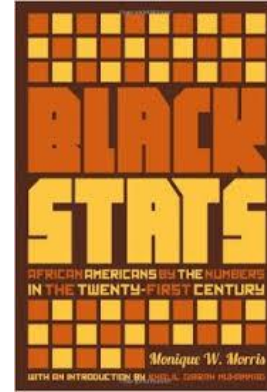


Monique W. Morris, **Black Stats: African Americans by the numbers in the Twenty-First Century**, New York, NY: New Press, 2014, 240 pp., \$14.95 (paperback).

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Monique Morris's short volume contains a wealth of information for scholars. **Black Stats: African Americans by the Numbers in the Twenty-First Century** is an invaluable resource for researchers, and is highly recommended for undergraduates, graduates, media professionals, and activists. Morris's work contributes to the ongoing discussion about black identity, representations in media, and intersection with other identity markers such as gender, religion, class. While not strictly a text about communication studies or rhetorical studies, the author's text complicates the ways in which black people are represented in the media by using statistics to challenge simplistic notions of identity in film, news media, music, and popular culture, among other media.

There is, indeed, much here for communication and rhetorical scholars. Those interested in rhetoric and composition studies will find the statistics on blacks and technology as well as the digital divide useful (pp. 123-133). Scholars of communication pedagogy will be interested in the data on elementary, secondary, and college education, along with discussions of black teachers, black student performance, and black degree completion (pp. 3-21). Media and moving image studies scholars will find much in the discussion of entertainment and sports. (pp. 32-42). Rhetorical and intercultural communication scholars will likely be drawn to the discussion of lifestyle and identity (pp. 83-92), as well as the data on politics, voting, and civic engagement (pp. 115-122). In such a succinct volume, Morris aptly provides clear, readable statistics for readers interested in supporting their own research or challenging those with whom they disagree. It is a difficult task to compile, let alone make readable, so much data, but Morris has.

What specifically, though, might communication and rhetorical scholars find useful in this menagerie of statistics? The information about voter participation paints a hopeful, but still troubling picture. In 2008, although young blacks (58%) voted at a higher rate than young whites (52%), the percentages of young people voting remain low (p. 119). Furthermore, voting is still difficult in many areas of the country which feature voter registration restrictions, strict identification laws, and legislators introducing bills at the state level that would make voting more difficult (p. 120). If communication and rhetorical scholars are concerned about civic engagement, and many are, then these statistics complicate the ideas these scholars teach in argumentation, debate, rhetorical theory, and other classes containing civic engagement components.

Furthermore, the lifestyle and identity statistics suggest new areas of study or emphasis for scholars of gender, sexuality, and interpersonal communication. Morris tells readers that half of blacks

live in neighborhoods with no white residents (p. 88), suggesting that interpersonal scholars must address the reality that some students of color might have little experience forming relationships with their white colleagues. Likewise, 47% of blacks have never been married and 24% of black males are married to non-blacks (p. 88). This indicates, perhaps, new ways to think about romantic relationships that interpersonal text books may not include. The lifestyle and identity chapter opens up other avenues of inquiry as well as challenges monolithic understandings of black identity and relationships including encouraging scholars to question beliefs about romantic relationships, family structures, residential segregation, and multiracialism.

A helpful introduction by Khalil Gibran Muhammad contextualizes the tremendous amount of data in this book. He sets the stage for a powerful rhetorical argument about black identity. He writes, "Statistics will often tell an incomplete story at best or an outright falsehood at worst. They cannot change the world on their own. Beliefs are far more powerful than numbers" (p. xvii). Gibran has set up an argument about the ways in which statistics contribute to identity construction. If he is correct, and I believe that he is, then Morris's text can be read as a text attempting to construct a notion of blackness. To be sure, Gibran knowingly writes that beliefs are more important, as statistics are manipulated and ignored to support racial ideologies, but statistics are nonetheless central to popular conceptions of identity. Morris, then, is doing much more than offering a compendium of statistical knowledge, she is writing blackness according to the numbers. This pursuit is not without problems, however.

Rhetoricians and communication scholars will be interested in the way Morris constructs black identity. Morris's chapters suggest, in some sense, places from which black identity may be constructed. Her chapters are "The Basics," "Education," "Environment," "Entertainment and Sports," "Health," "Justice," "Lifestyle and Identity," "Military Service," "Money and Jobs," "Politics, Voting, and Civic Engagement," and "Science and Technology," along with chapters on gender differences. The order of the chapters is not quite alphabetical, nor is length seemingly an organizational feature, nor is the text's arrangement seemingly an argument (e.g., "Entertainment and Sports" would not seem to be more important for identity construction than "Politics, Voting, and Civic Engagement"). Yet, there is much here to suggest an implicit argument about identity, namely that Morris is mostly concerned with economic empowerment. As such, she relies on static notions of capitalist success and economic deliverance. One third of the chapters are primarily about job categories and economics ("Entertainment and Sports," "Military Service," "Money and Jobs," and "Science and Technology"). Furthermore, each chapter hints at issues of economic empowerment through data about careers, skills, and economic indicators without so much as a pause. In so doing, her book begs a question she identifies in her Afterword, "What has not been asked?" (p. 160).

Morris fails to ask questions about the relationship between United States blacks and capitalism; specifically she accepts capitalism as if it has no impact on black identity and has no influence on the statistics she presents. This omission is likely not intentional, yet still noteworthy. Her book, which makes much of the late Manning Marable's impact on Morris and her writing of this text, elides consideration of the complex relationship between blackness and capital, about which Marable was intimately concerned. Marable's (1983) classic text *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America: Problems in Race, Political Economy, and Society* addressed these questions, yet Marable's insights are not present in Morris's

reading of race, identity, and economics. This is troubling, of course, because capitalism is part and parcel of the entertainment industry, justice system, education system, and health system. Yet, Morris does not contextualize her quantitative data with the qualitative assessment necessary to make sense of capital's influence. She admits as much about the need to compliment her quantitative work with qualitative analysis in her Afterword, but the reader is left wondering if there is a way to construct black identity absent capitalistic notions of economic progress. Relatively little, and to be sure these ideas do appear in the text, is made of familial, religious, cultural, and civic identification. A more fruitful way to consider black identity, quantitatively, would be to make more of this information in the face of Morris's implicit economic determinism.

In order to address these concerns, Morris's next book should connect economic policy, anti-union activities, and a theoretically nuanced position that explains these statistics in light of capitalism, political liberalism, and whiteness. These issues, at the center of U.S.-style capitalism, would help ground her statistics in socio-history, helping readers see the connections between race and capital in order to advance a more thorough understanding of majoritarian and minoritarian politics, social activism, and lived experience. Scholars and students looking to place Morris's well-researched text in conversation with the writings of Cedric Robinson, David Roediger, Ron Greene, or Dana Cloud will be forced to do that work on their own. The problem is that Morris does not provide the theoretical connections necessary to make a more compelling argument about U.S. blacks, which would make the text more rewarding.

Morris writes of Marable's sending a private note to her arguing "it was time 'to present a new vision for Black freedom'" (p. xvii). Mass incarceration, workplace and housing discrimination, the war on drugs, and other policies all indicate Marable is correct. Now is the time, but without a more nuanced consideration of capitalism's enduring legacy, this time may pass us by.

These quibbles are minor, however, and readers would be well served by adding this book to their collection. In today's multi-mediated 24-hour cycle of statistics, Morris distills the (mis)information into an accessible format, helping students and scholars make sense of the deluge of numbers. While it would have been helpful for her voice to come through more by providing longer introductions to her chapters and making theoretical connections, there is no doubt she has done an admirable job in compiling this information, and has provided a much needed service to challenge pervasive stereotypes about blacks in the United States.

References

Marable, M. (1983). *How capitalism underdeveloped black America: Problems in race, political economy, and society*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.