

Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity by Ann Arnett Ferguson, Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan, 2000, 272 pp., \$20.95, (paperback)

Reviewed by Royce S. Sarpy, *Howard University*.

Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity accounts the discipline and learning experiences of preadolescent Black males in Rosa Parks Elementary School through the field work of Ann Arnett Ferguson. The book illuminates the role teachers play in how Black boys shape their identity through the negative perceptions teachers hold about them and how these beliefs foster the criminalization of Black boys.

Ann Arnett Ferguson is the Associate Professor Emeritus of Afro-American Studies at Smith College. Ferguson was almost 50 years old, a Black woman, wife, mother, teacher, and a graduate student returning to Ph.D. work while authoring *Bad Boys*. *Bad boys* is a reflection of the research of an ethnographic study to determine the effects of punishment on Black boys academic and general outcomes in life. Ferguson's central focus throughout the book is the negative labeling of Black boys relative to societal stereotypes and bias towards Black men. The book details the school day from the perspective of Black boys. Through the use of raw data and interpretive analysis, Ferguson argues that the disproportionate use of punishment against Black boys in schools becomes a filter into the criminal justice system.

In Chapter 1: *Don't Believe the Hype*, Ferguson describes how Black males experience being sent to the "punishing room," labeled as the "dungeon" and "Jailhouse" by Black students, more often than any other race and gender. She argues that cultural differences largely impact the overuse of punishment against Black boys. Ferguson states, "So, in the school setting, it is assumed that it is the cultural differences kids bring to school that produces the existing pattern of punishment rather than instructional operations themselves" (p. 20). Ferguson's study reveals that schools and discipline create social constructs for Black boys by labeling them as behaviorally inept.

Ferguson notes the importance of understanding the implications of culture on actions and behavior and how this can lead to misinterpretation creating a continuous trend of labeling Black boys as bad. She states, "Culture can be a significant mode of defense, of succor, of resistance and recuperation for those with few sources of power in society" (p. 21). Throughout the text, there are examples of how Black boys display this defense mechanism through the use of cultural language. Oftentimes this language does not fit the social structure of the school, which leads to an increase in punishment. By incorporating the youth perspective, Ferguson details the subjective nature of punishment in schools. She notes how that subjective nature fosters inequities in school discipline.

Ferguson's perspective of Black boys and punishment at Rosa Parks is guided by Radical Schooling Theory and Foucault's Theory of Disciplinary Power. She states, "The radical perspective assumes that educational institutions are organized around and reflect the interest of dominant groups in the society: that the function of school is to reproduce the current inequities in our social, political, and economic system" (p. 50). The radical perspective is that there is a "hidden curriculum" that reflects the larger societies' culture of white dominance. Foucault argues that individuals see themselves as a specific identity naturally while not considering this identity as a relation to power structures. Foucault conceptualizes that discipline may be used to control students. Ferguson highlights how the discipline practices in schools reify that Black boys are bad. She discusses how school rules are a method of normalization for students as they

are, “sorted, evaluated, ranked, compared on the basis of (mis)behavior: what they do that violates conforms to, school rules” (p. 52).

At Rosa Parks Elementary, Ferguson conducted interviews with 20 participants in her study. The ranking and sorting system was evident in her sample. She placed the boys in 2 groups of 10 with the names, “troublemakers” and “school boys.” Ferguson shares a culmination of bits of the boys’ experiences through transcriptions of interviews, field notes, and observations. She is able to illustrate the perspective of Black boys through her field work. Ferguson built relationships with the boys as she shared an account of going to see a movie with a participant. By taking the time to get to know the boys as individuals, Ferguson was able to highlight the voices of Black boys who had previously been silenced by disciplinary power. She found that public schools are structurally created to weed out Black boys through surveillance resulting in the overuse of punishment. That overuse of punishment leads to labeling, and Ferguson notes that Black boys live up to the negative labels that have been placed on them. Defining Black masculinity through school culture is a theme in *Bad Boys*. Black boys are in a constant struggle with presenting their innate and cultural masculinity in the public school setting. Ferguson discusses the role of public schools in shaping masculinity for Black boys. She states the following:

African American boys are not accorded the masculine dispensation of being “naturally” naughty. Instead the school reads their expression and display of masculine naughtiness as a sign of an inherent vicious, insubordinate nature that as a threat to order must be controlled (p. 86).

While white boys are free under the guise of, “boys will be boys,” Black boys are not offered this liberty. Ferguson outlines that this is a form of control relative to society’s control of the Black male body. She argues that in public schools Black boys must learn to be docile, to hold their tongue, and fall in line with school rules. Ferguson describes, “The boys must be taught to endure humiliation in preparation for future enactments of submission” (p. 87).

Teachers are representative of their position in society. Teachers will act based on this position. The teachers at Rosa Parks Elementary reflect the demographics of teachers in public schools serving Black boys in the United States. There are more white teachers than any other race. Teachers typically do not live in the neighborhood in which they instruct. Like Rosa Parks, teachers do not come from the same racial, cultural, social, and economic background of Black boys.

Ferguson’s work details how this leads to a cycle of Black boys being oppressed in school. Black boys develop an identity rooted in the negative labels held by teachers who do not understand their culture and language. Every educator must read this book. In order for Black boys to have a fair chance, we must understand how public schools are pervasively destroying Black boys.