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The Education of Black Males in a 'Post-Racial' World

Anthony L. Brown

Jamel K. Donnor

William & Mary - School of Education, jkdonnor@wm.edu

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Edited by
**Anthony L. Brown and
Jamel K. Donnor**

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The education of Black males in a ‘post-racial’ world

Jamel K. Donnor and Anthony L. Brown

For many in the United States and abroad, the 2008 presidential election of Barack Obama denotes a watershed moment. With the election of the first African American president, many individuals have enthusiastically declared that America entered a new era where race is no longer a determinant in shaping the life fortunes and experiences of people of color. Because the current President of the United States is an African American male, many have used this moment of accomplishment to craft the larger social narrative that race is no longer a barrier in the social advancement of the African American male. While there is an increased presence of African American males in various sectors of American life, such as law, academia, and politics, to posit that race is no longer a relevant factor in the lives of males of African descent is misguided.

Consider, for example, the circumstances surrounding the arrest of Harvard Professor Henry Louis ‘Skip’ Gates. Upon returning home from filming a documentary for the Public Broadcasting Station (PBS) entitled ‘Faces of America’, Professor Gates and his cab driver were identified by his white female neighbor, Lucia Whalen, as breaking into his home. Responding to Ms. Whalen’s 911 call to the Cambridge Police Department that ‘two Black males with backpacks’ were forcing their way into a residence, Officer James Crowley, a white male, asked Professor Gates to exit the home. After declining the request to exit the premises, Officer Crowley informed Professor Gates that he was ‘investigating a report of a break in in progress’ (Cambridge Police Department 2009, 1–2). Responding to Officer Crowley’s statement, Professor Gates remarked, ‘why, because I’m a [b]lack man in America?’ (Cambridge Police Department 2009, 2). Crowley proceeded to ask Professor Gates ‘if there was anyone else in the residence’ (Cambridge Police Department 2009, 2). Professor Gates replied ‘that is none of [your] business’ (Cambridge Police Department 2009, 2). Informing Professor Gates that he was responding to a ‘citizen’s call to Cambridge Police,’ Officer Crowley asked for identification despite ‘believing [Professor Gates] was lawfully in the residence’ (Cambridge Police Department 2009, 2). Upon providing the officer with his Harvard University identification card and Massachusetts driver’s license, Professor Gates asked Crowley for his name and his badge number. Failing to furnish the professor with the requested information, Crowley proceeded to leave the premises. Professor Gates repeated his request for the officer’s badge number. Determining that Professor Gates’ behavior had become ‘tumultuous,’ Officer Crowley arrested the professor for disorderly conduct (Cambridge Police Department 2009, 2). Although the charges against Professor Gates were dropped, and he along with Officer Crowley met with President Obama to quell the negative publicity associated with the arrest, this example illustrates how race remains an underlying and salient component in the lives of African American males regardless of social status. Despite his prominent status as a public intellectual and professional affiliation with the most prestigious university in the United States,

Professor Gates did not 'escape the prism of race' (Ladson Billings and Donnor 2005, 279). Further, this example illustrates that being 'Black' and 'male' irrespective of societal position recapitulates the historically and ideologically informed racial imaginary of Black male deviance and criminality. This existential marking of the Black male body, we argue, has direct and indirect implications for education (Holt 1995).

The goal of this special issue of *Race Ethnicity and Education* is to contribute to the education literature's understanding of the contemporary challenges in the schooling of African American males. The contributors to this special themed issue discuss, in varying ways, the constant and dynamic interplay between ideology, history, space, policy, and structure in configuring the education of African American males. Further, the contributors to this special issue of *Race Ethnicity and Education* respond to the mainstream, curricula, theoretical, and methodological discourses that continue to construct Black males as a 'unique' population with dispositions and proclivities that are inherently contradictory to societal norms. Lastly, the articles in this special issue highlight the structural, institutional, and discursive practices that define, constrain, and adversely affect the material and existential lives of African American males.

The first article in this issue entitled, 'Boyz to men? Teaching to restore Black boys' childhood,' by Gloria Ladson Billings describes the current state of education for Black male students. She contends that many individuals, including teachers, view the teaching of African American boys as a 'daunting task.' The result, according to Ladson Billings, is a gender-specific emphasis on maintaining order and discipline, rather than academic achievement or learning. Hence, in many instances by the time most Black boys reach the third or fourth grade their teachers and other school personnel no longer treat them like children, but rather, like men en route to prison. Ladson Billings posits that educators need to develop and utilize pedagogical strategies to learn about the interests and course taking patterns of boys to ensure that they are taught in intellectually, socially, and culturally appropriate ways so schools can function as centers of change, rather than as places that perpetuate racial inequity.

Next, in our article, 'Toward a new narrative on Black males, education, and public policy,' we argue that the dominant social narrative of the Black male crisis perpetuates a discourse of Black male pathology. Analyzing mainstream trade publications and reports from private foundations on the status of Black males, we conclude that many of the solutions to address the Black male crisis de-emphasize the historical importance and structural role race plays as a life opportunity shaping variable. We assert that this omission not only renders an incomplete understanding on the social and educational status of Black males, more importantly, the policies and programs informed by the discourse of Black male pathology are unlikely to create meaningful change. We suggest that a new and fluid narrative is needed to account for the multifarious ways the social and educational status of Black males in the United States are systematically constructed.

In crafting a new social and educational narrative on Black males in America, the following articles examine how various institutions configure the life chances of African American males. In 'Escaping Devil's Island: confronting racism, learning history,' Carl A. Grant argues that African Americans, especially males living in urban communities, are physically and mentally trapped. Similar to the penal colony off the coast of French Guiana, Devil's Island, Grant asserts that African American males in urban schools are closed off from opportunities in part, due to a lack of historical knowledge. For Grant, the significance of historical knowledge, in the advancement of African American males is essential to deciphering the broader social

world around them. While social movements of the twentieth century, such as the Civil Rights Movement, have produced racial progress, according to Grant, none of them has generated enough progress to eliminate the racism that keeps Black males on Devil's Island. Grant contends that this historical 'sin of omission' markets racism as prejudice in personal preferences. The paradox in framing racism as an isolated phenomenon or individual act is that white supremacy remains intact. Grant posits, that for African American males to successfully escape Devil's Island a resiliency informed by a history of self-determination and social justice must be taught to develop and maintain a sense of agency in order to promote social change.

The fourth article, by William F. Tate IV and Mark Hogrebe entitled, 'From visuals to vision: using GIS to inform civic dialogue about African American males,' argues that a key step toward building opportunity in urban communities is the development and support for a visual political literacy project. Tate and Hogrebe discuss the significance of Geographic Information System (GIS) as a psychological and political tool in supporting civic engagement and capacity related to improving the status of African American males and their communities. Using the city of St. Louis as a case study, Tate and Hogrebe's visual political literacy project of spatial maps calls for a greater investment in funding and human development resources to support sustained research related to African American males. In addition, they call for the utilization of insights gleaned from geospatial arrangements to improve opportunities for Black male academic advancement and job potential. The methodological approach and conceptual knowledge advanced in this article are cutting edge.

The next two articles in this special issue by Keffrelyn D. Brown and Amelia Kraehe, and Louis Harrison Jr., Gary Sailes, Willy K. Rotich, and Albert Y. Bimper Jr., discuss the sociocultural construction of African American males in two important mainstream institutions in the United States-popular media and sports. Beginning with 'Sociocultural knowledge and visual re(-)presentations of Black masculinity and community: reading *The Wire* for critical multicultural teacher education,' Brown and Kraehe discuss the implications of using popular media situated around representations of Black masculinity as a pedagogical tool for white teachers. Conducting a textual analysis of the critically acclaimed Home Box Office (HBO) series *The Wire*, Brown and Kraehe explain how visual media and popular culture play an important role in crafting societal knowledge about Black males as learners and as people. Highlighting the historical, psychological, and global power of visual media, Brown and Kraehe argue that *The Wire* renders a nuanced and complex image of Black males and the communities they call home. Yet, while *The Wire* provides a more nuanced depiction of Black male life, the authors illustrate how the show might serve to perpetuate and reify long-standing tropes of deviance and difference as it relates to the Black male and his place within the 'Black' community. Brown and Kraehe suggest that *The Wire* and similar critical media projects can offer the requisite conceptual spaces for teachers to transform themselves from mere depositors of information into engaged pedagogues who understand and 'authentically teach' about the confluence of exogenous forces that shape the educational lives of African American males (Freire 1997). They, however, also recognize and caution about the challenges of using visual media in teacher education. Thus, they maintain that when using visual media in teacher education classrooms instructors must do so in a critical, non-decontextualized way that challenges, rather than reinforces problematic perspectives about people of color.

Louis Harrison Jr., Gary Sailes, Willy K. Rotich, and Albert Y. Bimper Jr.'s article 'Living the dream or awakening from the nightmare: race and athletic identity'

examines the relationship between race and athletic identity. Discussing their findings from their study on the athletic identity of African American and white Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) student-athletes, Harrison, Sailes, Rotich, and Bimper found that African American football student-athletes possess a stronger athletic identity compared to their Caucasian American counterparts. The authors discovered that African American male identification with the athlete role is more likely to intensify as they interpret their involvement with major college football as a conduit to playing professional football. Harrison et al. argue that educators and academic advisors who work closely with African American student-athletes are vital in the development of other identities, particularly students. Thus, it is important that African American student athletes do not over-identify or foreclose themselves to being just an athlete at the expense of other pertinent aspects and possibilities in their development.

Next, Tyrone C. Howard and Terry Flenbaugh in their article entitled, 'Research concerns, cautions and considerations on Black males in a "post-racial" society,' examine the research literature on Black males and discuss its implications for schooling within the context of 'post-racialism'. According to Howard and Flenbaugh, much of the research on Black males focuses on observed behavior, which is absent of the factors that might contribute to the behaviors under observation. They posit that any attempt to dismiss or overlook race as a key variable in the ways that Black males experience school further marginalizes them collectively. For Howard and Flenbaugh, Black male identity is multifaceted, and thus studies must consider the intersectionality of race, class, and gender to fully understand how each marker, respectively, influences identity construction and meaning making within the context of education and academic achievement. Like any population of students, the authors contend that Black males possess multiple identities that are profoundly shaped by race, socioeconomic status, and gender in all of their complex manifestations. Moreover, Howard and Flenbaugh warn that research on Black males at its core is controversial and must be transformative if it is to humanize a dehumanized population.

Finally, Bianca J. Baldrige, Marc Lamont Hill, and James Earl Davis in 'New possibilities: (re)engaging Black male youth within community based educational spaces' discuss the findings from their qualitative study on Empower Youth (pseudonym), a nationally federally-funded youth community development program, that serves over 10,000 youth in low-income urban and rural communities. An out-of-school designed to provide youth with supplemental education, job training, and life skills, Empower Youth as a youth community development program focuses on issues facing low-income neighborhoods, including housing, (un)employment, crime prevention, and leadership development. Conducting a series of interviews with 24 African American male participants of Empower Youth, Baldrige, Hill and Davis discovered that the program's incorporation of work opportunities, emphasis on applied knowledge and responsive adult-youth relationships helped Black males navigate difficult experiences in traditional school settings. The authors contend that youth and community development programs, such as Empower Youth, can serve a broader societal function by providing young Black males with the support and skill-set needed to offset larger undesirable outcomes in education, such as disaffection, under-performance, and dropping out. Baldrige, Hills and Davis conclude that out-of-school programs that reframe African American males as valued members of society not only respond their distinct educational and social needs, but also serve a template for traditional learning environments to model.

The articles in this special issue of *Race Ethnicity and Education* fundamentally shifts the conversation on education and Black males in the twenty-first century from crisis mode to a more holistic approach. By expanding the field's understanding of how unequal access to productive opportunities and quality resources converge to systemically create disparate experiences and outcomes for African American males, these articles remind us that race *still* matters in 'post-racial' America.

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