

STUDYING MASCULINITY(IES) IN BOOKS ABOUT GIRLS

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This study explored the nature and performance of masculinity portrayed in popular young adult novels featuring female protagonists. Although all had their limitations, the novels offered more complex renderings of gendered identity in the lives of female and male adolescent characters, addressed the effects of enforced traditional masculinity, and productively, if only momentarily, disrupted the connection between sex and gender in ways that allow for engagement with alternative notions of masculinity. Studying masculinity in these contemporary young adult novels about girls' lives offers much for students and teachers to consider in analyzing masculinity and femininity in texts and in life.

Key words: cross-dressing, youth, literature, masculinity, femininity, adolescent novels

L'étude porte sur la masculinité telle que représentée dans des romans populaires pour jeunes adultes mettant en scène des protagonistes de sexe féminin. Malgré les faiblesses de tous ces romans, ils présentent des descriptions relativement complexes de l'identité masculine et féminine à l'adolescence, tiennent compte des effets de la masculinité traditionnelle et réussissent, ne serait-ce que momentanément, à ébranler le lien entre le sexe et le genre de manière à permettre la prise en compte d'autres notions de la masculinité. Ces romans contemporains pour adolescents sur la vie des filles offrent un matériau riche aux élèves et aux enseignants qui veulent réfléchir sur la masculinité et la féminité dans les textes et dans la vie.

Mots clés : Travestisme, jeunesse, littérature, masculinité, féminité, romans pour adolescents

In this article, I focus on the discursive construction of masculinity made available to male (and female) adolescent readers, rather than on boys and their literacies per se. The two areas are connected in that the social and linguistic construction of gender, together with other forms of social difference, are deeply implicated in how literacy practices are organized, negotiated, and performed in everyday life (Brozo, 2005; Davies, 1989/2003, 1993/2003, 2000; Dutro, 2003; Lesko, 2000; Weaver-Hightower, 2003). As a study of literary texts rather than a sociological study of boys and their reading, this study makes visible some of the meanings that organize masculinity in young adult literature. More specifically this study explores the nature and production of masculinity offered in young adult literature featuring female protagonists, that is, in girls' books.

This study may seem odd. The exploration of masculinity may be viewed as more appropriately conducted on books about boys, and certainly there are studies that do such work, as well as an increasing number of studies that attend to the representation of masculinity in children's books generally (Bean & Harper, 2007; Kidd, 2000; Mallan, 2002; Nodelman, 2002; Stephens, 2002). But I contend, along with others, that girls' books in particular have much to say about masculinity (Flanagan, 2002; Halberstam, 1998; Noble, 2004). In Western thought, masculinity and femininity are often organized as a binary, a highly polarized binary in which the terms gain meaning only in relation to the other, such that what is feminine is not masculine, what is masculine is not feminine. Connell (1995) in an often-cited quotation reminds scholars:

Masculinity and femininity are inherently relational concepts, which have meaning in relation to each other, as a social demarcation and a cultural opposition. This holds regardless of the changing content of the demarcation in different societies and periods of history. (p. 44)

Books, then, that focus on femininity may speak at least indirectly to the construction of masculinity. Conversely, books about masculinity might well imply something about the nature and construction of femininity.

Although masculinity and femininity are often organized as oppositional concepts tied to particular bodies (hence girls books/boys

books), the gendered performances of individual characters (or indeed real people) cannot always be so easily divided as feminine or masculine according to their sex.¹ Feminist and queer studies over the last twenty years have consistently argued for and aptly demonstrated the separation of gender from sex (Butler, 1990, 1997; Parker & Sedgwick, 1995; see also Martino & Palotta-Chiarolli, 2001, 2003). This scholarship suggests that gender is not a fixed set of biologically determined behaviours. Moreover gender identity can be understood as a stylized performance, socially scripted and regulated, but amenable to change (Butler, 1990, 1997). As such masculinity is not the exclusive purview of male bodies, but can be performed by anyone. Thus the study of masculinity cannot be reduced to male characters, or to so-called boys' books.

Evident in Judith Halberstam's (1998) *Female Masculinity* and Jean Bobby Noble's (2004) *Masculinities with Men*, masculinity can be and has been enacted by female characters in a wide range of historical and contemporary texts. Such enactments may or may not be simple imitations of conventional or traditional masculinity, or what is often referred to somewhat erroneously as hegemonic masculinity.² They can offer rich and interesting reworkings of masculine subjectivity, including lesbian masculine subjectivities, e.g., the drag queen, butch, stone butch, or transgendered man; and heterosexual female masculine subjectivities, e.g., the tomboy, the female-to-male cross-dresser. According to Halberstam (1998), these performances provide powerful glimpses of "how masculinity is constructed as masculinity" (p. 1) and indicate that perhaps the best place to find masculinity is "actually the least obvious, not with men at all," but with women (Noble, p. ix).

The performance of masculinity by female characters and femininity by male characters by way of cross-dressing is surprisingly common in children's literature (e.g., the wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood*, Toad in *The Wind in the Willows*). However, female-to-male cross-dressing tends to be liberating and successful – she passes; whereas male-to-female cross-dressing, with some exception, is often deployed comically and unsuccessful – he does not and cannot pass (Flanagan, 2002; Gaber, 1993). Because of this discrepancy, female-to-male crossing, not only exposes the "artifice of gender constructions," but challenges "traditional

gender constructions, providing a spectrum of gendered alternatives"; whereas male-to-female cross-dressing often, though not always, serves to reinforce gender binaries (Flanagan, 2002, p. 79). At the very least the recognition of female masculinities, including cross-dressing females, works to debunk a unitary notion of masculinity tied exclusively to male bodies.

Recognizing and acknowledging a diversity of masculinities, including female masculinities, in text and in life challenges norms and expectations associated with traditional masculinity, destabilizing gender hierarchies that limit human potential. Certainly research, if not the local news, reminds scholars that masculinity and femininity have been so strongly named and normalized as polarized and hierarchical opposites, and so deeply conflated with sexual identity that serious repercussions result for those who do not or cannot embrace or enact the gender and sexual norms produced within this organization. Acting outside the norms of masculinity can result in a myriad of problems ranging from name-calling, to physical assault, to suicide. Moreover, research suggests that traditional, essentialized masculinity is implicated in patterns of dominance, bullying, and other acts of violence (Brozo, Walter & Placker, 2002; Connell, 1995; Weaver-Hightower, 2003).

But much can be done. Rather than naming and policing the boundaries of what is and is not traditional masculine behavior, pedagogical contexts can be sites of inquiry into gender difference with the goal of expanding human freedom and possibility. In this study, I examined how masculinity is enacted by female and male characters, and more generally, how masculinity is configured in a selection of contemporary young adult literature for and/or about adolescent girls with the idea that such explorations in such texts might be carefully incorporated into Language Arts/English classrooms. I focus this study on contemporary young adult literature because literature can be a focal practice, that is, a site of inquiry where identification, analysis, and insight may be possible both individually and collectively (Sumara, 2002). Contemporary young adult literature, popular with youth, would seem a more obvious place to begin than with the canonical adolescent literature often featured in school curriculum. Novels that students read and enjoy outside, and sometimes inside, school, may allow adolescents

to think through the ways in which masculinity (and indeed femininity) is, and might yet be “storied” and “performed” in texts, and in life.

BOOKS ABOUT GIRLS

The selection of young adult literature, purposefully chosen for this study, included *Speak* (Anderson, 1999), *The Breadwinner* (Ellis, 2000/2003), *Luna* (Peters, 2004), *Accidental Love* (Soto, 2006) and *Stargirl* (Spinelli, 2000). These are popular books and popular authors (see for example, the International Reading Association website on Children’s Book awards). Several are award winning and the majority have gone through multiple printings. Most of these books can be currently found in middle and secondary classrooms and school libraries. All are available in public libraries and bookstores.

Unlike other textual studies concerning masculinity and cross-dressing, all the novels feature teenaged female protagonists, ranging in age from 12 to 17 years. The focus on adolescence means that budding sexuality and the body can be a significant aspect of the narrative and to the analysis in ways that children’s literature would not. In this selection of novels all the characters are heterosexual, with the exception of the novel, *Luna*, which features a character who considers himself a transgendered girl. As will be discussed, the nature and deployment of masculinity is absolutely pertinent and obvious in some of the narratives, so, for example, cross-dressing of varying sorts is central to the plot; in other cases masculine performance is more implicitly organized in the unfolding of the storyline.

The analysis involved close readings of the novels for moments when traditional or feminine or alternative masculinity was in play. In particular, I gave attention to instances of male-to-female and female-to-male cross-dressing, and to less obvious moments when an alternative, feminine or traditional masculinity was apparent in the narrative. The analysis focused on how these various performances of masculinities operated in the novels. Such an analysis extends and supports recent efforts to include masculinity as a lens through which to read and analyze texts.

THE NATURE AND PERFORMANCE OF MASCULINITY

The performance of masculinity in a strategic act of cross-dressing is key to the narrative in Deborah Ellis' (2000) *The Breadwinner*. In this short but powerful novel set in Afghanistan, the main character Parvana disguises herself as a boy to enter the public market in Kabul and secure food for her family. During the time of Taliban rule, females were not allowed to enter public space without a male relative, but in Parvana's family no adult male relatives were available to take on this responsibility. Her father had been arrested and her brother killed by a land mine. Parvana, easily adopting a male persona, is able to secure food for the family, as her mother had indicated, "As a boy, you'll be able to move in and out of the market, buy what we need, and no one will stop you" (p. 63).

Parvana's performance of masculinity lasts for months and extends to her home-life. Her sister warns her: "If you're going to be a boy outside, you should be a boy inside, too. What if someone comes by?" (p. 72). In addition to purchasing food for the family, Parvana earns some money by hiring out to read and write for illiterate citizens. She becomes a letter reader, work her father did before his arrest. Dressing like a boy, looking much like her deceased brother, and working in the same job as her father, Parvana becomes "the Breadwinner" for her family – a term traditionally reserved for males. Like other female-to-male, cross-dressing literary characters, Parvana is successful in adopting and performing masculinity. Not only does she pass as a tea-boy, but indeed Parvana comes to enjoy her masculine performance: her short hair, male attire, and, more generally, the freedom and the responsibility she carries outside the home.

When her father returns home, the more traditional patterns of gender could also return, but her father, out of necessity, but as emphasized in the novel, also because he has had a "western education," is not distressed by Parvana's disguise, and comments, "Now you are both my daughter and my son" (p.156). The blurring of gender boundaries in this comment and Parvana's successful performance of masculinity, and her pleasure in the experience, potentially opens up a moment for reflection on what constitutes and limits gender identity.

In this, novel masculinity (and youth) offers invisibility to Parvana: "Now with her face open to the sunshine, she was invisible in another

way. She was just one more boy on the street. She was nothing worth paying attention to" (p. 70). The performance of masculinity is universal and unmarked. More specifically, male youth is both unmarked and insignificant in the public market. The performance of femininity is organized in direct opposition as marked and significant in public space if only as a transgression.

Parvana's performance of masculinity allows her to become outspoken and "wild" as indicated with alarm by her mother. Such characteristics name what maleness means or allows. Violence does, too, because the performance of Taliban masculinity allows for physical and verbal violence against women, children, and at times other men:

Just before she left, Parvana caught a glimpse of a young Talib man, too young to have a beard. He was holding up a rope strung with four severed hands, like beads on a necklace. He was laughing and showing off his booty to the crowd. (p. 122)

Yet in front of the insignificant Parvana, dressed as a tea-boy, another Talib male cries after she reads him a letter from a now deceased relative:

He shook his head and held out his hand for the letter. His hands trembled as he put the letter back in the envelope. She saw a tear fall from his eye. It rolled down his cheek until it landed in his beard. (p. 79)

In this moment, Taliban masculinity is rendered more complex than traditional masculinity might allow. Nonetheless, Talib masculinity, even for men who may cry, is more often depicted as unpredictable, violent, and figured by ignorance and illiteracy.

Other performances of masculinity are offered in this novel. Parvana's father, for example, is positioned in opposition to the Taliban soldiers, as an educated man, modernized (read as Westernized), the victim of violence rather than its perpetrator, and an ardent supporter of his wife's career and his daughters' public education. Good masculinity is limited by the Taliban's enforced gender performances and read in relation to how gender should be organized from a modern, Western, liberal gaze. This renders the story intelligible and Parvana and her family's plight, tragic. Such representation also serves to reinforce a

colonial notion that Western educated masculinity is different from and superior to other forms of masculinity like those of the Taliban.

In its narrative, *The Breadwinner* addresses the obvious state enforcement of gender roles and norms: obviously norms and standards for women but also for men. In addition, *The Breadwinner* goes further to disconnect if only in the form of a disguise, males from the performance of masculinity. Thus gender potentially becomes a performance that anybody can do, or at least what some bodies can do. In several parts of the novel, the female body is viewed as an absolute obstacle to the performance of masculinity. According to the novel, what makes Parvana's cross-dressing possible and ultimately successful is her prepubescence. Her more mature sister evidently would not pass: "No one would believe me to be a boy," Nooria said calmly, looking down at her body" (p.65). The mature and maturing female body is seen as betraying the possibility of male performance, as evident too when Parvana's friend, Shauzia, who is also disguised as a tea-boy, worries: "I'm starting to grow My shape is changing. If it changes too much, I'll turn back into a girl and then I'll be stuck here" (p. 127). This depiction reinscribes the polarization of mature female and male bodies – they become so different that successful cross-dressing is placed in jeopardy. This depiction renders less intelligible the passing of mature female bodies, thus those female bodies that can or do pass can be seen as odd or unnatural, or at the very least not as feminine. Masculinity and femininity in these moments in the novel are tied back to idealized male and female bodies and thus limit gender to anatomy. Nonetheless the female-to-male cross-dressing in this novel, though a desperate measure limited to prepubescent female bodies, makes it possible to consider, if only momentarily, the performances of masculinity, and whether gender is or is not just an act, open to change, and if so, whether performances, state enforced or not, should or might be changed.

Julie Anne Peters' novel *Luna* bears some similarity to Deborah Ellis' *The Breadwinner* but offers more complexity in the performance of gender. Like *The Breadwinner*, the narrative of *Luna* focuses on the explicit cross-dressing, but in this case it is a 17-year-old male character, Liam, who dresses as a female: Luna. The novel is perhaps more unsettling than *The Breadwinner* because Liam is a transsexual who does

not wish to disguise himself as a woman, but dresses to live life as a woman – to be a woman – in accordance with what he sees as his true nature. Over the course of the novel, Liam begins to transition, that is to dress and act as a girl publicly. The story, told from the perspective of Regan his sister, concerns the burden she bears in supporting her brother, his secret enactments of femininity, and his eventual transition to Luna, in a family, school, and world that offers little support, and indeed considerable hostility and condemnation.

Liam's shifting performances of female and male throughout the novel, together with Regan's own negotiation of feminine and heterosexual performance (she has a boyfriend), along with the family's and school's organization of gender offer a unique display of how masculinity can and cannot be enacted and enforced. In many instances Liam's dual performances are dramatically and stereotypically opposed. In what he calls "his boy role," Liam is an exceptionally intelligent young man particularly in the sciences, and a highly skilled computer geek. He owns a sports car and is a budding entrepreneur, but Liam is desperately unhappy to the point of suicide. His father repeatedly looks to Liam to perform appropriately as a male by trying out for sports, working with him on restoration of an old car, and taking a romantic interest in girls. Although Liam hates disappointing his father, none of these boy activities interest Liam. As Luna, the character dresses and enjoys women's clothing and fashion in general, wears and enjoys makeup and nail polish, wants his hair long, laughs and giggles, and dreams of going to his prom dressed as a girl. As Luna, Liam's gestures and body movements are entirely feminine and very expressive. As a child, before he knew enough to hide his true nature, Liam is depicted as having a strong interest in dolls, in playing the Mommy and insisting that Regan play the Daddy, which she does. In many ways Liam's feminine and masculine performances reifies conventional bifurcated gendered norms and expectations. However, in the novel Regan's own performance of femininity serves to blur the polarized organization of these norms.

Regan, often portrayed as unable to perform conventional femininity as well as Liam/Luna, has no desire to dress as or become a male. Although she is interested in boys and dating, Regan does not like nor is

she good at cooking, for example, or at being neat or fashionable. She is often placed in direct contrast to Luna's feminine performance. When her parents insist that she prepare the family meal, Regan flares: "Why is it my job?...I hate to cook. Let Liam do it if he wants to. He's a better---" (p. 10). *Cook*, the word can't be spoken because it hints at Liam's inappropriate gender performances and his transsexual nature. In another instance, Regan describes Liam in his boy role: "His long sleeved shirt was pressed and buttoned to the chin; tucked into his khaki Dockers, which were ironed with military precision" and compares this to her own presentation of self: "I couldn't even spell iron. My outfit consisted of faded carpenter pants and whatever shirt from the heap on my floor was closest to the door" (p. 6). A bit of a tomboy, Regan's comments are light-hearted except when Regan notes that Liam/Luna is a more beautiful young woman than Regan, even when she makes efforts with her appearance. But usually Regan cannot nor does she always want to perform traditional femininity, despite the pressure from parents and teachers.

Chris, Regan's boyfriend, also blurs or at least complicates the distinctions of feminine and masculinity performance. At one point in the novel, Chris, unaware of Liam's situation, cross-dresses as a girl to amuse Regan. The disguise is temporary and theatrical, but among other things, serves to distinguish between cross-gendered performances that are meaningful in relation to who one really is, and disguises that evidently are not. For Liam there is urgency to his enactments. His female performances are intended to be permanent and it is crucial to Liam that he pass as Luna, that is, that he looks like an ordinary girl. The need to reject masculinity and male performance for Liam is understood as a biological anomaly, a problem he was born with. For the character Chris none of this is true. As noted in Flanagan's study (2002), male-to-female characters rarely pass because they retain masculinity despite their female clothes, usually for comic effect. Unlike Liam's masculinity, and unlike Regan's femininity, Chris's masculinity adheres to him and so it is possible that his cross-dressing serves to reinscribe and naturalize gender as polarized opposites that cannot be altered. However, in this case, the circumstances of Liam and Regan counter this. Regan's inability to perform some aspects of conventional femininity, Chris's

unsuccessful passing, and Liam's more successful male-to-female cross-dressing offer readers greater complexity to consider in making sense of masculinity and femininity in relation to the body.

In this novel the social regulation of gendered performance lies at the heart of Liam's struggles. He is sneered at and accosted in school and elsewhere for his transgressive behaviour. With regard to school, Regan notes that although there was some leeway, not every performance of gender, even her own, was acceptable:

There were lines you didn't cross, in clothing, behaviour, attitude. Like if I wore lipstick and lace to school, nobody would even notice. Well, they might, since I'd never worn either. I wasn't that girly-girly. People could accept if you moved along your own gender scale...a princess one day, a slob the next. The same for boys...to a point...if you were a girl you could be off the scale feminine and that'd be fine, but if you acted or felt just a little too masculine, you were a dyke. Same for guys, Mucho macho, fine. Soft and gentle, fag...If you happened to be born off both scales, between scales, like Liam. Then you were just a freak. (p. 50-51)

This regulation of and insistence upon conventional masculinity is also challenged by the negative effects of its performance described in the novel. Although there are for the most part sympathetic readings of many of the males in the novel, violence and cruelty is at times attached to conventional masculine performance. For example, according to the whispers of their grandmother, Liam and Regan's father and uncles were beaten by their father, "He was a mean son of a bitch," and his sons hated the hunting trips they went on with their father: "Phillip hated to hunt. Every time they came home with a kill, he'd lock himself in his room and cry his eyes out... Jack never enjoyed it either" (p. 108). Yet, they "worshipped their father" and later in life, remembered the hunting stories positively: a psychologically odd response, indicating perhaps, the effects of identification and association with male power and violence. However, Regan remembered her father saving Liam from his grandfather's fists and later from a schoolyard bully, using traditional masculine aggression in the protection of his family. In general, though, the violence associated with traditional masculinity, together with

Liam's unhappiness and talk of suicide, positions his decision to forego masculine identity performance permanently less tragic.

The study of this novel, like *The Breadwinner*, has the potential to raise awareness of the nature and extent of the social and institutional regulation of masculinity and the degree to which individual choice rather than biology and the social regulation should determine gender performance. In addition the novel offers several renderings of masculinity and femininity in its portrayal of Reagan's and Liam's struggles.

SCRIPTING MASCULINE PERFORMANCES

The narratives of cross-dressing in *The Breadwinner* and *Luna* offer explicit examples of how masculinity and femininity may be performed, how particular performances are regulated and enforced, and how and why change may or may not be possible. Dramatic and deliberate cross-dressing is key to the narratives. The other novels in this study are far more conventional in their depiction of masculinity and its consequences. However, even in these books about girls with less dramatic transgressions of gender performance, a focus on masculinity reveals much about the seemingly commonsensical way in which it is organized. Indeed it is the commonsensical depiction that makes a critical focus on masculinity all the more startling in what it reveals in the scripting of male (and female) characters and their actions.

Gary Soto's 2006 *Accidental Love* is a story of young love between two Mexican-American adolescents: fourteen-year-old Marisa Rodriguez and thirteen-year-old Rene Torres, individuals who do not deliberately cross-dress but nonetheless perform gender in less than conventional ways. Their gender transgressions are depicted as oddly endearing but at the same time open to change. The novel is written from Marisa's perspective. In many respects Marisa seems to perform female masculinity. She is described as "a big girl" (p. 5), overweight, tough, loud, and outspoken. She is frequently involved in fistfights with male and female peers in the poor, urban, and largely Hispanic neighbourhood where she lives. She is highly protective of her female friend Alicia who is tiny. Positioned as a kind of "big mama," Marisa looks out not only for Alicia but others as well including her boyfriend,

Rene. When Alicia is injured, Marisa cuts school to visit her “homegirl” to give her “a meaningful hug” (p. 2) and ends up in a fight with Alicia’s boyfriend who has “cheated on” her friend: “‘You cheater! She loved you so much!’ Marisa yelled. She hauled off and fired a stiff punch into Roberto’s iron-flat stomach. The flowers popped out of his arms. She stomped on them and began to thrash him from all angles” (p. 11). Her aggressive nature, verbally and physically, places Marisa at odds with conventional femininity. She can be read in many senses as more masculine than Rene.

Rene is named and described repeatedly in the novel as a “nerd.” His depiction draws on a stereotypical image of the nerd. Rene has a highly developed vocabulary, obvious intelligence, is thin and weak, and wears eyeglasses, high-water pants, and white socks. Rene is said to belong to the chess club, the science club, and the drama club, and used to play the violin. He detests violence in part because he is frequently the victim of schoolyard bullies and as it turns out at the end of the novel, an abusive mother. In the context of the novel, nerdiness is not aligned with masculinity. Rene, for example, repeatedly asserts that he is not a nerd, and quite to the contrary claims: “No, really! I’m very Shakespearean, very manly” (p. 65). In effect Rene is arguing for an alternative masculinity, but then early in the novel when Rene deliberately decides to demonstrate his masculinity he does so by lifting weights while Marisa watches rather than use his intelligence or dramatic Shakespearean flair (p. 50).

As an “odd couple,” Rene and Marisa also do not always perform gender in conventional ways even when they are together. For example, when riding on Rene’s bicycle, Rene rather than Marisa rides on the bar with Marisa peddling, and it is Rene who comments, “My, you’re strong” (p. 75). In the gym, it is Marisa who does a hundred sit-ups, and who, “for the fun of it lifted Rene into her arms and staggered about,” saying, “If you ever get sick or in an accident, I’ll carry you to the hospital” (pp. 113-114). Marisa physically fights those who accost Rene: “Marisa hauled off a punch to his [Roberto] shaved temple and a second punch that brought a flow of blood from his mouth” (p. 68). Marisa is Rene’s protector. She acknowledges the oddity of this:

She loved Rene more than ever, all because he appeared helpless. She knew that usually the guy protected the girl – or at least that was what she had salvaged from the story lines of teenage romances. But their roles were reversed. (p.153)

But this knowledge does not appear to trouble her or Rene.

Rene becomes a project for Marisa. She realizes, “She could help him change, and – yeah I know, she thought– he could help her change” (p. 46). Marisa wants to fight less, learn more, and lose weight. In the organization of the text and this analysis, Marisa’s wishes can be read as the desire to become more feminine. With Rene’s support, Marisa not only fights less, but also starts wearing dresses and looks “cute” and “marvelous.” Attending to her diet, she remembers that “for years [she] had been chubby – una gordita – [a fat little girl] but for now she could see that beneath that wobbly fat breathed a shapely young woman” and the thought makes her “sparkle and skip” (p. 138). The young woman was not evident in Marisa’s fat body, despite her age and the strong caring and nurturing she displays from the outset of the novel. Ideal femininity and its performance are organized in this instance as antithetical to verbal and physical aggression and to a large, overweight body.

Rene also begins to look and act differently as the novel progresses. With Marisa’s support, he starts lifting weights and becoming stronger. He becomes bolder and is willing to enter into fights to the point that when Marisa is hurt in a fight, Rene states, “If he touches you like that again, I’m going to hit him back...I don’t care anymore” (p. 69). Rene then takes Marisa away with her riding the bar on his bicycle. Marisa buys Rene more fashionable clothing, and in the face of his mother’s verbal and physical opposition to his new look, Marisa reminds Rene, “Listen, buddy boy remember you wear los pantalones. You’re the dude...you wear the pants – recuerdas? You’re the man, el mero mero” (pp. 124-125). Masculinity and assertiveness are tightly woven here and viewed as necessary to allow Rene to leave his abusive mother at the end of the novel.

Earlier in the novel, Marisa speculates whether Rene “would be bolder if his father had been a part of his life. She conjured up the vatos [homeboys] at her old school parading their badness. Rene, she

concluded, needed a little of their juice, a little of their bravado" (pp. 151-152). Masculinity and the display of bravado are closely linked, dependent on male mentorship despite all that Marisa does. By the end of the novel, Rene gains "juice" and Marisa notices towards the end of the novel: "'Rene,' she meowed. 'Rene, you look so different'" (p. 173). *Meow*, a verb often associated with extreme femininity – men don't usually meow – is used in this instance in response to Rene's display of more appropriate, and evidently more potent masculinity.

The narrative of *Accidental Love* is the story of Marisa, and young love, but it is also a depiction of appropriate adolescent gender development. Although Marisa claims that she was dieting ultimately for herself, clearly dominant social norms and expectations support her efforts, and those of Rene to change their lives. Marisa's female friends and Rene's geeky friends cannot and do not play a part in this development. Most importantly for this study, growth and maturity in this novel can be read as a move to more conventional gendered performances. Maturing masculinity means a look and a performance that encompasses boldness or bravado and the potential of engaging aggressive behaviour. Although there may be an obvious cultural dimension to this masculine bravado, boldness and aggression are often associated with masculinity in many cultural contexts. Such masculinity is interlocked with performances of femininity. Although Rene does not abandon his chess and Marisa continues to call him a "nerd," in supporting each other, the future at the end of the novel is bright with hope that leaves Marisa "crazy with happiness" (p. 175).

The novel raises the question why Rene's geekiness does not constitute an acceptable form of masculine behaviour and why Marisa's weight and aggressiveness so transgresses femininity. Certainly the characters grow in complexity and maturity but the link to particular gender performances is worthy of discussion. *Accidental Love* offers the possibility of looking at what makes the characters so odd and at the same time endearing and what the narrative implies about maturing gender identity and performance and its appropriate development.

MASCULINE PERFORMANCE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

In the other two novels in the study, *Stargirl* and *Speak*, masculinity (and femininity) are not as obviously and deliberately transgressed as they are in *The Breadwinner* or in *Luna*, nor are these novels stories of the development or redevelopment of appropriate masculine (and feminine) performance as in the young teens in *Accidental Love*. Moreover the female masculinity of Marisa, Parvana, and to a lesser extent Regan is not evident in the more feminine female characters in *Stargirl* and *Speak*. Nonetheless both *Stargirl* and *Speak* can be read as girls' narratives that involve the conventions and consequences of masculinity. The study of masculinity for these novels requires attending to masculine performances in the male characters and to questions of how and to what effect traditional and alternative performances of masculinity enter into storylines about adolescent girls.

Jerry Spinelli's (2000), *Stargirl*, is the story of Stargirl Caraway, a free and flamboyant spirit who enters into the life of the male teenaged narrator, Leo Borlock. Although a new student in a very conventional high school, Stargirl has no difficulty with public performances, making what others might describe a "spectacle of herself." The first time Leo sees Stargirl, she was wandering in the lunchroom, singing and strumming on her ukulele. Although always feminine in appearance, she wears "something outrageous" every day, brings a pet rat to school, dances in the rain, and in general fails to conform to the social norms of adolescent life. In a high school where "we all wore the same clothes, talked the same way, ate the same food, listened to the same music" (p. 10) she is seen as "weird," "strange," and "goofy." She does not dramatically transgress feminine norms in her attire, and in fact though a free spirit, encompasses a kind, nurturing, and caring hyper-feminine persona.

Leo becomes infatuated with Stargirl. He watches and follows her everywhere and eventually they become romantically involved. Her free, flamboyant nature makes her popular with him and with the students, but her transgression of social norms eventually affects her popularity. She is shunned by students for supporting an opposing basketball team, and although the transgression seems relatively minor, the "chilling isolation" (p. 99) is not. Linked to an unpopular girl, Leo is also

ostracized. Unable to cope with it, he insists that Stargirl conform to the social norms of the school. Moreover, her attentiveness to the needs of others makes Leo jealous. Stargirl sees this problem and comments, "You're upset because I'm paying all this attention to other people and not enough to you...You just want me all to yourself, don't you." (p. 125). Near the end of the novel, she makes Leo "the target of her public extravagance" by erecting a sign proclaiming publicly her love for him. The public nature of this event and his continued isolation upsets Leo, and distressed discussions between them ensue with the result that Stargirl vanishes for two days.

She returns as the more conventional Susan Julia Caraway. To Leo's eyes there was now,

Nothing goofy, nothing different . . . She looked magnificently, wonderfully ordinary. She looked just like a hundred other girls at Mica High. Stargirl had vanished into a sea of them, and I was thrilled . . . I didn't care if others were watching. In fact, I hoped they were. I grabbed her and squeezed her. I had never been so happy and so proud in my life. (p. 140)

Leo's desire for Stargirl's exclusive attention and his demands that she conform to the social standards of the school can be read as an enactment of traditional masculinity. In effect he is acting on a male prerogative that allows him to both expect and have considerable influence over his girlfriend's behaviour. Leo makes demands on Stargirl and is pleased by her compliance. Despite her conformity, the students do not embrace Susan anymore than they did Stargirl. Susan reverts back to Stargirl again and is happy having given up on being "popular and normal" (p. 162). She walks away from Leo, and although Leo and the rest of the students never see her again, they remain strangely enchanted by her.

One character tells Leo, "She did it for you, you know...Gave up her self, for a while there. She loved you that much. What an incredibly lucky kid you were" (p. 178). The story hinges on Leo's insistence that Stargirl conform. His masculinity is not threatened by such an insistence. It would seem commonsensical for him as a boyfriend to make such demands, commonsensical for her to comply – to give up her self for love. It is possible to consider what would happen if the roles were

reversed: whether Stargirl could insist upon change in her partner without transgressing feminine norms and whether male compliance, even momentary, would have been considered as diminished masculinity. Although this is a story of a teenaged girl, Leo's actions, consistent with traditional masculinity, are key to Stargirl's renewed commitment to her self rather than to others. Masculinity and adolescence in general are depicted as negative and limiting, confining, and regulating Stargirl's performances of self. Acknowledgement of this comes at the end of the novel when Leo, years later, wonders "if I'll ever get another chance" (p. 186) to redeem himself with Stargirl.

Speak, a tremendously popular young adult novel, offers an even darker picture of both school culture and masculinity. *Speak* is the story of Melinda Sordina, who like Stargirl, is an outcast in her high school. No one will talk to her, even her long-time friends, because she called the police at an end-of-summer party. What her friends don't know is that Melinda had been sexually assaulted at the party. Traumatized, she does not tell anyone of the assault and withdraws from her parents, teachers, and any other source of support. Despite invitations and demands from her parents, teachers, and counselors to speak, Melinda rarely communicates with anyone, and with rare exception the students don't speak to her. Eventually when Melinda sees her assailant making moves on her former best friend, she breaks her silence by writing a note warning her and other girls away from this male student. When the assailant confronts Melinda and begins to attack her again, she finds voice and strength, and fights him off. With a shard of glass to his neck she says, "I want to hear him scream. I look up. His lips are paralyzed. He cannot speak. That's good enough. . . I said 'No'" (p. 195). Her actions gain the respect of her peers, and Melinda notes, "With hours left in the school year, I have suddenly become popular" (p. 197).

Violent assault by a male student is key to the narrative. Although other males in the novel are portrayed sympathetically, Andy, the "Beast," as Melinda calls him, encapsulates violent maleness. Interestingly enough, although she finds voice in warning other young woman about her assailant, and in fighting off her assailant a second time, it is her male art teacher, Mr. Freeman, to whom she finally confides: "The tears dissolve the last block of ice in my throat...Words

float up. 'Let me tell you about it.'" (p. 198). This supportive teacher repeatedly attempts through art to give Melinda an avenue for expression. Mr. Freeman, as his name implies, is an unconventional teacher, and unconventional as a man. He insists on and paints his emotions and asks that his students do the same. Although he does not transgress masculine performance dramatically, Mr. Freeman is sufficiently unusual to warrant hearing Melinda's story. Melinda believes his humanity, organized in unconventional masculinity, can hear her.

STUDYING MASCULINITY: YOUNG ADULT NOVELS IN ENGLISH/ LANGUAGE ARTS CLASSROOMS

The novels offer various understandings of current and possible masculinities and gender organization. *Speak* and *Stargirl* would seem to support an alternative unconventional masculinity. In *Speak* an alternative, unconventional masculinity supports the character Melinda. In *Stargirl* a less conventional masculinity, unconcerned about social norms and expectations, could have ensured rather than doomed the relationship of Leo and Stargirl. In *Accidental Love*, the gender transgressing behaviour and the associated self-improvement projects of Rene and Marisa would lose their significance if masculine and feminine performances were less rigidly, less conventionally, defined. This novel challenges but depends upon recognition of traditional gender performances. In *Luna* and *The Breadwinner*, deliberate cross-dressing shows the social and institutional construction of masculinity (and femininity) that limits life's possibilities and opportunities. Thus these young adult novels about girls by and large engage or privilege alternative masculinities. A range of masculinities, including feminine masculinities, serves to challenge traditional masculinity, and all that is associated with it.

In doing so, these girl novels can be used to support current research and theory in the area of masculinity, calling for a transformative pedagogy that opens spaces for students to read against the grain of traditional masculinity (Dutro, 2003; Lesko, 2000; Weaver-Hightower, 2003). Although an increasing array of young adult novels appeal to boys' interests (Brozo, 2002), along with websites devoted to books for

boys (e.g., guysread.com), the analysis in this study suggests that masculinities, traditional, alternative, and feminine, play powerful roles in at least five young adult novels about adolescent girls. The study of masculinity in young adult literature featuring female protagonists would appear to offer potent and transformative moments for readers. Thus girls' books should not be forgotten in the rush to address boys and their literacy.

More research is needed to explore the depiction and reading of masculinity in other young adult novels. Other aspects of social difference (race, age, class, ethnicity) need to be considered in the portrayals of masculinity. However, and more importantly, research and scholarship need to focus on how male and female students actually engage in the study of masculinity using popular young adult literature about girls. Such engagement may not be easy or comfortable for teacher or student. A reviewer for this article reminded me that male students may well be highly invested in traditional masculinity and neither be interested in nor open to the possibility of rethinking its organization in any text, let alone one about girls. Female students may be similarly invested in the traditional organization of gender relations (Harper, 2000).

For this reason it is important to begin with popular, contemporary young adult literature, along with careful pedagogy that begins by considering the masculinities and femininities already at play in students' lives at home, in school, and in popular culture. Such efforts may not make for comfortable classroom discussion, but they are important if they create critical possibility for our students, ourselves, and all our masculinities.

NOTES

¹ This assumes that the anatomical sex of an individual is definitive which is not always the case. For a discussion of "unseen genders" together with other forms of sexual and gender identities, see Hanes and McKenna (2001).

² "Hegemonic masculinity" is often conflated with traditional masculinity or macho masculinity characterized by toughness, muscularity, rationality, individualism, courage, as well as aggressiveness, violence, emotional indifference, misogyny, and homophobia. However, according to John Stephens (2002), it is best understood as any privileged form of masculinity that

supports patriarchy; Stephens cites a quotation from R. W. Connell (1995), who defines hegemonic masculinity as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (p. 77).

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