

The Respectable Brotherhood: Young Black Men in an All-boys Charter High School

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Abstract

Neoliberal public school reform has revitalized efforts to open unique all-male schools for black boys. Existing research stresses how these black male academies nurture resilience but has failed to examine what makes these schools distinctive. Drawing on one year of ethnographic research, this article demonstrates how Northside Academy, an all-male charter high school, built a *respectable* brotherhood. Modeled after elite all-male institutions, Northside's classics curriculum and professional uniform marked its young men as having disciplined minds and bodies, destined for college and a middle-class future. Yet to maintain legitimacy within a competitive environment, the school community drew moral boundaries between its exceptional young men and those delinquent boys most in crisis. This engaged a respectability politics where upwardly mobile black men reject their more marginalized peers for failing to reform their character. This study's findings extend knowledge of single-sex public schools and of the impact of increased competition under neoliberalism.

Keywords

single-sex education, black boys, neoliberalism, boundaries, respectability

In the early 1990s, the cities of Detroit and Milwaukee proposed a unique form of schooling for their struggling young black men: all-boys public schools, or “black male academies” (Hopkins 1997; Watson and Smitherman 1996; Williams 2016). These proposals drew polarizing responses. Civil rights organizations argued that isolating young men further from their peers would replicate punitive spaces, such as special education classrooms, and was therefore tantamount to racial resegregation (Salomone 2003). Feminist groups claimed that they posed a threat of sex segregation by denying similar opportunities to girls (Williams 2004). Proponents, however, defended the academies as part of a *community control* tradition. In the post-civil rights era, black families have fought for control over *where* and *how* their children learn (Pattillo 2015; Stulberg 2015). Rather than punish, the first black male academies intended to empower black boys by adopting Afrocentric curricula and by recruiting black men to serve as role models (Hopkins 1997; Salomone 2003).¹ A major goal was for these innovations (both rare in public schools at the time) to nurture resilience, or the various capacities that enable individuals to overcome adversity (Hall and Lamont 2013).

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In 1991, courts sided with the opponents and ruled that these early academies be traditional coed schools. Yet major public school reform over the past 15 years has reinvigorated hope in all-boys education. Driven by the sentiment that a “crisis” of young black men requires more innovative schooling arrangements, as well as increased support for public charter schools, which have more flexibility with how they teach and govern, a second wave of black male academies has emerged. While there is scant quantitative evidence that single-sex schools are effective for boys of color (Pahlke, Hyde, and Allison 2014), emerging qualitative research suggests otherwise (Brooms 2015; Fergus, Noguera, and Martin 2014; James 2010). This research also suggests these academies nurture resilience in students through the building of “resilient brotherhoods” (Fergus et al. 2014). However, by overlooking the first wave academies entirely—and, therefore, by not comparing today’s academies with their earlier counterparts—this research has not fully addressed what makes today’s academies distinctive. In their academic orientation (college-preparatory curricula grounded in the classics) and dress (blazers and ties), today’s black male academies signal *respectability*. A “politics of respectability” first represented an attempt by black leaders to reject racist, controlling images of African Americans by embracing middle-class values (Collins 2004; Higginbotham 1994). Yet this effort to reform black men’s behavior overlooked structural causes of inequality, and led to the moral rejection of men who failed to ascribe to those values (Griffin 2000). The history of elite black colleges—which serve as models for today’s all-male high schools—reveals a respectability politics where upwardly mobile black men have “constructed their own status against that of the black ‘unrespectable’ poor” (Summers 2004:43).

What explains the shift to building respectable brotherhoods in today’s black all-male public schools? And what are the consequences for cultural membership? To address these questions, I draw on one year of ethnographic research at Northside Academy, an all-male charter high school serving young black men, located in the East Coast city of Morgan. (All names in this article are pseudonyms.) To draw out the full implications for school belonging, I turn to research in cultural sociology that examines the impact of neoliberal policies on boundary configuration (Lamont 2000, 2012; Mijs, Bakhtiari, and Lamont 2016). Neoliberalism encourages schools to adopt market principles to best meet the needs of educational consumers. Yet market fundamentalism has encouraged greater competition, where self-interested actors fight for scarce educational resources and draw sharper boundaries between themselves and “undeserving” others (Labaree 1997; Lamont 2012).

Moving beyond previous research, I demonstrate how competition encouraged Northside Academy officials to build a legitimate all-male institution: a respectable school, modeled after the country’s most distinguished educational institutions, and set apart from stigmatized all-male spaces thought to be occupied by the most delinquent young black men in crisis. This boundary work involved attracting and recruiting those “customers” who best fit the school’s desired profile: academically oriented, law-abiding young black men (Ferguson 2000; Rios 2011). The school used its two most visible resources—its Latin curriculum and its uniform—to mark their young men as possessing the disciplined minds and bodies central to a respectable masculine identity (Lamont 2000; Summers 2004). To strengthen the respectable brotherhood, the school used these unique resources to draw moral and social boundaries against disreputable and undisciplined neighborhood boys. By shifting attention from resilience to respectability, the findings in this article contribute to the growing body of research on single-sex public schools. Moreover, these findings extend knowledge of the impact of increased competition under neoliberalism, by drawing attention away from interracial inequality (e.g., Mijs et al. 2016; Renzulli and Evans 2005) to how boundaries promote another outcome: intraracial inequality within the black community.

Community Control: The First Wave Black Male Academies

In the early 1990s, Milwaukee and Detroit proposed single-sex schools as interventions for their young black men. Educators viewed this first wave of “black male academies” as a “balm for high dropout rates, low achievement, and hopelessness confronting the community” (Williams 2004:17). Young black men continue to face considerable educational disadvantages. They are punished at a disproportionately high rate; in 2012, for example, black boys nationwide were three times more likely than their white peers to receive an out-of-school suspension (Civil Rights Data Collection 2014). These exclusionary practices have further dampened young black men’s educational attainment. In 2013, the high school graduation rate for black boys nationwide was 59 percent, compared with 80 percent for white boys (Schott Foundation for Public Education 2015).

The *community control* tradition helps to explain the strong support for black male academies. In the face of failed integration efforts following *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), this tradition nurtures the agency of black families to control *where* and *how* their children learn (Pattillo 2015; Stulberg 2015).² The legacy of community control views black-controlled schools as vehicles of racial empowerment. This tradition maintains that black communities have not always prioritized racial integration, but instead have sought greater self-determination amid an “educational terrain over which they have had little control” (Pedroni 2007:4). As Lisa Stulberg (2008:97) has written, the Detroit and Milwaukee efforts exemplified these “community-sought district initiatives.” In Detroit, for example, the proposal for all-boys schools emerged only after community members passed a resolution demanding that elected officials take steps to help the city’s struggling young black men. Officials designed the schools with two innovations in mind. To challenge the Eurocentrism of school curricula, the schools would be African-centered; and to combat the dearth of black male teachers in public schools, the academies would recruit black men to serve as role models for the boys (Watson and Smitherman 1996). Officials believed that these innovations would nurture the young men’s optimism, self-confidence, and capacity to work: those characteristics that make up “social resilience,” or the ability to “advance . . . well-being in the face of challenges to it” (Hall and Lamont 2013:2).

Yet critics opposed these schools on two grounds. Civil rights groups resisted these schools because they posed a “real danger of racial resegregation” (Salomone 2003:130). The fear was that by replicating punitive spaces such as alternative disciplinary schools and special education classrooms, young men would feel they were being “punished rather than privileged” (Goodkind et al. 2013:1174). This fear echoes findings that school segregation correlates with lower academic achievement and negative long-term life outcomes (Reardon and Owens 2014). Additional opposition came from the National Organization for Women (NOW), which argued that these schools denied similar opportunities to black girls and, therefore, were a form of sex segregation (Williams 2004). A Detroit court agreed with NOW and ruled that the academies be coeducational.

Resilient Brotherhoods: The Second Wave Black Male Academies

The court’s ruling was met with widespread protest from the community (Watson and Smitherman 1996). A major restructuring of public education would bring new hope to these supporters of all-boys public education. A second wave of black male academies has benefited from support for expanded schooling options, a hallmark of the 2002 No Child Left Behind Law (NCLB) (Oeur 2016). Charter schools—which are granted the autonomy to pursue their own curricula and forms of governance—have flourished under NCLB. They were rare during the proposals for black male academies in the early 1990s, but by 2012, there were 6,000 charter schools

nationwide (Berends 2015). The Department of Education released additional guidelines in 2006 that made it easier to open single-sex schools, especially as charters (Goodkind et al. 2013). There are an estimated 100 single-sex public schools today in the United States (Klein et al. 2014). To be eligible to operate as single sex, a school must be voluntary and provide a rationale for opening as single sex.

A meta-analysis determined that single-sex public schools offer no significant benefits compared with coeducational schools (Pahlke et al. 2014). This research could not draw any conclusions on schools targeted to boys of color given the relative absence of controlled quantitative studies on these institutions. Yet emerging qualitative research offers a promising outlook (Brooms 2015; Fergus et al. 2014; James 2010).³ Although these studies curiously overlook the history of the first wave academies, they also find that promoting student resilience is a defining goal of the schools.⁴ The nature of male relationships in these schools has changed, however; while the first wave academies prioritized adult male mentoring relationships, the second wave academies have focused on building peer solidarity, or “resilient brotherhoods,” which were “important for promoting positive student outcomes” (Fergus et al. 2014:129). Graduates of these academies attest that classmates form “pacts” to look after one another, so as to “not let the neighborhood win” (Brooms 2015:272).

Yet by neglecting to compare today’s all-male schools with the first wave academies, the resilience framework has overlooked what makes the second wave academies distinctive. Today’s academies show strong evidence of *respectability*. Early black elites and church leaders promoted a “politics of respectability” that stressed conformity to middle-class values as a way of rejecting racist discourses of African Americans (Collins 2004; Higginbotham 1994). However, these politics proved troubling as they focused on reforming black men’s behavior—the embrace of Victorian ideals such as moral discipline, temperance, obedience, and refined manners—while taking “the emphasis away from structural forms of oppression” (Griffin 2000:34). A respectability politics, therefore, revealed class tensions and divided black communities when upwardly mobile black men “constructed their own status against that of the black ‘unrespectable’ poor” (Summers 2004:43). While black all-male secondary institutions are relatively new, elite black institutions such as the all-male Morehouse College have long endorsed a respectability politics. Grundy (2012:46) writes that Morehouse “embrace[s] conformity to mainstream middle-class gender constructs to produce and sustain normative patriarchal citizenship and ‘respectable’ Black males,” and in doing so draws symbolic boundaries against those black men most in “crisis.”

Indeed, the resilience framework tends to offer a dichotomous view of urban life: Across this research, the schools are cast as safe harbors from neighborhoods characterized in overwhelmingly bleak terms. The present study, therefore, answers the call to complicate the “sociosexual binary of respectability versus deviance . . . by exploring the political and cultural imperatives for perpetuating it” (Ross 2004:9). Whereas the first wave academies were African-centered and targeted to young boys, the second wave academies have established rigorous college-preparatory curricula grounded in the classics. At Chicago’s black all-male Urban Prep Academies, which have been lauded for their exemplary college placement record, students wear blazers and ties and call one another by their surnames (Bonner 2014). A politics that symbolically divides “respectable” and “unrespectable” black boys suggests that these academies may target law-abiding, academically oriented “schoolboys” who are better positioned than their peers to be successful (Ferguson 2000), even as school reform policies purport to reach all young black men. In fact, although existing research highlights the success of “resilient” young black men, there is evidence of selection effects in these schools.⁵ For example, each interview respondent in Derrick Brooms’s (2015) research on one black male academy was already in college. The author leaves unexamined how this exceptional group of young men may have possessed the characteristics and buy-in important for success *prior* to enrolling at the academy, compared with young men

who did *not* attend the school. By contrast, Detroit's Malcolm X Academy, the most well-known first wave academy, developed an "At-Risk Variables Tabulation Scale" to identify the most disadvantaged black boys for admission to the school (Watson and Smitherman 1996:41). This prevented the school from "skimming" for the highest achieving students (Stulberg 2015).

Respectable Brotherhoods: Competition and Boundary Work under Neoliberalism

To draw out the full implications of belonging in black male academies, this article asks "Why do today's second wave black male academies promote respectability, and what are the consequences for cultural membership?" To address these questions, I locate the second wave academies in a context that differs markedly from that of the first wave academies: the hyper-competitive environment of neoliberalism (Lamont 2012). Neoliberal principles maintain that deregulated markets can best improve schools (Hursh 2007). A model of privatization replaces democratic governance and bureaucracies, which are to blame for ineffective schools. Market-driven school policies assume that competition among charter schools will lead to innovation and higher student achievement, and that families are free to make choices in the best interest of their children (Lubienski 2003). Critics, however, argue that as market pressures intensify, education becomes "a zero-sum game competition filled with self-interested actors seeking opportunities . . . at the expense of the other" (Labaree 1997:56). In fact, the resilience framework has characterized graduates of unique black male academies as virtuous "winners" in a fight against a dangerous neighborhood (Brooms 2015), but has not interrogated how this framing assumes a market logic where there must be "losers" as well.

The community control tradition has distanced itself from charges of harmful competition. As Mary Pattillo (2015:44) writes, black school choice advocacy "is not rooted in free market ideology of privatization, deregulation, and competition." Indeed, aggressive competition among families and schools was not part of the narrative of the first wave academies in the early 1990s.⁶ Hyper-competition became a concern only after the rise of state-sanctioned charters through the 1990s and with the passage of NCLB, which codified neoliberal principles into educational law (Hursh 2007). Toward that end, this study draws on research in cultural sociology that assesses the link between macro "diffusion of neoliberal policies and ideologies on the one side" and local "boundary configurations and institutional histories on the other" (Mijis et al. 2016:2; see also Lamont 2000). The competitive logic of the market narrows definitions of belonging and encourages institutions to enact boundaries that reject "undeserving" others. Here, little attention has been paid to how the entrenchment of neoliberal ideologies has accommodated a rise in respectability politics. For example, as Fredrick Harris (2014:33) writes, amid massive state disinvestment and downward economic mobility (exacerbated by the Great Recession, which devastated black families immediately prior to my year of fieldwork), "the virtues of self-care and self-correction are framed as strategies to lift up the black poor out of their condition by preparing them for the market economy."

Entering a competitive schooling market and facing an uncertain future, Northside Academy sought legitimacy, a paramount concern for charters on short-term contracts (Berends 2015). To earn legitimacy, Northside officials designed a respectable all-male institution set apart from the stigmatized all-male institutions thought to serve the most troubled and disreputable young black men: precisely those environments critics had in mind when they opposed these schools in the early 1990s (Salomone 2003). Continuing the boundary work present in the design of the school, the Northside community continually enacted symbolic boundaries (moral distinctions) and social boundaries (distinctions that highlight an unequal allocation of resources) to maintain the school's respectable identity (Lamont and Molnár 2002). This identity was set against the undisciplined minds and bodies of delinquent young men most in crisis. The spread of neoliberalism

has meant that cities have drawn on the language of cost-effectiveness to recruit an array of institutions—including schools—in their surveillance efforts (Rios 2011). Northside's boundary work reinforces larger surveillance efforts where "respectable" good boys are pitted against their "deviant" peers who are more likely to have had formal contact with the criminal justice system (Ferguson 2000; Rios 2011).

Method of Inquiry

Field Site

As a college-preparatory, all-boys high school that opened under NCLB's pro-charter policies, Northside Academy rests squarely in the second wave of black male academies. Northside resided in Morgan, a large East Coast city. The Morgan school district underwent a major overhaul shortly before NCLB became law in 2002. Citing the city's record of poor academic achievement and fiscal mismanagement, the state legislature intervened and made Morgan one of the country's first laboratories for expanded school choice. These reforms were a boon for the charter school movement. Thomas Pierce, a black community leader with many years of experience working in schools, founded Northside Academy. He served as chief executive officer (CEO) when the school opened in 2007 as the city's first all-male charter school, and the first to require four years of Latin. Fundraising efforts secured Northside a \$1 million budget used to fund resources such as used laptops and summer internships for students.

Northside opened with a single ninth-grade class, and added one grade each year until it had a full four grades. I observed Northside in its third year of existence, when it served approximately 380 boys in Grades 9 to 11. The student population was nearly all African American (99 percent), and a large majority of students were poor, with 86 percent qualifying for free or reduced-priced lunch. The student population reflected the concentrated poverty and segregation in Morgan. African Americans, who comprised the largest racial group in the city, had a poverty rate of 26.7 percent, compared with the national average of 15.1 percent.

Northside Academy's admissions policies were typical of all-male public schools (Fergus et al. 2014). To apply, prospective families were required to attend an informational session and to sit for an informal interview. Students were admitted on a first-come, first-served basis. There were selection effects given the school's college-prep mission and respectable character, and because the school recruited young men who were committed to their schoolwork. Still, as a group, the boys were disadvantaged academically. More than 75 percent of students entered two-to-three grade levels behind in reading and math.

Data Collection and Analysis

I observed Northside Academy for 11 months: the 2009–2010 academic year and summer school period. For approximately 25 hours a week, I sat in on classes and faculty meetings; attended games, extracurricular events, and other school gatherings; and hung out with the boys at lunch and after school. I took detailed notes by hand during the day, which did not seem out of place in a school setting (Morris 2012). Early on in my fieldwork, I used open coding to make basic observations. I used these codes to refine my observations when I returned to the field. This process produced more salient theoretical themes that I analyzed in memos.

I supplemented my participant observation data with 81 in-depth interviews with students ($n = 39$), teachers ($n = 16$), the school CEO, noninstructional staff members ($n = 4$), parents and grandparents ($n = 15$), and middle-school administrators who had sent students to Northside ($n = 6$). I used purposive sampling to seek out a range of backgrounds (Morris 2012). The student interview sample was roughly proportional to the school's demographics. This included a mix of

students from all grade levels. Only 10 percent of the students I interviewed ($n = 4$) had a parent who had attended a two- or four-year college. The interviews included predetermined questions tailored to each group of respondents, and opportunities for them to speak on topics of their choice (Berg 2007). The interviews with students normally lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, and those with adults lasted between 75 and 90 minutes. I used the software ATLAS.ti to code and analyze my interviews and field notes.

Reflexivity

My research required me to think carefully about the relationships I formed at the school. I generally found it easy to interact with the young men, many of whom wanted to share their thoughts on the school because of its uniqueness. Given the school's college-prep mission, the staff also encouraged students to ask adults (including me) about their college experiences. This allowed me to get to know many students. For those curious about my motivations for the study, I found it helpful to share how my interests in urban education grew out of my past experiences as a teacher in a low-income public school. However, children can distrust unfamiliar authority figures (Ferguson 2000), so it was important for me to build rapport with the boys before requesting interviews. I also found that speaking openly about my own educational experiences as a first-generation American citizen helped to strengthen trust.

A Charter School and Competition

Like the community officials who supported the first wave of black male academies, Thomas Pierce was disheartened by the number of struggling young black men in his city. And when Mr. Pierce applied for an all-boys charter in 2006, he faced the same opposition that Detroit's Malcolm X Academy had faced 15 years earlier. Feminist groups cited Detroit as precedent and claimed that an all-boys arrangement remained illegal because it discriminated against girls. Swarmed with applications for other charters and fearing a lawsuit, the school district denied Mr. Pierce's application.

When Mr. Pierce reapplied later that year, he came armed with a petition.

We had 900 signatures of people in this neighborhood who wanted the school. We had the support of a lot of elected officials, community activists, religious leaders. People thought this was a good idea. People who didn't know me. This wasn't about me, okay? They looked at the idea and went, "This is a good idea."

Like his counterparts in the first wave academies, Mr. Pierce wanted to show that Northside Academy had the support of community members, who were angry over efforts to block the all-boys school. Yet unlike his first wave counterparts, Mr. Pierce benefited from the support of the law. The same year Mr. Pierce reapplied, the Department of Education released guidelines that removed legal obstacles to single-sex education. These helped to clarify that Northside would not segregate based on sex. The school founder just needed a clear rationale for an all-boys school. Having once had an application denied, and seeing "all these people coming with applications for their own schools," Mr. Pierce designed a respectable school distinct from other all-male spaces.

Everybody when they start thinking about what to do with boys, they approach it from a, "This is where they screw up. Let's get them from here." No. Let's get them *before* they screw up and let's send them in a different direction. You have to make this school based on academic merit, not just gender or athletic ability or things like that. You've got to shun the whole Special Ed, bootcamp mentality; disciplinary school mentality.

In designing Northside, Mr. Pierce drew a clear boundary between his legitimate all-male school and schools that have “an immediate, ongoing connection” with prisons (Ferguson 2000:231). Northside would be a privileged place that taught the *appropriate* kind of discipline: a strict obedience and work ethic (Lamont 2000; Summers 2004).

The school district was persuaded. In a press release, district officials justified their decision to accept Northside’s application because a “crisis” facing young blacks demanded more “innovative” schooling models. Yet contrary to the school district’s claim, Northside was only innovative in the narrow sense that it differed from other local options. To become respectable, Northside displayed isomorphism, or the tendency to imitate elite institutions (Lubienski 2003). School community members told me that Northside was a blend of elements from prestigious historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), and a local elite boarding school. Mr. Tomlinson, a black science teacher and an HBCU graduate himself, said that Northside “reminds me of a mini-Morehouse. They’re both special places with disciplined black men: black men who aim for excellence.” Students made this connection, too. Speaking of Howard University, Terrell, a ninth grader, felt that “it’s a really good college for black people, for black people who will be successful. And that’s what Mr. Pierce wants for us.” The school also actively linked HBCUs and Northside. Teachers mentioned HBCUs in classroom lessons, and pennants of these various colleges were prominently displayed in the hallways.

Mr. Pierce, however, was more directly inspired by Crane Academy, an elite private all-boys boarding school located just outside the city. Mr. Pierce knew that the school signaled prestige to community members, stakeholders, and district officials. He met personally with the school district superintendent and convinced him that Northside would succeed if it were modeled after Crane Academy. This pitch was also appealing to the staff, as some had attended a private or parochial single-gender school, and had studied Latin. Melissa Spring, a white teacher, vividly recalls how Mr. Pierce had sold her on the school. “The whole idea for this school is to get it to be like Crane Academy, like a college-prep school,” she said. “And [Mr. Pierce] believed that these kids deserved a chance. It was the fact that this was like a very much justice-oriented thing that sold me.” As Ms. Spring implied, the school founder wanted young black men to have the “chance” their more privileged peers had. Yet Mr. Pierce only intended for a select group of boys to get this chance. To give his school legitimacy, Mr. Pierce actively sought the customers who could provide it: respectable, high-achieving students. While charters by law must be open to all students, school officials knew that the school—with its demanding curriculum and extended school hours—would likely attract studious young men and families who supported them. Or, as Mr. Pierce told me, “we only want serious students.” The school made certain that applicants were aware of this. At an informational session, Mr. Pierce emphasized that the school required “complete buy-in” from families.

Northside officials felt they had little chance of attracting students who were admitted to the city’s few magnet schools. They were, therefore, competing for the very best students not headed to magnets. As Mr. Pierce said,

If you could go to one of those [magnet schools], go there, good luck. They’re great schools. But if you didn’t go there, how well do you believe that the school that you would attend could prepare you for college, and what are the things they’re doing that says they’re going to prepare you for college?

Jim Chambers was the black principal of a local middle school that had sent students to Northside. He echoed Mr. Pierce’s sentiments. “If you don’t get into” magnet schools, he said, “you end up going to your neighborhood school.” He continued,

I didn’t think it boded well for the majority of African American males. If you’re lucky, you dodge a bullet. If you’re not lucky, I don’t know what’s going to happen, even though you’re a good kid.

Mr. Chambers implied that Northside attempted to siphon off “good kids”—a proxy for studious and obedient young men—who would otherwise be lost to neighborhood schools. Here, Mr. Chambers hinted at the boundary work that was central to the school’s collective identity work.

Respectable Minds

Having attracted academically oriented students from across the city, Northside set out to make them into a respectable brotherhood. Boundary work was not only written into the design of Northside Academy; in a competitive environment, institutions continuously reproduce moral and social boundaries to make those boundaries durable (Lamont and Molnár 2002). As Grundy (2012:47) has written about Morehouse College, “in the ideological pressure cooker that has been built up around black male advancement in a time of widespread crisis, aggressively policed codes of class and gender emerge.” In this section, I describe how the school borrowed the “unimpeachable” classics curriculum found in the country’s oldest elite schools (Finn 2012), to mark the disciplined minds of their own students against the undisciplined minds of other boys.

Disciplined Minds

The second wave black male academies are distinct from the first in their singular focus on preparing young black men for college (Fergus et al. 2014). What set Northside’s college-prep curriculum apart was its classics curriculum, which included Latin as well as Roman culture and history. As Afrocentric immersion schools, the first wave academies were intended to be culturally relevant. Yet Northside’s curriculum seemed culturally *irrelevant* for young black men. New students encountered a strange and difficult curriculum, full of complex rules and images of white gods and gladiators. Yet officials wanted Northside to be a fully immersive Latin environment. Latin was mandatory all four years. Directions throughout the school were written in Latin. In one classroom, “What we do in life echoes in eternity” graced the wall, a line from the blockbuster movie *The Gladiator*. It was followed by the question, “What will your echo be?”

The question was prescient; Northside was determined to use Latin to help pave the way to future success for the young men. School officials told prospective students and their families that Latin would help to improve the students’ vocabulary and reading comprehension skills. This proficiency would give the young men a substantial leg up with the SAT and state standards-based exams (the students took practice exams each month). In the era of “No Child Left Untested,” where exam scores rank and sort and breed competition among families and schools, this message resonated strongly.

Moreover, Latin would mark the young men as exceptional in the community. In recalling the school CEO’s recruiting pitch to her, Ms. Spring shared,

He told me that every kid was going to have four years of Latin and that it was mandatory for all of them, that it was the most important thing that they could be studying because it was going to set them apart from everybody else in the other city schools. That he was looking for something that was going to be hard for them, that would impress college admissions people. It will set them apart, it will make them special.

After a difficult first year, the students came to embrace Latin’s exceptional quality as well. Charles, a 10th grader, remarked that “lots of people don’t know a language like that. That’s a great thing to know. And then a lot of colleges might accept you in there because you took up to four years of Latin.” As Tamar, an 11th grader, observed, Latin “looks pretty good on a college application because people think, ‘He can speak a dead language.’” Staff members frequently told students that earning medals on the National Latin Exam and their experience giving mandatory

“declamations”—Latin recitations of famous texts—would shine on college applications. School officials stressed that if the boys worked hard enough to master it, then their reward would be a college. While many boys in the school’s first entering class left Northside, a high percentage of students in subsequent cohorts made it to graduation. And the results earned the school widespread acclaim. Nearly 85 percent of students in the second cohort enrolled in college, a percentage that placed the school in the top three of all high schools in the city.⁷

The “major objective” of elite boarding schools has been a “disciplined and trained mind” (Cookson and Persell 2008:74). Latin, therefore, signaled respectability in a certain way: It was so rigorous that it required an absolute commitment to obeying and mastering its rules. As Mr. Pierce shared,

If we teach these guys Latin, first of all, we’re insisting that they take on something that we know is very complex, okay, and that will have to challenge them. What it will do in taking on that challenge and overcoming that challenge, it will empower the boys.

The rigor of Latin was especially daunting for these young men. The school’s extended hours and occasional Saturday classes meant extra time dedicated to Latin. And few of the students had any experience taking a foreign language.

Ronald Davidson, a white math teacher, had attended a private all-boys school and taken Latin himself in school. He likened Latin to a complex form of math.

I struggled through four years of Latin. I look back and I’m kind of glad I had it and I tell the kids that, that even though I had a very difficult time with it, I’m glad that I went through those four years because it did teach me things. I also think that it does teach exactness. The five declensions and everything else. So that, I think, teaches you to be more particular. And I was a scientist for a long time so obviously having that trait is not a bad trait if you’re going to be a scientist. To understand and to be very careful and particular the way you put things together.

At an induction ceremony, Kyrie, the student government president, warned the new students that Latin would be hard. But as Finn (2012:58) has written about elite private schools, “[t]he hard work demanded of students furthers their sense of shared struggle, solidarity, and entitlement to status and power.” The shared struggle to master Latin united the young men of Northside Academy, and students were told that they would be successful if they supported one another. The school stressed that each student could achieve great things with the help of his fellow “gladiators”—the school mascot and how the students referred to one another—and that individual achievements were everyone’s achievements. Mr. Davidson told me,

[The principal] talks about gladiators and he talks about family at the same time. And I think he’s trying to get the idea that this is a community. You’re all in this together. If one succeeds you all succeed and if you all succeed the individual succeeds.

The fraternal culture was a defining feature of the school. Richard, an 11th grader, was a member of the school’s first cohort. He had been skeptical of the all-boys model at first, but came to value a brotherhood he did not think was possible to build in larger schools. When I asked him about the school’s challenging curriculum, Richard appealed to the importance of brotherhood:

If we see one person struggling, we’ll try to pick him up and help him. Just like how we do in the football field, we all work as one team. And if we all work as one team, we all can go to the next level together. And that’s why everybody got to push somebody to get to that next level. And some people don’t want to be pushed, you just try to tell them that, “I’m trying to help you to get better,” and nobody can’t get mad because you’re trying to help them or they’re trying to help you. That’s why I

try to just help everybody that I can and I take some help from other people, too. Because I know I don't know everything.

As Ann Ferguson (2000:208) has written, academically oriented black boys experience a "psychic strain" as they attempt to navigate the competing expectations from schools and from their peers. This frequently results in feelings of isolation. Northside Academy sought to overcome this alienation by bringing together likeminded students who were bound together by a sense of relative privilege and shared academic struggle. Knowing that their exceptional education oriented them to college would motivate them to work hard together.

Undisciplined Minds

The respectable character of Latin was racially coded: Only men from the country's well-to-do white Protestant families once had access to the "dead language." "As an intellectual status symbol," Peter Cookson and Caroline Persell (2008:73–74) have written, "the classical curriculum helped distinguish gentlemen from virtually everyone else." The Northside community participated in its own local boundary work. The school set the disciplined minds and work ethic of their students apart from young men who were viewed as undisciplined and lazy. "Other kids just don't work hard enough," Mr. Madsen, a Latin teacher, said. "It becomes a bad habit you can't break. Our students are different because Latin demands so much of them, and so we're helping them build a habit that really sets them apart from other kids." Given how much work was expected of them, the students also came to draw these boundaries between themselves and their peers. One day, Burton, a ninth grader, was honored at an assembly as the "Top Gladiator" for the week. A few boys complimented him for the golden tie he received with the honor. He told his friends he earned the award because he had committed "24/7 to working hard on my Latin." Referring to other non-Northside students, he continued, "all these other kids ain't got their minds right and don't grind as hard as we do. They can't never get this tie. That's just for us." Even as Northside had offered their own young men a highly desired resource in Latin, laziness was always viewed as a personal failing. In this context, then, success was a matter of making the right character choices, a guiding principle of both neoliberalism and a respectability politics (Harris 2014).

Northside also occasionally counterposed its respectable "dead language" against urban slang or Black English (Ferguson 2000). The school officials did not actively suppress the young men's slang (their "living language") because it was so ubiquitous, but in certain moments, staff members clearly marked Black English as illegitimate compared with Latin. For example, one day in class, Mr. Madsen asked a few boys to stop talking and to return to their work. When they continued to talk, he said, "you know, that language won't get you in college." Pointing to the Latin vocabulary on the board, he said, "but knowing this will."

Respectable Bodies

Given that black men's bodies are heavily scrutinized in public spaces, the school's concern with dress and presentation was far from arbitrary (Ferguson 2000). The young men had to dress the part of a respectable brotherhood. In what follows, I describe how a professional uniform provided the young men with a respectable self-deportment, set apart from that of disreputable boys. Most important, the community felt the uniforms provided their students with protection from violent young men.

Disciplined Bodies

Many charter schools have strict uniform policies to maintain a semblance of order in their schools (Lubienski 2003). But these are rarely viewed as points of pride for students. The

Northside uniform, however, was a mark of high status. As the school's student handbook proclaimed, "The apparel oft proclaims the man": a line from Shakespeare's play, *Hamlet*. The students wore blazers with gold buttons and the school's emblem on the left breast pocket, striped ties in the school colors, black belts, and black dress shoes. A small minority—and most of these students were the newest ninth graders—were torn over the uniforms because they felt their peers in the community derided them for "looking gay" (Fergus et al. 2014). Yet they largely overcame these feelings of emasculation by viewing the uniform as a source of empowerment.

While Latin indicated that the Northside young men were destined for college, the community associated the uniform with a professional career and, therefore, a secure, middle-class future. In this instance, the school community likened Northside to elite boarding schools, given that these institutions have uniforms and that universities do not. "Fittingly," Cookson and Persell (2008:29) have written, "the uniform of choice for American elites is the business suit, and the prep uniform of choice has generally been jackets and ties." Charles, a 10th grader, felt that the uniform helped to classify him as someone who was destined for a financially secure future. He told me that his father, who worked for a mail carrier service, proudly told Charles that he would be the first man in the family to wear a suit to work. Like other students, Charles invoked Barack Obama (who had just started his first year as president) in projecting a successful future for himself.

The uniforms make you feel like you're a professional, like you're going to an everyday job. Makes you feel kind of good about yourself. It makes you feel like a person like Barack Obama, make you feel like you're up there and that you're somebody and stuff like that.

The uniforms also required and taught discipline. Four pages of the school's "Code of Conduct" handbook were dedicated to the school's uniform policy, which spelled out when and how students were to wear the uniform. School officials carefully inspected each student's uniform upon arriving to school, to emphasize that it was of utmost importance that the students presented themselves respectfully in public. The idea here was that if the students took special care in their dress, then each morning they would be "warming-up," as Richard, an 11th grader, put it, for the hard work needed in school. Above all, the uniform was a visible marker of the young men's commitment to the discipline required for a successful future. Richard wanted to be the first lawyer in his family. A member of the school's football team, he used a sports analogy to explain what the school uniform meant to him:

No one likes practice. But I feel when I'm a grown man I'll be in a law office somewhere. And I feel like lawyers have to get their fancy degrees first. And they wear their fancy suits, too, and so I see our school uniform as like a practice jersey for that job.

For Richard, the uniform was a "practice jersey" for the *real* uniform he desired: a lawyer's suit. In the same way that a practice jersey represented the hard work needed to be competitive in a game, Northside's uniform represented the disciplined self that Richard was cultivating.

According to Charles's mother, Yolanda Bridges, when community members see the Northside students, "they look up to them. You know, even older women you find complimenting all the boys and how well-dressed they look and all that, and that makes a person feel good." Two poignant examples reinforced Ms. Bridges's observation. During a fire drill, the boys stood in perfect lines along the perimeter of the school. A woman pulled her car up next to the boys and shouted out, "My, what school is this? All these young men heading to college!" Pleased with the compliment, several of the boys stood taller, fixing their blazers and ties.

A respectability politics disciplines bodies by reforming individual "manners and morals" (Higginbotham 1994:187). To prepare for the school's annual Mother-Son luncheon, Ms. Spring taught the young men fine dining etiquette, complete with plates and silverware. The young men

were advised to surprise their mothers by opening the doors for them. The luncheon, Ms. Spring observed, is “all about behaving like a gentleman for 90 minutes.” At the event, the president of a local nonprofit, Imani Coleman, told the families she had taken Latin herself and that the boys were “the cream of the crop” for doing the same. She gushed at “all the gentlemen in the room” and how they had such “impeccable manners” that “you just don’t see with many boys anymore.” While the expressed intent of the annual ritual was to celebrate mothers, it also served to fortify the brotherhood’s privileged standing in the community.

Undisciplined Bodies

Northside set their own students apart from the unrespectable bodies of other young men. In two ways, the Northside community repudiated other young men in the community. The first was to distinguish between the respectable dress of their students and the self-presentation of other boys. Enyo Agyeman, the mother of Johnny, a ninth grader, shared that the uniform set her son and his “intelligent” classmates apart from the community’s “worst boys.”

They look very intelligent. I love to see them when they all come out with their suit jackets, their blazers and their ties and everything. I really like that because it just seems like they’re going somewhere in life, you know? And you don’t see them with the pants hanging down or the shirts out of their pants or anything.

Parents of black “schoolboys” will “through a careful selection of clothing, mode of self-deportment and style” attempt to “derace” their sons from the “prevailing image of Black males as poor, lawless, and dangerous” (Ferguson 2000:108). The young men participated in this boundary work as well. Tracy Bly recalled the initial visit her grandson, Khalil, took to the school:

When he saw how well Northside was with the neckties and the dress pants and the shirt and how well, first thing he said, he said, “You know, grandma, their pants is not hanging down.” And then he said, “This is where I want to go.”

The school community also drew boundaries between its respectable young men and the undisciplined boys who were prone to fighting. As the Northside community viewed it, public schools were environments full of young men who had chosen fighting over schoolwork. At an induction ceremony, Trevor Green, the school’s African American principal, told the school’s newest students,

You are all here right now because either you or your parents want better for you. Whether “better” means not having to pay for a private school tuition—for a good education—or whether “better” means avoiding your neighborhood school, where fighting and failure is more prevalent than love and learning.

The failure of these schools could be explained by their lack of discipline. Tyson, a 10th grader, shook his head when I asked him what he thought about the middle school he had attended. “It’s like a juvenile school mostly,” he said. “It was fights every day, people bringing weapons.” Here, Tyson likened his middle school to the very disciplinary schools that Mr. Pierce had rejected when designing Northside.

The Northside community was constantly worried about potential fights between their students and other boys in the community. Earlier, I described how some students felt the uniforms emasculated them, which made them the target of antigay taunting. The school rationalized these

behaviors by concluding that other boys were envious of Northside students, and that jealousy prompted them to be aggressive with their more respectable peers. I asked Charles, the 10th grader we heard from earlier, why other boys initiated fights with Northside students.

They think we're bettering our education. We're wearing blazers and ties and all that. Maybe they wish that they still had the chance to come to Northside so that they can get a good education like we do.

At one assembly, Clark Holmes, a black administrator, recommended that the students hurry home after school to avoid confrontations with boys from other schools. "You have everything to lose and they have nothing to lose," he implored. "[Those boys] see you as having opportunities." While fighting is a valuable form of masculine currency in poor communities (Morris 2012), the school officials emphasized that the boys stood to gain far more by being disciplined and by avoiding fights with neighborhood boys.⁸

Symbolic boundaries are not simply moral forms of evaluation but also justify the creation of social boundaries, or "differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources . . . and social opportunities" (Lamont and Molnár 2002:168). The Northside community constructed boundaries to protect the valuable opportunities their students possessed. One boundary was physical. Before and after school, staff members literally lined the streets so the boys could walk safely to their buses. The school's "Safety Zone"—which no other local schools organized—gave the impression that the boys were law-abiding and, therefore, worthy of protection. This "Safety Zone" extended beyond this physical border to include other adults and authorities in the community. The school boasted that strangers not only respected the young men, but were "looking out for our boys," as Ms. Bridges put it. Katrina Holden, a history teacher, described how the school sometimes received calls from strangers complimenting the boys, and that some had gotten into the habit of telling other boys they should "act more like Northside students." An esteemed school had propped up a respectability politics, and had been used by the institution's many admirers to judge the failures of delinquent boys in this city. This supports findings that authorities criminalize delinquent young men of color, in part, by pitting them against academically oriented and law-abiding boys (Rios 2011). Over time, the respectable identities of the Northside students had likely granted them advantages in the community. Compared with other maligned young men, it appears that community members gave Northside students the assumption of innocence and, therefore, more protection of the law.⁹ By relying on authorities to help keep watch over their students, and by winning over many others in the community who viewed their boys as exceptional, the Northside community had in its own way participated in the larger forms of surveillance in the neighborhood.

Conclusion

After efforts stalled in the early 1990s, black male academies have reemerged in an era of public school reform. I demonstrated how one all-boys charter school capitalized on new pro-charter policies and offered their young men a distinguished education. This article's findings deepen understanding of all-male public schools, and of the diffusion of neoliberal principles more generally. In doing so, it addresses several limitations in a dominant "resilience" framework, which has tended to characterize these academies in positive terms (Brooms 2015; Fergus et al. 2014; James 2010). First, it is not so much resilience that distinguishes today's second wave academies from their earlier counterparts, but respectability. Second, it is the co-constitution of neoliberal ideologies and a respectability politics that perpetuates the very boundaries between respectability and deviance that earlier work fails to examine.

This study found that a core objective of black male academies is to develop a respectable brotherhood: an exceptional class of young black men with disciplined minds and bodies,

destined for college and middle-class security. While the first wave black academies were truly innovative, a neoliberal context has created different motivations for today's second wave black male academies. As a new entry in a competitive educational marketplace, Northside Academy did not so much innovate, but imitated the customers and resources of elite private schools to gain legitimacy (Lubienski 2003). To maintain it, the school drew on a legacy of black elites using the criteria of self-discipline to draw moral and social boundaries against disreputable outsiders, a stigmatized group of young black men most in trouble with the law and thought to occupy stigmatized all-male spaces.

The school's achievements earned Northside widespread praise and led to a surge of applications. Yet while the promise of all-boys schools is couched within language of assisting poor black boys as if they were a homogeneous population, I found that Northside has likely instead "exacerbate[ed] existing disparities between students" (Stulberg 2015:36). A focus on a brotherhood's resilience may glean the advantages that accrue to its members, but calling attention instead to the brotherhood's respectable character reveals the flipside to those advantages: the reemergence of a respectability politics that polices the immoral behavior of the most marginalized black men. As Grundy (2012:58) has written about the all-male, historically black Morehouse College, "class ideologies that back notions of respectability and male hegemony can place upwardly mobile Black men in direct conflict with their perceptions of the behaviors and images of Black men in crisis." I observed the same conflict at Northside Academy, the "mini-Morehouse." This boundary work "suggests the growing influence of neoliberalism, which defines cultural membership in terms of middle class status" (Lamont 2000:94). As neoliberalism intensifies, respectability politics will likely be especially damaging for schooling in poor black communities, given that neoliberalism and respectability politics are guided by a shared principle: that in periods of stark inequality, social advancement is contingent solely upon making the right individual choices and on reforming one's character (Harris 2014). Future research should inspect how neoliberalism and respectability politics operate as complementary forces in public education today.

More generally, the findings in this study extend knowledge of the impact of increased competition within neoliberal regimes. By defending the right of black empowerment in schools, the community control tradition has mostly avoided an association with the "ultra-competitive charter schools that have generated the most controversy" (Garcia and Stigler 2012:214). My use of a boundary framework highlights instead the "increasing hegemony" of neoliberal educational ideologies in segregated communities (Labaree 1997:73). As these communities become increasingly saturated with charters, schools may see no other choice than to join a high-stakes struggle for resources and customers. Given the rising levels of competition that accompany neoliberalism, it is also likely that the boundary work I observed at an all-boys charter is becoming more common in charter schools more generally.

This article's findings provide an opportunity to reevaluate the topic of segregation. In research on competition under neoliberalism, researchers have focused mostly on interracial inequality and on the segregation of blacks from whites. For example, educational sociologists have found that with increased competition, "charter schools left to their own devices may promote racial segregation in the public schools," with "whites avoiding their nonwhite counterparts" (Renzulli and Evans 2005:413). This mirrors analyses of the spread of neoliberal policies at the state level, which finds that "intergroup competition . . . leads to stronger boundaries toward ethnoracial minorities" (Mijs et al. 2016:2). However, the boundary work performed by respectable black male academies shifts attention to a relatively overlooked outcome of educational stratification. It reveals how "*intra-racial* inequality has been perpetuated and created anew" (Keith and Herring 1991:775; emphasis added) under competitive neoliberal regimes. Given hyper-segregation in the city of Morgan, pro-charter policies would have done very little to create more racially integrated schools, given that families frequently choose among racially homogeneous schools

(Garcia and Stigler 2012). By focusing on the educational determinants of intraracial inequality, this study joins other research showing how punitive neoliberal policies have created divisions *within* communities of color; and how cultural and moral boundaries help to empower a select group of young men in part by disempowering the young men of color most disadvantaged and in closest contact with the criminal justice system (e.g., Rios 2011). A boundary framework enabled me to observe ethnographically these “microdynamics of exclusion” under neoliberalism that are missed by more typical macro-level observations of intergroup inequality (Lamont 2012:202).

Finally, these findings have implications for policy and future research. While the issues of racial and sex segregation have quieted down since the time of the first wave academies—when critics alleged that male academies violated the law on these two grounds—the finding that these schools promote intraracial inequality should help guide future debates over the legitimacy of these schools and whether they can truly meet the needs of all black boys. In fact, a recently opened male academy appears to emulate the character and curricula of Northside Academy.¹⁰ This article was principally concerned with how a group of young men gained advantages *as a group* vis-à-vis excluded young men, but future research could address topics that were outside the scope of this article. For instance, the patriarchal ideologies that embed a respectability politics are likely to marginalize black women and girls within all-male institutions (Collins 2004; Williams 2004). Moreover, although the disciplining of minds and bodies marked the Northside young men as exceptional, some young men of color may be harmed inside these schools. Strict disciplinary policies may unduly punish some students, even as discipline is taken to be a marker of respectability.

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Notes

1. These initial efforts were coed, but given the spirit and intent behind them, researchers still refer to them as “male academies” (see Hopkins 1997).
2. Pattillo (2015) defines community control as the power of black communities to determine “where and what” their children learn. I use “how” to include forms of belonging in these schools.
3. A multischool study by Fergus, Noguera, and Martin (2014) is noteworthy for supplementing qualitative observations with multiple regression analyses. It found only modest evidence for the claim that male academies improve academic performance. For this and other reasons, these researchers offer milder support for these academies compared to Brooms (2015) and James (2010).
4. Fergus and his coauthors (2014) write that all-male schools have only been embraced since 2003, but community support for these schools dates back to the early 1990s (Hopkins 1997; Stulberg 2008).
5. Bonner (2014:4) concedes that “gifted” students are a “consistent theme” across research on resilience in young black men.
6. Minnesota passed the nation’s first charter law in 1991. Wisconsin and Michigan, home to the first wave academies, adopted charter legislation in 1993 (Renzulli and Roscigno 2005).

7. About 50 percent of the students in the inaugural cohort left before graduation. Beginning with the second cohort, the attrition rate dropped precipitously. Officials believed this was because Northside was more successful in attracting students who had bought into the school's academic culture. By just the second year, Northside boasted a long wait list of students.
8. See Brooms (2015) for an excellent discussion of how black male academy students feel pressured to defend their masculinity.
9. This study is part of a larger research project comparing two black male academies in the city of Morgan (see Oeur 2016). The second school lacked Northside's elite status and was stigmatized for being punitive. Comments from people comparing the two schools (including from one mother who had one son in each school) suggested that Northside students were viewed much more favorably than black boys at other schools.
10. Washington, D.C.'s Ron Brown College Preparatory High School opened in 2016. It features a Latin curriculum and grooms "mental and physical discipline" ("Ron Brown"). Morehouse College students have visited and claimed Ron Brown Prep students as their "little brothers" (Bama 2016).

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