

## “PISSING OUT THE FIRE”: REASSERTING MASCULINE IDENTITY IN A CLOSURE RITUAL

*Rurik Goyton*

*Writer's comment:* During the past fourteen summers I have been enjoying my camp experiences, never pausing to really consider their larger meaning. Professor Jay Mechling's course, *The Lives of Children in America* (American Studies 152), began my thinking about the “pissing out the fire” ritual in its cultural context. The class that I wrote the paper for focused particularly on children's folklore, exploring its role in creating and maintaining children's folk groups. As summer rapidly approached, my energy for school and my thoughts of the coming camp season competed for my attention. It was during this struggle that I thought to look toward summer camp as a rich source of children's folklore and a possible paper topic. Incorporating my experiences with cultural criticism not only made for an enjoyable paper to write, but also helped me to better understand an important period in my life.

— *Rurik Goyton*

*Instructor's comment:* While the early writing assignments (750-1,000 words) in *The Lives of Children in America* (American Studies 152) ask the student to show how we construct the lives of children with adult goals in mind, later assignments expect the student to take the children's and teens' small group “folk” cultures on their own terms. Here the story gets more complex, as children's folk cultures often resist adult goals and meanings. Rik Goyton's skillful essay captures one of those splendid moments, using our shared class reading - sociologist Barrie Thorne's *Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School* - to analyze how a tradition invented by the adolescent male counselors-in-training at a summer camp undermines the adult leaders' progressive gender agenda. He reports all the small details important to the ritual's meanings, but he also shows the reader the larger gender dynamic at work, striking a nice balance between concrete detail and a more abstract thesis.

— *Jay Mechling, American Studies Department*

**S**UMMER CAMP IS AN IMPORTANT ANNUAL EXPERIENCE in many children's lives. Some kids choose to continue with camp long past their camper years and become counselors. A program, the Camper in Leadership Training (CILT) program, exists within the camp structure as a leadership program designed to educate kids, aged fifteen through seventeen, on how to become effective counselors. Each session typically concludes with a closing campfire, which the male CILTs extinguish after the females have left by urinating on the embers. This folk ritual, affectionately known to the CILTs as "pissing out the fire," is employed by the male CILT folk group as a strategy that allows them to reassert power, to reaffirm the solidarity of the all-male group, and to regain their masculinity, which has been altered within the camp environment, before leaving the shelter of that environment. During this transitional period, the CILTs anticipate returning to the larger social world and are socializing themselves accordingly. These kids' experiences with gender identity at camp mirror Barrie Thorne's point that gender is socially constructed and highly contextual (Thorne 10). This folk ritual allows these boys to regain their gender identity, the identity largely accepted by the outside culture, as they prepare to re-enter mainstream society.

The program is an emotionally challenging one: apart from teaching the foundations of counseling skills, the CILT directors encourage an opening of one's true self that often involves breaking down the gender fronts kids bring with them. Thorne argues that "boys' social relations tend to be overtly hierarchical and competitive" (92). The program does not encourage this type of social interaction. Rather, the program chooses to emphasize the emotions in personal relationships and self-disclosure typical of girls' social relationships (94). After two weeks of learning, sharing, and growing within the camp context, the males' social relations operate similarly to the females' because there is no threat of being socially outcast for adopting the behavior values of the other gender. That is to say, the males have become bicultural along gender lines. Just as teasing (as Thorne points out) dissuades cross-gender interaction, social pressure outside camp plays a similar role in limiting males' expression of things seen as feminine, such as sharing feelings (54). For an age group faced with many social anxieties, extinguishing the fire at the end of the session is an essential tool of anticipatory socialization used to recreate the male gender identity necessary for acceptance in the outside male social world.

The context is very important to establishing the significance of "pissing out the fire." The CILTs would not "piss out" any fire. The closing campfire is a reflective ritual where each child speaks briefly about his or her experiences over the past two weeks and throws a stick, representing their memories of camp, into the fire. This is often a teary and emotional time because the kids are sad to be leaving camp the next morning. Following this ceremony, the CILTs have a similar one of their own. By the end of the night, the campfire's ashes symbolize many emotions and memories. It is at the conclusion of this campfire that the males ask the females to leave, so that they can "piss out the fire." The first step, asking the females to leave, is important in re-establishing the all-male identity.

Pissing out the fire is an exclusively male event. This selectivity frames a same-gender group relationship that emphasizes the group's commonality as male. The older CILTs then instruct the others to circle around the fire, a highly symbolic event further marking the identity of the group as a whole. Thorne notes that when these same-gender groups are formed, other processes occur such as "the dynamics of group loyalty and the teasing of individuals who try to violate patterns of separation" (60). Some may be shy or may not want to join the circle for other reasons, but to protect their perception of loyalty to the group and not risk being defined as un-male, all eventually join with a little persuasion. This persuasion usually takes the form of taunts from the older CILTs, putting the dissenters into the female role. "C'mon, don't be such a wuss," or "Don't be piss shy, the girls already left. Or are you going with them?" are common examples of persuasion. Once the entire group assembles around the fire, assertion of masculinity

takes place.

The direct testament to the group's masculinity is established in the act of urinating on the fire. Thorne argues that "kids often use the frame of play as a guise for often serious, gender-related messages about sexuality and aggression" (5). I argue that, for this bicultural group, the play frame of "pissing out the fire" does not represent serious gender messages that they entirely embrace personally, but represents larger messages of the society they are going back into. The CILTs are informed that they will "piss on the fire" to put it out. But, in doing so, the boys are told they will be "pissing on everyone's memories" as thrown into the fire. Nancy Chodorow has argued that in males' efforts to separate their identity from their mothers', they learn to separate from all things female (59). Culturally, urine is a pollutant. Consequently, "pissing on everyone's memories" expresses blatant disregard for people's memories and emotions, associated with female culture. Rejecting something considered female helps them regain masculinity and prepares them to reenter the society beyond the context of camp, where males who value anything considered female may not be socially accepted.

"Pissing out the fire" also reasserts masculinity by allowing the CILTs to interact in ways typical of male culture one last time before leaving the camp environment. Competition and demonstrations of physical strength are two examples (Thorne 92). Competition is central to the ritual of extinguishing the fire. Everyone begins urinating at the same time, and the last person to stop is seen as the champion, the most "manly." In a few instances someone has completely smothered the fire; stories of their victory are passed from session to session, and even year to year. The competition to have the longest lasting "piss" is so strong that, throughout the campfire, many males try to build up a large supply by guzzling from water bottles.

The act of urinating on the fire serves to reassert masculinity through a demonstration of physical strength, a widely recognized aspect of male culture exhibited in activities such as athletics - "Sword fighting" with streams of urine replaces actual physical strength as an expression of masculinity. Thus, while one cannot literally be physically dominated by another's urine, the physical dominator is judged to be the last urinating individual. This is an activity in which many males I know have participated as children. Important to recognize here is that "sword fighting" is an exclusively male activity. Consequently, "pissing out the campfire" rejects that which is seen as female, while celebrating that which is male. While both male and female CILTs are subordinate to the authority of their counselors and the camp administration, the male folk ritual of "pissing out the fire" allows the male CILTs access to power. Thorne argues that boys, while subordinate to adults, contribute to the "larger structure of male dominance" (159). The CILT unit encourages cooperation, and as a result the group cooperates on many levels, and gender competition is very rare. Because the females are excluded from the closing ritual, the males know something that the females do not. Thus, the males acquire some power by taking it from the females. Taking power from others, especially females, is typical male behavior in mainstream culture (159). This occurs only at the last campfire because at no other time during the session would exclusion of the other group be tolerated.

The folk ritual of "pissing out the fire" serves as a reentry process by which the CILT males are allowed to reassert their masculinity before moving beyond the cultural context of camp. Had a similar folk ritual occurred earlier in the session it would have subverted the goal of opening the path to self-disclosure and threatened the cooperative relationship between the males and females. Most importantly, the "pissing out the fire" ritual offers closure to these male CILTs' summer experiences, and allows them to leave their experiences there. In providing closure, however, it preserves the camp experience as a largely contextual one, and again limits similar gender blurring in other environments.

### **Works Cited**

Thorne, Barrie. *Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1993.