



MAKING SPACE FOR DIVERSE MASCULINITIES

Difference, Intersectionality,
and Engagement in an Urban High School

LANCE T. McCREADY

What's it like for Black male students who are openly gay or "gender non-conforming" to navigate the social geography of urban schools? In the tradition of critical ethnographies of schooling, Lance T. McCready mobilizes feminist theories of intersectionality to explore the voices of Black gay male students and their teachers in a Northern California comprehensive high school. He analyzes the brave and often hilarious ways students "make space" by challenging conventional notions of Black masculinity and gay identity in educational spaces, such as an African dance program and the Gay-Straight Alliance. McCready challenges the dominance of race-class analyses in the field of urban education that fail to critically account for the relevance of gender and sexuality in school reform. The book will be of interest to anyone seeking to gain a better understanding of the lives of queer youth of color in urban communities. Their experiences open up new ways of viewing the troubles of Black boys and the interventions meant to address those troubles.

"Lance T. McCready has gone where few scholars of urban education have ventured. Thoughtfully, he weaves theoretical, empirical, and autobiographical details together to highlight the school lives of other 'invisible' men—four young gay African American males attending a multiracial high school in northern California. *Making Space for Diverse Masculinities* depicts how race, gender, and sexuality intersect to create disparate educational experiences for another marginalized student population in America's urban schools. This is a read for those who care about how to avoid reproducing multiple forms of inequality in education."

Prudence L. Carter, Associate Professor, Stanford University

"This book is a breath of fresh air. It has come at a time of growing attention and concern over the status and plight of Black males. It is more than a book about being Black and gay in school. It is an analysis of the experiences of those who contest traditional notions of masculinity, and who at times, suffer consequences for doing so. It is also a wake-up call to those who claim to want to 'save' black males but never question how traditional notions of masculinity may in fact contribute to the very problems that many black men and boys face. This book is insightful, at times funny and very well written. For those who are ready to do something to help, read this book and get ready to question your assumptions about what it means to be black and male in America today."

*Pedro A. Noguera, Peter L. Agnew Professor of Education, New York University;
Executive Director, Metropolitan Center for Urban Education*

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GENERAL EDITORS

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Let me begin by thanking my mother, Joyce Jacobs-El. She is loving, smart, analytical, tough, down-to-earth, and most importantly, an inspiration. We have spent many hours on the phone talking about this book. I knew if I could engage my mother, a veteran culinary arts instructor at Job Corps in the South Bronx of New York City and Manhattan, Kansas, I was on the right track. My brothers, Jeffrey, Roger,

and Travis, have also been incredibly supportive. My father, William McCready, New York City public school teacher who died two weeks before I relocated to the Bay Area to begin graduate school, was a motivational force in my graduate studies. He wanted to earn his doctorate and write a book. Through me, I believe he has. I also want to acknowledge my family of aunts, uncles, and cousins, especially my Aunt Vet and Uncle Tiny. To my partner, Craig Morris, who bravely crossed the border with me into Canada and continues to inspire me through his humor, sense of adventure, and tolerance of my early morning habits. Thank you for all your love and support.

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I transferred to University of California, Berkeley to finish my doctorate and was pleasantly surprised to find that my professional blend of scholarship, activism and artistry (dance) was viewed as an asset rather than a liability. Carol Stack, my dissertation advisor and a dancer herself, has always provided endless amounts of guidance, particularly on my writing and the ethnographic process. Her unwavering advocacy and wise counsel warmed the corridors of Tolman Hall. The other members of my dissertation committee have also been important colleagues and mentors. Pedro Noguera opened the door to UCB when he recommended me for the Healthy Start Coordinator position at Berkeley

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friend, and colleague as I make my way in the world of academia.

I returned to Carleton College in the fall of 2002 to begin my first tenure-track job in the Educational Studies Department, which had been an important place for me as an undergraduate. As a faculty member, I was immediately befriended by my undergraduate mentors, as well as a new crop of faculty members in history and women and gender studies—Annette Igra, Parna Sengupta, Serena Zabin and Adriana Estill. They helped me shape the chapters of my dissertation into articles, and became incredible friends and colleagues. I want to acknowledge that one of these articles, published in the *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education* (now *Journal of LGBT Youth*), formed the basis of chapter 3 which focuses on Project 10. In the fall of 2006, wanting to gain a more global, comparative perspective on issues of identity and engagement in urban communities and schools, I accepted a tenure-stream position in the department of Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning (CTL) at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. CTL is by far the most queer-friendly academic department I have ever been in, thanks to the tireless work of faculty members Tara Goldstein, Heather Sykes, and Kathy Bickmore. In addition, Jeff Kugler, Kathleen Gallagher, Dominique Riviere, and Nicole West-Burns from the Centre for Urban Schooling have graciously helped incubate many of the ideas for this book through its speaker series and study groups on race, masculinity, and sexuality in urban schools. My copy editor Dody Riggs and the staff at Peter Lang Publishing, Bernadette Shade and Chris Myers, have shown amazing amounts of patience and support. Christopher Cushman, photographer extraordinaire, created the exquisite photo collage that is the book's cover. Thank you Christopher for inviting people to open and read the book. Finally, the amazing members of my writing group, the "Spice Girls," Roland Sintos Coloma, Indigo Esmonde, Joseph Flessa, and Ruben Gaztambide-Fernandez, have been the best friends, colleagues, and critics a junior faculty member can have. Their passion for scholarship, writing, critical thought, and praxis is amazing. Their karaoke skills aren't too shabby either.

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Chapter One

Theorizing the Pink Ballet Tutu Incident

My mother has often told me that as a child I asked too many questions—she claims that “Why Mommy, why?” was one of my favorite phrases. I don’t disagree. One of the first times I remember asking “Why Mommy, why?” was when I was a nursery school student at Grace Church School in Brooklyn, New York. I was one of two black students in my class and the only black male. One day, during dress-up time, my teacher Ms. Weinstein, a white woman in her mid-fifties, discovered me struggling in vain to put on a pink ballet tutu from the costume box that was many sizes too small for me. I remember thinking how shiny and pretty it looked, and how much I wanted to wear it so I could dance like the white girls in the picture books we read during story time. There were never any black boys doing ballet in the pictures, much less black boys who lived in apartment buildings in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn. I remember thinking that none of the children in the picture books took the #41 bus to and from school every day as I did, riding forty-five minutes each way. They attended schools in predominantly white, middle-class neighborhoods where two-parent families lived in houses with white picket fences. There weren’t any white picket

fences in my Flatbush neighborhood, just apartment buildings and small row houses.

Living in an apartment building in a working-class neighborhood didn't stop me from imagining what it would be like to take ballet lessons. In fact, attending Grace Church School, which was located in Brooklyn Heights, an affluent neighborhood at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge, inspired me to think about a lot of things beyond Flatbush. But as much as I loved daydreaming, I grew tired of its limitations, so I tried to transform my dreams into reality by acting out a new story about an African American boy from Flatbush who dances ballet in a pink tutu.

The look of horror on Ms. Weinstein's face was enough to convince me that I was doing something wrong. She calmly asked me why I was trying on a ballet tutu, and before I could answer she told me to take it off and try on something "more appropriate" for little boys. I remember thinking, "Appropriate? What does that mean?" Disappointed and confused, I stopped what I was doing and began to peel off the tutu—it felt as if I were shedding a layer of skin. Adding to my confusion, Ms. Weinstein said she would call my mother so the two of them could have a talk about this incident. I knew my mother would not be happy about being summoned to a parent-teacher conference, much less one centered around her son's desire to wear a pink ballet tutu. My mother arrived at school that afternoon looking embarrassed, irritated, and afraid. She continued to look this way throughout the conference with Ms. Weinstein, which I observed from the opposite corner of the room.

During my teenage years, I learned that my parents had planned carefully for my brothers' and my education. The first part of the plan was for us to attend a private school like Grace Church because, from their perspective, the public schools in our predominantly black, working-class neighborhood discriminated against black boys. My parents were concerned that their sons, no matter how well we did in school, would always be viewed as delinquent and dumb. My parents had recently divorced and as a result I was described as living in a single-parent home, although I still had regular contact with my father. Both of my parents tutored my brothers and me so that we could achieve high enough scores on the IQ tests and entrance exams that were required by New York City's most prestigious private prep schools. In