences of class, race and gender among groups of children. They are part of our common-sense knowledge of young people: who they are and what they must be taught. Teachers and school administrators speak of discipline as the essential prior condition for any learning to take place.

However, adults and children, parents and relatives, teachers, custodians, and student specialists come into the Punishing Room as self-identified and identifiable members of different social categories of class, race, and gender. They bring with them theories, commonsense knowledge, readily available explanations, to give meaning to the everyday occurrences in these rooms. So, the Punishment Room is a focal point of intersecting and contradictory ideas of how and why so many African American boys are found in spaces like this one all across the nation. The dominant theory that I heard expressed was that the problem was one of dysfunctional families. This explanation is grounded in a gender discourse that identifies females, as mothers and as teachers, as “incompetent” or inadequate socializers of masculinity.

Notions of family, in general, come in as relatives are called up, called in, or more rarely, come on their own volition to challenge the school's assessments. They enter this classificatory system as a credit or a debit to the child. School adults call upon images, representations, beliefs about family to theorize away school dilemmas and difficulties in dealing with youth: troublesome children come from troubled or troublemaking families. School adults have families and family histories and bring in these concepts to inform the truths they hold about family in general.

Children bring parents, grandparents, and guardians into the room as they come for punishment. They come with the baggage of family knowledge and history, warnings, daily practices, family admonitions about how to handle oneself in the face of confrontations with authority. And they especially bring in all the mannerisms of speech, laughter, and emotional expressions that echo in the household.

Punishment practices are mapped on assumptions about “essential” differences. The apparent consensus underlying the discipline system is fractured by the racial and gender meanings of social relations and of power brought in by children and adults. For example, some adults in the school privately disagree with the changes in discipline and punishment procedures that have been made in the last decade. This disagreement crystallizes around claims that there are different racial styles in disciplining children, a “white” style and a “black” one, and that this difference affects the knowledge and expectations that adults and children bring to school. Several black teachers, for example, described the present mode at Rosa Parks School as representing a “white” style that was confusing to black children, who were used to more direct and clear-cut authority relations and practices in black households. A frequently cited example was that the white style disguises what are really commands in the form of suggestions or requests, thus causing black children to misinterpret the nature of the relationship with the consequence of getting in trouble.

School rules also seem to be specifically designed to control, manage, and channel the “natural” behavior of boys, who are said to be more physical, aggressive, sexual. Girls are believed to be more naturally agreeable, tractable, and able to tolerate the controlled atmosphere. Several adults and many of the boys I interviewed claimed that girls got off more lightly than boys under school rules; classroom structures and organization, it was argued, are more suited to girls. African American girls are expected to “get in trouble” in ways that damage their own life chances, rather than make trouble for others like the boys do.

There is the assumption that the gender of the adult authority figure and that of the child’s is important in shaping adult-child interactions in disciplinary moments. Men bring a certain authority to the interaction by virtue of what being male means in the world in general. It is not by chance that three of the four punishing jobs in the school are held by African American men (race relations are significant here as well), nor that these men have imposing physiques. Furthermore, the

male adult's interaction with girls is constrained and complicated by sexual overtones, making touching or contact between adult male and female child bodies suspect and dangerous. The chastising relationships between the two are therefore more likely to be at arm's length and verbal. On the other hand, male adults do not hesitate to grab boys by the shoulder, by ears, or to push and shove them in body contact.

Our construction of femininity from the earliest age as victimizable and requiring protection, as well as sexualized, makes body contact volatile, while for boys physicality and the active development of a defense system against encroachments from others becomes something admirable. Masculinity is constructed as the practice of power plays and brinkmanship. Boys are expected to learn how to take body contact in stride, to handle situations independently, and to not get ruffled by them.

For some of the boys, the route from the Punishment Room leads to another series of rooms where psychological counseling is offered in order to teach them "impulse control" and how to get along better with their peers. So troublemaking acts become transformed into "troubled" children, with pathological personalities and character flaws that must be documented and treated. This psychologization of "troublesome" behavior is linked with a discourse about the nature of the problem as an individual disorder rather than one that is social and systemic.

The punishment rooms are workplaces, reflecting a division of labor that draws on race and gender relations in the world outside the school in order to function effectively. The actual punishing work is experienced by the African American adults in conflicting and troublesome ways that directly involve their knowledge of the community they live and work in, their own life history, the conditions of their work, their feelings about what their job should be versus what it is, the pressures from the system to accomplish goals that may or may not conflict with their own image of the job. One of the systemic pressures making for more oppressive, punitive relations for African American children is the fear that white middle-class families will increasingly pull their children out of the public school and send them to private schools. Pressure is felt by the student specialist and "Jailhouse Keeper" to contain, suppress, and conceal damaging behavior that could contribute to the school's reputation as a hostile environment.

But the Punishing Room is not just a space in which identities are conferred and taken up by children, a field in which power is exercised

by the adults in authority. This is a place where children create another space for themselves in the school that is sociable. They reconstruct a more public, random set of associations where the separations and divisions orchestrated by the school do not always exist. This room is an escape from the pain of the classroom for many. It is a space where failure and success, wins and losses are fashioned out of the same events that spell trouble for the adults.