

“TO BE YOUNG, GIFTED, AND BLACK”

A Journey to Manhood, Mediating Middle-class Status and Masculinity at Morehouse College
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Black college men, in pursuit of social and professional advancement, often suppress authentic expressions of their identity because of America's white middle-class hegemonic concept of masculinity. When attempting to reflect normative behaviors of white heterosexual men, while maintaining a sense of authenticity, young Black men often exist in states of double-consciousness. Young Black men often modify their behaviors and stifle feelings that reflect their genuine nature because professional and academic success has long been associated with whiteness. Consequently, a college education has continuously served as the primary cultural marker of upward mobility for Black men.

Saida Grundy in her ethnographic study, “‘An Air of Expectancy’: Class, Crisis, and the Making of Manhood at a Historically Black College for Men,” explores the formations of masculinity among students at Morehouse College, a historically Black all-male college, and the implications of the institution's synonymous view with upward mobility for Black men because of its national reputation for consistently producing substantial numbers of distinguished professionals (46). As a result, Morehouse has become “The College Choice for Black Men,” attracting young men of the Black middle and elite class, as a steppingstone to achieving their “American Dream,” a fanciful objective rarely applicable to the experience of Black men in America.

Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays, the college's longest serving and most prominent president asserts, “there is an air of expectancy at Morehouse College...It is expected that once a man bears the insignia of a Morehouse Graduate, he will do exceptionally well.” The “men of Morehouse” must determine for themselves what it means to meet the expectations of an institution defining its mission entirely in the terms of manhood (44). The institution's crafting of manhood is equated with heteronormativity and middle-class status, stifling the comfortable exploration of non-heteronormative identity expressions. Morehouse ought to create an open and inclusive environment, allowing the exploration of all identity intersections, a clarion call made by Danté Pelzer, in his scholarly journal article to all historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), *Creating a New Narrative: Reframing Black Masculinity for College Men*, thereby granting students the opportunity to reconcile

and mediate the multiple expressions of their masculinity.

The Black male experience in America has long been affixed to White supremacy, and society continuously measures Black men against a set of norms based on a middle-class heterosexual model (Pelzer 18). As a means of securing class advancement, Black elites during the Jim Crow era adopted dominant values and behaviors of whites, especially as they pertain to respectability and gender (Collins). The gendered notions that arose from Black elites' emphasis on the patriarchal family as the cornerstone of Black progress and adherence to a bourgeois morality has repeatedly centered Black male leadership as the political vehicle to class mobility and race betterment (Gaines). The trend of class socialization and gender ideologies among the affluent subset of Black people in America, particularly in the South, contextualizes why the "favored sons of the Black elite" are sent to Morehouse, to "[forge] the identities of Black male professionals" (Grundy 47). At Morehouse, Black manhood is mapped onto performances of racial respectability and middle-class identity, thereby reinforcing hegemonic masculinity and social class indoctrination within the campus (West and Zimmerman). As a result of the institution's effort to craft its sons to represent and embody normative Black male respectability, the "men of Morehouse" are unable to construct and negotiate their meanings of race, class, and masculinity.

The institution's cultural emphasis on performative respectability directly stems from America's concept of hegemonic masculinity, subjugating non-heterosexual individuals. Any non-heteronormative expression of sexual identity is disassociated with themes surrounding Black masculinity because of the perception that one is a man when dating and pursuing romantic or sexual relationships with women, a trend found in a qualitative study analyzing Black college men's perception of their masculinity (Harper). At Morehouse, it is encouraged, and in some ways, almost expected its "beaus" will engage in romantic relationships, and perhaps, marry one of the equally yoked "belles" of Spelman College, the unofficial sister institution and a historically Black college for women. The reinforcement of the suggestive patriarchal model is one of the underlying reasons Morehouse fails to consider non-heteronormative sexual identities applicable to the mold of the quintessential renaissance "man of Morehouse."

Morehouse prepares its men to be pillars within their communities and leaders within society, but a non-heteronormative expression of one's sexual identity is viewed as inconsistent with the archetypal successful Black man. The Black community's notion of positive expressions of Black masculinity exclusively includes examples of men, living lives of leadership and service exemplified in prominent or notable career choices possessing wives and children. The pressure to adhere to traditional gender norms to eventually qualify as a true "Morehouse Man" causes "men of Morehouse" to navigate their sexual identity silently. The College must create spaces where it is acceptable to voice struggles of one's sexual identity and employ the use of counter-narratives as a way for the "Men of Morehouse" to begin re-considering and re-authoring the skin they are in, prompting them to discern their life's mission and preparing them to impart meaningful impact in society.

When spaces are created for Black college men to re-imagine, mediate, and restore the multiple expressions of their masculinity, they are emboldened to explore the intersections of their multiple identities, without crafting personas that conform or assimilate to the status quo. As a result, a newfound confidence can be birthed within young Black men, thereby enabling them to become comfortable with writing their narratives, and effectively empowering them to claim their cultural heritages, sexualities, gender orientations, and religious backgrounds in more profound ways than before. The ability to construct identities that are more honest and reflective of one's self leads individuals to distinguish their life's work and contribution to the world, walking daringly in their destiny. This exploration propels one to be more soluble in their identity and affirm their complexities. Morehouse College must allow their "men of Morehouse" to openly and fully explore the varying expressions of their masculinities, including their sexual identities, thereby serving as a source of empowerment, to be content with one being their true and genuine self when seeking upward mobility and attempting to institute positive change within the world.

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