

Saida Grundy

Respectable: Politics and Paradox in Making the Morehouse Man

Oakland: University of California Press, 2022, 356 pp.

Saida Grundy unravels the elements of race, gender, and class at Morehouse College in this complex and thought-provoking work. While the trope of the “Morehouse Man” may be well known within the middle- and upper-class Black community, Grundy unpacks this concept as well as the importance that Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) hold within the Black community for a general audience who may not be familiar with these institutions or their esteemed place. Morehouse was founded in 1867, a mere four years after emancipation in Atlanta, Georgia. It is the only single-sex HBCU for men, and thus a worthy subject of such an in-depth sociological analysis. Moreover, Grundy is uniquely positioned to take on this task as a graduate of Morehouse’s “sister” institution, Spelman College, and a self-described “radical Black feminist” (33).

Grundy helps the reader to understand that those who attend HBCUs are uniquely exposed to the full diversity and different ways of expressing Blackness in America. It is the conflicts posed by these various ways of being that are at the heart of her analysis. Grundy focuses on perceptions of African Americans and how these perceptions shape the experiences of students at Morehouse. She interviewed thirty-two graduates from 1998 to 2002 about their experiences and how they believe their coming of age and perceptions of manhood were shaped by the institution. Grundy employs W. E. B. Du Bois’ veil of racial subjectivity in her examination of identity formation and the institution’s goals in shaping its students. As Grundy explains: “The veil structures the world into a one-way mirror in which the racialized subjects who live behind it can see out, but the racializing white subjects who live outside of it cannot hear, see, or properly recognize those within” (20).

Respectable presents a rare exploration of how the veil functions *within* the race. Grundy posits that the education, culture, and idealized image at Morehouse College are structured to appeal to the white (and patriarchal) gaze.

As Grundy establishes, the college devotes significant time and resources to building its image and brand and promoting the idea of the Morehouse Man. So, what is a Morehouse Man? He is first and foremost as made clear by the title, respectable. This is an extension of the term “respectability politics”: the notion that historically marginalized communities are worthy of rights and privileges only if they look and behave in a particular way (8).

The idealized respectable Black man produced by a Morehouse education is impeccably dressed, has excellent manners, is conversant and well-spoken in many subjects, is excellent in his profession, and is devoted to his family and the advancement of his community. While the above may all seem to be objectively positive attributes, Grundy is masterful in identifying the various ways that each of these values advances particularly patriarchal and capitalist ideals and rigid notions of acceptable masculinity. While the college draws upon the full spectrum of Black men from the US and

the world, it seeks to suppress particular signifiers of Blackness that are not expressly associated with upward mobility and traditional standards of mainstream success as determined by the white dominant majority, thus employing the Du Boisian veil. As Grundy writes, Morehouse “organizes material and social resources around a specific idea of which meanings of Black identity and experience are acceptable for its students” (18).

Grundy provides ample evidence for these claims. Her work began as an undergraduate, with an examination of how Morehouse sought to suppress queer students’ visibility on campus. She opens the introduction with the story of Gregory Love, who in 2002 was brutally beaten after another student thought Love was looking at him in the shower. Queer students are forced to navigate an ever-evolving dress code that at one time stated that female-associated attire was prohibited. She notes that Morehouse’s recent decision to admit trans men (likely to comply with Title IX, the federal law prohibiting gender discrimination) “double downed on gender conformity” (87), and made it clear that those who were transitioning from male to female could no longer continue as students.

One of the many paradoxes Grundy identifies is around the treatment of women. Beginning with an elaborate orientation for new students, there is rhetoric around Morehouse men protecting Black women, especially their Spelman sisters. Yet instances of rape are all too common, and met with responses rooted in rape culture and common myths: what were you wearing, why were you in his room? Spelman students are discouraged from pursuing charges by administrators and told that they will harm the reputations of their Morehouse brothers and the college. The legitimate fear of an often-unjust criminal legal system and racist stereotyping as Black men sexual predators means that some men were willing to “deracialize” their sisters, as though Black women had no traumatic experiences in dealing with law enforcement or sexual violence (184).

The outsized importance of the business department and the unusually high number of business majors are attributed to the fact that the school equates leadership with financial success. Producing *Fortune 500* executives is viewed as a crowning achievement, with classes devoted to the etiquette of business lunches and small talk. The dress code requires business attire at certain campus events and prohibits particular clothing associated with street culture.

This process of inculcating the values that make the Morehouse Man comes with considerable harm to some students. Grundy witnessed what can only be termed a hazing incident at new student orientation, involving a freshman’s hairstyle that was deemed unacceptable. Many of the rules, Grundy notes, are unspoken, resulting in inconsistent and discriminatory enforcement. Dress codes require the resources to purchase particular clothing, thus creating a burden for low-income students. For the considerable number of students who grew up among the Black elite, the things learned in etiquette classes are second nature. Unfortunately, some students who are forced to navigate these rules, including those who are from lower-income backgrounds or are gender-nonconforming, disproportionately do not make it to graduation. Rather than seeing significant attrition as a crisis, the administration

views it as weeding out those who were not fit to represent the brand.

This book is not intended as a “take-down” of Morehouse or its graduates. Indeed, in providing her brilliant conceptual framework as to what is shaping the actions of the institution, Grundy identifies a path forward. The most hopeful part of her book focuses on the student body, their evolving approach to gender, and how they are clear-eyed about the failings of the administration. Students are demanding more. Her interviews also reveal significant personal growth among some of the graduates who look back with remorse at how they made the campus a less-than-welcoming place for their classmates who did not conform to the expected social or gender norms. One graduate describes arriving on campus as being the first time he experienced the full spectrum of Black manhood, and all of his internalized stereotypes about who Black men are fell away. Grundy exposes the untapped potential of Morehouse to be a place where all Black men, in all their incarnations, can thrive.

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Jon Shelton

The Education Myth: How Human Capital Trumped Social Democracy

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In his excellent and important new book, *The Education Myth*, Jon Shelton argues that by the 1980s and 1990s, both leading Democrat and Republican politicians came to believe that “only those who acquire the right human capital are worthy of economic security and social respect” (ix). He calls this belief in education’s magical capacity to solve the problems of inequality the education myth. As education moved to the centre of American governors’ and presidents’ priorities, Shelton concludes, “the myth choked off social democratic alternatives” (3).

Shelton traces the changing public rhetoric and public policies over education from the founding of the US. His story is ironic and tragic. It is ironic because the more attention education received—including the formation of a federal Department of Education under President Jimmy Carter in 1979—the more advocates of more investment in education whittled away the public purposes of education, such as forming citizens and developing a national community, until the dominant goal became developing students’ human capital. It is tragic because, from Shelton’s perspective, the more policymakers turned to education to address poverty and unemployment, the more they blamed individuals and eschewed progressive reform.

How did it happen? The biggest villains in Shelton’s story are Democrats. After the American Revolution and into the Cold War, for all their shortcomings, public education’s advocates focused largely on the importance of a broadly educated public and the integrative function of common schools. Of course, parents and policymakers understood that access to K–12 schooling and higher education encouraged