The Disestablishment of African American Male Compliant Ambiguity: A Prison Pipeline Essay

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Abstract

There is an apex to each day, a climax, where a decision is made, and a falling action is the result of that decision. Recommendations to combat the never-ending struggle of my invisibility are derived from culturally relevant and culturally responsive frameworks, resiliency frameworks, and ethical caring frameworks. Without systemic reform in local educational settings that includes local teachers, administrators, parents, and students providing new conceptual frameworks for learner and teacher efficacy, the African American male learner will persistently encounter crucial conflicts throughout the School to Prison pipeline while entering a space that has been rendered invisible due to the focus on policy that perpetuates the pipeline. This essay shows that every day when African American boys enter the pipeline, we are faced with two distinct conflicts—Man vs. Man and Man vs. Self—as we navigate an invisible space, compliant ambiguity.

Keywords: African American, Black, compliant ambiguity, conflict, invisible

Introduction

[1] I am invisible. Invisible as a result of how I am defined by others, how I define myself, and how others define me historically. I awake this morning, as I do each morning, with hope and aspirations for making it through the day. My journey through the day is filled with choices I would prefer not to have, decisions I would rather someone else make, and triumphs that seem to always be just out of grasp. I walk through each day in heavy contemplation, wondering if the next turn I take may be my last or if it may lead to incarceration or ridicule.

There are expectations laid out for me in my home, in my community, among my peers, and inside the school or classroom. "In America I [am] part of an equation – even if it [isn't] a part I relish…I am [not] just a father but the father of a [B]lack boy. I [am] not just a spouse but the husband of a [B]lack woman, a freighted symbol of [B]lack love" (Coates, 2015, p. 124). However, the expectations within my community represent a stark contrast to the expectations when I enter the school or classroom; I am invisible as I enter these spaces. My family and friends express the norms of my community. The school, on the other hand, represents a puzzle, a conundrum, a paradox, and a foreign land that I haven't yet learned to navigate—even in adulthood. There are rules that have not been clearly articulated, to which I have neither contributed nor consented. I am rendered invisible.

Without systemic reform in local educational settings to include local teachers, administrators, parents, and students providing new conceptual frameworks for learner and teacher efficacy, African American male learners will persistently encounter crucial conflicts throughout the school to prison pipeline while entering a space that has been

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[1] "I" is used throughout the essay even though there are two authors.

rendered invisible due to the focus on policies that perpetuate the pipeline—a systemic and social metaphor where African American male children are three times as likely to be suspended or expelled from school versus their White peers. This proven phenomenon results in African American males being three times as likely to drop out and enter the justice system prior to graduating high school, a trend that continues into adulthood. The mass incarceration of African American males in the United States due to the criminalization of drug addiction in the 1980s plus zero tolerance school policy reform of the 1990s has perpetuated a pipeline from school to prison that is not only difficult to navigate, but also nearly impossible to escape (Alexander, 2010).

The authors of this essay are both African American males. Therefore, this essay speaks from that perspective, showing that every day African American males enter the pipeline faced with two distinct conflicts—Man vs. Man and Man vs. Self—as we navigate an invisible space, *compliant ambiguity*. We speak from a first person singular perspective. Our purpose in this approach is to reflect upon our unique perspective as African American male learners and examine how our decisions positively and negatively impact our reality. In either case, our decisions are commonly perceived as incorrect and often problematic.

Background

Some children come to school with the rules already understood, even if only implicitly. The same holds true in the work life of professionals. Because I am an African American male, I do not know these rules. The rules were created without any thought of me or any concern of how these rules would impact my well-being. I am invisible. I do not exist. "When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me" (Ellison, 1980, p. 3). My uniqueness in speech, movement, and experience does not permit me to be successful under these conditions. Whereas the rules of the classroom and the corporate office are set up to be analytical and topic centered (competitive and individually focused), the African American male is conditioned very differently within his home, community, and among his peer group to be relational and topic chained (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Carter, N.P., Hawkins, T.N., and Nateson, P., 2008; Neil, L.I., McCrary, A.D., Webb-Johnson, G., & Bridgest, S.T., 2003). The analytical orientation is usually how White students learn versus African American students' relational orientation. "Aspects of analytic style can be found in the requirements that the pupil learn to sit for increasingly long periods of time, to concentrate alone on impersonal stimuli, and to observe and value organized time allotment schedules" (as cited in Hale, 1986, p. 34).

As a result, how I represent myself, carry myself, and express myself has created a conflict. This conflict is external to me and a consequence of my existence. Due to my uniqueness as an African American male, I am in conflict with others who look like me, others who do not, and, most interestingly, those who are supposed to be providing support, nurturance, and guidance—the school and the school personnel. However, I am unseen. "It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often rather wearing on the nerves. Then too, you're constantly being bumped by those of poor vision" (Ellison, 1980 p. 4). The conflict becomes more apparent as I grow older. "I did not master the streets, because I could read the body language quick enough. I could not master the schools, because I could not see where any of it could possibly lead" (Coates, 2015, p. 115). I am being led to a predestined invisible space unseen due to my navigation of the school to prison pipeline—from here forward known simply as *the pipeline*.

Manifestations of conflict

This conflict has manifested itself in multiple forms—dropout rates, suspension rates, special education referrals—and it is a battle that I know I am losing. Furthermore, this outer conflict, which I shall refer to as Man vs. Man, has now become focused inwardly. There is an inner turmoil eating at my spirit. However, there is no identity conflict, even though according to Robinson (2000) I am believed to have low self-esteem, self-hatred, and a negative racial identity (as cited in K. Michelle Scott, 2003, p. 104). I do not wake up hating myself, nor do I hate my race as the research on Black-on-Black crime indicates. According to Rubenstein (2016), from 1980 to 2016, 93% of crimes against Blacks were committed by other Blacks. Massie (2016) highlights that "64% of respondents to a 'YouGov' survey believe that intra-communal violence is a bigger problem for Black Americans than other minority groups." In other words, if I am in a school or community consisting mostly of other Blacks, I am most likely to lash out at other Blacks. Yet, if I am in a school or community where the majority of my peers are non-Black, I will likely lash out at those individuals also. During the same period, 87% of crimes against Whites were committed by other Whites (Rubenstein, 2016). Therefore, the research data is highly skewed and representative of a much larger issue. I am constantly evading the pipeline, leading to a predetermined future that was specifically designed for the invisible Black body:

> In America, it is traditional to destroy the [B]lack body- it is heritage. Enslavement was not merely the antiseptic borrowing of labor – it is not so easy to get a human being to commit their body against its own elemental interest. And so, enslavement must be casual wrath and random mangling, the gashing of heads and brains blown out over the river as the body seeks to escape. (Coates, 2015, p. 103)

I remain enslaved mentally while my Black body, running parallel in the invisible space, seeks an escape. As Chideya (1995) points out, "African Americans are a mere 12 percent of America's population. The majority of violent crime is committed by Whites, but violent criminals are disproportionately likely to be Black (over 40 percent of violent criminals are black)" (p. 8). In 2014, 374 people were arrested for murder in New York City; of those 374, 61% were Black (Rubenstein, 2016). However, the Black population in New York was 22.6 % while the White population was 32.8% and the White arrest rate for murder was 2.9%. This means that a Black person was 31 times more likely to be arrested for murder than a White person. When Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber, blew up a building that contained large numbers of White people who looked like him, it was considered a travesty. Meanwhile, my violent encounters with other Blacks are viewed as acts of self-hatred or racial self-abdication. Furthermore, Whites have not become symbols of mass murder even though serial killers are disproportionately likely to be White (Chideya, 1995). Therefore, the suggestions made about me tend to be false, misleading, and terribly skewed especially since Northwestern University Professor Robert Entman found that Black pundits only showed up as experts in fifteen of 2,000 minutes of mainstream news not specifically covering racial issues (p. 4)—an indication that Black experts are rarely consulted to dispute and/or provide an insightful defense of research identifying Black perspectives.

According to Tatum (2005) conflict often exists between institutions and Black males because those in positions of leadership lack understanding of the cultural-specific behaviors exhibited by Black males (p. 31). Freire (1993) exhorts:

> There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (p. 16)

Does the establishment truly want to improve the plight of the African American male or does the establishment want to maintain the status quo? When one works in an invisible space, one does so knowingly or unknowingly, and those who are complicit in or actively constructing the invisible space have a goal in mind— *compliant ambiguity*.

The planning of the pipeline

The pipeline is predetermined and predestined. The pipeline is produced unconsciously through the habit of marginalization and systemic racism as well as consciously through policy. The oppressor (Freire, 1993) controls the reality we are attempting to transform within our navigation of the pipeline. The oppressor refers to those who have gained social and economic status and power based on the manipulation and/or the dismantling of another culture.

The conflict within me, referred to here as Man vs. Self consists of the two warring souls of *double consciousness* described by W.E.B Du Bois:

> The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world…One ever feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled striving; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois, 1903, p. 3)

"On the one hand [I] am a product of my Afro-American heritage and culture and on the other hand [I] am shaped by the demands of the Anglo-American culture" (Hale, 1986, p. 21). Hale and Du Bois are referring to acculturation of marginalized groups, in this case African Americans, into that of mainstream—European American—culture. It is a constant battle of wills, the African me vs. the American me, that I must navigate each day, and this inner conflict results in decisions and choices that I'd rather not make. Michelle T. Johnson (2004) states that "society will be equal when [B]lack people have the same peace of mind that [W]hites do, so we can just let life happen, without the added stress of hidden agendas constantly tugging at the edges of our consciousness. We still live in a society where being [B]lack is a consideration, which impacts every aspect of our existence" (p. 186). "The same is true with the individual oppressor as a person. Discovering himself to be an oppressor may cause considerable anguish" (Freire, 1993, p. 32). This anguish humanizes the oppressors, so that they become conscious of the evil that has been inflicted. Their anguish is rarely used as a device to remedy the issue; instead, it is displaced as guilt. The marginalized group sees the oppressors' anguish and guilt as a sign of change, owns some of the guilt and anguish for the oppression, and remains oppressed. This is called hegemony. I am taking part in my own oppression.

Compliant ambiguity

The choice is simple for the oppressors. They can either accept that they wield power and privilege or they can blame others while deflecting attention from the underlying problem. *Compliant ambiguity* results when communities and schools fight to dismantle the pipeline through policy modifications and grassroots protests of school reform. I become compliant in order to fit into the mainstream and not be a part of the pipeline. My compliance then eradicates my uniqueness, so that I am part of the whole and no longer exceptional. I become ambiguous.

Unknown to the change agents is that now that the pipeline has been built, any block of the pipeline requires more resources than can be provided as witnessed in government relations advocates who are focused on restructure rather than reform. The pipeline is a byproduct of the reform frame of thought not a foregone plan of action. As a Black professional, I remain a part of the pipeline since Black professionals cause anguish; this, in turn, drives the oppressor to create situations and conditions to conceal my presence. I am forced to choose between being an American who is defined by upward mobility or being defined as an African whose existence is divisive.

The pipeline and the invisible space –compliant ambiguity—run parallel. As I attempt to deal with the pipeline, the only light I see is the invisible space with the only alternate path being forward into compliance or backwardly remaining in the pipeline. I am uncomfortable with having to choose and am fearful of being individually free. This "fear of freedom" produces a discomfort, forcing me to sabotage my trajectory and move deeper within the pipeline (Freire, 1993).

Conflict #1: Man vs. Man

"How does it feel to be a problem?" (Du Bois, 1903, p. 4). Moreover, how does it feel to know *you* are a problem? How does it feel to know that the expectations you have for yourself are more than others have for you? Black students enter schools and face teachers who do not recognize their distinct language gifts, but instead view them from a deficit orientation; the students' language becomes "foreign" in their own school.

Milner (2010) states, "Standardization, in many ways, is antithetical to diversity because it suggests that all students live and operate in homogenous environments with equality of opportunity afforded to them" (p. 3). Because the teachers often rely on a colorblind logic, a mode of thinking that does not recognize the diverse living conditions and opportunities differences, African American males are exposed to biases and judgments which overrule any logical understanding of what it means to be African and American and male. This is more the case for African American males where according to the Schott Report, "Black male students… are more than twice as likely to be classified as mentally retarded as White male students, in spite of research demonstrating that the percentages of students from all groups are approximately the same at each intelligence level" (Jackson, 2010). It is disheartening to realize that I believe more in myself than others believe in me. How does it feel to walk into a classroom and immediately you know you do not belong? "You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world that you're a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, your curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it's seldom successful" (Ellison, 1993, p. 4).

I have been defined out of existence and am therefore formless. Because of my topic-chained communicative style, the faces I encounter in the classroom exhibit

disdain, repulsion, disgust, and outright hatred. These sentiments emanate mostly from the teacher whose definition of communication is based upon what is deemed appropriate by the powerful Other. "Topic chaining" is highly contextual, and much time is devoted to setting a social stage prior to the performance of an academic task. This is accomplished by the speakers (or writers) providing a lot of back ground information; being passionately and personally involved with the content of the discourse; using indirectness (such as innuendo, symbolism, and metaphor) to convey ideas; weaving many threads or issues into a single story; and embedding talk with feelings of intensity, advocacy, evaluation, and aesthetics (Gay, 2002, p. 112).

Comments and responses such as "they let you out?" "you are back," "why did they put you in here?" "what's your name again?" and "I hope you know I am not slowing down just for you" are a daily exchange between the teacher and me. So, why persist? [I am] in a system that is designed to fail; therefore, when [I]fail, [I] am essentially succeeding at how the system was designed (Neal, McCrary, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003, p. 60). Navigating in the invisible space while focusing on the pipeline allows my success within a failed system, designed specifically to maintain my marginalization. As Freire (1993) indicates, "For the oppressors…it is always the oppressed whom they never call the oppressed…those people…or savages…or natives…or subversives who are disaffected, who are violent, barbaric, wicked or ferocious…" (p. 38). As a result of how the system is designed, there is a disconnect that creates a conflict.

The conflict I describe is what literature has defined as Man vs. Man. Rather than talk about the cultural conflicts which are evident by the over-representation of African American males being suspended and/or expelled for the same infractions as their White peers, I am choosing to point out the literal conflict I face each day when entering a school. I enter a space where 76% of my teachers are White females according to the National Center of Educational Statistics (2015), and I along with my brown peers make up 90% of the population in urban schools (Cook, 2015).

Conflict #2: Man vs. Self

In order to clarify the African American male's internal conflict of Man vs. Self, it is imperative that I share intricate and explicit details and methodologies for identifying particular styles, orientations, and "cool poses" that African American learners deploy for the sake of coping within the pipeline (Tatum, 2005):

> Although [B]lack males have developed multiple survival techniques throughout their history in the United States, the "cool pose" is perhaps unique…a ritualized form of masculinity, uses certain behavior, scripts, physical posturing, and… crafted performance to convey…pride, strength, and control. (p. 29)

The cool pose is a coping mechanism used to deal with oppression, invisibility, and marginality…communicates power, toughness, detachment, and style (Tatum, 2005, p. 29). Although based in pedagogical practice, identifying styles and orientations as they relate to African American male conflicts will assist teachers' perceptions of what is appropriate vs. inappropriate. In other words, when I become withdrawn, it should not be construed as being disrespectful or not understanding. For instance, pay attention to when I place a hoodie on my head and how I respond to redirection. If embarrassed, I my put the hoodie on my head to hide my face. Upon redirection, the hoodie will come off. However, out of habit, I may put it back on again. I am simply trying to determine how to proceed based on the options provided, and my instinct is to hide my frustration and embarrassment from my peers and you.

When identifying the struggle of Man vs. Self, it is important to note that this is not an identity conflict. For if it were, it would suggest that I do not know who I am as a person, as an African American male, or as an African American period. Despite the research that suggests that my identity conflict is a result of ethnicity, appearance, intelligence, colorism, or "acting white" (Scott, 2003, p. 95), I argue that the conflict that was initially external or Man vs. Man, has now turned inward to Man vs. Self. The focus is not on assimilating to mainstream culture—the battle to steer my way through a classroom whose rules I do not understand and therefore struggle to follow. Instead the focus is now when and if the African "me" can breathe. I am moving into compliant ambiguity in order to survive the pipeline.

Resolving the external conflict

Alfred W. Tatum devised three goals to address feelings of discontent and resentment within the classroom: 1) reduce fear of embarrassment; 2) decrease levels of frustration experienced due to students' inability to employ word attack strategies; and 3) have students read, understand, discuss, and write about literature (Tatum, 2000, p. 55). By establishing a supportive community—essentially a learning community that utilizes culturally relevant texts to teach skills—the author was successful. The community was comprised of smaller cooperative groups that were mutually responsible for the success and failures of all members. Students assisted one another and completed self-evaluations using portfolios, assessing their strengths and weaknesses in addition to those of their peers.

"Must read" texts

Bawden (1904) tells us "the real self is always a social self" (p. 366). In his essay "The Social Character of Consciousness and Its Bearing on Education" Bawden explores the social character of consciousness as well as how educators can recognize its characteristics. He stipulates that no one can exist on his or her own.   From the time we are born, everyone becomes a part of a whole. In essence, we all have a bipolar self – a self-conscious self which is at the same time a socially-conscious self, a person which is at the same time a *socius* (p. 366). Due to this bipolar self, it is essential that African American males learn in a non-traditional educational environment that encourages critical thinking so that they can begin to dismantle compliance and challenge the existing reality. This would include exposing children to stories of heroic adventures wherein they vicariously indulge their passion for adventure (Watras, 2008, p. 223).

In addition to the curriculum *mandatory* texts*, must-read* texts—such as newspaper and magazine articles, and literature written by Black authors—should be included to make the learning culturally relevant and experiential. The purpose, the author contends, is to establish "cultural hooks" to engage [B]lack males (Tatum, 2005, p. 58), allowing the students to understand the context of their positionality and view themselves as agents of change. Texts would include W.E.B. Du Bois, Malcolm X, James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and Dick Gregory. As James Baldwin (1963) reminds us, many Black males are never able to shake their dungeons, "becoming defeated long before they die" (as cited in Tatum, 2005, p. 9). Brozo (2003) suggests using literature with traditional male archetypes as an entry point into literacy for boys. Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) note, "the ways these needs have often been ineffective because they, teachers, have not taken sufficient amount of the gendered construction of the boys they work with" (as cited in Tatum, 2005, p. 10). Discussions of texts should become a recurring theme as students will be better able to relate to the discussion and add their personal experiences. If the African American male is able to enter an environment such as this, he is no longer

foreign or invisible; in such a way, the conflict of "to be or not to be" is no longer an issue. He begins to recognize his power and purpose.

Experiential learning

Dewey (1938) proposed that all experiences are not educative. Some experiences are mis-educative; in other words, they halt, distort or hinder further learning experiences. Learning experiences that stifle communication styles, criminalize movement styles, reinforce Eurocentric and/or colorblind resources and tools are examples of such mis-education (Hale, 1986; Boykin, 1994; Gay, 2002; Landsman, 2004; Freeman and Freeman, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Goodman & Hilton, 2010; Milner, 2010; & Boser, 2014). To call it a learning environment is a falsehood; one should call it simply a "classroom." A learning environment must be adaptive, stimulating, and evolving, so that student learners do not become extinct (Darwin, 1864). Current curriculum structures and instructional programs are postulated according to Social Darwinism's *survival of the fittest*. At least, this is the case in urban classroom settings where the reasons why a student hasn't turned in homework ("no electricity") or can't stay awake in class ("babysitting a younger sibling") are not considered viable considerations. Invisibility limits my choices and narrows my possibilities. I am emerged in the pipeline, and to survive, my invisibility assures my *compliant ambiguity*.

In order to dismantle, deconstruct, immobilize, disrupt, or change the current landscape of what counts as education in U.S. schooling, authentic learning experiences must be the only desired outcome. It is essential to provide divergent experiences where all students are able to take what they have learned and apply it to multiple situations and circumstances. Students will thereby create a new reality where they themselves are able to "change their stars" (Helgeland, 2001). After all, the school is the educational beacon of a community, charged with the responsibility to ensure that students are being educated in such a way as to ensure the progress of the community. If I am not progressing within the community or helping the community, I remain invisible both in a known space, the pipeline, and in the foreign space, compliant ambiguity.

Resolving the Man vs. Self conflict

African American boys must reinvent the invisible space. The oppressor cannot be the architect of this reinvention (Freire, 1993). Therefore, those who seek the dismantling of the pipeline cannot be the authors of the policy that produced the pipeline in the first place. "In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation [from the invisible space] they must first perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform" (Freire, 1993, p. 31). The key to such a reinvention is engaging African American males in academic discourse in the classroom setting. Conversations about science, in particular, may hold the key to dismantling "learned helplessness" and invisibility through argumentation. Duschl (2008) proposes five potential contributions: First is the supporting access to cognitive and meta-cognitive reasoning. Second is supporting the development of communication and critical thinking. Third is supporting the development of scientific literacy and enabling students to engage in the language of science. Fourth is supporting participation in practices of scientific culture and developing epistemic criteria to evaluate knowledge. Fifth is supporting the growth of reasoning employing rational criteria (p. 284).

Educators can achieve these five contributions for African American male learners by utilizing a dialectic discourse called "Science Talk" as well as the cultural capital of "the code of the streets" (Anderson, 1999). As a means of survival, children acquire a

repertoire of behaviors that garner them respect on the street that provides them with security. The image of being "nerdy" or "geeky" contradicts the profile. However, the ability to communicate, to signify, to be topic chained does fit the "code of the street."

Bridging the gap: Scaffolding

To examine the applications of such cultural capital, Sieler (2001) conducted a study involving students eating lunch together while talking about science. The key was to help the students to understand that science was part of their everyday life. In doing so, Sieler (2001) used scaffolding. "We began with what the students knew, could do, and wanted to do" (p. 1007). There is a tendency, according to Boykin (1986), in curricular reform to avoid considerations of students' motivations, interests, and values (as cited in Seiler, 2001. p. 1008). By engaging the students' motivations, interests, and values the lunch group grew and they began to engage in scientific dialogue, Science Talk. Using newspapers and other resources, students built a case to support their choice for the most valuable player (MVP) of the National Basketball Association (p. 1009). In such a way, the power structure was changed from the Initiation Response Evaluation (IRE) model which was the standard format of the students' regular science classes (p. 1009).

If all schools and classrooms implemented dialectic modalities within all content areas, there would be more effective schools since learning would be culturally relevant. Waxman and Huang (1997) conducted research comparing effective and ineffective schools. They point out that some studies (Lomotey, 1989, 1999; Sizemore, 1985) have found that there are similar characteristics of African American principals in effective, predominantly African American schools such as (a) commitment toward educating, (b) compassion and understanding of their students and communities, and (c) confidence in the ability of African American students to learn (as cited in Waxman & Huang, 1997, p 35).

Address the opportunity gap

Milner (2009) writes,

> Educators must recognize that the essence of curricular content (what is actually included, how and why) is very important as students come to understand themselves and others in a pluralistic and every changing society, because students need to see themselves and their cultural group through positions of strength and tenacity. (p. 7)

African American males must see themselves as strong and tenacious in order to successfully navigate the invisible space (compliant ambiguity), reinvent the invisible space, and change their trajectory in the pipeline. This reformation is accomplished only through experiential learning opportunities such as travel. In a foreign environment, exposed to a different language and culture, the Black male learner gains a new perspective. As noted with experiential learning via Dewey (1938), the experience produces learning that is transferable. "Opportunity…forces us to think about how systems, processes, and institutions are overtly and covertly designed to maintain the status quo and sustain depressingly complicated disparities in education" (Milner, 2009, p. 8). We can often find such disparities in the opportunities for African American males to enroll in advanced placement (AP) and dual enrollment (DE) courses. Whereas AP classes provide rigorous college level instruction in the high school setting, DE courses allow learners to gain dual credit, thereby producing a trajectory leading to early college success.

Furthermore, providing field learning opportunities via study abroad programs and field research initiatives places African American males at an equitable playing field with their White peers. Through programs such as PASA (Peruvian Amazon Study Abroad), African American males can explore ideas and experiences outside their community and country. They are immersed in a foreign culture, communicating in a new language, and gaining valuable sensory and affective knowledge. Whereas previously he was a passive passenger, now the African American male is visible as he recognizes his place in the world as an explorer, inventor, and navigator. The pipeline no longer appears as comfortable and inevitable since new experiences create new emotions and ways of thinking.

Conclusion

As I navigated my way through public school, suicide, invisibility, and defeat preoccupied my thoughts. Ridicule and low-expectations were my companions. Hope was nowhere to be found. However, I did not develop, according to Henderson & Milstein (2003), the litany of problems educators have come to expect. I became "resilient" (p. 5). As I experienced adversity, I also experienced habits that buffered that adversity (p. 5). I became alive when I recognized my invisibility (Ellison, 1993). Key to the survival of African American male learners is recognizing their invisibility and, in so doing, becoming "alive."

Ideally, through this essay, others have recognized that African American male learners are unaware of a vital component to our existence—a recognition of their invisibility. For African American male learners to become aware of this invisibility, learning environments must begin to redefine what it means to be a student and how an effective learning environment is defined. As it currently exists, Black boys who fidget are loud and those who "play the dozens" are troublesome. Meanwhile, Black boys who sit quietly and behave "respectfully" are either acting White or are ignored. However, movement and expression are all cultural norms of African American identity.

If I accept this imposed silence, I remain invisible. Failure to recognize my unique position will continue to manifest in a multitude of scenarios most often leading to the pipeline. When I am expelled or suspended, I miss out on learning opportunities which allow me to graduate from high school. When I do not graduate, I am less likely to earn a decent wage. The domino effect leads to dead-end solutions (Griffen, 2015). Do I feed my child or pay the rent? How do I gain income quickly so that I am not evicted? Where can I gain the most income to support a dying mother or father? I am more likely to go to prison than to college unless I am able to comply with the standards and reforms that ensure my safety out of the school to prison pipeline. However, we enter another pipeline called *compliant ambiguity* when we conform in order to be safe. My uniqueness is no longer an issue or a question as I am now a part of the whole. Exceptionalism is a question of the past for it was my exceptionality that placed me in the pipeline. My movements, speech and mannerisms have left me ambiguous because I move and sound like everybody else. I am as invisible to others as I am to myself. As a result, the conflict remains because I am not permitted to simply go to school and later go to work. I do not meet the definitions prescribed to or about me. I am rationalized out of dual existences. I am not a part of the "mainstream" culture, nor am I a part of the "marginalized" culture. I have to tell myself,

> You exist. You matter. You have value. You have every right to wear your hoodie, to play your music as loud as you want. You have every right to be you. And no one should deter you from being you. You have to be you. And you can never be afraid of you. (Coates, 2015, p. 113)

I have to make the decision to be the African me or the American me. One of the two conflicts emerge each day and on some days, I am both at one time, especially when I find myself in a setting where mainstream culture is mixed with the African American culture. I draw the disdainful glances, the disgusted stares, and the threat-laden commentary from my teachers and peers (African American and mainstream) forcing yet another conflict, *Man vs. Nature*.

Man vs. Nature is the conflict erupting between psyche and the ego, manifesting as an ongoing battle of who I believe I am vs. who others tell me I am. To disrupt this compliant ambiguity, teachers of African American male learners need to provide exemplars of male visibility via "must read" texts concurrently with "mainstream texts" as well as experiential learning activities that force me to see myself in a positive, heroic, and intellectual light. In addition, there is a need to reinvent academic discourse and close the opportunities gaps that prevent me from accessing resources that offer exits out of the school to prison pipeline, such as AP courses, study abroad trips, internships, and academic scholarships.

How does it feel to know that I am a problem, and not understand how I am a problem? Such questions should be considered when educational policies and instructional methods are developed and evaluated. We must see the conflict from the African American male cultural, historical and social perspective, rather than the "this is how we fix the problem" point of view. Failure to do so only perpetuates the African American male's rising conflicts about who to believe and which pathway to choose.

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