

INTRODUCTION

Reform, Respectability, and the Crisis of Young Black Men

On a winter day in 1990, the city of Detroit convened a “Saving the Black Male” conference. It was democracy in action. Parents, school officials, and other community members passed a resolution demanding that elected officials intervene to “reverse the tide of failure among urban males.”¹ A city task force responded with the bold proposal of opening several unique all-male public elementary schools. The proposed schools would innovate by recruiting Black male role models and by adopting African-centered curricula. Detroit’s efforts came closely on the heels of another Rust Belt city, Milwaukee, seeking to open its own Black male academies. As one newspaper observed at the time, Milwaukee’s proposal represented “the most drastic educational approach aimed at saving the next generation of young Black men from the social maelstrom now devouring much of the current generation.”²

The schools faced heavy opposition. Some believed they were another form of racial segregation because they further isolated Black boys from their peers. Kenneth Clark, the psychologist whose research steered the U.S. Supreme Court in its monumental decision to desegregate public schools in 1954, called these Black academies “nonsense.”³ Meanwhile, feminist organizations argued that these academies posed a threat to Black *girls* by denying this population similar opportunities. A Detroit court sided with these opponents, and the city was required to enroll girls as well as boys in the new schools. The most well known of these schools, the Malcolm X Academy, was then subjected to cruel acts of racism. Protesters spray-painted “white power” on the school and demanded that the children go through security checks.⁴ Yet this hostility only emboldened supporters, who felt that Black communities should have the right to design schools as they wished. In their eyes, schools that taught Black

boys apart from their peers represented “islands of hope in a sea of indifference.”⁵

A major restructuring of U.S. public education today has renewed hope in all-boys public education. Anchored by the 2002 No Child Left Behind law and propelled by the free-market doctrine of neoliberalism, this restructuring has embraced innovation and freedom of choice in schools. This second wave of Black male academies has benefited from the support of courts and civil rights organizations that had earlier been skeptical of these schools.⁶ While firm numbers are elusive, there were an estimated 106 entirely single-sex public schools in 2014, up from just a handful during the 1990s.⁷

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? These are the questions that guide *Black Boys Apart*.

My research for this book took me to the large East Coast city of Morgan, one of the country’s first major laboratories for choice and experimentation in public schools.⁸ On a sweltering day in September 2009, I arrived at Northside Academy, a charter high school, and made a beeline for the school’s lunchroom. An assembly was about to start. I stood near the back row next to Jeremiah, a ninth grader.

“Do you teach here?” Jeremiah asked. Like many of his classmates, Jeremiah had attended a charter middle school before enrolling in Northside. He lived with just his mother. He wanted to be the first person in his family to attend college. He loved comic books.

“No, I’m a researcher,” I responded. “I’m here to learn more about your school. I’m Mr. Oeur.”⁹

We shook hands, but Jeremiah looked skeptical. He then flashed a grin and said, “I’m learning about the school, too. I can be your assistant!” I chuckled. Jeremiah was already certain of one thing. “What you should *know* is that we *need* some girls in here!”

Trevor Green, the school’s new principal, walked to the front of the room. The young Black men, members of the school’s newest cohort, sat up dutifully and quietly, just as the school’s strict culture of discipline required. “Good is the enemy of great,” Mr. Green started. “Our focus is to be great at everything we do.” He kept the details to a minimum that morning and instead relayed big messages that would be a hallmark of the school’s weekly assemblies: “Prove society wrong.” “Respect your brothers.” “College is your pathway.” Mr. Green frequently paused to ask, “Is that clear?” “YES!” the boys shouted in unison.

Around the same time, across town, Perry, a combined middle and high school, was also preparing for the new school year.¹⁰ Just a few years before, Perry High had been one of the first public schools in the country to adopt an all-boys model. The implementation had been rocky, however, and the school struggled for years with staff turnover. Yet there were new reasons for optimism. Perry had won a large federal grant to support new initiatives, and several veteran administrators had been recruited to help lead the school. Perry lacked Northside's flexibility as a charter school (free to determine its own curricula and governance structure and to hire its own teachers), but there was a palpable sense of hope that the all-boys model could still work.

A spectacular marble staircase beckoned inside the front lobby, but the students entered instead through a small side entrance. There, they passed through a metal detector with a sign overhead that read, "ONLY YOU CAN TAKE THE 'U' OUT OF TRUANCY." Once inside, the students headed straight for the auditorium. On my way there, I ran into Laura Wheeler, a middle-aged white Spanish teacher I had met the week before in a faculty meeting.

The look on her face read, *I'm already stressed!*

"Busy morning, Ms. Wheeler?"

"A new year, a new start, Mr. Oeur!"

She was one of several staff members who had made a mid-career transition into teaching. As luck would have it, her siblings were already teachers, and they helped her secure her first teaching gig at an all-boys Catholic school.¹¹ When she looked into working in public schools, she found that the school district in Morgan was desperate for language instructors. So Ms. Wheeler had her pick of schools. Discovering that Perry High was all-boys, she jumped at the opportunity to work there. She would replace a long-term Spanish substitute teacher who, to her students' dismay, did not speak any Spanish.

Inside the auditorium, Lavar Bradley, the principal, welcomed the students to a new school year. While normally a jovial person, Mr. Bradley's smile quickly disappeared. The tone of his message matched that of Mr. Green's over at Northside Academy:

Our school is on a serious mission this year. There needs to be a sense of urgency. All the statistics show that Black boys have no business being successful. But we're in the business of showing that those statistics are wrong!

For one school year, I traveled back and forth between Perry High School and Northside Academy. I observed classroom lessons and assemblies,

hung out with the boys throughout the school, and spoke with parents, teachers, and other school officials. The young men had much in common: they came from many of the same racially segregated and class-disadvantaged neighborhoods. They came of age in a neoliberal conjuncture, a “contradictory moment of political struggles, victories, defeats and transformations” that constructs specific race and gender formations.¹² The young men found themselves at the center of major local and federal school reform in a time marked by the increased policing of their communities, state disinvestment, and a Great Recession that had crippled Black wealth. And they faced grim realities. Black boys are three times more likely than their white peers to receive an out-of-school suspension.¹³ In 2013, the high school graduation rate for Black boys nationwide was 59 percent, compared to 80 percent for white boys.¹⁴ Health indicators are similarly discouraging.¹⁵

Perry High School and Northside Academy also differed in significant ways. Without a clear plan of action, Perry High found itself stuck, so to speak, between the two waves: the school was determined to adopt the role-modeling mission of its earlier counterpart schools in Detroit and Milwaukee, but it was unable to achieve the respectable character for which it also yearned. Northside Academy, on the other hand, exemplified the second-wave model. Blessed with resources that Perry lacked and a mission to attract academically oriented students, the school aimed for nothing less than to join the ranks of the city’s elite schools. Miscalculations and poor planning dogged Perry High, while Northside Academy quickly gained admirers across the city. Yet *Black Boys Apart* is not primarily concerned with what makes these schools successful. Black male academies are likely to succeed for reasons that other public schools succeed, such as the presence of a rigorous academic curriculum, caring adult-student relationships, and strong leadership.¹⁶ A different question is what these schools judge to be success, and how they mold Black male identity to meet those goals. This book therefore interrogates all-boys schools as a matter of masculinity politics, or “those mobilizations and struggles where the meaning of masculine gender is at issue, and with it, men’s position in gender relations.”¹⁷ This approach departs from the view of Black male academies as primarily a school-reform effort, or a way to “fix” schools to meet the needs of young men of color.¹⁸ Instead, I examine these schools through the framework of governmentality, or the techniques and knowledges that manage the conduct of citizens and make them into appropriate gendered and racialized subjects.¹⁹ In this view, Black male academies are not so much about reforming schools. Instead, they join a long political history of social institutions—including schools, churches, families, the

media, and the criminal justice system—seeking to reform Black men and boys.

Educational researchers have rightfully been skeptical of the term “crisis,” as it implies a temporary episode for something that is actually chronic.²⁰ I find, however, that two meanings of the term are central for a story on sex-separate education. First, the history of schooling in the United States reveals how perceived crises—“real” or not, temporary or not—have had real effects for gender arrangements, the distribution of resources, and the shaping of life outcomes. Second, the term “crisis” has profound valence in a history of Black political struggle. In the inaugural (1910) issue of *The Crisis*, the periodical of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), W. E. B. Du Bois wrote that the newspaper “takes its name from the fact that the editors believe that this is a critical time *in the advancement of men*.”²¹ Du Bois, a cofounder of the NAACP and one of the twentieth century’s towering intellectual-activists, was not merely referring to dire statistics; rather, *crisis* was intended to motivate Black communities and their allies to take political action. *Black Boys Apart* will return often to Du Bois and his ideas. Conducted exactly a century after Du Bois penned these words, my research heeds the call to make sense of today’s “critical time” in the advancement of Black boys.

From Resilience to Respectability

No statistical data show that single-sex schools benefit young men of color.²² Yet qualitative work provides a more optimistic outlook on these schools. Edward Fergus, Pedro Noguera, and Margary Martin’s book *Schooling for Resilience* is most representative of this approach. This study argues that the primary aim of male academies is to create “protective environments” in order to cultivate in the young men *resilience*, or the various capacities (such as optimism, self-confidence, and perseverance) that are needed to overcome adversity and to improve well-being. I refer to this as the *resilience perspective*. The thesis that these academies represent a “new wave” of school-reform efforts intended to “save” young men by instilling in them the resilience to overcome structural challenges (a lack of access to mainstream institutions) and cultural deficits (such as popular stereotypes and harmful cultural beliefs and behaviors) has been taken up enthusiastically by other scholars. In one study, graduates from a Black male academy cultivated resilience in order to not “let the neighborhood win.”²³ In another, an all-male school cultivated *imara* (meaning “perseverance” in Swahili) in their students.²⁴ Black male academies are exalted for encouraging their students to “never quit” and to “never give up.”²⁵

While the resilience perspective is commendable for focusing attention on how young men of color are empowered agents in their schooling, this research overlooks the very social dynamics that motivate academies to promote resilience in the first place. Without an understanding of this wider context and history, resilience passes uncritically as a commonsense, virtuous quality. It is protected by the good intentions of school staff members. As Kenneth Saltman has argued, the admiration of resilience echoes controversial efforts to cultivate “grit” in disadvantaged children:

Resilience studies ask not how the social conditions of poverty and violence can be transformed or how students can learn to comprehend and act to change what oppresses them. Instead resilience studies identifies the rare student who survives, graduates, and goes to university despite the social disinvestment, violence, targeting by the criminal justice system, despair, and poverty. Resilience studies focuses on the exceptional “success against all odds story.” . . . Grit shares with resilience studies a deeply conservative refusal to address radical disparities in social investment, the historical policy legacy that reproduces a racialized class hierarchy, the ways there are clear winners and losers and the political pressure that maintains such radically unequal public spending patterns.²⁶

The various study participants in the resilience framework resemble what Loïc Wacquant has called “paragons of morality,” or honorable protagonists who narrate moral tales where they use their resilience to fend off an overwhelmingly threatening social landscape.²⁷ Across this scholarship, the barometer for school success is the degree to which students demonstrate the individual willpower, effort, and hope needed to transcend a racial subject position marked mostly by its defects.²⁸ All-male academies (and the students, families, and staff they represent) view their school as a possible “solution” to an external environment characterized as a monolithic problem. In this view, the schools are variously described as seeking to “protect,” “inoculate,” and “buffer” young men from neighborhood factors (the oft-cited gangs, drugs, and violence), while the community environment is reduced to a set of risks that need to be “countered” and “undone.”²⁹ The study participants in *Schooling for Resilience* see themselves as fighting “a battle between good and evil.”³⁰ Derrick Brooms explains how his respondents view themselves as “winners,” but he is silent about who the “losers” are in this moral tale.³¹ This framing accepts as an unassailable virtue precisely that which needs to be historically situated in these schools: the growing need to “protect” a respectable male identity from deviant features of Black masculinity and Black urban life.³²

As Stuart Hall has written, common sense “represents itself as the ‘traditional wisdom or truth of the ages,’ but, in fact, it is deeply a product of history.”³³ *Black Boys Apart* roots commonsense resilience in history to draw out issues of privilege, power, and politics. Indeed, the resilience perspective has overlooked the respectable character of Black male academies because—quite curiously—it has largely overlooked a long history of separating boys and girls in schools.³⁴ This history includes recent attempts to embrace Black all-male education, and a longer history of how Black children have been implicated in sex-separate public schooling since the Jim Crow era. The resilience perspective elides the historical antecedents to today’s academies.³⁵ Had these authors compared today’s all-male academies to efforts in the early 1990s (in Detroit and Milwaukee, which comprise what I call the first-wave Black male academies) they would have found that these original educators also sought to instill resilience in their young men. Without acknowledging this history, this research has failed to compare today’s schools to their first-wave counterparts and therefore cannot specify precisely what makes today’s academies distinctive.

This book departs from endorsements of Black male academies as school-reform efforts that seek to instill resilience and instead views these schools as efforts to reform Black male character by cultivating respectability.³⁶ Early Black leaders in the latter part of the nineteenth century promoted a “politics of respectability” that conformed to middle-class values in order to reject racist discourses of African Americans.³⁷ However, these politics proved troubling as they focused on reforming Black men’s behavior—the embrace of moral discipline, self-restraint, and obedience—while taking “the emphasis away from structural forms of oppression.”³⁸ A respectability politics therefore divided Black communities when upwardly mobile Black men “constructed their own status against that of the Black ‘unrespectable’ poor.”³⁹ In an era of deteriorating Black wealth—exacerbated by state austerity measures and the Great Recession, which rocked the country shortly before my research started in 2009—a respectability politics has reemerged. As Fredrick Harris observes, these politics have become a common sense in Black communities and are pushed by high-profile Blacks from the comedian Bill Cosby, to CNN anchor Don Lemon, to even President Barack Obama. They have demanded that Black youth correct their behavior. Meanwhile, conservatives tout modern finishing schools and other educational programs that teach good manners to poor youth as a way of lifting them out of poverty.⁴⁰ A respectability politics demands correcting one’s conduct in a “post-racial” America.

While Black all-male secondary institutions are relatively new, elite Black institutions such as the all-male Morehouse College continue to

promote a respectability politics. Saida Grundy 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 clear symbolic boundaries against those Black men most in “crisis.”⁴¹ Today’s second-wave academies show evidence of institutionalizing respectability. Whereas the first attempts to open all-male schools were African-centered, 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.⁴²

Black Boys Apart complicates the “sociosexual binary of respectability versus deviance . . . by exploring the political and cultural imperatives *for perpetuating it*.”⁴³ Following Lester Spence, Michael Dumas, Fredrick Harris, and others, I link a respectability politics to a “neoliberal turn in Black politics.”⁴⁴ Neoliberalism is a pervasive social policy doctrine that turns to the market for answers. To achieve greater innovation and efficiency, it demands deregulation and the transfer of the handling of goods and services from democratic institutions to the private sector. As part of this transition, Black communities emphasize “technical, entrepreneurial interventions” over “political organization as the imagined solution” to socioeconomic inequality.⁴⁵ Neoliberalism was codified into educational law in 2002 with the passage of No Child Left Behind, a sweeping set of school reforms that loosened restrictions on single-sex education.⁴⁶ *Black Boys Apart* demonstrates that this neoliberal turn marks a return to historical attempts to reform Black male subjectivity. Only by understanding how Black male academies are oriented to the past can we assess whether they can carve a hopeful path forward for their young men.

Crises of Masculinity

To understand why communities have turned to single-sex education for Black boys, we first need to grasp the historical precedent of turning to sex-separate education as a strategy to defend and restore gender and racial hierarchies. The concept of hegemonic masculinity can help us chart these strategies. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the web of practices, relations, and regulations that ensure men’s dominance over women in a larger gender order. It is the most exalted form of manhood in a specific historical and social context.⁴⁷ Hegemonic masculinity exists in relation to other marginalized masculinities, which vary by race, class, sexuality, ability, and other lines of difference. Hegemonic masculinity is not simply

a matter of brute force; rather, people consent to its practices. It is less a stable system and more a “mobile relation” that is always on guard, monitoring and responding to challenges to its authority.⁴⁸ Throughout U.S. history, dominant groups have resisted the encroachment of others—including women and nonwhites—by framing young white men as victims in crisis.⁴⁹

These strategies appear at the very start of coed schooling in the United States. In the mid-nineteenth century, calls for more cost-effective schooling and a thriving evangelical movement helped to spread coeducation across the country.⁵⁰ Early school leaders explained that coeducation would not disrupt an existing gender hierarchy grounded in the belief in natural differences between men and women.⁵¹ Boys and girls could physically mix in schools—just as they did in the home and the church—but this would not violate their “separate spheres.” Girls were groomed to be dutiful wives and mothers while schooling helped boys cultivate a genteel respectability that was the “source of men’s strength and authority over both women and the lower classes.”⁵² Gender relations were defined by a principle of “different and unequal.” Given entrenched views of gender difference, coeducation was hardly controversial.⁵³

The growing success of girls sparked concerns of a “crisis” of boys. The psychologist G. Stanley Hall warned that the “feminine environment” of schools would strip young boys of their essential “savage” nature.⁵⁴ The progress of the nation—perhaps civilization itself—was at stake, since boys needed to channel their aggressive tendencies for the nation to advance as a global superpower.⁵⁵ Critiques that schools were both failing and feminizing young men were nested in larger fears of threats to dominant white masculinity during this time. As Michael Kimmel writes, the ideal of the “Self-Made Man” was under siege. A corporate workforce threatened to stifle men’s “primal” tendencies and inhibit their autonomy, while women’s suffrage threatened to unsettle men’s hold on political power.⁵⁶

For Blacks during the Jim Crow era, gendered divisions took shape through a project of racial uplift. Black elites pushed for a “Talented Tenth” of men to lift up the race by pursuing a college education and by adopting the Victorian ideals of temperance, refined manners, and industriousness.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, the Black church pushed for the training of respectable Black girls who would enter occupations such as nursing, missionary work, and domestic work in white homes.⁵⁸ This separate educational track for Black girls illustrates how “sex segregation sought to replicate gendered norms as a strategy for gaining white respect.”⁵⁹ Most Black men and boys, on the other hand, were met with fear—rooted in “controlling images” of Black men as sexual predators—and were deprived of

these educational opportunities.⁶⁰ As Verna Williams describes, Black men were thus denied access to breadwinning roles and came to be viewed as failed patriarchs.⁶¹

With the U.S. Supreme Court's mandate of racial integration in schools in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), white communities would turn to sex segregation as a strategy to confine Black boys. Desegregation sparked fears that Black boys would socialize with white girls. Some schools in the South, which had led coeducation efforts some one hundred years earlier, now devised strategies to create single-sex schools as new options for white parents. Today's skeptics cite these "last-gasp attempts of segregationists" as evidence of the racist undertones in the history of expanding school choice for parents, now a key feature of neoliberal education.⁶² Responding to the decision to open separate boys' and girls' schools in one Mississippi district, the school board's sole Black member flatly remarked, "The idea is to keep the Black boys from having any contact with the white girls—pure and simple."⁶³ Demanding the deference of dangerous Black men would help preserve the sanctity of white womanhood, while white men retained control of white women's bodies.⁶⁴

A new boy crisis emerged on the eve of the twenty-first century. In the absence of much comprehensive research on masculinity in schools, anxious educators and parents have turned to trade publications concerned with "saving boys."⁶⁵ This "boy-industry" genre—including Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson's *Raising Cain* (2000) and especially William Pollack's *Real Boys* (1998)—claims that young men now suffer from depression and low self-esteem. Pollack explicitly writes that coed schools favor girls over boys. A strong theme across boy-industry literature is that schools inappropriately feminize young men and therefore engage in a form of reverse gender discrimination.⁶⁶ Single-sex schooling proponents have their own reading list of "how-to" books, all of which stress that coed schools are increasingly not "boy friendly," by authors such as Leonard Sax and Michael Gurian.⁶⁷ According to this perspective, while boys and girls remain essentially different, this difference has nothing to do with inequality. Rather, inequality is the "naturally occurring outcome of difference."⁶⁸ By tailoring schools to the unique needs of boys and girls, sex-separate education embraces the increasingly dominant principle that the sexes are "different but equal." Indeed, the first-wave Black male academies emphasized the idea that "being equal does not mean being the same" and that hyperactivity and aggressiveness were "accepted as normal" among the boys at the school.⁶⁹ To be sure, young women do outperform young men on a range of measures. They earn, on average, higher grades in high

school, and they graduate within four years at a higher rate.⁷⁰ Yet women and girls remain structurally disadvantaged relative to men, as educational success has not translated into full economic equality. Sociologist Philip Cohen has rebuked hand-wringing over the “end of men” by reminding us that women remain, despite incremental progress, a tiny minority “in the top echelons of wealth and power.”⁷¹ Men also continue to possess far greater symbolic control than women in cultural domains such as athletics.⁷² Yet the “boy crisis” narrative persists because a new “soft essentialism” allows sympathizers to focus on the costs to boys while overlooking men’s overall advantage in a gender order.⁷³

There has been mounting criticism of essentialist claims. Researchers have dubbed such claims “pseudoscience” and an “essentialist myth.”⁷⁴ The neuroscientist Lise Eliot explains that the best scientific evidence available shows that the “basic brain mechanisms of learning and memory do not differ between boys and girls.”⁷⁵ Yet school districts continue to draw explicitly on these trade publications in crafting the “best practices” behind single-sex schooling.⁷⁶ The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has led the charge against these practices. In 2012, its campaign, Teach Kids, Not Stereotypes, collected data on single-sex programs in a number of states.⁷⁷ The ACLU argued that most of the districts in their report drew on the flawed logic of hardwired brain differences between boys and girls and had repackaged sex stereotypes. The organization found that one middle school taught images of men as “warrior, protector, and provider.” These beliefs reflect those in the boy-industry literature, which blend a “pining for an idyllic past” with “a spiritualist view of masculinity as inherent in a biology created by God.”⁷⁸

The feminist legal scholar Juliet Williams observes that a belief that boys and girls are “different but equal” not only spares proponents from having to explain historical patterns of sexism, but strategically distances them from the more insidious “separate but equal” doctrine associated with *de jure* racial segregation.⁷⁹ In fact, the boy-industry camp has selectively used the language of “disadvantaged boys” to advance its own agenda. Williams shows how texts in the boy-industry literature acknowledge the disproportionate harm that young men of color face, but still prioritize gender as the explanatory variable in children’s educational inequalities.⁸⁰ Differences between Black boys and white boys are treated as matters of “nuance” and are generally subsumed under the perceived commonalities of young men.⁸¹ In another example, Williams observes how Leonard Sax and others have increasingly invoked the language of “social justice” to defend the right to single-sex public education. In appropriating a phrase associated with civil rights struggles, “boys not traditionally

associated with disadvantage” are able “to partake in a language of redress.”⁸² For example, the original name of the Sax-led National Association of Single-Sex Public Education was the National Association *for the Advancement* of Single-Sex Public Education, curiously reminiscent of the Black civil rights organization, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). This is especially ironic because the NAACP rejected Black all-male schools when they were first proposed in the early 1990s. Why, then, would communities today support schools that historically have been used as a strategy to reinforce gender and racial hierarchies? To gain some purchase on this question, I turn to W. E. B. Du Bois himself, a cofounder of the NAACP.

The Black Nationalist Defense of All-Boys Education

Reflecting on Milwaukee’s efforts to open male academies in the early 1990s, the NAACP warned that these schools would only replicate the damaging effects of segregating Black boys in punitive spaces such as special education rooms and disciplinary schools.⁸³ Benjamin Hooks, the executive director of the NAACP, asserted “that it would be a backward step with untold consequences to embrace the notion of officially sanctioned, state-sponsored racial segregation.”⁸⁴ This view was consistent with the organization’s long-standing commitment to *integrationism*, a racial ideology that rejects “any form of institutional separation based on racial categories” and fights “for full civil and political rights within the existing system of capitalist democracy.”⁸⁵ This ideology became a foundation of Black emancipatory struggle following de jure segregation of public institutions under Jim Crow. In the inaugural (1910) issue of *The Crisis*, the NAACP’s monthly periodical, Du Bois decried efforts to open racially segregated schools. Separate schoolchildren by race, the scholar warned, and “the result is war.”⁸⁶

It is startling, then, that Clifford Watson and Geneva Smitherman, two of the chief architects of this first wave of Black academies, identified Du Bois as a guiding light.⁸⁷ However, to use the words of gender studies scholar Roderick Ferguson, these Black reformers were “incited” to different “norms, concepts, and ideals” associated with Du Bois.⁸⁸ The school reformers had used Du Bois strategically for achieving specific political goals. In a development that has received little attention in existing research, Black male academies have drawn inspiration from elite Black colleges. Watson and Smitherman were incited to a Du Bois who was giving a lecture at Fisk University (Du Bois’s alma mater) in 1933. Du Bois now argued emphatically that Black-controlled educational institutions

were necessary in the face of deepening racial segregation. Writing a year later in *The Crisis*, Du Bois advocated for voluntary separate schooling for Blacks (for the “race-conscious Black man cooperating together in his own institutions and movements”), but for the eventual integration of Blacks into mainstream society.⁸⁹

Today’s all-boys schooling proponents align with various intellectual and political traditions (such as Critical Race Theory and Black progressive education), but they are linked by Black Nationalism.⁹⁰ This ideology stresses Black agency and self-determination. It seeks “to strengthen in-group values while holding those promoted by the larger society at arm’s length.”⁹¹ A Black Nationalist ideology has fought for community control over schools.⁹² The community control tradition reveals that the “commitment to desegregated schooling” among Black families “is complex and certainly not unwavering.”⁹³ Rather than offer unconditional support for integrated schools, actors in this tradition have yearned for “momentary” strategies amid an “educational terrain over which they have had little control.”⁹⁴ In response to failed integration efforts in the 1960s and 1970s, community schools have fought to empower Black families to control *where* and *how* their children learn. For example, the first-wave Black male academies were built around two innovations that were rare in public schools at the time.⁹⁵ One was academic: the schools immersed themselves in Afrocentric themes, pedagogies, and curricula to challenge the Eurocentrism of public schooling. The other centered on the nature of within-school relationships, or forms of belonging. The schools recruited Black men to serve as mentors and role models for the Black boys.⁹⁶ In a 1991 issue of *The Crisis*, a Detroit school official emphasized “that community support for the academies’ original all-male concept was overwhelming.”⁹⁷ The district received twelve hundred applications for five hundred available spots.

More recently, Clarence Terry and colleagues have maintained that “stakeholders concerned with the education of African American students are well within their rights to call for more sympathetic, intentional, and effective schooling practices directed specifically at Black males.”⁹⁸ Their inspiration? A brief 1935 article by Du Bois entitled “Does the Negro Need Separate Schools?” “God knows he does,” was Du Bois’s response.⁹⁹ White-dominated schools, Du Bois felt, possessed “unsympathetic teachers” and were marked with “hostile public opinion.”¹⁰⁰ In 2006, a decade and a half after the Milwaukee and Detroit experiments, and now well into the era of No Child Left Behind, the NAACP reversed course and offered mild support for all-boys education. Theodore Shaw, the president of the organization’s Legal Defense and Educational Fund, hinted strongly at the

neoliberal logic behind this change of heart. “I believe,” Shaw said, that “the crisis among Black males is so severe we have to have some room to experiment.”¹⁰¹

Black Manhood and Governmentality

Black Boys Apart examines how in this contemporary neoliberal moment, Black leaders and Black institutions use Du Bois as a cultural and historical reference for fashioning a desirable Black manhood. My intention here is not to valorize Du Bois or to “discover” or “reject” him.¹⁰² I do not mean for Du Bois’s lessons on Black politics and education to be the final word on Black single-sex schooling. Rather, it is precisely the wide-ranging and revisionist nature of Du Bois’s ideas on education, race, and gender that accentuate the promise *and* perils behind Black all-boys education, as well as the contradictions within this form of schooling.¹⁰³

To gain traction on the formation of neoliberal subjectivities, I draw on Michel Foucault’s notion of governmentality. In his observations of neoliberalism’s ascendancy, Foucault developed this concept to refer to the ensemble of technologies and practices that regulate conduct and make people into appropriate subjects and citizens.¹⁰⁴ Unlike sovereign power, which secures domination through fear and terror, governmentality actively shapes a way of life—habits, sensibilities, and manners—in a more “gentle” fashion.¹⁰⁵ As David Garland writes, governmentality is not a coercive form of power that acts on docile subjects; rather, governmentality

constructs individuals who are capable of choice and action, shapes them as active subjects, and seeks to align their choices with the choices of governing authorities. This kind of power does not seize hold of the individual’s body in a disciplinary grip or regiment individuals into conformity. Instead it holds out technologies of the self, to be adopted by willing individuals who take an active part in their own “subjectification.”¹⁰⁶

Following this, feminist researchers have demonstrated how a “gendered governmentality” operates through institutions such as schools and the media, which regulate young people against a “neoliberal spreadsheet, a constant benchmarking of the self.”¹⁰⁷ Discourses characterize youth of color as dangerous and in need of reform. Yet in a post-racial moment that falsely claims an end to racism (a narrative that hinges in part on the election of an African American man to the nation’s highest seat; indeed, Barack Obama’s presidency began the year of my research), youth are

taught to internalize that success is a matter only of hard work, personal responsibility, and making the right choices.¹⁰⁸ Scholars such as Michael Dumas and Lester Spence have argued that a neoliberal governmentality constructs Black boys “as essentially damaged, as problems in need of technocratic public-private solution.”¹⁰⁹ With declining state resources, corporations and other semiprivately owned institutions (such as charter schools) compete for the chance to create programs that will “solve” the problems facing poor Black boys.

This book argues that today’s purportedly “innovative” all-male schools revise old notions about Black male reform. In this vein, Roderick Ferguson has suggested that Black actors are “incited” to Du Boisian intellectual and political ideas for the “creation of the self” in concrete moments.¹¹⁰ In his early work, Du Bois famously argued that formal education, and particularly higher education, should serve as the training ground for a class of exceptional men: a “Talented Tenth” thesis that reverberates throughout today’s Black male academies. As Du Bois wrote in 1903, “Men we shall have only as we make manhood the object of the work of the schools.”¹¹¹ Reflecting on the condition of Black Americans during this period, Du Bois proffered an ideology of racial uplift: that the social advancement of Blacks required their integration into middle-class white society and that this would be achieved by embracing a moral character defined by temperance, chastity, and self-help.¹¹² Yet a respectability politics proved to be elitist. As historian Martin Summers writes, from the post-Emancipation era to the advent of Jim Crow, demonstrating a “capacity for citizenship” for Blacks “required drawing gender and class lines within the community.”¹¹³ Even as Du Bois’s thinking evolved and developed a more gender-egalitarian and democratic form of racial uplift, I will show that Black male academies “freeze” specific constructions of Du Boisian thought for their own political ends.¹¹⁴

Sociological studies of respectability have typically pursued one of two tracks. In the first, individual Black men assert their moral superiority over less respectable Black men, who are variously characterized as irresponsible, lazy, and hypersexual.¹¹⁵ Or Black men adjust their behaviors and mannerisms to distance themselves from “controlling images” of deviant Black masculinity.¹¹⁶ A second line of research examines how academically oriented and law-abiding young Black men (“schoolboys”) navigate competing expectations from their peers and from authorities such as police officers and school staff members.¹¹⁷ *Black Boys Apart*, however, is unique in focusing on how all-male education as a social movement seeks to institutionalize respectability and to lift up and reform Black men. Chapters

3 and 4 hone in on how male academies take part in these practices through their curricula and relationships, respectively.

With its focus on how gender domination is secured through *consent and persuasion*, hegemonic masculinity again proves to be a useful framework.¹¹⁸ To explain the construction of Black male identity at the start of the twentieth century, Martin Summers stresses that hegemony does not operate through sheer domination. Instead, it normativizes a worldview and seeks to secure the “consent of marginalized communities to that normativization”; therefore, “the relationship between these masculinities is not always one of antagonism,” or resistance.¹¹⁹ As I see it, in seeking what Du Bois called the “advancement of men,” Black male academies navigate a dialectic central to Black U.S. political history: that between resistance and accommodation to hegemonic power.¹²⁰ Consent, in this instance, is not a matter of people being “duped,” but rather clarifies how groups and individuals adopt dominant masculine norms as a means of social advancement.¹²¹ This process has important consequences. Summers continues,

As hegemonic masculinity relies on negative referents for its construction and contributes to relations of domination and subordination *between* men in dominant and subordinated social groups, so too does the social construction of masculinity contribute to relations of power *within* those marginalized communities. Using a model of hegemony also allows us to think about the influence of marginalized masculinities on the culturally dominant gender conventions—Black masculinity as “counter-hegemonic.”¹²²

In other words, asserting hegemonic dominance in a local context promotes *intra*-racial division. This book demonstrates that those divisions are aggravated by a respectability politics that intensifies under neoliberalism. Yet because hegemony is always contested, actors can mobilize to challenge its dominance. In the Conclusion I discuss how the seeds of effective counter-hegemonic struggle are found in Du Bois’s notion of an abolition democracy.

While governmentality shifts attention to the noncoercive features of power, violence and coercion are not absent under hegemonic regimes. In Antonio Gramsci’s original formulation of hegemony, domination is the ability to win the consent of the masses, in conjunction with the state’s ability to use coercion to control groups that fail to provide that consent.¹²³ As several excellent qualitative studies have shown, authorities in and out of schools surveil, harass, and punish young men of color more than their peers.¹²⁴ This book is therefore attuned to how coercion and governmentality work together to discipline young Black men.

The Black Feminist Challenge to All-Boys Education

Hegemonic masculinity also subordinates women to men. To round out the historical context of these schools, we need finally to understand the steady resistance to Black male academies. The Detroit and Milwaukee academies never opened as all-male. Alongside charges of racial segregation, the ACLU and the National Organization for Women (NOW) represented families in a case claiming that the academies discriminated against young Black women, who were also struggling in Detroit public schools. In denying similar opportunities to girls, these exclusive all-male schools therefore segregated based on sex. A district court agreed that the proposed all-male academies violated federal statutes mandating sex equality in public education. An unfortunate consequence of these and subsequent battles has been the perception that feminist efforts have sought to thwart interventions for disadvantaged children.¹²⁵ According to this view, feminists are elitists who use gender ideology to impede racial progress. Indeed, educators who helped design the Detroit academies described NOW's claims as "an attack from outside the community."¹²⁶ More recently, the ACLU's Teach Kids, Not Stereotypes initiative has angered advocates by continuing to call single-sex education a form of segregation.¹²⁷ This issue will remain contested given that the judicial scales have slowly started to tip in favor of all-boys proponents. In a 2011 case in which the ACLU challenged the legality of single-sex classes in Kentucky, the presiding judge dismissed the claim of segregation and declared that "no such historically-grounded injury has been recognized as inherent in the separation of students by sex."¹²⁸

Black feminist theory offers a potent challenge to the revival of Black male academies. An intellectual tradition that draws on the collective experiences and knowledges of Black women, Black feminism dates to early Black abolitionist struggles and is today a vibrant scholarly tradition.¹²⁹ Black feminist theory casts light on how patriarchy interacts with racism and other systems of oppression. This work unsettles a hegemonic order by focusing on the destructive consequences of domination. A Black feminist perspective is skeptical of initiatives that assume that granting Black men more gender privilege will address the problems facing the Black community.¹³⁰ This perspective suggests that all-male education and other well-intentioned programs may reproduce gender inequality even as they press forward under the banner of anti-racism.¹³¹ As Patricia Hill Collins writes, while Black Nationalism and Afrocentrism (traditional pillars of the pro-Black male academy camp) possess oppositional and liberatory potential, they historically have relied on a sexist politics. The emphasis

on racial solidarity has tended to rely on a conservative gender ideology in which it is the duty of women to be “good” mothers while a “benevolent male authority ruled.”¹³² In this way, Black Nationalism has held up the patriarchal and heteronormative family structure as a vehicle to racial liberation.

Black Boys Apart therefore asks how Black all-boys schools reproduce and challenge gender and sexual inequality as part of a larger effort toward the racial uplift of Black communities. Black feminism critiques the view of Black men and boys today as the paradigmatic victims of racial oppression. This view is rooted in historical racial struggles that emphasized “the victimization of Black men through lynching or economic exclusion” while “silencing the particular victimizations of Black women.”¹³³ Following this, Kimberlé Crenshaw argues that federal programs (such as President Obama’s My Brother’s Keeper initiative) demonstrate how “‘fixing’ men of color—particularly young Black men—hits a political sweet spot among populations that both love and fear them.”¹³⁴ Crenshaw implies that those who “fear” young Black men will support programs that will ostensibly groom them to be more respectable.

Moreover, feminist scholars contest the view that intentional race-separate educational spaces are sufficient justification for intentional sex-separate schools. As Juliet Williams argues, Terry and his colleagues (who adopt a Black Nationalist standpoint) make an inappropriate “leap” from Du Bois’s defense of all-*Black* schools to an argument for all-*boys* schools targeted to young Black men.¹³⁵ This leap suggests that coed schools (and Black girls by association) discriminate against Black boys in a similar way that racially mixed schools have historically discriminated against Black children. Yet according to Williams, this position is untenable as it suggests that Black boys should be provided opportunities at the expense of Black girls, when Black girls themselves are also severely disadvantaged in schools. I agree with Williams that all-boys education can pose harm to women and girls. But to reject all-boys education entirely for this reason overlooks a complex history of Black families seeking greater control in how their schools look and operate.

Researching All-Boys Schools

The next chapter provides a detailed introduction to the city and the schools at the heart of this study: Perry High, a combined middle and high school for boys in grades seven through twelve, and Northside Academy, a college-preparatory charter school for boys in grades nine through eleven. (There was not yet a class of twelfth graders when I conducted my

research at Northside.) This section covers how I collected and analyzed my data. I adopted an ethnographic approach in order to gain a “deep social portrait” of the two schools.¹³⁶ I observed the two schools during the eleven-month academic year of 2009–10, which included the regular school year and the summer-school period. My observations at each school averaged twenty-five hours per week.

Outside of class, I interacted with the young men in the cafeteria, at practices and games, and at assemblies. I spent additional time with a few different student groups, such as an anime club at Northside Academy and a newly formed gay–straight alliance student group at Perry High. I observed special gatherings, such as back-to-school nights, teacher recruitment events, family information sessions, faculty meetings, and staff professional development sessions. I occasionally accompanied the young men off school grounds to places such as a college fair and the city court. To build trust and to strengthen my presence in the school, I sought out and welcomed opportunities to help.¹³⁷ These ranged from serving food at mentoring meetings to leading a résumé workshop for students.

I supplemented my observations with 150 interviews with students, parents, teachers, administrators, and school district officials. (See Table 1 in the Appendix for a breakdown.) The interviews were semi-standardized, with a set of predetermined questions and opportunities for the interviewees to speak on topics of their choosing.¹³⁸ The interviews with the young men typically lasted between forty-five and sixty minutes, and those with adults lasted between seventy-five and ninety minutes. I interviewed a small number of parents and students in pairs. Each person received a small gift card for participating in the interview. My goal was to interview a wide range of school community members as well as a large diversity of students ($n = 64$) and teachers ($n = 36$). I intentionally sought out students from each grade and, at Northside Academy, students who had attended a range of middle schools (public, charter, and private/parochial). My sampling was also purposive for the teachers, who taught a range of grade levels and subjects, had varying levels of experience, and were of varied ethnic and racial backgrounds.

My methodological guide for this research was the *extended case method*. This approach to ethnography is not concerned primarily with the “generalizability” of specific cases. Thus, the aim of *Black Boys Apart* is not to assess the “statistical significance” of single-sex education or to offer firm conclusions on what “works” in these schools. This view departs from existing research, which has highlighted similarities among male academics, despite their important variability.¹³⁹ Rather, the extended case method seeks “societal significance. The importance of the single case lies

in what it tells us about society as a whole rather than about the population of similar cases.”¹⁴⁰ It focuses on anomalies and variations among similar cases and uses those to intervene in existing theory. Therefore, despite their institutional differences, my comparison is not to judge the “failures” of one school against the “successes” of the other, but to see how their varied efforts deepen understanding of collective, ongoing efforts to reform Black manhood and of the sociopolitical context in which they occur.

The extended case method involves three “dialogues”: (1) between the researcher and those he or she observes in the field, (2) between the local processes of the field site and historical forces, and (3) between theories.¹⁴¹ First, I was in constant dialogue with people at the schools, who had wide-ranging perspectives on the schools and came from diverse backgrounds. At the outset, people I met were curious about my motivations for the study. I found it helpful to describe how my larger interests in educational inequities grew out of my own experiences as a teacher in a low-income, predominantly Black public school. Many people were also curious about my background, and I found that speaking openly about my identity as the child of Cambodian immigrants helped establish trust. However, I recognized that my experiences of having “been there” could lead to wrong assumptions, so I welcomed conversations with those wishing to tell me what was distinctive about their schools.¹⁴²

The second dialogue behind the extended case method involves a movement between “localized interventions” and “broader structuring external social forces.”¹⁴³ This dialogue “extends” the micro-level, daily interactions inside Perry High and Northside Academy to a larger urban ecology in which those schools are situated (defined by relationships between and among schools, law enforcement, families, the court system, and churches), and finally to a wider political field, marked by Black political and educational mobilization in the face of failed integration efforts; the enduring embrace of racial uplift ideology; and a current neoliberal conjuncture, years in the making, which has signaled the privatized, punitive, and respectable turns in Black schooling. As I envisioned it, this second dialogue placed the schools on a historical trajectory “to connect the present to the past in anticipation of the future.”¹⁴⁴

Last is the dialogue of theory with itself. One task of theory is to narrate a coherent story out of a diverse set of standpoints and observations. As sociologist Michael Burawoy writes, this means engaging continuously with theory: moving “out” to theories to make sense of observations after a day in the schools, and then moving back “in” to the schools, always with theoretical glasses on, in a recursive process. At a more practical level, I found that theories were never in short supply. People were eager to

explain to me why they felt the schools worked or did not work and why the schools even existed in the first place. As feminist researchers have noted, “standpoints” can rise beyond an individual’s perspective to the level of group production, or “communal achievement.” In other words, they generate theory.¹⁴⁵

As a first-year graduate student, I read and absorbed Du Bois’s *The Philadelphia Negro*, the first systematic study of race in the United States and a model of meticulous urban sociology. Years later, Du Bois spoke regretfully of his relationships with the Black Philadelphians he had met. He had been a “cold and scientific investigator, with microscope and probe,” and found that people received him “with no open arms” and “had a natural dislike to being studied like a strange species.”¹⁴⁶ These reflections were never far from my mind as I thought of my own positionality at Northside Academy and Perry High. I was fortunate that I generally found it easy to interact with the young men, many of whom wanted to share their thoughts on their school because of its uniqueness. Given Northside’s college prep mission, the staff also encouraged students to ask adults (including me) about their college experiences. However, children can distrust unfamiliar authority figures, so it was important for me to build rapport with the boys before requesting interviews.

Following the lead of childhood scholars, I envisioned the young men as both “becomings,” or as growing individuals on certain life trajectories, and as independent “beings” in their own right.¹⁴⁷ I used Alford Young Jr.’s interviews with marginalized Black men as a general blueprint for how to organize my interviews with the boys.¹⁴⁸ I asked them to describe their social worlds (the school, their families, their neighborhoods, their peer networks, and larger society) and to situate themselves inside those worlds. I also asked them to imagine how they would fit into these various social worlds as they grew older. I found that the students frequently broached issues about race and disadvantage, especially when I asked them to speak about their communities and to describe why they think their all-male school was founded. Encouraging them to speak about such sensitive issues also helped build trust.¹⁴⁹

Organization of the Book

The first chapter situates all-boys education in the massive public school reforms that have swept the country since the turn of the century. While Perry High and Northside Academy set out on different trajectories, each was shaped by the transition to market fundamentalism in the public school sector. At Perry, officials—including the school’s new for-profit

manager—made a hasty decision to convert to an all-boys model. Without a clear mission for innovation, the school fell into disarray. The pressure for accountability within the school district’s new neoliberal governance created an unduly punitive environment at Perry. Across town, Northside Academy’s founder embraced the city’s new market principles and understood that his school needed to gain an edge in an increasingly competitive schooling market. Northside did not so much innovate as imitate the culture, character, and curricula of elite schools.

In chapter 2 I offer a detailed portrait of the young men and how they enacted different forms of masculinity. I then illustrate the myriad and sometimes contradictory ways that members of both school communities understood the separation of boys and girls. These took the form of several discourses, including a discourse of distractions, a discourse of teenage pregnancy, a discourse of competition, and a discourse of motivation. A final discourse crystallized in each school taking on the reputation as “the gay school,” a particularly troubling formation shaped by race, sexuality, and gender that refracted different meanings at the two schools.

The focus of chapter 3 is on how these schools teach their boys. I link the curricula of the schools to historical attempts to teach the *head* (to offer a classical, liberal arts education), the *hand* (technical or industrial education), and the *heart* (virtuous character) of Black children. Unlike Perry High, Northside Academy benefited from a clear academic mission intended to prepare the young men for “the race to college.” This mission exemplified what Du Bois termed a “college-bred community.” The school’s curriculum was intended to cultivate the disciplined bodies and minds necessary for a respectable identity. Perry High, on the other hand, lacked a strong standardized curriculum, but the staff made an effort to practice cultural relevance. Key members of the community also challenged the hegemonic utility of a “college for all” ethos and envisioned expanded career and technical education to prepare a greater number of boys for success after high school.

Chapter 4 shows how a religious spirit animated the two schools and considers how they in turn nurtured different kinds of families, or solidarity among fictive kin. To increase the young men’s sense of belonging, the “race men” of Perry High—a Black male leadership—articulated a responsibility to provide a care that had eroded in the neighborhood. Drawing on the legacy of the first-wave academies, Perry High implemented a multipronged program to provide boys with male mentors. By contrast, Northside de-emphasized male role-modeling in favor of strong relationships among the boys: a brotherhood of exceptional and upwardly mobile students. This chapter also examines several factors that nurtured or

threatened belonging in the school: the presence of influential (white) female teachers, school discipline, and the young men's friends outside the school community.

Chapter 5 links themes from the previous chapters and examines how the schools cultivated different kinds of men. These scripts for manhood and citizenship were shaped and constrained by the very neoliberal context from which the schools emerged. The schools aimed to build different kinds of respectable men. The Northside brotherhood was aimed at protecting young men who would graduate and become successful workers and leaders, whom I call *ambitious entrepreneurs*. The young men looked out for one another in the present (in the form of a brotherhood) so they could one day thrive as individual workers in a global economy. By contrast, Perry High saw divergent tracks for their young men. While school officials hoped that their most accomplished students would go on to stable and successful careers outside the city, they also put forth the vision that their students could become *heroic family men* who care for their children, their partners, and the many fictive kin (especially Black boys) who desperately needed good men to lead the way. The young men also embraced visions of responsible fatherhood. The school, unlike Northside, lacked a brotherhood; instead, the young men at Perry took care of themselves in the present so they could one day take care of their own families and local communities.

In the Conclusion, I take stock of the evidence in these pages to consider the implications of all-boys schooling for the uplift of Black men and Black communities. Evincing neoliberalism's contradictory politics, Black male academies are a strange mix of democratic empowerment and privatization, segregation and separation, strict discipline and love. As a form of schooling given new life by the convergence of neoliberal social policies and a respectability politics, all-boys schools serve ultimately as a cautionary tale for Black activists and school reformers. Rather than asking boys to be resilient and to reform their character, a better path forward aligns with what Du Bois called "abolition democracy," where an alliance of social movements *hopes and hustles together* in a fight against oppression.