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Book Review. 2015. Black Male(d):Peril and Promise in the Education of African American Males

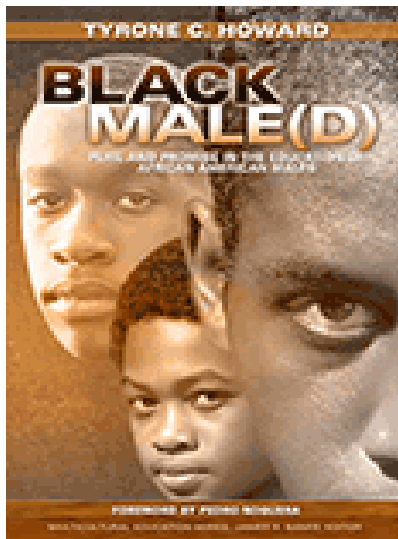
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Howard, C. Tyrone, *Black Male(d): Peril and Promise in the Education of African American Males*. New York: Teachers College Press., 2014, ISBN 978-0-8077-5491-7, pp.188. Reviewed by Felix Kumah-Abiwu, PhD (fkumahabiwu@gmail.com), Assistant Professor, Department of Pan-African Studies, Kent State University, Ohio.

The challenges facing many Black males in America continue to attract the attention of scholars, policy experts and social activists for several decades. Although some achievements have been made by African American males in their quest for good education, the age-old negative perception of “blackness” and its adverse effects on the dignity of Blacks, especially young Black males appear not to be over. In fact, the intractable nature of these challenges, though difficult, has also not weakened the determination of scholar-activists from addressing these issues. Instead, the interest of many continues to be invigorated in keeping the “flame of the



struggle active” on the scholarly agenda. In essence, one could describe Tyrone Howard’s recent book as another excellent piece of the “active flame” and a superb addition to the literature on Black males and the challenges of public education in America. The book is not only well-researched and clearly written, but the author has taken an extraordinary path, or better put, a radical position by making a strong case for a paradigm shift in the ways that Black males are viewed, studied, taught and understood (p.19).

Drawing on different scholarly works from the field, the author re-energizes the debate on the so-called “struggles in educating Black males.” Howard challenges both academic and policy researchers to disengage from the negative monolithic portrayal of Black males and the deficit-laden narratives, which are often used as frameworks to study and understand Black males.

Frames like endangered individuals, persons in crisis or individuals at risk for failure, especially within the public school system. Instead of these frames, Howard strongly suggests the need for scholars to shift the paradigm toward an asset-based approach with emphasis on promise, strengths and the potential of what Black males/students can do or capable of doing (pp.19-21). After outlining the basic assumption (*paradigm shift*) of the study in the introductory section, the author divides the rest of the book into seven chapters in exploring the issues.

The first chapter examines the state of Black males in terms of their achievements, college-going prospects, suspension/expulsion rates as well as the dropout rates with strong supporting data. The chapter also discusses the competing explanations in the literature on some of the numerous problems that continue to face many Black males. Theoretical concepts such as institutionalized racism, monolithic constructions of Blacks, especially African American males, (*structuralist perspective*), oppositional identities, cultural norms and practices (*cultural view*) have all been critically examined in the book (pp.21-24).

The author extends the dialogue on the monolithic constructions of Black males in chapter two with a compelling analysis of how they have been historically portrayed (negatively) in the American society for centuries. The book underscores what the author describes as the five common deficit-based depictions (*physical brute/anti-intellectual, shiftless and lazy, hypersexual, criminal-minded, slickster-pimp/gangster*) of Black males. The author reminds readers about the negative implications of these depictions. One implication is the inability of Black males to integrate into the mainstream society leading to the creation of countercultural realities. Another effect is the manner in which Black males have internalized these images with self-fulfilling negative consequences on their human dignity and education (pp.29-37). The chapter reiterates the conceptual argument by some scholars on the *perpetual negotiation* state of Black males “as they seek to reconcile their own individual lived experiences with prescribed societal expectations and limitations” (pp.38-40).

Chapters three and four take the reader into deeper levels of the critical problems facing Black males with questions like: who really cares? Or does race still matter? The book explores these questions by integrating the critical race theory (CRT) with evidence (field research data) in the analyses of both chapters. By integrating the CRT with personal accounts (*counter-storytelling*) from interviews conducted with many Black males, the key finding reveals that racism (subtle/institutionalized) is still pervasive in many public schools. For example, the “zero tolerance” policy, as Howard contends, was designed to control school violence, but the policy, according to the author, “seems to have clear racial overtones in terms of who is most affected” (p.69). Chapter four unpacks the competing arguments on whether sports provide opportunities or obstruction to the success of Black males. The author’s analysis of the different perspectives with good cases has generally enhanced the discourse on the challenges facing Black males.

The last three chapters (five, six and seven) reflect on the views and voices from Black males in terms of the interpretation of their own challenges. Chapter five is quite revealing because of the in-depth interview responses that have been integrated with the author’s persuasive analysis regarding the role(s) of schools and teachers in the improvement of academic outcomes of Black males (pp.93-104). Dr. Howard’s discussion of the success of Black males and why it matters has enhanced our understanding of the issues as well. The positive stories (interviews) of high-achieving Black males in chapter six have provided another support for the author’s basic assumption of why a paradigm shift is needed. The concluding chapter’s (seven) take on Black males and the so-called post-racial era has also given a current flavor to the deliberations in the book (pp.132-150). It is clear that the author has shown an outstanding mastery of the field which deserves commendation. Notwithstanding, there are two main drawbacks of the book worth noting.

First, while the book has extensively discussed the systemic-driven explanations with supporting data (interviews) from the field on the challenges facing Black males, it is also noticeable that the author was not able to adequately (in-depth) examine what could be considered as the community/family-driven explanations for the problems facing Black males.

Of course, the systemic explanations such the deficit-laden framing and subtle institutionalized racism cannot be disputed in terms of the huge impacts on Black males, but the reader also expects an in-depth analysis of the forces within the Black community/family settings that might be contributing to the difficulties. Second, the author's basic assumption of a paradigm shift from the deficit-laden frames to asset-based perspective is laudable, but I think the pages devoted to the analysis of the *positive accounts* of high-achieving Black males in chapter six should have been more extensive since these counter narratives, I presume, would have provided more empirical supports for the underlying assumption of the book. Nevertheless, the book is an excellent piece of work and a reminder to scholars/policy makers to shift the narrative from the deficit framing of Black males to asset-based approach to studying our brothers.