

PREFATORY

Negotiating the ‘In-Between:’ Liminality and the Construction of Racial Identity Among African American Male Collegians

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The people who mattered most to us in our youth believed in the simplest virtues of honesty, sobriety, thrift, kindness, charity, and mutual respect. They abhorred dishonesty, boasting unkindness, disloyalty, and sloth. Although such virtues bear no ethnic label, we learned them as patented human behavior... – Samuel DeWitt Proctor

In *The Ritual Process*, Turner (1969) engages the reader in a discussion of rites of passage (*rites de passage*) (Van Gennep, 1909). Significant to the discussion is the explanation offered by Turner of the three phases or “transitions” that Van Gennep described. Accordingly, these phases include separation, margin (limen), and aggregation. Said differently, transition in rites of passage processes involve “pulling away” from the known (e.g. family, friends, and community); searching for self in a sea of choice and confusion; and ultimately establishing connections with a new community—congruous with the individual’s newfound identity. It is the second transition that I specifically highlight in this prefatory as it relates to the college-going process for African American males.

Analogous to the phases articulated in Van Gennep’s rites of passage process, the move from p-12 to higher education contexts represents for the African American male the shift from separation to liminality. It is during this liminal phase — the undergraduate years — that many wander aimlessly in search of identity. Turner reports, “Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony” (p. 2). Thus, it is incumbent for institutions of higher education to

capitalize on this “in-between” phase for this cohort and foster critical engagements that will facilitate their establishment of healthy gender, racial and scholarly identities. Thus, there is a need for scholarship which will provide key insight on myriad ways identity, particularly racial identity, is developed in the higher education setting.

Masculinity in Liminal Spaces

Exacting a profound impact on the development of gender identity among African American males, the undergraduate experience can prove to be quite formidable. In addition to the challenges inherent in gender development, these males must also contend with framing a masculine identity that is for lack of a better term “colored.” Reeser (2010) asserts, “In this sense, a certain quantity of masculinity is implicitly or explicitly assigned to certain groups or to certain individuals because of their racial positioning” (p. 150). Consequently, the African American male primarily serves as the understudy in the performance of masculinity. The White male serves as the lead character, and the script is structured around his actions and proclivities. This essentialist, hegemonic, heterosexist, White model serves as the benchmark from which all notions of masculinity are based.

For the African American male who falls outside of this rigid template, he faces potential ostracism, isolation, and invisibility. Researchers must underscore how masculinity among African American male cohorts can be fashioned within enclaves of African American men — establishment of self without a script from the “other.” Scholars must aim to respond to hook (2004), who said, “No matter how much we call attention to the crisis of black masculinity, there is yet no collective response” (p. xv). A resounding response to this dilemma should be fostered in intellectual spaces, such as those fostered by the Journal of African American Males in Education (JAAME).

Racial Identity Development in Liminal Spaces

A congeries of elements intersects and impacts the African American male undergraduate experience. Perhaps one of the most pervasive elements is race. W.E.B. DuBois more than a century ago spoke to the strength and resilience of Black people in negotiating what he termed a “double consciousness.” He said,

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness— an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (p. 45).

What DuBois’ double consciousness connotes for the African American male in contemporary settings, especially in academe, is that the successful navigation of the terrain will often require the cultural savvy to function from a divided self—academic and social. However, to bridge this divide a critical third space is required, one that eschews dualism and provides a non-bifurcated sense of agency for this cohort. The real question then becomes how does the African American male establish a positive racial identity that recognizes both his scholarly and social self? The fact remains that these two beings do not have to be at odds or mutually exclusive.

Scholarly Identity in Liminal Spaces

Scholars have suggested that challenges facing high-achieving African American males across the p-16 continuum are the result of problems associated with this cohort in their attempts to fuse personal and scholarly identities (Bonner, 2010; Ford, 2005; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Fries-Britt, 1998; Harper, 2008; Hebert, 2002). In *Academically Gifted African American Male College Students*, Bonner shares a statement made by one of his colleagues who offered the following rejoinder regarding his intent to study gifted African American males, "You're interested in studying whom? Academically gifted African American males? You know the greater academic community doesn't believe this being exists!" (p. xv) Not only does this statement in Bonner's text reflect what this individual perceived greater society to advance, but also is indicative of the self-perceptions that many African American males hold of themselves.

Whiting (2006) offers great promise in this area, serving metaphorically as aspic congealing the ingredients contributing to an African American male's scholarly identity. Whiting contends: masculinity, racial identity, self-confidence, need for achievement a greater need for affiliation, self-awareness, internal locus of control, willing to make sacrifices, future orientation, and self-efficacy all contribute to a scholar identity. Seeing self as scholar is an important first step in redirecting the higher education experience for African American males. Noted among many scholars of the Black male experience are articles aimed at presenting this population from an asset-model perspective, jettisoning the deficit-model thinking that too often tends to frame their existence.

Conclusion

The focus of research on racial identity development and psychological coping strategies for both undergraduate and graduate brothers in the academy will occupy an important place in the constellation of literature geared toward enhancing the position of this population. Emerging scholarship must provide a platform to better understand those African American males who attempt to fashion an identity in liminal spaces. At the beginning of this prefatory, I quoted from Proctor's book *The Substance of Things Hoped For: A Memoir of African American Faith*. What scholars must provide is the conclusion to Proctor's title—taken from Hebrews 11:1—the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

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