

## PREFATORY

# Villains or Virtuosos: An Inquiry into Blackmaleness

Marlon James  
*Texas A&M University*

Chance W. Lewis  
*University of North Carolina at Charlotte*

*Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it...How does it feel to be a problem? (Du Bois, 1903, p. 2)*

*The same educational process which inspires and stimulates the oppressor with the thought that he is everything and has accomplished everything worth while, depresses and crushes at the same time the spark of genius in the Negro by making him feel that his race does not amount to much and never will measure up to the standards of other peoples. (Woodson, 1933/2011, p. 5)*

Is there a true contradiction between the sentiments' of Du Bois (1903) and Woodson (1933)? Are African American males a collective problem, America's villains, or miseducated virtuosos? In this work, the guest editors theorize that these are extremes within the multidimensional, shifting, and oftentimes-contradictory nexus of *Blackmaleness*. Loosely defined, Blackmaleness is the individually unique, yet collective developmental needs and processes experienced by Black male learners situated within the American inopportunity - opportunity structure. Highlighting the intricacies of Blackmaleness reveals the distinctive cultural, social and emotional needs of Black male learners, and such insights can help redress hegemonic educational philosophies, practices and pedagogies that counter or ignore all together the unique development trajectories of Black males.

Additionally, Blackmaleness is both a personal journey and a social reality, tethering the life chances of Black males to an inescapable but navigable milieu of ideological, institutional, and individual inopportunity that all Black males must masterfully traverse or face the certain consequences of disenfranchisement. Yet, Blackmaleness is equally characterized by a

Correspondence regarding this article should be directed to Marlon James. Email: [mjames1@tamu.edu](mailto:mjames1@tamu.edu)

transgenerational collective force, organized to contest, defy, resist, and persist despite the presence of social barriers particularly constructed to make war with the potential of Black males in American society.

Within this matrix of possibility and peril, Black males seeking to actualize the “spark of genius” that Woodson (1933) alludes to are faced with some intimate and confounding tensions yielding questions including:

- How do African American males reconcile the permanent perception of being villains regardless of one’s moral character, and intellectual virtuosos typed as producers of inferior knowledge despite its intellectual merit?
- How can African American males engender an identity of coolness and astuteness with no identity conflict within social and educational milieus largely incapable of supporting the emergence of such a persona?
- How do African American male educators and professors navigate both hypervisibility and invisibility as k-20 students and professionals?
- Why do African American males identify with and come to emulate personally, culturally and professionally particular African American educators during their k-20 experiences?
- How do African American males in the academe reconcile their formal job requirements and their inherit responsibility to their communities, while managing the mental and cultural taxation brought on by the devaluing of community service in university settings?
- How do African American males unlearn Euro-dominant educational praxis, and incorporate Black educational thought as the central pillar of their cultural and professional selves?
- How do African American males balance the moral pull to address issues of on-going discrimination in their work environments, the threat of disenfranchisement if one chooses to engage in justice work, and the need for employment stability?
- How do African American males synthesize cultural knowledge, life wisdom, and community expertise into a unique approach to teaching and learning that is responsive to the tensions fostered by Blackmaleness?

These dilemmas of Blackmaleness were explored in this special issue of the *Journal of African American Males in Education*, entitled, “Can You See Me Now?: Exploring the Critical Autoethnographies of Successful African American Males in Education.” Specifically, the task for this special issue was to explore how Black males use education to contest self, schools and society for their right to define and determine a unique, positive and functional understanding of Black male reality, and educational praxis that is responsive to the realities of Black male development. Toward these goals, the guest editors reviewed and submitted for double-blind reviews, 33 manuscripts, and painstakingly selected 9 essays to present in this volume. This sample represents a diverse array of Black male educators, and when considered as collective this volume offers:

1. Critical narratives and counterstories examining African American male educators’ journeys toward self-actualization;
2. Accessible yet rigorous analyses of Black males’ formative educational, cultural, familial and social experiences through past and contemporary theoretical lenses;

## VILLAINS OR VIRTUOSOS

3. Intimate integration of various literary and hip-hop works as reflective tools, representing the contributions of African American thinkers and artists spanning more than a century, and
4. Sage recommendations to educators, parents and policy-makers concerned with promoting the matriculation of Black males along productive life pathways.

Readers will enjoy a diversity of perspectives from K-12 teachers, graduate students, junior faculty, and tenured professors. Contributors represent single mother homes, nuclear families, and extended families from urban, suburban and international communities. Essays were also selected to provide insights from Black males socialized in families with different socio-economic statuses; and schooled in a variety of k-12 schools such as Jesuit, Catholic, private, select enrollment and neighborhood schools.

### **Methodological Framework**

A series of nine autoethnographic essays will look afresh at the unique existence of Black males through the PK-20 pipeline by mingling the perspectives' and life experiences' of past and present Black male educators, intellectuals and researchers. This special issue seeks to provide hopeful autoethnographies to inform, inspire and challenge a new generation of educators responsible for setting African American male youths on paths toward success in education and life.

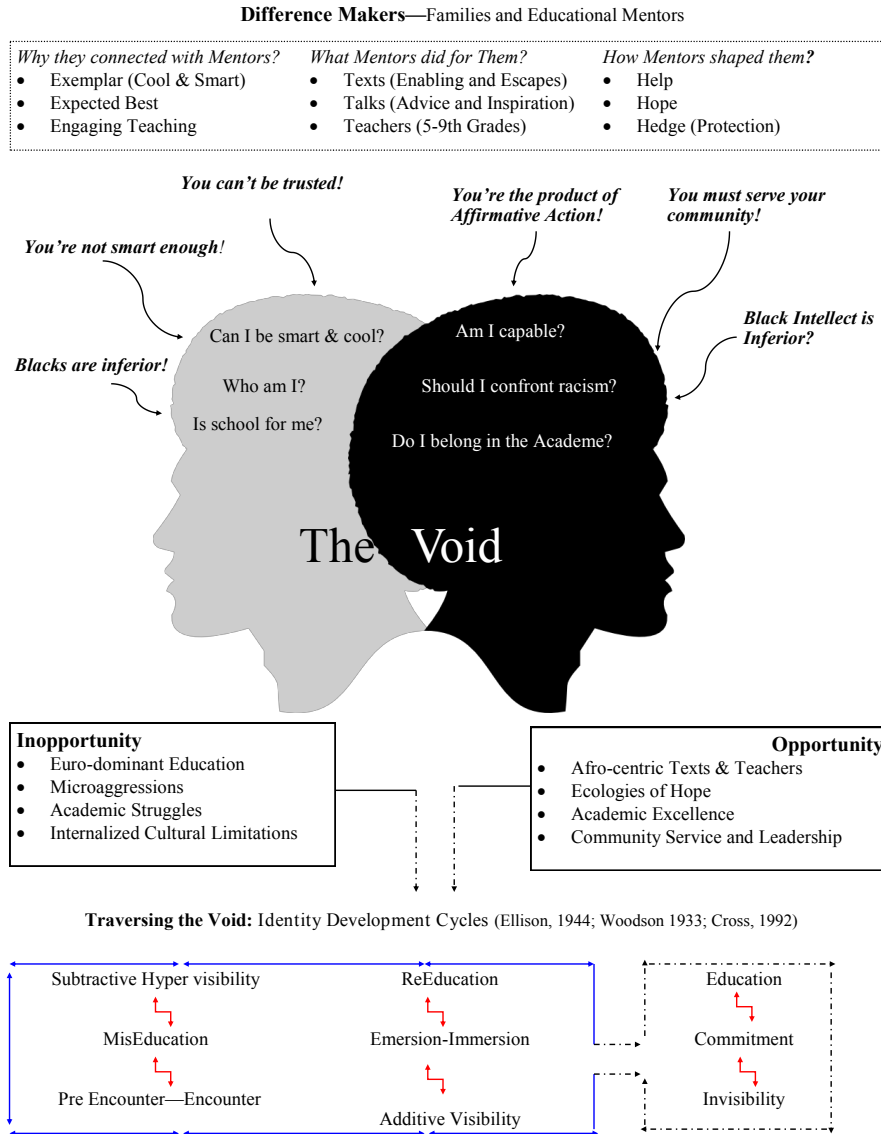
In reference to the significance of autoethnographic methodology, Neuman (1996) noted:

Autoethnography is a form of critique and resistance that can be found in diverse literatures such as ethnic autobiography, fiction, memoir, and texts that identify zones of contact, conquest, and the contested meanings of self and culture that accompanies the exercise of representational authority. (p. 191)

Supportively, Ellis and Bochner (2000) noted that this reflexive mode of inquiry positions the experiences of the researcher as the unit of analysis. Further, the researcher examines his or her experiences as a member of sub-cultures with multiple identities that intersect creating unique personal realities. Autoethnographies also explore connections between personal realities and the shared experiences among members of social communities.

In keeping with this methodological tradition, contributors candidly critically analyzed how their educational experiences intersected with the nuances of their personal and professional journeys. Furthermore, each essay provided new or revised theoretical frameworks for generating success-grounded recommendations related to host of issues in contemporary education including: effective teaching, motivation, identity development and career development among African American males. The guest editors conclude this volume with a robust justification for urgent action, and a synthesis of common recommendations for various stakeholders concerned with nurturing the spark of Black male genius. The synthesis of findings and recommendations is illustrated in *Figure 1 – Kindling the Spark of Black Male Genius*.

Figure 1 - The SPARK of Black Male Genius



Reproduce with written permission from Marlon C. James or Chance Lewis, 2014

**References**

- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1903). *Souls of Black folk: Essays and sketches*. Chicago, IL: A.C. McClurg & Co.
- Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. (2000). Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: Researcher as subject. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Sage handbook of qualitative research*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (pp. 733-768). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Neuman, M. (1996). Collecting ourselves at the end of the century. In C. Ellis & A. Bochner (Eds.), *Composing ethnography: Alternative forms of qualitative writing*. (pp. 172-200). London, England: Alta Mira.
- Woodson, C. G. (2011). *The mis-education of the Negro*. New York, NY: Tribeka Books. (Original work published 1933)

**Author Note**

*Marlon C. James is an Assistant Professor of Urban Education and the Associate Director of The Center for Urban School Partnerships in the College of Education and Human Development at Texas A&M University. He can be reached by e-mail at [mjames1@tamu.edu](mailto:mjames1@tamu.edu).*

*Chance W. Lewis is the Carol Grotnes Belk Distinguished Professor of Urban Education and Director of The Urban Education Collaborative in the College of Education at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. He can be reached by e-mail at [chance.lewis@uncc.edu](mailto:chance.lewis@uncc.edu).*