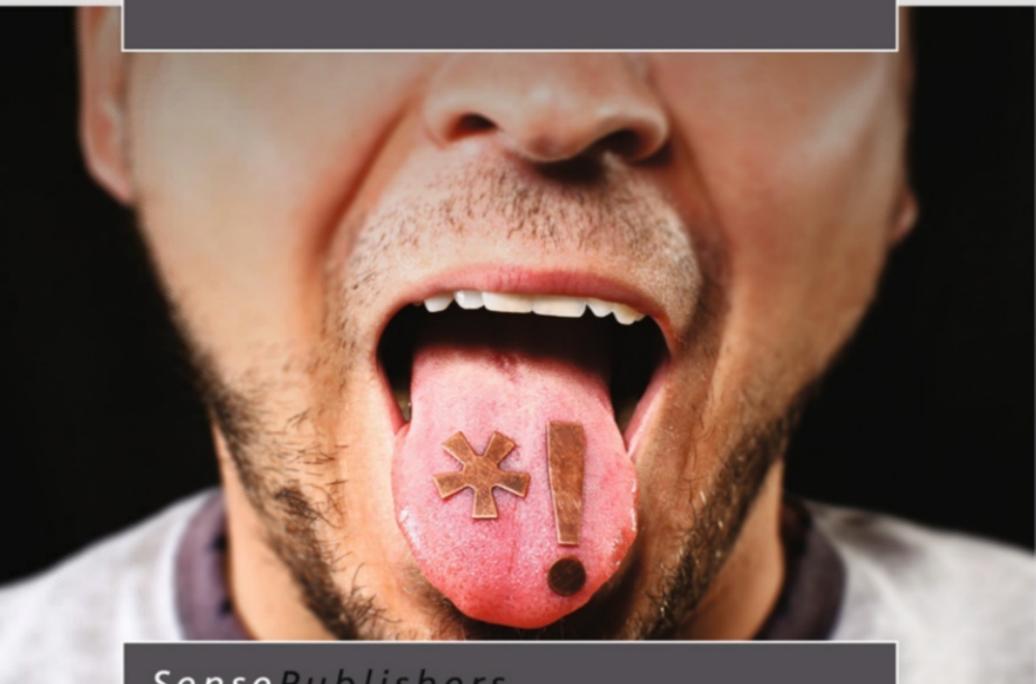


eleMENTary School

(Hyper)Masculinity
in a Feminized Context

Scott Richardson



SensePublishers

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THE TRUTH, AN INVITATION, AND A DARE

I have never met bell hooks. In my mind, however, we are the greatest of friends because no matter how difficult, she always tells me the truth. But I know our relationship isn't a selfish one because she speaks to all of us:

“Once upon a time I thought it was a female thing, this fear of men. Yet when I began to talk with men about love, time and time again I heard stories of male fear of other males. Indeed, men who feel, who love, often hide their emotional awareness from other men for fear of being attacked and shamed. This is the big secret we all keep together—the fear of patriarchal maleness that binds everyone in our culture. We cannot love what we fear....We struggle then, in patriarchal culture, all of us, to love men. We may care about males deeply. We may cherish our connections with the men in our lives. And we may desperately feel that we cannot live without their presence, their company. We can feel all these passions in the face of maleness and yet stand removed, keeping the distance patriarchy has created, maintaining the boundaries we are told not to cross.”¹

So I invite you:

Witness the undercurrents and sadness of patriarchy, not just here, but everywhere.

And dare you:

Cross those boundaries.

NOTE

¹ Hooks, b. (2003). *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*, 9.

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This was a tough book to write. I felt as though I was betraying my “brothers” by narrating a world that women, and a few other men, know about to a certain extent, but often do not understand fully. While writing, I was extremely anxious. But I felt it was important to carry the project forward. In part, I wanted to examine my distant years in that I had firmly embraced patriarchy, the more recent years that I believed to know better, and the current in which I try better.

Thanks to Robert Hampel for his astute guidance and intellectual support. A profound scholar and teacher, he urged (err...Jedi mind tricked?) me to write *the story, the book*, as it was meant to be—how I needed it. Thanks to Tony Whitson, Tonya Bartell, and Judith Dorney for challenging me along the way. Their insight was paramount to this project. Thanks to Elizabeth Soslau for being a wonderful friend, Deer Park buddy, supporter, and colleague who was willing to consider any and all of my half-baked ideas. Also, thanks to Cris Mayo for helping me to think through and shape much of my theoretical understandings of masculinity and socialization.

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INTRODUCTION

Sex, women, sports, beer, technology...these are some of the things that consume the lives of men. Or at least, this is what we (society) expect should inhabit male minds and influence their actions. What we expect of elementary school teachers, however, is usually quite different. We want sensitive, thoughtful teachers who care deeply for our children and their colleagues—to possess perceived “feminine” qualities. Men who teach elementary school are “caught in-between” and become confused as to whether their primary role should be that of a man or of a teacher. *eleMENTary school* is a multi-year ethnographic/composite non-fiction/narrative inquiry that unearths the complicated space of multiple and (in)flexible masculinities in the primary setting. This work invites readers to witness an unfiltered look at the inner-workings of male relationships, to examine their own experiences with patriarchy, and to reconsider the familiar practice of commodifying (hyper)masculinity.

Male elementary school teachers who chose to perform hypermasculinity loosely organized themselves into groups who socialized mostly with one another. I call them “Boys’ Clubs.” Boys’ Club members fought against being perceived like their female colleagues and men who they considered “the Others”—those who “take teaching too seriously,” “act like women,” and “are gay.” They also revolted against the “over-feminized” physical and social environment of the elementary school. Though many consequences resulted from the Boys’ Club’s performances, two of the most devastating were the subordination of the Others, and the self-sabotaging of their own careers. The Others experienced extreme isolation, intimidation, confusion, and hurt. Their school environment became unpleasant, even hostile, and it deeply impacted their ability to focus on their work as teachers. Boys’ Club members self-sabotaged their professional development by consuming the majority of their time with “being masculine”—“fucking around,” “not worrying too much,” and allowing (the expected narratives of) sex, women, sports, beer, and technology to dominate the majority of their conversations. This resulted in missed opportunities to understand their students, learn from their colleagues, discuss curricula, plan lessons, and so on. Because of these on-going antics, women and the Others avoided professional collaboration with the Boys’ Club. They perceived it as “an uncomfortable waste of time.”

My research provides detailed descriptions about performances and consequences of hypermasculinity. But since socially constructed forms of (hyper)masculinity are deeply engrained in our schools and society, I avoid providing oversimplified quick fixes. Rather, the work ends with a complicated conversation that wonders if schools might be successful in socializing male teachers to abandon hypermasculinity and acquire dispositions of care.

This text is full of stories. It chronicles intersections of masculinities and elementary schools through characters—myself, Owen (a friend), Alex (a new teacher), Dru (a librarian), and our colleagues. I was fascinated in the performances of masculinities and wondered how we changed, reacted, and responded; how we

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socialized ourselves, and how others socialized us masculine, within elementary school.

From Owen's story and my own, I provide insight into the operations of men, their factions, and how masculinity was constructed within and by our elementary school faculties. Then, I consider the beginnings of a new teacher—Alex. In great detail, we follow him throughout his first year of teaching. Dru's story, like many of Alex's colleagues, is found woven throughout. And in the end, Dru becomes special for me, and I think, for all of us.

These narratives relate directly and indirectly to the stories of others, including your own. I have attempted to illustrate the multiple differing and similar experiences of these narratives so that you, the reader, may map that of your own in relation to what is in these pages. In writing this work, I have kept in mind (y)our “multi-perspective as integral to the research project's transformative potential” (Sameshima 2007, 284). And as the writer I depend on it. Representative realism is what we, you, I, Owen, Alex, Dru, and other characters will engage in throughout this reading.

I provide many examples, conversations, and observations, and stay as close as possible to the actual words and events so that we may consider these stories seriously. However, it is important to note that with such sensitive work, I have been careful and utilize pseudonyms for the names of all people (but my own) and places. I engaged in composite nonfiction (Sizer 1984): I altered and/or blended details of people, places, and events, in ways that further protects the anonymity of my site and participants. I even employed this method in writing autobiographically. Composite nonfiction enabled me to fairly and clearly represent necessary themes of masculinity and schooling without jeopardizing individuals' reputations.

This text makes known many gendered operations of elementary school teachers. My work is framed within the context of elementary schools, and with individuals who are teachers; however, these “masculine” and “feminine” themes can be found everywhere. All of us are continually at work, individually and within groups, trying to understand the social constructions of gender. But sense-making typically happens in fleeting moments. It happens on subconscious and surface levels and we have become desensitized to the elaborate ways we organize, label, and determine gendered meanings, thoughts, and actions. We “perform” gender on a daily basis without critically thinking, let alone talking, about it. Considering the formidable force of gender in our lives, we devote very little safe space to examine it. I hope that my work will generate reflection and conversation.

We are all important in and to this text, but because Alex, Dru, their male colleagues, and other men are teaching, we should be especially concerned for them and their students. We need to think through how men are socialized, how they perform masculinity, and how we may support them as teachers—people who care for children.

CHAPTER 1

OWEN AND SCOTT

In college I was close friends with a guy, Owen Reynolds, who lived directly across the hall from me in my dorm. Owen and I had a lot in common. We grew up in cities, loved sports, had similar religious affiliations, and shared deep interests in music, art, philosophy, and politics. We were both at the university, a teachers' school, studying education with the intent to teach elementary aged children. We were always together. So much so that our college friends joked that the only discernable difference between us was in our skin tones. Sometimes people called him "black Scott" and me "white Owen".

In the dorm, Owen and I would keep our doors open so that our tiny cinderblock rooms would expand into one larger shared living area. Owen and I walked between rooms and exchanged school materials, food, magazines, and whatever else we had available. Most of the time, we borrowed things without permission. Between us, this kind of sharing was normal.

We were notorious for playing music loudly. We would fill the spaces of our rooms and the rest of the hallway with our eclectic mixes ranging from avant-garde jazz, conscious hip hop, punk blues, psychedelic rock, to opera. Often this resulted in protesting neighbors. It was not the volume of our music that met opposition, but rather the kind. Often, Owen responded, "Well, what is it you like to listen to?" After the disgruntled neighbor answered, Owen scrambled to find it, or something similar, in his expansive music library. This would lure the complainer into his room for conversation about the band, a concert they had attended, or a particular song. All would be quickly forgiven.

Owen had a knack in making people feel comfortable, recognized, and valued. In class, at a party, or on the basketball court, Owen made everything feel right. Those who encountered Owen found him kind, insightful, and wise. He had the ability to carry on diverse conversations. Owen, however, did not fully recognize or appreciate these talents. He never truly understood the kind of meaningful impact he had on those around him. His conversations were always laden with questions, challenges, and observations that encouraged, and sometimes demanded, others to think more deeply. This kind of engagement, though not consciously purposeful on his part, happened not for any other reason but because he cared for people and their ideas. People who engaged with Owen found themselves evolving. When I attempted to point this out, or talk about how he made others feel important and special, he would scoff and say, "Whatever, man." This humility also made Owen special.

Owen and I were friends from the very first semester of our freshman year. We preferred taking courses with one another because class conversations would spill into deep theoretical discussions over dinner or late at night doing laundry. We

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enjoyed being students and found that time together helped us to develop a seriousness about the world and ourselves.

During our last semester of our undergraduate career, we were required to complete student teaching assignments. The university assigned us schools, and co-operating teachers, that would give us our most formidable teaching experiences to date. We became consumed with these placements. We designed lesson plans, graded projects, read papers, attended field trips, and so on. We also became busy trying to find employment. This meant studying for licensure exams, writing letters to school districts, fine-tuning our resumes, and filling out applications. Our time together became sharply limited. Occasionally, we would bump into one another in the hallway and briefly swap stories about students, lessons gone terribly wrong, interviews attended, and the growing sense of reality most college seniors experience toward the end of college. We would make plans to grab a bite to eat or to hit the gym, but later one of us would always cancel. Preparation for our careers demanded intense attention that semester, and being serious students, we blocked all else out.

Our hard work paid off. During the last week of the semester we both received good news. We were hired to teach at elementary schools beginning in the fall. The school district in which I served my practicum hired me to take the place of my cooperating teacher who was retiring. Leighton School District, a mid-sized city that bordered Owen's hometown, Stockton, hired him to teach fourth grade.

So, in this final week of college, Owen knocked on the frame of my open door, walked into my room, and demanded that I ditch the writing assignments I was grading.

"Come on...forget whatever you're doing, for just a moment. We have jobs! Let's go celebrate!"

I briefly protested, "But, I..."

He walked over, grabbed my arm, and pulled me from my desk chair. "Nope, let's go. We're going to Antonio's for beers."

We celebrated and talked about how incredibly lucky we felt to have landed jobs prior to graduation. We also talked about the new cities we would call "home". I was very curious about Leighton because I did not know it well. I had been there as a kid, but never for more than a few hours at a time. Owen confessed that he too, despite living close by, never really spent much time there. He said, "From what I can tell it's kind of an up and coming city. I'm hoping it's better than Stockton!" He believed Leighton to be increasingly progressive, sophisticated, and diverse, which would serve him well, because although Owen found the challenge of engaging with people who were much more traditional and conservative than he to be exciting at times, he wanted to live in a community where his values would be taken seriously. He thought that maybe Leighton could offer this.

After several beers, Antonio's became crowded. The early college party crowd filtered in looking for cheap drafts. Owen and I knew some of these "pre-gamers" from class or around campus. They were dressed to attract the special attention of others. Naomi, a mutual friend, came to our table and sat with her beer and a slice of pizza.

“What are you guys up to?” Naomi asked.

“Not much. Just some beers,” I responded.

“I heard a rumor from Professor Rochelle.”

“Yeah, what’s that?”

“That you have jobs!”

“Really, she spilled?!” Owen exclaimed.

“What’s the big deal? That’s awesome!”

“No, no, it’s fine, it’s just funny...unexpected.”

“So, tell, tell, fill me in!” she begged.

We gave her details about our new assignments, but she was mostly interested in our interviews because she too would be soon looking for a teaching job.

Owen said, “Well, I felt pretty confident, or perhaps comfortable, with the answers I gave. But considering that it was the first teaching interview I ever went on, I was surprised when I got the call from the principal.”

This was my experience as well, so I agreed. But Naomi adamantly rejected that we should have been so surprised.

“What are you talking about? Of course you got the call. You are guys.”

Defensive, I asserted, “That’s crazy! What are you talking about? I’m not saying it didn’t help us, maybe it did, but I think we must have demonstrated potential. I think we had some qualities they desired.”

Naomi, full of beer and knowing we were always up for a fight, told us otherwise.

“Please! Look, I’ve never known a guy to have a problem getting a teaching job. Especially in an elementary school. Even look at all the dumb jocks sitting in our classes. They just want to be coaches. And they *always* get jobs. Do you think they are good classroom teachers? Doubt it. I know you two and yeah, sure, you have good qualities, you aren’t like the jocks or the losers who just pick teaching because they think it’s easy, but I think you would have still gotten these jobs even if you had very little going for you. I always think that for men, it’s their job to lose. But for women, it’s their job to gain...”

Owen and I were listening carefully when her friends interrupted, “Naomi, come on! Let’s go!”

“Okay,” she yelled. “Fellas, sorry, gots ta run!” She hurriedly drank the rest of her beer and shoved her keys and I.D. into her purse.

As she was got up, I kidded, “Thanks Naomi for that congratulatory speech. I feel honored.”

She smiled and with the palms of her hands, smashed my cheeks inward so my mouth puckered. “You’re so very welcome!” She planted a sloppy kiss on my forehead. She turned to Owen and did the same.

We sat there and pondered Naomi’s assertion. We threw questions into the air to see which ones would take flight and which ones we could cast aside as ridiculous.

“What if it was true?”

“What if we were hired first and foremost because we were men?”

“What would this mean?”

“Would there be different expectations for us?”

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“What would these expectations be?”

“If we found out we were only hired because we were guys, would this be a big blow to our egos?”

After all our deliberation, and in the moment of celebrating our new jobs, we convinced ourselves that we were hired because we were competent. That we had potential as teachers.

Although this type of evening at Antonio’s was familiar because we had engaged in hypothetical conversations over beers dozens of times before, it was unfamiliar in that it felt like it was the last time we would do this—it was an ending. Owen and I were departing from our university, our dorm, and the ability to walk across the hall with a question. We were venturing out in new directions, to different cities, and with new casts of people to associate. Downing the end bit of our last beers together as undergrads, Owen and I promised to stay in touch and, if possible, to visit one another in our new elementary schools the following year.

After Antonio’s, we walked back to our dorm. I noticed that Owen’s hands were stuffed into his jean pockets and his stride was unusually fast. He was also silent. I did not understand whether Owen was sensitive to our departure from school, if the night just became too late and he was tired, or if the beers were starting to affect him. I joked and made small talk, but Owen remained quiet. He was silent the entire way to our rooms. I turned to my door, back to the hall, and inserted my key into the lock. Before pressing my door open, I turned around and began to say, “Hey, let’s try to...,” only to realize that Owen had already slipped quietly into his room.

Something was wrong, I thought. I would catch up with him tomorrow to check-in. I convinced myself that everything would be fine.

Tomorrow, however, would be much different than expected.

“Wake up! Wake up, Scott! Come on man, you have to! Tell me this isn’t true! Are you playing a joke on me?!”

My roommate, Will, a square shouldered football player for the university and a conservative Christian, stood over me and demanded my attention. Opening my eyes, I found Will wearing his favorite t-shirt that read “JesUSAves”, and a friend of his—of whom I never knew his name because he was always referred to as “Brother”—pacing. They were both furious.

I sharply responded, “What? What the fuck?!” I liked to use the word “fuck” because I knew it antagonized him.

He glared at me with disappointment for my profanity. “You better hope this isn’t true.” He held a stack of papers high into the air and with his other hand, pointed his finger in my face. “Tell me this is some prank or you’re going to have a lot to explain to me.”

Not appreciating his tone or my abrupt awakening, I antagonize him some more.

“Okay, fuck! But before I look at this, please calm the fuck down.”

Brother protested my response and came to Will’s protection, “Come on, and stop playing around. Have a little respect.”

I wanted to discuss this idea of “respect” but thought it more pressing to figure out what this perceived crisis was all about. Will released his clenched fist and

dropped the handful of papers onto my lap. Each page was of notebook paper, written on by hand, and mostly in red ink.

Will said, "I found this...this filth...I found this on the floor under our door."

The very top page read:

Scott, how can I damage our relationship like this? How can I be so foolish? But last night, I wondered, would I be more of a fool if I never told you how I feel? Would I just let you go so easily? What if? What if? What if? Scott, I've been in love with you for years now...

My mind swum, my heart raced, my lungs stopped accepting air. Peripherally, I felt my roommate and his friend staring at me with hatred.

Owen was in love with me.

I read more...

I've written here for months. Poems, music, stories, scenarios...about you, about us. I've retraced our conversations a million times. I've never known anything like this. I'm not asking you for anything. I'm not sure what you will do. But I trust you. I love you. I know you, Scott...

My roommate and his friend continued to wait for "an explanation." But in that moment I needed to be alone. I needed time to think about what this meant for Owen and me. I got up, pushed by Will, and started to walk out the door, still just in boxers, to escape into the hall.

"No! No! You can't just walk away from us!" screamed my roommate and Brother.

I tried to ignore them.

Just a step through the door, my shoulder was yanked and my back was slammed hard into the wall. Will and Brother shoved their faces into mine. They screamed, "Are you or are you not a faggot?! We need to know. Are you or are you not a faggot?!"

In this moment, I was extremely sensitive to the fact that in most dorms, students can usually hear everything that happens in the hall. If Owen was in his room, I thought, he could certainly hear us. He would have not wanted it to go like this. He wanted *me* to read his words alone. He would not have wanted such personal details shared in a public forum, for his loving me to unfold like this, to have put me in such a hostile situation. Yes, this should have been between us; we should have been given the opportunity, together, in our own way, to talk.

My sensitivity fueled anger. My roommate and his friend's hate fed further anger. I resented that they were dominating this moment, that they were "demanding answers", that they acted as though this had anything to do with them, that they were trying to intimidate me, that they were attempting to flush out the gay in me. Furious, I turned offense. I swiftly gripped my roommate under his jaw, and threw my weight into my arm forcing his head into the opposite wall. The rage in my eyes, rage that likely neither my roommate nor his friend ever experienced, signaled to them to back down. This was a fight they would surely not win. With my hand still around Will's throat, I took a deep breath, and applied more pressure.