

OPINION

GUEST ESSAY

Black Valedictorians and the Toxic Trope of Black Exceptionalism

By Samuel Getachew

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Mr. Getachew graduated in 2020 from Oakland Technical High School in California. He is the 2019 Oakland youth poet laureate.

I was in the sixth grade in 2014 when a high school senior named Akintunde Ahmad appeared on “The Ellen Show” and announced that he had committed to attend Yale University. After graduating from Oakland Technical High with a 5.0 grade-point average and receiving acceptances to a number of top universities, he had become a bit of a hometown hero, featured in articles that upheld him as an “inner city” success story.

Five years later, Mr. Ahmad offered his perspective on the fanfare that had surrounded him as a teenager: “My story is told as though it is a positive one, inspirational,” he wrote in *The Atlantic*. “But I see it as a grim one, the tale of a harsh reality that wrecks people. There is nothing positive about classifying me as an exception. When a person is exceptional for doing what I have done, the whole system is cruel to its core.”

I’m also from Oakland. As a Black and ambitious student with few role models, I was fascinated by Mr. Ahmad’s trajectory. Six years after he appeared on “The Ellen Show,” I graduated in May 2020 from the same high school during a pandemic, preparing to attend Yale as well. One year after that, Ahmed Muhammad, a former classmate of mine, was celebrated in a number of newspapers and television shows after being named the first Black male valedictorian in Oakland Technical High School’s long history.

I’d known Mr. Muhammad since he was a freshman, and I was incredibly proud of him. But the familiar fanfare once again failed to acknowledge the challenges that Black students — including Mr. Muhammad and I — continue to face.

In his graduation speech last month, Mr. Muhammad pointedly asked why it took 106 years for Oakland Tech to award this honor to a Black male student: “So why me?” he asked. “I don’t know. But for all of those who didn’t get to maximize their potential, for all those who had the ability but lacked the opportunity, I owe it to them to appreciate this history made by the people who put me in this position. We owe it to them to make sure that, while I may be the first young Black man to be our school’s valedictorian, I won’t be the last.”

We all owe it to those who follow in Mr. Muhammad and Mr. Ahmad’s footsteps to focus on removing the obstacles they will confront. And we owe it to them to be more

dedicated to dismantling racism than to congratulating them for being among the few to thrive despite it.

That requires an examination of the structures that helped us thrive, but weren't available to others. Both Mr. Muhammad and I were part of a discussion-based humanities program at our school known as Paideia — the kind of program for “gifted” students whose benefits and problems are common in public high schools all over the country, which often include what social scientists refer to as “racialized tracking.”

The Paideia program, named after a classical Greek system of education and training, was started in the mid-1980s at Oakland Tech. Credited by some for transforming the school from one of the lowest performing and violent in the city to one of the most sought-after in the East Bay, Paideia once served mostly Black students. But as the academic reputation of the school improved and it became more popular with upper- and middle-income white families in Oakland, the program's demographics have shifted.

Oakland Tech's enrollment is about a quarter Black, but the courses I took that were necessary to be a competitive college applicant were disproportionately white. The classes in the Paideia program are standard size: about 20 to 30 students. But there were only three Black students in my grade remaining in the entire program by the time we graduated. During my junior year I was the only Black person in my Advanced Placement U.S. History class.

Paideia's de facto educational segregation is a microcosm of the issue on a national level; a ProPublica survey from 2018 [found](#) that white students across the country are nearly twice as likely as Black students to be in Advanced Placement courses.

I have no doubt about the value of the educational experience I got from this program. It was easily the most rigorous part of my high school career; it taught my classmates and me to think critically and write persuasively. And it helped me to find my voice as a poet and writer.

But being the only Black student in the room is not for every student — and that's an obstacle that no one should have to face. Mr. Muhammad told me that he was discouraged by friends from joining the program because it was “for the white kids.” When he actively sought to recruit more students of color for Paideia and other advanced courses, he said, the problem was that “since the classes lack diversity, many students of color feel that these courses aren't ‘for them,’ or feel that they won't enter a welcoming environment.”

The issue with programs such as Paideia is not merely that students are hesitant to participate. When I was entering the program, students were required to fill out an application during freshman year, and their acceptance was also based on teacher recommendations.

Reached for comment, John Sasaki, Director of Communications at the Oakland Unified School District said that the school and district were working on eliminating the racial “achievement gap” and that the application and recommendation for the Paideia program are no longer required.

Such changes are important to help encourage more students to enroll in Paideia and similar programs across the nation, but there is no single solution to centuries of systemic disadvantages. Highlighting stories of Black exceptionalism while neglecting to contextualize them simply perpetuates the inequities that make them unique to begin with.

Mr. Ahmad reflects on this in his piece in *The Atlantic*, in which he describes how his smart, talented older brother ended up incarcerated, and became a “footnote” in the media accounts of his success story. Instead of focusing on his own admission to Yale as the striking exception, or as proof that systemic racism can be overcome with hard work and good upbringing, Mr. Ahmad writes, “I wish they would ask, ‘What trap lay before this talented, bright boy so that he was bound to fall into it?’”

The academic and societal circumstances that made Mr. Ahmad’s success so noteworthy years before Mr. Muhammad or I arrived on campus remained long after the reporters left and the dust settled. When the annual news cycle of underdog valedictorians fades, segregated classrooms endure. These heartwarming stories are a distraction from the reality of our education system.

I don’t want to see yet another “inner city” success story emerge from my community. I want these stories to be so common that they are unworthy of such coverage.