

mediated boyhoods



BOYS, TEENS, AND YOUNG MEN
IN POPULAR MEDIA AND CULTURE

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INTRODUCTION

Media about Boys, for Boys and by Boys

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Judith Butler (1990, 1993) explores the paradox that gender is at once socially constructed and a foundation of identity: “What are we to make of constructions without which we would not be able to think, to live, to make sense at all, those which have acquired for us a kind of necessity?” (“Bodies” v). Gender is foundational because it is not merely one aspect of identity we can separate out from a true self; we are not capable of fully imagining what it would mean to be a human without a gender. Gender is integral to our understanding of ourselves, our place in the world and the relationships we have with one another. We inhabit bodies that are gendered, and people around us react to us and interact with us in particular ways based on our gender. When a child is born—or these days, months before a child is born—the first question we ask is, “is it a boy or a girl?” and the answer to this question shapes the ways in which that child will be allowed to navigate through the world. As Judy L. Isaksen writes in her contribution to this collection, “gender reigns as one of the most potent features to not only organize our lives but also to determine our individual and collective identity” (147).

Because gender is so foundational to our sense of self and to many of the minute, ordinary events and interactions we experience every day, it is easy to think of gender identity as natural, as something that just is, which is fixed and permanent. Over the past 150 years though, feminist scholars have worked to de-naturalize gender by making visible those aspects of femininity that are socially

constructed and, therefore, alterable by individuals and society. As a result, our individual and cultural assumptions about girls and women have broadened so that many people now believe, for example, that girls are not naturally bad at math and science, do not always yearn to become wives and mothers, can excel in athletics, and can grow up to be political leaders, C.E.O.s, doctors or astronauts.

Those things we believe our children can or cannot achieve—whether true or false, whether we are conscious of these beliefs or not—directly affect our everyday interactions with children and teenagers, the school curriculums we design for them, the limits we impose upon them, the books and other media texts we create for them, and the gendered ways we depict children and teens in these various texts. However, the media texts young people consume, read, create, or use as background noise for their lives are so ubiquitous, and yet so fleeting, that they often escape careful analysis: “It’s *just* a kids’ movie. Why are we reading so much into it?” These everyday media texts and our interactions with them—even ones that at first glance might seem trivial; *especially* ones that at first glance might seem trivial—are worthy of careful study because they help to shape the sort of gendered adult a child will eventually become. “So much of Subject formation occurs in minutia, in an accretion of details that build upon one another through repetition—*innumerable* insignificant moments join together to create the seamless-seeming narratives that shape our sense of self” (Wannamaker 227). In other words, the little bits and pieces of popular culture—that children’s film watched over and over again on the VCR in the living room, that beer commercial with high-fiving men and bikini-clad women aired during sports programming, or that YouTube video we forward on to all of our friends—all work together as part of a complex and expansive media matrix that both reflects and shapes our collective and individual attitudes about gender.

While much research has been conducted analyzing the ways girls and young women are depicted in the media, we have not yet focused the same intense and far-reaching critical attention on boys and young men in the media. As Suzanne M. Enck-Wanzer and Scott A. Murray point out in their contribution to this collection, “there has been a bevy of research on constructions of femininities across popular media; however, emphases on the construction of masculinities have, most often, been an afterthought or implied by default” (59). We have not conducted enough research on media created about boys, for boys and by boys, and, as a result, we have not asked most boys and young men to think critically about the ways they are portrayed, the ways in which these portrayals might reflect or influence their lives, or about the ways in which various masculine roles are socially constructed and, therefore, as alterable as feminine roles. The cliché “boys will be boys,” for instance, implies there is something natural and simple about traditional masculinity that we should not work to alter, and that does not need to be interrogated. Also, while there are, increasingly, a number of scholars

who study and teach masculinity, men's studies, and boyhood studies (e.g., Kimmel and Messner, 1990; Messner and Sabo, 1994; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Connell, 1995; Harris, 1995; Beneke, 1997; Faludi, 2000; Nodelman, 2002; Stephens, 2002; Bilz, 2004; Kidd, 2004; Kimmel, 2008) most "gender studies" programs at colleges and universities still focus almost exclusively on femininity and women's studies. This is understandable because "gender studies" grew out of larger political movements meant to challenge deeply entrenched policies and attitudes that severely limited (and continue to limit) the social and familial roles women play, the political and economic power women wield, and the rights and privileges they enjoy in their everyday lives. This work is unfinished and needs to continue both as an academic study and as a social and political movement.

However, as several of the men's studies scholars listed above have noted, since gender is seen as a binary (masculine/feminine, man/woman, boy/girl) a focus solely on women and girls is incomplete and, ultimately, unproductive. Masculinity and femininity, as is the case with any binary, exist only in relation to one another: We cannot fully understand one without fully understanding the other; we cannot change one without changing the other; and we certainly cannot work to break down and challenge binaries without developing a deeper understanding of the ways one half of the binary is inextricably linked to and works to define the other half.

One might assume that boys and boyhood are receiving a great deal of serious scholarly attention because, over the past few decades, boys have been the focus of much attention from mainstream media pundits and authors of pop-psychology books on parenting, psychology and education (e.g., Gurian, 1996; Biddulph, 1998; Pollack, 1998; Garbarino, 1999; Kindlon and Thompson, 1999; Gurian and Trueman, 2000; Sommers, 2000; Brozo, 2002; Marano, 2008; Strausbaugh, 2008). Much of the recent attention boys have received in the mainstream media, however, has been less an attempt to understand masculinity, and more an attempt to pathologize boys and then to prescribe various remedies to cure them of an ailing masculinity. At their worst, some of these texts kindle and then capitalize on parental and societal fears about boys and teens, worries about boys being violent or illiterate or delinquent or gay being the most common of these adult anxieties. In the public debates played out in mass-marketed books and on television talk shows, traditional versions of masculinity are either valorized or pilloried. For instance, some argue that traditional cultural assumptions about masculinity harm boys and young men by brutalizing them and by severely limiting the emotional and social roles allowed to boys and young men (Kindlon and Thompson, 1999). Others argue that feminist demands are harming boys and men and making them feel guilty about being male, and that we should just let boys be boys instead of asking them to embrace more feminine roles (Gurian, 1996). Many of these mainstream discussions about boys often play to an adult

nostalgia about a mythic time when “boys could be boys” or they use boys as a symbol or a scapegoat for societal ills (Sommers, 2000; Strausbaugh, 2008). These public debates about the failings of contemporary boyhood are so pervasive that they have led to policy changes in schools such as gender-segregated classrooms or subjects, and have created a niche industry of advice manuals for the parents and teachers of boys. They have also directly and indirectly influenced our culture’s current attitudes about boys.

In their article critiquing four of these pop-psychology books, Kristin J. Anderson and Christina Accomando (2002), discuss the ways that these books often ignore the differences among boys, and instead focus mostly on a universalized, straight, white, middle-class boy. They end their study by calling for research that would “complicate notions of gender and critically inspect false universalities. Such analysis also could examine the ways in which boys and men both benefit from and are constrained by gender polarization and male privilege” (511). This is one goal of this collection, to complicate some of our commonly held notions about a universalized boyhood by studying a broad variety of boys and young men from various cultures and subcultures.

Another goal is to complicate commonly held notions about the media and its influences upon boys. When I tell people I am editing a collection of essays about boys and the media, responses are enthusiastic and concerned, but also vague: “Oh . . . boys and the media . . . That’s a problem, isn’t it?” This response—that there is some sort of “problem” involving boys and the media—is not surprising given the negative tone of many recent books and articles that raise alarms about boys in crisis, gloomy and often over-exaggerated reports of illiterate and alliterate boys, and various news stories that imply a direct connection between violent video games or music lyrics and violent behavior. The vagueness of the response also is not surprising, given the contradictory information available about boys, young men and the media:

- One assumption is that violent video games, slasher films, rap music, sports programming, and an overdose of on-line role playing games are turning our boys and young men into violent delinquents (e.g., Garbarino, 1999; Ravitch and Viteretti, 2003)
- Then, conversely, there are the experts who claim that all this media consumption is turning our boys into obese and alliterate couch potatoes. (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004)
- Or, according to a different set of experts, the media has turned the current generation of boys and young men into “wimps” and “sissies,” who need to be taught how to be the vibrant (violent?), outdoorsy, and appro-

priately manly boys their fathers and grandfathers most certainly must have been (e.g., Gurian, 1996; Sommers, 2000; Marano, 2008; Strausbaugh, 2008).

- And then there are those who argue the exact opposite: stereotypical depictions of gender in the media work to reinforce narrow and oppressive gender roles that objectify girls and women, and that restrict options for those boys (most boys) who do not easily fulfill traditional, rigid expectations of masculinity (e.g., Pollack, 1998; Kindlon and Thompson, 1999; Faludi, 2000; Stephens, 2002; Way and Chu, 2004; Kimmel, 2008).
- And, finally, there are those who question whether media is harming boys at all, or whether some adults are overreacting. Generations of adults have, after all, fretted over every new media platform to come along, proclaiming that each new development—from moving pictures to comic books to rock-and-roll to rap to video games to the internet—will most certainly create marauding bands of juvenile delinquents. Some scholars, therefore, argue that we need to temper our alarm with a bit of historical perspective, and that, perhaps, we need to have more faith in the critical thinking abilities and moral compasses of our boys and young men (e.g., Jenkins, 1992, 1998; Newkirk, 2002; Osgerby, 2004; Gee, 2007; Wannamaker, 2008).

Perhaps, given these contradictory opinions, the relationship between boys and young men and the media is far more complicated and ambiguous than it might initially seem.

What is worth considering, then, is not whether we can find commonalities among all boys or all media created for boys, or whether we are able to succinctly define contemporary boyhood, but, instead, whether the generalizations we make about boys in our public discourse have an effect on the lives of boys, on the ways we socialize them, on the policies we make regarding them, on the media we create for them, on the ways we portray them in the media, and on the ways they view themselves. What is at stake in the assumptions we make? What is the picture of the contemporary boy created by the popular media? Is this mediated boy a reflection of or an influence on the lives of actual boys? How thoughtfully are boys and young men able to respond to and interact with the media texts they consume or create? While various pundits, authors, educators, and psychologists seem to reach very different conclusions about the current state of boyhood, one thing too many of these mainstream theories have in common is the notion that something negative is being “done to” our boys by contemporary popular culture and media. Missing from many of these arguments are the points of view of the

boys themselves, which, as will be illustrated in some of the chapters that follow, often surprise us and transcend our assumptions through their abilities to understand, to resist, to remake, and to critically think about the media in their lives.

All of the essays in this collection work to challenge and complicate our assumptions about masculinity, boys, young men and the media. They ask us to question and to re-think the supposed naturalness of such dominant masculine traits as heterosexuality, emotional toughness, sexual aggressiveness or violent impulses. They also ask us to expand our beliefs about the ways boys and young men use the media or are affected by it. They do so from a variety of perspectives and critical lenses, but all assume that a) there is no monolithic, universal “boy” or experience of boyhood, that there are numerous varieties of boyhoods influenced by such factors as race, sexual orientation, socio-economic class or national identity; and that b) there is much we can learn from media portrayals of boys and boyhood, which sometimes are at odds with the actual lives of boys at the same time as they reflect cultural attitudes about boys.

This collection features chapters examining the ways boys and young men use, interact with and create film, literature, fashion, YouTube videos, bedroom culture, video games, wrestling shows, hip hop, social networking sites and queer culture. There are also chapters examining the ways boys and young men are depicted in documentary films, news shows, music videos, magazines, young adult novels, and children’s films. The contributors to this collection are all working to understand boys and young men, and their depictions in and relation to the media, in complex ways that do not assume we can make easy generalizations about all boys, and that do not assume that all media aimed at boys or created by boys is inherently negative. Additionally, by listening to boys, by studying various media texts and the contexts in which these are used, and by paying close attention to some of the media texts that boys themselves are creating, this collection hopes to illuminate the thoughtful and interactive relationship many boys and young men have with the media.

The Chapters: Approaching Interdisciplinary Approaches

This collection brings together work from scholars approaching boys and the media using a variety of research methodologies and critical lenses, which can be a challenge for readers unused to navigating among different sorts of disciplinary discourse, but which also can work to highlight the complex web of relationships among boys and young men, identity, community, culture, ideology and the media. Contributors to this volume come from the fields of literary studies, media studies, film studies, sociology, folklore, cultural studies, rhetoric and gender studies. While some of the scholars contributing to this collection look at the ways boys and young men are depicted in the media, others look at the ways boys

use and understand the media, and some others look at the ways that boys and young men are creating their own media texts.

Different research methodologies ask different sets of questions and focus on different aspects of media environment (e.g. text, author, reader, context, community, genre, media platform, and various modes of production, distribution and consumption). So, for instance, a careful close reading of a work of literature or a film text can help us to think more critically about the ideologies about gender that might be underlying that work, while interviews with boys and young men can map their viewing habits or reading strategies. Observations of boys and young men using media in their living rooms, bedrooms or on internet chat rooms and social networking sites can shed light on the active roles they take when using the media, while cultural, gender or rhetorical theories can provide lenses through which to analyze what all these texts and interactions might mean. Taken together, then, this collection of essays employing a wide range of disciplinary approaches allows us to come at the complex relationships among boys, the media and culture from various angles, and to look at similar questions using different points of view and different sets of data. For example, while a close reading of a television program might reveal certain themes or patterns of discourse, a study of the way young people view the program might reveal that they are surfing the internet while watching and not paying full attention to the program or that their parents and younger siblings are watching with them in ways that influence their viewing experience. Interviews with these same young people might demonstrate that they interpret the program in ways adults might not predict or that they create sophisticated video mash-ups that are meant to be parodies of the program. An analysis of the advertisements running during the program or of the corporate sponsorship of the program could create an even more complex picture of the larger, increasingly global, media environment contemporary boys and young men inhabit.

All of the contributors to this volume have worked to retain the complexity of their arguments while also making their ideas accessible to a general audience. As editor, I have worked to organize the chapters in an order that highlights the relationships among them and that works to create a multi-faceted look at masculinity and the media that, ideally, challenges and complicates many of the assumptions we make about boys, young men and the media. For this reason, the collection begins with a chapter that asks us to reconsider the very notion of boyhood as a biological category: Michelle Ann Abate's "When Girls Will Be Bois: Female Masculinity, Genderqueer Identity and Millennial LGBTQ Culture." Abate researches the lesbian sub-culture of "bois," young women who take on the role of teenaged boys, and convincingly argues that "this phenomenon suggests that the study of masculinity and femininity in the twenty-first century cannot simply

exist side-by-side as two separate, though parallel, discursive disciplines. Instead, they must be viewed as mutually constructive and constitutive" (32).

Abate's chapter is followed by another that challenges us to re-think the naturalness of masculinity as a category. In "Who is the Victim Again?: Female Abuse of Adolescent Boys in Contemporary Culture," Matthew B. Prickett turns a critical eye on young adult novels, films and television shows and news stories that feature adult women in relationships with teenaged boys in ways that assume the boys want to be sexually molested and benefit from being seduced by an adult woman. He documents a double standard that constructs all women as victims and all males—even underaged ones—as sexual predators. This double standard perpetuates a culture in which boys and young men are discouraged from seeing themselves or other males as victims of sexual abuse, and is an example of the ways in which our attitudes about "natural" masculine sexual desire work to harm boys and young men.

The chapter "How to Hook a Hottie": Teenage Boys, Hegemonic Masculinity, and *CosmoGirl! Magazine*" by Scott A. Murray and Suzanne Enck-Wanzer, continues this discussion by looking at different media texts targeted at a different audience, magazines written for an audience of teenaged girls, which also work to naturalize male sexuality as aggressive and predatory. They study advice columns and articles in these magazines that depict teenaged boys as sexually forceful and emotionally stunted, and that encourage girl readers to expect and enable such behaviors. They write that "if we can identify the messages being directed at girls, we can, by extension, realize how girls are being trained to (re)act toward boys" (58). If our identities, attitudes toward others and communities are shaped by the ways other people react to us, then these magazines, ironically, may be encouraging girls to perpetuate some of the more negative aspects of traditional masculinity that are harmful to both boys and girls. These magazines, then, are part of a larger matrix of media texts working together to maintain our collective cultural constructions of boyhood.

The next two chapters continue this dialogue by carefully examining the ways boys and young men are depicted in popular children's and young adults films. Both argue that in order to appeal to a broad audience, movies often depict boys and teens in ways that universalize them or that place them into "types." In his chapter, "From 'Booger Breath' to 'The Guy': Juni Cortez Grows Up in Robert Rodriguez's *Spy Kids* Trilogy," Phillip Serrato analyzes the development of the main male character over the course of the three *Spy Kids* films. Serrato convincingly argues that director Robert Rodriguez "departicularizes Juni to offer a text that can speak to a broader audience of boys" (93), but in so doing, he loses an opportunity to create a specific, complex and multi-faceted boy, and Juni—a potentially ground-breaking character, who could have performed specific aspects of Latino masculinity—simply reverts to being a generic "type." Kent Baxter looks at

similar issues in his chapter, “Adolescence Vérité: Shocking Glimpses of the Teen in Contemporary American Film,” which focuses attention, primarily, on two recent and controversial films about teens that blur the lines between fiction and documentary: *Kids* and *American Teen*. These films, he argues, reflect an American obsession with trying to uncover and represent the “real” teenager: by conflating documentary and fiction these films work to reinforce gender role stereotypes and continue to perpetuate the idea that there is a universalized experience of boyhood.

The next several chapters also challenge our constructions of a universalized boyhood, but do so by examining very specific cultures and subcultures of boys and young men, both in the United States and overseas. Bayard E. Lyons, in his chapter, “Beyond the Gloss of Youth: Turkish Cypriot Television’s Mediation of Young Men in the Public Sphere,” looks at the ways masculinity, and, by extension, femininity, are portrayed on television and constructed in public spaces and in public discourse in Turkish Cyprus. His chapter looks at a broad range of factors—nationality, economics, traditional cultural values, attitudes about youth, allocation of public space and public speech, and the role of the news media—that all work together to construct gender expectations and norms for young people living in a specific culture. This careful study works to destabilize notions of a natural and universal boy or young man by looking very carefully at the complex and specific factors at work in depicting, reflecting, and creating one culture’s attitudes about boyhood.

Jes Battis also destabilizes universalizing notions of masculinity, which often assume a heterosexual boy or young man, in his analysis of two highly acclaimed young adult novels featuring idealized gay characters and communities. In his chapter, “Almost Paradise: Queer Utopias in Abeyance in David Levithan’s *Wide Awake* and *Boy Meets Boy*,” Battis considers the queer communities and gay male characters depicted in these novels, and the questions raised by these depictions: What might a queer utopia look like? What would it take to achieve? Most significantly, what factors keep both our culture and these novels from fully realizing the political and social changes necessary to achieve such equality among people of various sexual orientations and gendered identities?

The next several essays look at various other subcultures in the United States in order to explore the specific ways that African and African-American masculinity are portrayed and constructed—sometimes in dialogue with, and sometimes in opposition to one another. In her chapter, “‘Word Up’: Hip Hoppers’ Smart Pose Outwits Masculine Scripts,” Judy Isaksen explores the rhetoric of hip hop as it is read by and re-appropriated by teens and young men in on-line communities. These musical and digital discursive spaces, she argues, allow boys and young men to perform resistant, playful gendered identities, which “brilliantly use rhetorical techniques as defense mechanisms to survive and re-articulate masculinity” (161).

Isaksen demonstrates, through examples of on-line discussions among boys, the ways in which we need to rethink our assumptions about hip-hop culture, internet culture, and masculine identities.

While Isaksen focuses on young African-American men finding ways to re-define their identity through the media, Rebecca B. Watts looks at a group of young men from Africa whose American identity is being constructed for them through mass media coverage. Her chapter, “The Lost Boys of Sudan: Race, Ethnicity, and Perpetual Boyhood in Documentary Film and Television News,” focuses on the ways adult male refugees of the Sudanese Civil War are depicted as perpetual “boys.” The essay that follows Watts’s looks at another group of immigrants from Africa living in the United States, and the ways in which they are working to re-define their masculine identities by combining African and American cultural rituals. Sandra Grady’s essay, “Consuming the WWE: Professional Wrestling as a Surrogate Initiation Ritual among Somali Bantu Teenagers,” examines the ways boys and young men from Somalia incorporate American media into their cultural identity, their coming of age rituals, and their efforts to adjust to life in the United States. In order to understand the viewing habits and attitudes of Somali Bantu teenagers living in the U.S., Grady spent time in their living rooms interviewing groups of boys and young men as she watched wrestling programs with them.

Stacey J. T. Hust used similar methods to study the ways 13– to 15-year-old boys use various media platforms and texts in their homes in her chapter, “The Shrines to What They Love: Exploring Boys’ Uses and Gratifications of Media in their Personal Spaces.” Hust’s study complicates commonly held assumptions about the ways boys consume media: her research, part of a larger study on teens and the media, suggests we may be underestimating the access teen boys have to various sorts of media in their homes, we need to better understand the ways differences in socio-economic class shape the ways in which and the spaces in which boys consume media, and we need to do more to carefully study and understand the ways boys often multi-task by consuming a variety of texts at once.

Finally, this collection concludes with two chapters focused on the creative and analytical work of young men. “Love Song: Queer Video Use of One Pop Tune by Homosocial Boys and Young Men” by Keith Dorwick is a case study of one song, “What is Love?” by Haddaway, which has become the backdrop for numerous YouTube video appropriations, parodies, and mash-ups, many of which were created by boys and young men. Dorwick looks specifically at the ways that some of these on-line performances create playful spaces where boys and young men can safely, yet publicly, celebrate their relationships with other boys and young men. Finally, Margaret Mackey’s contribution to this collection, “Growing Up Multimodal: Young Men Talk Media,” includes transcripts of her interviews with young men, who are comparing and analyzing their readings of literary,

video game and film texts. While a number of experts raise alarms about boys and young men being negatively influenced by media texts like films and video games, Mackey asks young males to speak for themselves on the subject. Working from the assumptions that “young male gamers are as varied and perceptive as the rest of humanity” and that, “some of the most interesting observations about contemporary boyhood might come from those who have most recently left it behind” (240) Mackey conducted in-depth interviews with a group of young men. The transcripts and analysis of these interviews work to counter our assumptions that video game playing can contribute to illiteracy, short attention spans, or a lack of critical reading and thinking abilities. Indeed, the young men interviewed by Mackey speak eloquently and thoughtfully about the pleasures of reading a variety of media texts, both print and digital.

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