

ANNOTATION

Gonzalez, Angel Rubiel. “Under the ‘hood’: Poor and Working Class Black and Latino Boys in the Age of Obamerica.” PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2013. 145 pp.

This dissertation provides us with an approximation to the ways in which the experiences of poor and working class Black and Latino boys transitioning into young manhood inform their perspectives on race, class, and gender power relations (1).

The study, under the ethnographic approach, draws its conclusions from a full year of participant observation and 33 semi-structured interviews with “gifted and talented” Black and Latino boys, during which evidence was found of language and feelings of liminality and contradiction on the analyzed issues. The data was interpreted on the basis of Black and Latino Theories of Existence that understand race as a dynamic and evolving site of contestation where the very notion of what it means to be human takes shape (1).

The project found experiences of existential dissonance in the subjects as they processed their lived realities against the colorblind ideology promoted in XXI Century U.S. society. This dissonance moves Black and Latino boys to search for existential resources in the form of institutions, spaces, and relationships that help them process the conflicted meanings, experiences, and feelings they face on their way to adulthood. These resources, however, are limited in availability, effectiveness, and usefulness due to the effects of poverty, mass incarceration, deportations, poor housing, and violence; even in the case of “gifted and talented” Black and Latino boys (1).

Having written his dissertation in 2013, the author has adopted the term “Obamerica” from authors Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and David Dietrich, to describe the contextual social situation of the research, set in an America perceived as often too willing to settle for narratives of racial harmony and to neglect the necessary attention and scrutiny toward the institutions, laws, policies, and structures that perpetuate inequality and injustice and foster traumatic experiences in people and communities alike (2).

The dissertation opens with an anecdotal narrative that grounds the research project and illuminates the meaningfulness and necessity of such a study, bringing us to realize that it deals with discussions and reflections that affect real people living real lives (3).

While acknowledging that boys are not the only population facing similar or related challenges, the dissertation sets itself in the context of a growing body of research that is particularly interested in the study of masculinities and their development and social impacts, as well as in the recognition of differential outcomes in educational achievement and attainment as they relate to gender differences (3). Critical masculinity studies, race theories, and existential theories converge to provide a theoretical base and an interpretive framework for this study, allowing the author to find

and provide insights into the “existential balancing act” that young men engage in as they contend with the competing ideologies and structures of racism and color-blindness (5).

The data for the study was collected in two urban independent middle schools for economically disadvantaged gifted and talented students during the 2011-2012 school year (5). The participant observations conducted in them were complemented with neighborhood visits and collections of song lyrics, magazines, internet sites, social media artifacts, homework assignments, video games, popular TV shows, YouTube clips, and artwork that helped understand and contextualize the observed phenomena (7). All the data obtained was then consolidated into a body of information from which larger social dynamics and structures could be elucidated and described (7). Then, using ground theory tools, four thematic areas were established in order to organize the reported meanings and experiences. These areas are: narratives of class and racial authenticity, transitions into young manhood, race and meanings of manhood, and the emotional and affective lives of the boys.

The author analyses different aspects of the observed schools and their policies and the way they represent values and ideologies that the students are invited or required to adopt, while being subject to the influence of other axiological and ideological influences in the context where they live and spend their time outside school (29-30). He also analyses the influence and attributed meanings and impacts of the humanistic style of the schools and their Catholic inspiration (31-33).

Rules, uniforms, environments, relationships, constructive curricula, religious emphases, and other elements at school are all analyzed as they inform the boys’ concept of manhood, adulthood, and even of being human. At home and in the neighborhood, other values and influences come into play such as the “middle class values” of hard work and individualism (55). Race and class issues are found to be constantly negotiated between the schools and the students and, inevitably, the values and policies expounded by the schools and the society at large find tensions and contradictions with the students’ experiences and existential realities in the broader social context. These contradictions and the cognitive dissonances that they entail are evident in the multiple long quotations to the interviews conducted with the students, allowing the reader to experience a closer contact with the subjects, their realities and, particularly, the meanings they attach to them.

“The burden of acting human is something we must take note of as educators in poor and working class communities of color. This becomes especially so in early adolescence (. . .),” writes Gonzalez as part of his conclusions after these analytical processes (62).

In the ensuing chapters, the dissertation offers further theoretical framework and research evidence into the formation and derivations of the concept of manhood and how it is achieved and expressed. Evidence shows that while students at the time of the study did not often witness the kinds of overt racism and violence of the past, they all seem to believe race to be an important element in their path to understanding and attaining manhood in spite of the supposedly color-blind orientation of the society in which they live (89). These beliefs have concrete consequences; boys develop identity traits and poses in accordance to what is expected of them as members of certain race and gender groups. The dissertation provides insight into the role of different poses as means to avoid feelings of powerlessness (92-99), and the influence of friendships (104), role models, heroes

(115), violence (111), video games (109), and pornography (112) as elements present in the immediate context of most youth and their developmental processes.

“This dissertation proposes that schools need to explicitly deal with race and class in their curriculum while also providing students with the cultural, spiritual, and emotional infrastructures to heal and renew relationships and friendships that can help them deal with the trauma and pain they experience as a result of structures of identity and power” (122) This help that schools should provide, needs to be addressed on three different levels: a micro-level (teaching students to express pain and vulnerability and to develop meaningful relationships, and accompanying them at a human level); an institutional-pragmatic level (providing students with tools to understand the world with its contradictions, complexities, and dissonances while speaking the truth without trying to “sanitize” it, training students to meet life with agency, confidence, and strategies); and a macro-level (dealing with advocacy for change in public institutions, laws, policies, and structures) (123).

The dissertation also briefly presents the outlines of a workshop for boys (123) that was developed as informed by the results of this research for one of the participating schools and that still continues due to its success in bringing boys into deep critical conversations around race, gender, and class issues.

This dissertation is a research-informed invitation for educators to imagine a better future for schools, teachers and children, particularly but not exclusively for Black and Latino boys (127).