

chapter six

getting in trouble

*Well you asked me
what my definition
of a homie is
a friend till the end
which starts off
when you kids
little “gargechos” that are always into something
doing something bad
acting like they did nothing*

*Well here’s a little story
bout a homie named Frankie
had another little homie
that was down for hankie pankie
sorta like Spankie and Alfalfa
little rascals
doing what they do and getting away without a hassle
like going to the schoolyard
forging late pass to their class
cutting in lunchlines
leaving other students last
or strolling to the movies
to see a Rated R
when moms dropped them off
thought ET would be the star
still there was an issue
that just could not be ignored
taking tapes and forty-fives
from the local record stores
being good kids
to them was nothing but baloney
cos this is what you do when its you and your homies.*

—LIGHTER SHADE OF BROWN, “HOMIES”

Horace has that drained look in his eyes that is always there when he first emerges from the classroom at the end of the day. He moves as if there is just enough energy left to get him through the door and out of school. I see the identical look of stunned exhaustion on the faces of teachers, but I am not surprised to find the aftermath of a hard work-day on adult faces. It is unexpected, unsettling to recognize that same slow, defeated posture on a twelve-year-old boy.

Outside the classroom, Horace catches sight of the crowded hallway and his expression lightens. The corridor is choked with kids and adults moving eagerly toward the exits. Everyone, young and old, is in a rush to be outside, to get on with life. He breaks into a run, tossing his backpack playfully in the direction of another kid. I see his body shake loose as he bolts into the toilets in chase of another boy. Now there are shrieks, yells, roars coming from that room into which I, a female adult, cannot follow.

I tutor Horace in an after-school program once a week. He is one of the boys identified as a “troublemaker” by the school. His name had appeared on every list of the school adults whom I had asked to identify boys “getting in trouble” for me to interview. This is the boy described by one of the teachers as “on the fast track to the penitentiary,” whose name had become the norm among school adults against which other children could be ranked in terms of their tractability.

Horace shakes off a day in which there have been few rewards, intense surveillance, and the virtual eradication of all that he brings to school. He has been marginalized to ranks and spaces that are full of disgrace. What lessons does Horace learn about self and school as he journeys from classroom to Punishing Room to Jailhouse? How does he fashion selfhood within this context? What is the connection between this self-fashioning and getting in trouble?

In this chapter, we examine masculinity as a nexus of identification and self-fashioning during the school day, a ritualized source of articulating power, of making a name for oneself, of getting respect under conditions where the officially sanctioned paths to success are recognized as blocked. Masculinity, however, exists in a dynamic and structuring relationship with other coordinates of social identity: race and class. Therefore, in the discussion that follows I will elaborate on how gender acts are always and already modulated through race at the constitutive embodied level as well as that of the imaginary and representational.

Schoolwork

School is a workplace. This seems obvious for the adults who work there, from custodians and cafeteria workers to teachers and administrators. But school is also a workplace for children. Certainly what children do in school is characterized as “work” by both adults and kids.

I found many examples in the discipline records of the relationship between “work” and “trouble.” Children are described as “working hard” or as “refusing to work.”¹ One teacher had scribbled on the referral form, “He has refused to do any work today,” as the reason a boy was sent to the Punishing Room. In another case, the charge was that “he won’t do the work, won’t read, won’t write, sits and refuses.” Some children are characterized as “good workers,” while others defy the conditions of work, go on strike openly or use slowdown tactics through procrastination and escape avoidance. The work of school is compulsory labor: children must, by law, attend school. They have no control over the materials they work with, what they produce, the nature of the rewards for their exertions and performance.

I was interested in how the boys that I interviewed felt about schoolwork so I asked them to describe the school day. Both Schoolboys and Troublemakers characterized it as boring, uneventful, dull, a stretch of time in which you did nothing interesting. The following comment was a fairly typical answer: “Nothing happens—you go to classes and do your work.”

When I asked Eddie what was his least favorite part of the day, his answer was, “My teachers. Homework. And classwork, yeah, class. When you have to sit there and write and do nothing but listen.” Even Ricky, described as an “ideal” student by the teacher, was lukewarm, indifferent about schoolwork. Math was “the worst” and P.E. was his favorite part of the day because it was “fun.” Claude, one of a group of boys most marginalized by the school who was described by the principal as a “thug,” seemed most alienated from schoolwork. He flatly told

1. I was surprised to find that getting in trouble happened more frequently during work time or transitions back to work than during play and recreation periods of the school day. Interestingly enough, studies of juveniles have found that delinquent acts decline significantly when public schools are not in session, and that youth who leave school during the academic year are involved in fewer crimes than those who are currently enrolled. For example, see James W. Messerschmidt, *Masculinities and Crime: Critique and Reconceptualization of Theory* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1993), 87.

me, "School, I don't like school. Really, it's boring. No way. There isn't a single thing about school for me."

In their descriptions, both Troublemakers and Schoolboys presented a timetable of their movement from one set of tasks to another, from one space in school to another. They recalled the mechanics of work: getting books out, writing, listening to the teacher, reading aloud. But they generally found it difficult to come up with the substance of what they actually learned in classrooms, what or who they read or wrote about, for example. This is not surprising since the routine is indeed what the school emphasizes through sheer repetition as the most noteworthy aspect of the school day. Being in the right place at the right time and the physical acts of going about the tasks called for when you are there is the fundamental knowledge about work impressed on the children. The kids recognize this. They have registered that the timetable, the form, not the content of the curriculum, is the significant element in their education. In a context of extremely scarce rewards, this physical conformity is positively acknowledged by teachers with verbal recognition such as, "Everyone have their books out and open at page 6? Good." There is also a personal, sensuous reason for recollecting the daily agenda: the compartmentalization of activity into time and space and the motion from one to another gives a rhythm to the day, the change that breaks up the monotony of the routine.

My own experience as a participant observer in a classroom corroborated the description of the school day as one that was tedious, interminable, and deadening of any imaginative impulse or insight. My field notes, soon after I began observing in the sixth-grade room, record one afternoon when I found myself caught up in a collective effort to break out of the passive mold and do something active to keep myself awake. This spontaneous activity made clear to me that even the children who were most successful in the class had their own methods for helping to pass the time.

I catch the eye of Chris who I notice has made a clever paper gizmo that opens and closes in his hand displaying a little message which he flashes at me. I smile in acknowledgement of receipt. Chris is a white boy who is bussed in to the school. He is a good student, quiet and cooperative who tackles his work with the dedicated fortitude of someone who wants to get it done as quickly as possible

so that he can get on with something else. This something else is often a book from the class library which he escapes into. The gizmo, which I learn later is called a “cootie catcher,” looks simple enough so I begin to construct one with paper from my notebook as silently and surreptitiously as possible. I have to tear out a sheet of paper without making a loud crackling noise and call attention to myself. Carefully. Chris watches me encouragingly shaking his head as I make a wrong move and guiding me by partly undoing his own creation. As I signal back to him, my work completed, I notice that a few other kids in the room also have cootie catchers. They know what I am doing. We signal back and forth. It is a moment of thrilling complicity. I remember that we are supposed to be sitting listening to other children reading aloud about the Egyptians from the social science textbook. I have not registered a word in the last few minutes. Others are passing time differently. One girl is braiding the hair of one of the girls at her table; some children are openly daydreaming. Surely the teacher is aware of all these activities which she would certainly have stopped instantly earlier in the day. It seems that everybody knows that we are just passing time, waiting for the bell to ring. We are all tired, drowsy, bored, and ready to go home.

When the teacher signals that it is okay to pass time this way, that she will turn a blind eye, even conforming kids fool around. This play at work does not disrupt the routine; rather, it helps to make it more tolerable.

Note passing also helps to make the minutes go faster. It is about the need to communicate with others across a space in which communication is technically only allowed through the adult. Some children pass notes surreptitiously, discreetly. Occasionally a child decides to make the note passing public in order to make things happen by engineering the discovery of a note that will cause adult consternation and “finger” another kid. So Lonnie was banished to the Jailhouse for an entire day when he passed a scrap of paper with a penis drawn on it to a friend who looked at the contents and reacted in a way to draw attention to the communication.

Nothing, however, is as finely practiced an art as getting out of work at the same time as appearing to do it. This usually involves slowing down the pace of task completion to one that would make a snail

seem a speedster. Horace's teacher would often complain about his inability to follow instructions promptly; pointing out to me how long it took him to move from one task to another. Long after he has been told to get his book out and turn to a particular page, his head is still in his desk as he ostensibly searches for the book. Once it is out, he stares fixedly into space while the teacher asks him to turn to the page: "Everybody else already has it open in front of them. We're waiting."

One of the few periods of the day that the boys say they look forward to is recess. In contrast to class time, this is the interlude when kids have some control, though still limited and highly surveilled, over what they do and with whom. This is a moment when you can play games, socialize with friends, run around, shout, laugh, eat.²

Frequently, I noticed that Troublemakers engineered subversion as a way of exercising some command over the pattern of work and play during the day. Sometimes this involved prolonging recess through a trip to the Punishing Room. I saw this played out several times in a scenario where Boy Number One would be sent by the teacher to the Punishing Room, where he would tell a story that implicated Boy Number Two, and possibly Three and Four, in an action that happened during recess. So Boy Number One would be sent back to the classroom to bring the others in to tell their story. Trips up and down the hallway, peeking into rooms, making faces in passing, extended the length of time away from class. This was a con-game that worked from time to time.

A variation on this theme was using misbehavior to prolong an outing. So Horace and Lamond, who had behaved like model students on the field trip, on the way home ran ahead of the group in the last few blocks, scaled the school fence rather than going through the gate, and got sent to the office.

While schoolwork was described as boring and hard, getting in trouble was described as "easy" by the Troublemakers. Claude explained to me that it was "easier than staying good" for him. Within the field of power of school, trouble is the condition of being a child, while conformity takes work: "Somebody gets spotted and they just pick out that

2. McNeil reports that teachers who also labor under alienating work conditions and whose work has become increasingly routinized with the adoption of scientific management techniques of controlling children also look forward to recess. This is time when teachers have some modicum of free activity themselves. Linda M. McNeil, *Contradictions of Control: School Structure and School Knowledge* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986).

person,” was how he described it to me with a shrug. Like the other Troublemakers, he grounded his conclusion in his observation that troublesome behavior was not all that unusual an occurrence for a kid in school. Another of the boys told me,

Everybody gets in trouble sometimes. Laura [a white girl in the class who is a very good worker], even she gets in trouble sometimes. Everybody does. [Pauses to reflect for a moment.] Maybe Marsha and Simone [two other white girls], they barely get in trouble.

Under tedious, routinized conditions of work and learning, activities that risk trouble, even trouble itself, function to spice up the work-day and make time go faster through creative attempts to make things happen and disrupt the routine. This is one of the more obvious functions of trouble for, as I have pointed out, even the most conforming kids.

However, for African American children the conditions of schooling are not simply tedious; they are also replete with symbolical forms of violence. Troublemakers are conscious of the fact that school adults have labeled them as problems, social and educational misfits; that what they bring from home and neighborhood—family structure and history, forms of verbal and nonverbal expression, neighborhood lore and experiences—has little or even deficit value. The convergence of the routine with the harsh, exclusionary ambience of school calls forth a more intensive mode of identity work. My concern now is to home in on this work through an examination of the relationship between trouble and masculinity; of the specific circular relationship between risky, rule-breaking behavior, getting in trouble, and the experience of being and becoming male. Making a name for yourself through identity work and self-performance, even if the consequence is punishment, becomes a highly charged necessity given the conditions of school for the Troublemakers.

Making a Name for Yourself: Transgressive Acts and Gender Performance

Though girls as well as boys infringe the rules, the overwhelming majority of violations in every single category, from misbehavior to

obscenity, are by males. In a disturbing tautology, transgressive behavior is that which constitutes masculinity. Consequently, African American males in the very act of identification, of signifying masculinity, are likely to be breaking rules.

I use the concept of sex/gender not to denote the existence of a stable, unitary category that reflects the presence of fundamental, natural biological difference, but as a socially constructed category whose form and meaning varies culturally and historically. We come to know ourselves and to recognize others as of a different sex through an overdetermined complex process inherent in every sphere of social life at the ideological and discursive level, through social structures and institutional arrangements, as well as through the micropolitics of social interactions.³ We take sex difference for granted, as a natural form of difference as we look for it, recognize it, celebrate it; this very repetition of the “fact” of difference produces and confirms its existence. Indeed, assuming sex/gender difference and identifying as one or the other gender is a precursor of being culturally recognizable as “human.”

While all these modes of constituting gender as difference were palpable in the kids’ world, in the following analysis of sex/gender as a heightened and highly charged resource for self-fashioning and making a name for oneself, the phenomenological approach developed by ethnomethodologists and by poststructuralist feminist Judith Butler is the most productive one to build on. Here gender is conceptualized as something we do in a performance that is both individually and socially meaningful. We signal our gender identification through an ongoing performance of normative acts that are ritually specific, drawing on

3. Here are a very few examples of the enormous body of work concerned with the production of gender differences in the last two decades. At the ideological and discursive level see Mullings, “Images, Ideology”; Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); and Michele Barrett, *Women’s Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis* (London: New Left Books, 1980). For processes of social structure and institutional arrangements see R. W. Connell et al., *Making the Difference: Schools, Families, and Social Division* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1982); Mariarosa Dalla Costa, “Women and the Subversion of the Community,” in *The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community*, ed. Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James (Bristol, England: Falling Wall Press, 1973); Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987). For micropolitics see Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home* (New York: Viking, 1989); Donna Eder, Catherine Colleen Evans, and Stephen Parker, *School Talk: Gender and Adolescent Culture* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995); and Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, “Doing Gender,” *Gender and Society* 1, no. 2 (1987).

well-worked-over, sociohistorical scripts and easily recognizable scenarios.⁴

Butler's emphasis on the coerced and coercive nature of these performances is especially useful. Her work points out that the enactment of sex difference is neither voluntary nor arbitrary in form but is a compulsory requirement of social life. Gender acts follow sociohistorical scripts that are policed through the exercise of repression and taboo. The consequences of an inadequate or bad performance are significant, ranging from ostracism and stigmatization to imprisonment and death. What I want to emphasize in the discussion that follows are the rewards that attach to this playing out of roles; for males, the enactment of masculinity is also a thoroughly embodied display of physical and social power.

Identification as masculine through gender acts, within this framework, is not simply a matter of imitation or modeling, but is better understood as a highly strategic attachment to a social category that has political effects. This attachment involves narratives of the self and of Other, constructed within and through fantasy and imagination, as well as through repetitious, referential acts. The performance signals the individual as socially connected, embedded in a collective membership that always references relations of power.

African American boys at Rosa Parks School use three key constitutive strategies of masculinity in the embrace of the masculine "we" as a mode of self-expression. These strategies speak to and about power. The first is that of heterosexual power, always marked as male. Alain's graffiti become the centerpiece of this discussion. The second involves classroom performances that engage and disrupt the normal direction of the flow of power. The third strategy involves practices of "fighting." All three invoke a "process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms," in doing gender; constitute masculinity as a natural, essential corporeal style; and involve imaginary, fantasmatic identifications.⁵

These three strategies often lead to trouble, but by engaging them a boy can also make a name for himself as a real boy, the Good Bad Boy of a national fantasy. All three illustrate and underline the

4. Judith Butler. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988).

5. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 95.

way that normative male practices take on a different, more sinister inflection when carried out by African American boys. Race makes a significant difference both in the form of the performance as well as its meaning for the audience of adult authority figures and children for whom it is played.

Heterosexual Power: Alain's Graffiti

One group of transgressions specifically involves behavior that expresses sexual curiosity and attraction. These offenses are designated as "personal violations" and given more serious punishment. Inscribed in these interactions are social meanings about relations of power between the sexes as well as assumptions about male and female difference at the level of the physical and biological as well as the representational. It is assumed that females are sexually passive, unlikely to be initiators of sexual passes, while males are naturally active sexual actors with strong sexual drives. Another assumption is that the feminine is a contaminated, stigmatizing category in the sex/gender hierarchy.

Typically, personal violations involved physical touching of a heterosexual nature where males were the "perpetrators" and females the "victims." A few examples from the school files remind us of some of the "normal" displays of sexual interest at this age.

- Boy was cited with "chasing a girl down the hall" [punishment: two days in the Jailhouse].
- Boy pulled a female classmate's pants down during recess [punishment: one and a half days in the Jailhouse].
- Boy got in trouble for, "touching girl on private parts. She did not like" [punishment: a day in the Jailhouse].
- Boy was cited for "forcing girl's hand between his legs" [punishment: two and a half days in the Jailhouse].

In one highly revealing case, a male was cast as the "victim" when he was verbally assaulted by another boy who called him a girl. The teacher described the "insult" and her response to it on the referral form in these words:

During the lesson, Jonas called Ahmed a girl and said he wasn't staying after school for detention because "S" [another boy] had

done the same thing. Since that didn't make it ok for anyone to speak this way I am requesting an hour of detention for Jonas. I have no knowledge of "S" saying so in my presence.

This form of insult is not unusual. When boys want to show supreme contempt for another boy they call him a girl or liken his behavior to female behavior. What is more troubling is that adults capitulate in this stigmatization. The female teacher takes for granted that a comment in which a boy is called a girl is a symbolic attack, sufficiently derogatory to merit punishment. All the participants in the classroom exchange witness the uncritical acknowledgment of adult authority to a gender order of female debasement.

Of course, this is not news to them. Boys and girls understand the meaning of being male and being female in the field of power; the binary opposition of male/female is always one that expresses a norm, maleness, and its constitutive outside, femaleness. In a conversation with a group of boys, one of them asserted and then was supported by others that "a boy can be a girl, but a girl can never be a boy." Boys can be teased, controlled, punished by being accused of being "a girl." A boy faces the degradation of "being sissified," being unmanned, transferred to the degraded category of female. Girls can be teased about being a tomboy. But this is not the same. To take on qualities of being male is the access to and performance of power. So females must now fashion themselves in terms of male qualities to partake of that power. Enactments of masculinity signal value, superiority, power.

Let us return to Alain, the eleven-year-old boy who while cooling off and writing lines as a punishment in the antechamber of the Punishing Room, writes on the table in front of him: "Write 20 times. I will stop fucking 10 cent teachers and this five cent class. Fuck you. Ho! Ho! Yes Baby." Alain's message can be read in a number of ways. The most obvious way is the one of the school. A child has broken several rules in one fell swoop and must be punished: he has written on school property (punishable); he has used an obscenity (punishable); he has committed an especially defiant and disrespectful act because he is already in the Punishing Room and therefore knows his message is likely to be read (punishable). Alain is sent home both as a signal to him and to the other witnesses as well as to the students and adults who will hear it through the school grapevine that he cannot get away with such flagrant misbehavior.

An alternative reading looks at the content of the message itself and the form that Alain's anger takes at being sent to the Punishing Room. Alain's anger is being vented against his teacher and the school itself, expressing his rejection, his disidentification with school that he devalues as monetarily virtually worthless. His message expresses his anger through an assertion of sexual power—to fuck or not to fuck—one sure way that a male can conjure up the fantasmatic as well as the physical specter of domination over a female of any age. His assertion of this power mocks the authority of the teacher to give him orders to write lines. His use of “baby” reverses the relations of power, teacher to pupil, adult to child; Alain allies himself through and with power as the school/teacher becomes “female,” positioned as a sex object, as powerless, passive, infantilized. He positions himself as powerful through identification with and as the embodiment of male power as he disidentifies with school. At this moment, Alain is not just a child, a young boy, but taking the position of “male” as a strategic resource for enacting power, for being powerful. At the same time, this positioning draws the admiring, titillated attention of his peers.

These moments of sex trouble exemplify some of the aspects of the performance of sex/gender difference that is naturalized through what is deemed punishable as well as punishment practices. Judging from the discipline records, girls do not commit sexual violations. It is as if by their very nature they are incapable. To be female is to be powerless, victimizable, chased down the hallway, an object to be acted upon with force, whose hand can be seized and placed between male legs. To be female is also to be sexually passive, coy, the “chaste” rather than the chaser, in relation to male sexual aggressiveness. In reality, I observed girls who chased boys and who interacted with them physically. Girls, in fact, did “pants” boys, but these acts went unreported by the boys. For them to report and therefore risk appearing to be victimized by a girl publicly would be a humiliating outcome that would only undermine their masculinity. In the production of natural difference, boys' performances work as they confirm that they are active pursuers, highly sexualized actors who must be punished to learn to keep their burgeoning sexuality under control. There is a reward for the behavior even if it may be punished as a violation. In the case of African American boys, sex trouble is treated as egregious conduct.

African American males have historically been constructed as hypersexualized within the national imagination. Compounding this is

the process of the adultification of their behavior. Intimations of sexuality on their part, especially when directed toward girls who are bused in—white girls from middle-class families—are dealt with as grave transgressions with serious consequences.

Power Reversals: Class Acts

Performance is a routine part of classroom work. Students are called upon to perform in classes by teachers to show off their prowess or demonstrate their ineptitude or lack of preparation. They are required to read passages aloud, for example, before a highly critical audience of their peers. This display is teacher initiated and reflects the official curricula; they are command performances with well-scripted roles, predictable in the outcome of who has and gets respect, who is in control, who succeeds, who fails.

Another kind of performance is the spontaneous outbreaks initiated by the pupils generally defined under the category of “disruption” by the school. These encompass a variety of actions that punctuate and disrupt the order of the day. During the school year about two-thirds of these violations were initiated by boys and a third by girls. Here are some examples from the discipline files of girls being “disruptive”:

- Disruptive in class—laughing, provoking others to join her. Purposely writing wrong answers, being very sassy, demanding everyone’s attention.
- Constantly talking; interrupting; crumpling paper after paper; loud.

Some examples of boys’ disruption:

- Constant noise, indian whoops, face hiccups, rapping.
- Chanting during quiet time—didn’t clean up during art [punishment: detention].
- Joking, shouting out, uncooperative, disruptive during lesson.

From the perspective of kids, what the school characterizes as “disruption” on the referral slips is often a form of performance of the self: comedy, drama, melodrama become moments for self-expression and display. Disruption adds some lively spice to the school day; it injects

laughter, drama, excitement, a delicious unpredictability to the classroom routine through spontaneous, improvisational outbursts that add flavor to the bland events.

In spite of its improvisational appearance, most performance is highly ritualized with its own script, timing, and roles. Teachers as well as students engage in the ritual and play their parts. Some kids are regular star performers. Other kids are audience. However, when a substitute is in charge of the class and the risk of being marked as a troublemaker is minimal, even the most timid kids “act up.” These rituals circulate important extracurricular knowledge about relations of power.

These dramatic moments are sites for the presentation of a potent masculine presence in the classroom. The Good Bad Boy of our expectations engages power, takes risks, makes the class laugh, and the teacher smile. Performances mark boundaries of “essential difference”—risk taking, brinkmanship. The open and public defiance of the teacher in order to get a laugh, make things happen, take center stage, be admired, is a resource for doing masculinity.

These acts are especially meaningful for those children who have already been marginalized as outside of the community of “good,” hardworking students. For the boys already labeled as troublemakers, taking control of the spotlight and turning it on oneself so that one can shine, highlights, for a change, one’s strengths and talents. Already caught in the limelight, these kids put on a stirring performance.

Reggie, one of the Troublemakers, prides himself on being witty and sharp, a talented performer. He aspires to two careers: one is becoming a Supreme Court justice, the other an actor. He had recently played the role of Caliban in the school production of *The Tempest* that he described excitedly to me:

I always try to get the main character in the story ’cause I might turn out to be an actor because I’m really good at acting and I’ve already did some acting. Shakespeare! See I got a good part. I was Caliban. I had to wear the black suit. Black pants and top. Caliban was a beast! In the little picture that we saw, he looks like the . . . the. . . [searching for image] the beast of Notre Dame. The one that rings the bells like *fing! fing! fing!*

Here is one official school activity where Reggie gets to show off something that he is “good at.” He is also proud to point out that this

is not just a role in any play, but one in a play by Shakespeare. Here his own reward, which is not just doing something that he is good at, but doing it publicly so that he can receive the attention and respect of adults and peers, coincides with the school's educational agenda of creating an interest in Shakespeare among children.

Reggie also plays for an audience in the classroom, where he gets in trouble for disruption. He describes one of the moments for me embellished with a comic imitation of the teacher's female voice and his own swaggering demeanor as he tells the story:

The teacher says [he mimics a high-pitched fussy voice], "You not the teacher of this class." And then I say [adopts a sprightly cheeky tone], "Oh, yes I am." Then she say, "No, you're not, and if you got a problem, you can just leave." I say, "Okay" and leave.

This performance, like others I witnessed, are strategies for positioning oneself in the center of the room in a face-off with the teacher, the most powerful person up to that moment. Fundamental to the performance is engagement with power; authority is teased, challenged, even occasionally toppled from its secure heights for brief moments. Children-generated theatrics allow the teasing challenge of adult power that can expose its chinks and weaknesses. The staged moments heighten tension, test limits, vent emotions, perform acts of courage. For Reggie to have capitulated to the teacher's ultimatum would have been to lose what he perceives as the edge in the struggle. In addition, he has won his escape from the classroom.

Horace describes his challenge to the teacher's authority in a summer school math class:

Just before the end of the period he wrote some of our names on the board and said, "Whoever taught these students when they were young must have been dumb." So I said, "Oh, I didn't remember that was you teaching me in the first grade." Everyone in the room cracked up. I was laughing so hard, I was on the floor. He sent me to the office.

Horace is engaging the teacher in a verbal exchange with a comeback to an insult rather than just passively taking it. In this riposte, Horace not only makes his peers laugh at the teacher, but he also

defuses the insult through a quick reversal. The audience in the room, raised on TV sitcom repartee and canned laughter, is hard to impress, so the wisecrack, the rejoinder, must be swift and sharp. Not everyone can get a laugh at the teacher's expense, and to be topped by the teacher would be humiliating; success brings acknowledgment, confirmation, applause from one's peers. For Horace, this is a success story, a moment of gratification in a day that brings few his way.

The tone of the engagement with power and the identity of the actor is highly consequential in terms of whether a performance is overlooked by the teacher or becomes the object of punishment. In a study of a Texas high school, Foley documents similar speech performances.⁶ He describes how both teacher and students collaborate to devise classroom rituals and "games" to help pass the time given the context of routinized, alienating classroom work. He observes that upper-middle-class male Anglo students derail boring lessons by manipulating teachers through subtle "making out" games without getting in trouble. In contrast, low-income male Hispanic students, who were more likely to challenge teachers openly in these games, were punished. Foley concluded that one of the important lessons learned by all participants in these ritual games was that the subtle manipulation of authority was a much more effective way of getting your way than openly confronting power.

Style becomes a decisive factor in who gets in trouble. I am reminded of comments made by one of the student specialists at Rosa Parks who explained the high rate of black kids getting in trouble by remarking on their different style of rule breaking: "The white kids are sneaky, black kids are more open."

So why are the black kids "more open" in their confrontations with power? Why not be really "smart" and adopt a style of masculinity that allows them to engage in these rituals that spice the school day and help pass time, but carry less risk of trouble because it is within certain mutually understood limits?

These rituals are not merely a way to pass time, but are also a site for constituting a gendered racial subjectivity. For African American boys, the performance of masculinity invokes cultural conventions of speech performance that draws on a black repertoire. Verbal performance is an important medium for black males to establish a reputa-

6. Douglas E. Foley, *Learning Capitalist Culture: Deep in the Heart of Texas* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1990).

tion, make a name for yourself, and achieve status.⁷ Smitherman points out that black talk in general is

a functional dynamic that is simultaneously a mechanism for learning about life and the world and a vehicle for achieving group recognition. Even in what appears to be only casual conversation, whoever speaks is highly conscious of the fact that his personality is on exhibit and his status at stake.⁸

Oral performance has a special significance in black culture for the expression of masculinity. Harper points out that verbal performance functions as an identifying marker for masculinity only when it is delivered in the vernacular and that “a too-evident facility in white idiom can quickly identify one as a white-identified uncle Tom who must also be therefore weak, effeminate, and probably a fag.”⁹ Though the speech performances that I witnessed were not always delivered in the strict vernacular, the nonverbal, bodily component accompanying it was always delivered in a manner that was the flashy, boldly flamboyant popular style essential to a good performance. The body language and spoken idiom openly engage power in a provocative competitive way. To be indirect, “sly,” would not be performing masculinity.

This nonstandard mode of self-representation epitomizes the very form the school seeks to exclude and eradicate. It is a masculine enactment of defiance played in a black key that is bound for punishment. Moreover, the process of adultification translates the encounter from a simple verbal clash with an impertinent child into one interpreted as an intimidating threat.

Though few white girls in the school were referred to the office for disruptive behavior, a significant number of African American girls staged performances, talked back to teachers, challenged authority, and were punished. But there was a difference with the cultural framing of their enactments and those of the boys. The bottom line of Horace’s

7. Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin: Language of Black America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1977); Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Philip Brian Harper, *Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Keith Gilyard, *Voices of the Self: A Study of Language Competence* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991).

8. Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin*, 80.

9. Harper, *Are We Not Men?* 11.

story was that “everyone in the room cracked up.” He engaged authority through a self-produced public spectacle with an eye for an audience that is at home with the cultural icon of the Good Bad Boy as well as the “real black man.” Boys expect to get attention. Girls vie for attention too, but it is perceived as illegitimate behavior. As the teacher described it in the referral form, the girl is “demanding attention.” The prevailing cultural framework denies her the rights for dramatic public display.

Male and female classroom performance is different in another respect. Girls are not rewarded with the same kind of applause or recognition by peers or by teachers. Their performance is sidelined; it is not given center stage. Teachers are more likely to “turn a blind eye” to such a display rather than call attention to it, for girls are seen as individuals who operate in cliques at most and are unlikely to foment insurrection in the room. Neither the moral nor the pragmatic principle prods teachers to take action. The behavior is not taken seriously; it is rated as “sassy” rather than symptomatic of a more dangerous disorder. In some classrooms, in fact, risk taking and “feistiness” on the part of girls is subtly encouraged given the prevailing belief that what they need is to become more visible, more assertive in the classroom. The notion is that signs of self-assertion on their part should be encouraged rather than squelched.

Disruptive acts have a complex, multifaceted set of meanings for the male Troublemakers themselves. Performance as an expression of black masculinity is a production of a powerful, subjectivity to be reckoned with, to be applauded; respect and ovation are in a context where none is forthcoming. The boys’ anger and frustration as well as fear motivate the challenge to authority. Troublemakers act and speak out as stigmatized outsiders.

Ritual Performances of Masculinity: Fighting

Each year a substantial number of kids at Rosa Parks get into trouble for fighting. It is the most frequent offense for which they are referred to the Punishing Room. Significantly, the vast majority of the offenders are African American males.¹⁰

10. One-quarter of the 1,252 referrals to the Punishing Room were for fighting; four-fifths of the incidents involved boys, nine out of ten of whom were African Americans. All except three of the girls who were in fights were black.

The school has an official position on fighting: it is the wrong way to handle any situation, at any time, no matter what. Schools have good reasons for banning fights: kids can get hurt and when fights happen they sully the atmosphere of order, making the school seem like a place of danger, of violence.

The prescribed routine for schoolchildren to handle situations that might turn into a fight is to tell an adult who is then supposed to take care of the problem. This routine ignores the unofficial masculine code that if someone hits you, you should solve the problem yourself rather than showing weakness and calling an adult to intervene. However, it is expected that girls with a problem will seek out an adult for assistance. Girls are assumed to be physically weaker, less aggressive, more vulnerable, more needy of self-protection; they must attach themselves to adult (or male) power to survive. This normative gender distinction, in how to handle both problems of a sexual nature and physical aggression, operates as a “proof” of a physical and dispositional gender nature rather than behavior produced through discourses and practices that constitute sex difference.

Referrals of males to the Punishing Room, therefore, are cases where the unofficial masculine code for problem resolution has prevailed. Telling an adult is anathema to these youth. According to their own codes, the act of “telling” is dangerous for a number of reasons. The most practical of these sees it as a statement to the “whole world” that you are unable to deal with a situation on your own—to take care of yourself—an admission that can have disastrous ramifications when adult authority is absent. This is evident from the stance of a Troublemaker who questions the practical application of the official code by invoking knowledge of the proper male response when one is “attacked” that is shared with the male student specialist charged with enforcing the regulation: “I said, ‘Mr. B., if somebody came up and hit you, what would you do?’ ‘Well,’ he says, ‘We’re not talking about me right now, see.’ That’s the kind of attitude they have. It’s all like on you.”

Another reason mentioned by boys for not relying on a teacher to take care of a fight situation is that adults are not seen as having any real power to effectively change the relations among kids:

If someone keep messing with you, like if someone just keep on and you tell them to leave you alone, then you tell the teacher. The

teacher can't do anything about it because, see, she can't hit you or nothing. Only thing she can do is tell them to stop. But then he keep on doing it. You have no choice but to hit 'em. You already told him once to stop.

This belief extends to a distrust of authority figures by these young offenders. The assumption that all the children see authority figures such as teachers, police, psychologists as acting on their behalf and trust they will act fairly may be true of middle- and upper-class children brought up to expect protection from authority figures in society. This is not the case with many of the children at the school. Their mistrust of authority is rooted in the historical and locally grounded knowledge of power relations that come from living in a largely black and impoverished neighborhood.

Fighting becomes, therefore, a powerful spectacle through which to explore trouble as a site for the construction of manhood. The practice takes place along a continuum that ranges from play—spontaneous outbreaks of pummeling and wrestling in fun, ritualistic play that shows off “cool” moves seen on video games, on TV, or in movies—to serious, angry socking, punching, fistfighting. A description of some of these activities and an analysis of what they mean provides the opportunity for us to delve under the surface of the ritualized, discrete acts that make up a socially recognizable fight event into the psychic, emotional, sensuous aspects of gender performativity. The circular, interactive flow between fantasmatic images, internal psychological processes, and physical acts suggest the dynamics of attachment of masculine identification.

Fighting is one of the social practices that add tension, drama, and spice to the routine of the school day. Pushing, grabbing, shoving, kicking, karate chopping, wrestling, fistfighting engage the body and the mind. Fighting is about play and games, about anger, and pain, about hurt feelings, about “messing around.” To the spectator, a fight can look like serious combat, yet when the combatants are separated by an adult, they claim, “We were only playing.” In fact, a single fight event can move along the continuum from play to serious blows in a matter of seconds. As one of the boys explained, “You get hurt and you lose your temper.”

Fighting is typically treated as synonymous with “aggression” or “violence,” terms that already encode the moral, definitional frame that

obscures the contradictory ways that the practice, in all its manifestations, is used in our society. We, as good citizens, can distance ourselves from aggressive and violent behavior. "Violence" as discourse constructs "fighting" as pathological, symptomatic of asocial, dangerous tendencies, even though the practice of "fighting" and the discourses that constitute this practice as "normal," are in fact taken for granted as ritualized resources for "doing" masculinity in the contemporary United States.

The word *fighting* encompasses the "normal" as well as the pathological. It allows the range of meanings that the children, specifically the boys whom I interviewed and observed, as well as some of the girls, bring to the practice. One experience that it is open to is the sensuous, highly charged embodied experience before, during, and after fighting; the elating experience of "losing oneself" that I heard described in fight stories.

War Stories

I began thinking about fights soon after I started interviews with the Troublemakers and heard "fight stories." Unlike the impoverished and reluctantly told accounts of the school day, these stories were vivid, elaborate descriptions of bodies, mental states, and turbulent emotional feelings. They were stirring, memorable moments in the tedious school routine.

Horace described a fight with an older boy who had kept picking on him. He told me about the incident as he was explaining how he had broken a finger one day when we were trading "broken bones" stories.

When I broke this finger right here it really hurt. I hit somebody in the face. It was Charles. I hit him in the face. You know the cafeteria and how you walk down to go to the cafeteria. Right there. That's where it happened. Charles picked me up and put me on the wall, slapped me on the wall, and dropped me. It hurt. It hurt bad. I got mad because he used to be messing with me for a long time so I just swung as hard as I could, closed my eyes, and just *pow*, hit him in the face. But I did like a roundhouse swing instead of doing it straight and it got the index finger of my right hand. So it was right there, started right here, and all around this part [he is

showing me the back of his hand] it hurt. It was swollen. Oooh! It was like this! But Charles, he got hurt too. The next day I came to school I had a cast on my finger and he had a bandage on his ear. It was kinda funny, we just looked at each other and smiled.

The thing that most surprised and intrigued me about Horace's story was that he specifically recalled seeing Charles the next day and that they had looked at each other and smiled. Was this a glance of recognition, of humor, of recollection of something pleasing, of all those things? The memory of the exchanged smile derailed my initial assumption that fighting was purely instrumental. This original formulation said that boys fight because they have to fight in order to protect themselves from getting beaten up on the playground. Fighting from this instrumental perspective is a purely survival practice. Boys do fight to stave off the need to fight in the future; to stop the harassment from other boys on the playground and in the streets. However, this explains only a small group of boys who live in certain environments; it relegates fighting to the realm of the poor, the deviant, the delinquent, the pathological. This position fails to address these physical clashes as the central normative practice in the preparation of bodies, of mental stances, of self-reference for manhood and as the most effective form of conflict resolution in the realm of popular culture and international relations.

I listened closely to the stories to try to make sense of behavior that was so outside of my own experience, yet so familiar a part of the landscape of physical fear and vulnerability that I as a female walked around with every day. I asked school adults about their own memories of school and fighting. I was not surprised to find that few women seemed to recall physical fights at school, though they had many stories of boys who teased them or girlfriends whom they were always "fighting" with. This resonated with my own experience. I was struck, however, by the fact that all of the men whom I talked to had had to position themselves in some way with regard to fighting. I was also struck that several of these men framed the memory of fighting in their past as a significant learning experience.

Male adults in school recall fighting themselves, but in the context both of school rules and of hindsight argue that they now know better. One of the student specialists admitted that he used to fight a lot. I found it significant that he saw "fighting" as the way he "learned":

I used to fight a lot. [Pause.] I used to fight a lot and I used to be real stubborn and silent. I wouldn't say anything to anybody. It would cause me a lot of problems, but that's just the way I learned.

The after-school martial arts instructor also admitted to fighting a lot when he was younger:

There were so many that I had as a kid that it's hard to remember all of them and how they worked out. But yes, I did have a lot of arguments and fights. A lot of times I would lose my temper, which is what kids normally do, they lose their temper, and before they have a chance to work things out they begin punching and kicking each other. Right? Well I did a lot of those things so I know from experience those are not the best thing to do.

As I explored the meaning of fighting I began to wonder how I, as female, had come to be shaped so fighting was not a part of my own corporeal or mental repertoire. A conversation with my brother reminded me of a long forgotten self that could fight, physically, ruthlessly, inflict hurt, cause tears. "We were always fighting," he recalled. "You used to beat me up." Memories of these encounters came back. I am standing with a tuft of my brother's hair in my hand, furious tears in my eyes. Full of hate for him. Kicking, scratching, socking, feeling no pain. Where had this physical power gone? I became "ladylike" repressing my anger, limiting my physical contact to shows of affection, fearful. I wondered about the meaning of being female in a society in which to be female is to be always conscious of men's physical power and to consciously chart one's everyday routines to avoid becoming a victim of this power, but to never learn the bodily and mental pleasure of fighting back.

Bodily Preparations: Pain and Pleasure

Fighting is first and foremost a bodily practice. I think about fighting and physical closeness as I stand observing the playground at recess noticing a group of three boys, bodies entangled, arms and legs flailing. In another area, two boys are standing locked closely in a wrestling embrace. Children seem to gravitate toward physical contact with each other. For boys, a close, enraptured body contact is only legitimate

when they are positioned as in a fight. It is shocking that this bodily closeness between boys would be frowned on, discouraged if it were read as affection. Even boys who never get in trouble for “fighting” can be seen engaging each other through the posturing and miming, the grappling of playfight encounters.

This play can lead to “real” fights. The thin line between play and anger is crossed as bodies become vulnerable, hurt, and tempers are lost. One of the white boys in the school who was in trouble for fighting describes the progression this way:

Well we were messing with each other and when it went too far, he started hitting me and then I hit him back and then it just got into a fight. It was sorta like a game between me, him and Thomas. How I would get on Thomas’s back an—he’s a big guy—and Stephen would try to hit me and I would wanta hit him back. So when Thomas left it sorta continued and I forgot which one of us wanted to stop—but one of us wanted to stop and the other one wouldn’t.

Fighting is about testing and proving your bodily power over another person, both to yourself and to others through the ability to “hurt” someone as well as to experience “hurt.”

HORACE: You know Claude. He’s a bad boy in the school. When I was in the fifth grade, he was in the fifth grade. I intercepted his pass and he threw the ball at my head and then I said, “You’re mad,” and I twisted the ball on the floor. I said, “Watch this,” and y’know spiraled it on the floor, and he kicked it and it hit my leg, and I said, “Claude, if you hit me one more time with the ball or anything I’m going to hurt you.” He said, “What if you do?” I said, “Okay, you expect me not to do anything, right?” He said, “Nope.” Then I just *pou, pou, pou*, and I got him on the floor and then I got him on his back. I wanted to hurt him badly but I couldn’t.

ANN: Why couldn’t you?

HORACE: I didn’t want to get in trouble. And if I did really hurt him it wouldn’t prove anything anyway. But it did. It proved that I could hurt him and he didn’t mess with me anymore.

Pain is an integral part of fighting. Sometimes it is the reason for lashing out in anger. This description by Wendell also captures the loss of self-control experienced at the moment of the fight:

Sometimes it starts by capping or by somebody slams you down or somebody throws a bullet at you. You know what a bullet is, don't you? [He chuckles delightedly because I think of a bullet from a gun.] The bullet I am talking about is a football! You throw it with all your might and it hits somebody. It just very fast and they call it bullets. You off-guard and they throw it at your head, and bullets they throw with all their might so it hurts. Then that sorta gets you all pissed off. Then what happens is, you kinda like, "Why you threw it?" "'Cause I wanted to. Like, so?" "So you not going to do that to me." Then: "So you going to do something about it?" Real smart. "Yeah!" And then you tap the person on the shoulder and your mind goes black and then *shweeeee* [a noise and hand signal that demonstrates the evaporation of thought] you go at it. And you don't stop until the teacher comes and stops it.

Fighting is a mechanism for preparing masculinized bodies through the playful exercise of bodily moves and postures and the routinized rehearsal of sequences and chains of stances of readiness, attack, and defense. Here it is crucial to emphasize that while many boys in the school never ever engage in an actual physical fight with another boy or girl during school hours, the majority engage in some form of body enactments of fantasized "fight" scenarios. They have observed boys and men on TV, in the movies, in video games, on the street, in the playground adopting these stances.

These drills simultaneously prepare and cultivate the mental states in which corporeal styles are grounded. So for instance, boys are initiated into the protocol of enduring physical pain and mental anguish—"like a man"—through early and small infusions of the toxic substance itself in play fights. The practice of fighting is the site for a hot-wiring together of physical pain and pleasure, as components of masculinity as play and bodily hurt inevitably coincide.

Consequently, it also engages powerful emotions. Lindsey described the feelings he experienced prior to getting into a fight:

Sometimes it's play. And sometimes it's real. But that's only sometimes, because they can just suddenly make you angry and then, it's like they take control of your mind. Like they manipulate your mind if you angry. Little by little you just lose it and you get in a temper.

One of the white boys in the school who had gotten in trouble for fighting described his thoughts and feelings preceding a fight and the moment of "just going black" in a loss of self:

My mind would probably be going through how I would do this. If I would stop it now or if I would follow through with it. But once the fight actually happens I sort of go black and just fight 'em.

Fighting is a practice, like sports, that is so symbolically "masculine" that expressions of emotion or behavior that might call one's manhood into question are allowed without danger of jeopardizing one's manliness. Even crying is a permissible expression of "masculinity" under these circumstances. One of the boys who told me he never cried, corrected himself:

But if I be mad, I cry. Like if I get into a fight or something like that, I cry because I lose my temper and get so mad. But sometimes, I play football and if I cry that mean I'm ready to tumble—throw the ball to me because I'm going.

Fighting in school is a space in which boys can feel free to do emotional work.¹¹ In a social practice that is so incontrovertibly coded as masculine, behaviors marked as feminine, such as crying, can be called upon as powerful wellsprings for action.

One of the questions that I asked all the boys about fighting came out of my own ignorance. My query was posed in terms of identity work around the winning and losing of fights. Did you ever win a fight? Did you ever lose a fight? How did you feel when you lost? How did you feel when you won? I found the answers slippery, unexpected, con-

11. Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983). Hochschild explores the feeling rules that guide and govern our own emotional displays as well as how we interpret the emotional expression of others.

tradictory. I had anticipated that winning would be described in proud and boastful ways, as success stories. But there seemed to be a surprising reluctance to embellish victory. I learned that I was missing the point by posing the question the way I had in terms of winning and losing. Trey enlightened me when he explained that what was at stake was not winning or losing per se but in learning about the self:

I won a lot of fights. You know you won when they start crying and stuff or when they stop and leave. I lost fights. Then you feel a little okay. At least you lost. I mean like you ain't goin' win every fight. At least you fought back instead of just standing there and letting them hit you.

Another boy expressed the function that fighting played in establishing yourself as being a particular kind of respectable person:

It's probably like dumb, but if somebody wants to fight me, I mean, I don't care even if I know I can't beat 'em. I won't stop if they don't stop. I mean I'm not scared to fight anybody. I'm not a coward. I don't let anybody punk me around. If you let people punk you around, other peoples want to punk you around.

Proving yourself to others is like a game, a kind of competition:

Me and Leslie used to fight because we used to be the biggest boys, but now we don't care anymore. We used to get friends and try and fight each other. I fought him at Baldwin school all the time. We stopped about the fifth grade [the previous year]. Just got tired, I guess.

Standing and proving yourself today can be insurance against future harassment in the yard as you make a name for yourself through readiness to fight: "Like if somebody put their hands on you, then you have to, you have to hit them back. Because otherwise you going be beat up on for the rest of your life."

Eddie, who has avoided fights because he does not want to get in trouble, is now seen as a target for anyone to beat up, according to one of his friends, who characterized Eddie's predicament this way: "He can't fight. *He can't fight*. Every girl, every boy in the whole school fixing to beat him up. Badly. They could beat him up badly."

Eddie explains his own perspective on how he has come to actually lose a reputation.

Yeah, I won a fight in preschool. Like somebody this tall [his gesture indicates a very tall someone] I had to go like this [reaches up to demonstrate] so I could hit him. He was older than me. He was the preschool bully. Till I mess him up.

But Eddie's parents came down hard on him for getting in trouble for fighting in elementary school:

Yeah, I lost fights. See when I got to Rosa Parks my parents told me not to fight unless I had to—so I lost my face. 'Cause I was so used to telling them to stop, don't fight, don't fight.

In constructing the self through fight stories, it is not admirable to represent oneself as the aggressor or initiator in a fight. All the boys whom I talked to about fighting presented themselves as responding to a physical attack that had to be answered in a decisive way. No one presented himself as a "bully," though I knew that Horace had that reputation. Yet he told me that "only fights I been in is if they hit me first."

There are, however, times when it is legitimate to be the initiator. When verbal provocation is sufficient. This is when "family" has been insulted. Talking about "your momma" is tantamount to throwing down the gauntlet:

Mostly I get in fights if somebody talk about my grandfather because he's dead. And I loved my grandfather more than I love anybody and then he died. [Tears are in Jabari's eyes as we talk.] That's why I try to tell people before they get ready to say anything, I'm like, "Don't say anything about my grandfather, 'cause if you say something about him, I'm goin' hit you."

The boys talked about how they learned to fight. How one learns to fight and what one learns about the meaning of fighting—why fight, to fight or not to fight—involved both racial identity and class positioning. Ricky and Duane, two of the Schoolboys, have been enrolled by their parents in martial arts classes. Fighting remains a necessary accoutrement of masculinity that is "schooled," not a "natural" acquisi-

tion of doing. As such, it becomes a marker of higher class position. Fighting takes place in an institutionalized arena rather than spontaneously in just any setting. The mind seems to control the body here, rather than vice versa.

Horace, on the other hand, like the majority of boys with whom I talked, explained that he had learned to fight through observation and practice:

I watched people. Like when I was younger, like I used to look up to people. I still do. I look up to people and they knew how to fight so I just watched them. I just like saw people fight on TV, you know. Boxing and stuff.

Another boy told me that he thought kids learned to fight “probably from themselves. Like their mom probably say, if somebody hit you, hit them back.” This advice about proper behavior is grounded in the socialization practices that are brought into school as ways of responding to confrontations.

Gender Practice and Identification

Fighting acts reproduce notions of essentially different gendered natures and the forms in which this “difference” is grounded. Though class makes some difference in when, how, and under what conditions it takes place, fighting is the hegemonic representation of masculinity. Inscribed in the male body—whether individual males fight or not, abjure fighting or not—is the potential for this unleashing of physical power. By the same token, fighting for girls is considered an aberration, something to be explained.

Girls do get in fights at school. Boys asserted that girls can fight, even that “sometimes they get in fights easier. Because they got more attitude.” Indeed, girls do make a name for themselves this way. One of the girls at Rosa Parks was in trouble several times during the school year for fighting. Most of her scraps were with the boys who liked to tease her because she was very tall for her age. This, however, was not assumed to be reflective of her “femaleness” but of her individuality. Mr. Sobers, for example, when I asked him about her, made a point of this singularity rather than explaining her in terms of race, class, or gender: “Oh, Stephanie is just Stephanie.”

Fighting is not a means of “doing gender” for girls. They do not use physical clashes as a way to relate to each other in play. Girls did not practice “cool” moves or engage in play fights with each other. They used other strategies for making the day go by, such as the chain of stories about other children, the “he said, she said,” which can build up to a more physical confrontation.¹² More often it leads to injured feelings, the isolation and ostracism of individuals, and the regrouping of friendships. On the playground at Rosa Parks, girls were more likely to interact physically with boys than with other girls. They often initiated encounters with boys to play chase games by pushing, prodding, hitting, or bumping into them.

Through male fighting we can see how gender difference is grounded in a compulsory and violently enforced heterosexuality. The interaction involves the convergence of the desire for physical and emotional closeness with another, the anxiety over presenting a convincing performance of a declarative act of identification, and the risk of ostracism or punishment. Boys from an early age learn that affectionate public physical contact such as an embrace with those who are seen as most like oneself, other males, is taboo. For them, a physical embrace, the close intertwining of bodies is culturally permissible only in the act of the rituals of the fight.¹³ Thus the fulfillment of desire for physical intimacy, for body contact, can most safely be accomplished publicly through the apparent or actual infliction and experience of bodily pain. A desire for closeness, for identification with a reflection of oneself, can be achieved through an act that beckons and embraces using apparently threatening and hostile gestures. In a revealing story of the constraining boundaries of male self-expression, Mac an Ghaill recounts how the public exchange of flowers between two males in a high school was regarded by personnel as more unnatural, reprehensible, and threatening than the physical violence of the fight that the gesture provoked.¹⁴

12. For a full discussion of this strategy see Marjorie Harness Goodwin, *He-Said-She-Said: Talk as a Social Organization among Black Children* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

13. In the U.S. context, we see passionate public embraces between males in certain high-contact team sports such as football, basketball, and soccer in moments of great emotion. It is less likely to be witnessed in sports such as tennis or golf where team camaraderie cannot develop or where the masculinity of the participants is not so indubitably demonstrated.

14. Mairtin Mac an Ghaill, *The Making of Men: Masculinities, Sexualities, and Schooling* (Buckingham, England: Open University Press, 1994), 1.

Most men don't have to actually fight; they can participate in the inscription of power on male bodies through watching. Fighting acts are a major form of entertainment in our society. From popular cultural figures on television, screen, in video games, boxing and wrestling matches, the use of fists and agile feet deeply encode the hegemonic representation of masculinity. Even as the pantheon of cultural superheroes real and fantasy, such as Mike Tyson, Dennis Rodman, Schwarzenegger's "Terminator" and Stallone's "Rambo," are supplemented by cultural representations of the "New Man" who is a more fitting partner for the stronger images of the liberated woman—Kevin Costner's Robin Hood or Keaton's Batman, for instance—these more "sensitive" heroes are also still skilled and courageous physical fighters. They become "real men" because they can, when inevitably called upon to do so, physically vanquish the villain and save the female "victim." The fight scene/shootout between hero and villain continues to be the most enduring convention of climax and resolution in film and television. Violence remains the most predictable way of males resolving conflict and problems in the popular culture as well as in world events.

The presence of spectators is a key element. The performance of fighting in settings such as the playground, the boxing ring, the movie theater, the sports arena is not only rousing entertainment for an audience, but a reinscription of an abstract masculine power. This performance is affirmed by ardent spectators, mostly men but some women, who consume the ritualistic enactment of raw, body power. Video games are an excellent example of how even males who avoid physical aggressive behavior in their own personal life symbolically perform a violent masculinity in order to play the game at all.¹⁵

Fighting is the emblematic ritual performance of male power. Participation in this ritual for boys and for men is not an expression of deviant, antisocial behavior but is profoundly normative, a thoroughly social performance. Though it is officially frowned on as a means of resolving personal problems, it is in fact culturally applauded as a way of settling differences among men. As boys mock fight through imitating martial arts movements with or without an audience, playfight with peers, play video games, they bodily and psychically inhabit male power through fantasy and imagination.

For Troublemakers, who are already sidelined as academic failures,

15. R. W. Connell, "Teaching the Boys: New Research on Masculinity and Gender Strategies for Schools," *Teachers College Record* 98, no. 2 (1996).

one route to making a name for yourself, for expressing “normalcy,” competency, and humanity, is through this identification with physical power. Once again, a sense of anger and frustration born of marginalization in school intensifies the nature of these performances.

Race makes a difference in how physical power is constituted and perceived. African American boys draw on a specific repertoire of racial images as well as the lived experience and popular knowledge from the world outside the school. Most of the black boys live in an environment where being mentally and physically prepared to stand up for oneself through words and deeds is crucial. However, there is another reason specifically grounded in the history and evolution of race relations in the United States. Up to the 1960s, physical violence wielded by whites in the form of individuals, mobs, or the state was the instrument used to police the racial order; demonstrations of male privilege or assertions of rights on the part of black men was the cause for brutal retaliation. The prevailing wisdom in black communities was that in order to survive males had to be carefully taught to mask any show of power in confrontations with whites. With the emergence of Black Power as an ideology and a practice, the right of black men to stand up for their manhood and their racial pride through physical force was asserted. This was the right to have the physical privileges of white men. This “right” is inculcated into young black males in family and community, many of whom are taught, “Don’t let anyone take advantage of you. If someone hits you, you hit them back.” First blows are not always physical, but sometimes symbolic; racial epithets are violent attacks. A physical response is especially likely on the part of the Troublemakers, who have a heightened racial consciousness.

Simultaneously, this manifestation of physicality is the very material presence that the school seeks to exclude: black males are already seen as embodying the violence and aggression that will drive away “desirable” families and their children. Fighting on the part of black boys is more visible as a problem, so it is viewed with extreme concern and responded to more swiftly and harshly. Once again, the process of adultification of black male behavior frames the act as symptomatic of dangerous tendencies. The Troublemakers, who have already been labeled as bound for jail, have little to lose and everything to gain in using this form of rule breaking as a way of making a name for themselves, gaining recognition through performances of masculinity.