



Dude, You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School

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High school and the difficult terrain of sexuality and gender identity are brilliantly explored in this smart, incisive ethnography. Based on eighteen months of fieldwork in a racially diverse working-class high school, *Dude, You're a Fag* sheds new light on masculinity both as a field of meaning and as a set of social practices. C. J. Pascoe's unorthodox approach analyzes masculinity as not only a gendered process but also a sexual one. She demonstrates how the "specter of the fag" becomes a disciplinary mechanism for regulating heterosexual as well as homosexual boys and how the "fag discourse" is as much tied to gender as it is to sexuality.

Dude, You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School Details

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From Reader Review Dude, You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School for online ebook

Damien says

Extremely repetitive; any one who attended a public high school will find nothing here that they didn't already know; in fact, most of what is written here can be witnessed first hand on any public transit bus in just about any city. The observations were about as juvenile as the teenage jocks need to prove their "masculinity".

Scott says

It's good to see that this kind of work is being done. I used part of the text for an interview theatre project with my students and it helped foster some bravery to see that they are not the only high school in the country dealing with these issues.

I found the text clear and easily followed. The case study was interesting and it seemed fairly written about.

Karli says

My skepticism about ethnography and sociological methodology aside, I think Pascoe does a fair job of putting her fieldwork observations into conversation with feminist and queer theory. True, much of what she writes will not come as any big surprise to those who are up on teen culture and the use of the terms "gay," "fag," and "faggot" today, but I think her observations about the ways in which teenage boys are homophobic are the more innovative clincher. I sometimes wonder if she dismisses the more general usage of "gay" to mean stupid or silly in order to keep her findings in line with her ideas about the construction of masculinity; nevertheless, she defends her point well. This is clearly something that she has devoted a lot of time and thought to (I understand it was originally her dissertation), so I give her props for that. Her more recent work sounds interesting and I look forward to the publication of her research on internet culture and pro-ana groups.

AJ LeBlanc says

This is not a light read. Pascoe does hardcore research, resulting in an intensely documented and cited work. It is an excellent text for anyone working in schools or with middle and high school students.

Pascoe spent a year and a half in a high school mostly observing boys in a variety of settings. She documents the girls as well, but only how the boys act towards and with them. (She does meet with a group of girls that are lesbians, but only after hearing about them from the boys. I do not know if she had planned on working with them when she began her research) She follows the fag discourse throughout, searching for threads and meanings and applies queer theory to her observations.

The beginning chapter is clearly and solidly organized. Pascoe gives an overview of how the chapters are set up, gives a brief explanation of queer theory and why she chose to use it, and explains why she chose this high school for her research.

It was interesting to see how fag discourse was created and how the boys explained it - often two very different versions.

Pascoe sees the boys labeling others as fags so they themselves are not labeled. Revealingly the boys explain that they don't use the word fag to imply homosexuality and they don't even think of it in a sexual way. Yet they use it to identify non-masculinity, implying a lack of sexual prowess and manliness. The rare times that they are accepting of male homosexuality is when the male isn't a sissy. If he can "throw a ball around" like any straight guy, he's OK. If he acts outside of the male stereotypes it is not OK and he must be cast out.

Lesbians, on the other hand, are awesome. Because the boys are able to cast them in their own sexual fantasies, they are accepted... as long as they are hot.

Pascoe also looks at how sexuality is accepted and often encouraged in high schools BUT only if it falls into socially acceptable parameters. At assemblies students put on skits where girls grind on boys, boys mime oral sex on girls, and lap dances are front and center...only if white boys are involved. When the administration approves the skits, the black students are told that there is to be no touching. If a black boy touches a girl, there will be immediate consequences, including suspension. The skit with the white boys is just as sexual as the skit with the black boys, but nothing is said. As the black boys come off stage, they start protesting in advance that they never touched any of the girls. They don't get in trouble, but there is a clear message that black students are hyper-sexualized and the adults in the school must do everything to make sure they don't have sex. White kids? Not a problem.

In the same thread, the mostly white cheerleading team is supported while the step team, made up of mostly black and Latina girls, is not invited to participate at events and has to fight to be included in assemblies.

The message the school is sending, both indirectly and clearly, is that white relationships are acceptable and homosexuality is OK as long as the students are popular. The school reluctantly allows a GSA, but does nothing to help the club. Their submitted information is regularly left off the morning announcements, they have to fight to have information at school and they are squashed when they try to celebrate National Coming Out Day, which happens to fall at the same time as Homecoming. Members of the GSA wear shirts to the assembly with the sexually explicit skits with slogans such as "No one knows my girlfriend is a lesbian" and other GLBT supportive statements and they are told to change or be punished. The administration explains that the shirts send a sexual message and are in violation of the dress code. The GSA students immediately see the hypocrisy in this and try to challenge the administration, but give up when they see how difficult it will be. Instead they retreat to their meetings and continue to support each other, gay and straight. These students are not popular and therefore are not deserving of support of the school.

In a brief side observation, Pascoe notices how the fag discourse is turned when it comes to girls. If a boy thinks he can get a girl, then the girl is cool. If she rejects or ignores his advances, she is labeled a whore. The whore discourse comes from both girls and boys, but Pascoe notes that girls never call the boys fags. (There might have been one instance, but I can't remember.)

On a hopeful note, Pascoe details how boys change when she meets with them individually. The majority of them seem uncomfortable with male group dynamics and either clearly state this or give examples that show it. When they are in a group they go along with the fag discourse and relate to girls as sexual conquests, but

when they are alone they cringe about the behavior. The fag discourse is too strong in a group to step up because it will probably be turned on them and they will become the fag. Occasionally a boy can call another boy on it, but only if he is already in a dominant position. Because he is confident that he won't be called a fag or has a history to disprove he is a fag, he can feel secure in making another boy stop and/or look foolish.

Pascoe finishes her work explaining the challenges of her research. She had to create a careful line with the students. She needed to be as gender and age neutral as possible. The students needed to trust her and not see her as an authority figure. They needed to be able to relate to her and not see her as a sexual object. This didn't stop them however and she explains how she used their own discourse to stop their advances.

I was impressed by both the content of the book and the skill of Pascoe's writing. She not only did intense research but she was able to turn it into a text that isn't mired in the type of academic writing that can alienate the reader.

Angela says

I had the kind of high hopes for "Dude You're a Fag" that were bound to leave me disappointed. It would've been impossible for the author to exhaustively cover absolutely everything I hoped she would about masculinity and sexual identity development in high school in a couple hundred pages. What's left, then, is a nonfiction work that is at times fascinating and at others deeply frustrating with its lack of information.

Pascoe sets out to earn her PhD by studying masculinity within the dynamics of a small town California high school. It's racially diverse and indeed some of her most interesting observations come in the different way that masculinity manifests between White and Black students. (It is a little disappointing that while students of most ethnic backgrounds identify as either Black or White, there's a third socially recognized ethnic group of Latino students who speak no English, but Pascoe fails to interact with them at all since she doesn't speak Spanish. She didn't have a Spanish-speaking friend to help her out? It seems like even interviewing one or two students would've added quite a bit to the study.)

The real highlight of the book was the chapter about masculine girls in the school, which primarily documented two very distinct cliques - the popular "basketball girls" who identified primarily as nonwhite and included open lesbians among their ranks, while adopting some of the clothing and culture of straight Black men, and the "GSA girls" who included mostly white lesbians who identified with more of a goth or punk culture. Her observations were fascinating, although I did take some issue with the treatment of the basketball girls' harassment of other female students as mostly harmless. Maybe I've been reading too much Julia Serano for my own good, but my immediate thought was that these girls weren't bending gender stereotypes so much as adopting masculine behaviors and deriving a higher social status from demonizing femininity. When describing how they threw food at other students in the cafeteria, Pascoe dismisses it as almost cute while elsewhere regarding the hazing of the school's only openly gay student Ricky, who has to change routes home because people throw things at him, as tragic and hateful. I am not arguing with the latter point, but failed to see the basketball girls' hazing of feminine students as quite so butch-girls-will-be-butch-girls benign.

Perhaps the main area that I wish the book had covered more was how gay males functioned within the school's social structure. The story of Ricky is thorough and heartbreaking, but while Pascoe mentions at least one closeted gay male (one of the drama students), she never actually talks about his experiences beyond that. Since a good part of the book is devoted to how the administrators and school institution

reinforce heterosexuality as normative behavior, it would have been nice if her writing and/or research had touched upon what effects of this structured endorsement had upon gay (and for that matter lesbian) students. Unfortunately beyond Ricky's story there's nothing here about gay men, perhaps the biggest disappointment of the book.

The very issue of school as structure enforcing heterosexist norms, however, is mentioned repeatedly but never really defended well. Surely society as a whole has enough heterosexually-focused institutions that the high school isn't imposing assumptions on students they won't encounter elsewhere, and while that doesn't defend the practice there's also little time devoted to why the existence of gender-coded graduation gowns, differences in attire expectations between genders, school dances, or even the proclaimed horror of one teacher posting photos her students had given her from their school dances on a wall in the classroom (called by the author a "shrine to heterosexuality") actually hurts students, particularly ones who are not heterosexual.

On the whole "Dude You're a Fag" was a fascinating read once I escaped the book's tedious first chapter, which is loaded down with sociology jargon (I'll be happy to never again read a book that contains the word "post-structuralist"). In particular the ways in which sexism and heterosexism were institutionalized and the suggested policy changes made the book a worthwhile read for anyone in a position to change these things. Seeing how ineffective anti-harassment laws can be in the context of school teachers and administrators unwilling to enforce them was sobering, and realizing how different Ricky's fate might have been had he been part of a stable, wealthy family willing to insist upon laws made to protect him being held up made me wonder how at-risk gay teens can be helped effectively.

Katy says

Really interesting. I can't wait to reread this one and absorb more of it. Not all of it was entirely surprising, but the observations that Pascoe made were fresh and interesting. Drawing on old-school feminists and adding her own spin, she wove an interesting text. I found the dialogue between the students especially intriguing.

My favorite chapter (unsurprisingly) was chapter five, "Look at My Masculinity!" which was focused on masculine girls at River High. To me, this was the most unusual.

I also found details about Pascoe's time at River High fascinating--the process of her research. She tried to maintain a position of "least gender" and "least adult." She told students that she was "almost thirty" (though she was, indeed, already thirty, but very young-looking) and was often mistaken for a student. To appear masculine, she wore black, masculine clothing and no makeup, walked with a swagger in her shoulders rather than her hips, and talked about her more traditionally masculine hobbies, rather than feminized topics like her love of cooking and that she was planning her wedding at the time. Despite her efforts, she was still frequently intimidated sexually or physically by the boys in her classes and had to work hard to maintain a level of trust with the boys that didn't compromise her dignity or professionalism. She often used humor as a tool to hide her intimidation and to build rapport.

Given all this, Pascoe seems like quite the intrepid researcher. I'm looking forward to checking out more of her work.

Deb says

I used this for a gender and sexuality class. Thought-provoking. Students really connected to it, and used it to look at their own experiences in a new and critical way. The author is relentless in her analysis of seemingly innocent practices -- you don't have to agree with all of her conclusions to appreciate the value of her consistency, great for educational purposes. After a few chapters the phrase "compulsory heteronormativity" was second nature to me. And it has stuck with me.

Katie says

I read this book as part of a Gender Reading Group started by a group of friends after taking a really fun and enlightening Gender Theory course.

All I can say is WOW. Sometimes sociology is so crazy because it brings to light things that are so embedded and taken for granted in our society. Reading this book was like going back to my high school. I literally pictured the halls of my school as I read.

I really liked her analysis of the word "fag" and how high school boys use this word to insult other boys. But, it's not to really challenge their heterosexuality, as much as it is to make sure the boy doing the insulting is seen as masculine. It's pretty amazing the way women and gay men are used to prop up straight male sexuality. And, of course, it's stuff I've thought about before, but never in such an insightful and in-depth way. It definitely got me reflecting quite a bit on my high school and other young adult experiences.

Also, to totally nerd out, the appendix was really cool. Pascoe talks about the challenges of doing participant-observation in a high school, studying boys. She's a lesbian, but had to remain closeted until the end of the study for fear of her safety, losing access to the site and to get the best possible data. It's really interesting to see how she navigates all the different relationships she forms at the school. I would definitely recommend reading just the appendix for anyone interested in field methods or doing research at a school.

Danny says

Dude You're a Fag explores the multifaceted ways in which masculinity and sexuality police the everyday lives of high school adolescents. Of primary significance to the book is how heteronormative practices, such as school dances, performances, and policies, work to reinforce gender and sexuality stereotypes. Pascoe finds that masculinity is not the sole domain of biological males. Rather, it is a set of practices predicated on the notion of dominance that both males and females can utilize to their advantage. She states that "achieving a masculine identity entails the repeated repudiation of the specter of failed masculinity." The most damaging of phrases to a boy's masculinity is to be labeled a fag and in order to regain one's masculinity a boy must quickly pass the label onto someone else, like a game of hot potato, or bolster his masculinity by publicizing his sexual exploits, even if that means fabricating exaggerated sexual stories.

What I found most striking in Pascoe's research was the subtle ways teachers and administrators allow boys to verbally and physically dominate girls by categorizing these interactions as playful flirting. I found it

difficult to swallow some of her research, thinking "High school wasn't THAT bad...Was it?" Upon reflecting on my own high school experiences, I concluded that Pascoe's research site wasn't too far from the realities I faced in high school. In addition, Pascoe discusses how masculinity varies between races and how African American students are punished more severely for the same actions performed by their white male peers. Personally, I would have liked her to explore this issue further but that's solely because race is one of my biggest research interests. Briefly, Pascoe mentions how in private, more intimate settings boys who publicly dominate girls and participate in compulsive heterosexuality become much more sentimental and come to understand the severity of their misogynistic actions. Pascoe should have devoted a larger discussion on how boys navigate their public and private feelings since at times they can be polar opposites. In her policy recommendations, Pascoe mentions nothing about providing psychological or emotional support for boys needing to vent their frustrations for the pressure they feel to live up to these dominant masculinity standards. She accuses some researchers on being too lofty with their policy recommendations but Pascoe is also lofty in hers, arguing that high schools should create safe spaces where both boys and girls can engage in a wide variety of gender play. She doesn't mention having larger discussions with high school students about new ways to think about masculinity. In other words, we must teach our adolescent boys that masculinity can also mean being committed to one's partner, loving arts and culture, restraining one's self from engaging in physical violence, and treating women and others with respect. Arguably, these discussions are much more important than having boys engage in gender play, which as she shows in her research they are extremely hesitant to do.

In sum, Pascoe does a great job illuminating the turbulent waters today's adolescents wade through as they develop their identities. She does a great job of balancing strong sociological research with mass market appeal. *Dude You're a Fag* can be read by both gender and sexuality academics as well as high school teachers and administrators looking to learn more about the ways in which their policies implicitly allow boys to dominate girls, in every sense of the phrase. Her book is important to understanding how masculinity and sexuality develop in adolescence and how these lessons embed themselves in everyday interactions, which allowed to continue without consequences could have severely damaging effects for male-female interactions in larger society.

Hannah says

A really great read for anyone who works with adolescents to check out--and parents, too! A look at how high schools can be really hostile environments that impress gender norms on students in ways that can be SUPER harmful and inhumane, and at how we can make space for deviation and free expression in our schools, too!

Jimmie says

As other reviews have stated, it didn't provide a tremendous amount of groundbreaking research for any reader with a working knowledge of sociology and gender studies. But it was written accessibly enough (for an academic text) that I think it should be included in lower division gender studies curricula, especially since it illustrates Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity a whole lot more understandably than Butler herself does. For that matter, I think I actually got a firmer grasp on symbolic interactionism from Pascoe than I did in Sociology 101.

I think my only criticisms would be that (1) Pascoe seemed to repeat herself a lot, (2) she unproblematically used terms like "act like a boy" and "dress like a girl" while interrogating the very concepts of gender and sex.

Nancy Babbitt says

Dude You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School (2012), by sociologist C.J. Pascoe, is a discourse on the exploration of schools as a socializing institution for boys concerning the formation of their masculine identities. Pascoe's discussion was based on the results of 18 months of ethnographic research that took place in a racially diverse middle-class suburban high school in northern California. The goal of her study was to "explain how teenagers, teachers, and the institutional logics of schooling construct[ed] adolescent masculinity through idioms of sexuality" (4). Through Pascoe's research, it was demonstrated that the construction of powerful and controlling masculine and heterosexual identities, regardless if the masculinity was in male bodies or female bodies, determined the degree of acceptance and popularity experienced by those who successfully created that identity. Furthermore, some students, who were not successful in creating this version of hegemonic masculinity, or else rejected it, were many times marginalized or stigmatized, and even sometimes victimized by the members of the majority and controlling group. This study leads to implications on how educational facilities, as major institutions of socialization, might work to educate both faculty and students beyond the confines of narrow stereotypical gender-norm definitions and provide a greater understanding and acceptance of alternate gender possibilities. Freeing youth from these narrow confines of gender identity will promote a greater degree of opportunity, acceptance, equality and social justice for our youth and the future society that they will shape.

Pascoe's masculine gender norm analysis centered on what she termed the 'fag discourse', the process by which boys reiterated "repeated repudiation of failed acts of masculinity" and an assertion of masculinity by "engaging in heterosexist discussions of girl's bodies and their own sexual experiences". She discovered that the fag trope did not refer to homosexual desire, but instead was in reference to a boy who was emotional, expressive, incompetent, noncompetitive, physically weak or unable or unwilling to dominate girls, for example. The fag discourse's purpose was to 'police masculinity' by 'shoring up contemporary definitions of masculinity', and she discussed this fact throughout the book. The fag discourse was used in the construction of a masculine identity and consisted of boys attaching the stigma of the fag to other boys, while at the same time deflecting it away from themselves. Most boys also used girl's bodies in the creation of their masculine identities through shared stories about girls and sex that were completely devoid of positive feelings of love or romance, but instead were about mastering and conquering girls' bodies, and sometimes in a violent manner. The formation of a masculine gender identity was a process by which boys continually rejected the specter of the non-masculine man while also demonstrating that they did indeed possess masculine power and control, and this happened by means of insults and violent speech, and sometimes, violent actions. Pascoe also addressed the institutional sexism that 'River High' (pseudonym) promoted through programs and policies that reinforced both heterosexual and masculine dominance. Messages sent by school policies and programs, classroom discussions and activities, and the students themselves all worked together to reinforce ideals of heterosexism and masculine power and domination. The resulting hegemonic masculinity that emerged was generally understood as power and domination over others. The creation of powerful, dominating masculine heterosexual identities simultaneously reinforced the feminine quality of passive submission, while it also created marginalized and stigmatized groups of students who did not identify with and fall within the narrow definitions of a controlling masculinity or submissive femininity.

What was clear in Pascoe's work was the dynamics of group formation and interactions, and the power that

was conferred to the majority and dominating in-groups, because they had the relative power to define what constituted normal versus abnormal thoughts and behavior. The dominating in-groups consisted of those who identified with either hetero-normative behaviors, and those who identified with masculine behaviors. The school institution set up a formal structure for the foundations for hetero-normativity through the sanctioning of different competitions, dances, homecoming rituals, and other sexist and hetero-sexualizing activities. Teachers at River High reinforced heterosexuality by using heterosexual metaphors in their instruction, and by making sexist and heterosexist jokes. It is interesting to note that sexual orientation did not necessarily distinguish one as non-conforming though. Students confirmed to Pascoe that if a boy was labeled a fag, it did not indicate that he was gay, because a gay person could be athletic, for example, and therefore not a fag. Rebecca, a ritualist, who was gay and identified as masculine, sometimes faced the same type of labeling and policing that boys did when she stepped outside the boundaries of her masculine role. Her friends found it difficult to accept her secondary deviance and teased her for it. Also, the Basketball girls, who were innovators, and of which some were gay, self-identified with a typically powerful and controlling 'masculine' style and behavior, and these girls were popular, being not only accepted by the larger in-group, but celebrated with their popular 'pimp' identity too. What was sanctioned and reinforced, by the majority in-groups at River High, were either hetero-normativity or masculinity, but not necessarily the need to be 'straight'. The school institution acted in a way that created an organizational culture that enforced and reinforced a hegemonic hetero-normative and dominating masculinity that existed there, while stigmatizing those they considered 'others'.

Those students who identified with neither white hetero-normativity nor masculinity were the non-conforming out-groups. Social deviance in the instances of 'feminine' boys, the politically active non-normative Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) group, and those who were identified by others as possessing a 'non-white sexuality', were stigmatized. Ricky, a retreat-ist, and an openly gay boy who violated most gender norms, was severely harassed and physically assaulted at River High, and because of the lack of institutional support, he eventually dropped out of school. The GSA group, were rebels, who were a politically organized group who worked to change the school's culture regarding sexual and gender norms. The members of this group did not necessarily identify as gay or to stereotypical ideals of masculinity or femininity, but rather encouraged individual notions of sexual and gender expression. African-American young men were frequently and unfairly disciplined for what the administration perceived as overly aggressive heterosexist behavior, as was the case concerning bodily contact during school dances. The social deviants who did not conform to the majority controlling in-groups, experienced not only physical violence, but also structural violence in the form of discrimination, harassment, unfair disciplinary action, and therefore also psychological harm.

What Pascoe discovered is that many aspects of the high school environment worked to form social cohesion by shoring up stereotypical ideals of hetero-normativity and masculinity while at the same time marginalizing and stigmatizing those who did not identify with or fit into those categories. The creation of a powerful and dominating masculinity also co-created a feminine identity of passive submission where women possess a great deal less power than men. Furthermore, the creation of this hegemonic heterosexual and masculine identity simultaneously constructed marginalized and stigmatized groups of those who did not fit into this stereotypical gender 'norm'. Understanding this process of identity creation through gender socialization is useful to help us see how the current hegemonic force shapes and maintains a position of masculine power through actions that should be recognized as forms of bullying and harassment. It is through the understanding of how hegemonic groups gain power through the creation of certain social sanctions that we may also realize how to intentionally re-create societies that encompass a greater degree of understanding, compassion and justice toward all.

Pascoe's study provides a useful way of thinking in a more inclusive manner when thinking about sex and

gender. Understanding that gender is a process, rather than a social identity associated with specific bodies allows us to recognize that there are opportunities for positive change. It will be by understanding beyond the stereotypical binary gender system of dominating males and masculinity in opposition to submissive females and femininity that the dismantling of hegemonic power and domination will take place. This allows us to devise and implement institutional practices, professional development, plus student education, in such a way so as to promote social integration of all students resulting in sexual and gender equality.

Lauren says

After reading a reference to this book in Jessica Valenti's *Full Frontal Feminism*, I was moved to pick it up out of curiosity about the study of masculinity and gender identity. Maybe my women's college education was just too thorough, or my upbringing in suburban Ohio was just too similar, but I didn't find anything particularly surprising or revealing in Pascoe's book.

Based on the subtitle, I was hoping for a book that would speak to the construction of gender identity in high school, and perhaps explore a range of identities through individual student experiences. I expected the full scope to better understand what it's like to grow up "male." What the reader gets, however, is the rather narrow case study of one California school (described as "racially diverse and working class"), with essentially one type of guy - the loud-mouthed jock who degrades female students to assert his masculinity. There are brief passages about those who fall outside of this type (one story about theater boys and some focus on heterosexual boys who are good dancers?), but Pascoe describes mostly one way of being masculine when she's not veering off inexplicably into long passages about gay female jocks and GSA members at the school. Pascoe reveals early on that she is a lesbian, and while sexual orientation is a natural part of the conversation about gender identity, I felt that she spent *way* too much time on these girls for a book with the subtitle "Masculinity and Sexuality in High School." I have to wonder if her personal interest in the narratives of these young women distracted her from the thesis of her book.

Anywho, all of this is to say that I was disappointed with Pascoe's efforts. I don't think it will be a surprise to most college educated folks that high school rituals like electing Homecoming Queens and the Prom make students perform and police their gender identities, that high school boys can be deeply homophobic, and that a key factor in creating a traditionally masculine identity is asserting dominance over women. It should also be a surprise to no one that the responsibility lies with adults to make the high school experience an affirming and supportive one, rather than the threatening and stifling one that Pascoe describes. I guess I'm most annoyed that a book like this was written in 2007. My reaction to much of her apparently hard-researched work was, "well, duh." But maybe that's a result of too much time in a women's college bubble?

c.s. says

this ethnography was a required text for my anthropology course (gender in cross-cultural perspective).

overall i found it to be a highly engaging & informative ethnographic study. (i was simulatenously intrigued & repelled by the title when i saw it in the syllabus !)

pascoe studies adolescent masculinity in a california high school in the early 2000s. she is primarily interested in how the construction of masculinity (via school sanctioned rituals like homecoming & disparate sessions of "boy talk") is harmful to non-normatively gendered students & is key in preserving harmful gender and sex roles and dichotomies. her main focus is how in illuminating an Other (the f**) adolescent boys create the abject. this abjected identity takes the form of any and all characteristics, behaviors, etc. deemed feminine and by participating in f** discourse, boys are able to create or retain their masculine selves by invoking the abject.

i remember the particular early 2000s culture (for better and worse) that was the backdrop of this high school. so the commentary on the popular media of the time (eminem's popularity :/ eve, pink, britney spears, too!) and the slang mentioned were very familiar & allowed for quicker immersion and understanding of the kind of f** discourse that was prevalent during that time. (which is interesting to note that f** has transformed into pejoratives like sissy, pussy, lame, etc. to keep boys "in their place")

i found problematic pascoe's claim that the main propellant of the abject f** was not rooted in homophobia per say. i would argue that by guarding against this perceived Other & using the historically heavy, disparaging slur f**, adolescents boys are very much implicated in and perpetuating homophobia.

my favorite portions of the book were the sections on abject identities, female masculinity, racialized masculinities, & the commodification/objectification of teenage girls:

*"the sexual tall tales these boys told when they were together were not so much about indicating sexual desire as about proving their capacity to exercise control on the world around them, primarily through women's bodies" (pg. 104)

*"the constraint of female bodies gets translated as masculinity and femininity, embedding sexualized meanings to which heterosexual flirting is coded as female helplessness and male bodily dominance" (pg. 100)

*(on female puppetry) - "definitions of masculinity that included control of female bodies through symbolic or physical violence" (pgs. 112-113)

(the sections with discussions with the GSA girls & the basketball girls were particularly enlightening also!)

i found this to be easy to follow for an academic text. most importantly it was readable! academic jargon was virtually absent or at least very minimal (some of the theories she works from, like butler's sex/gender presentation theories are a little dense, though this mostly only occurs in the introduction).

i recommend this to those interested in an introduction to masculinities. i also think it would be valuable to those hoping to understand the construction of masculinized identities specific to adolescent teenage boys & the implications of such constructions (marginlization, the creation of abject identities for girls & LGBTQ members)

Brent Calderwood says

(Reviewed for The Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide)

“Cheering students filled River High’s gymnasium. Packed tightly in bleachers, they sang, hollered, and danced to loud hip-hop music. Over their heads hung banners celebrating fifty years of River High’s sports victories. The yearly assembly in which the student body voted for the most popular senior boy in the school to be crowned Mr. Cougar was under way, featuring six candidates performing a series of skits to earn student votes.”

Thus begins *Dude, You’re a Fag*, which has the accessible narrative tone of a coming-out novel but is actually an incisive, well-researched, fascinating ethnography of a year in the life of students at a suburban, working-class public high school in Northern California. C. J. Pascoe, who now teaches sociology at the University of Puget Sound, did a year of fieldwork at the pseudonymous River High while a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley. It’s a tribute to her skill as a storyteller that in this opening scene, and mostly throughout, *Dude* reads more like a novel, or even a screenplay, than like a master’s thesis.

For most gays and lesbians, the thought of returning to high school for a year rates on a par with taking a hiking trip through Siberia. Many of us have doubtless wondered, though, exactly how—or if—high schools have changed for gay youth in the last decade. Never mind Stonewall—how have the Internet, Brokeback Mountain, and The L-Word changed the way gay kids grow up today? By spending a year in trenches, observing students in their native habitats—the classroom, the weight room, the quad, the parking lot, the principle’s office, school assemblies—Pascoe shines a light on these and other questions.

For native Californians like myself, who came of age and came out in the early 1990s in a high school eerily similar to River High, Pascoe provides clues about the real-life location of the school where Pascoe did her fieldwork: “Riverton’s approximately one hundred thousand residents are over half white and about a quarter Latino or Hispanic. The rest identify in relatively equal numbers as African American or Asian [American:].”

Aside from protecting the identities of the young people Pascoe interviewed, the anonymity performs a neat trick, recasting River High as what it most resembles—a typical Middle American high school, complete with pep rallies, cheerleaders, Homecoming dances, and Cougar pride. This “everyschool” aura convinces the reader that the sexual harassment Pascoe witnesses is a nationwide phenomenon.

Pascoe makes a convincing case for the notion that masculinity, above all, rules the high school roost, and that establishing, guarding, and proving one’s masculinity is a full-time job for those who are willing or able to do the work. With a nod to queer theorists like Eve Sedgwick, Pascoe points out that while homosexuality is no longer pathologized, gay male effeminacy is pathologized, and that the same edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders “that erased homosexuality as a diagnosis in the 1970s added a new diagnosis in its wake: Gender Identity Disorder”; to merit this diagnosis, a girl must “actually assert that she is a boy...whereas a boy need only display a preoccupation with female activities.”

For boys, the main way to protect and defend their fragile masculinity is through what Pascoe terms “fag discourse”—the omnipresent back-and-forth lobbing by boys of the word fag and its permutations “in a verbal game of hot potato, each careful to deflect the insult quickly by hurling it toward someone else.” Girls, although they are constantly prey to sexual harassment from boys (which, in her whole year at River High, Pascoe never saw disciplined or reprimanded), are immune to the fag epithet, which as Jeremy, a Latino junior says, is “the lowest thing you can call someone.” Girls do monitor each other for behavior that is appropriately feminine—i.e., sexually passive and non-agentic—but not to the level that boys monitor each

other: “the word slut (or its synonym ho) appeared one time for every eight times the word fag appeared.” (Pascoe slyly dubs this obsessive masculinity game “compulsive heterosexuality,” a clever nod to Adrienne Rich’s influential concept of “compulsory heterosexuality.”)

Ironically, at River High, lesbians are the main beneficiaries of this “crisis of masculinity.” Rebeca, an African American member of the women’s basketball team, is by all accounts one of the most popular girls at River High, admired by boys for her attractive, curvaceous physique and ability to attract other women, and admired by girls for her strong, dominant personality. Moreover the senior class president—and Homecoming Queen—is a masculine-identified, slacks-wearing, Asian American lesbian named Jessie. Pascoe is quick to note that masculinity, though traditionally ascribed to male bodies, is a mutable construct, one that girls can adopt to gain status while simultaneously reinscribing and reinforcing notions of masculine power.

As mutable and fragile as masculinity is revealed to be in *Dude*, Pascoe reminds us that there are some boys who are unable to move the “fag discourse” off of themselves: “For the one boy who permanently inhabited the fag position, life at River High was not easy.” For the gentle, effeminate Ricky, who enjoys choreography and wears make-up, the “double transgression of sexual and gender identity made his position at River High simply unlivable. The lack of protection from the administration meant facing torture on a daily basis.” Ultimately, Ricky, bereft of a supportive family or community, drops out of River High and moves to a nearby city to perform in local drag shows.

Pascoe is at her strongest in analyzing all of these and other stories through feminist and queer theory, quoting greats in those fields like Sedgwick, Adrienne Rich and Judith Butler. But from a political standpoint, there is much, much more that remains to be said about *Dude* and about the adolescent zeitgeist it portrays. Exposed as never before to media representations of gays and lesbians, students at River High are able to elect a lesbian of color as Senior Class President, and even to say about gay men that “eing gay is just a lifestyle. It’s someone you choose to sleep with. You can still throw around a football and be gay.”

Today’s teenagers, familiar with the heteronormative images of gays they receive from television, film—and, arguably, from the mainstream LGBT political movement—are now able to tolerate gay men who toe the gender-role line, but fags like Ricky remain fags always. This is what Riki Wilkins has termed the “Eminem Exception”—a reference to the rap artist Eminem, who has attempted to absolve himself of the label “homophobe” by claiming he uses the term fag for men who are weak and unmanly, regardless of sexual orientation.

Dude, You’re a Fag provides persuasive proof that gender identity should not be seen as an expendable addition to employment nondiscrimination laws, nor as an auxiliary to gay liberation—an optional T in our LGBT community. Gender identity is not a side issue; it is the issue. Until we get this message, which Pascoe’s book so clearly spells out, boys like Ricky will be jettisoned, and only those gay boys who can throw a football and those lesbians who comply with notions of masculine supremacy will be able to enjoy the dignity that all humans deserve.
