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Respiration: Breathing Between the Stacks

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Respiration: Breathing Between the Stacks

Abstract

How rare are we, who brandish Black and Male identity, in Academia?

In the past two weeks, I have been reminded of my Black maleness in a multitude of ways. I sat alone, subordinate in number, in a dialogue about Internalized Oppression at Diaspora House. Strong women of color discuss this issue while I work to stay respectful and non-oppressive in this space. I sat alone, subordinate in number, in each of my classes, where I am often the only one of my race and class. My race-gender circumstance is a matter of fact to me. How does this Black maleness play out on college campuses nationwide? [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, Race, Gender, Higher Education

Disciplines

African American Studies | Educational Methods | Educational Psychology | Gender and Sexuality | Higher Education | Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Other Languages, Societies, and Cultures | Race and Ethnicity

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](#) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

RESPIRATION: BREATHING BETWEEN THE STACKS

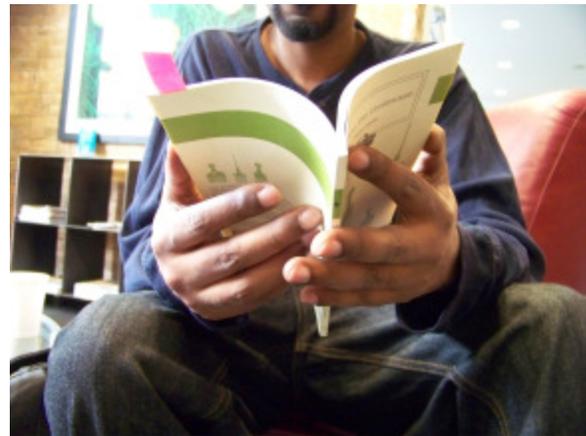
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“Ask my guy how he thought travellin the world sound
Found it hard to imagine he hadn’t been past
downtown”

– Common in Black

Star’s “Respiration”

How rare are we, who brandish Black and Male
identity, in Academia?



In the past two weeks, I have been reminded of my Black maleness in a multitude of ways. I sat alone, subordinate in number, in a dialogue about Internalized Oppression at Diaspora House. Strong women of color discuss this issue while I work to stay respectful and non-oppressive in this space. I sat alone, subordinate in number, in each of my classes, where I am often the only one of my race and class. My race-gender circumstance is a matter of fact to me. How does this Black maleness play out on college campuses nationwide?

Prior to our input into the collegiate equation, Black men are adults with unique histories and responsibilities. According to G. Talib Wright, a counselor of Black college students, our upbringing is a [“thousand-piece puzzle.”](#) The academic piece is often dismal. Ben Gose, writer for the Chronicle of Higher Education, notes that [“fewer than 20 percent \[of black boys\] are proficient in math and reading in both fourth and eighth grades...just over half graduate from high school.”](#) This fact should be startling and should be a focal point when considering the goals of education in this country. The College Board, in their report on [“The Educational Experience of Young Men of Color”](#) cite a few “roadblocks” for male undergraduates of color, such as adult burdens, the need of others coming first, money worries, feeling like an outsider, and the social life tightrope. These aspects are obviously not unique to men of color, but they are shared almost universally among this group.

To put it simply, Black men have many odds stacked up against them. My own experience has been wrought with financial distress, identity confusion, and the ever-lurking feeling of inadequacy. This was then compounded by the challenges of college.

Freeman Habrowski III, Gettysburg College's 2013 Fall Convocation Speaker and President of University of Maryland, Baltimore County, helped create the [Meyerhoff Scholars Program](#) at UMBC to get more Black men in STEM studies. He proudly states that this program is the first of its kind in focusing on Black male undergraduates as well as its focus on strength-based programs instead of deficit-based programs. When expanding this group to include Black women, he "found that the men were often less communicative and showed less enthusiasm for the work of science."

The basis of this, much like many things in our culture, is partly misogyny, but I find that it is also a lack of support. J. Luke Wood, a researcher of Black men in Community Colleges, found that "black men are leery of higher education to begin with, [in that] they may view it as a female sphere, or may hesitate to seek academic help because of a fear that they'll look dumb." The feminization of teaching also paralleled the feminization of learning. It goes without saying that women outnumber men in higher education. In fact, I would reckon that Gettysburg College would be 70% women if not for affirmative action and marketing reasons.

If this is the case, what are the departments that Black men find themselves in? Ivory A. Toldson, Editor in Chief of The Journal of Negro Education analyzed statistics from 2009 by the American Community Survey and National Center of Education Statistics. Her [findings](#) show that Black men typically graduate with degrees in Business, Social Sciences, Education Administration and Teaching, and Engineering. However, business outnumbers all other majors by a wide margin. To stress that point, although Engineering is the fourth most popular degree, only 3.5% of Black men have degrees in that field. That is staggering to the Humanities major writing this blog. I believe that Black men are highly cognizant of what our society values: money and political power. Therefore, it does not surprise me to see many Black male Gettysburg graduates with OMS and Political Science degrees (check out the Intercultural Resource Center's posters of former graduates for yourself).

Yet, the crucial reality remains that "[only a third of black men in the United States who attend four-year colleges graduate within six years, compared with 45 percent of Hispanic men, 57 percent of white men, and 64 percent of Asian men.](#)"

Apparently, I have a 33% chance.

Furthermore, as Matthew Lynch states in his piece "Black Boys in Crisis," "Black men carry the highest unemployment rates, year after year, and represent a large percentage of Americans in poverty."

In a recent class discussion, Professor Hakim Williams highlighted the perennial question of education: What is vs. What should be? Speaking not to represent all Black men in academe (for that would be silly), I offer these possible improvements: primarily focus on poor students of color in the K-12 arena, inspire Black men to break away from the quo and show them the wide range of possibilities in academia, and point towards Black boys' strengths instead of their deficits.

I can't breathe. I can't breathe alone here. I float on the support from peers and organizations like the Intercultural Resource Center. Black men face police brutality, poverty, and other challenges in America. Fresh air is what many Black men in Academia lack. Respiration is What Should Be. Asthmatic gasp for air is What Is.

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