(Re)Imagining Black Boyhood: Toward a Critical Framework for Educational Research

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Drawing on critical childhood studies, Michael J. Dumas and Joseph Derrick Nelson argue that Black boyhood is socially unimagined and unimaginable, largely due to the devalued position and limited consideration of Black girls and boys within the broader social conception of childhood. In addition, the "crisis" focus of the public discourse on Black males—focused as it is on adult Black men—makes it difficult to authentically see young Black boys as human beings in and of themselves. A critical reimagining of Black boyhood, the authors contend, demands that educators, policy makers, and community advocates pursue pedagogical and policy interventions that create spaces for Black boys to construct and experience robust childhoods. Further, a (re)commitment to critical research on Black boyhood should inspire inquiry that asks young Black boys who they are, what they think, and what they desire in their lives now.

When twelve-year-old Tamir Rice was shot and killed while playing in his neighborhood park, the police officer who fired the gun radioed in, "Shots fired. Male down. Black male, maybe 20" (Izadi & Holley, 2014). The officer imagined the toy gun in Tamir's hand as real and a threat, at least in part because he presumed the boy to be a man with violent intent rather than a child deeply engaged in make-believe play.

Similarly, neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman could not imagine Trayvon Martin as a *boy* who might reasonably be sauntering home, who might reasonably be frightened at being pursued by an adult. Instead, Zimmerman's defense for killing Trayvon—and the public discourse surrounding the inci-

dent—centered on constructing the seventeen-year-old as an *adult man* with suspect movements, threatening physicality, and malevolent intentions (Evans-Winters & Bethune, 2014; Fasching-Varner, Reynolds, Albert, & Martin, 2014; Love & Bradley, in press).

We argue here that Black boyhood itself has been rendered both unimagined and unimaginable. For us, Black boyhood is the material and discursive social phenomenon of childhood for Black boys. Rather than a developmental phase on the way to Black manhood, Black boyhood is a social experience *in the now*—not merely for some future existence or accomplishment—in which Black boys possess their own agential subjectivity and impact the world even as they remain vulnerable to the material effects of racism, the narrow constructions of masculinity (Blount & Cunningham, 1995; McCready, 2010), and the hegemonic notion that their lives as children only matter because of who others want them to be (or fear they may become) in adulthood. Thus, to assert that Black boyhood is unimagined and unimaginable is to lament that we have created a world in which Black boys cannot *be*.

Our conceptualization of Black boyhood is informed by scholarship in critical (or reconceptualist) childhood studies, which offers key insights into how childhoods are socially imagined (or left unimagined) and helps us frame our argument for careful attention to Black boyhood in education research and everyday practice in schools and communities. From a critical perspective, childhood might be understood as "what children mean" in a given society, with attention to the discursive and material forces that inform and are informed by that process of meaning making. Thus, to speak of children is not the same as speaking of childhood. However, always embedded in public discussion of children are implicit, and sometimes explicit, constructions of childhood (Stephens, 1995; Wyness, 2012). For example, Tamir Rice was, at age 12, a "child," as US society (and much of the world) defines "children" as those young people between the ages of 3 and 18 (or 21), with those younger than 3 "toddlers" and those older than 18 (or perhaps 21) "young adults." However, we contend that how the *child*, Tamir, experienced *childhood* was mitigated by perceptions of his own Blackness, his maleness, the racial makeup and history of the neighborhood and city, his social class, and community relations with the entire justice system, to name just a few dynamics that informed his living and dying on that day in the park. Thus, what childhood means, even who counts as a child and when and how that state of being begins and ends, is contingent on historical, economic, and cultural contexts (MacNaughton & Davis, 2009; Stephens, 1995). At the same time, we want to hold on to all the ways that young Tamir imagined himself, never outside of these contexts but also never totally constrained by them. Tamir, although always acting within unequal relations of power, participated in the making of his own being in the world and in the broader society's understanding of him as a child in the world.

Even so, the social imagination of Black childhood, and then Black boyhood, weighs heavily on Black boys' freedom to imagine themselves as they please. A growing body of research confirms that Black children are often perceived to be older than they really are and are often judged as less innocent than their white peers (Dancy, 2014; Ferguson, 2001; Goff, Eberhardt, Williams, & Jackson, 2008; Goff, Jackson, & Di Leone, 2014). This suggests a systemic cultural prejudice that becomes operationalized in social policy and everyday institutional practices. But more than prejudice, Black children are subject to a process of dehumanization (Goff et al., 2008; Goff et al., 2014; Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2015). While prejudice signifies negative attitudes that can lead to discrimination, dehumanization involves something far more dangerous: a construction of the Other as not human, as less than human, and therefore undeserving of the emotional and moral recognition accorded to those whose shared humanity is understood.

However painfully disheartening, a recent study (Goff et al., 2014) on perceptions of Black children provides further evidence of an enduring historical-cultural connection between Black people and African primates—more specifically, apes. Researchers sought to test the extent to which white subjects still associate Black people with apes and whether that association also extends to Black children. Findings suggest that, indeed, Black children—and, notably, not other children of color—are uniquely regarded as akin to apes and that those more likely to make this association are also more likely to view Black children as older and less trustworthy than other children. This finding was especially strong for Black *male* children.

For Black boys, anti-Black prejudice and, perhaps more so, dehumanization are compounded by the tenuous position of Black boys and girls within the already fragile and troubled social conception of childhood (Corsaro, 2015; Kehily, 2009; Majors, 2001). Further, the "crisis" focus of the public discourse on Black males—in which young men and boys become constructed as "problems" in themselves—prevents us from seeing Black boys outside of public fears and anxieties about their future lives as adults and locates crises within Black male bodies rather than the political economy and racial order that heavily determine the living conditions and life chances of Black males from boyhood on (Wilson, 1996).

Although we refer to Black *boyhood,* we might more precisely refer to *boyhoods* as a way to acknowledge the myriad "ways in which cultural identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and nationality) and social contexts (e.g., family, peers, and school) shape and are shaped by boys themselves" (Way & Chu, 2004, p. 2). Inherent in our understanding of the imagination of Black boyhood is this understanding of the multiplicity of Black boyhoods, the importance of social and cultural context (Patterson, 2015), and the myriad ways that Black boys identify and are identified. Our aim here is not to presume an essentialized, static description of Black boys but, rather, to open up

space to explore Black boyhood as always dynamic and contingent, as responsive to time, space, and "how boys respond, experience, perceive, resist and influence" the world around them (Way & Chu, 2004, p. 2).

We intend this article to be the beginning of a deep intellectual engagement and imaginative process, to inspire new conversations among scholars, educators, and Black boys. As a beginning, we are intentionally provocative, offering what we acknowledge are radical possibilities for Black childhoods. Although we offer recommendations that could be useful for research and practice today, we want to lean forward toward what may not seem immediately imaginable.

Let us say at the outset that Black girls—and, for that matter, all poor children and children of color—suffer by being outside the public imagination of what childhood means—that is, children are worthy of protection and are entitled to play and discover. Most notably, in the midst of ample federal and state interest in and funding for Black (and Latino) male interventions (e.g., the Obama administration's My Brother's Keeper initiative), there is a troubling lack of support for research and programs related to the educational lives and struggles of girls of color (Butler, 2013; Crenshaw, 1991, 2015; Dixson, 2007), even as the data show that Black girls and many other girls of color lag far behind white girls in access to social and educational opportunities (e.g., Crenshaw, 2015). To be sure, then, some of our concerns here are not specific to Black boys; other lines of inquiry—on Black girls, on Vietnamese boys, on Indigenous children—are equally important and receive too little attention. However, the specificity of our work allows us to name and analyze dynamics at the particular intersection of race, gender, and age occupied by young Black boys.

Although our focus is on the earlier years of Black boyhood, ages three to twelve, adolescents—those most often referred to, troublingly, as "young men"—also suffer because of the absence of an expansive imagination of Black boyhood, since they then become subject to an adultification that erases even their right to childhood and their status as *still* children (Boutte, 2012; Ferguson, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2011). These boyhoods become further erased in most research on Black males in education; largely absent from this body of work is any inquiry related to boys in early and middle childhood. This is unfortunate for a number of reasons. First, the lack of research on young Black boys means we have not adequately captured the school experiences of this population and therefore have little empirical knowledge to inform policies and practices to address their social and educational needs. Second, the absence of research specifically on young Black boys leads policy makers and educational leaders to extrapolate from research on Black adolescents, as if what we know about older boys and young men is sufficient or even appropriate to use as a guide in designing interventions for young children. Third, given the increased attention to the importance of early childhood education, and new proposals at the federal and local levels to develop initiatives

in this area, it is surprising that so little attention has been paid to the experiences and needs of Black boys in preschool and elementary school contexts. For all of our concern about the so-called achievement gap and the "crisis" of Black males in education (Brown, 2011; Howard, 2013), we devote most of our scholarly attention to understanding what happens and how to intervene several years after disparities in educational outcomes are already apparent. As James Earl Davis (2008) notes, "The early educational experiences of African American boys are by far the most important in the developmental trajectory of achievement throughout school" (p. 523). The limited research that does exist reveals that Black boys are treated differently than other students as early as kindergarten, have lower levels of literacy, and tend to be overenrolled in lower-ability classrooms, contributing to academic disengagement as early as the third or fourth grade (Davis, 2008; Kunjufu, 1986).

Clearly, we advocate for more research on, and programs for, young Black boys. However, our aim here is to address what we see as the broader challenge: not merely the limited number of young Black research subjects but the denial of subjectivity itself—that is, the right of Black boys to self-determine, to speak for themselves, to imagine their own present and presence in the world. The paucity of research on younger Black boys is merely a symptom of the broader *unimaginability* of Black boyhood.

We begin our analysis of the unimaginability of Black boyhood with a discussion of critical childhood studies, highlighting themes that promise to help us shift our historical and cultural-ideological imagination of Black children in general and Black boys more specifically. We then turn to the crisis-oriented social science literature on the education of Black males, not so much to offer an exhaustive review but to explain the difficulty of locating (younger) Black boys and Black boyhood within the dominant frames of impending manhood and preparation for career and college trajectories. Finally, we consider what might be possible for education research, practice, and policy if we can (re) imagine Black boyhood in more humanizing and expansive ways.

Critical Interventions in Childhood Studies

Critical childhood studies advance the idea that the meaning of childhood is always fluid, shifting, and responsive to cultural struggle and deliberation (Stephens, 1995; Wyness, 2012). This transdisciplinary field seeks to complement the traditional developmentalist approach, in which children are generally socialized by other (mostly adult) actors and by their environment. While critical childhood scholars do not deny the significance of both biological and psychosocial development, they argue that children themselves act on their environment in ways that impact their own development and the social world(s) around them. In this sense, then, critical childhood studies are a response to developmentalism, which prioritizes how adults intervene to affect children's behavior during normative phases or stages of natural growth

(Meacham, 2004). As Valerie Polakow (1992) lamented in an important early monograph:

> In the modern era of childhood, when every stage from infancy to adolescence is measured and demarcated with fine technological precision . . . children as young as a year old now enter childhood institutions to be formally schooled in the ways of the social system and emerge eighteen years later to enter the world of adulthood having been deprived of their own history-making power, their ability to act upon the world in significant and meaningful ways. (p. 8)

Critical childhood studies, by foregrounding the agency of children and interrogating the presumed rightness of adult interventions, imagine a childhood in which the very meaning of childhood is informed by how children themselves express its meaning. Even so, scholars realize that various cultural-ideological forces powerfully shape the discourse on childhood and exercise material control of children's bodies in ways that (most often) contain and constrain children's ability to act on their worlds.

Some critical childhood scholars have even suggested that childhood is nothing but discursive, its meaning only determined by language. However, this radical constructivist notion has been appropriately critiqued for not taking into account the experiences of children—that is, the material conditions within which childhood is lived and embodied (Stephens, 1995; Wyness, 2012). We argue that the discursive focus is a valuable but incomplete way of understanding children. It is *also* meaningful that children are in developing bodies (Erikson, 1963), are more vulnerable physically, and occupy less-powerful social positions. As David Archard (2004) contends, "Childhood is a period of immaturity understood in a particular way. A child is a young human being whose youth is interpreted differently across different societies and different historical periods" (p. 26). It is exactly because children are developing and materially vulnerable that they have limited access to resources which allow them to influence how they are imagined in society and what is done to and with their bodies.

Critical childhood studies privilege the perspectives of children and places "emphasis on children's opportunities to influence the socialization activities directed at them" (Närvänen & Näsman, 2004, p. 72). Scholars in this field are attentive to social and economic forces that facilitate or impede children's agency. Family income, neighborhood resources, and access to and quality of child care and schooling, among other factors, affect children's ability to act on their social environment and *how* they are able to act. Thus, the materiality of children's lives impacts how children construct their own childhoods and how all of us imagine what it means to be a child and, to the point of this article, *who* can be a child. Although the dominant developmentalist paradigm also takes into account social factors like economic status and neighborhood effects, these are most often considered factors that shape children's growth and are not explored as dynamics informed by children as agential actors.

If we also consider *where* children live much of their lives, we are moved to critique schooling as a site in which childhood is constructed through the instruction, surveillance, and disciplining of children. We might turn a critical eye toward the fact that children have little choice in attending school, are required to learn in large groups, and participate in repetitive rituals. They must concede to authorities not of their choosing and are subject to continuous judgment about their academic performance and behavior. The point here is not that schooling is inherently oppressive, although schooling does play a certain controlling function for individuals and society (Anyon, 1981; Ferguson, 2001; Fine, 1991; Tuck, 2013; Willis, 1977); rather, children have little power over or voice in most of their daily activities in school. They certainly have their own interpretations of what is happening to them in schools and often resist school practices and hidden curricula (Giroux & Penna, 1983). However, schooling is heavily informed by hegemonic notions of childhood and is often unresponsive and even hostile to the needs and desires of children themselves (Chu, 2014; Ferguson, 2001; Heath, 1983; Lareau, 2003; Orellana, 2009; Stephens, 1995).

In so many ways, adults determine the boundaries of children's social worlds. And to be sure, parents, educators, policy makers, and researchers are motivated, in part, by valid concerns about protecting children, transmitting values and habits, and preparing them to lead productive lives. Even so, recognizing children as social beings should lead us to shift our scholarly analysis, our politics, and our practice in ways that respond to children's rights and interests and to listen to what children can teach us about being a child in the world.

More than just valuing children's voices, the charge in critical childhood studies is to understand that children's individual and collective perspectives on their lived experiences can (and should) shape what childhood means and how its meaning transforms over time and in different spaces (James, 2004; Wyness, 2012). A critical approach also highlights how material, economic, and cultural-ideological forces constrain children's freedom and devalue their subjectivity as social actors (Wallace, in press).

The Implausibility of Black Childhoods

If children in general are materially vulnerable, and their perspectives and social worlds seldom acknowledged in public and policy discourse, it is no surprise that Black children are among the most invisible, the most underrepresented and misrepresented, of all. Beginning in slavery, Black boys and girls were imagined as chattel and were often put to work as young as two and three years old (King, 2005). Subjected to much of the same dehumanization suffered by Black adults, Black children were rarely perceived as being worthy of playtime and were severely punished for exhibiting normal childlike behaviors.

We contend that this imagination of Black children still holds. Under neo-liberal education reform (Au, 2008; Lipman, 2011), policy makers and the general public have privileged Black educational attainment (as narrowly assessed by high-stakes test scores) and zero-tolerance surveillance (Nolan, 2011) over and above Black children's happiness and creative exploration of themselves and their social worlds. In short, Black boys and girls are imagined not as real children but as suspect Black bodies for whom the broader public need have little compassion or connection.

For example, in October 2015 a white police officer in a South Carolina high school violently flipped a Black student out of her desk and dragged her across the room in front of her classmates (Lacour, 2015). As the video went viral, and even as the officer was fired, public debate centered on the extent to which the child's misbehavior made her culpable for the violent assault by the officer. Although it is difficult to prove that a white child would not have been subjected to this same kind of brutal treatment, we suggest that white children are not under such heavy police surveillance as Black children; nor is it as likely that we would witness similar defenses of such dehumanizing treatment against a white child (Young, 2015).

This lack of public patience for Black children's (childlike) insubordination is seemingly justified by the outcome of the last two presidential campaigns. Shortly after the election of Barack Obama in 2008, a number of commentators across the political spectrum began to insist that the election of the nation's first Black president meant that Black children—and particularly Black boys—now had "no excuses" for misbehavior or low academic achievement (Reed & Louis, 2009), because his election should signal to these children that there were no longer any barriers to their success and that racism was no longer a burden they had to bear. This argument was and is troubling, first of all, because it suggests that racial barriers are principally psychological rather than material and ideological. This "no excuses" discourse suggests that Black people have had little reason to complain all along, or at least not since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and then dismisses the genuine suffering and malaise experienced by Black children in schools, as if children just need to bear the burden of it all without complaint, without faltering (Bourdieu & Champagne, 1999; Dumas, 2014).

We do not mean to suggest that schooling is only misery and drudgery for Black children. However, "no excuses" has become our collective public response to these children, particularly for Black boys who "act out" in response to their mistreatment by school adults. Rigid gender norms and the unimaginability of Black boys as children compound to delegitimize these boys' right to experience fear or anger or sadness, to be anything but "tough." In doing so, researchers, educators, and policy makers fail to adequately acknowledge that schooling becomes a site of suffering for too many young Black boys. Davis (2008) contends:

For many of them, schools ignore their aspirations, disrespect their ability to learn, fail to access and cultivate their many talents, and impose a restrictive range of their options. Within this overwhelming oppressive schooling context, too many Black boys simply give up—beaten by school systems that place little value on who they are and what they offer. (p. 533)

Unfortunately, our inability or unwillingness to see Black boys as children leads us to blame *them* rather than ask what we can do to address the pain and isolation they feel.

To the extent that Black childhood is unimagined—and worse, unimaginable—Black children become responsible for their own school failures, regardless of maldistribution of economic and educational resources (Anyon, 1997, 2005; Noguera, 2003). The cultural discourse, as exemplified by the no-excuses response to President Obama's election, focuses more on the individual choices Black children make, even as elementary school students, rather than on their vulnerability to inequitable social and economic policy or racism. With regard to Black boys, the public and even scholars, to some degree, become preoccupied with order and discipline, paying minimal or no attention to boys' experiences of play or peer friendships or caring. Black boys become little more than "apprentice men" (Luttrell, 2012, p. 189) and, as such, cannot "blame" the structure of racism or urban political economy for their condition or for their low educational outcomes. Childhood itself must be put aside, and these boys must become men.

Black Male Research in Education and the Social Sciences

Our collective preoccupation with (future) Black manhood has also shaped the body of educational research on Black males. In a historical review of the social science and education research on Black males, Anthony Brown (2011) details the prevalent and persistent discourses that have shaped public consciousness. As early as the 1930s, Brown finds, the narrative about Black males centered largely on perceived pathology and difference mostly during adolescence and young adulthood. From earlier analyses of Black male powerlessness and emasculation to more recent studies documenting the "crisis" in Black male socialization, achievement, and mobility, the dominant tropes have been deficit and deviance. Recent research, Brown concludes, offers little more than a retelling of the "same old stories" in which Black males are "hypermasculine and oppositional to the norms and expectations of schools and society" and "psychologically powerless individuals who expressed manhood through pathological means" (p. 2068).

Concurring with Brown, Tyrone Howard (2013) laments that Black males are constructed in education research as a "problem" not only for schools but also for society at large. Howard notes that research has failed to give adequate attention to Black males who are not urban and poor and has not richly docu-

mented the experiences of high-achieving Black male students. Highlighting exemplars of *non*-deficit-focused research, Howard argues for more research on the resilience of Black males, focusing on their successful efforts "navigating difficult terrain, and how they address the life challenges inside and outside of school" (p. 78).

The arguments made by Brown and Howard are important in their own right and are consistent with calls by other scholars (Bristol, 2015; Brockenbrough, 2012; Carter, 2005; Dance, 2002; Fergus, Noguera, & Martin, 2014; Harper, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2011; Warren, Douglas, & Howard, forthcoming; Young, 2006) for a more complex, strengths-based approach to inquiry on Black young men and boys. Our concern is that Black boys and Black boyhood are mostly absent from the scholarly literature on the education of Black males. The focus on the crisis of Black males in education, and even the attention given to critiquing the crisis narrative, keeps our gaze focused on adolescence and adulthood. The preoccupation with issues such as incarceration, joblessness, and college readiness—the sites of crisis for schools and society—means that our primary interest in Black boys is ensuring that they have more productive *future* lives as teens and young men.

For example, in practice with younger boys, this emphasis on crisis and risk may result in more attention to perceived behavioral problems than to learning-related objectives and opportunities for self-expression (Matthews, Kizzie, Rowley, & Cortina, 2010). Other research reveals that one predictor of academic gains in young Black boys is the extent to which parents engage them in discussions about their racial/ethnic heritage; like all children, Black boys are "intrinsically interested in science, discovery and exploration" (Emanique & Davis, 2009, p. 271; see also Howard, Rose, & Barbarin, in press), suggesting once again the need to more deeply investigate the educational and social experiences of young Black boys *now*, in and out of school. Glynda Hull and colleagues (2006) suggest the need for more educational spaces that provide opportunities for self-exploration and expression. Their data reveal that afterschool programs can offer Black boys and other boys of color freedom from some of the constrictions of school environments, where their racial and gender identities and their identities and movements as students are often fixed and suffocating.

Ann Arnett Ferguson's (2001) ethnography, *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity,* does capture the worldviews and lived experiences of elementary school–age Black boys. However, the focus is on how "Troublemakers" construct meaning around their academic performance and identities within the context of school discipline policies and practices. This suggests, once again, that the public interest in Black boys' lives is usually related to some anxiety about their perceived maladaptive "bad boy" behaviors—not because we are particularly interested in the pain or insecurities they may be experiencing as children but because of our preoccupation with Black

males having a "jail cell with [their] name on it" (Ferguson, 2001, p. 1), making them the embodiment of lawlessness and violence.

In research and in public discourse, the cultural signification of "Black male" anticipates and *pre*constructs crisis in the lives of young Black boys. It privileges problems and prevention efforts (Carey, 2015; Jackson, Sealey-Ruiz, & Watson, 2014; Watson, Sealey-Ruiz, & Jackson, 2014) and pushes aside other desires expressed by Black boys in their social worlds. Even when researchers focus on the academic, social, and emotional strengths of Black males, what they count as strengths are those skills and attributes that will improve success in higher education or the world of work. Thus, there is little imaginative space in Black male research for the exploration of creativity or friendships or play (Chu, 2014; Way, 2013). These are not things that Black males, as discursively constructed, (need or get to) do. In some sense, of course, *all* children are impacted by this "erosion of childhood" (Polakow, 1992). However, young Black males are uniquely affected by this preoccupation with later success because of public fears that, without extreme intervention, they will either be a danger to, or an economic drain on, society. Here, then, the raced and gendered preconstruction of "Black male" contributes to greater scrutiny of Black boys' own desires and creative expressions as somehow in conflict with achievement and social mobility.

One of the priorities in Black male education research is identifying findings that will lead to actionable recommendations for school practice. Of course, crisis-centered research questions and theoretical lenses lead to proposals that focus on stemming perceived and anticipated crises, and the authors of these studies may not intend for their research to be applied in work with younger children. Yet, all we have is the discursive "Black males," and inevitably then, since we have no imagination of Black boys that is distinct from what is *over*-signified by this term, practitioners and policy makers make reference to this literature in discussions of interventions at the elementary level and even in early childhood education programs. This research alerts us to challenges Black boys may face later in life; it tells us little about their lives now or what we need to do to address their needs as children.

The difficulty in locating a place for Black boys in education research is due to a cultural-political anxiety about adult Black males that offers a very narrow time frame for childhood, which then informs the treatment of Black boys in educational settings. As Gloria Ladson-Billings (2011) notes, "The paradox of Black boys' experiences in school and society is that mainstream perceptions of them vacillate between making them babies and making them men" (p. 10). She theorizes that when Black boys are very young, they are *infantilized,* regarded as adorable but not necessarily intelligent or capable. While all children may be infantilized to some extent, it is Black boys who are most likely to be associated with apes, particularly in the white imagination. Thus, this is a kind of infantilization unique to Black boys, one in which they are not merely

treated as babies (of the human sort) but are also imagined as (unpredictably) wild and limited in their educability.

Similarly, Ferguson (2001) contends that as early as the second or third grade, Black boys are *criminalized,* which, like "adultification," acts to construct Black boys as a problem and threat in need of control and ensures that "their transgressions are made to take on a sinister, intentional, fully conscious tone that is stripped of any element of childish naïveté" (p. 83). Although research on Black males can counter this tendency to criminalize or adultify Black male students, unless scholars are equally vigilant in examining Black boyhood, we may be complicit in reinforcing this perception of school-age Black males as already men. And worse—to the extent that Black males of all ages are dehumanized, even manhood may not be fully available. This places Black boys and adolescents in this liminal space: certainly not children but accorded none of the legitimacy or regard of those with adult status, *only the culpability*. Thus, the adultification of Black male children and youth, as documented in the literature, is no guarantee of social or human recognition.

However, we are not naïve. It is precisely because of a long history of subjugation of, and societal disrespect toward, Black men that scholars and activists have been so attentive to ensuring that Black boys have clear pathways to manhood. Indeed, "boy" has long been a stinging, racist insult hurled at Black men, regardless of age or status. To the extent that schooling is preparation for the rest of one's life, it becomes a site for researchers to interrogate how the culture of schools and the practices of administrators and teachers facilitate or impede the development of Black boys into men. We caution that, at times, the "boys into men" discourse can devolve into a defense of a patriarchal Black masculinity (Cose, 2002) in which the aim is to train up particular kinds of Black men who can reclaim their "rightful" position at the head of the Black family and community (Collins, 2005; hooks, 1981). From this view, boyhood can become not only a waste of time but also a threat to a certain (masculinist) notion of Black upward mobility. A critical intervention is needed, one that neither prescribes nor romanticizes a fixed notion of Black male identity but that instead privileges how Black boys imagine and express their own senses of self.

Black Boys *Are* Silly, and So Much More: (Re)Imagining Black Boyhood

What becomes possible if we begin to see Black boys anew, as children, with all the agency and freedom envisioned in critical notions of childhood and without the anxiety and sense of limitation brought to bear on Black boys in educational research and everyday discourse on Black males? We suggest that a reimagining of Black boyhood challenges us to think creatively about how to create and nurture spaces for Black boys so that they can self-determine and shape their own worldviews. Such spaces are equally important for adoles-

cent Black males. Indeed, a commitment to protecting (young) Black boyhood makes it that much easier to understand all Black youth as still vulnerable to adult repression and still worthy of spaces to just *be* and be in *their* now. Prioritizing the social, emotional, and educational needs and interests of Black boys over and above dismal social and educational statistics about Black males shifts our attention to considering how schools can be sites of discovery and joy for Black boys. A reimagining of Black boyhood also makes space for Black gender-nonconforming and gay/queer/questioning boys who may also benefit from a more expansive possibility of who Black boys can be (Brockenbrough, 2014; McCready, 2004).

Reimagining Black boyhood allows us to reflect more critically on pervasive "no excuses" discourses in general, specifically as these get articulated in relation to Black boys and operationalized in harsh and inequitable discipline practices (Ferguson, 2001; Monroe, 2005) and in classroom pedagogies that focus more on keeping boys on task than on assessing whether curricula and teaching practices are engaging and intended to inspire boys' passion to explore new ideas and discover worlds of knowledge for themselves.

When we acknowledge that Black boys have legitimate fears, frustrations, and sadness about their lived experiences in school, we might challenge ourselves to think about our roles in protecting Black boys, in defending them from a host of assaults on their bodies and spirits. Schools, community centers, neighborhoods, and families must be places that are less concerned with, for instance, the discipline and control of Black male bodies and more concerned with being places where Black boys can giggle, play, cry, pout, and be just as silly and frivolous as other children without these activities being perceived as an impediment to their educational attainment or a threat to the well-being of others.

Implications for Educational Research

In part, we are calling for more empirical research on (*and with*) Black boys during early and middle childhood. Such an effort, in and of itself, would contribute significantly to disrupting restrictive imaginations of Black males in education. To be abundantly clear, however, beyond simply increasing the *number* of studies on Black boys, we are advocating for a radical (re)imagination of Black boyhood itself. That is, it is not enough to simply include younger boys within our already existing frameworks for understanding Black males.

A critical framework allows for, and even insists that we pose, research questions that help us capture the meaningfulness of childhood in, of, and for itself. Such work holds that if Black boys' curiosity and creativity are nurtured, if Black boys are cared for, then we have established a necessary and promising foundation for whatever may come later in their lives. All Black males need boyhoods: the foundational passion for learning, first of all, and then an ongoing scholarly and public interest in how Black males continue to find new inspirations for that passion throughout all their years of schooling. In

this sense, boyhood (and boyhood research) should never stop, and it is not limited to a specific life phase. That is, while boyhood is a construct most identified with the years of early to middle childhood, we suggest that memories of a rich, meaningful boyhood—and the experience of having our boyhoods acknowledged and embraced—serve us as Black men throughout our lives, and keep us connected to creativity, wonderment, and play.

Scholars with a special or vested interest in Black males should consider the pursuit of research projects that focus on the educational experiences of younger Black boys and that are situated within early childhood centers, elementary school communities, and home environments. Of course, researchers may have a particular interest in adolescents; we are in no way discouraging projects that focus on older Black male youth. Our hope is that more scholars with an interest in the lives of Black males conduct research at the nexus of Black male research and critical childhood studies.

A critical childhood studies lens enables educational researchers concerned with Black males to conduct empirical studies that (1) disregard deficit-based interpretative frameworks and employ more asset-based approaches, which strive to recognize the strengths, promise, and potential of research participants; (2) establish research approaches that more thoroughly grapple with the complexity and nuance of Black boys' schooling experiences (Howard, 2013), as well as render more authentic portrayals of boys' lives overall; and (3) embed counter-storytelling and narrative inquiry within these new frameworks and approaches, whereby boys' experiential knowledge of their education is considered an invaluable resource. Sadly, the voices of young Black boys are deafeningly silent in much research; their lived perspectives are essential to developing new research frameworks for deep examination, analysis, and understanding of their education (Chu, 2014; Hucks, 2014; Noguera, 2008; Reichert & Hawley, 2014; Way, 2013). Researchers therefore need to fundamentally (re)design empirical studies to explicitly ask boys who they are, what they think, and what they desire in their lives *now*.

Implications for Everyday School Practice

Reimagining Black boyhood has the potential to transform schools into sites of possibility for Black boys. For example, scholars have recently called for more relational strategies at school—a set of teaching strategies to facilitate positive learning relationships among boys and their schoolteachers—to first challenge deficit-based conceptions of boys as nonrelational (i.e., independent and autonomous), which distort teachers' efforts to meet boys' distinct learning needs and, second, facilitate all boys' learning and development (Chu, 2014; Reichert & Hawley, 2010, 2014) and the positive schooling experience of Black boys specifically (Fergus et al., 2014; Knight, 2014; Nelson, 2015). The asset-based perspectives of boyhood embedded in relational schooling is a stance taken by school adults to recognize boys' full capacities, which allows for boys to just be and be seen in their learning relationships with teachers.

When Black boys are seen, it is only then that teachers and administrators can begin to understand their play and silliness as not a threat to be disciplined away. In turn, this new understanding enables, for instance, school discipline to take a necessary and more restorative form (Noguera, 2008; Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2010), such as privileging boys' perspectives related to their school behavior and thoroughly considering the insights garnered from boys to ensure that school discipline practices are more meaningful and effective. When discipline matters arise, they should be viewed as opportunities to learn, with school professionals collaborating with parents and boys to determine a supportive response. Social traumas related to the intersections of race, class, and gender are thoroughly examined when disciplinary infractions arise and, most critically, boys' perspectives are considered integral to the delicate learning process.

Implications for Social and Education Policy

Reimagining Black boyhood also affects how we think about policy interventions at the national and local levels. We focus briefly here on My Brother's Keeper (MBK) because it is perhaps the most prominent current federal policy initiative related to Black males, and it also powerfully reflects and shapes national popular and policy discourse on Black boys and young men.

President Obama announced MBK in February 2014 as a means to provide boys and young men of color "who work hard and play by the rules" (My Brother's Keeper Task Force, 2014, p. 11) the "support they need to think more broadly about their future" (White House, 2014). As a partnership between government, business, nonprofit, and philanthropy sectors, MBK aims to encourage efforts to improve the academic engagement and performance of boys and young men of color, to increase their participation in the workforce, and to reduce levels of violence and incarceration. When announcing MBK, the Obama administration touted a number of mentoring programs, including one sponsored by the National Basketball League and another funded by AT&T. The administration also announced increased funding for a program called Becoming a Man, or BAM, a mentoring and cognitive behavioral therapy program developed by a nonprofit called Youth Guidance.

Within MBK, younger Black boys are targeted most directly with recommendations for early childhood interventions: improving vocabulary, increasing access to quality programs, implementing more accurate processes for special education placement, and eliminating suspensions in the early grades (My Brother's Keeper Task Force, 2014). These are all important goals—but, again, the emphasis is solely on developmental and academic tasks. The kind of radical reimagination of Black boyhood we offer here would make space for new kinds of interventions focused on ensuring that Black boys actually enjoy and hunger for learning and exploration and have access to culturally relevant and sustaining curricula (Baldridge, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012) and skilled teachers, administrators, and afterschool educators who love

them and value their human potential. But there is no language or stated aspirations to this effect in the MBK report.

Kimberlé Crenshaw (2014, July 29), in her sharp critique of the exclusion of girls in MBK and, more specifically, is troubled by the location of the problem in Black males rather than "the conditions in which marginalized communities of color must live." If we reimagine what it means to be "my brother's keeper" in a way that honors Black boyhood, we might begin with Crenshaw's critique. Here, she isn't merely calling for the inclusion of girls in MBK but, rather, for a shift from programs that target Black males for mentorship and motivation to serious policies that address the material conditions that shape everyday lives and opportunities for Black families. In this way, we begin to think about the rights of Black boys (and girls) to safe neighborhoods, health care, and food, which means we have to think about how we support Black parents and sustain the communities that strive to be (home)places of shelter and nurturance for Black children. A critical childhood lens leads us to push back against the primary focus on mentorship, with its lens on individual self-regulation and achievement. Much of the discourse on mentoring already predetermines Black boys as lacking guidance, role models, and values; the adult is there to provide these supports for the child.

Might we (re)imagine that Black boys themselves already possess values, interests, and ideas and use these as the bases for establishing meaningful relationships with them? Might we also aim to create spaces for Black boys to interact with each other and with Black girls and other children—spaces that support vibrant social worlds for children to advance and articulate their own needs, joys, and even demands of adults, schools, and government? In the announcement of MBK, there is little language on the importance of listening to children. Nor is there anything in the structure of the initiatives designed to facilitate honoring children's perspectives on their lives in communities, families, and schools or to offer children a voice in the design, implementation, or assessment of MBK. Social and educational policy that genuinely recognizes Black boyhood almost necessarily reimagines how policy is engaged and analyzed by everyone from policy makers to community partners to academic researchers.

Policy formation and implementation processes that center on Black boyhood necessarily involve Black boys as active participants, but they first seek their knowledge about the nature of the "problem" to be addressed by policy. This, of course, means that policy makers and educational leaders must refuse to see the problem as located within Black boys or as somehow precipitated by the presence of Black boys. As such, the problems experienced by Black boys must be understood as primarily structural and institutional, rather than psychological and attitudinal. In some cases it will be important to understand interventions for and with Black boys within the context of community or family supports, rather than isolating boys as if they exist or thrive outside of, and despite, communities and families. In other cases, policies may need

to respond more specifically to the gendered and social-emotional needs of young Black boys.

In the end, we agree with other scholars (Howard, 2013; Hucks, 2014; Noguera, 2008; Wright, 2011) who contend that more research is needed on how Black males construct their identities at the intersections of race, class, and gender and within the structural and cultural forces of school. Rather than simply designing interventions aimed at "correcting" Black youth behavior and attitude, the first attempt should be to understand the perspectives of Black males so that we gain a keener sense of their social and academic motivations, their friendship networks, and their performances of race and gender. The perspectives of *younger* Black boys, in part, have been largely ignored because of skepticism about whether young children are old enough to be social and cultural actors. More, the preoccupation with the "crisis" of Black manhood positions Black boyhood as beside the point. If educational researchers commit to a critical (re)imagining of Black boyhood, there can be a shift in the public discourse on Black males, and this may provide the knowledge needed to support schools that not only teach Black boys well but also are willing to learn from and be shaped by all children, from their first days forward.

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