Freeden Blume Oeur


Reviewed by: Emily S. Pingel, Emory University, USA
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Schools bring together multiple constituencies with a stake in the education of youth, yet sociologists have long gravitated to the educational system as a site in which social inequalities are reproduced (Bourdieu 1977; Lareau 2011; Lewis 2003). Freeden Blume Oeur’s ethnography Black Boys Apart: Racial Uplift and Respectability in All-male Public Schools takes this project further by examining how black male academies prescribe and instill particular formulations of black masculinity. In observing how schools shape gender, Black Boys Apart adds to the work of other sociologists, such as Barrie Thorne (1993) and Edward W. Morris (2012). Blume Oeur, however, takes the crucial step of linking gender reproduction to political economy, contextualizing his arguments within the neoliberal ethos that has characterized the early twenty-first century. Rather than adjudicating “best practices” for achieving academic success, Blume Oeur focuses on how neoliberal imperatives set the stage for schools’ adherence to practices of punishment and moral boundary policing.

Blume Oeur spent a year observing and conducting interviews at Perry High School and Northside Academy, both public schools located in the large East Coast city of Morgan. Perry High was originally coed but had turned to same-sex education as an improvement strategy in the face of an educational crisis that threatened widespread shutdowns. Without a clear plan to accompany this move, however, Perry High foundered and traditional forms of punishment and poor outcomes remained commonplace. Ten years after first instituting a same-sex education model, Perry High succumbed to closure. Northside Academy, on the other hand, garnered both material resources and a reputation for success. It sought to attract the brightest young black boys and instill values of self-respect and discipline. Yet Blume Oeur is less interested in what each school’s trajectory can tell us about teaching strategies and educational outcomes. Rather, he asks what each case can tell us about the ongoing efforts to shape black manhood, the political economic frameworks within which these efforts are situated, and the rebuke offered by black feminist theory. By contrasting the success of Northside Academy against the failure of Perry High, Blume Oeur is able to draw attention to how sex-separate education constructs and reinforces particular gender ideals, independently of achievement outcomes.

Black Boys Apart begins by locating this narrative in earlier school reform efforts of the 1990s. Blume Oeur develops his theoretical framework in the first chapter and then builds on it with empirical evidence in the following four chapters. Chapter 2 details the discourse around sex-separate education, both in the literature and in the schools that Blume Oeur observed. The author explores the explicit and “hidden” curricula at each school in chapter 3, whereas chapter 4 focuses on how each school attempts to shape black masculinities through different approaches to mentorship and interpersonal ties. Ultimately, as formulated in chapter 5, each school is preparing black boys for a distinct path, as either “heroic family men” (Perry High) or “ambitious entrepreneurs” (Northside Academy). Blume Oeur concludes the book by summarizing how these two cases enrich our understanding of how schools enact particular racial and gendered projects.

According to Blume Oeur, the literature to date examining black male education has centered on resilience. Scholars portray the black male academy as a respite from a violent, impoverished street culture, a place where black boys can finally reach their potential. The author points out, however, that this model selects particular boys, leaving the rest to the whims of structural violence. Northside Academy recruits “schoolboy” types, whose dedication and drive are already apparent. Furthermore, the school invokes respectability politics to draw moral boundaries, encouraging its students to distinguish themselves from the riffraff on the street corner. While Northside boys master Latin and dream of attending elite colleges, what remains for the rest of the boys in the neighborhood? Over at Perry High, desirable black manhood consisted of staying out of prison and providing for one’s
family, while the means of accomplishing these modest goals amidst scarce employment opportunities remained unclear.

W. E. B. Du Bois figures prominently in Blume Oeur’s account of the politics and history of black male academies. He deftly demonstrates how proponents of sex-segregated educational settings invoke early Du Bois through notions of the “talented tenth” and the importance of educating black male leaders who can represent the race and thereby bring about racial equality. By linking hegemonic masculinity to Foucauldian governmentality, Blume Oeur elucidates how and why black communities seeking educational self-determination turn to black male academies: a regulated, respectable black masculinity has a long history as a source of hope and change. Indeed, President Obama’s policies and programs promoted just such a narrative. To problematize these notions, Blume Oeur brings in the rich history of resistance within black feminist scholarship to calls for sex-separate education in black communities. He encourages us to wonder about not only the boys left behind but the girls, as well. Racial uplift through all-male education has long relied on a conservative gender ideology that privileges the kind of “race men” being cultivated at Northside Academy. Blume Oeur could have given more weight to these critiques by speaking with members of the community—whether boys, parents, or other invested adults—who were skeptical of the all-male model. As a reader, I was left wondering what forms of embodied resistance exist toward this program of racial uplift through respectability.

Grounding his analysis in intersectionality, Blume Oeur weaves together a cohesive theoretical framework within which the reader can then grasp subtle ideologies of race and gender that are at work in the schools alongside the empowerment narrative. Intriguingly, the author indicates how his own certainty about the potential inherent in the all-male educational movement in black communities “softened” over time. He cites an op-ed that he wrote years before the book’s publication, in which he lauded Northside Academy’s efforts toward empowering black boys. I find that this type of “confession”—buried in an early footnote—strengthens ethnographies, in that it demonstrates how extended immersion in a fieldwork setting can trouble our own early convictions. Nearly all ethnographic accounts answer a different question than that which initially preoccupied the investigator.

Given the breadth of its theoretical sources, Black Boys Apart is well suited to multiple substantive sociology courses for upper-level undergraduates or graduate seminars. Undergraduate courses focusing on the sociology of gender, race-ethnicity, and education would all benefit from the book’s insights into the processes of social reproduction within schools. In any of these courses, the instructor might develop a unit that pairs Black Boys Apart with C. J. Pascoe’s (2011) ethnography Dude, You’re a Fag, which similarly explores how gender, sexuality, and ethnoracial categories are reproduced, albeit in a very different educational setting. To supplement these readings, students might be assigned the 2013 documentary American Promise, which follows two young black boys and their families as they navigate an elite, predominantly white private school in New York City (Brewster and Stephenson 2013). Each of these materials offers an empirical account of how intersectionality operates in the American educational system. Furthermore, the instructor could assign a personal essay in which students reflect on how their own high schools reproduced and stratified raced, classed, and gendered subjects, using concrete examples from their everyday experiences.

The intellectual contributions of W. E. B. Du Bois appear throughout Black Boys Apart. As such, the book could easily serve as an entrée for graduate students to engage with his body of work, in either a foundational sociological theory course or one tailored to intersectionality. Through Du Bois, Blume Oeur offers two important lessons for graduate students: (1) a scholar’s theoretical positions may shift over time, and (2) theory can be selectively employed as evidence for particular public policies—in this case, all-male education. In addition, graduate students could draw on examples from the book to illustrate how Blume Oeur connects Du Bois to black feminist scholarship, hegemonic masculinity, and governmentality.

In Black Boys Apart, Blume Oeur achieves a difficult task by contextualizing a localized institutional phenomenon within an explanatory political economic framework. The result is a neatly layered account that cautions us to thoroughly examine well-intentioned responses to deeply entrenched structural inequalities. Students and scholars alike benefit when we approach social processes with an eye to how they naturalize difference and thereby reproduce exclusion.
REFERENCES


