Gender, Race and Class in the Preadolescent Marketplace of Identities

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The passage from late childhood to early adolescence is a key life stage in our culture, for it is during this period that the age cohort moves decisively into a peer-based social order. Because kids are quite consciously working out their social arrangements during this period, it is an ideal site for watching the actual process of co-construction of salient elements of identity such as gender, ethnicity, and class. And key to this entire process is the emergence of social heterosexuality — the social arrangements that support the patriarchal heterosexual social order. In the following, I will show how this is achieved as a collaborative enterprise, and how gender, ethnicity, race, class and heterosexuality enter into a system of value in a marketplace of identities.

My observations are based on ongoing participant observation, in which Christi Cervantes and I have been attending school with an age cohort of about 150 kids in each of two schools in Northern California. These schools are within fifteen minutes of each other and in the same school district. One of the schools, which I refer to as Hines Elementary, has a predominantly poor and ethnically diverse student body. The other, which I call Grant Elementary, has an 80% European American student population, from primarily middle and working class homes. Beginning in fifth grade, we have followed our cohorts through the transformation from a normatively asexual childhood social order to a normatively heterosexual preadolescent social order, and from the relatively safe and close environment of the elementary school into the more open junior high.

We are currently in eighth grade and much of the transition is done as we await the birth next month of the cohort's first child. The expectant mother is 13 years old and overwhelmed with terror at the prospect of the pain of childbirth. I mention this to emphasize the complex ways in which adult behavior and concerns emerge from and merge with childhood behavior and concerns. Indeed, as I will outline, the adolescent heterosexual social order builds more on a childhood need for excitement than on sexual desire.

The threat of being deemed immature is key to this process. All of childhood is dominated by what I call a developmental imperative. That is, childhood, to a great extent, is about growing up. Kids from the earliest age are under tremendous pressure — first from their parents and families, and then from their peers — to be age appropriate. Nobody wants to be a baby. Another force behind engagement in the heterosexual market is the overwhelming need for excitement. Facing forward to adolescence, childhood sources of excitement are abandoned in favor of the unknown and even the forbidden.

In February of fifth grade, as I walked out of the lunchroom onto the playground, Trudy and Katya, who normally played Chinese jump rope at recess, rushed over and invited me to come with them. They told me that they no longer always played at lunch time — sometimes they just talked instead. Katya said “just talk” with a hunch of her shoulders, wide eyes, and a conspiratorial grin. They led me over to some picnic tables, telling me behind their
hands that what they talk about is boys, and that Trudy is “with” someone. Once we were seated on the picnic tables, Trudy and Katya hesitated, giggled, and looked around conspiratorially. Trudy then whispered behind her hands, informing me that it was Carlos that she was with, and then told us both that he had kissed her. Katya “ooooo”ed and looked wise. I asked where he’d kissed her and she laughed uproariously and pointed to her cheek. We sat for a few more moments, and then went off to play hopscotch.

Trudy's move into heterosexual activity was not an isolated act, but part of her cohort's collaborative move to heterosexuality. Heterosexuality is achieved as part of a transcendence of the teacher-dominated classroom, developing a social order that spans the age cohort and moving towards age-group autonomy. This transcendence is accomplished through the emergence of a heterosexual crowd—a socially heterosexual community of practice. It is the collaboration of boys and girls that make the crowd particularly effective: combining boys’ and girls’ friendship groups allows the crowd to dominate the environment both through sheer numbers and through enhanced access to both boys’ and girls’ space, information and events. With its densely interconnected relationships, a crowd guarantees its members visibility and support of a variety of kinds. Here, heterosexual pairing can take place as a group endeavor, providing support and encouragement for individuals as they experiment with unfamiliar and face-threatening practices.

As the visible locus of emerging social heterosexuality, the crowd dominates attention through its fast-paced new heterosexual activity. And it IS fast-paced. Barry Thorne, in her book *Gender Play*, describes the early stages of the heterosexual market in fifth grade, as couples form and break up at a dizzying rate. Most last a few days, maybe a couple of weeks. But an alliance that begins in morning recess can easily be over by lunch. Most of these alliances are achieved, furthermore, through one or more intermediaries, and have more to do with relations among intermediaries and within the same-gender friendship group than with relations between the two people who are being paired up. The relationships themselves are almost entirely instrumental, and most of the activity is ABOUT getting together or breaking up rather than actually being together.

Adults view this frantic activity as evidence that kids don't know what heterosexuality is about. But in fact, it is very much about heterosexuality. The entire heterosexual enterprise at this point is about alignments within the cohort rather than about individual boy-girl relationships—alignances among girls and among boys as well as between girls and boys. And the rapid negotiation of alliances creates a market, constructing desirability and worth in heterosexual terms.

But this negotiation of desirability and worth measures the qualities of male and female with respect to varied cultural discourses, folding such things as class, ethnicity, and immigration status into the construction of gender differentiation. Status and desirability in the predominantly Latino crowd at Hines Elementary is different from status and desirability in the Asian American crowd, or in the European American crowd at Grant Elementary. Thus while the outline of the rise of the heterosexual market appears to be quite general, each crowd, depending on its character with respect to such things as class and ethnicity, will carry this out in its own way. Becoming a mature male or female is inseparable from becoming a mature urban working class Chicana/o, a suburban second generation Asian American in Los Cerritos, or a mature poor rural European American in Oklahoma.

While romance heightens heterosexual relationships in the Latino crowd, it is the drama of rejection that plays that role in the European American crowd. And while the norm among the Latinas of Hines Elementary is to develop attitude, the notable European American girls

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of Grant Elementary develop a regressive cute style for public displays. Girls' backroom machinations at Grant have their equivalent at Hines in up-front challenges and occasional fights. And while a girl who insists on clowning, or on enthusiastically competing with boys, is considered weird or immature in the European American, Latino and Asian American crowds, African American girls maintain and even enhance their performance rights. As the cohort moves into preadolescence, a new kind of gender differentiation emerges, and frequently a differentiation by which boys become the doers of things. They become the class clowns, the jokers, the fighters, the skaters, the computer nerds, the athletes, the taggers. People comment on their antics, their cleverness, their daring, their skills. They imbue many of these activities with a new flourish, develop a more organized system of competition, and view the activities as a vehicle for the achievement of public status. Girls who continue in these domains, on the other hand, are marginalized, and viewed as immature.

As boys take over the center of certain realms of accomplishment, girls establish and dominate new spheres of activity and accomplishment. They come to focus on style, and on the technology of beauty and femininity. But more important, they engage in social engineering. As girls become marginalized in their old activities, they become the movers and shakers in the heterosexual market. It is the girls who call the shots — they decide who should go with whom, they arrange meetings and alliances, they negotiate desirability. Because these endeavors are altogether new and linked to maturity and the unknown, and because they are endeavors that are and will remain closed and mysterious to boys, they are seductive to girls. They bring the kind of recognition that is no longer available in other spheres.

Thus for girls, the heterosexual market is not particularly about heterosex, or about boys. Rather, it's about social engineering, and boys are important, and quite passive, materials for the engineering enterprise. What is particularly striking about the heterosexual engagement is that while girls' relationships with boys are almost purely instrumental, the desire for substantive relationships is directed to other girls. The passion that heterosexual girls may, later on, come to focus on members of the other sex is now focused entirely on friendships with other girls. It is well known that preadolescent girls get involved in cliques, ganging up on each other, shunning individuals, changing friends. Being mean. This is a development of social toughness comparable to boys' development of physical or athletic toughness. As the boys in the crowd become obsessed with physical games, the girls become obsessed with social games.

Thus boys come to dominate certain arenas of recognized accomplishment that were once common to girls as well, as girls move on to become heighteners of the social, breathing excitement into heretofore normal everyday people and situations, producing desire where none was before. This development is particularly noticeable on the fifth grade playground, where boys come to dominate the large games that take up the central area. The girls' games that take place around the periphery — wall ball, slam, hopscotch, tetherball, Chinese jump rope — fade into insignificance. And as girls, one by one and group by group, move away from some of their old activities, they take to standing, sitting, or walking around the periphery, watching the boys, heckling them, or talking intensely together. The practice of walking around has in itself symbolic significance. Moving away from the crowd and walking around slowly, intensely engaged in conversation, draws attention to those who do it. It stands in stark contrast to the fast movements of their peers, with play, with the larger groups engaged in games, and with the louder tone of children's talk and shouting. This walking, furthermore, is a visible occasion on which girls engage in intense social affiliation activities, negotiating heterosexual pairings and realigning friendships.

Of course, while any pair or small group of girls can walk around and talk, only certain girls' walking and talking carries status. The crucial ingredient is the public knowledge that they have something important to talk about — that the social relations they are exercising in
their talk are important social relations—those of the emerging heterosexual crowd. For this reason, the realignments of socially marginal girls are viewed as unimportant, and their negotiation of these realignments is seen as a sign of immaturity rather than maturity. Socially marginal girls’ crushes on boys, and flirtations between socially marginal girls and boys are seen as silly. They are not forging key alliances, but engaging in activity disembodied from the “central” practice of the cohort. In this way, the development of social heterosexuality is intertwined with the development of an organized status system in the cohort. It is not simple engagement in heterosexual practice that signals the entrance into adolescence, but the cohort-wide co-construction of social status and heterosexual practice.

As a site for the energetic production of style, excitement and new kinds of rarified social information, the crowd produces and reproduces its domination of the social scene. The crowd's movers and shakers become public figures, and the details of their activities, and of their current and past alliances constitute important cultural knowledge, as do the strategies for engaging in these practices. The crowd brings their drama into the classroom, passing notes, talking urgently, teasing, fighting. The crowd provides support for its members when they get in front of the room, giving them their undivided attention, sincere applause and encouragement. Crowd members choose each other, vote for each other, and recommend each other for key jobs in the classroom. Thus a global status hierarchy develops based in the crowd, paired with a new desire for public status.

The public arena in the school articulates with the public arena outside. Trips to the mall are opportunities to interact with strangers, and particularly to try out one’s social courage on the open market. The braver girls delight in asking older boys how old they are, what their names are, and sometimes for their phone numbers. At this stage, they don’t write the numbers down or remember them; the significant event is only in the asking. Field trips are also opportunities for the cohort to be out in the world “on their own,” and as a result are occasions for all kinds of action. On a field trip to Stanford late in fifth grade, the girls of the Hines Latino crowd flirted with college boys—made cat calls, called out “you’re cute,” and even got one undergraduate woman to take their picture standing with her boyfriend. In eighth grade, they still talk about this field trip as their first real step into the public arena. Trips to the mall also afford opportunities for gang-oriented girls to "dog" girls affiliated with opposing gangs and to try out their courage with public insults and challenges.

The heterosexual marketplace is not just about heterosexuality, but about a certain kind of coming of age—a sense of the self as a production in relation to the social world, and a preparation for later markets — the academic market, the job market, etc. The preadolescent transition into a heterosexual social order brings girls and boys into mutual and conscious engagement in gender differentiation, and with this differentiation class and ethnic differentiation takes on new significance as well, as the entire gamut of stylistic forms comes to be organized within the peer cohort.

As one girl said during the first week of sixth grade, "Sixth grade is different. I feel different about my life - I mean, I never used to think of myself as having a life."