Gendered borderwork in a high school English class

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> ABSTRACT: This article demonstrates how literacy practices in an 11th grade, urban, English classroom in the United States worked to delineate and patrol gender borders between acceptable masculine and feminine social practices. Drawing upon Blackburn's (2005) and Thorne's (1993) studies of the gendered boundaries that are created and questioned in literacy events and classrooms, this ethnographic study explores how the students and teacher of the class actively constructed parameters of acceptable feminine and masculine social practices and policed each others' performances and representations of these practices through the classroom discourse surrounding literacy activities. I argue that heterosexuality was a primary characteristic of acceptable forms of masculinity in the class and that laughter was a primary discursive mechanism through which students marked gendered border crossings, particularly when boys' behaviour was interpreted as feminine. I also examine the social and literacy practices of those students who were successful at challenging and crossing the gendered borders that were constructed during classroom discourse.

> KEYWORDS: Gender, literacy, secondary English, classroom discourse.

On the first day of class in the 11th-grade, honours English class at Montana High School[1], Mr. Brown, the teacher, asked each student to write a fact that few people knew about them on a notecard. At the end of class, Mr. Brown, with the students' permission, read selected notecards without revealing students' names. One student had written that he or she had a cat named Sparky. Another student wrote that she or he hated apples. Then Mr. Brown read, "Someone in this class lo:::::ves guys!" making the pitch of his voice rise and lower and elongating the word "love". Students laughed and then one boy called out, "I hope a girl wrote that!" Students laughed even louder.

Through the remark "I hope a girl wrote that!", and the ensuing laughter, the members of the 11th-grade, honours English class that I studied constructed a shared representation of acceptable behaviour for boys and girls. Girls are supposed to "love", or feel romantic desire for, boys; boys are not supposed to possess such feelings for other boys. Distinctions between what girls and boys are, do and are supposed to do were made nearly every day during the six months that I observed Mr. Brown's 11th-grade English class. These distinctions served to reinforce symbolic "gender boundaries" or borders (Thorne, 1993) that dichotomized girls and boys and the kinds of social practices, desires and literacy activities that were considered appropriate for them.

The talk and laughter surrounding the "someone in this class loves guys" remark also served as an *orienting discourse* for the gendered borderwork that would occur through classroom literacy activities for the rest of the school year, particularly since they

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[1] The name of the school and of all the participants in the study are pseudonyms.

occurred on the first day of class as part of an introductory literacy activity (Rex, 2002). Rex defines an orienting discourse as a discursive expression that is valued and taken up within a classroom and functions to orient and shape students' literacy practices and identity constructions. In the evolving culture of Mr. Brown's English class, the dichotomization of masculinities and femininities became a recurring, orienting discourse and a normative part of literacy activities in the classroom. Consequently, the range of literate identities open to male students and those open to female students were limited and sometimes mutually exclusive, as differing expectations for boys and girls and their literacy practices were incorporated into the culture of the classroom.

In this article, I describe how Mr. Brown and the students in his class actively constructed parameters of acceptable feminine and masculine social practices and policed each other's performances and representations of these practices through the classroom discourse surrounding literacy activities. I argue that heterosexuality was a primary characteristic of acceptable forms of masculinity in the class and that laughter was a primary discursive mechanism through which students marked gendered border crossings, particularly when boys' behaviour was interpreted as feminine. I also examine the social and literacy practices of those students who were successful at challenging and crossing the gendered borders that were constructed during classroom discourse.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theories of Literacy

Literacy has traditionally been viewed as simply the acts of reading and writing print-based texts (Goody & Watt, 1968; Ong, 1982), but recent theories of literacy view it as a complex social practice that is interwoven with, shaped by and influencing of other social practices such as gender (Davies, 2003; Orellana, 1995; Thein, 2005), race and ethnicity (Dyson, 2006; Richardson, 2002) and class (Jones, 2006; Trainor, 2005). In these current conceptions, literacy includes all the social practices that surround how people construct meaning using texts – not just individuals' experiences reading and writing (Dyson, 1995; Gee, 1996). In the study reported in this article, for instance, I considered discussions about literature to be literacy practices, even though students sometimes did not read or refer to the texts during these discussions and some students participating in discussion may not have read the text at all. Such discussions, even when some students may not have individually read the text, were an integral part of learning academic literacy practices.

Current literacy scholars also view literacy as a form of meaning-making that is inherently social and contextualized (Heath, 1983; Jocson, 2006; Salomon & Apaza, 2006). Literacy is inherently social because it usually entails communicating meanings to others through texts. More broadly, literacy can be seen as a social practice since reading and writing (and texts) are socially, culturally and historically produced activities. Many literacy scholars also emphasize the contextualized nature of literacy; that is, that the term *literacy* has different meanings in different contexts and that the purposes and practices

of literacy are not the same in all historical or cultural contexts (Heath, 1983; Jocson, 2006; Salomon & Apaza, 2006; Street, 1984). Resnick & Resnick (1977), for instance, described how literacy assessments have changed in the United States over the past 100 years, showing an evolving national perception of what "counts" as literacy.

Emphasis on the contextual, historical and cultural nature of literacy has led to scholarship that examines how ideologies and power relations are created through literacy. The focus on understanding the relationship between literacy, ideologies and power is particularly evident in scholarship in *New Literacy Studies* (NLS) (Collins, 2000; Morrell, 2005; Solomon & Apaza, 2006; Street, 1999). Because gender is a prominent means by which power is exercised in societies throughout the world (Connell, 1987), I draw from NLS in this article to examine how literacy practices worked to construct gendered borders in Mr. Brown's English class and to maintain gendered power relations.

Theories of gender

The theoretical framework of this article rests on a view of gender as a performative social practice (Blackburn, 2005; Butler, 1990; Gallas, 1998; Godley, 2004; Thorne, 1993). Performative theories of gender reject the view that the actions, desires and traits commonly viewed as masculine or feminine are expressions of biological sex. Instead, they posit gender as a purely cultural construct whose major dichotomy – male/female – is sustained through repeated social practices or performances that are interpreted as masculine or feminine (Butler, 1999). Such theories also draw from cross-cultural and historical research on gendered practices and norms, demonstrating that what counts as masculine or feminine differs by context. "Those meanings [attached to male and female] can change over time and across cultures, situations, and contexts," writes Orellana (1995, p. 1). Additionally, Connell (1996) and others have demonstrated that even within a given situation or context, multiple versions of masculinity and femininity are performed. Elsewhere I have documented the multiple masculinities that were practiced in Mr. Brown's class, most notably those known in the class as "athlete" and "debater" masculine practices (Godley, 2004).

Even if multiple versions of masculinity and femininity are present in a given context, however, gendered practices typically privilege boys over girls and men over women (Connell, 1996; Godley, 2004). "There is an ordering of versions of femininity and masculinity at the level of the whole society," writes Connell (1987). "The forms of femininity and masculinity constituted at this level are stylized and impoverished. Their interrelation is centered in a single structural fact, the global dominance of men over women" (p. 183). By studying multiple, gendered, social practices or performances in educational settings, then, we can better understand how meanings are attached to masculinities and femininities in schools, how such meanings serve some students more than others, and how literacy can transform these gendered social practices and norms. This perspective on gender highlights the social and cultural interplay of gender and literacy and illuminates some of the gender-based reasons that students in Mr. Brown's class took up particular positions as readers, writers, and learners.

Gendered borderwork

One significant facet of practice- or performance-based studies of gender is the study of how participants in a given setting reinforce the dichotomization of girl/women and boys/men and the kinds of social practices, desires and literacy activities that are considered appropriate for each gendered group. Drawing upon Thorne's (1993) and Blackburn's (2005) studies of the gendered boundaries that are created and questioned in classrooms and through literacy events, I call this active differentiation between boys and girls or men and women *gendered borderwork*. As research has demonstrated, part of the power of traditional gendered ideologies is the dichotomizing of masculinities and femininities, the clear separation between "what it means" to be male and "what it means" to be female. Gendered borderwork includes all the social practices that uphold this gender dichotomy and that impose a strict separation of what it means to be a man or a woman and what social practices are viewed as masculine or feminine. Gendered borderwork also obscures situations in which gender is not salient (Thorne, 1993). Studies of schools and classrooms have found that gendered borders are often policed by students, and that those who cross gendered borders are often punished by their peers for their transgressions (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Cherland, 1994; Davies, 2003; Gallas, 1998).

Gendered borderwork can include the physical separation of girls and boys as well as the more symbolic, discursive activity of representing masculinities and femininities as dichotomous. Thorne's (1993) ethnography of two elementary schools focused on the physical separation of girls and boys in settings such as the playground, classroom seating arrangements and the lunch line. Thorne found that teachers, girls and boys – as groups and as individuals – worked to maintain a physical separation between boys and girls that pitted the two groups as opposite and sometimes as antagonistic. This separation resulted in a material and symbolic gender hierarchy in which boys claimed more school space (such as on the playground) and often spoke about girls as a source of contamination.

Blackburn's (2005) study of a literacy club for queer adolescents emphasized both the material and discursive practices of constructing and questioning gendered borders between men/boys and women/girls. In the literacy club, queer adolescents questioned and crossed gendered borders in physical, material ways by performing both masculinities and femininities and representing themselves as both female and male in different contexts of their lives. The adolescents in Blackburn's literacy club also questioned gender borders in more discursive ways through their interpretation of literature. In one case, the group interpreted a male character's physical abuse of a classmate whom he perceived as gay as evidence that the character himself was homosexual. In another study of discursive, gendered borderwork, Davies (2003) demonstrated how elementary-age students were taught to question the gendered ideologies in literature. However, after the curricular intervention ended, many students still interpreted feminist fairy tales through normative and dichotomous perspectives on what men and women "should" do.

What is essential for an analysis of gendered borderwork is an understanding of gender borders as contextualized and shifting. Thorne reminded us that, "The imagery of 'border' may wrongly suggest an unyielding fence that divides social relations into two parts. The image should rather be one of many short fences that are quickly built and as quickly dismantled" (1993, p. 84). In Mr. Brown's class, borders, perceived qualities, or practices that served to divide and differentiate males and females sometimes arose in particular literacy activities – like small group presentations – but were not necessarily carried over to other activities. Even more importantly, gender borders that the school, the media, or society at large emphasized were not necessarily reproduced or considered salient within the context of Mr. Brown's classroom. For example, one boy in Mr. Brown's class, Sean, often brushed his hair in class and on a few occasions filed his nails. Although personal grooming is often represented in society as a feminine practice – just look at the other products around which nail files and brushes are placed in a drugstore – no one in the class ever looked twice, remarked or found importance in Sean's actions. As Connell, Ashenden, Kessler, & Dowsett (1982) and Willis (1977) demonstrated, acceptable forms of masculinity and femininity and the borderwork that maintains them vary between communities. However, other scholarship suggests that there are non-negotiable aspects of acceptable practices of masculinity and femininity in most schools. Numerous studies have demonstrated that attractiveness and heterosexuality are rigid characteristics of idealized femininity in many adolescent settings (Bettis & Adams, 2005; Cherland, 1994; Eder, Evans, & Parker, 1995).

As in Blackburn's (2005) study, literacy activities in Mr. Brown's class also offered opportunities to question dichotomous, gendered borders in both embodied and symbolic ways. As Thorne noted, "The notion of 'borderwork' should be coupled with a parallel term – such as 'neutralization' – for processes through which girls and boys...neutralize or undermine a sense of gender as division and opposition" (1993, p. 84). Similarly, Haraway (1991) has postulated that cyborg environments, found in virtual worlds such as the Internet, allow traditional gender and sex binaries to be disrupted and questioned. There were times in Mr. Brown's class when literacy practices were used by students to neutralize or disrupt gendered borderwork and times when students were able to cross gender borders by engaging in gendered literacy practices that were seen as belonging to the other sex. However, as other research has demonstrated (Davies, 2003; Gallas, 1998; Thorne, 1993), such border crossings were viewed as more acceptable for girls than for boys.

METHODS

This ethnographic study was conducted in an 11th-grade, honours English classroom at Montana High School, an urban school in Northern California. I chose the school as the site of my research because of its reputation as a school that successfully educated a diverse student body and because of my previous experience at the school as an assistant basketball coach. At the time of the study, the student body at Montana High School was approximately 40% African American, 24% Asian or Asian American (mostly of Chinese, Korean, and Japanese origin), 24% White and 10% Latino. Forty-one percent of

students received free or reduced price meals. The school drew students from the middle class, mostly white and Asian-American neighbourhood that surrounded it as well as from a nearby city that was mostly African American and had high rates of poverty.

There were 32 students in the 11th-grade, honours English class, but the racial and socioeconomic make-up of the class, as is common in honours classes in racially and economically diverse schools (Oakes, 1985), was quite different from that of the school as a whole. The class included a much larger percentage of White, Asian-American and wealthy students and a smaller percentage of African American, Latino and economically disadvantaged students than the school as a whole. There were no Latino students in the class and 12% of the students were African American, while 50% were Asian/Asian-American and 38% were White. Four of the students (12.5%) in the class were immigrants to the United States and 22 (68%) were female. The teacher, Mr. Brown, was White.

The 11th-grade, honours English course focused on American literature. All but one of the texts that students read was written by a White man: Toni Morrison's (1970) *The bluest eye*. The other texts assigned included many "classics" of American literature: *The catcher in the rye* (Salinger, 1951), *Death of a salesman* (Miller, 1949), *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, 1925), *In dubious battle* (Steinbeck, 1936), and *Inherit the wind* (Lawrence & Lee, 1955). Additionally, students wrote a variety of academic texts, including an I-search (research-based) paper, literary analysis papers, timed essays, journal entries and more personal reflective essays. The majority of class time was spent in whole-class literary discussions led by Mr. Brown. At other times, students worked in small groups on literature-related projects that they would later present to the rest of the class. Twice, students worked in groups to teach the class.

Data collection and analysis

I observed Mr. Brown's class three days a week for a period of six months and attended other school functions, such as pep rallies and sporting events. Because Montana High School operated on an intensive block schedule, each class met 90 minutes a day for a semester (rather than for an entire school year). During class, I took ethnographic field-notes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995), focusing particularly on the intersection of students' gender and literacy practices and audio-recorded classroom talk. In sum, I audio-recorded and transcribed twenty-nine class meetings totaling of 43.5 hours of class. Additionally, I collected students' written work and interviewed seven focal students chosen to represent the range of racial/ethnic, class and gender diversity in Mr. Brown's class. I also interviewed Mr. Brown three times: at the beginning, middle and end of the semester. Emerging themes were articulated in theoretical memos (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995) as I collected data.

The gendered borderwork that students engaged in through literacy learning was one of the major themes that emerged during data collection. In order to better understand this theme, all fieldnotes, transcriptions of classroom talk, interviews and students' written work were coded for evidence of (a) the *construction* of gendered borders, such as

students' belief that it was appropriate for boys but not girls to debate and dominate during literary discussions, (b) the *policing* of gendered borders, such as when students' laughed at the idea that a boy could have romantic feelings for another boy, (c) the *crossing* of gendered borders, such as the few times when a female student led a whole class discussion, and (d) the *questioning* of gendered borders, such as when Kerri, who had immigrated from Iran, wrote a reflective essay opposing the veiling of women and the confinement of women and girls to the home in Iran. Instances of each of these four coding categories were further coded as either physical/material, meaning that they were either instantiations of students' actions, or discursive/symbolic, meaning that they reflected how students interpreted the actions of literary characters.

FINDINGS

Constructing Gender Borders

Gender borders and literacy practices
Although the students in Mr. Brown's class were not often physically separated into groups of boys and girls as the children in Thorne's (1993) study had been, gender borders were created, reinforced and patrolled through how students participated in literacy activities. Through interviews with students and Mr. Brown, a questionnaire that asked students about the social groups in the class, and the repeated terms that students used to describe each other during class, clear patterns emerged related to how students participated in literacy activities and how they interpreted these types of participation. I call these categories of participation *literacy positions*, drawing upon poststructuralists understandings of how people position themselves, and are positioned by others within particular social contexts, storylines and social categories (Davies & Harré, 1990; Enciso, 1998). The most prevalent and valued literacy positions taken up and mentioned by students in Mr. Brown's class were whole-class discussion participant, debater and smart student (Godley, 2003).

The most visible and public literacy positions in the classroom were those of whole-class discussion participant and debater. Whole class discussion participants were those students who participated the most in whole-class literary discussions. Such discussions were usually teacher-led and followed a traditional I-R-E (teacher initiation – student response – teacher evaluation) discourse pattern (Cazden, 2001). Whole class discussion participants were usually the first to answer a question the teacher posed and they usually spoke for longer than other students. Both quantitative comparisons of the amount of time each student spoke during whole class discussion and students' perceptions of who the whole class discussion leaders were demonstrated that they were all boys. Although boys made up 32% of the students in the class, they accounted for more than 50% of students' turns at talk during discussion. Additionally, when asked in interviews and questionnaires to name the students who were leaders in the class, most students responded with the names of a few boys – Alex, Max, and Mitchell – but no girls. Thus, gender borders were constructed through who did (and who was perceived to do) the public intellectual work in the class (the boys) and who did more private intellectual work (the girls). The border

between female/private activities and male/public activities has been shown to be prevalent in schools and other contexts (Cherland, 1994; Connell, 1987; Finders, 1997).

The literacy positions of whole group leader and debater overlapped considerably since those boys who dominated whole-class discussions were mostly members of the school's debate team. Debaters were visible and respected members of the school community who received special treatment from the administration and teachers. They were often allowed in the hallways without hall passes, they were trusted with teachers' keys to rooms, and they missed classes in order to travel to debate tournaments. The debate team was predominantly male, White and Asian-American, and middle- and upper-class. In Mr. Brown's class, male debaters tended to – not surprisingly – debate during literary discussions rather than work towards consensus or understanding multiple points of view. As in the case of whole-class discussion participants, students overwhelmingly perceived only boys to be debaters, even though two girls in Mr. Brown's class were also longstanding members of the debate team. One of these girls, Eun-Jin, demonstrated that even *she* perceived the debaters to be male when she wrote a class assignment describing the debaters as "wearing their fathers' suits" and "gelling their hair so it was stiff". In this assignment, Eun-Jin, although a member of the debate team, excluded herself from the literacy position of debater in Mr. Brown's class by representing that literacy position as male-only. Furthermore, the male debaters discouraged Eun-Jin from publicly taking up the literacy position of debater during class discussions. In an exchange described in more detail in Godley (2003), when Eun-Jin gave a passionate, confident presentation to the class about ideals of beauty, two other debaters, Alex and Max, undermined her control of classroom talk by interrupting her presentation multiple times, changing the topic of the conversation to their own beliefs about beauty, and taking long turns at talk in order to explain their views during an activity that was meant to highlight Eun-Jin's point of view. Thus, even though some girls in the class were debaters, students tended only to recognize boys as debaters, constructing a gender border between acceptable masculine behaviours (leading, debating, and publicly expressing ideas and disagreements) and feminine behaviours (following, listening to others, and privately expressing ideas and disagreement).

The literacy positions of debater and whole-class discussion participant also overlapped with that of smart student. Most students in the class assumed that the students who were debaters and frequent contributors to classroom discussions were also the most skilled readers and writers in the class because they spoke often and confidently. Similarly, Mr. Brown expressed surprise when the boys who participated often in class discussions did not turn in "A-level" work. But the few girls who also often participated in whole-class discussions were categorized neither by Mr. Brown nor other students as "smart students" who were expected to earn As. Thus, the gender borders constructed between vocal, mostly male students and less vocal, mostly female students in Mr. Brown's class worked to benefit those boys who participated in class discussions by raising the teacher's and students' expectations of their intelligence and grades.

Gender borders and literary interpretation

The construction of gender borders through literary interpretation was even more prevalent in Mr. Brown's class than the gender borders constructed through the literacy positions that girls and boys took up. The literature read in Mr. Brown's 11th-grade English class, on the whole, depicted settings in which gender dichotomies were upheld by traditional norms and expectations for women and men. These texts – which included *Death of a salesman, The Great Gatsby* and *In dubious battle* – highlighted characters who stayed within culturally and contextually acceptable gendered realms and practices. There were few if any representations of characters crossing normative gender borders. Although literacy scholars have demonstrated that students can question gender norms and borders when engaged in critical readings of traditional texts (Davies, 2003; Enciso, 1998; Thein, 2005), the students in Mr. Brown's class rarely discussed the literature in ways that would reveal or critique the systems of power, such as gender or social class, represented in the literature.

During many literary discussions, gender borders were created and maintained through students' analyses of characters' actions. Aggressive sexual activity, for example, was seen as only acceptable for male characters, as was made clear during a discussion of Holden's roommate, Stradlater, in The *catcher in the rye*. Analyzing a line about Stradlater "giving the time to" Holden's friend, Jane, Mr. Brown asked, "Could Jane give Stradlater the time?" "If she was a whore!" a girl called out, laughing. No similar judgment was made of Stradlater or other male characters who were sexually active in *The catcher in the rye* or other texts.

Likewise, during discussions of *The Great Gatsby*, students described Daisy's affair with Gatsby as "cheating on Tom", while Tom's affair with Myrtle was referred to as Tom's "making love to someone else's wife". In this comparison, the same action, having an extra-marital affair, was interpreted differently when seen as a feminine and then a masculine activity. Although Daisy was represented as doing something wrong and immoral ("cheating") to her husband, Tom was represented as doing something positive and loving ("making love") to Myrtle. Furthermore, Myrtle was referred to in the quotation above as a recipient of Tom's love-making (rather than an active participant) and as the possession of another man. These two different representations of the same practice – infidelity – create a gender border; they imply that infidelity has two different forms, masculine and feminine, that reflect different moral issues and levels of personal agency. Distinctions such as these serve to dichotomize males and females, exaggerate their differences, and ignore contexts in which gender is not important (Thorne, 1993). Using the same term (like "having an affair") for both Daisy and Tom's actions would neutralize this practice, denying the saliency of gender in this context. But as it were, the gendering of infidelity in this literacy activity suggested a judgment of the characters' actions based on notions of masculinity and femininity, a judgment that implicitly applied to real men and women as well as fictional.

Later in the semester during literary discussions of *In dubious battle*, aggressive heterosexual desire and activity were depicted by Mr. Brown as a natural, biological aspect of male characters' motivations but not female characters'. In the following

excerpt, Mr. Brown responds to a student, Susan, who has asked for an explanation of a passage in the novel in which one of the protagonists, Jim, sees and speaks to a woman in the striking, labourers' camp. (Transcript conventions can be found in the appendix).

Mr. Brown: Okay... I have a feeling, I have a thought about it. Well, Mac's kind of horny, isn't he? [xx] that's not the whole thing.

Susan: *(interrupting)* it's Jim

Mr. Brown: I know it is, but see, Mac says, "'If I saw a decent looking woman, I'd go nuts," he said [xx]. So there's that. Um, but Mac's, with Mac, it's about, it's real animalistic. You know drive, you know. He just sees a decent-looking woman. You know it, it, this is what Jim says here, "She had her head back. She combed her hair, she had a funny kind of smile on her face. You know, Mac, my mother was a Catholic. She didn't go to church Sundays because my old man hated churches as bad as we do. But in the middle of the week, sometimes she'd go into the church when my old man was working, and I was a little" – you know, Jim's got some [soul.] Whereas Mac seems to be all for the cause, he's a hard-driving [xx], by his politics. You know, his biology is sexuality is certainly part of it, but you know it's, there's no soul, there's no art, there's no depth in that sense. Um, these political people get into types, you know. They would um, I could see Mac trying to seduce a woman by telling her that she needed to sleep with him for the revolution. Doesn't that make sense? Doesn't that seem like what he would do?

Susan: *(interrupting)* What's like the voice that says "come on in" cause like –

Mr. Brown: Well, what do you think it is?

Susan: I don't know, but I was thinking like –

Mr. Brown: *(interrupting)* What page is that?

Susan: It's some guy who [xx], but then if he's [xx] her would she be saying that?

Mr. Brown: I think, I think, I think in these camps, you know in these tents and stuff like that, let me find the line...okay. It says here at the top, at the top, yeah. I mean look at the way it's written. "When Jim walked by, she smiled wisely and said, 'Good morning' and the combing didn't pause. Jim stopped. 'No,' she said. 'Only Good Morning.' 'You make me feel good,' he said. For a moment he looked at the long white throat and the sharply defined jaws. 'Good morning again,' he said, and he saw her lips form to a line of deep and delicious understanding." She, she took that as a compliment that he was interested in her, she reciprocated. "And when he passed along, and the tousled head darted out and the husky voice whispered, 'Come on in, quick! He's gone now.'" You know I think her father, her boyfriend you know? If I might be so crass as to say that sometimes in a situation like this, you [hit] while you could. And that's, that's, that's what's going on here. In any kind of situation where people are going to make camp, for any length of time and they're living in a [xx] city, can't you just imagine all the, you know, all the human condition exists. We know people were born in these camps, people died in these camps. People procreated in these camps. Um, people had arguments and hassles. I know that some of you guys know something about the Japanese internment in W.W.II. Um, before they were taken to these camps, and you know there's one, some of you know about Manzinar, and in Ezekiel's grandmother's picture there was one in Utah and stuff, they were taken to the racetrack stables. They were put in horse stalls. Um, a racetrack around here was [xx], which was south of San Francisco, it doesn't exist any

more. And they used [xx], and even though they were living in the stalls and the stables, life went on. If your girlfriend were in the camp with you, you would sneak out and spend a few minutes, literally, for a roll in the hay. *(Some students laugh.)* Sorry. Literally.

Mr. Brown's interpretation of this scene unequivocally represents men as having strong sexual urges and desires and women as passive recipients of them. Steinbeck's representation of the woman brushing her hair, although clearly showing her to be the object of Jim's gaze, also positions her as possessing sexual desires and powers of her own; she smiles at Jim, is engaged in a secret sexual relationship, and seems happy with it. But this was not addressed in Mr. Brown's explanation, and instead women were represented as the object of Mac's seductions and Jim's desires, as symbolic of the "aesthetic", as a bodily necessity like "bread". Similarly, in his parallel to the atmosphere of an internment camp, Mr. Brown represents women as passive objects of men's desire and represents men's desire as the universal norm through the use of the pronoun "you" by explaining, "If your girlfriend were in the camp with you, you would sneak out and spend a few minutes, literally, for a roll in the hay." In Mr. Brown's explanation above, first Jim and Mac's sexual desires are represented as natural and as defining factors of their personalities, then the "naturalness" of men's heterosexual desires is extended from fictional to real men through the interment camp example. Mr. Brown's textual analysis works to construct a gender border that crosses from the "text world" (Thein, 2005, p. 386) of *In dubious battle* to the real world by creating a distinction between men, who are all driven by biological urges to be heterosexually aggressive, and women, who are merely recipients of men's sexual desires.

The fictional and historical representation of women during the unit on *In dubious battle* led to the creation and reinforcement of other gender borders that slipped between fiction and fact. Many of the literacy activities during this unit represented women as doing domestic, private work such as cooking and cleaning and men as doing political, public work such as moving across the United States and engaging in labour strikes. It is certainly likely that more men than women engaged in these public activities during the 1930s, the historical setting of Steinbeck's novel. However, historians have also documented numerous cases of women "riding the rails" (illegally traveling on boxcars), working as farm labourers, and engaging in labour strikes (Lovell & Uys, 1997) even though Steinbeck's novel does not. Riding the rails, in particular, was represented as a purely masculine practice in *In dubious battle* and Mr. Brown's historical lectures. The students in Mr. Brown's class seemed to accept the gendered borders constructed through the novel and historical lectures and to amplify them in their own literacy practices. The amplification of borders between women's private work and men's public work was most prominent in a small group presentation focused on riding the rails during the Depression.

The small group who gave the presentation on riding the rails was comprised of four girls. In the girls' videotaped story, riding the rails was represented as a masculine activity through making most of the fictional characters of the story male. Although it could be argued that the female students neutralized or challenged gender borders by playing male characters, Thorne (1993) reminds us that simply engaging in practices with or defined by the other gender does not necessarily disrupt these boundaries. Throughout

the video, the girls constructed normative gender borders through their depiction of male and female characters. On the whole, the girls depicted female characters as powerless and confined to the home. Male characters, on the other hand, were represented as providing economically for their families and free to move around geographically and physically. The following is a combination of my field-notes and transcripts from the presentation:

The first group to present today is Keri, Zoe, Andrea and Kelly. Their presentation is called "The real world". They have set all the chairs up facing the TV monitor, and as we walk in, they hand out small bags of popcorn. The video is a fake documentary on riding the rails. In it, the girls play boys who are interviewed about why they chose to ride the rails. The characters, who are depicted riding the rails, are given male names and are dressed in masculine or androgynous clothing. In the first scene of the film, Andrea plays a father, Keri plays a boy named Joey, and Kelly plays a mother.

Kelly (mother):	Honey, we're very disappointed in you.
Andrea (father):	If you're going to live in our house, you have to play by our rules!
Keri (son):	Dad, I hate this hellhole! I'm going to get out of this [place]!
	In the next scene, Zoe plays a secretary, Andrea plays a man in a suit.
Andrea (man)	(shouting) [xx], get over here!
Zoe (secretary):	[xx] okay, I'll be right back.
	In the next scene, Zoe and Keri play boys who talk about how they lost everything and are going to go to California where there are jobs.
Keri:	Hi, my name is Joe. I live here with my mom, and we're heading out to California. Want to start a new life. We met a lot of new people on these trains, [xx] riding trains and my friend Charlie [xx]. He's helping me out a lot because, well, my dad, he died [xx]. And my mom's pregnant so he's helping me take care of her and get from here to there. [xx] our house was dilapidated [xx] our furniture, everything, it's just gone. And even my [xx] is [xx]. I used to play that for my parents, for my dad when he was [xx]. I'm the only man left in the Pritchett family.
	In the next scene, all the characters are all at a train station. Again, all the girls are playing boys.
Keri:	Well, my dad died and me and my mom [xx].
Zoe:	We're all going to make it.
Andrea:	We're getting off at [xx]. I heard that they have work [xx] apple-picking.
Keri:	Let's [xx] at the next stop so we can all head out together. Hey, mom! We're going to see where the next stop is. We'll come back.
	Andrea, Keri, Kelly and Zoe walk down the tracks.
Zoe:	Hey, look! The train's coming. Hey, Mrs. Pritchett, the train's coming, hurry up and get ready!
Keri:	Mom, hurry up the train's coming. Mom! Mom!
	Kelly now speaks alone to the camera. She says that she's a pig in disguise trying to work against "intentional violation of property" by those riding the rails. Then the scene switches to all the rail-riders by the tracks again.
All:	California, yeah!!!!
	Kelly turns out to be a "pig" in disguise waiting to arrest them.
Kelly:	You're all under arrest.
Zoe:	What are you talking about?

Kelly:	I'm an undercover bulldog [xx]. You're all under arrest.
Zoe:	You can't arrest me, I'm a girl!
Keri:	Oh, my God! You're a girl?
Zoe:	Yes, I couldn't travel as a girl, so I pretended I was a guy.
Keri:	What? Oh, my God!
Zoe:	[xx] I'm a girl.
Kelly:	I'm tired of this job. I don't want to be a bulldog anymore. Let's all go to California!
All:	Yeah!!

Throughout the video depicting riding the rails, the students created exaggerated differences between women/girls and men/boys through their representations of the characters and their actions. In the opening scenes, men were presented as more powerful (as fathers and bosses) and insistent, while women were portrayed as subservient and accommodating to men. The mother figure in the first scene did not voice parental power over her son, but rather appealed to him by way of their relationship, "Honey, we're very disappointed in you." Furthermore, her son did not reply to her comment but rather to his father's, implying that the father was the highest authority in their household. Differences between men and women were also exaggerated in the pitch of the students' voices; while playing males, the girls lowered the pitch of their voices below their normal speaking voices and while playing females, they raised the pitch above normal, exaggerating physical differences between men and women.

In the scenes that showed the students "riding the rails," young men were represented as strong, active, and independent while women were weak and dependent. Keri, in character as "Joe," told the camera, "[Charlie is] helping me out a lot because, well, my dad, he died. And my mom's pregnant so he's helping me take care of her and get from here to there... I'm the only man left in the Pritchett family." Though his mother was his parent, Joe was presented as having to "take care of her" because he was "the only man left in the Pritchett family." Furthermore, the dependence and weakness of the only openly female figure in the video was exaggerated by making her pregnant. Later, all the male characters walked down the tracks while Joe's mother, the only woman, stayed behind and had to be encouraged to hurry up when the train came. She was unable to walk, apparently, because she was pregnant and had to be directed by younger males on what to do.

The only aspect of the video that implied that the gender borders created within it were arbitrary was Zoe's character's revelation that she was a girl disguised as a boy. The closing dialogue of the film portrayed the character of Charlie as strong, active and independent even though "he" was female. By crossing gender borders, Charlie disrupted the dichotomous gender ideology that the rest of the video upheld. The following section describes other ways in which students in Mr. Brown's class crossed gender borders.

Crossing and questioning gender borders

Students crossed and questioned gender borders through both their participation in literacy activities and their interpretation of literature. The student who crossed gender borders the most through her interactions with other students was Paula. When a varsity football player in the class, Steve, continually initiated conversations about sport only with other male students, constructing a border that placed athletics firmly within masculine territory, Paula did not stop initiating or joining conversations about sport or stop bringing up the topic of sport during whole-class discussions. And though many students spoke of the literacy position of "class clown" as masculine, Paula made jokes and positioned herself as a clown as much as the two boys who were most often mentioned by other students as class clowns. Additionally, Paula had been a debater, ran for student government, and seemed to feel comfortable taking up many positions in the school, both ones that were considered feminine (like prom queen and homecoming princess) and masculine (like debater and class clown). Perhaps Paula felt the freedom to cross gender borders regularly because she was popular, well liked, and had a reputation within the school for being a likeable person (see also the case of John in Thorne, 1993). Although other studies have shown that popular girls often tend to practise forms of emphasized femininity that accommodate hegemonic masculinity (Finders, 1997; Thorne, 1993) this was clearly not the case with Paula, though it was with other popular girls in the class.

Other female students in Mr. Brown's class crossed gender borders by holding particular literacy positions that were symbolically tied, in varying degrees, to masculinity. Two girls, Andrea and Susan, crossed gender borders most frequently by being active participants in whole-class discussions and positioning themselves as smart students. And at times in Mr. Brown's class, such as during small group discussions, there did not seem to be a unified border that demarcated acceptable and expected masculine and feminine literacy positions at all.

For boys, border crossings were more risky, leaving them open to laughter and ridicule. In one example of this, a boy named Andy read an essay he wrote about doing a "random act of kindness", baking cookies for his neighbours. At the end of his essay, Andy noted that one of his neighbours remarked that he would become a good cook like his mother. Students laughed uproariously. This laughter – a reaction to a part of a story that was not humorous – seemed to be a reaction to the potential, gender border crossing represented in Andy's essay. Students seemed to laugh at the idea that Andy, a boy, would be similar to his mother, a woman, in the future. The students' laughter served to define cooking as a feminine activity and to send a clear message: boys should neither engage in perceived feminine practices nor be similar to women.

Because of the threat of laughter and ridicule, border crossings tended to be asymmetrical (Thorne, 1993) in Mr. Brown's class, with girls being more willing to represent themselves as boys/men and to engage in perceived masculine activities than boys being willing to represent themselves as girls/women or engage in perceived feminine activities. In the following excerpt from a small group of students planning their class

presentation on ideals of beauty, Paula was far more comfortable pretending to be male than Sean was pretending to be female.

Paula:	We could produce our own commercials.
Madeline:	I'll be the cameraman.
Sean:	No, you gotta be in it.
Paula:	Yeah, we have to – [then that] would be like, hey.
Madeline:	We only need one girl and one boy.
Sean:	I ain't no boy.
Paula:	I'll be the boy.
Sean:	Alright.
Brittany:	*(laughing)* You be the girl.
Sean:	Shut up, that ain't funny. *(starts laughing)*
Brittany:	Then why are you laughing?
Sean:	Because.

In this exchange, the students laugh when it is suggested that Sean cross a gender border by playing a girl, but not when Paula agrees to play a boy. Furthermore, Sean's verbal reaction to Brittany's suggestion that he be a girl – "shut up, that ain't funny" – suggests that he finds the suggestion of this border crossing to be threatening; he moves quickly to imply that her suggestion should not have been voiced, even in a non-serious way. That students' laughter in these situations did not reflect humour can be seen in the last three lines, when Sean laughs even though he says Brittany's suggestion is not funny, and when he responds vaguely when Brittany asks why he is laughing: "because".

Border crossings were also asymmetrical when students were picking characters to play during the reading of *Inherit the wind*. Most students picked characters of the same sex, but a handful of girls chose to play male roles. No one in the class seemed to find this unusual. The students' choice of characters for the most part served to reinforce "differences" between the categories of males and females, since students felt compelled to pick same-sex roles, but it also allowed girls to cross the gender borders created by the play if they so chose. The suggestion of a male student playing a female role, on the other hand, was used as an opportunity for demonstrating power and reinforcing gender borders. When Alex suggested that Andy would be perfect in the role of Mrs. Brady in the play, many students laughed, and Eun-Jin continued the borderwork by suggesting another non-popular male student, Brian, for the part. Though Mr. Brown eventually assigned the role to Paula, the suggestion that Andy and Brian, neither powerful nor popular boys, should play female parts tacitly suggested that male border crossing was linked to weaker forms of masculinity.

Throughout the course, students also tended to laugh when male students played female characters (by choice) during small-group presentations, but never when female students played males. In part this seemed to occur because often boys would act out caricatures of women, speaking in high falsettos, for example. Such caricaturing, however, I did not consider to be border-crossing, or at least not border crossing in good faith, since the caricaturing of female characters by males served to "other" and stigmatize forms of femininity rather than take them up. On the other hand, girls rarely caricaturized men

when pretending to be them, and their border crossings were neither stigmatized nor laughed at by other students, suggesting that it was viewed as normal that females would want to "cross over into" masculine realms. Likewise, during whole-class discussions of childhood experiences, many girls talked about being "tomboys" or hating dolls, but no boys spoke of "hating sports" or being like girls.

Questioning gender borders

I have separated the notion of questioning gender borders from crossing them since, often during literacy practices, the students in Mr. Brown's class explicitly questioned the real and fictional structures that created gender borders without actually traversing them. Even more importantly, the questioning and negotiating of these borders often did more to disrupt the gender order and privileging of males over females than mere crossing, for crossing, as I have shown, did not always challenge male/female dichotomies. In this section, I focus on two moments that show students' questioning or negotiating gender borders through literacy practices: Keri's presentation of a childhood object and Paula's monologue about ideals of beauty during her small group presentation. In both cases, the students questioned ideals of feminine beauty in response to the exploration of the theme of beauty in class discussions of *The bluest eye*, although Keri's questioning of gender borders spanned the entire semester.

Keri had immigrated from Iran to California when she was a young girl. She was very quiet in class and was considered neither popular nor unpopular, though many students seemed to like her. During the first week of Mr. Brown's class, students were asked to bring in an important object from their childhood to share with the rest of the class. Students brought in many different things, from photos to stuffed animals to baseball gloves. The following is an excerpt from my fieldnotes that describes the object that Keri brought in, a scarf, and how she explained it to the rest of the class.

> *Keri, who is sitting to my left, presents a scarf. She tells the class that, as many of them may know, in the country she comes from [Iran], women have to cover their heads (she circles her face with her hands) all except their faces. When she was little, she and her brothers used to run home from school so they could go out and play. Every day she'd see her brothers running out the door and then her mother would pull her back in and make her put on a scarf. She hated wearing scarves, and she would try to run out the door before her mother could catch her. (Students laugh.) But usually she did. She even sometimes sneaked out the back door. (She pauses a lot and her voice is quiet. She seems very nervous.) Sometimes when her mom didn't catch her, her brothers would make her go back in to the house and put on the scarf. (She is twisting the scarf around with her hands.) The day that we got on the plane to come here – to America, she says, my mother and I ripped off our scarves and threw them on the ground. Keri starts crying. She is not sobbing audibly, but there are tears rolling down her face and her voice is quivering. Everyone waits in silence to see if she is going to continue. I am crying, trying not to let the tears roll down my face. Keri sits down, and Ms. Nguyen goes to Mr. Brown's desk, pulls out two Kleenexes, and brings them back to her.*

Keri's presentation of the scarf questioned the gender borders in place in Iran by showing mandated scarf-wearing to be unfair, undesirable and oppressive. She questioned a

custom that served to conceal women and symbolically confine them to private, unseen realms of society. She also showed how her mother and her brothers acted in ways to police this border. At the same time, though, Keri presented America as an unequivocal place of freedom and opportunity for women. When I asked Keri about this in an interview, she said that she felt that women had far more freedom in the U.S. because they could leave the house with their friends, wear make-up, and wear a wider range of clothing styles.

Later in the semester, however, during the unit on *The bluest eye,* Keri began to question gender practices and borders in the school and U.S. society. Rather than seeing the U.S. as a place of unbridled freedom for women, Keri started to recognize, question and critique the structures that supported gender borders and the dominance of men in the U.S. as well as Iran. When I asked her if the presentations about beauty had changed her views, she explained:

> Because you know when they [other students] said that the girls try to be like this ideal, I don't know, skinny person and all that stuff, I realized that I was doing all that stuff, I, I didn't actually think about it, I didn't think I was doing, you know, trying to be that perfect girl, but I guess that was what I was doing because I bought all that make-up, I do all this hair stuff, I exercise and so everything so I can lose the weight and be skinny and that kind of stuff. And I'm sure that a lot of girls also noticed because they used to say, you know, "I'm doing this for *me* because I want to be beautiful," You know? That's partly true, but I don't know, I'm willing to admit that it's not for me, it's just trying to be what society wants me to be, trying to fit in.

Through the small-group presentations on ideals of beauty, Keri began to see that some of the appearance-related "choices" open to her as a girl in the United States were not free choices at all, but ways in which broad, socio-cultural gender borders were maintained. Keri seemed to realize that the "freedoms" of wearing make-up and wearing different clothes were ways in which girls were pressured to desire particular representations of beauty and perfection.

Paula's presentation on ideals of beauty was similarly personal and critical of the gendered borders maintained through ideals of feminine attractiveness. During her small-group presentation on *The bluest eye*, Paula questioned notions of beauty, their connections to ethnicity, and the way in which they had worked in her life to define her as female. Her monologue is notable not only because she explicitly questions the gender borderwork accomplished by the internalization of ideals of beauty, but also because she takes the floor for far longer than she did at any other point in the course, suggesting that this was a topic she felt strongly and personally about. Paula told the class:

> Society's perception of beauty causes [xx] to concentrate on, on, on a physical definition of beauty. Um, that's just how our society is, and that's me, just because I find myself getting caught up in the media. … "Be perfect. Pretty hair, a slim waist" you know, [xx] blond hair, pretty eyes, you know, slim waist, and I don't feel like I fit into the criteria, but at the same time, I don't feel like I'm ugly. Because, you know, I had a Barbie when I was younger, but I knew that was the Barbie, it wasn't me, and I can't, I realized like at 15 that that's not, but, so I, it never caught me like I was ugly... So, like the Asian aspect of

everything. When I was younger, I used to be really pale, and I looked like I was Chinese or something because I was just a lighter skin tone, and I was always told that I was a cute. But, it was just like a few years ago, when I went to visit like my family in Los Angeles and I had like totally changed from when I was younger, I got darker, you know, and I'm not as skinny as most Cambodian girls are, they were just like, "Whoa! What happened to you?" *(A few disbelieving laughs come from students.)* And they were, they told me, they were like, "Do you [xx] for the fact that you were light-skinned, now you're not cute any more!" And I was, that hurt me, but at the same time I was like I don't care 'cause you know whatever. 'Cause when I think about it now, it's just like my culture has this image too and it's just like I don't fit it.

Paula's presentation demonstrated the many ways in which notions of beauty and gender had influenced her self-image. In her presentation, she shared how ideals of beauty had operated in her life at a social and a personal level and as a raced concept; she had felt the pressure to define herself and her worth through cultural ideals of feminine beauty like those represented in the media (supermodels) and children's toys (Barbies). At the same time, the gender borders created by feminine ideals of beauty had entered her life in complex and personal trajectories. Because she was an ethnic minority, because she had dark skin, and because her home culture was Cambodian, Paula noted that she had internalized a desire to achieve and measure herself by particular White ideals of beauty that are difficult to resist but impossible to achieve.

Paula's presentation on ideals of beauty questioned the gender borders surrounding beauty that are ritualized at societal levels and internalized at the personal level. Paula, like Keri, seemed to be more aware of and critical of the way in which gender operated in the classroom, the literature and the school, perhaps because she felt that her home culture, Cambodian, was very oppressive for women. Her heightened awareness of the ways in which gender borders are structured and represented seemed to lead her to question them more often than many other students in the class. Paula's presentation, like Keri's presentation of her scarf, suggests that school-based literacy practices can be used to critique and transform gender borders. At the same time, I do not think it is a coincidence that the most extensive examples of questioning gender borders occurred in connection to a text, *The bluest eye,* that explicitly calls into question such borders and the assumptions they are based on. The other literary texts read in Mr. Brown's class, with their depictions of characters who embodied, accepted and stayed within traditional, normative gender boundaries, did not seem to provide students with similar opportunities. Additionally, it is noteworthy that no boys publicly questioned gender borders to the extent that Paula and Keri did, either during discussions of *The bluest eye* or any other literacy activity that I observed. As I demonstrate in the next section, perhaps boys' reluctance to question gender borders was caused in part by the ridicule that followed any hint of boys' border crossings.

Patrolling gender borders

In addition to constructing gender borders through literacy activities, the students in Mr. Brown's class also patrolled those borders, marking times when female students crossed into perceived masculine territory or male students crossed into perceived feminine

territory and expressing disapproval and distain for such transgressions. A significant way in which gender borders were reinforced during literacy activities in Mr. Brown's class was through representing heterosexuality as natural and homosexuality as stigmatized. During my observations of class, I witnessed many examples of the reinforcing of heterosexuality and stigmatizing of homosexuality, the first occurring on the first day of class, as the opening vignette of this article illustrates. Connell (1987) argues that heterosexuality serves to reinforce a dichotomous view of men and women by positing as natural the sexual desire for members of the "opposite sex". Furthermore, male homosexuality threatens men's overall dominance over women, because this dominance is upheld in part through the sexual objectification of women. Since gender is practised through relations of power, homosexual men's sexual desire for other men rather than women is often seen as a weaker or more unacceptable practice of masculinity. Thus, men's homosexuality often becomes symbolically connected with femininity. In Mr. Brown's class, only boys, not girls, accused and were accused of being homosexual. (I use the word "accuse" because within the context it carried a negative, social stigma.) This pattern suggests that homosexuality was more disturbing and threatening to boys and their dominant position in the class than to girls.

Homosexuality was frequently used by boys as a stigmatizing label for other boys who could not take up powerful literacy or social positions in the classroom. Accusations of homosexuality also helped set up hierarchies of gender in which boys who accused others of being homosexual were rewarded with laughter, recognition as funny people, and a public endorsement of their own heterosexuality. The student who was most often accused of being homosexual was Brian, a student who was not popular but often tried to initiate conversations with popular classmates. During Brian's group presentation on beauty, Brian attempted to position himself publicly as heterosexual by treating women as sexual objects. Brian's efforts, however, were thwarted by Max's questioning of his heterosexuality. In the following excerpt, a student-teacher, Ms. Nguyen, was leading class discussion.

Ms. Nguyen: I just have another question. Um, Brian, Brian, can you talk more about the models? What do they look like? Um, why are they considered beautiful, or, what similar do they have to what we talked about yesterday?

Brian: Well, okay, um, let's, let me start with this one here. Um, okay, um, so what do you want me to talk about here?

Ms. Nguyen: Like how is she similar to the kind of beauty we were talking about yesterday or how is she different.

Brian: *(Laughing)* I mean, just look at her! She's perfect! *There are some laughs, but students also seem annoyed since Brian himself is laughing so much.* She has smooth skin, perfect hair, and a beautiful smile. You guys [xx]

Ana: She has like–

Brian: *(Interrupting)* She has a very – yes. *Students laugh again.*

Max: *(Under his breath, but loud enough so that the students around him can hear)* I didn't know you liked girls, Brian. *(louder)* Do you like her, Brian? *(referring to the Asian model he has presented)*

Brian: Yes, she's one of my favorite actresses. This picture also, very... let's begin [xx]. Look at her!

Brian' resistance to articulating the qualities that make the model whom he presented "beautiful" positioned him as a heterosexual male who "naturally" desires a female who is "naturally" beautiful. He continually exhorted the rest of the class and the teacher to "look at her," implying that her beauty was self-evident. But Max challenged this by questioning Brian' heterosexuality, first quietly, then more loudly to the rest of the class.

Even Mr. Brown was subjected to laughter and embarrassment when one of his comments was interpreted as laced with suggestions of homosexuality. During a discussion of *Death of a salesman* and the "rags to riches" American dream, Mr. Brown used the case of Arnold Schwartzenegger as an example of someone who became rich and famous in the U.S. Mr. Brown told the class that one time he saw Schwartzenegger in person and he wasn't that impressive. "Maybe because he had his clothes on," he explained. Immediately, most of the students in the class began laughing, and Mitchell dramatically put his head on his desk in his arms. Students continued laughing and Mr. Brown seemed embarrassed. "You know," he added, posing his arms like a body-builder. The students patrolled the border between masculinity and femininity through their laughter, indicating that Mr. Brown's remark was an inappropriate expression for a heterosexual man. Though Mr. Brown tried to ignore their laughter initially, eventually it served its purpose; he repositioned himself as a heterosexual male through indicating that he was referring to Schwartzenegger's fame as a body-builder, rather than to sexual desire for Schwartzenegger.

As the examples above demonstrate, gender borders were often maintained and patrolled in Mr. Brown's class through laughter. At any suggestion of boys' border crossing – such as playing the role of female characters during small-group presentations, expressing interest in activities seen as feminine, or being mistaken for female – other students usually laughed. This occurred when Andy noted that his neighbour thought he would become a good cook like his mother, when a student suggested that a boy in the class might "lo:::ve guys!", and when Mr. Brown remarked on Arnold Schwartenegger's physique. Similarly, when Mr. Brown initiated a discussion about the male character named "Joy" in *In dubious battle*, students laughed when he remarked, "I have never – anybody? – met a male named Joy, never. Had a girlfriend named Joy, but never a man." The suggestion that Mr. Brown could have had a boyfriend named Joy, could have been homosexual or bisexual, was met with laughter that indicated that the students saw this, too, as a gender border crossing that was unacceptable. In general, then, laughter served as a discursive means by which students made clear to each other the kinds of behaviours that they considered appropriate for men/boys and women/girls. In the course of literacy learning, such laughter also taught students when a transgression across gendered borders occurred and offered a warning to other students to get back in normative gender territory.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the six months that I observed Mr. Brown's English class, the classroom discourse surrounding literacy practices not only worked to prepare students for more

advanced academic literacy, but also served to delineate and patrol gender boundaries between acceptable masculine and feminine social practices. My findings suggest that boys were far more likely than girls to patrol gender boundaries and to be accused of crossing them during literacy practices. Male homosexual desire seemed to be viewed as a particularly negative form of border crossing, and laughter was a primary discursive mechanism through which students marked gendered, border crossings, particularly when boys' behaviour was interpreted as feminine.

Girls, on the other hand, more often crossed and questioned gendered borders through the reading and writing they were asked to do in class. That some girls in Mr. Brown's class crossed and questioned gender borders suggests that literacy practices have the potential to disrupt the gender dichotomies that appear natural or a matter of individual choice. Furthermore, students' crossing and questioning of gendered borders in Mr. Brown's class demonstrates that such disruptions of normative and dichotomous views of gender can occur not only among youth who are already disrupting such borders in their everyday lives, such as the queer youth in Blackburn's (2005) study, but also among youth who hold more traditional and normative views of gender.

Implications for teaching

Some of the gendered borderwork that occurred during literacy activities in Mr. Brown's class was difficult for Mr. Brown to alter or address directly, such as comments made under students' breath or student laughter. Far easier to address in critical discussions about gender and power are direct statements about personal beliefs. However, I believe that changes in pedagogy can help more students question normative gender ideologies. For example, students could be asked to critically examine their own beliefs and assumptions about gender by being asked to explain why they have laughed. In a school like Montana, where racial and sexual diversity and tolerance were highly valued at least nominally, such discussions could provide opportunities for students to become aware of their unconscious beliefs about gender that run contrary to their stated values.

In this study, literacy activities that asked students to explicitly examine and question the social and cultural structures that support a male/female dichotomy and a hierarchy of gender seemed to be productive and transformative. There was far less evidence of creating and reinforcing gender borders during discussions of beauty and *The bluest eye* than during discussions of the other literature taught, and much more evidence of questioning gender borders and hierarchy. Though some students, particularly females, were more questioning than others, my interviews with some of the boys in the class suggested that even students who appeared resistant to questioning gender borders during class discussions of beauty felt that their views changed as a result.

Crossing gender borders, although allowing girls and boys to occupy subject positions and engage in practices seen as "belonging" to the "other" gender, did not have as much transformative potential, especially when boys crossed into "feminine territory." This border crossing usually resulted in suggestions of homosexuality or laughter that "policed" rather than questioned the boundaries of acceptable masculinities. As in the

case of boys pretending to be female characters, sometimes the parodying of femininity only served to reinforce gender borders and denigrate females further. When girls engaged in literacy practices seen as masculine their border crossings were more successful. Still, it seemed that the explicit examination of gender borders through literacy activities did more to neutralize and deconstruct dichotomous views of gender than gender border crossing.

Implications for research

In general, I found that the gender borders constructed and policed in Mr. Brown's class and at Montana High School were fewer and more shifting than those that have been studied in many other school settings (Cherland, 1994; Davies, 2003; Finders, 1997; Thorne, 1993). I would suggest that gender borders were less rigid at Montana High School because its student body was more ethnically, culturally and socio-economically diverse than that in other studies of gender and literacy in schools. Unlike other high schools and middle schools described in similar research (Cherland, 1994; Eder et al., 1995; Finders, 1997), popularity and recognition at Montana High School were not based on a few, gendered characteristics. Because the students at Montana brought various acceptable forms of masculinity and femininity from their home communities to school, both girls and boys could gain popularity and recognition in a number of ways – through appearance, through academics, or through extracurricular activities. I am not arguing that gender borders were not created and maintained in both real and symbolic ways at Montana, but rather that these borders seemed less institutionalized and less permanent than those shown to exist in more homogeneous schools.

This article contributes to current theories of literacy, most notably New Literacy Studies (Collins, 2000; Solomon & Apaza, 2006; Street, 1984), by documenting ways in which academic literacy learning is interwoven with learning about gendered norms and dichotomies. The gender borderwork that occurred through literary analysis and other literacy activities in Mr. Brown's class was inextricable from the reading and writing skills students were using. Furthermore, the dominant, dichotomous view of girls/women and boys/men that was constructed during literacy activities in the class sustained inequitable gender relations and educational opportunities by positioning vocal, male students as more intelligent and academically capable than female students. The study reported in this article supports Butler's (1999) assertion that normative, dichotomous views of gender privilege heterosexual men and boys over women and girls. In doing so, this study adds to the scholarship on the subtle, discursive ways in which widespread academic literacy practices reinforce inequitable gender practices. At the same time, the border crossings and questioning of gendered borders that students such as Paula, Keri, and Andy initiated during literacy practices demonstrate specific literacy pedagogies that can encourage students to question and ultimately change normative views of gender.

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APPENDIX

Transcript Key

(*italics*)	= author's comment/description of non-verbal activities
[xx]	= unclear talk
[words]	= author's guess at words spoken
–	= self interruption or interruption
?	= interrogative or upward intonation
.	= downward intonation (as in a statement)
:	= sound extended
,	= short pause
...	= author-omitted discourse