

## THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE BLACK MAN'S MASCULINITY

In September of 1992 I walked into a new high school overage and under credit. I had just landed at JFK International Airport three weeks ~~earlier~~ earlier ~~having~~ left everything behind in Jamaica for a country ~~that~~ about which -I knew nothing little -about and about which yet I -never stopped dreaming ~~about~~ -America. It was this idea that seemed to have turned the island of my birth inside out like a shallow pants pocket full of coins to empty my family into New York City. We made came full of hope, my brothers and sisters, grandmother, aunties and uncles -and innumerable cousins, and I. We ~~came~~ came, like so many millions before us, with naught but the belief that ~~on a simple idea~~ -America, the Land of Opportunity, -was better and offered was better than ~~where we were~~ our homeland.

I remember that summer vividly. It was a time of immense change, both for the good and for the annoying. I still remember my mother taking me shopping for school days before the first day of class that fall. At 17 years old, I should have had high school in my rear view, and I had actually graduated that very summer from Denbigh Secondary School in Jamaica. But here I was, starting high school it all over again (by choice). One weekend in late August, though I had graduated that very summer from Denbigh Secondary School in the country of my birth. She my mom -took me to Burlington and Payless for my back to school shopping. I wasn't prepared for the experience that is "shopping" in a land of such wealth and plenty. The clothing my mother bought for me was not second hand or threadbare. It was new, it was good quality, and it was abundant. I in my innocence, I had just struck gold in terms of the volume and newness of the clothing that I had received from my working mother. In fact, I felt that I was kitted out nicely at I was well put together for school, that was -until I -walked in one of the classrooms on the 3rd floor facing Bronxwood Ave at of Evander Childs High School. I don't remember what clothing I was wearing, but almost 30 years later I still remember my Payless sneakers. I remember it them because of the teasing that I endured endured that day by my peers. Steve, one of my new classmates, introduced himself and asked me the name brand -of my sneakers. The truth is that I had not thought about the name because into me -my immigrant mindset, a clean pair of sneakers with no holes in the bottom soles was a win. My self worth wasn't dictated by Nike. Adidas didn't legitimize in my place in the high school microcosm. mind, it didn't need a name to legitimize my self worth or the true reason why I was in the building in the first place. I lifted my -up my right foot, found the name, and told him. Well, of course he just wanted to "Payless shame" me by drawing attention to my substandard teen footwear. Predictably, this generated the requisite taunts and jeers commensurate to such gauche fashion choices. I thought he was actually asking a real question, but he just wanted to bring attention to my payless sneakers so that others could laugh at me. I told him the name and he busted out laughing as did others around me. I don't remember anyone standing up for me that day. I was confused and embarrassed by the encounter because I had never had that experience before. Up until that time I had worn a uniform to school all my life. Additionally, I I had also never had anyone laugh at my attire prior.

I started that day nervous but excited. I I-walked home that deflated and embarrassed. As I contemplated day reflecting on the experience as well as the shoes that were on my feet. I thought

~~America that states explicitly and implicitly that in order to be authentically Black we must avoid “acting white.” There’s no country for Blackmen.~~ W.E.B. Du Bois captured the sentiments of Black men and women in America then and now when he wrote, “One ever feels his twoness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”<sup>vi</sup> We live by two sets of rules at all times, those imposed by White America and those imposed by Black America. ~~that the former remind us daily that we are not good enough to participate in the American dream. The latter state both explicitly and implicitly that in order to be authentically Black we must avoid “acting white.” There’s no country for Black men.~~ ~~I have~~ lost count of the number of conversations I’ve had with my own children about how they are perceived by their peers. ~~They~~ My kids are often told that they are rich. ~~They are told by their peers~~ that they act and speak white. This pressure to conform to expected norms has, at times, ~~At times such pressure has seeped into our~~ family conversations. ~~like the time when~~ A few years back, my then 13 year old daughter ~~expressed~~ ~~said~~ ~~her desire~~ she wished we could ~~to~~ move into an apartment building ~~rather than a house~~. Her reasoning ~~for wanting to leave the house that she was growing up in~~ was that, “~~all~~ All of ~~her~~ my Black friends ~~lived on~~ the other side of the city in apartment buildings.”

~~Nigel I. Malcolm~~ ~~in~~ In his article, “Slave to the Community Blacks and the Rhetoric of Selling Out,” ~~Nigel I. Malcolm~~ notes, “Stigmatization functions to eliminate threats to group cohesion by rhetorically excommunicating “heretics. Malcolm continues, “Excommunication denies agency to those labeled “sellout,” yet as important it denies agency to other members of the racial group who learn from these negative examples that silence and conformity, rather than freedom of expression and individuality, are to be expected.”<sup>vii</sup> In other words, as much as White America reminds us that we are different from them, Black America ~~also~~ reminds ~~Black itself~~ ~~America~~ that ~~we it are is~~ not White America. Malcolm’s use of the ~~religious~~ term “excommunication” is ~~apt.~~ ~~exactly what it feels like for m~~ Many Black men who ~~fail to~~ toe the line of Black male masculinity ~~feel excommunicated by their own culture~~. The ~~young~~ teen who ~~enjoys~~ likes to ~~reading~~ must hide his ~~book novel~~ ~~from in his book bag until~~ his friends because reading isn’t something a Black man does for pleasure. ~~he part ways with his friends after school before breaking it out on the train to dive back where he left off before meeting up with them.~~ ~~T~~ The ~~adult~~ father who kisses his young son at home avoids doing so in the barber shop ~~with~~ where everyone ~~his~~ ~~can~~ ~~friends~~ ~~see~~ ~~around~~. Du Bois ~~was~~ ~~had~~ ~~it-~~ ~~right-~~; we ~~are~~ ~~all~~ ~~always~~ ~~live~~ ~~ing~~ double lives in order to adhere to the ~~social constructed~~ rules laid out for us by both Americas, the Black and the White.

A few years ago I was appointed as an assistant principal in a school. One morning, I walked into the building dressed in a suit and tie, my usual workwear. On the way to my office, I was stopped by a teacher who said to me, “Mister, why are you wearing a suit and a bow tie in this building? Do you know where you are? This is the South Bronx man, this is the South Bronx.”

Her words evoked in me the same emotions I experienced when Steve taunted me about my Payless sneakers—hurt, embarrassment, confusion. Guardians of Black masculinity are always ready to correct anything—speech, action, dress, etc.—that does not fall within the parameters of acceptable behavior for Black men. Both Steve and my coworker sought to educate me about how a Black man should and should not dress. Du Bois was correct; we are forever trapped in two worlds.