

Black boys apart: racial uplift and respectability in all-male public schools

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BOOK REVIEW

Black boys apart: racial uplift and respectability in all-male public schools, by Freedom Blume Oeur, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2018, 260 pp., \$26.95 (paperback), ISBN: 9780816696468

Single-sex all-Black high schools have garnered much criticism as another rendering of racial segregation and gendered privilege. Many members of Black communities, however, view them as “islands of hope in a sea of indifference” (p. 2). Could these schools serve as a remedy for the problems plaguing their young men (e.g., low graduation rate, high unemployment, and disproportionate levels of incarceration)? In *Black Boys Apart*, Freedom Blume Oeur applies ethnographic lens to explore the role of all-male Black high schools in the large East Coast city of Morgan (pseudonym) to explore the following questions: “Why have Black communities turned to all-male education today? How do these schools make and reform Black manhood? How do these institutions help and harm?” (p. 2).

In his year-long ethnographic investigation, Oeur observed and interviewed students, parents, teachers, and school officials of two single-sex high schools (Northside Academy and Perry High, both pseudonyms) to not only understand the lived experiences of their young black men, but also to examine how these schools were viewed in their respective roles as institutions of learning in forging Black masculine identities within the larger sociopolitical and historical context. Through the examination of the founding and practices of Northside and Perry, Oeur chronicles how one Black community sought to address the macro-level need to “save the black male” through local-level solutions.

As institutions of learning for young Black men, the two high schools had disparate goals for their graduates. Perry High School sought to produce what Oeur describes as *heroic family men*, ones who draw their idealized masculine identity as respectable provider and protector for their family and community, claiming their rightful role as head of the family. Northside Academy, on the other hand, prepared their boys to be *ambitious entrepreneurs*, independent leaders and workers in the globalized economy in the “larger stage” outside of Morgan. As such, Perry High endeavoured to yoke their graduates back into their community, whereas Northside Academy viewed success for their young men as the ability to leave their humble environments/communities and become leaders in the globalized marketplace.


Of the many strengths of Oeur’s work, the greatest contribution may be his insight in situating the two schools within the intersection of various social, historical, political, and market forces. Linking the schools to the earlier Reconstruction-era Black communities’ efforts to control the learning of their own children and the present-day neoliberal embrace of the free-market education, the author

unpacks the roles Black schools have played in the promotion of the ideas of racial uplift and “politics of respectability” – acceptance into the white mainstream through emphasis on “purity, self-restraint, and moral discipline” (p. 48). This respectability politics, Oeur argues, inadvertently resulted in dividing Black communities, as the upward-minded Black men constructed their identity in *contrast* to their fellow men most in “crisis”. Indeed, W.E.B. Du Bois, in his earlier works, juxtaposed the idea of the “Talented Tenth” to the notion of the “submerged tenth”, the Black underclass. As such, many Black leaders viewed all-Black schools as potential training ground for a “better class” of Blacks who can lead/guide the Black masses. Oeur suggests that these earlier Du Boisian view of the Talented Tenth now serve as a lodestar for present-day single-sex, all Black schools like Northside Academy and Perry High.

Oeur poignantly argues that as a result of how these schools situate their place in their communities and the society at large, Northside and Perry serve as a place of much contradiction. They not only function as institutions where the Black communities can rally around to promote Black manhood, but they also divide by symbolically pitting those who can versus those who cannot, those who are able versus those who are not, the Talented Tenth versus their submerged counterparts. They sought to empower Black manhood, but through strict control of their bodies, e.g., uniforms, sexuality, and strict submission to authority, they also arguably emasculated young Black males. And in the case of Northside, the school sought to engender in their young men pride in their Black culture and heritage; but its curricula emphasized Latin with Greek and Roman culture as the standard of educational and cultural excellence. Becoming Black leaders, then, entailed embracing elite white norms and expectations as a fast-track to upward mobility.

Oeur’s work brings into debate uncomfortable, but necessary, questions. What is the net impact of all-male, all Black institutions like Northside Academy and Perry High? Is it really a potential solution to the Black male crisis as many have hoped? Or is it another apparatus to perpetuate the inter-and intra-racial (and gender) divide where those who are more advantaged are further empowered through symbolic exclusion/contrast to those who are less so, with the larger societal inequalities left being unchallenged? In his concluding chapter, Oeur posits that neoliberal, market-driven solutions to Black-male crisis in the form of Northside and Perry, though well-intentioned, may in fact be part and parcel of the hegemonic process that “further naturalize inequalities not only between men and women, but among groups of men and boys” (p. 166).

Black Boys Apart is a notable work in the field of sociology of education, a must-read for those interested in the intersection of race, gender, and school choice. With the present-day emphasis on privatization, choice, and market-place solutions in the American school system, led by the leaders like the current education secretary, Betsy DeVos, Freeden Blume Oeur’s work stands out as a timely and relevant piece of scholarship.

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