

# TOWARD HEALTHY AND WHOLE

Rethinking Gender and  
Transformation for Bois of Color



## What is the Brown Boi Project approach to gender transformative learning?

Educators, community activists, and leaders often ask us the question “what is a gender transformative lens and why do we need one?” Through building the first leadership and high performance based space for straight, gay, and trans men and boys of color we have discovered that *culturally based gender transformative learning* is the missing link to most work with boys of color. Gender transformative learning builds an environment where mental health

resources are de-stigmatized, new models for masculinity emerge, and boys of color are able to develop an empowering sense of self.

We believe that the same gender transformative learning that can keep boys of color in the classroom, will also reduce the levels of aggression and sexual pressure exerted on girls, and reduce the kind of gender policing that perpetuates violence against LGBT youth of color.

While much attention has been paid to *racialized* notions of manhood and their impact on boys of color in the classroom, less has been given to the gendering of boys of color. Gender is powerful in determining whether boys of color will perform academically and ultimately thrive inside a classroom. By the time children reach 10 years old, their gender stereotypes begin to reflect those held by adults.<sup>1</sup> Gender norms of masculinity push boys further from academic performance and instead create a hyper pressurized expectation to perform physically and sexually. “Being ‘smart’ or ‘brainy’ has little to do with traditional male stereotypes, such as physical dominance, rugged self-reliance, and aggression.”<sup>2</sup>

## The Classroom as the Portal to Success

School policies and practices for connecting vulnerable youth to education and preparation for living wage jobs and careers continue to fall behind in reaching boys of color. As yet, however, education systems have failed to develop policies & resources commensurate with

The term **masculine of center (MoC)**, in its evolving definition, recognizes the cultural breadth and depth of identity for lesbian/queer womyn and gender nonconforming/trans people who tilt toward the masculine side of the gender spectrum—including a wide range of identities such as butch, stud, aggressive/AG, macha, dom, trans masculine, boi, etc.

**Gender non-conforming (GNC)** describes a way of being, in which an individual does not adhere to traditional societal rules about dress, gender performance, and activities that are based on their sex. Most of us have ways that we live gender non-conforming lives.



The term “Masculine of Center” never really hit me until BBP. I have been able to embrace my masculinity without shame. I have also incorporated masculinity with my everyday life allowing people to accept and embrace my spirit without judgment.

—Pookz



the needs of boys of color; let alone finding resources to meet the specific needs of gay and transgender boys of color, boys of color with disabilities, and undocumented boys of color.

For most of our young leaders, their critical needs include integrated mental health and gender based support (also known as gender transformative learning), school policies that address the disproportionate rates of school suspensions, expulsions, dropouts, and social capital skills (like communications, financial literacy, and life management) to bridge the gap between education based learning and success.

**In order to improve college graduation rates, we have to increase the number of boys of color that graduate—but that can only happen if we keep them in the classroom.**

Questions of academic achievement among students of color—in particular those surrounding the gap between African American students and their white counterparts—have plagued researchers and educators for years.<sup>3</sup> Disproportionate rates of high school graduation for African American students (50% compared to 75% for white students<sup>4</sup>) highlight these disparities. The Department of Education found that despite being only 18% of public school population, Black boys accounted for 46% of those suspended more than once and 39% of all expulsions.<sup>5</sup> Yet boys of color who actually make it into college face a 38% graduation rate<sup>6</sup>—a statistic that is even more dramatic for African American boys. In order to improve college graduation rates, we have to increase the number of boys of color who graduate from high school—but that can only happen if we keep them in the classroom.

*“Nationally, African American students are targeted for disciplinary action in the greatest numbers. According to quantitative reports, black pupils are statistically two to five times more likely to be suspended than their white counterparts. Qualitative findings simultaneously indicate that teachers confine reprimands and punitive consequences to black children even when youths of other races engage in the same unsanctioned behaviors.”<sup>7</sup>*

*“The Brown Boi Project changed my life. It was the first time, I felt like I could define myself for myself. I sat in a room with other masculine of center people, wrestling over the [complex] nature of masculinity. I truly found a healing space through connection and dismantling stereotypes of masculinity.”*

—Van



Although there is less data, these numbers reflect the challenges other boys of color face as well. Among Latino students, just 58 percent of 9<sup>th</sup> graders graduate four years after they start high school.<sup>8</sup> More than 70 percent of school related arrests and student referrals to law enforcement agencies are Hispanic or Black. For boys of color with disabilities, who make up roughly 12 percent of the average student body, these numbers are even more dramatic: 70 percent are subject to physical restraints—with boys of color being more likely to be singled out for the more egregious mechanical restraints, such as being strapped down and seclusion.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the homogenizing of Asian boys has obscured the deep need for investment among South East Asian boys (Cambodian, Laotian, Hmong, and Vietnamese) whose national graduation rates from college hover between 12 and 14 percent, depending on ethnicity.<sup>10</sup> The lack of data among other communities of color has resulted in missed opportunities to link efforts within immigration reform, reducing criminalization among men of color, and economic justice work.

The academic stigma of masculinity for boys of color undermines their ability to challenge the already stacked deck of teacher perceptions, poor quality elementary education, racial profiling in discipline, and the lack of social capital to navigate these barriers. While this work is still relatively under researched—the data that has been collected draws a strong link between perceptions of academic success and feminization that conflict with identity construction for boys of color.<sup>11</sup> As Renold points out in their field studies with young men:

*“Being ‘studious’ can involve quiet, settled study, visibly ‘working hard’ at a task, reading, publically adopting a pro-school attitude and taking test results seriously. By engaging or perceived to be engaging in any of these activities/body postures, boys potentially leave themselves open to verbal abuse and ridicule... being academically oriented, for a boy, is often devalued and denigrated because of its equation with ‘femininity’...however, there [is] still a strong need to assert their academic superiority over girls.”<sup>12</sup>*

In the classroom, boys of color are trapped inside a pressure cooker of gender expectations. They must not be too academically inclined, lest they appear soft. Yet to be seen as tough they must demonstrate their intellectual prowess over girls, who represent the ultimate gendered embodiment of softness. They have to simultaneously navigate racial and cultural notions of success, being too white or 'square' carries perils that also mark them as soft, illegitimate, or weak. Boys that step outside the norm, exhibiting gender non-conformity, become a target for ridicule. The result is not only a downplay of their intellectualism but a reinforcement of femininity and queerness as weak. As a byproduct, boys become locked in an intellectual battle with girls, disparaging them for their achievement while downplaying its significance.

### **Our Gender Transformative Approach**

Our concept of gender transformative learning draws from transformative leadership initiated by Burns (1978)<sup>13</sup> and developed by Bass (1985)<sup>14</sup> to include strategies of a transformational leader. As articulated by Burns & Bass, transformational leaders trade in the currency of culture. They motivate their followers by communicating an inspiring vision, in our case one that holds new



### **BROWN BOI PROJECT MASCULINITY MODEL**



#### **Our Framework For Masculinity**

The Brown Boi Project's leadership program is designed to strengthen brown bois in three key areas that construct masculinity. Our work speaks to trans and gender non-conforming brown bois, as well as those who identify as straight men of color, on their relationship to masculinity.

Masculinity in our society is built upon three core areas: mental health—"rational" intellect and smarts; physical health—being strong, powerful, and virile; and being a breadwinner—economic self-sufficiency and professional success. We acknowledge that it's difficult to make a positive shift in our lives without being anchored in these areas. But ultimately we believe that these should not be the only way to define healthy masculinity.



**Let your first act of resistance  
be one of self-love; and your  
second be accountability for  
your privilege.**

norms around masculinity. Gender transformative training remains virtually nonexistent at a systemic level, despite increasing research and data that shows that the stereotypes of gender have a detrimental impact on the health and well being of

our children.<sup>15</sup> We have an opportunity to shift that and bring effective tools for wellbeing to young boys and masculine of center LGBT youth.

These tools are built around the concept of self-actualization. Self-actualization refers to a person's ability to reach their full potential; and requires not only skills to adapt to our environment but also the resiliency or power to overcome life's challenges. We must first be aware of our psychological, emotional, and spiritual needs so that we can connect to our true purpose. Without this awareness, we seek to meet these needs in unconscious and often harmful ways, which keeps us from knowing who we really are and what our potential could be. Having a strong secure sense of self or deep understanding of who we really are is essential to building a healthy masculinity.

The building blocks for our sense of self, called ego strengths, include hope, will, purpose, competence, fidelity, love, care, and wisdom—all informed by our cultural roots as people of color. Early traumas and abuses in the lives of boys of color, their families and communities can disrupt the development of healthy ego strengths and make it difficult for them to develop them later in life.

Our tools embed these ego strengths in our work around masculinity. Accessing traditional mental health resources that build ego strength among boys of color often requires some form of clinical diagnosis. Moreover, mental health treatment often comes as a result of a crisis regarding aggression in boys of color, instead of earlier interventions that seek to address the root of this aggression. Untethering mental health support from diagnosis is essential to



*“BBP has helped me  
understand the way(s) I  
embody masculinity and that  
there’s no right or wrong way  
to do so. This awareness has  
helped me understand the  
ways I embody other things  
like beauty, power, and love;  
and of course, to recognize  
that there’s no wrong way to  
do that either.”*

*—Jay Marie*

reducing the stigma that our communities associate with mental health support.

Instead, mental health resources should be framed as a building block towards economic and social success. To do this, we advocate a model that embraces cultural frames as central to the healing of these young people and weaves it throughout. We want boys of color to know that this support is something you need, not because there is something wrong with you but because all people need this to be successful. Long term, we believe that the same gender transformative learning that can keep boys of color in the classroom will also reduce the levels of aggression and sexual pressure exerted on girls, and reduce the kind of gender policing that perpetuates violence against LGBT youth of color.

### **Real Talk: Masculinity is About Power**

We believe that the policing of masculinity is literally killing us. It drives boys of color to violence as a means of securing power and manhood. Its historical root though goes much deeper. The control of people of color for many centuries has been possible through the regulation of gender—especially the control of women’s bodies. From massacres of Native American women to prevent future generations,<sup>16</sup> to sterilization of one-third of all Puerto Rican women of child rearing age,<sup>17</sup> limiting the movement of Asian immigrant women to join their families,<sup>18</sup> and the countless forms of violence Black women endured during slavery—controlling women has been a profoundly effective tool in controlling all of us. These efforts while historical in nature are directly tied to current repeated assaults on bodies of women of color around their reproductive health and wellbeing. Part of our organizational purpose as is to leverage our masculinity to make a positive contribution to interrupt this cycle.

*“I always knew that masculinity was never about gender or sex, but instead a way that some decide to walk through the world. Brown boi challenged me to take it a step further by putting straight men in the mix so that we ALL had to address our love and hate of masculinity. I walked away understanding that I could learn from the men around me, just as they could learn from me.”*

—Tiff

**Gender transformative learning builds an environment where mental health resources are de-stigmatized, new models for masculinity emerge, and boys of color are able to develop an empowering sense of self.**



By controlling femininity in negative ways, society has been able to consolidate power and wealth in the hands of those with privilege around gender and race. It also unearths the truth about how we perceive women with in this society, the deepest embodiment of femininity. Thus the greatest threat to masculinity is to strip it of power, to feminize it. This is the root of homophobia.<sup>19</sup> Reversing this tide is essential if our communities are going to thrive. We understand deeply how our masculine privilege can become a wedge in our communities—pitting racial justice fights against gender justice. Yet we have been able to bridge these efforts in a way that strengthens boys of color, giving them access to masculinity without shame or negativity. Our core ethos is to let your first act of resistance be one of self-love; and your second accountability for your privilege. We have built a model that allows for both.

In many ways the first step is to realize that the gender you have always thought of as innate or natural because of the body you were born into—is actually constructed. It has been learned over time, handed to us by our family, friends, and even pop culture. For many of us, this understanding rocks us to our core because we realize that something we have relied on so deeply as a fixed part of ourselves is quite malleable.

This realization opens the door to a profound understanding that we can decide what pieces we want to keep and which we can now freely discard. We have the opportunity to build a new vision for masculinity; One woven from the rich legacy of fathers, uncles, and brothers who have always lived more complex masculinities than we have been led to believe. Men who nurture, who cook, braid hair, cry from sorrow and joy, laugh and dance. Who love the women in their lives fiercely—and recognize that women have profound lessons to teach about masculinity; withhold judgment of things they don't understand and embody integrity in their words and actions. We can craft an understanding of ourselves that moves us away from feeling inadequate, depressed, and powerless toward being healthy and whole.

*Building community with other masculine of center people of color was empowering. I was embraced as part of a spectrum of Brown Bois, as both masculine and feminine.... New models of masculinity transcend, and empower, with an underlying force of love.*

*—Jun-Fung*

*“I have a new understanding of masculinity that has taught me that there is privilege in that. Privilege that I have learned to use in a positive way within my community. It has also given courage to move through my transition with pride and dignity.”*

*—Luckie*





## What We Do

**The Brown Boi Project** is a community of masculine of center womyn, men, two-spirit people, transmen, and our allies. We are activists, philanthropists, and community leaders committed to offering the world a new vision masculinity. Through leadership and movement building retreats for some of the country's fastest rising leaders, we are building a network of leaders and organizations poised to support and anchor a new conversation around gender within communities of color.

We work for **Gender Justice** by re-envisioning the power imbalance between traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. We hold institutional systems, other masculine people, and ourselves accountable for masculine privilege. Our work draws on a gender inclusive framework that shapes non-oppressive masculinity rooted in honor, community, and collaboration with feminine identified people, especially women and girls.

## Join the Conversation

We believe that we are in a pivotal moment of our country's efforts to build social infrastructure for boys of color. The Brown Boi Project is building a radical new vision of masculinity for straight, queer, trans boys and men of color, along with masculine of center women of color. Lifting up the needs of those furthest on the margins—boys of color with disabilities, undocumented boys of color, formerly incarcerated boys of color, boys of color in the foster care system, and gay/bi-sexual/transgender boys of color allows us to develop a campaign that supports *all boys of color*.

Together, we can build awareness throughout communities of color to support the economic justice, health, and wellness for boys of color. Through a new pilot program, launching in 2013, we will develop core curriculum that can be integrated into existing programs working with boys of color.

We are looking for organizations to partner with, that work with and care about the needs of boys of color. Ways to partner include:

- Training and development for your staff/organizational leaders in our gender transformative practices/tools
- Host and assist with outreach and publicity for local community conversations about masculinity with men and boys of color in 2013-2014

If you are interested in partnering around this work, please contact Erica Woodland at [erica@brownboiproject.org](mailto:erica@brownboiproject.org).

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## End Notes

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