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THE ROOM IN WHICH I WRITE OVERLOOKS A PARK, OR rather the blocklong cement slab that passes for a park in New York City. This play space is divided in two by a chain-link fence, and further divided into two full basketball courts, three half-court basketball courts, and one miniature baseball diamond. A painted circle serves as the pitcher's mound, painted squares the bases. The sounds of the games often provide background to my writing: the ping of aluminum baseball bats (so distinct from the thwack of the wooden bats of my boyhood), the start-and-stop rhythm of dribbling, the smack of a ball hitting a mitt, the trill of a basketball hitting a metal backboard.

The park and the players are a wonderful source of distraction and reverie. I find myself at the window looking out upon the games: myself as the boy who played passable baseball wondering why the guy on first has yet to steal second; myself as the boy who grew up watching basketball in the Midwest gripped by a great shot; myself as the boy who usually observed

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from the sidelines, finding him once again in the middle-aged man at the window.

Multiple games can be under way at any given time, or a single game may hold court. Today: a boy with a glowing head of blond hair moves against the wind as he dribbles down-court. A few toddlers run around the bases, their caretakers drinking coffee from paper cups on the benches that line the park. Once, as though in a dream, I saw a lone hooded figure, backlit by acid-orange streetlights, shooting free throws as snow began to fall.

Skill ranges from the intense vigor of honed expertise to the dogged determination of the beginner. Hands fumble. Feet fly. Victory shouts. Dejection shouts. Occasionally, in the early morning, I see a group of elderly men and women practicing Tai Chi, their slow unified grace providing a vivid contrast to the fast practice of youth.

Skin colors vary, but run toward brown. Gender varies little. The park is populated almost exclusively by boys and young men. Girls occasionally skirt the margins, hang on the fences, jump double Dutch in the corner, but rarely enter the main game. I once relished the sight of a particularly fierce girl who hit a line drive and flipped the bird as she rounded second base.

The sights and sounds of boys at play have correlated with my efforts to capture the lives of boys, in particular the movement, the aggression, the competition, the rivalries, the friendships, and the muscular eroticism that inform boys' lives. Over time, these boys have seeped, settled, and overlapped in my mind. Even though I sometimes focus on individual players, they collect as a pattern—as Walt Whitman might have it,

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“Every one disintegrated yet part of the scheme.”¹ They fade and reconfigure. They disperse, only to return. The residue etches a pattern of perpetual dynamism (imagine writing—over and over again—on a chalkboard that is never fully erased).

Masculinity is a complex pattern. Boyhood is a chaotic dynamism. The terms *boyhood* and *masculinity* signify our efforts to catalogue the experience of a group of people, in this case male children from birth to full growth. *Boyhood* also strives to capture and categorize the gender pattern called masculinity, and more precisely the development of masculinity. Categorical speech, though, always fails; someone always falls out. No two boyhoods are the same. No one boy remains invariable.

Can we hold in tension the particular (the boy before us) and the general (that arises out of formalized thinking)? How might our understanding of familiar and expected gender patterns enliven, but also constrict, our understanding of masculinity? How do the presuppositions that underscore the pattern hold up? How might the particularity of any given boy offset normative expectation?

What, for instance, about the boys who are not in the park? How might we bring them into sight? What sounds do they make? How do we register their movements, their aggression, their surrender, their competition, their friendships, and their erotic embodiments? Are they kept indoors, perhaps tethered by troubled kin? Dulled by neglect? Are they collecting the collections that so often absorb boys (rocks, trading cards, dinosaurs)? Playing video games? Reading? Working on their diorama of Alaska for their social studies classes? Sugar cubes, cotton, and glue?

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One neighborhood boy has often caught my eye as I have watched him grow to about the same size as his cello case. I see another boy struggle every morning under the weight of a backpack that seems about to topple him. Yet another little boy's face has finally caught up to his glasses and his ears. What are the patterns of their play? How might the consideration of their unique boyhoods deconstruct the more familiar playground boy, and the more visible patterns and performances of masculinity shouted from the basketball court? Or might these boys be playground boys as well, complicating the pattern all the more?

The challenge ahead is to capture boyhoods without dropping that -s; to tap the exclamation of masculinity and not overlook that which is cloaked in defense; to appreciate the affection of boys, while duly noting the aggression that may more often characterize their play; to recognize the femininity in masculinity; to grasp the condition known as boyhood, but at the same time recognize the contingencies (social, racial, historical, economic, religious) that qualify that condition, making it plural.

The history of psychology is replete with the dropping of the pluralizing -s. We underestimate variability and multiplicity. We relish the norm, while overlooking the productive potential to be found in variance. Even though norms capture what is most conspicuous about human development (how we are all similar), they do not capture what is perhaps most interesting about human development: the variance that is necessary for norms to exist, the fact that repetition of patterns or averages is never exact. There is always distinction.

Masculinity and Psychoanalysis

Perplexity—the humbling recognition of impending contradiction, and the expansive embrace of uncertainty—has been slow in coming to the theorization of masculinity. Paradox has yet to call itself masculine. Even within psychoanalytic theory—the psychological theory that arguably offers the most compelling epistemology for thinking about human desire and the centrality of gender in human development—masculinity remains largely undertheorized and clinically underanimated.

While it could be said that much has been written about men and masculinity throughout the history of psychoanalysis, it would be more correct to say that much has been *presumed* about masculinity through the repetition of Sigmund Freud's normative Oedipal model: a boy becomes a boy through biological expression, intertwined with desire for his mother and rivalry with his father. He grows by separating from his mother and identifying with his father, in time, becoming a father himself. Masculinity in this frame is not distinguished from, and is defined through, the biology of phallic primacy (the determined interest a boy directs toward his directing penis), heterosexual desire, and the reproduction of fathering.²

Most early psychoanalytic theorists, through the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, followed upon and reiterated Freud's original male Oedipal thesis; even observations on femininity were informed by this male Oedipal frame. Boys and girls alike, according to Freud, develop in relation to the phallic organ.³ Freud did not recognize or attribute knowledge of the vagina to the girl. The girl is depicted as growing through her response

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to her recognition as castrated (a claim that puts in play a phallic/castrated polarity): she wishes for a penis (penis envy), resents her mother (for her lack), and chooses her father as her object of desire (the one who can offer her the promise of a child, the symbolic equivalent of a penis). Femininity in this frame is also not distinguished from, and is defined through, phallic primacy, heterosexual desire, and the reproduction of mothering.

Virtually from the start, though, feminist interlocutors challenged this depiction of femininity. They asserted that in fact girls did have knowledge of the vagina.⁴ They observed that girls' early relationships with their mothers involved more than resentment and the fraught wish for a penis.⁵ They set about to distinguish feminine sexual experience beyond envy and passivity.⁶ They maintained that while girls may envy the male body, so, too, boys envy the female body, and a mother's reproductive capacities in particular.⁷

Femininity was problematized. The discourse moved forward in an intricate evolution.⁸ This analysis of femininity is one of the most important and lively threads in twentieth-century psychological thinking. As theory, it has lifted off the page, filtered into social space, shaped political life, created social transformations, and produced critical changes in cultural practices, including psychotherapeutic practices.⁹

The psychoanalytic discourse on masculinity has neither evolved in such a complex fashion nor had the same kind of socially transforming impact.

It was not until the mid-1960s that a significant response to Freud's theory appeared, and a second-wave theory of masculinity took shape—one that stands today as the dominant

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theory of masculinity. This second wave was inaugurated via Robert Stoller's analyses that shifted the focus from the problems a boy has in identifying with his father to the problems a boy has in separating from and dis-identifying with his mother.¹⁰ A psychoanalyst well known for his theoretical considerations of gender and sexual arousal, Stoller suggested that boys become boys through their "not feminine," "not you" separation from their mothers.

Building on Stoller, and illuminating the maternal subject in these mother-son bonds, feminist scholars in the 1970s and 1980s, notably Jessica Benjamin and Nancy Chodorow, refined analyses of separation and provided new readings on the effects of maternal dis-identification.¹¹ Important here were considerations of how boys prematurely separate from their mothers, and in so doing split off from "not me" affect states considered to be feminine. Resultant upon this premature separation, boys are more vulnerable to depression and alienation. Boys' experiences of dejection and estrangement, it is further argued, form and inform the willful segregation from and the domination of women and girls.

In an expanding critical response to this second-wave theory, analysts at the turn of the twenty-first century began to reexamine a boy's attachment to his father.¹² These analyses spoke to a boy's need for a father of attachment versus a father of rivalry.¹³ Appeals to this mentoring father of attachment have also been made to redress the routine social condition of father absence, and to garner a father's care in response to reports of boys' faltering well-being, including increased aggression, violence, depression, and learning disabilities.¹⁴

Resetting the Normative Masculine Narrative

Masculinity has finally become a site of inquiry: a problem, the way femininity has been regarded for nearly a century. We have come to a revised understanding of boyhood, at least in terms of boys' relations with their parents, and a somewhat more complex sociopsychological vision of masculinity.¹⁵

Still, the normative narrative of masculinity has yet to be reset. We have a revised story of boyhood, but the premises upon which that revision has been made remain remarkably unrevised. The narrative context continues to be set by: (1) a married, heterosexual child-rearing couple; (2) a field marked off by the guideposts of the gender binary (there can be two and only two genders, masculinity and femininity, each defined by what the other is not); (3) a centralized domestic story (mother, father, boy) versus a contextualized domestic story, one that is encased within and permeated by the cultural surround (culture [mother, father, boy] culture); and (4) the continued conflation of anatomy with gender, underplaying the intricate congress of anatomy as it is made by and with the body, mind, and culture.

It is time to reset the terms.

In my view, a key stumbling block to resetting these terms and a more comprehensive analysis of masculinity has been the way in which psychoanalysts have been slow to take into account forces of cultural order. Illustrative of this lack of attention are the ways in which psychoanalysts have not effectively attended to how culturally ordered masculine ideals corral the emotional landscape called masculinity. The fantastic underbelly of masculinity is pinched and policed. The complexity that is masculinity goes largely unrecorded; the variety

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that makes for complexity is only recorded as pathology. The spectrum of masculine bodies and minds is underestimated; how they evolve, or how they come to matter is patrolled, and the margins are deemed pathological.

Offering a corrective illumination of this limited clinical vision, cultural theorists and feminist theorists (both inside and outside the psychoanalytic guild) have for the past twenty-five years produced any number of spectacular rereadings of psychoanalytic gender theory—readings that illustrate development, embodiment, and gendered identifications are open to a range of possibility and difference, perhaps the kinds of difference that make life worth living.¹⁶ This body of work follows primarily on Michel Foucault's refined conception of norms: how norms not only record the expectable, but also direct social order in such a way as to *shape* the expectable, and make the intelligible human.¹⁷ Key to analyses of how gender norms function as constructing ideals have been insights about (1) Gender's construction and constriction (boys wish, behave, express, feel in accord with a specified emotional geography); (2) the determining force of the masculine/feminine gender binary (there can be two and only two genders defined in opposition); (3) the overdrive of heterosexual gender complementarity as the privileged marker of reality and psychological coherence (the reproduction of heterosexual matrimonial relations and of heterosexual parenting as the principal markers of psychic and social well-being).

Importantly, this modern gender theorizing has largely been textual not clinical. And when clinical attention has been paid, it has rarely been directed at boys or men. The rhetorical strategy of this book is to bridge this gap by bringing boys into

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clearer focus, and by offering a new psychoanalytic theory of masculinity.

This strategy reflects my own history. For the past twenty years I have written and practiced at the intersection of clinical psychoanalysis, feminism, and queer studies. I read feminist and queer theory texts in college and graduate school before I read Freud. I read Freud in tandem with Foucault. I am part of the first cohort of openly gay people to train as clinical psychoanalysts. So while the lens of this book is psychoanalytic, in the spirit of boyhood, the psychoanalysis that is spoken here is not your father's psychoanalysis.

Rethinking Masculinity

The boys who come into view within these pages are seen through a reconstituted psychological lens. Each chapter of this book tells the story of one or two boys in relation to a central premise of boyhood. It is my hope that the clinical narratives, the stories of boys told within these pages, bring life and meaning to the theory being built. The boys who emerge here reflect my belief in social transformation, including the re-ordering of modern culture's guiding social-symbolic order—the widening frame of marriage law, the changing definitions of family, the lessening import of traditional gender codes, the dismantling of traditional gender polarities, the expanding net of language and modes of communicative exchange, to name a few. We can no longer presume that masculinity develops within a psychically specific heteronormative domestic story: dis-identification from a mother, rivalry with a father, and identification from son to father. We cannot continue to pre-

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sume that like gender produces like gender; fathers produce sons, mothers produce daughters.

Turning from these presumed domestic stories, we must now look at how masculinity is told *from* culture *through* parent to son, or put another way, how masculinity precedes parents and sons. How do norms *normalize* the family? How does the normalized family then shape the boy? How do norms move on cat's paws, silent and unthought? There they are, before we know it, in our living room, and without invitation. There they are on the playground, in the brother's voice ("Dude, don't throw like a girl"), in the nanny's nod ("That's right; defend yourself like a man").

Culture and cultural symbols, society and social orders, what we might call "backstories," build a boy. But as it turns out, over and over again, there is more than one backstory to tell, and more than one order to order. The traditional Oedipal backstory is grainy at best; we are copies of copies of copies of copies of Oedipus's children. Copies repeat. Copies degrade. Copies transform.

I do not place the traditional Oedipus complex as the major axis for human development. I do, however, look (with determination) for expressions of unconscious fantasy, for evidence of childhood wishes, and the lingering influence of parent-child desire. As Freud would have it, there is blood in the water: the unconscious wishes of childhood "are only capable of annihilation in the same sense as the ghosts in the underworld of the *Odyssey*—ghosts which awoke to new life as soon as they tasted blood."¹⁸

While I may not grant as much authority to ghosts and the past as did Freud, I do value what I have come to call the "psychic envelope" of early parent-child relations. I envision

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this envelope as constructed through the bodied and psychic excitability of parent and child alike—a space that encapsulates the lip-smacking, drooling, kissing, biting density or early childhood sexuality; a space that promotes parent-child recognition and a child's growing capacity to think and reflect on his experience; a space, that constructs childhood life, love, and sexuality through enigmatic unconscious parent-child processes — the space of blood, ghosts, and the emotional resonance of daily family fantasy/life.¹⁹

In my view, the appeal of Oedipal myth derives from the way in which narratives aid us in coping with blood and ghosts. I employ Oedipal theory as narrative, as a fantastic scenario (a unique and blended scene of unconscious wish and conscious imagination), not as a fixed social structure or a determining symbolic order. My clinical curiosity moves me to try to understand how children and families narrate the stories they collectively tell in order to account for their relations, and their overwhelming desires and losses. I pay close attention to how that narration unfurls and refurls in the course of treatment. I listen closely for the ways in which children and families position their stories in relation to dominant cultural narratives.

I place considerable value on the role of fantasy as it builds the boy. But I also strive, following on Judith Butler, to think about how fantasy and interiority are always-and-already constituted by cultural norms.²⁰ The early parent-child psychic envelope is permeable. I look toward masculinity not only as inner feeling or fantasy, but also as it is made and recognized in and through scenes of cultural narration. “*Boy*,” in this frame, is built inseparably between an inner feelings and states and an outer mode of social address.

How is that frame/space constructed by modes of social

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address and cultural dictates? What are the guiding presuppositions of masculinity as they are enforced by the masculine/feminine gender binary? How normal (in accord with the binary) does a boy have to be to be a boy? How normal does a boy need to be in order to cohere as masculine? And what is the relationship of this so-called coherence to psychological well-being?

Taking up such questions, I turn to the ways in which feminine boys are looked upon as having stepped outside the norm, over the line, and are deemed traumatized in accord with the binary. I argue for a more perplexed and humble approach to cross-gendered fantasy and experience, one that does not mistake social consensus for well-being. Social norms are not the problem per se; they speak the collective “truth” of convention. However, convention through repetition has a way of becoming steadily more conventional; norms become more constricting.

A boy’s experience of his body is often a wonderful way to measure the impact of convention, and to assess as well how cultural dictates knit with fantasy to shape the unique quality of any given boy. Children bring one toward the body: theirs as they find it; yours as they find it; yours as you find it; yours as you once found it. Conceptualizing boys’ bodies is one of the cornerstones of psychoanalysis, one of Freud’s inaugural moves. The phallic organ was frontmost and foremost. The penis preceded the boy.

A century hence such thinking has receded markedly. The body, the penis, and phallic strivings are given little consideration in our modern turn toward how boys relate to others (in particular their mothers), attach to others, and struggle to conceive of their and others’ internal experience. We tend

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now to think more about how children grow through (mental) attachment versus (physical) desire.

I argue for a return to the body, and suggest that the boy's experience of his body, and the fantastic orbit that is the boy's body, must be brought back into our clinical imagination. Many (perhaps most) boys live through a kind of full-bodied muscular eroticism colored by vigorous exhibitionism and phallic narcissism. These heightened states can be employed in the service of defense, resulting in a split from the feminine. But they can also be employed toward recognition, mutual pleasure, identification, and the promise of growth. I argue for the active clinical engagement of boys' aggression and the determined interest they direct toward their bodies, often their penis in particular. I suggest that we have not managed to create much in the way of potential space to imagine phallic desire, and the fantastic penis. Without such space, we are without a means to consider that the penis and phallic states are always materializations that are dictated by fantastic readings and measurement.

Recently, I saw a five-year-old boy in consultation. Several themes began to take shape in the first hour of play, the dominant having to do with his relationship with his older brother. But what lingered most in my mind was his way of saying good-bye. We were in my waiting room. I was arranging another hour with his mother, and my back was turned to him. As I turned to say good-bye, there he stood, his shirt pulled up over his head, exquisitely comic, determinedly exhibitionistic, vulnerable and hooded. It is my hope that such moments of "boy" open in these pages, over and again.

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Given the complex chaos that is boyhood, I well recognize that boys' lives overflow these pages. It is impossible to speak about masculinity in one voice, no matter how polyvocal. I speak for a category. I am claimed by a category. And I fail, as categories do. It is my hope that this study of masculinity resists the closure of categories, but I am also certain that it cannot. I speak across theoretical categories in an effort to further resist category reduction. And yet here too, the expansion I seek will and must fail. Boys are always more than the category that is masculinity. Gender is rarely, if ever, totalizing. It is rarely conscious, and only occasionally felt with much weight. Masculinity is, to paraphrase Keats, but a few steps from iron to feathers—from bodied density to fleeting fantasy.

Perhaps the best we can do is to name the various contingencies that inform how we think about boys and masculinity, and hope that readers can employ those limits as they move toward their own associations, their own thoughts that move beyond this text—beyond the boyhoods offered here. For example, as cultural theorists have been vigorously arguing for some time now, gendered identities are routinely and soundly trumped by narratives of race, class, historical epoch, and social location.²¹

Still, I believe there continues to be merit in charting the chaotic field of masculinity, or an archive of masculinity, as Foucault might have it, that illuminates how our thinking about masculinity is structured and brought to life. How a boy knows himself to be a boy, or not, continues to matter. How he comes to that knowledge in a social world continues to matter. How that social knowledge is internalized and becomes psychological continues to matter. We would, however, do well

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to live with the certainty that someday, even today, we will be wrong. We would do well to approach gender humbly. And reckon as well with the mystery of masculinity, the enigma of gender, and the limit of our reach as we move to consider boy hoods. In that paradox I find optimism.