Book Review

Black Boys Apart: Racial Uplift and Respectability in All-Male Public Schools. By Freeden Blume Oeur. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018, 272 pp., $108.00 (cloth); $26.95 (paper).

DOI: 10.1177/0891243219830946

In a moment where Betsy DeVos is the Secretary of Education and “choice” the refrain for saving education, Freeden Blume Oeur’s book Black Boys Apart: Racial Uplift and Respectability in All-Male Public Schools attends to the often-overlooked experiences of black boys and provides impressive insight into how one of these choices (single-sex schooling) reinforces racialized ideas of masculinity. Black Boys Apart (BBA) is an engaging analysis of the experiences of boys attending two schools “Northside,” a charter school modeled on elite boarding schools and historically black colleges and universities, and “Perry,” a low-achieving public school that the district is trying to save. Using rich ethnographic data collected over a school year, Blume Oeur investigates how “these schools make and reform Black manhood” (2).

Throughout the book, Blume Oeur highlights how the schools’ emphasis on resilience and respectability reproduce existing hierarchies and intensify intraracial divisions. Chapter one provides the neoliberal metropolitan context of the schools along with the history of the two schools as all-male. In chapter two, Blume Oeur examines the essentialized ideas of gender reflected in arguments to separate boys and girls, for example, separation to reduce distractions and protect girls. He also highlights the emphasis in the schools on self-esteem and “grit,” and lack of questioning of neoliberal goals. Blume Oeur then presents as cultural repertoires (to allow for agency within structural constraints) the options that exist for young black men of “street,” which prevails at Perry, and “scholar,” which dominates at Northside, and how these repertoires teach the boys to see heterosexual power and patriarchy as reflections of legitimate masculinity.

Chapters three, four, and five develop comparisons between the schools. Blume Oeur highlights how Northside’s techniques, namely, teaching Latin and requiring uniforms, promote intraracial divides.
Through their rigorous schedules and visible difference from other boys in the neighborhood, the students are disciplined subjects linked into a brotherhood. While Northside prepares its “Top Gladiators” (159) for roles as entrepreneurial leaders in the global economy, the young men at Perry are being groomed for the more modest goal of becoming what Blume Oeur calls “heroic family men” (152) who help to raise future boys and support mothers. Rather than Latin, education at Perry focuses on cultural relevance and career preparation; on providing the students with black male role models and surrogate fathers.

One of the most notable aspects of the book is the integration of multiple sociological fields and theoretical paradigms. Sociologically, *BBA* connects not only to discussions of education, race, and masculinity studies but also political economy, social movements, and caring. Blume Oeur draws on theories ranging from Antonio Gramsci’s and Michel Foucault’s hegemony and governmentality, to the intersectional analysis of black feminists Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins, to Ann Arnett Ferguson’s and Edward Morris’s investigations of education and masculinity. W.E.B. DuBois’s ideas play a particularly prominent role, from the use of his “Talented Tenth” (15) thesis by proponents of all-male education, to Blume Oeur’s use of DuBois’s later writing on “abolition democracy” (169) as a foundation to call for a radical rethinking of education through “collective resilience” (172).

That breadth of sociological influences, however, is at times overwhelming and raises questions of whether Blume Oeur tries to do too much. While extensive footnotes provide depth, moving some of the more detailed conceptual material into the main text could improve the overall lucidity of the arguments. This shift would also strengthen some passages where it was unclear where participants’ experiences ended and sociological insights began. Details on the methodology, particularly the use of Michael Burawoy’s extended case study method, were also limited. Blume Oeur’s website indicates his recognition of this post-publication, and provides an excellent essay, “Methodology, Wishes, and Lessons Learned,” elucidating his methodological choices (https://blackboysapart.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Blume_Oeur_Methodology-Supplement.pdf).

By focusing on all-male schools, *Black Boys Apart* provides exceptional insight into how the education system controls black masculinity and the need for an overhaul of our education system that breaks with neoliberalism. *BBA* also raise questions for future research about experiences not examined in-depth, including students at all-girls’ schools and
LGBTQ youth in single-sex schools. The application of a wide variety of theoretical perspectives and sociological concepts in the analysis of rich ethnographic data support that the book would be a beneficial text for a range of readers including upper-level undergraduates, graduate students, and people within academia and education with interests in the intersections of neoliberalism, race, gender, and education.

RACHEL CAMPBELL

Grand Valley State University, USA