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Beyond Love: A Critical Race Ethnography of the Schooling of Adolescent Black Males[1]

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There is no shortage of studies that document the plight of adolescent black male students in public secondary schools (e.g., Brown & Davis, 2000; J. Davis, 2001; L. Davis, 1999; Ferguson, 2000; Hopkins, 1997; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Noguera, 1995; Polite & Davis, 1999; Price, 2000; Sewell, 1997). One may reasonably gather from a review of the literature that society accepts as inevitable, albeit problematic, the often punitive (Ferguson, 2000; Hopkins, 1997; Noguera, 1995) and exclusionary nature (Ford, Grantham, & Bailey, 1999; Harry & Anderson, 1994) of the schooling of young black males. From the perspective of critical race theory (CRT), the plight of black males in schools is an expression of the racism that is endemic to North American society (Bell, 1992, 1998; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Delgado, 1995). Critical race theorists argue that because racism is such an ingrained feature of society, it is embedded in practices and values that have been shorn of the more explicit and formal manifestations of racialized power (Crenshaw et al., 1995). Therefore, although the standard education story explains the plight of young black male students as a persistent and troublesome, but random, outcome of a reasonably fair, aracial system, critical race theory holds that their situation is actually a manifestation of the racial politics that are intrinsic, even vital, to the day-to-day functions of U.S. society and social institutions such as schools.

The critical race ethnography presented in this article is part of a larger project that explores the academic and social lives of black male students at City High School (CHS [a pseudonym]), an integrated urban magnet academy located in the Midwest U.S. that is known as much for its caring ethos as it is for its academic excellence.[2] The article examines the different stories that students, teachers, and administrators use to explain the marginalization and exclusion of black male students at CHS and identifies their points of conflict that in part

help to sustain these conditions of oppression. I use the term *"différend"* to convey the sense that these disputes are largely incommensurable, thus leaving intact structures of domination that cause those who are oppressed to continue suffering wrongs (Delgado, 1996; Lyotard, 1988; Young, 1990).[3] Such a term aptly captures the general disregard for and the marginalization and exclusion of black male students at CHS.

My analysis of the academic and social experiences of black male students at CHS proceeds as follows: I begin by reviewing some of the relevant research and outlining a conceptual frame that demonstrate how racialized education discourses about black male students are "offensive without identification" (Ladson-Billings, 1999). By this I mean that racially informed relations of power are fixed in the seemingly objective social languages, especially those associated with science, popular culture, and the media, that administrators, teachers, and students employ to make claims about the academic experiences of black male students. Further, these discourses insulate those who employ them from accusations of racism when their remarks are called into question.

Following CRT, I argue that these discourses are not neutral but rather have embedded in them values and practices that normalize racism in society. Further, these discourses allow those who use them to publicly engage in racial politics while appearing to be reasonable, disinterested, and even respectable. Moreover, not unlike other discourses, these "representations assume the force of ideology by making an appeal to common sense while at the same time shaping political policies and programs that serve very specific interests" (Giroux, 1999, p. 8; see also Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Following the review, I present data from my ethnographic study at CHS to illustrate how these discourses are variously articulated and how they conflict with those of the young black men at the school who participated in this study. I conclude with a discussion of the pedagogical implications of CRT for transforming conditions that marginalize adolescent black males, placing them beyond love in schools and in the broader society.

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SCHOOLING THE LIVES OF ADOLESCENT BLACK MALES: AN OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

As suggested in the introduction, the prevailing wisdom in society suggests that the exclusion and marginalization of black males from schools such as City High School is a normal, albeit problematic, aspect of the education of this population of students. Studies in the United States and the United Kingdom seem to provide support for this pervasive belief. Most studies describe how adolescent black males or their families contribute to the problem of underachievement, while others also point out the roles of schools in creating these outcomes. For example, in her study of a predominately black urban high school, Signithia Fordham (1996) posits that black families, especially mothers, largely contribute to the problem of underachievement and maladjustment of black male students by encouraging them to embrace a "two-fold contradictory formula" in their approach to academic and social decision-making. In other words, parents encourage their sons "to concurrently accept subordination and the attendant humiliation (for survival in the larger society) and preserve gender domination (for survival in the black community)" (p. 148). What this means is that black parents urge their sons to downplay the significance of racism in their lives even as they encourage them to adopt patriarchal attitudes and behaviors "to be both nondominating and successful in a racialized patriarchy" (p. 149). Fordham notes that the formula, however, is complicated by the contradictory status of what it means to be both black and male in North American society. She concludes that black males largely reject their subservient place in the gender hierarchy of schools and appropriate alternative forms of black masculinity that "further stigmatize them, reproducing the patriarchy and their consignment to secondary domination" (p. 165). In short, Fordham surmises that black families contribute to the educational woes of black male students by providing them with untenable strategies for negotiating hostile academic climates and that black males further contribute to their problems by appropriating attitudes and behaviors that exacerbate their marginalization and exclusion in schools.

Other ethnographic studies support Fordham's (1996) general conclusion that notions of race and gender converge on and through black male students to shape their experiences in schools, and often to their disadvantage. For example, Ann Arnett Ferguson (2000) describes the daily interactions between black pre-adolescent male students, their peers, and teachers that illustrate "a disturbing tautology [where] transgressive behavior is that which constitutes [black] masculinity. Consequently, African American males in the very act of identification, of signifying masculinity, are likely to be breaking the rules" (p. 170). Similarly, in a study of a boys' comprehensive school in Britain, Tony Sewell (1997) argues that teachers and peers impose sexualized perceptions on black boys and that black boys appropriate "normative notions of masculinity that act as an oppressive and repressive agent on their schooling" (p. 187). Sewell explains that schools do not exist in a vacuum, though, and that influences from the wider society, including forms of popular culture such as music, also influence how black boys are perceived and perceive themselves. Likewise, Máirtín Mac an Ghaill (1994) examines the production of heterosexual masculinities in his study of an English secondary school. He posits that black male students, their peers, and teachers construct these compulsory identities within complex sets of power relations that have particular references to class, race, and ethnicity.

One may conclude from these ethnographic studies that, for black male students, academic success comes at a great personal loss, both real and imagined. In short, the literature frames the issue of their schooling in terms of a dilemma where black male students are damned if they do and damned if they don't achieve academically. Unsurprisingly, the typical orientation of psychological, sociological, and anthropological research on black male students is toward explaining the motivational, affective, or cognitive bases of their actions, or on explicating the cultural resources that they bring to bear in making academic and social decisions in school. In addition, researchers devote considerable attention to identifying interventions and strategies to rehabilitate and to incorporate black males more fully into schools; most pedagogical, policy, and programmatic responses to the problems of these young men are similarly focused.

Critical Race Theory and the Schooling of Black Males

Critics argue that the values that typically inform inquiries into the lives of marginalized groups, such as those described in the previous section, derive from curiosity and control (Laible, 2000; Palmer, 1993; Williams, 1974). They accurately note that the aim of such inquiries is to understand better these groups and to determine effective ways to integrate them into institutions or to devise compensatory programs to support them in attaining some measure of success within these social structures. However, critics of the "problem-solving approach" argue that this orientation leaves institutions unexamined for their complicity in reproducing a racist social order (Bell, 1992, 1998; Delgado, 1995; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Laible, 2000; Matsuda, 1996; Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993; Williams, 1974) and reinforces notions that members of oppressed groups are *strange* (Anderson, 1995; Delgado, 1995; Tillich, 1954). In other words, marginalized populations possess values and attitudes that require explication and

clarification because they are fundamentally different from those of the rest of society.

According to critical race theorist Richard Delgado (1995), "we cannot identify with or love anyone who is too different from us" (p. 55). For one thing, we perceive the strange "Other" to have little to offer us (Delgado, 1995); we regard the "Other" as something that disrupts and destroys whatever it comes into contact with (Tillich, 1954). The strange Other is *essentially* different and *ontologically* separate from those whom we consider to be normal (Anderson, 1995; Delgado, 1995; Tillich, 1954). Thus, society perceives a strange population as one that is *too* different from the mainstream and, therefore, has little concern and consideration for it, even when the group is vulnerable and endangered. My point here that much of the research literature tacitly constructs black males as a strange population and contributes to the widespread perception that their plight in schools is unremarkable: The dominant storyline suggests that black males are too different from other students, and oppositionally so. Moreover, it comes as no surprise that they have difficulty in schools, especially in those with high-powered academic programs and codes of conduct that rely on student consent and compliance for their enforcement. It is in this way that the problem-solving orientation in research on black male students contributes to a cycle where the perception of strangeness contributes to the further marginalization of the group in school.

The feminist political philosopher Iris Marion Young (1992) argues that marginalization is the most dangerous form of oppression. According to Young, "a whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life, then potentially subject to severe material deprivation and extermination" (p. 186). Similarly, Delgado (1995, 1996) uses the concept "beyond love" to describe the condition of those who are marginalized to the extent that they are excluded from society's economy and networks of care and expelled from useful participation in social life. Not only are certain social groups excluded from institutions and marginalized within society, Delgado notes, no one really cares about their plight. He argues that the majority of society perceives the conditions of the marginalized and excluded to be normal and simply as no cause for concern. It follows from this that the problems that chronically oppressed groups encounter in society are neither new nor particularly interesting and are mostly of their own doing.

Such sentiments inform a view, widely expressed by students, teachers, and administrators at CHS, that low numbers of and high attrition rates for black male students are to be expected at the school. To support their views, they often appropriate language directly and indirectly from institutional sources, such as news and popular culture media, universities, and research centers. Their uptake of these discourses assumes a level of abstraction that allows students, teachers, and administrators to avoid an examination of the social and material conditions at the school (Matsuda, 1996). Black male students at CHS, though, often challenge the dominant view of their experiences. Their words suggest that rather than constituting a *strange* population, black male students at CHS constitute an *estranged* population. In other words, despite evidence to the contrary, black male students, not unlike other students, value education; however, as their words suggest, they interpret their social and academic experiences "as evidence of malevolence or neglect on the part of those in power, or else to basic defects in the social system" (Delgado, 1995, p. 32) of the school.

Given the incommensurability of the different stories that those at the school employ to explain the experiences of black male students, conflicts in perspectives give rise to a *différend*. In what follows, I present ethnographic data to illustrate how a *différend* plays out at CHS in ways that place black male students beyond love. Before doing so, I first describe the setting and method I used to conduct the study presented in this article.

SETTING AND DATA COLLECTION[4]

Established in the 1970s in a mid-sized metropolitan setting in the Midwest U.S., City High School is a magnet academy of approximately 300 students. Although originally created as an alternative school "without walls" for students who were not successful in the city's regular public school system, in the 1980s CHS became a magnet academy as part of a city-to-suburb voluntary desegregation agreement. Over the past two decades, the school has gained a national reputation as a racially integrated public school that emphasizes a rigorous curriculum, produces first-rate students, and has a caring institutional culture. Anyone who visits the school will conclude that it merits its reputation for being a caring, high-achieving school. However, the school has contradictions that call into question its reputation for being a paragon of academic excellence and educational equity. As such, CHS is not unlike other deeply fragmented communities that at first glance appear to be internally coherent (Fine & Weis, 1998; West, 1992). A close examination of the institutional and interpersonal ethos that characterize the school's tone, character, and web of relations brings to light gendered and color-coded disparities that mark the academic and social experiences of some of the students at CHS. For example, those who praise the school's strong academic program and harmonious climate generally gloss over the fact that black male students are virtually absent from CHS, although the school district in which it is located is over 90% black. In 1998, a year when the state ranked CHS first among public high schools on various standards of academic achievement, there were only 24 black males in a student body of 274, and only one black male from an original cohort of 15 was among the 53 students who graduated that year.

Methods

In December 1998, I introduced myself to the principal of CHS and, with her permission, began to conduct research to identify the factors that contributed to both the attrition and the retention of black male students at her school. From January 1999 through June 2001, with the assistance of a team of university student research assistants, I conducted individual and focus group interviews and participant observations at the school. We also obtained data related to CHS demography, standardized testing, attendance, and graduation rates, and documents related to the historical, ideological, and programmatic features of the school.

We devoted most of the spring and fall of 2000 to interviewing black male students. These interviews elicited their insights about the culture of and their experiences at CHS and informed the theoretical framework to guide our ethnographic examination of the broader institution. In addition, we recorded formal and informal dimensions of the school that captured the day-to-day culture of CHS in a number of settings, including classrooms, hallways during passing periods, the main office, lunchroom, extra-curricular activities, and faculty and staff professional development workshops. Data were also recorded in entries made in a reflective journal over the course of the study that recorded my subjective responses to the project. Finally, I taught an ethics course during the 2000–2001 academic year. Of the 27 students who enrolled in the course, 21 were female (11 black and 10 white) and 6 were male (4 black and 2 white).

During the main period in which this study took place, there were 266 students enrolled at CHS, 155 females and 111 males. This gender ratio is a dramatic change from the previous year, 1999–2000, where there were 165 girls and 88 boys. The school has an equal number of black and white students, who comprise approximately 97% of the student body at CHS. The principal of CHS is a black female, the assistant principal for data processing is a white male, and the assistant principal for curriculum and instruction is a white female. Of the seventeen teachers at CHS from 1999–2001, seven were black and ten were white. Support staff included a white male guidance counselor, a white female security officer, a black female librarian, a black female secretary, three black male technicians, a black female secretarial assistant, and a custodial crew of a white male (head), a black female and a black male.

CONDITIONS FOR A *DIFFÉREND*

As I indicated in the introduction, a *différend* is a conflict between two or more parties that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of terms to which all parties can agree. When a conflict occurs between unequal social groups, dominant group members regularly dismiss, marginalize, or simply do not comprehend the versions of events expressed by subjugated group members. In such cases members of the subjugated group suffer (Delgado, 1996; Lyotard, 1988). Oppression is a characteristic feature of suffering when subjugated groups continue to suffer wrongs as a consequence of these disputes. Specifically, powerlessness and cultural imperialism inform the inability of certain groups to express themselves in their own terms and to be heard in socially recognized ways. According to Young (1990), powerless groups lack the authority and status that command the respect of others: No one really listens to the powerless or, in those cases when they are granted permission to speak, they are rarely understood by others. In the latter cases, the stories of subjugated group members are often incorporated into dominant narratives with which they are incommensurable. When this occurs, members of subjugated groups are subject to cultural imperialism, or "the universalization of a dominant group's experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm" (Young, 1990, p. 59). Under cultural imperialism, dominated social groups are subject to a norm that does not take their meanings into account and they thus "undergo a paradoxical oppression, in that they are both marked out by stereotypes and at the same time rendered invisible" (p. 59).

As it relates to CHS, the rejection of the stories of black male students creates a situation at the school where rather than viewing the marginalization and exclusion of these pupils as a reversible situation if addressed appropriately and vigorously, many view their situation as a predictable, albeit unfortunate, outcome of a reasonably fair system. Indeed, as the data discussed in the following section indicate, students, teachers, and administrators generally understand the marginalization and exclusion of black males from the school as a natural, if not an unproblematic, condition of a school with the reputation that CHS enjoys. To be sure, the data also indicate that relations at the school are complex and that, in certain instances at the level of interpersonal relationships, loving and caring networks prevail to the advantage of black male students. However, the overarching ethos of CHS produces the conditions and the rationales that undermine efforts to effect lasting changes in the culture of the school. In the following section, I highlight the role of competition in generating such an ethos. A defining characteristic of CHS, competition certainly contributes to a school culture that promotes high academic achievement; however, it also underlies a logic that contributes to an ethos that marginalizes and excludes black male students from the school's caring networks and academic program.

Competition and the Standard Story at City High School

I even find myself rooting for people to screw up. It is so sad, I want somebody to get a B in that one class, just slip a little, so I can move up. I am not going to force people to slip or make them but I am not going to be sorry when they do. I feel like I am being desensitized. It is just one big contest. (16-year-old white female student, eleventh grade)

The preceding quote captures how competition at City High School at times conflicts with the caring ethos that also defines the school. According to Delgado (1995), "caregiving and the profit motive are incompatible. The temptation is to cut corners, which is contrary to what's needed. With caregiving, the focus has to be on the individual, not the profit line" (p. 38). Concurring with this general sentiment, Margaret, a 17-year-old white senior, describes the impact of competition on her peers at her school. Connecting a discussion on epistemology in Parker Palmer's (1993) *To Know as We are Known* to an understanding of student identity at CHS, Margaret writes:

I never had heard of the concept of objective and subjective learning, but it colors the way I look at things now. I enjoyed how Palmer shed light on the lack of community in the classroom. City students should all have been nodding their heads on page 37, when Palmer talks about how students are pitted against one another. Ask any City student, and I bet they could tell you their class rank and G.P.A. instantly. These numbers are like badges of worth.

Both Margaret and her classmate suggest that competition, as a value expressed through individuals, has an effect that generalizes to all students at CHS. However, as an institutional value, competition has its severest impact on oppressed social groups as it further marginalizes or altogether excludes their culture from the curriculum. In fact, the greatest threat to the academic standing of the school is often presented in racial codes, which became pronounced as the school prepared to become an International Baccalaureate (IB) campus, a move that would give it even greater prestige. An example of how the institutional variety of competition at CHS supports deficit theories about black culture at CHS occurred during the 2000 fall semester. On this occasion, prior to a faculty meeting, an administrator asked teachers to submit entries for a "Top Ten List" of "Signs that City High teachers are exhibiting stress early in the school year." Items on the list, distributed at the meeting, included humorously clichéd to suggestive responses to the request by the administrator. Those in attendance either laughed or groaned as the list was read during the meeting. However, the top item on the list, "Thinking IB is bad grammar for 'I am,'" was met with a mixture of giggles and silence: On the one hand, some of the white teachers and the principal, a black woman, laughed; on the other hand, in contrast to their responses to the other items on the list, black teachers and a few of their white colleagues in the room sat, stone-faced, and without comment.

As suggested in this example, black language or Ebonics, is framed in opposition to the high status curriculum that is valued at the school: as something that will either disrupt or destroy it. This binary opposition extends as well as the relationship of black culture and the academic culture of CHS more generally and is taken up in particular ways at the school with respect to its black male student population. For instance, interview data with black male students indicate that they believe their peers regularly ignore them, staff members consistently police them, and their teachers commonly mistreat them. The general complaint of these students is that they are subject to double standards at the school, in and out of the classroom. Perhaps nowhere more do they perceive a double standard than in the "zero-tolerance" policy that CHS and the district implement with respect to school violence. For example, during my initial visit to speak with members of the school's black male mentoring group, students contemplated this double standard in the context of an example of one of their white male peers who recently had given a classmate a haircut during a lunch period:

Kevin: I mean he was right there in the middle of the cafeteria cutting that dude's hair! Everybody saw him, even [a teacher and an administrator]

Bruce: And, ain't nobody said nothing to him. I mean, you know if it was a brother—we would have been kicked out of the school.

Lyle: Shoot, out of the district. And handcuffed.

Kevin: And, it wasn't like he had the electric clippers like we use. He had those—what do you call those big scissors?

Bruce: *Yeah,* he had shears!

Kevin: Yeah, shears! Now, you know they ain't even trying to let a brother up in here with some toenail clippers, let alone some big scissors like that!

The views that these young men have concerning double standards and their general treatment at CHS echo other studies (e.g., Ferguson, 2000; Hopkins, 1997; Kailin, 1999; Ross & Jackson, 1991; Sewell, 1997) and are supported by data from interviews with and participant observations of their peers and teachers. Students and teachers may accord black male students little respect because of their perceived dependency on others, a condition that runs contrary to the value placed on the individualism implicit in the competition at the school. During a focus group interview, for instance, black and white female students complained that the school gave preferential

treatment to black male students and argued that, if these students couldn't compete with others at the school, no special effort should be made to either attract them to or to keep them at CHS. Similarly, in the spring of 2001 a research assistant recorded an exchange between students in a hallway between passing periods that indicates disdain for the perceived dependency of black males on others to make it in the school:

> When the bell rings to indicate the end of class I notice this white girl, standing next to an African-American female student, shouting "hello" to many other students. Her social interactions interest me, so I ease over to listen in on her conversations. At this point, she is leaning over the balcony, shouting to a friend in the cafeteria.
>
> "Hey, are you joining the black male mentor program?" she calls down to an African American male.
>
> "Naw, I don't need that," he answers. There is no hint that he is either startled or offended by her question.
>
> "Well, I'm starting a female Caucasian group," she screams back. She laughs and seems to be unconcerned that she may have offended either of her friends. Neither of the students responds to her last comment and the three take up separate conversations with other students.

The view that black males are overly dependent on others at CHS is pervasive at the school. This rather demeaning assumption is sometime expressed rather openly, as in unsolicited comments made to me by Rick, a white male junior at CHS, after observing an interview session that I conducted with one of his black male peers in the school's library: "I hear you're doing a project on why there are no black guys at the school. My response when it first came to my attention was 'So what?' I mean, if they can't cut it here, why should we care? I would say the same thing if it was any other group." Sometimes the notion of dependency is implicit in words intended to be supportive of black male students, such as the following remarks a staff person, a black woman, interjected into a conversation that I was having with a black male student in the corridors: "You know, our black males here need a lot of help. They don't always take care of business and end up getting into a lot of trouble. It's good that you're coming out to help them." My point here is that implicit in the language that students, faculty, and staff members employ to describe the circumstances of these young men is the notion that they are naturally academically and socially deficient and that they are, themselves, largely if not solely to blame for their marginalization and exclusion at the school; their language here is not unlike much of the research literature on black male students. The characterization of black male students as dependent is so pervasive at the school that, with the exception of a few of their allies, the average person at CHS and, indeed, the district, simply does not find their exclusion and marginalization at the school to be remarkable. As a consequence, black male students at CHS have little chance of appealing to those who hold these intuitive views of them. They, in short, are "beyond love" (Delgado, 1996).

Students and teachers also associate the difficulty black males have at the school with sports and athletics. The following excerpt, reconstructed from my field notes and reflective journal, describes one of a number of observations along these lines. The exchange takes place the first day of classes for the 2000–2001 academic year:

> While checking out my new classroom, I reintroduced myself to Ms. Richards the teacher who will be teaching in the classroom opposite the one that I was assigned. Ms. R. told me that she had taught at a private university in the city in the 1970s. She is one of the original City High faculty members. She expressed particular disdain for university student-athletes. As she spoke, I thought about the school's soccer and basketball programs, both of which have national reputations. I also thought about the racially coded nature of the programs: soccer is predominately a "white" sport at the school and basketball is generally a "black" sport. Ms. R. finally came right out and stated explicitly what I already knew she was saying. Shaking her head and rolling her eyes, she recalled that it came to a point at the college that "if I saw an African American male who had to duck when he entered my class, I just said 'oh, no'—he didn't have a chance in my class.

Ms. R. echoes a pervasive sentiment that emerges from the data: The most common reason that students, teachers, and administrators provide for the marginal status and exclusion of black male students at CHS is the absence of a viable sports program at the school. It is the case that the school lacks certain facilities, such as a track, football field, and baseball diamond and that in contrast to the CHS girls' sports program, the boys' sports program is not competitive with other schools in the area. District policy, however, allows students who leave their neighborhoods to attend CHS to participate in sports programs at schools in the neighborhoods where they live, if they choose to do so. This means that it is possible for a student to attend CHS and also play, say, on the state champion basketball team if she or he lived in the respective neighborhood. Blaming the absence of a school sports program for the dearth of black males only reinforces stereotypes about and perpetuates the fetishization of black males. It also obscures a basic flaw in the overall sports argument. Karen, a black senior who sees CHS "in 25 years [as] an all-white school" because she feels that *all* students of color will be sacrificed to accommodate the demands of white families to have the best education for their children, best exposes this flaw. Addressing the marginalization and exclusion of her male peers, Karen maintains that:

It can't be the sports thing. It can't be that anymore because everyone's not into sports; everyone doesn't play sports. It can't be that it's too hard 'cause you got 3.0, 4.0 students leaving also. It's just—what is it that's making them leave? (KMJ, 05/24/01)

Karen's question raises different possibilities for understanding the experiences of black male students at CHS. Her question is informed not only by her experiences but also from her willingness to see the basic contradiction in a dominant line that suggests other schools draw black male students away from CHS because they provide unlimited opportunities for students to play on sports teams. As Karen told me in a follow-up conversation, only a small percentage of students at any school can play team sports and it defies logic to assume that sports would be a significant factor in every black male's decision to come to or to remain at CHS. Yet, stereotypical depictions of black males mark the perceptions of their classmates and teachers, even in light of pervasive counter-evidence. For example, during an interview, a 16-year-old white junior said that she was "shocked" to encounter so many black students in the city's student debate league. She explains that:

> I was shocked because, I—I just [approximately a five second pause] you know, it's kind of like black people seem to give off the image that they don't really care about academics or, you know. Only sports and rap music and, this is horrible and .... It's really human nature. You know, they play basketball. They like fried chicken. Pretty lame but that's how it is.... I was reading in *Newsweek* the other day, "Anti-Intellectualism in black Culture." It's kind of like, you know, black people are supposed to be hip-hop stars and basketball players, and, you know, and that's what you should aspire to be. That's the stereotype that comes off. And it's bad and it's wrong to a certain extent.

In addition to associating black males with sports and other time worn racial theories in the above remarks, the student also makes explicit reference to anti-intellectualism to explain her dissonance upon encountering so many black students in the city's student debate league. Anti-intellectualism is a variation of a recurring theme in the educational literature, and one that has resurfaced recently in the news and popular media, which she directly cites, that blames black culture for the academic woes of black students. The notion of "anti-intellectualism" is part of an ensemble of academic inventions that students, teachers, and administrators appropriate to psychologize black students in general and black male students in particular. A related concept, the idea that academic achievement poses a threat to black identity, is implicit in an exchange I had with a teacher in the corridors of CHS. On this occasion, I was approached by Ms. M., who was interested in my research

and wanted to know more about my project at the school. I perceived a quizzical expression on Ms. M.'s face after I had described the project to her and, in response to it, added, "not all black students equate high academic achievement with 'acting white.'" Ms. M., who appeared to be surprised by the idea, replied, "Oh! That's good to know!" Also, during a faculty meeting in which the CHS student scores on a high-stakes test were being discussed, yet another related idea was invoked to explain the black-white "achievement gap." In this instance, an administrator stated that black male students think academic achievement is "not cool," which accounted for the lower aggregate scores for black students. She supported her claim by referring to a project that she completed as part of her post-graduate coursework. These common but deeply problematic "academically informed" explanations for the plight of black male students at CHS are not restricted to the school site but circulate throughout the community. For example, echoing the sentiments expressed by the student, teachers, and administrator above, an article about CHS in a local magazine reports:

> Dating boys is best done outside of school. At City, "There are no good guys. They all are smart, but you just want to be their friend," Allison [a Black junior] says.
>
> Black males don't attend City because "sports aren't that good [here]," Allison says. "They think they've got to be rough and tough" and go to other schools for sports programs.

The administration has indeed attempted to address the school's marginalization of black males. However, my data suggest that, given the lack of respect accorded to black male students, some of these responses may be informed by false empathy (Delgado, 1996). False empathy describes a response to the plight of oppressed individuals or groups by privileged individuals who visualize themselves in the places of members of oppressed groups and ask what they, the privileged, would want if they were oppressed. They then act accordingly and create social policy that, regardless of its good intentions, may be at odds with how oppressed people comprehend and would respond to their circumstances. Such ill-informed policy may actually perpetuate the conditions that they intend to ameliorate (Hamovitch, 1999; Noguera, 1995). Along these lines, well-intentioned responses to the marginalization of black males at CHS, such as professional development workshops and the creation of the black male mentoring program by adults, mentioned previously, may actually reinforce the marginalization of black males at the school.

In the fall of 1998, the principal invited a nationally known black educational consultant to CHS to address the school on issues related to the education of black males. According to the principal, the all-day workshop was met with resistance from teachers, students, and

parents. Although such resistance is to be anticipated, interviews and informal conversations with students suggest that even those who agreed with the consultant's views were concerned about not being able to respond to the in-service or to have a meaningful and ongoing dialogue about the larger issue of the experiences of black male students. Further, the lack of input by black male students regarding their experiences, coupled with a failure to follow-up on the in-service only made students question the school's sincerity and willingness to grapple with real race and gender issues at CHS.

As I have described in previous writing, (Duncan, 2001, 2002), even the black male mentoring program at the school functions in some ways to marginalize the very individuals it seeks to serve. For instance, during an all-school assembly on the first day of the 2000–2001 school year, I scanned the audience for the faces and expressions of black male students during an announcement regarding the mentoring program. I experienced that "peculiar sensation," described by W. E. B. Du Bois (1903/1989), that is brought on by "a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (p. 3). For the most part, the young men I observed either looked down or straight ahead, in ways to suggest that they were shutting out the announcement. Their behavior was cause for me to wonder what the program meant to them. Although all the young men I interviewed stated that they found the mentoring sessions to be helpful, their low and inconsistent attendance suggested that the program represented something more complicated in their lives at school. Indeed, during sessions, mentors sometimes conveyed contradictory messages to the mentees: They encouraged them to do well academically but also blamed the young men for the stereotypical attitudes that their teachers had of them. In addition, as indicated elsewhere, some students deride the program and point to it as evidence that black male students are unqualified to be at the school. These contradictory views towards black male students are also evident in the words and deeds of black male students themselves. However, as I describe in the following section, black male students nonetheless provide insights about their experiences at CHS that conflict with the standard explanations for their marginalization and exclusion.

"We're a Loving People": Black Male Students at CHS

Local publications, such as the city's weekly newspaper and monthly magazine, laud City High School for its family-like atmosphere. In fact, they often credit a care ethic, established by the school's founding principal and codified in its mission statement and credo, for contributing to the school's academic success and harmonious climate. Indeed, visual displays on the walls in the corridors at the school often link caring both to

achievement and to race relations. For example, a large banner that overlooks the cafeteria reads, "Twenty Five Years of Excellence," and a poster that hangs above a water fountain announces, "We are a nation of many cultures but only one species: So let's make respect part of our cultural heritage." The theme of racial harmony is also implicit in some public displays of caring, such as the school's trademarked "City High Hug" that the principal regularly gives to each student, staff, and faculty member who wears the school's colors of black and white on Fridays. Mission statements and hugs notwithstanding, students point to the school's caring reputation as one of the most pervasive misperceptions that the public has about CHS. Perhaps nowhere is this more poignantly captured than in an interview with Kevin, conducted on site at CHS. During the interview in question, Kevin and I were discussing his relationship with his mother, an elementary school teacher and the person whom he credits as having the greatest influence in his life. Specifically, I asked Kevin if he recognized the person at school as the same person whom he knew at home. In response to my question, Kevin said:

> Her school [his mother's], unlike this school [CHS], is a family. I mean her secretary calls her Mom. Her kids call her Grandmom. Secretary's kids and other kids at school call her Grandmom. The assistant principal, that's like her sister. And the office staff and a lot of teachers, like I was saying, call her Mom. Their kids call her Grandmom. So, there's really a tight connection there in that building. It's really a lot of love in the building. And, I can see it when I come in because the secretary calls me her brother, you know? It's like—it's a real tight loving. I mean, like City High puts up a bunch of things like the City High hugs, things about City High that makes it seem, appear loving and real sweet. But when you go to a place and people are actually showing it everyday without having to mention it.... It's not, "Oh, yeah, I call her Mom." When you see her, it's like, "Oh yeah, hey Mom!" It's not a playing thing. It's just that's how it is. And, it's not—we didn't plan on making this a loving place. It is a loving place because we're a loving people. Like that kind of thing.

In the above excerpt, Kevin, a black 17-year-old senior, expresses an unambiguous view about his school's social climate and chides its reputation and the various rituals and artifacts that give it its particular aura. To be clear, Kevin is *directly* responding to my question to him about his perceptions of his mother, a principal at an elementary school in the district. His references to CHS (i.e., "unlike this school" and "I mean, like City High") are spontaneous counter-examples of the loving, family-like culture he describes as existing at his mother's elementary school. That his views about CHS are uttered as asides suggests the extent to which they inform the powerful tacit level of his understanding of the school. It is also critical to point out the ways he resists the

codification and normalizing imposition of liberal discourses that institutions such as schools employ through mission statements and credos to police social practices and to ensure maximum conformity (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). Kevin echoes the remarks of his peers, presented elsewhere in this article, as well as those of other students who, regardless of their background or class standing, complain that rather than fostering a caring, communal culture at CHS, too much emphasis is placed by some students, teachers, and administrators on competition, often at the expense of caring relationships. Their views are in accord with Delgado's (1995) who, as noted elsewhere in this article, argues that love and the profit motive are often incompatible and, when we privilege the latter interest over the former one, we tend to "cut corners" in responding to humans' social and emotional needs.

Making No Assumptions

Cutting corners in the context of students' needs at CHS contributes to teacher conduct that undermines the academic achievement of students for whom they have low expectations. One such action is violating the assumption of truthfulness. This assumption is at the heart of the expectation that "teachers the world over ... speak the truth when addressing their students, and students ... do the same when speaking up in class" (Jackson, Boostrom, & Hansen, 1993, pp. 16–18). This assumption is "one of the substructural elements within the total amalgam of tacit understandings that combine to facilitate instruction and enable it to proceed smoothly" (p. 18) and generally becomes apparent only when it is violated. Jackson and his associates (1993) describe the violation of this element mainly in terms of students who engage in dishonest acts, such as cheating on assignments or being less than forthcoming about their feelings. Teachers for the most part violate this assumption when they feign "interest and enthusiasm during the teaching of a lesson in order, presumably, to arouse a similar reaction from students" (p. 22). However, evidence of this violation also is indicated in reports from black males at CHS that their teachers often fail to give them appropriate or honest feedback about their work. The following excerpt from a focus group interview with Roger, a sophomore, recounts an experience that illustrates this violation:

> You see I wanted to be in a math contest last semester and Ms. C. was like, "No, you can't be in it." I was like, "Why not?" Then this semester she was like, "You can't be in it because you are not able to do the work." And I was like, "How you gonna say that to me?" She was like, "Well on your homework, you are not getting the answers right." I said, "That's strange because I get 100s on my homework." She then said that she doesn't have time for

all that: "I only give you 100s because you completed the assignment." I'm like that's wrong because now I'm thinking that I got all the answers right and I don't know what I'm doing wrong. And she was like, "i have a life." What do you want me to do about that?

Aaron, a senior, reports a similar incident in which his teacher failed to give him appropriate feedback on an assignment. He described how he turned in the paper of one of his peers as his own—to the same teacher, in the same semester, for the same assignment. The teacher gave Aaron a B although he gave his white male classmate an A. Later, when I asked Aaron why he would submit someone else's work as his own, his response was, "That's what we do—everyone does it." He continued:

> Okay, well, I felt like ... my opinion is, if you know I cheated or whatever, you could have just, you know, you could have just told me to do it over instead of give me a lower grade when I did the exact same thing that someone else has done, word for word, it's the exact same thing. I feel like it was totally unfair. I knew that it was ethically wrong. I knew that the fact is, I'm not wrong—I'm not the only person wrong. I realize that I'm wrong, but that teacher will not realize that he's wrong. He will not realize at all.

The actions of Aaron's teacher may reflect his perception of black male students in general, of Aaron in particular, or it may simply reveal a more general flaw in his pedagogy. However, Aaron noted that he arrived at CHS with certain disadvantages and that he has always had to prove to his peers and teachers that he belongs at the school. For example, unknown to students, teachers, and administrators, pediatricians diagnosed Aaron with lead poisoning early in his life, and he exhibited some of the symptoms that required him to process information at a rate different from his peers. As Aaron noted, "The doctors told me that, um, I was going to pick up on things a little slower than other people would, but if you look over my record you wouldn't know .... But, like I said, it's every man for himself."

Given the pervasive stereotypes that inform his peers' and teachers' perceptions of black male students at CHS, perhaps it is true that young black men have no one but themselves to count on at the school. This point became especially clear to me from an incident that I was a part of late in the fall semester of 2000–2001. On this occasion, Aaron's advisor, a white female teacher in her early 40s, reported to his parents that his quarter grade for my ethics class was a B. Aaron had actually earned an A-for the quarter but, because of snow-related school closures, I had not provided advisors with grade reports in time for their regularly scheduled phone calls to the parents of their advisees. When I finally returned to campus, assuming that my grades had gone unreported to their parents, I distributed the dated grade reports and

narratives directly to the students in my course. "I *knew* I had an A," Aaron said after reading his report and informing me of the grade that his advisor had reported to his mother. "You know," he continued, "my mother was really mad at me because she thought that I had lied about how I was doing in your class. I really don't understand. Ms. E. gave the grade as though she was reading it from this paper."

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: CRT AND IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATING ADOLESCENT BLACK MALES

> Some of the more recent speakers have come speaking to our students as if they have the solutions to *all* of their problems...and after the presentation, their problems would be solved.... These younger brothers don't need a speech or series of speeches, they need positive and conscious black men like ourselves to be honest with them, guide them, and truly listen to them (Jamal, 25-year-old CHS Technical Assistant, personal communication).

As indicated in the introduction, City High School gained its current reputation within the historical and political contexts of a voluntary desegregation agreement in the region. However, Derrick Bell (1995), like W. E. B. Du Bois (1935) before him, critiques desegregation policy for its failure to encompass the complexities of what it means for black students to achieve a quality education. Thus, he argues, "remedies that fail to attack all policies of racial subordination almost guarantee that the basic evil of segregated schools will survive and flourish, even in those systems where racially balanced schools can be achieved" (1995, p. 232). Following up this line of thought, William Tate and his colleagues (1996) note that the flaw in desegregation policy is that it proposes "an essentially mathematical solution to a sociocultural problem...and propose[s] that by physically manipulating the students' school placement the problems of inequality would be addressed" (p. 33). In accordance with these critiques, in this article I have argued that black male students in schools suffer a condition characteristic of a population that is *beyond love*, a condition of those who are excluded from society's economy and networks of care and thus expelled from useful participation in social life. Further, because black males are constructed as a strange population, that is, as a group with values and attitudes that are fundamentally different from other students, their marginalization and oppression are understood as natural and primarily of their own doing.

Such a view of black males is indicated in the data presented in this article and suggests that their plight cannot be ameliorated by the redistributive or mathematical formulae that underpin desegregation policy. The absence of opportunities black male students have to describe their experiences in schools is also linked to the limitations of desegregation policy and their status as an oppressed social group. They are relatively powerless to define their circumstances and, as a result, are subject to cultural imperialism, or to being defined by others. These conditions of oppression are intensified in a postindustrial economic order where images proliferate and

> the incessant characterization of blacks in demeaning terms means that the average member of society virtually equates any one of us with trouble. We come to be seen as absent fathers, welfare mothers, lazy office worker "quota queens," and so on. Once this sets in, we have little chance of appealing to the better natures of persons who hold this unconscious image of us. The image renders us "Other." It means people simply don't think of us as individuals to whom love, respect, generosity, and friendliness are due. We are "beyond love" (Delgado, 1996, p. 51).

Such characterizations are clearly observable in the comments made by CHS students and teachers that I document in this article. Certainly, the competitive nature of CHS contributes to the marginalization and exclusion of black male students. Unbridled competition gives rise to values that reinforce individualism, not only making it difficult to sustain caring relationships but also reinforcing what the ethicist Victor Anderson (1995) calls "ontological Blackness" or "the Blackness that whiteness created" (p. 13). Thus, the competitive culture at CHS reinforces the notion that black male students are strange and do not belong at the school. However, the data presented in this article indicate that the competitive culture of CHS alone fails to adequately account for the exclusion and marginalization of black male students at the school. In contrast, one might argue that a contrived caring community at CHS blinds it and others to its exclusionary practices. The school's caring reputation, as is the case with other codified, normalized, and normalizing discourses, ensures maximum conformity to a particular view of CHS and builds resistance to an examination of how such a model institution, a paragon of equity and excellence, contributes to the oppression of any of its students.

However, this paper demonstrates that the tenacity with which racist stereotypes remain fixed to the imaginations of CHS students and teachers not only calls the reputation into question, it clearly undermines the ability of black male students to excel at the school as well. For example, the violation of the assumption of truthfulness, whether this occurs to avoid conflict or to spare someone's feelings, severely compromises the ability of black male students to take full advantage of the resources available to them at CHS. The negative sentiments that populate the public statements of students and teachers about black male students foster an inhospitable climate that undoubtedly has an impact on their academic achievement of at the school. Thus, attending

solely to the competitive nature of CHS will only go so far to eradicate the conditions that marginalize black males and, moreover, may even compromise some of the positive qualities of competition, such as rigor and focus. Further, narrowing the focus to just the competitive nature of the school lends itself too easily to simply adjusting black males to the social and academic networks of the school and leaves the day to day practices and organization of the institution unexamined. As the evidence presented in this article suggests, mere access to schools like CHS does little to address relationships and structures that are more fundamental to the ways that we organize institutions and to how we shape human lives within them. Therefore, attempts to transform the academic and social experiences of black students at competitive schools must go further than compensatory programs and professional development workshops and examine the moral dimension of schools.

Following Young (1990), I posit that oppression and domination should be the primary terms for conceptualizing the exclusion and marginalization of black male students from schools such as CHS and that liberation should be the primary term for conceptualizing the remedy to the problems they encounter. Toward this end, CRT privileges the narratives of those who have been victimized to ameliorate the conditions attendant to oppression and domination and, in particular, engages the problem of the *différend* in ways to generate new social theories in the service of liberation. As Jamal states in the epigraph at the beginning of this section, black male students need people to "truly listen to them." Allowing those who suffer wrongs to express their grievances and to be heard on their own terms counters the powerlessness that constitutes a condition of oppression; it also provides those who do wrong to others with an opportunity to participate in redressing the situation (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Along these lines, bell hooks (2000) tells us that "the heart of justice is truth telling, seeing ourselves and the world the way it is rather than the way we want it to be" (p. 33). Truth telling, and listening to the truth are preconditions to addressing the problem of the *différend*. Therefore, a first step toward changing the conditions that undermine the achievement of black male students is listening to what they have to say about their academic and social experiences in schools. In the context of CHS, using the narratives of black male students to frame my approach to researching the reasons for their marginalization and exclusion, my research assistants and I found compelling—and disconcerting—evidence to support their stories. The same method is applicable to other settings to determine how black males make meaning of their experiences and to approach our studies of schools based on their stories.

To be clear, though, powerful narratives that exclude and marginalize black youth are canonical and anything that deviates from or casts doubt upon them is put in question (Delgado, 1995). This stated, I nonetheless reiterate that a concrete step towards eliminating oppression of black male students and providing space for their narratives is in challenging the structures of domination in schools. Challenging domination consists of eradicating institutional conditions in schools that inhibit or prevent students from participating in determining their actions or the conditions of their actions. In the context of the present discussion, such a challenge begins with an invitation to young black males to speak their piece and with our willingness to see the world through their eyes, the way it is rather than the way we think it is or want it to be.

NOTES

1. Shorter versions of this article were presented at the 2000 Meeting of the Association for Moral Education, Glasgow, Scotland, UK, July 7, 2000 and at the 2001 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Seattle, WA, USA, April 14, 2001. The author wishes to thank Ryonnel Jackson, Cleo Brooks, Lauren Kalikow, Kenneth Jamison, Frances Henderson, Victoria Houseman and Natasha Marcus for their research assistance and Marvin Lynn, Maurianne Adams, James Wertsch, and the anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier drafts of this article. Finally, I am grateful to the Washington University African and Afro-American Studies Program and the Washington University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences for the generous funding that supported research and writing in connection to this project.

2. The larger project is an institutional examination of City High School that includes: (1) a critical race analysis that critiques the limitation of desegregation policy and the distributive paradigm of justice upon which it is predicated and that explicates an unaccounted for intersectional dilemma related to race and gender; (2) an ethno and sociolinguistic analysis of the narratives that adolescent black male students draw upon in their academic and social decision-making, linking their voices to those of diasporan Africans engaged in struggle in the Western Hemisphere (Duncan, 2001); and (3) a political race project (Guinier & Torres, 2002) that employs the metaphor of the miner's canary to identify the possibilities and limitations of pedagogical interventions for student coalition-building across differences of race, class, and gender (Duncan, 2002).

3. As noted by Delgado and Stefancic (2001), there is no English word to convey the specific meanings in the technical term *différend* and following them I draw upon the work of the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard (1988). Lyotard (1988) uses the term to describe "a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments" (p. xi). Lyotard argues that when a conflict arises between dominant and subjugated group members the stories of members of the latter group are incommensurable with those of the former group and are not taken into full account in decision-making processes, causing the oppressed to continue suffering wrongs at the hands of those who oppress them. Similarly, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (2001) note that the *différend* "occurs when a concept such as justice acquires conflicting

meanings for two groups" (p. 44). In most cases, the dominant system of justice deprives subjugated persons of the chance to express their grievances in terms the system will understand. In such cases, the language that subjugated persons use to express how they have been wronged does not resonate with those who are in authority and, consequently, their versions of truth are not accorded full respect when justice is meted out. Critics of Lyotard find his idea of incommensurability troubling and point out that such a take on language disputes is epistemologically suspect and leaves no hope for a resolution of the *différend* (e.g., Burbules, 2000). Departing from Lyotard in this respect, Delgado and Stefancic (2001) frame the *différend* as a dialectic and believe that narrative intervention, that is, allowing those who suffer to tell their stories on their own terms, creates the conditions for a resolution that involves both the oppressed and the oppressor. This take on the *différend* is consistent with the political race project that Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres (2002) propose. This conceptual project is one of social critique and action that is based on the point of view of those who suffer the greatest wrongs. In this article, I use the concept of the *différend* to capture the conflicting accounts that students, teachers, and administrators provide for the marginalization and exclusion of black male students at CHS. On the one hand, with the exception of black male students and a few peer and adult allies, students, teachers, and administrators generally frame the plight of black male students in *technical* terms (e.g., "they simply do not perform well in such environments"). Black male students at CHS, on the other hand, frame their experiences in *moral* terms (e.g., "People really don't care too much about brothers here." or "I think they set up some of us to get us in trouble."). Moral discourses are generally absent from the language of school reform (Bartolomé, 1994; Noblit & Dempsey, 1996), except in those cases where the vocabulary is incorporated into technical frameworks, such as "character education" curriculum. Moreover, given both their domination and oppression (Young, 1990) and the intensified post-9-11 technical discourses that reduce important educational issues to high-stakes tests, the "achievement gap," and school violence, black male students are even more prone to suffer a *différend* when they employ moral discourses to describe their academic and social experiences in school. I use the French spelling of the concept, as opposed to the English "differend," to emphasize my technical use of the concept in the article and to avoid confusion with the similarly spelled word "different."

4. The names of persons and places used in this section are pseudonyms.

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