# THE SOULS OF BLACK COLLEGES: CULTURAL PRODUCTION, IDEOLOGY, AND IDENTITY AT HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

By

Magana J. Kabugi

Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of
the Graduate School of Vanderbilt University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in
English
June 30, 2020
Nashville, Tennessee

Approved:
Hortense J. Spillers, Ph.D.
Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo, Ph.D.
Ben Tran, Ph.D.
Forrest E. Harris, Sr., D.Min.
Robert M. Franklin, Jr., Ph.D.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Words cannot adequately express how grateful I am to the many people who have helped to make this dissertation possible. First and foremost, I'd like to thank my dissertation committee—Hortense Spillers, Ifeoma Nwankwo, and Ben Tran of Vanderbilt's English Department—as well as my two external readers, Forrest E. Harris Sr. of American Baptist College and Robert M. Franklin Jr. of Emory University. Each committee member was an invaluable resource, and each brought unique strengths to the shaping of this work. I'm also heavily indebted to Andra Gillespie and the James Weldon Johnson Institute for the Study of Race and Difference at Emory University for awarding me a dissertation fellowship that enabled me to complete my dissertation in my final year of graduate school.

Over the five years I've been a doctoral student at Vanderbilt, I've benefited from having a multitude of friends, mentors, and students who have become friends. My friends Mariann VanDevere, Nadejda Webb, Abraham Liddell, Demetrius Murphy, Webster Heath, James Avery Alexander Jr., Logan Northcutt, Thea Autry, Terrell Taylor, Ashley Jones, and Kevin Lubin have helped to anchor me when I felt that my ship was either not going anywhere or going off course. The Organization of Black Graduate and Professional Students, of which I had the privilege of serving as treasurer and on the community affairs committee, provided a safe, fun, and welcoming space for me to balance work with downtime and fellowship with my fellow scholars-in-training behind the Veil. Lucius T. Outlaw Jr. has been an incredible mentor and professor, and provided invaluable insight into the politics of revolution and pedagogical traditions at his alma mater Fisk University during the 1960s and 1970s. The Black Cultural Center staff—Frank Dobson, Rosevelt Noble, Nicole Malveaux, Katrina Crawford, and Jackie Grant—are like an extension of family, and Dr. Dobson's pitch was key in recruiting me to Vanderbilt. The Department of African American

and Diaspora Studies—Gilman Whiting, Tracey Sharpley-Whiting, Tiffany Patterson, Hector Myers, Candy Taafe, and David Ikard—provided a second home for me within the academy. Special thanks to my other mentors—Houston A. Baker Jr., who shepherded me through my first year as he was preparing for retirement; Brandon Byrd and Herbert Marbury, for guiding me through the ropes of being a junior scholar; Deborah Lilton, for being an invaluable archival resource and for showing me where all the gold was buried; and Sha'Tika Brown, for her constant great energy and assistance in scheduling meetings with Dr. Harris. Thanks to the Department of English and the Graduate School for the various institutional travel grants that enhanced my research. A big thank you to all of the undergraduates I've taught at Vanderbilt, and particularly that first course I ever taught in the fall of 2016. Despite my nervousness and that unexpected presidential election, you didn't drop the class. I'm thankful for all of you.

When I arrived in Nashville as a first-year doctoral student, little did I know that Fisk University would become a place of intellectual and personal grounding for me. Jason Curry has been a wellspring of Fisk knowledge and a great mentor to me ever since I first entered the doors of the Fisk Memorial Chapel as a first-year graduate student looking for churches in Nashville. DeLisa Minor Harris of Special Collections has been tremendously resourceful, even sorting through unprocessed collections to provide me with whatever I needed. Hannibal Leach has been an important influence to me personally and intellectually throughout grad school, and got me involved early on in the life of the African American Studies program at Fisk. Leantin Bracks, LaTonya Reese Rogers, Katie Burnett, Holly Hamby, and Patrick Fleming have all been a deeply supportive English department. Many thanks to the wonderful students at Fisk who I've both befriended in chapel and taught in the classroom. I'm also grateful to my many mentors and friends

in the administration: Joe Watkins, Willie Jude, Vann Newkirk, Kenneth Jones, President Kevin Rome and First Lady Stefanie Rome.

My research on Howard University Press would have been practically impossible had it not been for Dana Williams pointing me in the right direction. Her mentorship and guidance as I worked on this chapter have been indispensable. I'm also grateful to the Howard University Press family for pouring themselves into the many sit-down and over-the-phone interviews: Fay Acker, Janell Walden Agyeman, Cynthia Lewis, D. Kamili Anderson, Phil Petrie, Michael Nelson, and Renee Mayfield. I'm deeply grateful to Andrew Billingsley, vibrant and in his nineties, for meeting with me at Howard and sharing his firsthand recollections of the founding of the Press and the "New Direction" campaign at Howard in the 1970s. Paul Coates of Black Classic Press graciously gave of his time also, and provided valuable personal and historical perspective on the politics of black independent publishing. Sonja Woods of Howard's Moorland-Spingarn Research Center went out of her way to make sure all of my archival research needs were met, even on short notice. Special thanks to Ivory Toldson and Robert Palmer for their mentorship and our many conversations on the dynamics of HBCU leadership. I will also be forever grateful to Gregory Hampton, who sadly passed away before I completed this dissertation.

To my friends at Morehouse College: Lawrence Edward Carter Sr., dean of the Martin Luther King Jr. International Chapel, was an incredible resource to me during my time in residence in Atlanta. His "Thurman Thursdays" and "sermon talkbacks" opened me up to the ways in which the chapel participates in cultural production. I'm grateful to Marva Griffin Carter as well for her interest in my work, her encouragement, and for introducing me to her husband, which inspired me to write the Morehouse chapter. Many thanks to Quincy Rineheart for encouraging me as a fellow doctoral student and for creating space for me to give an invited lecture at the chapel on my

dissertation. Thanks also to the students whom I got to know, particularly Donavan Pinner, Gabriel Cloud, Jordan T. Griffin, Spencer Nabors, and Shelby Wallace. I'm especially indebted to Corrie Claiborne and Sam Livingston for taking me under their wing and showing me the faculty side of life at Morehouse. Vicki Crawford showed great enthusiasm for my work and introduced me to the fascinating Morehouse Martin Luther King Jr. Collection. A number of scholars and leaders from Spelman College and Clark Atlanta University also brought richness and depth to my dissertation and to my Atlanta University Center experience: to Donna Akiba Sullivan Harper, thank you immensely for your encouragement. It was invigorating to share a stage with you at the 2020 MLA Convention. Many thanks also to Cynthia Neal Spence for believing in me and my work enough to invite me to speak at the UNCF Mellon Summer Institute (unfortunately canceled due to COVID-19). I would be remiss to omit Said Sewell of the Atlanta University Center Consortium, whose mentorship, leadership, and interest in my work has benefited me tremendously as an up-and-coming HBCU scholar.

To the staff of the James Weldon Johnson Institute—Rhonda Patrick, Antoinette Burrell, and Christle Wright—thank you for helping to make Atlanta and the Institute home! To my co-fellow and close friend, Morehouse man Justin Shaw, thank you for everything—your friendship, shared investment in HBCUs, advice, many jokes, and dropping me off at various MARTA stations after each Sunday evening dinner with guest speakers. Thanks also to my other co-fellows: Yami Rodriguez, Shante Paradigm Smalls, Kyle Mays, Courtney Baker, Sarah RudeWalker, Shanya Cordis, and Robin Brooks. Your camaraderie and laboring alongside me in the intellectual vineyards made the process all the more enjoyable and fulfilling. Sadly, Pellom McDaniels III departed from us near the close of the academic year; I'll always be grateful for his passion for

African American studies and archival work, and for always making sure I had what I needed for my research. He will be sorely missed.

Many thanks to Crystal deGregory, who has set a high standard for excellence in HBCU scholarship, digital humanities, think tank leadership, and advocacy. Thanks also to Jelani Favors for his powerful book on HBCU student activism and for his talk at the Auburn Avenue Research Library. I'd also like to express gratitude to the following HBCU presidents, current and retired, for taking the time to talk with a young grad student about the business of leading black colleges: Roslyn Clark Artis, Julianne Malveaux, Johnnetta Cole, Makola Abdullah, Michael Sorrell, Herman Felton, Logan Hampton, Ron Mason, M. Christopher Brown II, Stanley Pritchett, George T. French Jr., and Mark Miles Fisher IV. I'm grateful to the Council of Former HBCU Presidents in Atlanta, and particularly Sam Jolley, Cheryl Davenport Dozier, Kofi Lomotey, Barbara Hatton, and Dorothy Cowser Yancy for inviting me to give an invited talk in February 2020 about my dissertation research. Many thanks also to Jarrett Carter Sr. and HBCU Digest for providing a steady stream of content that keeps me on my toes intellectually, and to Pastor John Faison, who graciously shared with me his HBCU fervor and connected me to his cousin, Jarrett Carter.

Lastly, I want to thank my family for their unending love, encouragement, and sacrifices: my father and mother, Njuguna and Patricia Kabugi; my brother Kinuthia; and all of my extended family on both sides of the Atlantic who encouraged me along the way. Many thanks also to my home church, Oakland Baptist Church in Alexandria, Virginia; and my adopted church home, Fifteenth Avenue Baptist Church in Nashville.

TABLE OF CONTENTS


Chapter Page

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ... ii

LIST OF FIGURES ... ix

INTRODUCTION: WHY CULTURAL PRODUCTION MATTERS AT HBCUS ... 1

Introduction: Booker T. Washington, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and the “Tuskegee Song” ... 1
Critical Interventions ... 10
A Clarification of Terms ... 14
Chapter Overview ... 16

1. “HER OWN BLACK BEAUTIFUL SELF”: WALTER LEONARD, FISK UNIVERSITY, AND THE DU BOIS CAMPAIGN ... 20

Introduction: Walter Leonard’s Challenge ... 20
“The Last Salon of the Harlem Renaissance”: The Humanistic Ideal at Fisk ... 24
The “Turbulent” Years: Fisk in the Civil Rights and Black Power Eras ... 36
Fighting “Intellectual Genocide”: Walter Leonard’s Artistic Renaissance Campaign ... 46
Conclusion: The Lessons from Leonard’s Campaign ... 54

2. “CREATING KNOWLEDGE TO SAVE THE REPUBLIC”: THE STORY OF HOWARD UNIVERSITY PRESS ... 57

Introduction: Black Authorship vs. Black Inclusion ... 57
Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, James Cheek, and the (Re)Making of “The Capstone” ... 61
Howard University Press and the Rebirth of HBCU Publishing ... 71
Howard University Press in the World ... 82
Howard University Press and the Travails of the Later Years ... 87
Conclusion: HUP, Authorship, and the Specter of Black Erasure in Washington, DC ... 94

3. AN “INTANGIBLE SOMETHING”: MOREHOUSE COLLEGE AND THE MAKING OF MEN ... 98

Introduction: What Does Morehouse Mean to America? ... 98
The “Candle” on the “Red Clay Hill”: Morehouse, the AUC, and the West End ... 102
The “Morehouse Man” ... 108
The “Campus Canon” of Morehouse ... 118
King Chapel, Lawrence Carter, and the Production of Culture ... 122

Conclusion: The Future of the Campus Canon....................133

4. IN SEARCH OF "EXCELLENCE": GIL SCOTT-HERON'S *THE NIGGER FACTORY* AND DEBBIE ALLEN'S *A DIFFERENT WORLD* ....................137

Introduction: Black Power and the Question of Excellence....................137
Gil Scott Heron's *The Nigger Factory:* Making "Black People"....................142
"A different world than where you come from": *A Different World* and HBCU Excellence on the Silver Screen....................156
Conclusion: The Continuing Impact of *Nigger Factory* and *Different World* ....................166

CONCLUSION: BLACK COLLEGES AND THE CULTURAL PRODUCTION RENAISSANCE OF THE 21ST CENTURY....................168

REFERENCES ....................173

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Page

1. James Weldon Johnson hosting poetry reading for Fisk students, 1930s ................................34

2. Student workers at Howard University Press, 1914/1915.......................................................73

3. Howard University Press catalogue, 1982.................................................................................89

4. *Ebony* photographic essay about the Morehouse Man, 1983 ..............................................112

5. Martin Luther King Jr. as a Morehouse student, 1940s......................................................124

6. Lucius M. Tobin Library at the Martin Luther King Jr. International Chapel......................131

7. First edition of Gil Scott-Heron's *The Nigger Factory,* 1972 .............................................144

8. Commencement march scene from *Cosby Show* episode "Hillman," 1987.........................159

9. Advertisement for "Citizen Wayne" episode of *A Different World,* 1989 ...........................165

# INTRODUCTION

## WHY CULTURAL PRODUCTION MATTERS AT HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

By the dawn of the twentieth century, Alabama's Tuskegee Institute had become a nationwide legend. The little school founded in 1881 by a 25-year-old former slave named Booker T. Washington had grown into an educational and political powerhouse among the nation's historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). The school had not only become famous for championing vocational and agricultural education as pathways to black advancement, but also for the tremendous cultural and political influence it wielded among black and white Americans alike: African Americans saw the "Tuskegee model" as the tangible embodiment of black ingenuity, while whites felt that the Tuskegee philosophy didn't disrupt their preference for a societal demarcation line between the races.

Washington deployed literary production as a way to diffuse the Tuskegee gospel throughout the country and to amplify his own personal notoriety as the nation's leading black intellectual and political figure. In 1900 the New York-based Christian periodical *The Outlook* published serialized installments of what would become Washington's autobiography, *Up From Slavery,* the following year.[1] *Up From Slavery* dramatized Washington's journey from enslaved child to educator, and outlined the curriculum and educational philosophy endemic to the institutional culture of Tuskegee Institute. *Up From Slavery* was followed by a second book in

[1] See Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery,* edited by William L. Andrews. W.W. Norton, 1996.

1905, *Tuskegee and Its People: Their Ideals and Achievements,* a collection of first-person essays (basically testimonials) by Tuskegee graduates on how the Institute prepared them for their vocations. In 1902, still on the heels of *Up From Slavery*'s critical acclaim, Washington commissioned his close friend Paul Laurence Dunbar (who was the most popular black poet in America at the time) to write the university's official alma mater song. The previous year Dunbar had written a poem celebrating the opening of Dorothy Hall, a women's residence hall on the Tuskegee campus, that declared, "The women of a race should be its pride; / We glory in the strength our mothers had, / We glory that this strength was not denied / To labor bravely, nobly, and be glad."[2] Dunbar dedicated the new song, called "The Tuskegee Song," to William Henry Baldwin, a white Northern benefactor of Tuskegee who would die of cancer three years later:

> Tuskegee, thou pride of the swift growing South, we pay thee our homage today
> For the worth of thy teaching, the joy of thy care, and the good we have known 'neath thy sway.
> Oh, long-striving mother of diligent sons, and of daughters whose strength is their pride,
> We will love thee forever, and ever shall walk thro' the oncoming years at thy side.
> Thy hand we have held up the difficult steeps, when painful and slow was the pace,
> And onward and upward we've labored with thee, for the glory of God and our race.
> The fields smile to greet us, the forests are glad, the ring of the anvil and hoe
> Have a music as thrilling and sweet as a harp which thou taught us to hear and to know.
> Oh, mother Tuskegee, thou shinest today as a gem in the fairest of lands,
> Thou gavest the heav'n-blessed power to see the worth of our minds and our hands,
> We thank thee, we bless thee, we pray for thee years, imploring with grateful accord,
> Full fruit for thy striving, time longer to strive, sweet love and true labor's reward.[3]

Like a classic HBCU alma mater song, "The Tuskegee Song" focuses upon Tuskegee Institute as a nurturing as well as a subversive figure: it is nurturing because it inspires love and admiration from its students like a mother, and has been with its students as they've labored "onward and

---

[2] Paul Laurence Dunbar, "On the Dedication of Dorothy Hall." *The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar,* edited by Joanne M. Braxton. U of Virginia P, 1993, p. 214.
[3] Nathaniel Clark Smith and Paul Laurence Dunbar, "The Tuskegee Song (mixed voices)." Tuskegee Institute P, 1902. Musical score.

upward" towards progress. Dunbar also cleverly inverts the infamous slogan "the South will rise again," the rallying cry of the emerging second-wave Ku Klux Klan, by making Tuskegee (and thus, blackness) the symbol of the "swift growing South" instead of whiteness and racism. The industrial and agricultural focus of the institution is also exemplified in the ecological imagery of the song: "the fields smile to greet us, the forests are glad, the ring of the anvil and hoe / have a music as thrilling and sweet as a harp which thou taught us to hear and to know," signifying a symbiotic harmony between the Tuskegee student and the earth.

However, Washington wasn't thrilled upon reading Dunbar's initial draft. He urged Dunbar to accentuate the school's industrial focus, and decried the lack of religious imagery in the song, pointing to the school's strict mandates woven into the institutional culture, such as mandatory chapel attendance; social demarcation between men and women students; and the importance of moral values such as thrift, industry, and racial pride. He also took issue with the phrase "swift growing South," perhaps because he felt that the phrase could be read as conflating the South's economic stagnation with cultural stagnation. Washington was accustomed to getting his way—he would buy controlling shares of black-owned newspapers nationwide and dispatch supportive media outlets on his rivals in order to shape the narratives about his institution and himself personally.[4] Dunbar, however, was no wallflower either. Though the 30-year-old poet's health was failing, Dunbar was an accomplished writer, having published several collections of verse, short stories, and novels in his own right. A passionate disagreement on ideology and artistic integrity raged between the two men through the mail. From his row house in Washington, DC, Dunbar wrote:

My dear Mr. Washington,

[4] Manning Marable, *Black Leadership.* Columbia UP, 1998, pp. 29, 34.

I have your letter and note your objection to the song. In the first place, [your] objection to the line, "Swift growing South" is not well taken because a song is judged not by the hundred years that it lives but from the time at which it was written, and the "swift growing" only indicates what the South has been, and will contrast with what it may achieve or any failure it may make. The "Star Spangled Banner" was written for the time, and although we may not be watching the stars and stripes waving from ramparts amid shot and shell, the song seems to be going pretty fairly still.

> As to emphasizing the industrial idea, I have done merely what the school itself has done, but I will make this concession of changing the fourth line of the third stanza into "worth of our minds and our hands," although it is not easy to sing.
>
> The Bible I cannot bring in. The exigencies of verse will hardly allow a paraphrase of it….[5]

In the end, Dunbar's arguments won out, and more than a century after he and Washington scuffled over the artistic and ideological implications of the song's phrasing and thematic content, "The Tuskegee Song" remains Tuskegee University's treasured institutional anthem.

The composition of "Tuskegee" provides a glimpse into the interconnectedness between cultural production and HBCU identity. From the founding of Fisk University's Jubilee Singers and Morehouse College's Glee Club to the publication of the 1954 poetry anthology *Lincoln University Poets* by Lincoln University in Pennsylvania in celebration of its centennial anniversary,[6] the production of music, art, literature, and other forms of cultural expression have been endemic to the identities of historically black colleges. Cultural production, in its diverse range of iterations, makes visible the distinct ideologies that permeate and define HBCU life: the intricate murals by painter Aaron Douglas adorning the walls of Fisk's Cravath Memorial Library, depicting a "panorama of the development of Black people in this hemisphere, in the

[5] Paul Laurence Dunbar to Booker T. Washington, 23 Jan. 1902, typed letter. Booker T. Washington Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (6-7). http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/african-american-odyssey/images/06/0607001r.jpg.

[6] See Waring Cuney, Langston Hughes, and Bruce McMarion Wright, editors. *Lincoln University Poets*. Fine Editions P, 1954.

new world"[7]; the statue in the middle of the Tuskegee campus of Booker T. Washington lifting the "veil of ignorance" from the face of an enslaved black man; Du Bois's short story "On the Coming of John," written in Stone Hall on the campus of Atlanta University (which is today Fountain Hall at Morris Brown College), about a young black man who attends an HBCU and learns the jarring truths of being black in America.[8]

Following the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* and the subsequent legislative victories of the American Civil Rights Movement throughout the 1960s, historically black institutions of higher learning faced a major hurdle: as more predominantly white institutions (PWIs) began to open up to black students and poach black faculty members from black colleges, the number of students and faculty at HBCUs began to diminish. Carolyn O. Wilson Mbajekwe examines how prominent black leaders in higher education such as Benjamin E. Mays, president of Morehouse, and Frederick D. Patterson, president of Tuskegee and co-founder of the United Negro College Fund, tried to adapt to the new normal that confronted HBCUs by developing approaches to collegiate desegregation rooted in the theoretical school of cultural pluralism.[9] Others (for example, the founders of experimental black institutions such as Nairobi College and Malcolm X University in the 1970s) turned in a different direction and advocated for black people to ignore desegregation and focus on strengthening their own institutions. Many observers, particularly white educational scholars and

---

[7] Howard Kaplan, "Stop-Loss: Restoring the Aaron Douglas Murals at Fisk University." *Smithsonian American Art Museum,* 14 Oct. 2008. Web. https://americanart.si.edu/blog/eye-level/2008/14/1070/stop-loss-restoring-aaron-douglas-murals-fisk-university.

[8] See W.E.B. Du Bois, "On the Coming of John." *The Souls of Black Folk,* Penguin Classics, 1996, pp. 171-186.

[9] For more on Mays and Patterson's engagement with cultural pluralism, see Carolyn O. Wilson Mbajekwe, *A Vision for Black Colleges in a Post-Brown America: Benjamin E. Mays, Frederick D. Patterson and the Quest for a Cultural Pluralism-Based Definition of Collegiate Desegregation.* 2006. Emory U, PhD dissertation.

media pundits, speculated on whether HBCUs would cease to exist altogether in the new (supposedly) post-segregation educational landscape. To this day, the common retelling of HBCU history in the post-Civil Rights era paints desegregation as a tidal wave that overpowered HBCUs and greatly diminished their impact within the higher education sector in the U.S. In other words, the oft-repeated historical narrative traces a familiar yet well-worn route: the nation's colleges desegregated. HBCUs lost students. But HBCUs are still valuable today. The end.

This dissertation, *The Souls of Black Colleges: Cultural Production, Ideology and Identity at Historically Black Colleges and Universities,* seeks to disrupt that inaccurate historical narrative. Through my analysis of how three real HBCU campuses (Fisk University, Howard University, and Morehouse College) and two fictional campuses in literature and media (Sutton University and Hillman College) responded to this era of social and political flux, I pose two questions: first, *what roles did the humanities and cultural production play in HBCUs' responses to the social and economic shifts precipitated by collegiate desegregation?* And secondly, *what do these creative projects teach us about the roles of the humanities and cultural production in the construction of HBCU identity and ideology overall?*

To answer these questions, this dissertation revisits the post-Civil Rights era, a time in which HBCU students, faculty, and administrators engaged in intense debates within their own intellectual communities about the meaning of the HBCU mission in a changed educational landscape. Historian Lerone Bennett Jr. succinctly captures the urgency behind these debates in his 1972 essay "The Challenge of Blackness," in which he explicates the pressing need for institutions that incubate black thought. Blackness, he argues, requires "a new rationality, a new way of seeing, a new way of reasoning, a new way of thinking" that will liberate the black mind

from the Eurocentric frames of reference that have long circumscribed black imagination. This new frame of reference is formed through the "institutionalization of black experience… making blackness *a presence* in the land…. Giving [blackness] visible body and form so that black people can plug into it and absorb the energy they need."[10]

The phrase "institutionalizing the black experience" often evokes images of the black students who protested at HBCUs alongside the black student movements at PWIs demanding black studies programs.[11] However, these student protests form only a partial picture of how HBCUs responded to the new social order created by the desegregation of American higher education. I argue that a number of HBCU leaders and stakeholders drew upon aesthetic approaches influenced by an amalgamation of cultural, philosophical, literary, and artistic movements—ranging from the Black Arts Movement, social gospel theory, Pan-Africanism, and the aesthetics of black Generation X hip-hop politics—in order to formulate creative projects designed to reaffirm the HBCU mission and enable black stakeholders to "plug in" and "absorb the energy they needed," in the words of Lerone Bennett.

Some of these projects were university-wide endeavors, such as Fisk president Walter Leonard's attempt at reorganizing his institution's identity around the cultural production and ideology of W.E.B. Du Bois in the 1970s and 1980s; other projects were more localized within institutions, such as Howard's creation of the nation's first fully functional HBCU-based academic press, or Morehouse's establishment of a chapel dedicated to the memory of its most

---

[10] Lerone Bennett Jr. *The Challenge of Blackness.* Johnson Publishing, 1972, pp. 37-38.

[11] The black student movement at HBCUs from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s is well documented within historical scholarship. See Robert C. Smith, *Ronald W. Walters and the Fight for Black Power, 1969-2010,* SUNY P, 2018; Ibram H. Rogers, *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstruction of Higher Education, 1965-1972,* Palgrave Macmillan, 2012; Martha Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus,* U of California P, 2014.

famous alum, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Still other projects were not tied to any specific institutions, but sought to define, celebrate, and even critique the HBCU experience, such as musician and writer Gil Scott-Heron's 1972 novel *The Nigger Factory,* and the popular eighties NBC sitcom *A Different World,* directed by actress and choreographer Debbie Allen. These creative projects also sought to disrupt the question posed to HBCUs by white universities and the media: what will black colleges do now that they are no longer the only options available to black students? Through these initiatives, HBCUs answered affirmatively, "The same things we've always been doing… we're still here, and we still matter."

By examining these creative projects and the ideologies that informed them, this dissertation aims to examine the ideological core, or the "souls" of black colleges, from a different angle. Just as Du Bois theorized the interiority of the "souls" of people of African descent more than a century ago in his 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*, this dissertation seeks a better understanding of the intricacies of HBCU interiority through the unique cultural and ideological traditions that are foundational to these institutions. Not only does this research seek to bring to the fore cultural histories that have received scant attention in scholarship, but also delineate the significance of the ideals of the humanities to the HBCU intellectual tradition. The humanities have long been foundational to what Jelani M. Favors calls the "second curriculum," or the cultural aspects of HBCU pedagogy that speak to the black soul. The main curriculum (i.e. literature, history, mathematics, science) can be replicated at any institution, but the "second curriculum" is the critical ideological element that gives the HBCU its distinction. It manifests itself through the personal investments that faculty have in students, and through the embedded

pedagogy that teaches black students how to navigate and dismantle systemic racism.[12] Humanistic fields such as English, history, art, philosophy, and religion have long been the intellectual driving forces behind the second curriculum, which makes the awakening of racial consciousness and radical action in black students possible. The relationship between the humanities and HBCUs started to become strained in the years following collegiate desegregation. Favors writes that during this period, the humanities curriculum at many HBCUs

> faced serious challenges. The promise of corporate and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) jobs, which offered a higher earning potential after graduation caused many to steer clear of the humanities. Potential activists were less and less likely to take the traditional courses that had the potential to politicize them…. the privileging of STEM fields would further undermine the intellectual foundations of Black militancy. The idealism, race consciousness, and cultural nationalism that defined the second curriculum had fed the freedom dreams of Black college students for generations. It was powered by faculty who operated out of departments and programs that stimulated critical thought. Students, in turn, linked those ideas with the messages that they received from visiting speakers, returning alumni, and sometimes administrators themselves. Following the climax of the civil rights movement, however, those departments were increasingly marginalized. Almost every major financial investment coming into HBCUs was being funneled toward the hard sciences. Social science programs and humanities departments languished. After a brief bump at the beginning of the 1970s, enrollment in the humanities suffered a precipitous dip toward the end of the decade and flatlined for almost the next forty years with negligible gains…. This same period witnessed fairly new fields such as communications, architecture, vocational studies, and social work undergoing exponential growth, ballooning from just a couple hundred majors in 1966 to over ten thousand by 2014.[13]

Unquestionably, the weakening of humanities programs is occurring across higher education, in both HBCU and PWI environments, but the phenomenon is especially crippling to HBCUs, where the humanistic ideal has been central to the "second curriculum" that makes HBCUs stand apart as unique institutions of American higher education.

---

[12] Jelani M. Favors, *Shelter in a Time of Storm: How Black Colleges Fostered Generations of Leadership and Activism.* U of North Carolina P, 2019, p. 5.
[13] Favors, *Shelter in a Time of Storm*, pp. 239, 241.

## Critical Interventions

The relationship between HBCUs and liberal arts ideals brings me to the critical interventions that this dissertation seeks to make within the capacious field of HBCU studies. One objective of *The Souls of Black Colleges* is to contribute to the small but growing body of scholarship on HBCUs using humanities-based approaches. The bulk of scholarship on HBCUs is rooted in social science-based, qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches that focus on topics such as student enrollment, institutional leadership, alumni giving, and student performance. Social science-based scholars of HBCU life such as Kassie Freeman, M. Christopher Brown II, Robert T. Palmer, Ivory Toldson, and Marybeth Gasman are some of the most prominent names in this branch of HBCU research.

However, the last decade alone has seen a renaissance of research from humanities scholars on the role that HBCUs have played (and continue to play) in the nurturing of black intellectual communities, such as Dana A. Williams' work on HBCUs and archival preservation; Favors' *Shelter in a Time of Storm: How Black Colleges Fostered Generations of Leadership and Activism* (University of North Carolina Press); Joshua M. Myers' *We Are Worth Fighting For: A History of the Howard University Student Protest of 1989* (New York University Press); Lavelle Porter's *The Blackademic Life: Academic Fiction, Higher Education, and the Black Intellectual* (Northwestern University Press); Derrick E. White's *Blood, Sweat and Tears: Jake Gaither, Florida A&M, and the History of Black College Football* (UNC Press); Zachery Williams' *In Search of the Talented Tenth: Howard University Public Intellectuals and the Dilemmas of Race, 1926-1970*; and Eddie R. Cole's *The Campus Color Line: College Presidents and the Struggle for Black Freedom* (Princeton University Press).

Additionally, there has been a blossoming of HBCU research within the online and digital humanities spheres. Crystal deGregory, a historian of black educational history who has written extensively about the dilemma facing HBCU archives in the 21st century, has made her own imprint on the world of HBCU scholarship and digital humanities with her online think tank HBCUstory and her academic journal, *The Journal of HBCU Research + Culture,* which publish articles, interviews, photographic essays, graphic art, and other forms of cultural production dealing with HBCU history and leadership.[14] Walter Kimbrough, the president of Dillard University, also regularly produces a number of online thinkpieces on the importance of black institutional leadership in the twenty-first century. *HBCU Digest*, an online podcast and news outlet founded by independent journalist and Morgan State University professor Jarrett Carter, is also playing an important role as a platform for young faculty at HBCUs who are embarking on eye-opening and critically engaging new work about the black college sector.[15]

Moreover, *The Souls of Black Colleges* engages with the newly emerging field of critical university studies (CUS) and interrogates the role (and absence) of HBCUs within this growing field. Jeffrey J. Williams writes that the field's aim is to target "the corporatization of American higher education over the past three decades, relinquishing much of its public promise, often at the expense of students and faculty."[16] Other topics of discussion frequently raised in CUS include the current state of academic labor, student debt, the burgeoning administrative domain, and the explosion of institutional reliance on contingent labor. Although. a considerable number of the scholars associated with CUS are humanities-based (and particularly from within literary

---

[14] See Crystal deGregory, *HBCUstory.* HBCUstory, http://hbcustory.org/.
[15] Jarrett Carter Sr., *HBCU Digest.* Carter Media Enterprises, https://hbcudigest.substack.com/.
[16] Jeffrey J. Williams, "The Need for Critical University Studies." *A New Deal for the Humanities: Liberal Arts and the Future of Public Higher Education,* edited by Gordon Hunter and Feisal G. Mohamed. Rutgers UP, 2015, p. 145.

and cultural studies), the field is interdisciplinary and incorporates a broad range of theoretical approaches. In spite of this methodological diversity, however, the field's absence of (or rather, disinterest in) black scholars period, let alone HBCU-based scholars, represents a gaping lacuna within the CUS community. While many black scholars have produced work that deals with the experiences of black people in American institutions of higher learning (such as Corrie Claiborne,[17] Layli Phillips and Barbara McCaskill,[18] Tressie McMillan Cottom, Craig Steven Wilder, Roderick A. Ferguson, Fred Moten,[19] Sekile M. Nzinga,[20] and the Critical University Studies Working Group at the University of California at Berkeley's Center for Race and Gender[21])—work that would logically fall under the umbrella of CUS—the names of these scholars and collectives are rarely called in CUS discussions led by white scholars, particularly in academic media outlets such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education.* Jeffrey Williams's 2012 *Chronicle* thinkpiece "Deconstructing Academe," which lays out the objectives and the intellectual genealogy of the field, fails to mention a single text by a black or non-white author.[22] Since the days of Booker T. Washington, Anna Julia Cooper, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Mary McLeod Bethune, black American intellectuals have been engaging critically with issues of race

---

[17] See Corrie Claiborne, "Leaving Abjection: Where 'Black' Meets Theory." *Colorizing Literary Theory,* special issue of *Modern Language Studies,* vol. 26, no. 4, 1996, pp. 27-36.
[18] See Layli Phillips and Barbara McCaskill, "Who's Schooling Who? Black Women and the Bringing of the Everyday into Academe, or Why We Started 'The Womanist.'" *Postcolonial, Emergent, and Indigenous Feminisms,* special issue of *Signs,* vol. 20, no. 4, 1995, pp. 1007-1018.
[19] For a list of these scholars' CUS work, see Abigail Boggs and Nick Mitchell, "Critical University Studies and the Crisis Consensus." *Doctoral Degrees in W/G/S/F Studies: Taking Stock,* special issue of *Feminist Studies,* vol. 44, no. 2, 2018, p. 433.
[20] See Sekile M. Nzinga, *Lean Semesters: How Higher Education Reproduces Inequity.* Johns Hopkins UP, 2020.
[21] "Critical University Studies." *Center for Race and Gender, UC-Berkeley.* Web. https://www.crg.berkeley.edu/research/critical-university-studies/
[22] See Williams, "Deconstructing Academe." *Chronicle of Higher Education,* 19 Feb. 2012. Web. https://www.chronicle.com/article/An-Emerging-Field-Deconstructs/130791

and university education in their scholarship; however contemporary discourses within CUS frequently overlook this history.

The field's attention to corporatization and government influence also presents a dilemma for black scholars, and particularly to those whose work focuses on HBCUs: though the corporate and government influence has definitely taken a toll on the state of the humanities in black institutions, the HBCU sector has historically had a complicated love-hate relationship with both corporate America and federal, state, and local governments. HBCUs are leaders in social and economic mobility for low-wealth and first-generation students, and many black colleges serve as pipelines for graduates to enter high-paying careers. Corporate donations also help to make institutional research, infrastructure upkeep, and scholarship funding possible at HBCUs, given their financial precarity. As for the government, it was through Congressional legislation that HBCUs received special classification. HBCUs still depend on billions in federal and state funding every fiscal year, particularly public institutions. At the same time, HBCUs are confronted daily with systemic issues such as underfunding from the federal government and from states, as well as targeted efforts by state legislatures to merge or close certain black institutions, sometimes for the benefit of a nearby PWI with overlapping academic programs. Given that book titles within CUS are peppered with phrases such as "corporate corruption" and the "entrepreneurial university," can there be room in the field for scholars at HBCUs, where business and entrepreneurism are seen as pathways to black advancement, and where relationships with government and business are necessary to ensure institutional survival and growth? It's my intention for this dissertation to highlight some of the tensions between HBCUs, the government, and the corporate world that intersect with (and often complicate) the missions of cultural production initiatives at black colleges.

## A Clarification of Terms

There are a number of theoretical and historiographical terms that I repeatedly revisit throughout this dissertation; the most obvious one being "HBCU": what exactly is a historically black college/university? When referring to HBCUs, I am talking about institutions of higher learning in the United States that fall under the official HBCU classification as delineated in the Higher Education Act of 1965: "Any historically black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of black Americans."[23] This family of colleges and universities are distinct from what are known as predominantly black institutions (PBIs). Unlike HBCUs, PBIs have specific qualifying characteristics that are explicated in the Higher Education Act of 2008: they must serve at least 1,000 undergraduate students (many small private HBCUs have enrollments less than this), have at least 50% of low-income or first-generation undergraduates enrolled (the majority of HBCUs have at least this number, but there is no requirement), and enroll at least 40% of black students (due to demographic shifts, a few HBCUs are majority white, including Bluefield State College in West Virginia, and majority Latino, such as St. Philip's College in San Antonio, Texas).[24] Prince George's Community College in Maryland and Atlanta Metropolitan State College in Atlanta, Georgia are two examples of PBIs.

---

[23] "What is an HBCU?" *White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities.* Web. https://sites.ed.gov/whhbcu/one-hundred-and-five-historically-black-colleges-and-universities/

[24] "Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs): A Background Primer." *New America,* 21 Jan. 2015. Web. https://www.newamerica.org/post-secondary-national-policy-institute/our-blog/predominantly-black-institutions-pbis/

The term “cultural production” also deserves attention, as there are a variety of different applications. By cultural production I mean, quite literally, the creation of culture, whether it’s literary (i.e. short stories, novels, nonfiction essays, poetry), artistic (paintings, murals, architecture, alma mater songs), or media-based (television, film, recorded music). I also consider publicly performed campus traditions to be examples of cultural production: for instance, institutional rituals and practices such as convocations, pinning ceremonies, and public recitations. Not only do events such as these incorporate a number of the aforementioned forms of cultural production, but they have specific ideological histories that inform their significance to individual campus communities. For example, Jubilee Day at Fisk is an annual celebration of the Fisk Jubilee Singers’ departure from Nashville in 1871 for their European tour (explained further in Chapter 1). The ceremony involves choral and instrumental performances, speeches, and various tributes to the memory of the university’s iconic performance troupe.

This dissertation analyzes HBCU-focused cultural production roughly between the advent of the Black Power era (late 1960s) to the early 1990s; I refer to this area repeatedly throughout this research as the “post-Civil Rights” era. By using this term, I don’t mean to suggest that the social, political, and intellectual problems that spurred the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements have been fulfilled and are no longer relevant; Stephanie Li warns us of the fallacy of post-struggle and “post-racial” thinking when she notes that such an understanding of the term “post-Civil Rights” is actually a “rhetorical ruse that quells the

necessity for further social change."[25] My use of the term "post-Civil Rights" is intended as a historical demarcation, referring to the years following the American Civil Rights Movement.[26]

## Chapter Overview

*The Souls of Black Colleges* is comprised of four chapters that examine different "institutionalizations" of the black experience at HBCUs through cultural production. My first three chapters focus on three creative projects at prominent HBCUs in the post-Civil Rights era: the Du Bois campaign at Fisk University, Howard University Press at Howard University, and the Martin Luther King Jr. International Chapel at Morehouse College. My final chapter looks at cultural production outside of the walls of the university: I explore writer and musician Gil Scott-Heron's novel *The Nigger Factory* and the NBC sitcom *A Different World* as projects that sought to shape the national conversation on HBCUs from within literature and popular culture.

In the first chapter, "'Her Own Black Beautiful Self': Walter Leonard, Fisk University, and the Du Bois Campaign," I examine Fisk University president Walter Leonard's attempt to rally the Fisk community around a cultural production campaign that sought to re-center Du Boisian thought and aesthetics within the institutional identity. My first section provides a historical sketch of the cultural development of Fisk and its rise as a leading historically black liberal arts college in the South. Home to a vibrant cadre of black scholars, artists, and archivists

[25] Stephanie Li, *Signifying Without Specifying: Racial Discourse in the Age of Obama*. Rutgers UP, 2012, p. 4.
[26] The Civil Rights Movement is commonly demarcated between 1955, the beginning of the Montgomery bus boycott, and 1968, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and the signing of the last major wave of civil rights legislation that was the direct product of King's leadership and the advocacy of other civil rights leaders of his generation. Of course, this demarcation isn't fixed, as the Civil Rights Movement was only a stage within a long struggle for black liberation in the U.S. that started during slavery.

including James Weldon Johnson, Blyden Jackson, Nella Larsen, Aaron Douglas, and Arna Bontemps, Fisk represented what can be considered the early-twentieth century "Wakanda" of the black aesthetic. The 1960s brought a period of political upheaval to the campus, as students boldly fronted the university administration to rethink its stance on what it meant to be a leader in black education. I use the work of Lerone Bennett and John Oliver Killens as theoretical frames for thinking through the implications of an HBCU "embracing its own black beautiful self," in the words of Killens.

My second chapter, "Creating Knowledge to Save the Republic: The Story of Howard University Press," charts the creation of Howard University Press (HUP), the first-ever professionally staffed academic press at an HBCU, and HUP's role in the dissemination of black diasporic literature and scholarship. This chapter chronicles how literary and scholarly publishing established HBCUs as sites of authority on knowledge relating to the black Diaspora, and how the encroachment of predominantly white institutions (PWIs) into black studies drove HBCU presses into near extinction. Under the leadership of the late Charles F. Harris, a pioneer in the worlds of African American scholarly and commercial publishing, HUP quickly gained a national reputation for being, in its own words, "the first professionally staffed and structured academic press at a predominantly Black university." HUP cultivated a national reputation for excellence in black knowledge creation through its dissemination of key works of Africana literature and scholarship, such as the first U.S. edition of Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa,* as well as its public relations within black intellectual circles. Despite its monumental impact in black diasporic scholarship and literature, it ceased operations in 2011. My chapter seeks to not only trace HUP's role in solidifying Howard's academic and social preeminence, but also investigate how the press's mission, reputation, and editorial decisions

helped to underscore Howard University's ideological commitment to radical black politics in the post-Civil Rights era.

Chapter 3, "An 'Intangible Something': Morehouse College and the Making of Men," explores how Morehouse curates literary and visual culture in two ways: through what I call the "campus canon" and through chaplain Lawrence Carter's work as head of the Martin Luther King Jr. International Chapel since 1979. As the world's only historically black liberal arts college for men, Morehouse occupies a unique position within the pantheon of HBCUs. The alma mater of iconic black leaders such as King and Baptist minister Howard Thurman, Morehouse has a distinct institutional culture that sits at the intersection of a number of eclectic philosophical and aesthetic traditions. This chapter explores the college's "campus canon," or an assemblage of authorial figures, literary texts, philosophical ideas, and aphorisms that infuse the campus with what the late Morehouse president Benjamin Mays called the "intangible something" that imbues the college with its distinct character. The King Chapel, founded in 1978 as a memorial to King's ideology and race work, acts as a complement to the campus canon. As dean of the chapel for the past four decades, Lawrence Carter has sought to preserve the campus canon and the values it represents through rituals, traditions, and the curation of commemorative space. The first section of this chapter close-reads the campus canon and the ways in which it shapes Morehouse's institutional character and external image. The following sections examine Carter's approach to cultural production, and the spaces in which he applies this approach (notably, the Tobin Library, which mobilizes art and photography to communicate Morehouse's ideology of training black men for service in the world).

The fourth and final chapter, "In Search of 'Excellence': Gil Scott-Heron's *The Nigger Factory* and Debbie Allen's *A Different World*," examines "excellence" as a subject of debate

among black scholars interested in strengthening black institutions in the post-Civil Rights era. The implications of achieving excellence in black education became particularly pertinent within historically black colleges and universities. In addition to the creative projects being launched by leaders at Fisk, Howard, and Morehouse, cultural workers outside the walls of the university made their own imprint on the conversation. This chapter focuses on two texts in particular: Gil Scott-Heron's 1972 novel *The Nigger Factory,* about student protests at a fictional HBCU that spiral out of control, and the NBC sitcom *A Different World,* created by Bill Cosby and directed by Debbie Allen, about the adventures of students at a small liberal arts HBCU. I call these texts "inside-outsider texts" because they provide an "inside" view into the ideology of HBCU excellence from "outside" of the walls of the university. Through my analysis, I explore the competing views that *Nigger Factory* and *Different World* offer on what constitutes academic excellence at an HBCU and how it comes about. *Nigger Factory* is largely concerned with leadership as a vehicle for change, and the two underdeveloped but crucial women characters in the novel are key to understanding the role of university leadership in cultivating institutional distinction. In contrast, *Different World* sees administrators as ancillary to role of the student in cultivating and defining institutional culture.

# CHAPTER 1

## "HER OWN BLACK BEAUTIFUL SELF": WALTER LEONARD, FISK UNIVERSITY, AND THE DU BOIS CAMPAIGN

> [The white professors at Fisk] could be placed into about three categories; first were those hard-core conservatives who saw Fisk as the "Negro Harvard." Then there were those whites who were a wee bit pinker and saw Fisk as becoming a "colored" Oberlin or Antioch, and then there were the funky, bushy-haired "radicals," who saw Fisk as becoming the "Afro-American" Berkeley. But none of these saw Fisk as becoming her own black beautiful self, and being renamed W. E. B. Du Bois University and being rebuilt in his magnificent image.[27]
>
> John Oliver Killens, "The Artist and the Black University" (1969)

> Blackness is a challenge because it raises the whole question of *values* and because it tells us that we must rise now to the level of teaching this profoundly ignorant and profoundly sick society. In order to do that, we must create a new rationale. We must create a new rationality, a new way of seeing, a new way of reasoning, a new way of thinking…. The challenge of blackness is the challenge of making blackness *a presence* in the land, the challenge of making it more than a theme for rapping, the challenge of giving it visible body and form so that black people can plug into it and absorb the energy they need.[28]
>
> Lerone Bennett Jr., "The Challenge of Blackness" (1972)

### Introduction: Walter Leonard's Challenge

At his home in Cambridge, Massachusetts one day in 1975, Walter J. Leonard received a phone call from a longtime friend, the former Morehouse College president Benjamin E. Mays. Leonard, a 1961 graduate of Morehouse who had served as the special assistant to Harvard University president Derek Bok, was an institution unto himself at the Ivy League school. He was nationally renowned for creating what had become known as the "Harvard Plan," or the

---

[27] John Oliver Killens, "The Artist and the Black University." *The Culture of Revolution,* special issue of *Black Scholar,* vol. 1, no. 1, 1969, pp. 61-65.
[28] Lerone Bennett Jr., *The Challenge of Blackness.* Chicago: Johnson Publishing, 1972.

seven-step affirmative action formula that counted race among several other factors in Harvard's admissions process. The plan's success played an important role in establishing Harvard as an early leader in diversity and inclusion at predominantly white institutions (PWIs), and the plan inspired replication at other institutions. Among his other achievements, Leonard had also served as executive secretary on the committee that organized Harvard's W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research, and he played a central role in the creation of the university's first daycare center for employees with children. Leonard had become so thoroughly ingrained into the fabric of Harvard that the idea of leaving the university seldomly crossed his mind—that is, until Mays called.

"I think you ought to give some thought to Fisk University," Leonard recalled Mays telling him. "We're about to lose that school… it's really, really going down the tubes…. There's too much history there, too much meaning. That's Du Bois's school, you know."[29] This was the second time Leonard had been contacted about taking the reins of a historically black institution facing an uncertain future. W. Montague Cobb of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People previously tried to recruit Leonard to fill a looming vacancy created by executive director Roy Wilkins' impending retirement, but Leonard declined. A few days after

[29] Benjamin Mays had firsthand experience with Fisk's financial struggles, dating back to 1934, when Fisk offered him a faculty position. At the time he was married and completing his doctorate at the University of Chicago. According to Linda M. Perkins, Fisk made what Mays considered to be an underwhelming salary offer of $3,000 (roughly $57,000 in 2019 dollars); he had made more previously at Atlanta's YMCA. His wife Sadie Gray Mays earned $2,400, which would be lost due to Fisk's Depression-era belt-tightening and overall policy against spousal (i.e. wife) hires. Mays accepted the offer, but asked to be released from his contract less than a month later when he was offered the position of Dean of the School of Religion at Howard University, and Sadie was offered a professorship in Howard's School of Social Work. See Linda M. Perkins, "Merze Tate and the Quest for Gender Equity at Howard University: 1942-1977." *History of Education Quarterly,* vol. 54, no. 4, 2014, p. 522.

the conversation with Mays, Leonard received a visit from another highly influential former HBCU president, John Warren Davis of West Virginia State University, who took a train from his NAACP Legal Defense Fund office in New York to Cambridge specifically to see Leonard. Using language similar to Mays's appeal, Davis emphasized Fisk's precarious situation, telling Leonard that "Bennie and I have thought about this and we've prayed about it."

Figuring there would be no harm in considering the idea, Leonard finally decided to make the trip down to Nashville, Tennessee to see Fisk for himself. Once he arrived on campus, he looked around and, in his words, "almost cried." Numerous buildings were in various states of disrepair, and the university was broke. During Leonard's childhood, Fisk had been a larger-than-life icon of black hopes, dreams, triumphs and struggles. He first stepped foot on the campus as a young boy traveling with his blind grandfather on a Greyhound bus. The first stop they made was in Atlanta to see Morehouse, Spelman, Clark, and Morris Brown Colleges and Atlanta University; the following day they detoured to Nashville to see Fisk. "I saw these institutions through the eyes of a blind man," Leonard recalled. Seeing Fisk anew motivated him to act on Benjamin Mays's appeal and apply for the presidency.[30]

As science and technology-related fields increasingly assert their footholds in not only the HBCU sector, but across higher education, this chapter mobilizes the theoretical work of John Oliver Killens and Lerone Bennett Jr. in an attempt to answer the question posed by Howard University's Dana A. Williams: "In what ways does the HBCU, with its commitment to fostering and extending black intellectual traditions especially, advance humanities ideas and

---

[30] Walter Leonard. Interview by Julieanna Richardson. *HistoryMakers,* 27 Jan. 2003, https://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/walter-j-leonard-39. Accessed 12 Feb. 2020.

ideals?"[31] In the pages that follow, I undertake a close reading of an aggressive artistic renaissance campaign curated by Walter Leonard between 1976 and 1984, intended to restore Fisk's financial strength by reestablishing its national reputation as the South's black artistic and intellectual nucleus, and particularly as the alma mater of W. E. B. Du Bois. To this day, Leonard's tenure at Fisk is treated as one of the most underwhelming presidencies in the history of HBCU leadership because of his ultimate failure to reverse the university's financial misfortunes or fully secure the confidence of students, faculty, or alumni.[32] In hindsight, however, I ask readers to reexamine and reassess the man and his vision, and to look at his campaign as an attempt to address the conceptual challenges posed by Killens and Bennett.

The first section of this chapter provides historical context on the development of humanistic culture at Fisk, and the curation of Fisk's identity as the "last salon of the Harlem Renaissance." The second section explores how the black student protests of the late 1960s and early 1970s underscored internal tensions within Fisk about the meaning of "institutionalizing" blackness. The third section examines Leonard's entry into the conversation and his attempts to implement a new form of institutional consciousness through the centralization of black humanistic culture. The final section uses Leonard's presidency to reflect on the meaning of "institutionalizing blackness" at HBCUs today, and the role of culture in that enterprise.

---

[31] Dana A. Williams, "'The Field and Function' of the Historically Black College and University Today: Preparing African American Undergraduate Students for Doctoral Study in the Humanities." *PMLA Profession,* November 2013.

[32] In both scholarship and mainstream media, the presidency of Walter Leonard is framed as, simply put, a miserable failure. Leslie M. Collins, in his *One Hundred Years of Fisk University Presidents,* covers the history of the Fisk presidency from the school's founding in 1866 up to James Raymond Lawson, who retired in 1975. Collins explains his decision to end the volume there, saying that Leonard's tenure was marked by mostly financial malaise.

**"The Last Salon of the Harlem Renaissance": The Humanistic Ideal at Fisk University**

Located approximately two miles north of the Tennessee state capitol and Nashville's downtown core, Fisk grew from a small, financially endangered school for the descendants of slaves into one of the South's most prestigious wellsprings of black art, literature, music, and culture. Originally established in 1866 as the Fisk Free Colored School, by 1873 the fledgling school had reached university status but teetered precariously on the brink of bankruptcy. It took the formation of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, a student ensemble who performed Negro spirituals throughout the world, to raise the funds necessary to rescue the school from financial collapse.[33] The popularity of the Jubilee Singers was vital in imprinting Fisk as the insignia of black cultural production and humanities education onto the American public consciousness.

From 1837 (when Cheyney University, the first historically black institution of higher learning in the United States, was founded) to the first half of the twentieth century, HBCUs underwent a period of accelerated development. Most black colleges began as multi-departmental institutes designed to educate black people with varying levels of training: "normal" departments specialized in teacher education, while elementary and high school divisions trained children and youth students who were eventually pipelined into college-level divisions that granted baccalaureate degrees. Still other divisions were wholly devoted to the teaching of vocational skills such as welding, animal husbandry, and home economics.[34] A

---

[33] For more on the founding and development of Fisk University, see Joe B. Richardson, *A History of Fisk University, 1865-1946.* U of Alabama P, 1986.

[34] For a fuller history of the founding and development of HBCUs, see James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935.* U of North Carolina P, 1988; also Henry N. Drewry and Humphrey Doermann, *Stand and Prosper: Private Black Colleges and Their Students.* Princeton UP, 2001.

significant aspect of the evolution of black colleges is the rich—and at times acrimonious—debate among black educators about the precise definition of an HBCU, and how such an institution should fit within broader philosophies of black education. Cultural production (essays, short stories and novels, particularly) served as the primary stage for these back-and-forth contestations of HBCU identity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Fisk and Tuskegee Institute, Booker T. Washington's Alabama-based vocational school, became the living embodiments of two literary texts that imprinted HBCUs onto the national psyche.

Booker T. Washington's autobiography and educational manifesto *Up From Slavery,* published in 1901, and W.E.B. Du Bois's essay collection *The Souls of Black Folk,* which appeared two years later. These texts were remarkable in that they not only presented an ignored cross-section of higher education, they also both served as a national showcase for a bitter ideological divide between Tuskegee president Washington, who at the time was the country's most visible and lauded black intellectual, and Du Bois, a young upstart sociology professor at Atlanta University. *Up From Slavery* and *Souls* form a dialectic between two oppositional strains of black social thought: accommodation to the Jim Crow social order, promoted by Washington, and agitation for what Manning Marable calls "democratic transformation," which Du Bois championed.[35] Though both positions sought the same objective, for decades Washington's position remained dominant within the public eye until his premature death at the age of 59 in 1915. The conservatism that Tuskegee came to symbolize served as a key political and literary foil for Fisk.

Washington and Tuskegee captured the imaginations of black and white Americans by offering an ostensibly new path forward in U.S. race relations. By the time Tuskegee Institute

---

[35] Manning Marable. *Black Leadership.* Columbia UP, 1998.

was founded in 1881, the Republican Party's attempt at "reconstructing" America in the wake of the Civil War and the abolition of slavery was seen largely as a failure.[36] White Democrats would retake control of the South, the lynching rate would skyrocket, and numerous state legislatures and municipalities would enact stringent Jim Crow laws and ordinances that would rival the slave codes of previous generations. At the threshold of the twentieth century, the Supreme Court would normalize the doctrine of "separate but equal" segregation in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, in which a biracial black man would attempt to challenge Louisiana's segregated streetcar law. This climate was fertile ground for Washington, whom Louis R. Harlan christens the "wizard of Tuskegee,"[37] to flourish as a national celebrity and for *Up From Slavery* to become one of the bestselling books of the new century.

Washington's notoriety had already began taking hold nationally following extensive media coverage of his address at the 1895 Cotton States Exposition in Atlanta, where he boldly told a predominantly white audience, "No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem. It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top…. In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress."[38] His recipe of vocational training and accommodationist politics earned him swift popularity among whites who saw his conciliatory

---

[36] The view of Reconstruction as a "failed" national project is a popular one among antebellum scholars, particularly among the pre-1930s "Dunning school" of thought; Du Bois disrupted this discourse with his 1935 *Black Reconstruction in America,* in which he argued that the takeover of the South by the white Democratic power structure was due to racial divisions and a racist reign of terror that included the founding of the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist organizations. For more, see W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880.* Free P, 1998.

[37] Louis R. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901-1915.* Oxford UP, 1983.

[38] Ernie Suggs, "How 'Atlanta Compromise' divided black America and cemented Washington's legacy." *Atlanta Journal-Constitution,* 18 Sept. 2017. Web.

stance as a bridge for nursing lingering bitterness between the North and the South over the Civil War; many others were relieved that his appeals did not implicate them for perpetuating a racial caste system. For the South's poorest blacks, Washington's message presented ideals such as thrift, strong work ethic, and personal initiative as promising mechanisms for circumventing the South's repressive social order of segregation.

As a literary work, *Up From Slavery* capitalized on Washington's growing popularity by presenting a classic "Great Man" narrative with a twist: a self-made Great Man who is also black. Though it shares many commonalities with the slave narrative genre, it also deviates from it in an unorthodox way: mirroring the theme of self-liberation present in many slave narratives (such as Harriet Jacobs's hiding from her master's sexual advances), *Up From Slavery* filters self-liberation through the lens of capitalistic enterprise. The story paints a portrait of a black teenage boy doggedly driven by not only the desire for literacy and education, but also to control his own destiny by declaring his own financial independence. From his beginning as a young slave toiling in the salt mines of Malden, West Virginia to his journey on foot to Hampton Institute, a vocation-oriented HBCU in Virginia after which Washington patterned Tuskegee, his story connects with different reader sensibilities in different ways: for white readers, the book provides proof that segregation—all inhumanity aside—is negotiable, and that all blacks need to do to improve their lot is to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps.

For black readers, the book affirms black ingenuity and fortitude in the face of a racist society that is diametrically opposed to black advancement. An additionally unique aspect of the book's capitalist bent is its secondary purpose as a fundraising tool. *Up From Slavery* had an especially profound emotional impact on white Northern philanthropists. Upon finishing it, George Eastman, founder of Eastman Kodak, immediately wrote Tuskegee a check for five

thousand dollars. At a public forum headlined by Washington, billionaire Andrew Carnegie slipped Washington ten thousand dollars in cash, telling him to keep a small percentage of it for his own discretionary spending. In 1903 at a fundraiser at Madison Square Garden in New York City, Carnegie pledged the largest amount ever donated to Tuskegee. The front page of the *New York Sun* blazed with the headline "MR. CARNEGIE GIVES $600,000 TO ENDOW BOOKER WASHINGTON'S TUSKEGEE INSTITUTE."[39] Quite literally, *Up From Slavery* is an unabashedly capitalist text that not only is inspired by the system but provides a bridge between capital enterprise and higher education. The powerful narrative of the book, combined with Washington's charisma and ability to lubricate the wheels and cogs of the white philanthropic sector, made Tuskegee a legendary institution within the American psyche.

Although Fisk was somewhat similar to Tuskegee for its incorporation of vocational training and teacher education into student learning, the centerpiece of the Fisk experience was its liberal arts curriculum. The university's 1915 course catalogue states that the school's mission is to train "colored youth" for "high positions and large responsibilities," and the faculty roster includes a number of instructors based in a broad range of humanistic fields including English, rhetoric, philosophy, history, Latin, German, French, and voice and piano.[40] The tension between vocational training and liberal arts curriculum makes Washington a prominent target for Du Bois, an 1888 graduate of Fisk, throughout *Souls of Black Folk.* In the essay "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others" from *Souls,* Du Bois ridicules Washington's condescension towards liberal arts-focused HBCUs such as Fisk,[41] saying that "the picture of a lone black boy poring

---

[39] Harlan, ibid.
[40] Fisk University, "Catalog of Fisk University, 1915-1916." Fisk UP, 1915.
[41] Ironically, though Booker T. Washington was a staunch advocate for vocation-based education for African Americans, he also supported other forms of black resistance to racism, albeit less vocally. Louis Harlan notes that Washington secretly wrote checks to the National Association

over a French grammar amid the weeds and dirt of a neglected home soon seemed to [Washington] the acme of absurdities."[42]

Though *Souls* helped to thrust the idea of HBCUs as sites of radical intellectual reorientation into the national spotlight and put it in direct contention with Washington's social program, the notion of the radical HBCU did not originate with Du Bois. A decade before both *Souls* and *Up From Slavery,* Frances Ellen Watkins Harper gestures towards the idea of black schools as radical spaces in her 1892 novel *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted.* The novel follows Iola, the daughter of a wealthy white planter and a biracial woman (who was formerly the planter's slave until their marriage) who grows up believing she is a white blueblood daughter of privilege—until she is kidnapped and sold into slavery in the deep South. Over the course of the story she undergoes her own moment of racial awakening and embraces her blackness. The novel ends with her marrying a black doctor and joining the struggle for black liberation by becoming a teacher at a black institution of higher learning. The idea of the black university as a site of radicalization became even more pronounced as international students, particularly those from Africa and the Caribbean, increasingly enrolled at black colleges in the twentieth century and brought back to their home countries ideological frameworks that were key in wrestling home rule from colonial powers.[43]

---

for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), of which Du Bois was a founding member; Washington also joined the Fisk board of trustees in 1909 and enrolled his son, Booker Jr., there in 1911.

[42] W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Souls of Black Folk." *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings,* edited by Nathan Huggins. Library of America, 1987, pp. 347-547.

[43] Historian Jim Harper writes that British officials in colonial Kenya became "fearful of the small number of students who found their way to… [HBCUs]. These students, the authorities strongly believed, would import [the] virus of self-assertion and nationalism that contaminated them in [schools such as] Tuskegee, Hampton, Howard and Lincoln." See Jim C. Harper II, *Western-Educated Elites in Kenya, 1900-1963: The African American Factor.* Routledge, 2006.

As the rest of the nation plunged into depression in the 1930s, Fisk saw its status rise as one of the most highly acclaimed and well-resourced HBCUs, particularly within literature and the fine arts. The year 1930 saw the opening of the Erastus M. Cravath Memorial Library, a neo-Gothic structure named for the university's first president, which opened at an estimated construction cost of $400,000.[44] That same year, Fisk became the first HBCU to be approved for accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, and in 1953 it became the first HBCU to acquire a chapter of the Phi Beta Kappa honor society. Fisk also boasted a substantial concentration of first-rate black talent (students, staff and faculty) with few institutional rivals. The historian John Hope Franklin, who graduated from Fisk in 1935, recalls the larger-than-life significance that the university occupied within black cultural memory during his youth, and the ways in which the white administration and larger white community carefully curated the school's image. He writes:

> When my siblings and I were growing up, our parents had regaled us with stories about Nashville, the rivalry between Fisk and Roger Williams[45] universities, and the subsequent decline of Roger Williams and steady rise of Fisk in importance and influence…. When my sister Anne and I arrived in Nashville in September 1931, Fisk was enjoying a steady advance in virtually every way since McKenzie's unheralded departure in the spring of 1925. Thomas Elsa Jones [McKenzie's successor], an energetic and spirited white educator who was considered "safe" in the eyes of the white citizens of Nashville, had attracted some of the leading African-American scholars to join the Fisk faculty…. Financial support for Fisk was increasing despite the Depression, and a newly constructed library and a renovated memorial chapel gave every indication that the university was fiscally sound and educationally strong.[46]

---

[44] George B. Hutchinson, *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line.* Harvard UP, 2006.

[45] Roger Williams University was an HBCU located in downtown Nashville on land that is now occupied by Vanderbilt University's Peabody School of Education. The campus of Roger Williams was ravaged by a mysterious fire in 1905. The university relocated to Memphis and became what is now LeMoyne-Owen College.

[46] John Hope Franklin, "John Hope Franklin: The Fisk Years." *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 49, 2005, pp. 74-83.

Indeed, a robust cash flow and an influx of well-to-do students from the black middle class distinguished Fisk among its peer institutions. The English faculty boasted distinguished scholars such as Lorenzo Dow Turner, the "first African American linguist"[47] who arrived at Fisk in 1929 to chair the department after eight years as chair of English at Howard. He would later establish Fisk's African studies department. Blyden Jackson, the black literary critic who taught at Fisk from 1945 to 1954, described it as "the last salon of the Harlem Renaissance" because of its critical mass of faculty members in English and creative writing who had made their names during the twenties.[48] This "salon" included Arna Bontemps, the university librarian; Fisk president Charles S. Johnson, the eminent sociologist, founder of the magazine *Opportunity*, and editor of the classic 1927 literary anthology *Ebony and Topaz*;[49] and painter Aaron Douglas, who founded Fisk's art department (Jackson). Nella Larsen, author of *Passing* and *Quicksand,* frequented the campus often, although she wasn't a faculty member; her husband, physicist

---

[47] For more on Turner and his contributions to linguistic studies, see Margaret Wade-Lewis, *Lorenzo Dow Turner: First African-American Linguist.* Temple UP, 1988; and Alcione M. Amos, "Lorenzo Dow Turner: Connecting Communities Through Language." *Journal of Black Studies,* vol. 41, 2011, pp. 4-15.

[48] Blyden Jackson, "A Postlude to a Renaissance." *Southern Review,* no. 26, no. 4, 1990, pp. 746-766.

[49] In 1946, Dr. Charles S. Johnson, a leading professor in Fisk's sociology department, was selected as Fisk's first African American president. Under his leadership the university launched the Race Relations Institute, a campus-based think tank that gathered multiracial coalitions of scholars, writers, clergy and grassroots activists for annual summer conferences designed to foster cross-racial dialogue and brainstorm solutions to the pressing racial issues of the day. Participants in the Race Relations annual institutes included Martin Luther King Jr., as well as several leading voices from Native American, Puerto Rican, and Jewish communities. A hallmark of intellectual engagement at Fisk, the Race Relations Institute ran from 1944 until 1969; over the next three decades in various iterations the Institute would be relaunched. For more on Johnson and the Race Relations Institute, see Katrina M. Sanders, *Intelligent and Effective Direction: The Fisk University Race Relations Institute and the Struggle for Civil Rights, 1944-1969.* New York: Peter Lang, 2005; also Richard Robbins, *Sidelines Activist: Charles S. Johnson and the Struggle for Civil Rights.* Jackson, Miss.: UP of Mississippi, 1996; also Patrick J. Gilpin and Marybeth Gasman, *Charles S. Johnson: Leadership Beyond the Veil in the Age of Jim Crow.* State University of New York P, 2003.

Elmer Samuel Imes, was chair of the physics department and a nephew of Mabel Lewis Imes, one of the last surviving original Jubilee Singers.[50] By the end of the Harlem Renaissance period, Fisk was also developing its capacity for archival preservation: the University's special collections started out as a "small section of bookcases" in the library-based office of Jubilee Singers director George White; by 1928, the University had reached such prominence that Arturo A. Schomburg wrote Fisk president Thomas Jones saying, "I believe the time is ripe for an exhaustive study and presentation of historical material with the Negro in America…. [I want] to be useful in helping Fisk library obtain the best collection on Negro life."[51]

Among the most prominent Fisk faculty members of the 1930s was the writer, poet and former NAACP field secretary James Weldon Johnson, who was appointed to the Adam K. Spence Chair of Creative Literature in 1931.[52] Johnson had built a name for himself as the author of "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," the 1900 poem celebrating Abraham Lincoln's birthday that later became known as the Negro National Anthem; he also received literary acclaim for his 1912 novel *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man,* initially published anonymously, and his 1927 poetry collection *God's Trombones*. As a diplomat he served as U.S. consul under President Theodore Roosevelt to Venezuela and Nicaragua, and as secretary general of the NAACP, he

---

[50] George B. Hutchinson, *In Search of Nella Larsen,* pp. 350.
[51] Ann Allen Shockley, "Special Collections, Fisk University Library." *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy,* vol. 58, no. 2, 1988, pp. 151-163.
[52] Best known as the author of "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," the 1900 poem written in commemoration of Abraham Lincoln's birthday that later became known as the Negro National Anthem, Johnson was among Fisk's highest-paid faculty; his overall salary during the 1930-1931 academic year was $5,000 (equal to roughly $76,500 in 2019), according to George B. Hutchinson. Johnson also received literary acclaim for his 1912 novel *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, initially published anonymously, and his 1927 poetry collection *God's Trombones.*

helped to move the organization's main base of power from the white New York-based philanthropic class to everyday black citizens.

Though relieved to divest himself of the stressors associated with the day-to-day operations of the NAACP, Johnson would still divide his time between teaching in Nashville and conducting NAACP-related business in Harlem. His contributions to African American literature and social critique throughout the thirties, including his columns for the *New York Age* newspaper and his weekly lectures on contemporary social issues in the Fisk Memorial Chapel, played a large role in putting the university on the map within the realm of American intellectual discourse. In his autobiography *Along This Way* he writes about the pleasures of stepping back from the political scene and his engagement with undergraduate English majors at Fisk, stating:

> There are moments when I miss the thrill of action. At times when there is a pitched battle between justice and wrong, I have a longing to be back in the thick of the fight. But there are thrills also in the contemplative life; and in it there are also fields on which causes may be won. I am almost amused at the eagerness with which I go to meet my classes. The pleasure of talking to them about the things that I have learned and the things that I have thought out for myself is supreme. And there is no less pleasure in drawing from them the things that they have learned and the things that they have thought out for themselves. I realize that, though I am nominally the teacher, there are many new things that I shall be taught. In touch with the youth of my race in a great university in the midst of the South; I shall be zealous to learn what they are thinking, how the world looks to them, and what goals they are pressing toward.[53]

The "contemplative life" that Johnson describes at Fisk gestures towards Du Bois's idealized notion of the black liberal arts university: Johnson's description evokes a tranquil, genteel setting, patterned in the tradition of New England colleges such as Wellesley or Dartmouth, in which an elite group of young African Americans are trained to uplift the race. In the above passage by Johnson, we see one of the most familiar representations of a charmed life within the

---

[53] James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson*. Penguin, 2008.

ivory tower: the intellectual interplay between a professor and his students. That the professor and the students are black, engaging freely within an insulated environment that allowed open inquiry and theorization, lends to the intrigue and mystique that Fisk wielded over black America during the early twentieth century.

**Figure 1.** James Weldon Johnson (seated, gesturing) and his wife Grace Nail Johnson (seated at far right between two students) host a reading of his poetry collection *God's Trombones* for Fisk students at the Johnson residence. "There are thrills also in the contemplative life," he wrote in his autobiography. Photograph courtesy of Fisk University Special Collections.

At this point in the 1930s, most HBCUs that would eventually develop the collective moniker "the black Ivy League" were still in various stages of institutional development, and only a few schools could match Fisk's widespread name recognition: Howard, which by the 1960s would become the nation's most visible HBCU and a national mark of black academic

prestige, was growing under the leadership of its first black president, Mordecai Wyatt Johnson. Atlanta University, where Du Bois wrote *The Souls of Black Folk* and taught, carried its own distinction as the nation's only graduate school for black Americans. Fisk would garner nationwide excitement in 1946 when Charles S. Johnson, the esteemed sociologist, was selected by the Board of Trustees to be Fisk's first African American president. Johnson was already one of the nation's foremost black public intellectuals; upon his appointment to the Fisk presidency, his status only increased. That same year, Lorenzo Dow Turner left his chairmanship of the English department to join the University of Chicago faculty; he was replaced by Harvey Curtis Webster, a progressive white scholar from the University of Louisville who had written for Louisville's black-owned newspaper, the *Defender*. Webster recruited a young poet by the name of Robert Hayden who was completing a master's degree at the University of Michigan. Hayden and his family relocated to Nashville at the beginning of the 1946-1947 academic year, and he began what would become a 23-year teaching career at Fisk.[54] During his first year at Fisk, Hayden would publish the poem "Frederick Douglass" in the *Atlantic Monthly*.

The decades of the 1940s would also make Fisk a well-regarded name within the art world: 1949 marked the opening of the Fine Arts Gallery, later named the Van Vechten Gallery after the famous white novelist and Harlem Renaissance patron Carl Van Vechten; as well as the donation of the famed Alfred Stieglitz Art Collection to the university by his wife, painter Georgia O'Keeffe. After Stieglitz's death, O'Keeffe's decided to bequeath portions of his collection to institutions that were overlooked by the New York art scene. Using Van Vechten, a close friend of O'Keeffe, as an intermediary, President Johnson successfully convinced her to

---

[54] Blyden Jackson, "Robert Hayden at Fisk: A Personal Note." *Robert Hayden,* special issue of *Obsidian*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1982, pp. 76-87.

donate some of Stieglitz's collection to the school. Despite such an atmosphere that made Fisk unique among black universities, the social movements of the postwar era would give birth to new questions among black students, young faculty, writers and artists regarding new ways of conceptualizing HBCU culture—as well as how Fisk fit within these expanding definitions.

**The "Turbulent" Years: Fisk in the Civil Rights and Black Power Eras**

The decade of the 1960s brought a renewed wave of civil rights activism and awareness to college campuses, and particularly to HBCUs. In 1960, three students from historically black North Carolina A&T University sat-in at a whites-only lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, sparking a chain reaction of black student activism across the South. This wave hit Nashville especially, where Fisk students joined forces with students from the other three HBCUs in town, Tennessee State University, Meharry Medical College, and American Baptist College, to sit-in at white establishments throughout downtown. The determination and persistence of student leaders such as Fisk's Diane Nash and American Baptist's John Lewis garnered national media attention and proved ultimately successful in desegregating Nashville's public establishments, so much so that Martin Luther King Jr. praised the students during a visit to Fisk for being "the best organized and the most disciplined" branch of youth activists within the South's entire student movement.[55]

Fisk students' demands for change did not remain limited to outside the walls of the university, however; as the push for integration evolved into calls for HBCUs to dedicate themselves wholly to the decolonization of the black mind, the Fisk leadership found itself in

[55] Letter from Martin Luther King Jr. to Reverend Kelly Miller Smith, 9 June 1960, in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Volume V: *Threshold of a New Decade*, edited by Clayborne Carson.

unfamiliar territory. In one respect, it was caught between maintaining Fisk's generous (and mostly white) donor base and prestigious reputation, and responding to growing student restlessness with the university's stances on current problems facing black America.[56]

The shift in student protest was becoming increasingly visible on black college campuses across the country. Howard University law student Jay Greene described it as a way of "rebelling against paternalism in black universities—paternalism prevalent since their conception," while Walter Jackson, an undergraduate at the University of North Carolina, stated that black students were "discouraged by the quality of education they're getting."[57] Whereas predominantly white institutions more readily accepted black students' demands because there had been no precedent of a culture of "blackness" on campus previously, black students' demands for reorganizations of HBCU culture clashed with the protocols and practices already set in place by HBCU administrations over generations. Students' calls for HBCUs to become "black" in ideology and praxis often did not align with universities' more conservative conceptions of what it meant to be a black institution in a white society.

These were some of the questions taken up at the Black Writers Conference, a gathering of Fisk students, faculty and America's most preeminent black and white novelists and poets, held at Jubilee Hall over the weekend of April 22-24, 1966. At the time of the conference, Fisk

---

[56] Student activism was nothing new at Fisk in the 1960s—four decades earlier, Fisk students led a successful uprising against the university's domineering white president, Fayette McKenzie, who implemented a draconian change in campus culture, known as "Southernization," in order to bring Fisk in line with "Jim Crow" practices and make white Southern donors more open to helping the university meet its million-dollar endowment goal. See Wolters, Raymond. *The New Negro on Campus.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1977; also Lamon, Lester C. "The Black Community in Nashville and the Fisk University Student Strike of 1924-1925." *Journal of Southern History*, vol. 40, no. 2, 1974, pp. 225-244.

[57] Hendrick, O'Neil. "Communists, SNCC, Black Power Blamed: A Look at the Civil Rights Move on Negro Campuses." *Madera Daily Tribune*, 22 May 1967.

was undergoing a changing of the guard in humanities leadership: much of the Harlem Renaissance generation (such as James Weldon Johnson and Aaron Douglas) had either passed away or had retired from Fisk. Just the year prior, Arna Bontemps retired as head librarian and was replaced with a newly minted young PhD from the University of Illinois, Jessie Carney Smith. That same year, Douglas was succeeded in the art department chairmanship by David Driskell, who had been acting director of the galleries at Howard. Novelist John Oliver Killens held the position of Writer-in-Residence and presided over the conference, which focused on "The Image of the Negro in American Literature."

The three-day event served not only as a forum for writers to discuss and debate matters such as the portrayal of black characters in fiction, but also as a threshing floor for conversations and contentions at the heart of the Black Arts movement: the meaning and purpose of black art, what it means to write for a black audience, and the definition of a black writer. The conference and its proceedings have been heralded in literary history for showcasing the complicated demarcation lines between varying ideological stances within and outside of the movement. In her autobiographical work *Report From Part One,* Gwendolyn Brooks evokes what she calls the "New Black" urgency and excitement that punctuated the conference when she attended it in 1967, writing:

> Coming from white white white South Dakota State College I arrived in Nashville, Tennessee, to give one more "reading." But blood-boiling surprise was in store for me. First, I was aware of a general energy, an electricity, in look, walk, speech, *gesture* of the young blackness I saw all about me. I had been "loved" at South Dakota State College. Here, I was coldly Respected…. I was in some inscrutable and uncomfortable wonderland. I didn't know what to make of what surrounded me, of what with hot sureness began almost immediately to invade me. *I* had never been, before, in the general presence of such insouciance, such live firmness, such confident vigor, such determination to mold or carve something DEFINITE.[58]

[58] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report From Part One*. Broadside P, 1972.

Brooks' account paints a portrait of a Fisk on intellectual fire; this fire is particularly discernible within the pages of *Negro Digest*'s coverage of the 1966 conference, which according to Denk Smith, "bounces from one exchange to the next, seeking to record the expostulations of the newly-born consciousness" that infused the conference proceedings.[59] At one of the panels, the writer William Melvin Kelley passionately implored the assembled black writers to "stop writing the protest novel and start writing the revolutionary novel…. Stop writing imitation white novels to white people and start writing to black people." Kelley's appeal was greeted by rousing applause from the audience.[60] One particularly vivid moment from the same panel involved differing views on the implications of being a "black writer." Robert Hayden, the bespectacled, bowtie-wearing poetry professor, offered a rejoinder to Kelley, saying, "Let's quit saying we're black writers writing to black folks—it has been given importance it should not have…. I don't think we're consciously trying to escape." In anticipation of those who might oppose him, Hayden added, "Baby, that's your problem, not mine."[61] In response, the writer Melvin B. Tolson recounted an inscription on a tombstone he once happened upon, saying, "*I am dead as all can see, ye bear you all to follow me!*" In response to the inscription, Tolson told the audience:

> *To follow you I'm not content, until I know which way you went!*.... Nobody writes in a vacuum—when a man writes, he tells me which way he went in society…. A man has his biology, his sociology, and his psychology—and then he becomes a poet…. I'm a black poet, an African-American poet, a Negro poet. I'm no accident—and I don't give a tinker's damn what you think.[62]

---

[59] Denk Smith, "Quarreling in the Movement: Robert Hayden's Black Arts Era." *Callaloo*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2010, pp. 449-466.
[60] David Llorens, "Seeking a New Image: Writers Converge at Fisk University." *Negro Digest* June 1966, pp. 54-68.
[61] Llorens, "Seeking a New Image," pp. 62.
[62] Llorens, ibid.

Though the *Negro Digest* doesn't detail any specific contributions from Fisk students to the discussion, the account of the conference proceedings does indicate that the captivated audience does include students. This fact is confirmed by an unnamed audience member who chastises Hayden for his colorblind conception of race and authorship. The man charges:

> The question of whether or not you identify yourself as a poet who happens to be a Negro or as a Negro poet does have effect on the students who come in contact with you at this University. It is a fact that many young black people leave Fisk terribly deluded, and someone is responsible for their delusion. I am suggesting that you do have a responsibility to them, a responsibility to help them understand that they will become black poets, black teachers, or what have you—and whether you like it or not, *that is your problem, baby.*[63]

The events that were to unfold at Fisk and in the city of Nashville leading up to the dawn of the 1970s suggest that contrary to the worries of the man at the conference, Fisk students were far from "deluded" on whether one was a "black student" or a "student who happens to be black." For a growing number of Fisk students, the idea that being a black student carries specific sensibilities and responsibilities was merely the foundational premise in a larger conversation regarding police brutality, the crisis in the inner cities, and the implications of rapid desegregation for the future of HBCUs. Throughout the sixties, the student body at Fisk put mounting pressure on university officials to delineate Fisk's stances on many of the aforementioned issues, as well as the university's own relationship to the Black Power movement's urgent yet unsettled definition of blackness.

The trials that ultimately tested Fisk's resolve would unfold over the course of the 1960s, and particularly during the fateful 1969-1970 academic year. Early warning signs sounded in 1966 when President Stephen Wright stunned the university community by suddenly announcing his resignation. Though he didn't name his exact reasons for leaving, according to L.M. Collins,

---

[63] Llorens, ibid.

Wright could sense signs that "impending racial unrest" was reaching a level that he was increasingly unsure of how to deal with or address.[64] In Wright's place, the Board of Trustees appointed James R. Lawson, chair of the Physics department and university vice-president. In time, Lawson's presidency would fulfill the almost prophetic prediction made by Wright in his 1957 inaugural address—that Fisk would face "turbulent" years ahead.[65] Sure enough, in April 1967, riots erupted adjacent to the Fisk campus following a rousing speech given by Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee leader Stokely Carmichael during his visit to Nashville; the Tennessee state legislature labeled Carmichael a "dangerously unprincipled demagogue."[66]

New directions in black intellectual discourse revealed the tectonic shifts happening within the HBCU sector as a whole. Among young black academics, the concept of the "Black University" quickly gained momentum and peppered the pages of publications ranging from the journal *Daedalus* to popular magazines such as *Negro Digest* and *Ebony.* Although different scholars envisioned the particulars of the Black University ideal in different ways, at its core remained the notion of the HBCU as a site of intellectual and economic liberation for not only black students, but also for the black masses on a global scale. In the September 1967 issue of *Negro Digest,* Charles V. Hamilton, who would later co-author *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* with Carmichael, penned an essay titled "The Place of the Black College in the Human Rights Struggle," in which he describes conservative administrators within HBCUs who try to deny an institutional identity that is rooted in blackness. Often, these administrators will prevaricate by noting that HBCUs are merely "predominantly" black; Hamilton argues, in

---

[64] Leslie M Collins, *One Hundred Years of Fisk University Presidents, 1875-1975*. Hemphill's, 1987.
[65] Collins, pp. 144.
[66] Bill Carey, "A Nashville Guest Starts a Riot." *Nashville Post,* 2 Apr. 2008.

contrast, that it is "*precisely* because of the black predominance there is a prevailing *ethos* which pervades the Negro college campus—an ethos distinctive to *that* campus."[67] The historian Vincent Harding, a former associate of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and director of the Atlanta-based Institute for the Black World, wrote in a 1970 special issue of *Ebony* that "The search for the Black University is really a part of our larger search for a sense of direction and life in the new, black-oriented time that is upon us."[68] John Oliver Killens created his own spin on the Black University concept, which he called the "Communiversity": the HBCU as a site of spiritual and cultural homecoming for black people, and one in which artists, writers, and other creatives had the space to make their own unique contributions to the black struggle.[69]

The student appetite for Fisk to institutionalize the Black University ideal accelerated as the 1960s drew to a close. In 1966, Lucius Outlaw Jr., a Fisk senior majoring in philosophy, won the student government election for president on a campaign platform of "student power." After spending a stint studying at Dartmouth and watching black students demonstrating for racial equality and against the Vietnam War, Outlaw brought back to Fisk an agenda that would give students more of a say in university affairs.[70] In a December 1969 article the *Tennessean* published a feature article about a fiery sermon delivered at the chapel by the Reverend Albert B. Cleage, the Detroit-based liberation theologian. Cheered on by a chapel filled with jubilant students, alumni and other visitors, Cleage declared from the pulpit that Jesus was a black man and that he was coming to deliver the black nation of Israel from the tyrannical white empire of Rome. Tying the theme of a black Messiah to the present-day Fisk student body, he said that in

---

[67] Charles V. Hamilton, "The Place of the Black College in the Human Rights Struggle." *Negro Digest,* Sept. 1967, pp. 4-10.
[68] Vincent Harding, "Toward the Black University." *Ebony,* Aug. 1970, pp. 156-159.
[69] Killens, pp. 64.
[70] Lucius T. Outlaw Jr. Personal interview. 19 Sept. 2019.

order for Fisk students to carry on the work of Christ, "this 'colored' university must be turned into a Black University," and that it was the university's duty to send students out to share "black communal experiences."[71]

As the enthusiasm for Fisk to become a Black University increased, so did activism on campus. Fisk students appealed for the university to assert its history and mission as a Black University by purging all white faculty and staff, and by incorporating "black English, black mathematics, black philosophy" into the university curriculum.[72] To make a formal case for reorganizing the university curriculum, students joined with faculty to form the Committee on Student Concerns for a Black University. The committee's report anchored its demands in a specially crafted definition of a black university: "A black university is an institution addressing itself to the immediate and long-range needs of black people in America."[73] In response to the demands, the Board affirmed that it agreed with the students' main argument that black universities, and specifically Fisk, are obligated to meet the particular needs of black people and to teach black students about themselves, but not at the expense of a broad-based liberal arts curriculum, for "no one can be humanely educated if he knows no culture but his own."[74] Trustee John Hope Franklin played a significant role as a liaison between the student committee and the Board, but because of students' displeasure with the Board's caveat regarding "humane education," the two sides ultimately failed to reach a compromise.

Lawson's inability to concretely grasp students' calls for more actionable approaches towards community outreach also presented a stumbling block to the fulfillment of students'

---

[71] W.A. Reed Jr., "Jesus Black Leader: Fisk Speaker." *Nashville Tennessean*, 8 Dec. 1969.
[72] Collins, pp. 182.
[73] Fisk University Special Collections. "Minutes of the Fisk University Board of Trustees." 15-16 May 1970.
[74] "Minutes," ibid.

demands. He felt that the demand for greater community outreach was redundant considering the leading role Fisk had played in numerous black liberatory movements throughout the twentieth century. In his 1968 inaugural address, Lawson stated, "It does no good to denigrate these manifestations of [student] discontent, nor does it profit us to dwell upon the failures of the university…. The history of Fisk University reveals that it has always been sensitive to the needs of society."[75] To add to students' frustrations, Lawson's lexicon of black self-identification also appeared outdated and conciliatory to non-black interests. At a listening session held in the chapel, while Lawson explained to students that a revised curriculum would require approval from Fisk's accrediting bodies, he repeatedly referred to Fisk as a "*predominantly black* university, not a *black university,*" much to the chagrin of students. At that moment the forum devolved into a spectacle in which students throughout the chapel pelted him with profanities and epithets.[76]

Ultimately the Board and the president's response did little to quell the most restless students. The student government president sent letters to hundreds of corporations and foundations that had donated to Fisk, telling them to keep their "honky money," and that Fisk would only accept support from "Sammy Davis, Jr., Sidney Poitier, and other black entertainers."[77] The situation escalated when a group of students stormed into Park-Johnson Hall and destroyed a portrait of Charles S. Johnson before bolting into the Race Relations Institute and seizing hundreds of books on Africana studies from the institute's library. Despite his attempts to restore calm and gain some perspective on what students exactly wanted, Lawson

[75] Fisk University Special Collections. "Fisk University Looks to the 1970s: Inauguration Address of James Raymond Lawson, Eighth President of Fisk University." Hemphill P, 1968.
[76] Collins, pp. 181.
[77] Collins, pp. 182-183, 199.

struggled to maintain a semblance of firm control. At a listening session held in the chapel, Lawson attempted to explain to students that a revised curriculum would require approval from Fisk's accrediting bodies, but repeatedly referred to Fisk as a "*predominantly black* university, not a *black university,*" much to the chagrin of students; at that moment the forum devolved into a spectacle, with students throughout the chapel shouting profanities at the president.[78]

More turbulence emerged when Lawson dismissed Dr. Paul L. Puryear,[79] a political science professor at Fisk, from Puryear's directorship over Fisk's Black Community Research Project, a research center with "emphasis upon the study of political behavior and public policy," the only center of its kind at the time that was based at an HBCU.[80] Puryear was a young, energetic and fiercely militant scholar who was popular with students; upon his removal, students staged a sit-in at Lawson's office. Lawson, his son James and the dean of students attempted to forcibly remove the students, and the students responded by having Nashville Metro police arrest the three on charges of assault and battery. Though the charges were immediately dismissed by a Metro Nashville judge, the damage to the relationship between Lawson and Fisk students was already set in motion.[81]

A major blow to the campus happened in the early morning hours of May 18, 1970, when students set fire to Livingstone Hall, the men's dormitory. At the time, students were marching on campus to protest Fisk's decision to not suspend classes after two students at historically

---

[78] Collins, pp. 181.
[79] Lawson's skirmish with Puryear also demonstrates the inability of the Fisk administration to connect intellectually with the rising "blackness" movement, from a faculty/administration perspective. See Craven Crowell. "Fisk, Prof to Share Material Temporarily." *Nashville Tennessean*, 5 May 1970.
[80] "Interim Report of the Committee on the Status of Blacks in the Profession." *PS*, vol. 2, 1969, pp. 552–557.
[81] Collins, ibid.

black Jackson State University in Mississippi were fatally shot by police; several predominantly white campuses had chosen to close. In solidarity with Jackson State students, Fisk students called for final examinations to be canceled. According to the *Tennessean*, a 19-year-old freshman, Aaron Taylor, was taken into police custody for starting the blaze.[82] At the time, Livingstone was home to the fine arts and music departments, the campus music library, and several priceless archival collections that could never be replaced, including a number of historic recordings of the Jubilee Singers. As the nearly century-old building burned, Lawson's wife wept bitterly, "appalled and grief-stricken, watching the conflagration, a silly waste."[83] Livingstone Hall wasn't the only thing that was lost in the fire; the university's morale—as well as its former confidence in its standing as a black university—had taken a serious hit.

**Fighting "Intellectual Genocide": Walter Leonard's Artistic Renaissance Campaign**

Though Fisk still enjoyed considerable cultural cachet within the public imagination, the reality of the Fisk of the mid-1970s was one of fiscal belt-tightening, budget cutting and structural readjustments designed to keep the institution afloat financially. Earlier in the decade the university faced such severe budgetary shortfalls that the Board of Trustees often spent the principal of the university's endowment as a fallback measure for making ends meet. What had been a nearly $15 million endowment in 1968 had been whittled down to just over $3 million by 1975.[84] The school's financial woes had become a mainstay in the local and national press. A 1975 *New York Times* article declared that Fisk was undergoing a "painful examination of its

---

[82] Bill Preston Jr., "Freshman at Fisk Charged in Blaze." *Nashville Tennessean*, 19 May 1970.
[83] Collins, p. 199.
[84] Keith Lamar Jennings, *The Destruction of a Black Institution: A Political Economy of Fisk University, 1977-1984.* MA Thesis. Clark Atlanta University, 1994.

programs and priorities" and "anxiously searching for new money sources."[85] Eleven percent of full-time faculty had been laid off, and the university's operating budget had been slashed from $10 million to $7 million.

The rapid administrative turnover that Fisk experienced during this period only exacerbated the university's financial pains. Towards the end of his presidency, James Lawson's health began to decline due to stress. Upon his resignation in 1975, Rutherford Adkins, who had already been serving as university vice-president, became interim president.[86] The constant state of flux in the president's office alarmed a number of funding agencies that had awarded grants to Fisk. Many of these agencies put the disbursement of funds on hold, causing additional financial stress for the university.[87] The rocky financial outlook also affected changes in the composition of the student body: after having reached a peak of nearly 1,600 students in 1973, enrollment steadily decreased with each year. Fisk temporarily dropped the standardized test score requirement from its admissions criteria, causing faculty to question whether the quality of the "Fisk student" would decline. The composition of the student body indeed shifted in terms of family income and geographic location; whereas many Fisk students formerly hailed from Jack-and-Jill enclaves of influence and wealth, the student body profile became unquestionably lower-wealth and less college-ready.

Despite the volatile Black Power shakeup on campus, Walter Leonard's ascension to the presidency revealed that longstanding schisms between the administration and students regarding

---

[85] Judith Cummings, "Fisk U. Cutting Faculty and Salaries." *New York Times*, 14 July 1975.
[86] Adkins, who would later serve as president of historically black Knoxville College from 1976 to 1981, returned to the Fisk presidency in 1996. He died in office from lung cancer two years later.
[87] Jennings, pp. 97.

Fisk's identification with "blackness" as an organizing ideal had not been resolved. Leonard's selection was met with derision from several students who were unimpressed by his Harvard pedigree. Robbie Banks, a student, penned a satirical op-ed in the campus newspaper mocking Leonard's arrival as the second coming of a bourgeois black Jesus, stating:

> My brothers and sisters, you may all rest easy! As it was promised in the Good Book, the savior, the messiah, has come again! Instead of coming into the humble surroundings of a stable, he has come clad in regalia, heralding from Harvard University. He is Walter J. Leonard!... He has come to save Fisk. Pull us up from the depths of financial decay, spiritual putrefaction and academic decadence… However, let me offer these warnings. First of all and foremost, beware of "the transition." The transition will be from Black liberal arts Fisk to "Oreo" liberal arts Fisk…. Walter wishes to see us mass produced, assembly-line style scholars…. Fiskites oughta know better than to get sucked in by this display of finesse. People, don't settle into complacency. Stop, look and listen… the signs are all around us.[88]

Banks's lampoon of Leonard and the warning posed to the student body provides a small glimpse into what would become a tumultuous relationship between Leonard and the Fisk student body throughout Leonard's seven years as president. Leonard's affinity for the black educator style of the 1900s and 1910s, the culture in which his parents were immersed and raised him, and the unvarnished militancy of black Fisk students of the 1970s, turned out to be a mismatch.[89]

The very students who needled Leonard throughout his presidency were in fact a sign of the university's strength in attracting vocal, politically astute young people—both students and faculty—who carried forward Fisk's historical tradition of critiquing society and leadership. During the early 1970s, Fisk saw an increase in students, particularly incoming freshmen, whose

---

[88] Robbie Banks, "The Savior Has Come." *Fisk Forum.* 8 Sept. 1977.

[89] Keith Jennings, a political scientist who attended Fisk during the Walter Leonard years, shares a number of detailed (and some rather quirky) anecdotes in his master's thesis regarding the combative relationship between Fisk students and Leonard. See Jennings, *The Destruction of a Black Institution*.

"primary motivation may have been a search for the 'black experience.'"[90] A faculty hiring spree in the late 1960s and early 1970s during Lawson's presidency sought to meet this growing need. Lawson's political foresight influenced his decision to recruit a cadre of energetic, innovative and unabashedly militant young scholars to join Fisk's faculty, including Rosentene Purnell, an education scholar who headed the university's Humanities Curriculum Development Project; Gerald McWorter, a sociologist from Spelman who became the director of Fisk's Afro-American Studies program; Stephanie Pogue, a Howard-trained artist; George Neely, a professor of nuclear physics who would become physics chair and eventually university vice-president; Bob Holmes, a composer with experience in scoring television productions and director of the Fisk Jazz Ensemble; and D.L. "Dante" Graham, a young, energetic, Black Arts-influenced graduate of Fisk who taught on the creative writing faculty until his untimely death in a car crash. Many of these professors saw themselves as what C. Eric Lincoln, the eminent sociologist who came to Fisk in 1970 to chair the department of religion, as "repatriated scholars," or black scholars who left PWIs to settle at HBCUs as a form of homecoming.[91] These young faculty members helped Fisk continue to carry out its historical mission as one of the nation's most intellectually open and culturally vibrant HBCUs.

Walter Leonard sought to make the work of culture—the tradition that allowed Fisk's bright student body and free-thinking faculty to flourish—the centerpiece of the university's revival from its financial doldrums. Upon his selection as president, he boldly declared to *JET* Magazine, "There will be no intellectual genocide at Fisk."[92] His inaugural ceremony was a star-studded showcase of black educators and celebrities, including Benjamin Mays, track star Wilma

[90] Drewry and Doermann, *Stand and Prosper*.
[91] Hamilton Bims, "Business as Usual at Flexible Fisk." *Ebony* (April 1974), pp. 67-74.
[92] "Dr. Walter Leonard Named New Fisk Univ. President." *JET*, 21 Oct. 1976.

Rudolph, and actress Cicely Tyson, to whom Leonard awarded the first-ever Fisk Presidential Medal for her contributions to entertainment. Leonard's foremost goal as president was to preserve Fisk's cultural heritage through various restoration and renovation projects that had been deferred for years. Shortly after the inauguration, Leonard's administration applied for nomination of the "Fisk University Historic District" to the National Register of Historic Places. The process of securing renovation funding proved to be difficult, as the university had to contend with racial discrimination from the state of Tennessee. At least three times Fisk applied for a Historic Preservation Grant, but each time was denied. Sherman Jones, vice-president for administration, fumed about the state's intransigence in a letter to Herbert Harper, executive director of the Tennessee Historical Commission, saying:

> I find it somewhat difficult to understand how Jubilee Hall—itself a national historic landmark—and our Little Theatre—constructed in the 1860's and the first classroom on the Fisk campus—have failed to merit favorable consideration for grant support from your agency for three years, especially since the Commission staff is personally acquainted with the physical condition of these structures.[93]

The commission's Historical Projects Officer responded saying that decisions regarding the disbursement of grant money were made based on a system of ratings formulated and mandated by the United States Department of the Interior, and that historical significance was only one factor among others within the ratings system, including "whether or not the project incorporated the use of revolving funds, involved the preservation of natural or recreational, as well as historical resources, or incorporated techniques of energy conservation." He also blamed Fisk's repeated rejections on a "large number of applications received" and an "inadequate level of

[93] Fisk University Special Collections. Letter from Sherman Jones to Herbert L. Harper, 21 Sept. 1979.

funding" available.[94] However, a list of approved sites that was sent to Fisk shows that the "large number of applications" that received priority funding for restoration from the commission were buildings located in areas largely rural and predominantly white.

After repeated lobbying by Fisk, the commission finally granted the university the funds necessary for renovating Jubilee Hall and a number of other campus properties. In February 1978, the university received National Historic status.[95] The Board of Trustees approved the sale of campus property to the city of Nashville and Davidson County for the construction of what would be named the Fisk Jubilee Singers Memorial Bridge. In commemoration of the publication of Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk* and to reorganize the institution's identity around Du Bois, Leonard commissioned soft-cover copies of *Souls* to be given to every enrolled student and to selected friends of the university. A special "Diamond Jubilee" hardcover edition of *Souls* was also commissioned and distributed to select donors.[96]

One of Leonard's greatest goals, however, was to secure funding to restore the Stieglitz art collection that Georgia O'Keeffe had donated three decades earlier. By the time Leonard arrived at Fisk, the Van Vechten Gallery was badly in need of renovation, and the Stieglitz collection had been moved to New York and kept in storage in a warehouse. Leonard hustled to find renovation funding while making periodic trips to New York to check on the collection. Board member Wesley Hotchkiss, a clergyman and member of the United Church of Christ, secured a grant from the UCC. Fisk also received $12,500 to fund an endowed visiting professorship in Black American Music and $150,000 for the reestablishment of Charles

---

[94] Fisk University Special Collections. Letter from Richard G. Tune to Sherman Jones, 7 Nov. 1979.
[95] Jack Sirica, "Fisk Buildings Gain 'Historic' Status." *Tennessean*, 10 Feb. 1978.
[96] Fisk University Special Collections. Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 1979.

Johnson's Race Relations Institute, which reopened on campus in 1980 under the direction of historian Manning Marable.[97] O'Keeffe herself also donated $20,000 to restore the collection in 1981. To thank her for the donation, Leonard visited her at her Abiquiu, New Mexico home. By this time she was nearing one hundred years of age. As they sat down to enjoy a lunch of fresh vegetables prepared from O'Keeffe's garden, she told Leonard, "I want to hear about Fisk…. I had heard about Fisk all my life, and changed my vocabulary from 'colored' to 'Negro' to 'black.' I knew the interest Fisk had in the arts, all the arts."[98]

Despite Leonard's successes, he also realized that white capitalists' praise for Fisk's historic legacy did not necessarily translate into a desire to help the university overcome its present-day financial hardships. A significant number of Leonard's appeals for philanthropy from major corporations throughout the year 1980 were met with rejection slips or excuses: the Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Company, Xerox Foundation, First Canadian Bank of Montreal, Anheuser Busch, Hertz, General Foods, *The Washington Post*, and Prudential all responded with flat-out rejection letters, while other entities stated that although they did not support individual institutions, they remained committed to minority education through annual donations to the United Negro College Fund. Fisk was able, however, to secure some funds from the Ford Foundation through Leonard's friendships with Franklin Thomas, the Foundation's first African American president, and Benjamin Payton, a Ford program officer who would later become president of Tuskegee Institute. However, Fisk's meager resources, as well as the

---

[97] Ibid.

[98] Nancy Hopkins Reily, *Georgia O'Keeffe: A Private Friendship, Part 2: Walking the Abiquiu and Ghost Ranch Land.* Sunstone P, 2009.

indifferent attitude of many potential funding sources (including many absentee board members), ultimately made Leonard's job a painstaking challenge.

Fisk's attempt to expand its mass media presence also met a financial roadblock. Minutes from the Board of Trustees' December 11, 1981 meeting indicate that Congressional funds which Fisk had requested to establish a low-power television station in Nashville were in jeopardy because the U.S. Department of Commerce deemed the university's small size, precarious finances, and under-resourced facilities to be inadequate for the university to claim ownership of the satellite.[99] Only a year before, Howard University had launched WHMM-TV, the first black-owned and HBCU-operated public television station. Fisk's goal for its proposed station was to connect 107 HBCUs as part of a national black university television network.

The 1983-1984 academic year became Fisk's most dire period since its near collapse in the 1870s. The university was $4 million in debt. That year the Nashville Electric Service shut off the school's heat due to an unpaid $170,000 gas bill.[100] Students took up buckets and stood at intersections in downtown Nashville soliciting donations to help the university get its heat and electricity turned back on. The images, exacerbated by sensationalized media reports, were transmitted nationally on television and in newspapers. A group of concerned students, alumni, and faculty convened a meeting on campus with the objective of forming a committee to "save and reconstruct" the university. The final death knell for Leonard's presidency was the appearance and circulation of an anonymously authored tabloid—professionally designed, typeset, and printed—that called for him to step down for the good of the university. On Thanksgiving Day 1983, Leonard submitted his letter of resignation to Board chairman Timothy

---

[99] Fisk University Special Collections. "Minutes of the Executive Committee of the Fisk University Board of Trustees," 11 Dec. 1981.
[100] Marilyn Marshall, "Fisk Bounces Back." *Ebony,* May 1987, pp. 33-40.

Donaldson,[101] saying, "When I accepted the position [of president], I considered Fisk to be a damaged Rembrandt that could be restored. I simply can't beg any longer."

**Conclusion: The Lessons from Leonard's Campaign**

In a scathing op-ed, television journalist Tony Brown mocked Leonard's attempt at an artistic renaissance campaign, writing:

> To even mention the Fisk of the last six years in the same breath with the Fisk of W.E.B. Du Bois, the Fisk of scholarship and integrity, the training ground of some of our most prominent blacks today and the Fisk of 112 years ago when the children of ex-slaves sang spirituals around the world to raise funds for the school, is blasphemous—at best. The only bright spot in is Walter Leonard's resignation, but he cannot be held accountable or responsible for everything unfavorable at Fisk. Leonard is a former affirmative action officer at Harvard. Fisk's board of trustees was obviously impressed with "Harvard" and all of the White mythology it represents when choosing him to lead the school. It appears that the Fisk board got exactly what it deserved.[102]

Ironically, Leonard never attended an Ivy League institution, or any PWI for that matter. Apart from a bachelor's degree from Morehouse, he held a law degree from Howard and a masters of business administration from Atlanta University. However, the "White mythology" of Harvard overshadowed his efforts to rally the university community and its fundraising program around the school's rich legacies of black cultural production and Du Boisian intellectualism, legacies which Fisk still claims as cherished heritage. To this day, Leonard is remembered primarily as a well-meaning outsider recruited to revive the spirits of a demoralized institution, only to be massively shunned by that same institution a few years later.

---

[101] A graduate of Fisk, Timothy B. Donaldson was a prominent Bahamian banker and politician who served as Governor of the Central Bank of the Bahamas from 1974 to 1980. He subsequently became chair of his alma mater's Board of Trustees.

[102] Tony Brown, "Fisk Trustees Should Quit." *Cincinnati Herald,* 17 Dec. 1983.

In retrospect, Leonard's attempt to refocus Fisk's identity around black classics, and his linkage of the black humanistic tradition to the rejection of "intellectual genocide," offer productive ways for HBCUs to think about what it means to embrace one's "own black beautiful self." First and foremost, Leonard was able to tap into the traditions that make Fisk distinctive. He entered office with a passionate and unequivocal commitment towards affirming blackness, and his efforts at marshaling figures such as Du Bois and the Jubilee Singers as symbols of institutional identity served to bolster that commitment. Ironically, that re-infusion of the spirit of Du Bois into the campus during the university's hour of need had both intended and unintended consequences—students were able to "plug into and absorb" the energy generated by Leonard's campaign, but that same energy ended up driving Leonard out of office.

The re-centering of Du Bois and black creative expression during the Walter Leonard years also pushed the university community to reflect upon its identity in a new and unfamiliar moment of collegiate desegregation, budget cutting, and existential uncertainty. The timing couldn't have been more appropriate: the year Leonard took office, Fisk celebrated its 110th anniversary, the United States celebrated its bicentennial, and the renowned Baptist minister Howard Thurman delivered a speech at the University of the Redlands, in which he declared that America was "in search of its soul" and seriously in need of renewing its spiritual foundations.[103] In our current moment, the topic of institutional renewal has arisen again, as many HBCUs seek to remake themselves and their narratives in order to remain competitive in a constantly evolving and increasingly global educational landscape. Michael Sorrell's "We Over Me" campaign at Paul Quinn College (emphasizing collectivity and teamwork over individual interests), Makola

[103] Howard Thurman, "America in Search of a Soul," in *A Strange Freedom,* edited by Walter Earl Fluker and Catherine Tumber. Beacon P, 1999.

Abdullah's "Opportunity University" campaign at Virginia State University (highlighting the university's ability to advance students academically and economically), and Roslyn Clark Artis's "The Best of BC" campaign at Benedict College (emphasizing positive achievement and talent) are a few examples of how the current generation of young HBCU presidents are rebranding their institutions to appeal to an upcoming generation of stakeholders.

Interestingly, the towering figures of HBCU history—Du Bois, Mary McLeod Bethune, James Weldon Johnson—are playing a lesser a role in current commercialized constructions of HBCU identity, while more abstract concepts such as "excellence" are being emphasized; this trend is occurring while a number of humanities disciplines (and some social science programs) are increasingly being cut from or consolidated within HBCU curricula.[104] One bastion of humanistic education that still requires every incoming student's attention is the introductory English composition course, and occasionally the mandatory cultural studies or historical survey course. It remains to be seen how these venues will play a larger role in achieving Walter Leonard's dream of curating institutional character through the preservation of culture.

[104] Benjamin Mays at Morehouse and Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee remain exceptions to this trend.

# CHAPTER 2

# CREATING KNOWLEDGE TO SAVE THE REPUBLIC: THE STORY OF HOWARD UNIVERSITY PRESS

While we must manage knowledge to save the environment, it is also required that we create new knowledge to save the republic.

—James E. Cheek, Inaugural Address, "To Seek a New Direction: Howard in the Decade of the Seventies," April 25, 1970

As it is now we are handing everything over to a white jury. If a colored man wants to publish a book, he has got to get a white publisher and a white newspaper to say it is great; and then you and I say so. We must come to the place where the work of art when it appears is reviewed and acclaimed by our own free and unfettered judgment. And we are going to have a real and valuable and eternal judgment only as we make ourselves free of mind, proud of body and just of soul to all men.

—W. E. B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," 1926

## Introduction: Black Authorship vs. Black Inclusion

The subject of representation, which W. E. B. Du Bois takes up in his address to the 1926 Convention of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (later published as the essay "Criteria of Negro Art"), continues to occupy the American public sphere as much as it did nearly a century ago. #OscarsSoWhite, #WeNeedDiverseBooks, and other campaigns throughout the 2010s highlighted the lack of representation of people in color in entertainment, publishing, technology, and other professional arenas.[105] Most of these campaigns were built

[105] The social media hashtag #OscarsSoWhite was created in January 2015 by Washington, DC-based writer/editor April Reign initially to mock the lack of diversity among Academy Award winning actors and films; the hashtag soon took off as a vehicle for people of color to vent their frustrations about the lack of racial and ethnic representation in Hollywood, and particularly at the Oscars. Likewise, the hashtag #WeNeedDiverseBooks emerged in 2014, led by author Ellen Oh, following the announcement of an all-white male panel at the annual BookCon conference; in response, Oh and other authors, illustrators and publishers of color took to social media to

upon a conceptualization of "representation" as "inclusion": *inclusion* of black people in the Academy Awards, *inclusion* on the publishing lists of Random House and Simon and Schuster, and *inclusion* in predominantly white institutions (PWIs). However, this popular notion of inclusion as the dominant understanding of representation offers us with only a partial understanding of what it means to "represent" blackness. The rhetoric of inclusion doesn't consider that when a black person is granted entrée to a prestigious venue—say for example, a contract with a prominent publisher or a glowing review in a prominent publication, that act of inclusion still perpetuates systemic inequality by solidifying the includer's gatekeeping power over the included.

This chapter explores how Howard University, the historically black university in Washington, DC, attempted to address the challenges of black authorship and editorial agency questions in the years following desegregation and the rise of the Black Power Movement: how do black folks wrest control over the construction and telling of narratives from interlocutors, particularly white interlocutors, and how do black people maintain that control? Here I mobilize a capacious definition of "authorship" that extends beyond the writing of literary texts, instead focusing more broadly on being a creator—particularly a creator of alternative spaces of innovation and affirmation. By exercising what Du Bois calls "free and unfettered judgment," authorship enables the black author to effectively untether cultural production from the legitimization of the white gaze and place it back into the hands of black people. This notion of

---

highlight the lack of diverse representation in the editorial rooms of major American publishing houses. The hashtag grew into a nonprofit organization that seeks to promote racial equity in children's book publishing. For more on the #OscarsSoWhite movement, see Aggi Ashagre, "A Conversation With the Creator of #OscarsSoWhite." *National Public Radio,* 25 Jan. 2016. Web; For more on #WeNeedDiverseBooks, see Ron Charles, "'We need diverse books,' they said. And now a group's dream is coming to fruition." *Washington Post,* 3 Jan. 2017. Web.

authorship is nothing new at HBCUs, which have served as intellectually and psychologically empowering spaces of innovation and affirmation for generations of black students, faculty, staff, and extended stakeholders for generations. Howard's location, access to capital, and unique subject position within the HBCU sector made it an ideal site for such experimentation: within the black American and black diasporic consciousness, Howard has loomed like a giant, both as a physical entity and as an idea. Founded in 1867, Howard University has an enrollment of twelve thousand undergraduate, graduate and professional students, and is ranked as a "high research activity" institution by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education; it is also the only HBCU that has its own line item in the annual federal budget, though it is a private institution.

While other HBCUs grappled with defining institutional blackness at the apex of the Black Power Movement, Howard moved swiftly and definitively to remake itself within the image of the Black University ideal that was growing in popularity among black students, young faculty, and activist administrators. As part of this comprehensive reorganization, Howard University took the stance that part of the mission of a black university is to aid black people globally in the project of authorial agency; from this declaration grew Howard University Press (HUP), the first fully functional academic press housed at an HBCU. Launched in 1972, HUP became a leading niche publisher of a wide range of black-interest books, particularly new and out-of-print works of literature penned by authors across the diaspora. From its publication of the first United States edition of Guyanese historian Walter Rodney's 1974 classic *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa,* to its creation of an annual summer book publishing institute designed to train students of color interested in entering the publishing industry, HUP energized a generation of black scholars and gave voice to scores of black authors across the globe.

Furthermore, HUP provided a vital outlet for black cultural expression and intellectual life when both were threatened by global economic uncertainty, neoconservative hostility to race work and liberation politics, and an overall decline in institutional support for black studies. HUP demonstrated that the processes of authorship and creation that happen at HBCUs are necessary—even imperative to the well-being of American society and the international community at large. As stated in the epilogue, James Cheek, president of Howard, described the work of HUP as necessary for "saving the republic"; Fay Acker, a former HUP senior editor, has described HUP's primary function as "saving lives."[106] The genealogy of these assertions can be traced back to Zora Neale Hurston, who argues in her 1950 essay "What White Publishers Won't Print" for the national and international urgency of black publishing; she notes that

> The internal affairs of the nation have bearings on the international stress and strain, and this gap in the national literature now has tremendous weight in world affairs. National coherence and solidarity is implicit in a thorough understanding of the various groups within a nation, and this lack of knowledge about the internal emotions and behavior of the minorities cannot fail to bar out understanding.[107]

Thus, HUP was a place of refuge in addition to an intellectual and creative resource, whose main Achilles heel was its precarious revenue streams: in addition to Howard's financial strains, the 1990s brought federal budget cuts that hampered HUP's output and eventually led to its shuttering in 2011.

To provide contextual foregrounding for the Press's founding and its development, this chapter will first explore the building of Howard as a center of black higher education and intellectualism, and how the political activism of young people—both students and

---

[106] Fay Acker. Personal interview. 11 July 2019.

[107] Zora Neale Hurston, "What White Publishers Won't Print." *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present,* edited by Angelyn Mitchell. Duke UP, 1994, pp. 117-121.

administrators—forced the University to reexamine and reassess its values, priorities, and social obligations, out of which HUP sprung forth. The second section examines the creation of HUP and how its earliest books helped to shape the Press's direction. The third section discusses the state of scholarly publishing in Africa and the Caribbean in the early postcolonial period, and clarifies HUP's presence within the larger black diasporic publishing world during that time. The fourth section examines the factors that led to the decline in HUP's operational resources and the eventual demise of the Press. The conclusion of this chapter surveys the tensions between authorship and anti-blackness that affect Howard presently. I close with a critical speculation of how HUP's story encourages consideration of authorship as a way of reframing the discourse of racial representation.

**Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, James Cheek, and the (Re)Making of "The Capstone"**

In the fall of 1866, members of the First Congregational Church in Washington, DC met to establish a "Howard Theological Seminary" for the training of black clergymen, named after General Oliver Otis Howard, the prominent Union Army general and Commissioner of the Freedman's Bureau who served as a founding trustee and an early president of the school.[108] The following January, the name of the institution was changed to Howard University. The still-young United States was reeling in the aftermath of the long and bitter Civil War, and President Andrew Johnson was locked in an extended battle with Congress regarding the role of African Americans in the fabric of the country; according to Howard-based historian Rayford Whittingham Logan, it's possible that the creation of Howard University was part of a

[108] For more on the founding of Howard University, see Rayford W. Logan, *Howard University: The First Hundred Years.* New York UP, 1965.

compromise between “Radical” Republicans, who were strongly in favor of aiding black citizens through the Reconstruction period, and Democrats, who sought to maintain a semblance of the order of slavery.[109] Congress passed the bill establishing the University’s charter, which was subsequently by Johnson, who ironically had vetoed the continuation of the Freedmen’s Bureau.

For generations, Howard University has been known under the moniker “Capstone of Black Education.”[110] Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, the University’s first black president, is credited as the key figure who laid the foundation for modern Howard. His selection by the Board of Trustees in 1926 was partly due to his familiarity with the institution—as a preacher and theologian, he spoke frequently at the school’s Rankin Memorial Chapel—as well as his belief in Howard’s potential to become a hub for black social critique and activist teaching. Williams notes that Johnson’s 1927 inaugural address characterizes Howard as “the first mature university organization” for African Americans “in the modern civilized world,” and that its development from a startup school for former slaves represented “one of the great romances of modern American education.”[111] Through his leadership, Johnson implemented his vision of the Black University ideal, which wouldn’t become known as such until the late 1960s.

---

[109] Logan, *Howard University,* p. 18.

[110] Scholars disagree on when exactly the University began to develop this distinction. Walter Dyson considers 1904 as the pivotal year when Howard started being referred to as the “Capstone,” while Jonathan Holloway argues that Howard did not truly start exhibiting “capstone”-like qualities until the tenure of Howard’s first black president, Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, who led the school from 1926 to 1963; Zachery R. Williams argues that the foundations for Howard’s prestige, which started to flourish during the Harlem Renaissance and into the 1930s, were being laid as early as 1890. For more, see Walter Dyson, *Howard University, the Capstone of Negro Education: A History, 1867-1940.* Howard University Graduate School, 1941; Jonathan Scott Holloway, *Confronting the Veil: Abram Harris Jr., E. Franklin Frazier, and Ralph Bunche, 1919-1941.* U of North Carolina P, 2002; Zachery R. Williams, *In Search of the Talented Tenth: Howard University Public Intellectuals and the Dilemmas of Race, 1926-1970.* U of Missouri P, 2009.

[111] Zachery R. Williams, *In Search of the Talented Tenth,* pp. 41.

Howard also boasted of a vibrant intellectual culture fostered by a faculty that included sociologists Alain Locke and E. Franklin Frazier; Benjamin Mays, dean of the School of Religion; Charles Hamilton Houston, the influential attorney and dean of Howard University Law School; Howard Thurman, dean of the chapel; archivist and collector Dorothy Porter Wesley; literary scholar Sterling A. Brown; historians Merze Tate, John Hope Franklin, Rayford Logan, Chancellor Williams, and William Leo Hansberry; economist Abram Harris; and education scholar Charles H. Thompson, who in 1932 founded the *Journal of Negro Education,* then the nation's first and only academic journal focusing on black education issues. The dynamism of Howard's intellectual community was bolstered by its location within Washington, a thriving Mecca of black culture and politics only rivaled by Harlem and Atlanta. Howard's proximity to federal power also aided its rapid growth. After relentless lobbying by Johnson and Republican allies in the House of Representatives, Congress began giving the University an annual appropriation in 1928, enabling Howard to upgrade its facilities and academic programs and increase faculty salaries.[112]

A pivotal moment that helped to cement Howard's place within the national cultural imagination was the inclusion of Kelly Miller's essay "Howard: The National Negro University" in *The New Negro*, Alain Locke's 1925 anthology that became one of the Harlem Renaissance's greatest literary hallmarks. An esteemed mathematician and sociologist, graduate of Howard Law School and former dean of the University's college of arts and sciences, Miller was selected by fellow Howard sociology professor Locke to pen the essay for the anthology. "The National Negro University" not only explicates in detail Howard's institutional configuration and guiding

[112] Katherine I.E. Wheatle, "Exploring the Context and Influences Behind the Founding of the Journal of Negro Education." *Historical Perspectives with Current Studies on Testing and Trust in Education,* special issue of *Journal of Negro Education,* vol. 86, no. 1, 2017, pp. 3-12.

philosophy, but also introduces America to what was quickly becoming the nation's most prominent HBCU. The essay is notable for the lead role it assumes in weaving a larger-than-life mystique surrounding Howard, and especially through Miller's two monikers, the "Capstone" and the "Mecca," that would become the University's most enduring nicknames in subsequent decades. At the heart of the essay is Miller's investment in tying Howard's mission with the notion of a national project. For Miller, Howard is a university that embodies the spirit of a people on an upward trajectory. Because of its comprehensiveness in academic programs, student body size, location in the nation's capital, and support from the federal government, Howard serves as an ideally situated and resourced intellectual "Forum" and "Acropolis" for black America.[113]

By the 1960s, a significant ideological shift in what a black university should mean and look like—particularly within the minds of Howard's students—had started to take hold at HBCUs around the country. Howard's administration was slow to keep pace with and embrace this change. After 34 years, Mordecai Johnson retired from the Howard presidency in 1960. His successor James M. Nabrit Jr. was steeped in the civil rights struggle: he was known nationally for his work as an attorney for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, and was instrumental in arguing against segregation in Washington, DC's public schools. He also served as a dean of Howard Law School, designed the nation's first-ever civil rights course taught in a law school, and took a two-year leave of absence while president of Howard to serve as a United Nations delegate in newly independent African nations. Despite his long career, Howard students felt that his views of institutional culture and purpose were too steeped in the old elitist dogmas

[113] Kelly Miller, "Howard University: The National Negro University." *The New Negro,* edited by Alain Locke. Atheneum, 1992, pp. 312-322.

of black education, and that the University itself was too invested in being a proper "Negro university" rather than a radically transformative black university. Nabrit's announcement in 1966 of an integration plan that called for a 60% white student body only further convinced students that he was not seriously committed to advancing black education; the plan was never implemented. Furthermore, though Howard was a historically black institution, its curriculum in the 1950s and early 1960s failed to offer a substantive number of courses in black literature, art, history or social thought.

By the mid-to-late sixties, students and young alumni had become increasingly vocal about their desire for the Capstone to become a "black university," and felt that the University had interpreted the opening lines of its alma mater song—"*Reared against the eastern sky, proudly there on hilltop high*"—to mean being detached from black causes and the black masses. During Howard's 1966 homecoming, student Robin Gregory, who was elected homecoming queen, eschewed the traditional queen "look" of years past by wearing her hair in a natural Afro. Upon her selection, students fervently marched out of Howard's Cramton Auditorium chanting, "Umgawa, Black Power! Umgawa, Black Power!"[114] The writer Claude Brown, a 1965 graduate of Howard and author of *Manchild in the Promised Land,* told National Educational Television in 1968, "For a long time, I was more than proud to be identified with the institution, but now I'd prefer to be in Mississippi than near Howard University." He added that if Howard had no interest in identifying as a black university, "they might as well burn Howard University to the ground and plant cotton. At least it'll have some economic value."[115] And in 1967, at the

[114] Paula Giddings. Interview by Judy Richardson, 12 Dec. 1988. *Eyes on the Prize.* http://digital.wustl.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=eop;cc=eop;rgn=div2;view=text;idno=gid5427.0788.058;node=gid5427.0788.058%3A1.19.
[115] *Color Us Black!* Directed by Dick McCutcheon. National Educational Television, 1968.

invitation of the Black Power Committee, a student-led group advised by Howard sociologist Nathan Hare, boxer Muhammad Ali came to campus to speak to students about the meaning of black identity. Just days before, students marched in protest and burned effigies of Nabrit, dean of the school of liberal arts Frank Snowden, and Selective Service director Lieutenant General Lewis Hershey; as a result, the university revoked the Committee's privilege to hold the Ali event in any campus building. Not fazed in the least, Ali delivered his speech to throngs of students on the steps of Frederick Douglass Memorial Hall, a prominent building facing the campus "Yard."

Relations between the Nabrit administration and Howard students came to a head in 1968, a month before the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., when UJAMAA, a newly formed student coalition, rearticulated demands that Howard reaffirm its commitment to the surrounding community and to the black masses in general. More than 200 students staged a sit-in at the administration building, popularly known as the "A Building." As the days continued, the number of student demonstrators quickly exceeded 2,000. Students from other HBCUs and Black Power activists from around the country converged on the A Building and joined the protest as well. Students bearing Afros and dashikis gained access to the university switchboard and broadcast daily loops of Malcolm X records that reverberated throughout the campus.[116] Law students ran a legal aid office, medical students set up a makeshift first aid clinic, and English majors typed up and sent out press releases to local Washington media outlets. Local restauranteurs delivered fresh turkey dinners to student demonstrators. After eight days, the University and the protestors came to a truce: though Howard officials wouldn't commit to remaking the University into a "black university," agreements were made on inclusion of more

---

[116] Robert C. Smith, *Ronald W. Walters,* p. 69.

black studies-focused courses within the curriculum, the formation of a department of Afro-American studies, and the creation of a campus conference called Towards a Black University (TABU), in which students and guest speakers could unpack and debate the philosophical and conceptual strands of their ideal Howard that were yet to be tied.[117]

Like the Black Writers Conferences at Fisk, TABU attracted a broad array of students, faculty, outside scholars, activists and artists, and heightened a sense of fierce urgency in reforming Howard and other HBCUs. Building upon the Black University ideal that had been widely covered in national black publications such as *Ebony* and *Negro Digest*, the conference sought to reimagine HBCUs through multiple lenses, ranging from curriculum development, finances, politics, culture, campus sports, and student life.[118] Presentations included public readings by poets Amiri Baraka and Ted Joans, and performances by Ossie Davis, jazz musician Max Roach, and jazz singer Abby Lincoln, as well as an unexpected lecture delivered by Harold Cruse, who had been critical of Black Power activists in his book *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, released the previous year.[119] Though the event brought a fierce new energy to the campus, many students and faculty felt disappointed that TABU ultimately failed to bring any definite closure to the question of how to build a black university that consumed many of its attendees.

That same year, James Nabrit announced his retirement, stating that his plan to step down from the Howard presidency had already been made years earlier. Wishing to move in a new

[117] Russell Rickford, *We Are an African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination*. Oxford UP, 2016.
[118] Smith, *Ronald W. Walters,* p. 69.
[119] In the middle of his talk, Cruse abruptly stopped and walked off the stage, later blaming sudden illness; Lewis Myers, a student leader at Howard, believed that Cruse felt out of place among the young academics and students at the conference. For more, see Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus.*

direction, the University reached out to James Edward Cheek, the 36-year-old president of Shaw University, an HBCU in Raleigh, North Carolina. A Shaw graduate and North Carolina native, Cheek had gained a reputation as a young legend of black education, assuming the Shaw presidency at 30 years old and rescuing the institution from the brink of insolvency. Upon Cheek's selection in 1963, Shaw had only $100 in the bank and had nothing to feed its students returning from summer break. Cheek doubled student enrollment, implemented remedial academic programming to raise retention and graduation rates, raised faculty and staff salary rates above the national average, increased the university's budget from $700,000 to nearly $6 million, and put in motion plans for a student-operated FM radio station and a future television station (Shaw University). moreover, he was an energetic young president whose militancy aligned with the activist fervor of black students across the country. He regularly squabbled with Jesse Helms, the staunchly pro-segregation executive vice-president of Raleigh's Capitol Broadcasting Company who would later represent North Carolina in the United States Senate. Cheek was also known for his propensity for risk: soon after Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis in April 1968, Raleigh police surrounded the Shaw campus in anticipation of black student upheaval. According to his later recollection, Cheek confronted the police with a .38 caliber pistol on his hip and a carbine rifle on his shoulder, telling the officers that if any of them stepped foot on the campus, they wouldn't be able to take Cheek away without him "taking out" some of them as well. With that, the police decided to back away and leave.[120] By 1969 Shaw's academic and physical expansion had captivated Howard's attention.

That year Judge Scovel Richardson, the chair of Howard's Board of Trustees, called Cheek to say that the board had selected Cheek to become Howard's next president. Having

---

[120] James E. Cheek. Interview with Larry Crowe. *HistoryMakers,* 6 November 2003.

heard about Howard's constant upheaval in the news, Cheek told Richardson that he had no interest in leaving what he called the "tranquility" of Shaw for a school in political disarray. Nevertheless Cheek traveled to New York City to meet and dine with the board, and Judge Richardson told him, "We've interviewed ninety-some people for this job… some we've interviewed more than once…. Everybody we've interviewed is a mechanic. We're looking for an engineer." Herman Wells, then the chancellor of Indiana University Bloomington and a Howard trustee, said to Cheek, "Everything that you are talking about doing at Shaw, you can do at Howard, because everything is already there. And you can do it faster, better. It would be more effective because it would reach more people." What effectively forced Cheek's hand was hearing anchors Frank McGee and Barbara Walters announce on NBC's *Today Show* one morning that Cheek had been named Howard's new president.[121]

Part of what appealed to Howard's board about Cheek was his vision of not only the role of HBCUs in the building of black America, but of universities in American public life overall. Cheek conceptualized the American university in terms of comprehensiveness, and was averse to institutional misrepresentation for vanity's sake. As leader of his alma mater, he sought to change Shaw University's name to Shaw College to reflect the institution's size and scope more accurately, but he received such resistance and acrimony from alumni that he instead worked in reverse to make Shaw's size and scope match its name. He acquired land outside of the downtown Raleigh campus that would provide ample space for additional facilities. Howard in 1969, he later recalled, "was the puniest university that I had ever seen."[122] Because of Howard's landlocked location within Washington's compact urban grid, outward expansion presented a

---

[121] Ibid.
[122] Ibid.

problem; it became necessary for the university to acquire multiple satellite campuses by purchasing off-campus properties.

To better assess where Howard stood and what improvements needed to be made, Cheek commissioned a study in 1971 that compared Howard to eleven predominantly white universities with similar institutional missions, enrollments, and curricula, such as Johns Hopkins and the University of Chicago. Titled "The Lingering Legacy of Neglect and Deprivation," the study found that in comparison to all of the PWIs, Howard ranked either last or next-to-next on nearly every variable: educational expenditures, research expenditures, library spending, overall endowment value, physical plant condition, faculty compensation, and number of full-time faculty. Only in total federal support did Howard rank fifth among the overall list, though still challenged in light of its low rankings in the other areas.[123]

In his April 1970 inaugural address, Cheek declared before the assembled dignitaries, students, and faculty that Howard had the unique burden of being "one of the principal architects of our national destiny and one of the major engineers of our society's change," and that to meet this end, Howard would begin "an earnest search for a new direction."[124] Emboldened by his mandate as a newly inaugurated president, Cheek used the report's findings to lobby for increased federal and private funding for Howard. He ensured that copies of the report found their way to the desks of Representative Daniel Flood, subcommittee chairman of the House Appropriations Committee; U.S. Senator Warren Magnuson, chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee; and McGeorge Bundy, president of the Ford Foundation. The

[123] "Howard University must dare to challenge American philanthropy as no other black institution ever has before." Box 23. James E. Cheek Faculty-Staff File Folder. University Archives. Howard University Moorland-Spingarn Center. Washington, DC.
[124] James E. Cheek, "To Seek a New Direction: Howard in the Seventies." *New Directions,* vol. 6, no. 4, July 1979, pp. 43-46.

report's urgency convinced both Bundy and the federal government to provide Howard the increased funding it needed in order to actualize the scaling-up that Cheek envisioned. The Ford Foundation in particular awarded Howard, as well as Atlanta University, multimillion-dollar grants to become "centers of excellence" in black higher education.[125] As the 1970s began to dawn, the excitement generated by Cheek's quest to make Howard a "university of the first rank" gave the nickname "the Capstone" powerful new resonance.

**Howard University Press and the Rebirth of HBCU Publishing**

With a plethora of private funding and a substantial increase in federal appropriation money at his disposal, Cheek immediately began the work of reshaping Howard into his vision of the Black University ideal. He reorganized the entire institution into schools that lay the groundwork for modern Howard. To head the newly restructured academic program, Cheek created the position of vice-president for academic affairs and recruited Andrew Billingsley, a young sociologist at the University of California at Berkeley, to be the inaugural office holder. Billingsley enthusiastically shared Cheek's vision of an activist black university: he was highly acclaimed in 1968 for his landmark study *Black Families in White America,* which rejected the Moynihan Report's pathology-based assessment of the black family[126] and argued for blacks to divest from white institutions and strengthen their own; he also founded Berkeley's Ethnic

---

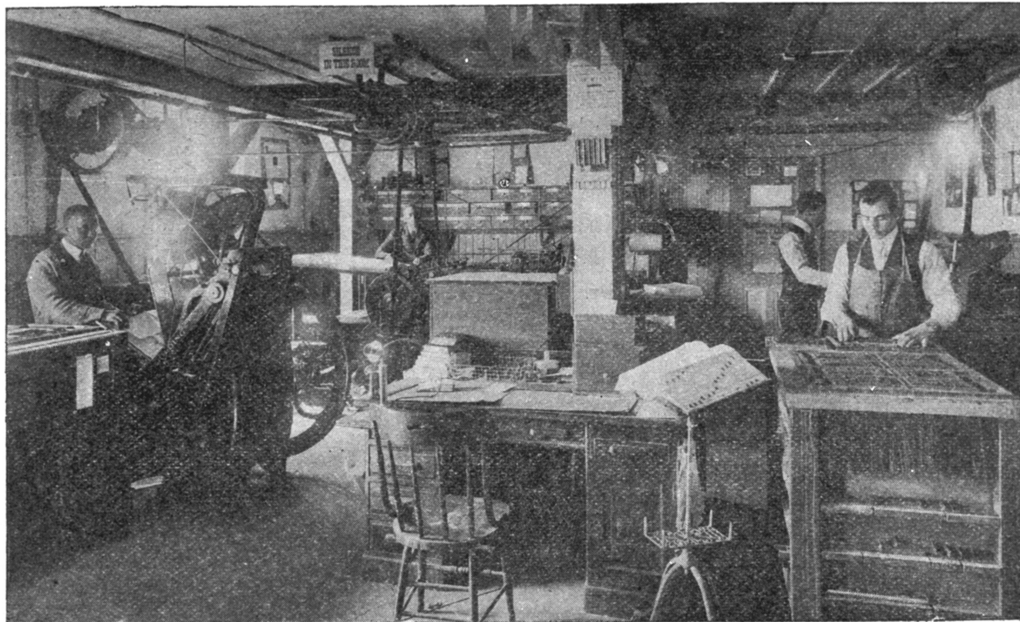
[125] Robert C. Smith, *Ronald W. Walters,* p. 71.
[126] *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,* also known informally as the "Moynihan Report," was a 1965 white paper written by Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan, in which he argued that black poverty was rooted in the preponderance of black households headed by single mothers, and that the breakdown of the "Negro family" was a vestige of slavery. However, this report failed to call out systems of institutional oppression that contribute to incarceration, poverty, divorce, and other problems that Moynihan highlights. He went on to represent New York in the U.S. Senate as a Democrat from 1977 to 2001.

Studies Department in response to black students' demands for more racially inclusive curriculum. As vice-president for academic affairs, Billingsley embarked upon the intellectual reconstruction of Howard by recruiting a robust assemblage of young pro-Black Power faculty from around the country. This generation of emerging scholars included Ronald Walters, a 33-year-old political scientist who established the nation's first doctoral program in Black Politics at Howard; John Oliver Killens and Haki Madhubuti in English; Donald Byrd in jazz studies; Tony Brown as head of the School of Communications (and host of public television's *Black Journal*, later renamed *Tony Brown's Journal*); and sociologist Joyce Ladner (who would later serve as interim president of the university).

Cheek also held an unwavering belief that the purpose of the university, particularly black universities, is to produce and disseminate research that would transform society and uplift those at the bottom. Unlike the PWIs surveyed in "The Lingering Legacy of Neglect and Deprivation," Howard lacked a university press, or at least an official one. Since the Capstone's earliest days, there had been an entity—more or less a department that existed on paper—that carried the name "Howard University Press." Records show institutional publications printed by "Howard University Press" dating back to Reconstruction. These early publications consisted mostly of minutes of meetings, such as the May 18, 1892 Sixth Triennial Meeting of the College Alumni Association; the Press also published the text of addresses given at university-wide events, including Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1872 lecture "What Books to Read," delivered at Howard, and Reverend George W. Cook's 1895 eulogy of Frederick Douglass, delivered at Howard's Rankin Memorial Chapel. In February 1919, the Board of Trustees voted to officially establish a press in the university's name, and for it to be administered under the auspices of a "Department of Publication," run by a faculty member. In 1927, the Board voted that President

Mordecai Johnson be vested with the power to authorize official university publications. However, the Great Depression presented Howard with financial challenges that impacted the press's output and sustainability. In 1932 the Board voted for the discontinuation of its "University Printing Office" at the end of the 1932 fiscal year. The university treasurer was delegated to sell off the press's remaining equipment.[127]

EAST SIDE OF QUADRANGLE



THE HOWARD UNIVERSITY PRESS

**Figure 2.** Student workers at what was known as "Howard University Press" during the 1914-1915 academic year. Photo courtesy of Howard University Moorland-Spingarn Research Center's Digital Howard Collection.

[127] "University Press: February 7, 1919." Box 64: HU Medical Alumni Association Programs through HU Press Catalogues. HU Press Abstracts Folder. University Archives, Howard University Moorland-Spingarn Research Center. Washington, DC. 12 July 2019.

By the time Howard's first attempt at a university press folded in the early 1930s, several Ivy League and other Research 1-tier PWIs already had thriving presses. The two earliest ones, Cambridge and Oxford, were established in 1534 and 1586 respectively. The university press sector in the United States, considerably younger, included Cornell (1869, relaunched 1930), Johns Hopkins (started 1878), University of Chicago (1891), University of California and Columbia (both 1893), Princeton (1905), Fordham (1907), Yale (1908), Harvard (1913), Stanford (1917), and the University of Pennsylvania (1927). These early presses took up the work of publishing scholarship because of commercial presses' reluctance to invest resources in printing works that only appealed to a small niche within the ivory tower. Scholarly journals of professional associations such as the *American Chemical Journal* comprised most of these early presses' output. In 1937, a conglomeration of member presses joined forces to form the Association of American University Presses (AAUP). In most histories of the American university press, these universities are spotlighted as pioneers in the systematic dissemination of scholarly knowledge and groundbreaking research in the U.S. Peter Givler notes that university presses have historically been at the forefront of "transmitting a knowledge of history and cultural traditions."[128]

What is less discussed, however, is the leading role these presses took in propagating racist ideas about African Americans, Africans, and other non-European-descended communities through the publication of racialized pseudoscience and revisionist histories. For example, the University of North Carolina-based sociologist Howard Odum's 1910 study *Social and Mental*

[128] Peter Givler. "University Press Publishing in the United States." *Scholarly Publishing: Books, Journals, Publishers, and Libraries in the Twentieth Century.* John Wiley and Sons, 2002, 107-120.

*Traits of the Negro: Research Into the Conditions of the Negro Race in Southern Towns,* published by Columbia University Press, argues the following:

> The Negro has few ideals and perhaps no lasting adherence to an inspiration towards real worth. He has little conception of the meaning of virtue, truth, honor, manhood, integrity. He is shiftless, untidy and indolent…. Thus with mental stupidity and moral insensibility back of them the children are affected already, in deed and speech.[129]

Odum's assessment of black intelligence and hereditary traits were emblematic of the prevailing sentiment about black people held by white scholars of the period. In response to the racist ideas and texts circulated by white academic presses, HBCUs started their own presses, but unlike presses such as those at Chicago and Stanford, HBCU presses were tremendously under-resourced and understaffed. Donald Franklin Joyce notes that book publishing at HBCUs was often sporadic and did not fall under the auspices of a specific printing office, but rather was handled by the university's head public relations or communications officer.[130] Black colleges that launched academic presses during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries included Hampton Institute (1871), Atlanta University (1896), Tuskegee Institute (1911), Fisk University (circa 1915), and Xavier University of Louisiana (circa 1930s).

These early HBCU presses published mostly institutional- or locally-focused materials such as course catalogues, speeches delivered at university functions, institutional histories, and histories of the local regions surrounding the universities. To a lesser extent texts with a more national focus were published, including the Atlanta University Studies series, edited by W.E.B. Du Bois, and *The Negro in Medicine* (1912), written by John A. Kenney, medical director of the John Andrew Memorial Hospital at Tuskegee Institute. Because of limited resources, however,

---

[129] Donald Franklin Joyce. *Gatekeepers of Black Culture: Black-Owned Book publishing in the United States, 1817-1981.* Greenwood P, 1983.
[130] Joyce, *Gatekeepers of Black Culture,* pp. 40.

these presses did not have the capacity to print titles at the volume of PWI presses or distribute them as widely. By the late 1950s, most of these presses were no longer extant. Negro Universities Press (NUP), an independent press, emerged in 1968 as an outgrowth of the renewed interest in Black Studies. NUP disseminated out-of-print titles dealing with the black experience. The press, however, was short-lived.[131] In light of this vacuum, the Howard Board of Trustees' vote to officially relaunch Howard University Press in 1972 marked a major milestone in not only the university's history, but in black publishing in general. Howard's press would become, in its own words, the "first professionally staffed and structured academic press at a predominantly Black university."[132]

Perhaps the most critical milestone in the creation of Howard University Press was Billingsley's hiring of Charles Frederick Harris, one of the first black senior executives at several of America's leading publishing houses, as the Press's executive director. Born in segregated Portsmouth, Virginia at the height of the Great Depression, Harris originally aspired to be a journalist and edited his high school's newspaper. After attending what are now Norfolk State and Virginia State Universities and serving briefly in the Army, Harris received on offer to join Doubleday and Company in New York as a research assistant. He rapidly advanced the professional ladder at Doubleday and became a senior editor in 1960. In this position he deployed his influence as a highly visible black publishing executive to give black literature and culture a greater platform. To get more black authors published by Doubleday, he traveled widely and developed relationships across the black literary and artistic scene. Throughout the

---

[131] In 2013, more than 200 titles from Negro Universities Press were acquired by Cornell University's John Henrik Clarke Africana Library. See Daniel Aloi, "Alumni donate books chronicling the black experience." *Cornell Chronicle,* 22 March 2013. Web.
[132] Advertisement for Howard University Press. *Commentary,* July 1, 1974.

early 1960s he went on a nationwide tour of HBCUs to meet with and solicit book proposals from renowned humanities scholars including Benjamin Quarles, James E. Lewis, Nick Aaron Ford, Waters E. Turpin, John Hope Franklin, Rayford Logan, Sterling Brown, Arthur P. Davis, Owen Dodson, William Leo Hansberry, E. Franklin Frazier, Saunders Redding, and Samuel DeWitt Proctor.

Harris possessed a strong sense of strategic vision and a laser-sharp ability for recognizing potential, both of which positioned him as a pathbreaker in the lily-white world of publishing. One of Harris's signature achievements at Doubleday was the publication of Zenith Books, a series of educational titles for children about black diasporic history and culture. Leaving Doubleday in 1965, he worked at John Wiley and Sons' imprint Portal Press before joining Random House in 1967, where he was a key figure in the acquisition of Muhammad Ali's autobiography. A dark-complexioned man with a full head of hair, standing at six feet tall and always sharply dressed, Harris always made an impression. Former employees of Howard University Press use a number of vivid descriptions and euphemisms to describe him: one who carried himself like an "African prince,"[133] a "champion of African American people,"[134] "charismatic,"[135] and "down to earth… an impeccable dresser."[136] His visibility as one of the few black men in the white-dominated publishing arena was enhanced by his charisma, effusive personality, and seamless dexterity in weaving in and out of diverse social circles. He embedded himself within the Harlem Writer's Guild, cultivating friendships with literary giants such as Langston Hughes (who attended a party thrown by Harris to celebrate Harris's hiring at

[133] Michael Nelson. Personal interview. 21 July 2019.
[134] Janell Walden Agyeman. Personal interview. 16 Dec. 2019.
[135] Renee Mayfield. Personal interview. 21 July 2019.
[136] Cynthia Lewis. Personal interview. 16 July 2019.

Doubleday in 1956), Maya Angelou, John Oliver Killens, and Lonne Elder III, as well as other black celebrities such as Jackie Robinson.

By the time Andrew Billingsley contacted Harris about starting a press at Howard, Harris had already been entertaining the idea of starting his own publishing venture. Seeing the success of small independent printers such as Dodd, Mead and Hill and Wang, Harris was convinced that he had accumulated enough credibility and professional experience to start a successful small firm. Although he acquired credit from a printer to start a press, he struggled to get the traction he needed. At the urging of John Hope Franklin, a close friend, Harris traveled to Howard in the spring of 1971 to interview for the HUP executive director position. After receiving an offer, he hired Reginald Lewis, the corporate lawyer who would become one of the wealthiest African American men of the 1980s, to represent him as they worked with Howard to negotiate a contract. Harris formally began work as HUP's director at the beginning of November of that year. One of his first initiatives as director was to conduct a study of best practices in academic publishing that would inform HUP's relationship to the University. Harris looked to academic presses at Princeton, Columbia, Teachers College Press, Yale, Harvard, MIT, and University of Chicago to examine their organizational structures, levels of autonomy, and business practices.

His next order of business was to recruit staff. With the exception of managing editor Iris Eaton, a veteran of the Manhattan literary scene of the 1950s, HUP's earliest staff was comprised largely of young black publishing and marketing professionals in their twenties and thirties from presses where he had worked previously. His earliest hires included Orde Coombs, a young Afro-Vincentian writer and editor known for his direct, unvarnished feature stories on black life for venues such as *New York Magazine*; Fay Acker, an editor and Hampton University graduate hired from the *Saturday Review;* Philip Petrie, a "hard-nosed" New York-based editor from

William Morrow and Company, as senior editor; Paula Giddings, a Random House copyeditor, Howard graduate and former editor of the university's literary magazine *The Promethean,* as associate editor; Roberta J. Palm, a Washington-based journalist, as assistant editor; and Lionel Wilson, manager of business information in Random House's school division, as HUP's first marketing manager. Harris was conscious of making HUP a nurturing and empowering environment for all employees, but particularly for the black women who were involved in all aspects of the Press's operations. Most of the editorial staff was comprised of women, and Harris incorporated professional development geared intentionally towards women of color in his office programming, particularly in recurring brown-bag lunches that he hosted for HUP staff.[137]

Howard University's expansion under James Cheek and the formation of HUP only helped to bolster Howard's national reputation as the "capstone." Headlines and bylines about the forthcoming press underscored its newness, promise and the improbability of its existence: the *Washington Post* declared that "Howard University is about to take an uncertain step into book publishing"[138]; the *Washington Star-News* declared the Press's staff as "Catalysts for Change in the World of Black Writers."[139] Media attention skyrocketed on April 8, 1974, when Cheek, Harris, and Billingsley convened a press conference at the National Press Club in downtown Washington that was attended by an assemblage of onlooking dignitaries, Howard University officials, writers, publishing executives, and local news outlets. Billed as "Howard University Press Day," the press conference served as the formal rollout of HUP to the public. In his remarks, Cheek announced HUP's mission of producing "publications that will be effective

[137] Fay Acker. Personal interview. 11 July 2019.
[138] Hollie I. West, "Howard: New Black Press." *Washington Post,* 4 Nov. 1972.
[139] Jacqueline Trescott, "Catalysts for Change in the World of Black Writers." *Washington Star-News,* 5 May 1974.

in improving the quality of education for millions of people at all levels of society."[140] To rousing applause, Harris presented Cheek with advance copies of the Press's first four books, to be released to the public later that spring.

Three of the four books were works of literary nonfiction, fiction, and criticism: *A Poetic Equation: Conversations Between Nikki Giovanni and Margaret Walker,* edited by Giovanni; *A Song For Mumu,* a novel by Jamaican writer Lindsay Barrett; and *Bid the Vassal Soar: Interpretive Essays on the Life and Poetry of Phillis Wheatley and George Moses Horton* by Merle A. Richmond. The fourth title, *Quality Education for All Americans: An Assessment of Gains of Black Americans with Proposals for Program Development in American Schools and Colleges for the Next Quarter-Century,* was a qualitative study by educational scholar William Brazziel. Part of the mission of the newly minted HUP was to mobilize the printed word as a manifestation of Howard's "new direction," as Cheek called it, and make a lasting impression on black Diasporic thought, literary production and scholarly discourse. "I can feel something moving here," Harris told senior editor Orde Coombs. "We have the administration behind us, and we are not going to grow any ivy on our walls…. We are reaching out to find new authors who have something to say about black life and the black future."[141] As the spring semester of 1974 drew to a close, the future of HUP seemed limitless.

From the outset, HUP focused heavily on the humanities. In his remarks at HUP's inaugural press conference, Cheek announced a total of 24 books for HUP's first year of production that would include "works of fiction, history, literary criticism, literary anthologies,

---

[140] James E. Cheek. "Remarks by Dr. James E. Cheek, President, Howard University, at the Launching of the Howard University Press, National Press Club, Monday, April 8, 1974." Howard University Press, 1974.
[141] Orde Coombs. "The Necessity of Excellence: Howard University." *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning,* Mar. 1973.

education, and social commentary."[142] Harris intentionally curated HUP as an instructive space for "young people to grow [and] do different things."[143] One of the most potent examples of the creative latitude that he extended to his young editors is *A Poetic Equation,* which began as an idea of Paula Giddings' when she attended the Paul Laurence Dunbar Centennial Celebration at the University of Dayton in October 1972. Organized by Herbert Woodward Martin, the poet and Dunbar scholar based at Dayton, the event almost didn't take place. It was meant to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of Dunbar's birth, but at that time Dunbar's frequent deployment of African American Vernacular English had fallen out of favor with many militant young Black Power academics who considered his use of AAVE a throwback to minstrelsy. According to film producer Ron Primeau, Martin was "beyond nervous" and unsure of how the loosely structured event would be paid for, and if any of the invited speakers would accept. In contrast, a number of highly regarded black writers ended up attending the event, including Margaret Walker Alexander, Nikki Giovanni, Etheridge Knight, Sonia Sanchez, Michael S. Harper, John Oliver Killens, Paule Marshall, Alice Walker, J. Saunders Redding, and Giddings herself, crowned in her signature halo-shaped Afro and armed with a notepad and pen.

Archived recordings from the Dunbar Centennial reveal that among the countless gifted and legendary black writers who spoke and performed readings of Dunbar's work during that weekend, Margaret Walker Alexander's readings in particular captivated the audience. She opened her reading of "An Antebellum Sermon" by telling the audience, "I cut my teeth on Dunbar. My mother read Dunbar to me before I could read it for myself."[144] Her reading of one

---

[142] Cheek, "Remarks," ibid.
[143] Susan Wagner. "Howard University Launches Its Own Press," *Publishers Weekly,* 4 Mar. 1974, pp. 48-50.
[144] penULTIMATE, Ltd. "Margaret Walker Alexander, Friday Night. Oct. 21, 1972," Soundcloud. Web.

of Dunbar's longer narrative poems, "The Party," showcases Alexander's unique ability to capture the vigor and personality of Dunbar's poetic voice. These performances struck Giddings personally as well. In the preface to *Poetic Equation,* Giddings writes: "[Alexander] captured the spirit of the work, and I think of the man, as only Margaret can—her eyes twinkling, her lips shaping the contours of his verses, the rise and fall of her voice signaling the poem's special meanings."[145] Nikki Giovanni, then a young poet only a few years removed from her graduation from Fisk University, also performed readings of her own poetry that received rousing applause from the audience.

During an intermission, Giddings and Giovanni discussed the possibility of doing a book about Alexander for Howard University Press. "Why don't *you* do the book with Margaret?" Giddings recalls saying in the preface. "I don't want you to think I was looking for a job," Giovanni replies. "O.K., but what do you say?" Giddings asks. Giovanni responds that she would proceed if Walker approved of the idea. Giddings dined with Walker that evening and explained the idea. Walker expressed her desire to participate, and from there *Poetic Equation* was born.

**Howard University Press in the World**

HUP introduced itself to the world when black scholarly publishing had reached a critical juncture throughout the diaspora, and particularly in post-independence Africa. As HBCUs in the United States sought to institutionalize a sense of blackness that was culturally connected to the political ideals of the Black Power movement, the African higher education sector underwent a similar process of "Africanization" in the 1960s and 1970s that sought to liberate African

[145] Giddings, Paula. Preface. *A Poetic Equation: Conversations Between Nikki Giovanni and Margaret Walker,* by Nikki Giovanni and Margaret Walker. Washington, DC: Howard UP, 1983, pp. vii.

institutions of higher learning from the ideological norms imposed by European colonialism.[146] Under the old system, many African universities functioned as satellites of European institutions such as the University of London and the Sorbonne, with the mission of reproducing citizens of the European "metropole."

Africanization resisted the notion that the purpose of the African university was to train elites who would merely replicate and replace outgoing colonizers; hence a number of reforms were implemented, such as opening access to a larger pool of potential students; broadening curricula to reflect more accurately the social, cultural, and intellectual needs of emerging African nation-states; and bringing on-the-ground educational programming (such as adult education, extension learning, and what is now called public humanities scholarship) to both rural and urban communities.[147] Through this process, many African schools either changed leadership in their quest to become autonomous institutions or were created anew, such as Dar es Salaam University in Tanzania in 1970. As Eni Njoku, the vice chancellor of the University of Nigeria stated in 1967, "it is the role of African universities to provide the new African nations with intellectual independence."[148]

Though the Africanization movement enabled the higher education sector to flourish immediately following independence in several African countries, a number of economic and political factors complicated the efforts of black indigenous publishing entities to gain a foothold

---

[146] The Kenyan novelist and playwright Ngugi wa Thiong'o lays out his case for African culture as the foundation for politically conscious education in his speech "Education for a National Culture," delivered at the Seminar on Education in Harare, Zimbabwe in 1981. See Ngugi wa Thiong'o, "Education for a National Culture." *Barrel of a Pen: Resistance to Repression in Neo-Colonial Kenya,* Africa World Press, 1983.
[147] J.F. Ade Ajayi, et al. *The African Experience with Higher Education.* Accra: Association of African Universities, 1996.
[148] Bert N. Adams. "Africanizing the African University." *Mozambique: Free at Last,* special issue of *Africa Today,* vol. 22, no. 3, Jul-Sept. 1975, pp. 51-59.

in the new postcolonial landscape. One factor was the lingering presence of European publishers and their dominance in the African market.[149] Kenya, for instance, lacked a major black-owned publishing venture at the time of its independence from Great Britain in 1963. The majority of literary and academic manuscripts by Kenyan authors were sent to Britain and published by Longman, Oxford University Press, or Macmillan. In 1964 the Kenyan government tried to offset the dominance of British publishing by organizing the Kenya Institute of Education (KIE), which produced pedagogical materials and syllabi that reflected the educational needs of the new nation and its youth; the syllabi were printed by the also newly-formed Jomo Kenyatta Foundation (JKF), named for the independence leader and first president. The profits made from JKF's sales went toward academic scholarships for children in need.

In addition to these governmental bodies emerged the short-lived East African Publishing House (EAPH), a collective of Kenyan, Tanzanian, and Ugandan academics who formed a printing partnership with the British press Andre Deutsch; the partnership collapsed due to disagreements regarding publishing policies. A number of short-lived African-run presses followed, including Afropress, Foundation Books, Comb Books, Bookwise, Njogu Gitene, and Transafrica (not related to the US-based organization of the same name founded by Randall Robinson in the 1980s).[150] The University of Nairobi Press launched in 1979 but wouldn't become fully operational until 1990.[151] Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, global recessions and

[149] For more on the state of indigenous publishing in post-independence Africa, see Walter Bgoya and Mary Jay, "Publishing in Africa from Independence to the Present Day." *(In)Visibility in African Cultures,* special issue of *Research in African Literatures,* vol. 44, no. 2, 2013, pp.17-34.
[150] Henry Chakava. "Kenyan Publishing: Independence and Dependence." *Publishing and Development in the Third World,* edited by Philip G. Altbach, Hans Zell, 1992, pp. 119-150.
[151] "About UoN Press." *University of Nairobi,* https://uonpress.uonbi.ac.ke/feature/about-uon-press. Accessed 25 Feb. 2020.

economic stagnation under the regime of Daniel arap Moi—in addition to structural adjustment programs implemented by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank—crippled Kenya's higher education sector and publishing industry.[152] Other countries in which indigenous African-owned presses opened following independence included Tanzania, where publisher Walter Bgoya directed the state-owned Tanzania Publishing House from 1972 to 1990; Ethiopia, where Addis Ababa University Press began in 1967; and Nigeria, home of the University of Ife Press (founded in 1970, now named Obafemi Awolowo University Press following the university's name change) and the now-defunct Ibadan University Press. South Africa's academic presses, which emerged in the 1910s and 1920s, have been mostly white-controlled throughout most of their history.

The colonial influence in Caribbean publishing, as well as the economic challenges confronting literary culture in many Caribbean countries in the 1960s and 1970s, also complicated the emergence of non-white presses. Alvona Alleyne and Pam Mordecai note that high illiteracy rates, the predominance of oral dissemination of literature and information, inefficient library and bookstore services, and the limitations of universal educational access accounted for many of the challenges faced by the scholarly book publishing industry in the Caribbean during that period.[153] European-based multinational publishing firms such as Heinemann Caribbean and Oxford University Press maintained a presence that effectively monopolized book production and dissemination. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, a number of black-owned independent presses specializing in black Caribbean and black British literature

---

[152] Emilia Ilieva and Hilary Chakava. "East African Publishing and the Academia." *Coming of Age: Strides in African Publishing—Essays in Honour of Dr. Henry Chakava at 70,* edited by Kiarie Kamau and Kirimi Mitambo, East African Educational Publishers, 2016, pp. 106-128.
[153] Alvona Alleyne and Pam Mordecai. "Educational Publishing and Book Production in the English-Speaking Caribbean." *Library Trends,* vol. 26, no. 4, 1978, pp. 575-591.

launched; one of the most prominent was Bogle-L'Ouverture, founded by Guyanese-born publishers Eric and Jessica Huntley in London in 1969. Founded in response to the banning of Guyanese historian Walter Rodney from Jamaica the year before, Bogle-L'Ouverture is best known as the publisher of the first edition of Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* in 1972, which Howard University Press brought to the United States three years later. Two of the Caribbean's most well-known indigenous presses—Ian Randle Publishers and the University of West Indies Press, both based in Jamaica—did not emerge until 1991 and 1992, respectively.[154]

The limitations of the publishing industries in Africa and the Caribbean made HUP a unique addition to the global black publishing scene. The Howard name was already a recognized and highly respected brand within the black diasporic intellectual sphere: political figures such as Nigeria's Nnamdi Azikiwe earned bachelor's degrees at Howard, and faculty members such as William Leo Hansberry and Ralph Bunche had held distinguished careers in African history and international relations. Howard Law School alum Thurgood Marshall had been instrumental in helping several newly liberated African nations draft their first constitutions. Howard's global standing, as well as the breadth of Charles Harris's professional contacts and his insistence on editorial and aesthetic excellence in all of the press's outputs, attracted numerous manuscripts from authors throughout the diaspora. Among HUP's first novels were the works of two prominent Caribbean writers: *Song for Mumu,* Jamaican novelist Lindsay Barrett's story of a young girl on a fictional Caribbean island who must navigate a series of hardships after leaving the countryside for city life, and *Saw the House in Half,* a diplomatic adventure set in Nigeria by Barbadian envoy and novelist Oliver Jackman. Barrett and Jackman

[154] To this day, however, still a large number of presses that publish black Caribbean literature remain located in the United Kingdom.

were among a number of young Caribbean authors in the 1960s and 1970s, including Paule Marshall, whose works dealt with negotiating identity through a return to African culture, locales and themes.[155] By bringing these texts to North America, HUP helped to form a literary triangle connecting the Americas, Africa and the Caribbean.

HUP also played a critical role in introducing many African and Caribbean titles to American audiences by publishing the first U.S. editions of texts ranging from Chinweizu Ibekwe's *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* to Walter Rodney's legendary *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa,* which was HUP's best-selling title for more than two decades. One of HUP's earliest landmark events was the publication of the North American edition of Jamaican prime minister Michael Manley's memoir *The Politics of Change: A Jamaican Testament,* originally published by Andre Deutsch. After a series of conversations with Manley's representatives, Charles Harris flew to Jamaica to meet with Manley; he had never met with a head of state before and was charmed by the prime minister's warmth and hospitality. To celebrate the book's publication in 1975, HUP hosted a reception for Manley at the Ford Foundation in New York City. In attendance were a number of prominent diplomats, Jamaican dignitaries and expatriates, Congressman Charles Rangel, and Manhattan borough president Percy Sutton.

**Howard University Press and the Travails of the Later Years**

Throughout the 1980s HUP continued to release high-quality and critically acclaimed titles, including an artful 1983 reprint of Langston Hughes's *The Sweet Flypaper of Life,*

[155] Daryl Cumber Dance, editor. *Fifty Caribbean Writers: A Bio-bibliographical Critical Sourcebook.* Greenwood P, 1986.

featuring photographs by Roy DeCarava. In 1985 HUP inaugurated its Library of Contemporary Literature, a series of formerly out-of-print works by African American and black diasporic writers reissued for a new generation of readers. Texts in this series included John Oliver Killens' *And Then We Heard the Thunder,* William Melvin Kelley's *Dancers on the Shore,* Kristin Hunter's *God Bless the Child,* Paule Marshall's *Soul Clap Hands and Sing*, Junius Edwards' *If We Must Die,* Barry Beckham's *Runner Mack*, David Parks' *GI Diary*, and Chester Himes' *A Case of Rape.*

The press also worked to address the lack of diversity in the publishing industry through the annual HUP Book Publishing Institute, created in 1980 when Time, parent company of *Time* Magazine and Time-Life Books, awarded HUP a $61,000 grant to train young aspiring publishers of color. The Book Publishing Institute hosted yearly five-week intensive summer courses for young professionals, predominantly people of color, to learn the ropes of copyediting, marketing, book design, and other aspects of the book production process; the courses also featured guest lectures from authors and top publishing professionals, field trips to printing presses and book manufacturing plants, and trips to the Library of Congress. At the end of each "semester," students devised mock book proposals and presented their ideas to a panel of judges. Many graduates of the Institute later went on to successful careers in editing, marketing, and other areas of publishing and media production.[156]

[156] "Howard University Press Book Publishing Institute." Howard University Press, 1991.

**Figure 3.** The Howard University Press catalogue, 1982. Charles Harris took pride in HUP's high standards in book design and editorial quality, which he felt were necessary in commanding respect from other universities, booksellers and media outlets. Photo courtesy of Howard University's Moorland-Spingarn Research Center's Digital Howard Collection.

Despite these successes, HUP increasingly less attention from Howard's administration as the University continued to pursue a "new direction." One disruption for HUP was the constant relocation of its main offices. In its earliest days, HUP operated out of Howard Hall, a three-story, 16-room Victorian mansion on the Howard campus overlooking Georgia Avenue, which served as the presidential residence of General Otis Oliver Howard from 1869 to 1874. When the University acquired the Dunbarton College of the Holy Cross, a picturesque Catholic women's college located five miles from Howard, the HUP headquarters was moved to Dunbarton's campus. However, when the University decided to expand the law school and move

it to the Dunbarton property, HUP was moved yet again to a smaller and more cramped location on Van Ness Street, closer to main campus but less amenable than Dunbarton.[157]

HUP also became a casualty of the University pivoting its attention to expanding Howard's reach in other forms of mass media. In 1980, Howard launched its public television station, WHMM-TV (later WHUT), which became the nation's first public television station operated by an HBCU. A few years prior, *Washington Post* owner Katherine Graham had gifted the newspaper's failing radio station to Howard, which successfully relaunched it as WHUR-FM, Washington's hub for black talk radio and contemporary rhythm and blues. As James Cheek sought to make Howard into a juggernaut of black media, the relationship between the administration and HUP became increasingly distant. By the early 1980s, Andrew Billingsley was already gone—he had resigned his position as provost and vice-president of academic affairs in 1975 to accept the presidency at Morgan State University in Baltimore; without Billingsley, HUP was short one influential ally in the administration. As Howard continued to expand, many students and faculty complained that the University had swelled into a top-heavy bureaucracy.[158] HUP increasingly had to rely less on institutional funding and more on revenue generated from sales of marquee titles such as *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* and *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*. To complicate matters, the University stipulated that HUP's profits had to go back into the University's general fund; the only exception was grants which HUP received from outside entities such as the Ford Foundation, made possible largely through the work of program officer and future Tuskegee University president Benjamin Payton.[159]

---

[157] Fay Acker. Personal interview. 11 July 2019.
[158] Steven A. Holmes. "Struggling Through Crises at Howard University." *New York Times,* 14 Dec. 1994.
[159] Charles F. Harris. Interviewed by Shawn Wilson. 28 July 2005.

In 1986, HUP lost book contracts with two influential prospective authors. Arthur Ashe, the tennis legend and civil rights advocate, signed a contract with Harris and HUP in 1983 for a manuscript tentatively titled *A History of the Black Athlete in America,* which Ashe envisioned to be a broad-ranging historical survey of black involvement in U.S. sports. The idea came to Ashe while teaching a course titled "The Black Athlete in Contemporary Society" at Miami's Florida Memorial College in 1981. He was struck by how little his students, as well as other black young people, knew of black sports history. After shopping the proposal around with little success, Ashe called Harris and pitched the book over the phone. Harris immediately flew to New York City the next day to meet with Ashe and his literary agent, and assured Ashe that HUP could get him a contract. Back in Washington, however, Howard officials were skeptical about whether a university press should "publish sports books."[160] As Ashe and Harris continued negotiating, a contract was finally created and signed, and HUP held a joint press conference with Ashe at Washington's prestigious Palm Restaurant in June 1983.

Ultimately, HUP did not publish Ashe's book. In December 1985 Harris, tired of what he perceived as the University's marginalization of HUP and still desiring to start his own press, left Howard and founded Amistad Books. Harris reached out to Ashe and promised him a $45,000 advance and ten shares of stock in the new company.[161] Ashe's book, retitled *A Hard Road to Glory: A History of the African-American Athlete,* was published by Amistad in multiple volumes in 1993, the year of Ashe's death. HUP was forced to dissolve another contract in 1986 when it found itself at the center of a disagreement between Margaret Walker Alexander, who was working on an unauthorized biography of the writer Richard Wright for HUP, and Wright's

[160] Harris, ibid.
[161] David K. Wiggins, "Symbols of Possibility: Arthur Ashe, Black Athletes, and the Writing of *A Hard Road to Glory.*" *Journal of African American History,* vol. 99, no. 4, 2014, pp. 379-402.

widow, Ellen Wright, who accused Alexander of "copyright infringements."[162] Alexander had sought permission from Ellen Wright to quote excerpts from Richard Wright's unpublished papers in the biograph; Ellen refused. HUP broke Alexander's contract and discontinued production of the book. Alexander eventually got the book, *Richard Wright: Daemonic Genius,* published by Warner Books in 1989.[163]

Following Harris's exit from HUP, O. Rudolph Aggrey, a diplomat who had served as ambassador to Senegal, Gambia, and Romania, was named interim executive director. Although HUP continued to release new titles and advertise in esteemed scholarly publications such as *The Black Scholar, Harvard Educational Review, Callaloo, Black Issues in Higher Education, PMLA,* and the *Black American Literature Forum,* its overall output had dropped precipitously: in 1984, it had released 24 titles; by the 1988-1989 academic year, HUP was releasing an average of five titles annually. To complicate matters, HUP lost its grip on the black-studies market in the 1980s as PWI presses increasingly saw black studies as an entry point to a previously untapped (by white universities) consumer base.[164] The presses of these institutions were infinitely better-resourced than any HBCU press, and could afford to widely distribute and advertise texts by emerging black public intellectuals such as Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey,* published in 1988 by Oxford University Press. Howard's finances also considerably tightened throughout the 1980s and 1990s. As a percentage of total revenues,

---

[162] Ethel Payne. "Behind the Scenes: Author Weighs Suit, Wright Book Delayed by Legal Questions." *Afro-American.* 5 Apr. 1986.
[163] Warner Books' publication of *Daemonic Genius* spurred Ellen Wright to sue the company, resulting in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit's decision in the case *Wright v. Warner Books, Inc.*
[164] Manning Marable calls this period the "second wave of growth" in black studies. See Manning Marable, "Beyond Brown: The Revolution in Black Studies." *Brown, Black, and Beyond: African American Studies in the 21st Century,* special issue of *The Black Scholar,* vol. 35, no. 2, pp. 11-21.

Howard's annual federal appropriations decreased from 56 percent in 1979 to 43 percent a decade later, even as the overall amount of federal appropriations increased.[165]

The mid-1990s saw a number of painful cuts to HUP's operations: the 1993-1994 HUP annual report stated that the Board of Trustees' review of HUP "concluded with a decision to restructure [the Press] through staff reduction, reorganization, and change in leadership." The Board also recommended that the Press raise its own funds by organizing an "annual fundraiser… [such as a] Poets and Writers Gala that could entail celebrity readings" from writers such as Rita Dove and Toni Morrison.[166] In November 1994, the University laid off nearly 400 employees, including several HUP staff members, in order to close a $6.9 million budget deficit. Though HUP continued to publish throughout the 1990s and 2000s, resources remained limited.

On May 25, 2011, the Office of the Provost sent the Howard University community the following email:

> For nearly 40 years, the Howard University Press (HUP) has published more than 175 scholarly books addressing the contributions, conditions and concerns of African Americans, other people of African descent and people of color around the world including the perennial bestseller, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* by Walter Rodney. Over the past several years, the Office of the Provost has consistently reviewed the feasibility of continuing the Howard University Press operation in view of the University's current renewal initiatives. The capacities to maintain and sustain a University press and publishing houses around the world have become increasingly challenging. Our recent press operations have consisted almost entirely of managing and distributing books in the inventory. A recent decision was made to close the Howard University Press; however, we are committed to maintaining its legacy, rich tradition and significant works. We are close to finalizing an agreement with a Baltimore-based firm of record to assume control of the backlist and make most HUP titles available. We will share additional details when they are solidified.[167]

---

[165] "Howard University Self-Study Report, 1999." Howard University. Accessed 29 Feb. 2020, http://www.howard.edu/msche/selfstudy/default.htm.
[166] 1993-1994 Annual Report of Howard University Press to the President of Howard University. Washington: Howard University Press, 1994.
[167] Tewodros Abebe. "Office of the Provost: Future of Howard University Press." Received by Howard University Community, 25 May 2011.

The "Baltimore-based firm" was Black Classic Press, an independent press founded in 1978 by W. Paul Coates, the influential publisher and community organizer in Baltimore, as well as father of Ta-Nehisi Coates.[168] According to Coates, he and Howard entered talks regarding Black Classic Press's acquisition of HUP's titles and other assets, but ultimately did not finalize any agreements.[169]

**Conclusion: HUP, Authorship, and the Specter of Black Erasure in Washington, DC**

To this day, the tension between black authorship and black erasure is still deeply ingrained in life at Howard University and its surrounding community. A walk along Seventh Street, a major thoroughfare that cuts through the heart of the historically black Washington neighborhood of Shaw in which Howard is located, underscores the impact of this tension. Outside the barbershops, beauty salons, and banks that line Seventh, a tight-knit social circle of older African Americans congregates regularly to catch up on the latest community news, signify, testify, make bets, smoke, sip spirits, or just observe the surroundings. Some of the assembled elders sit in lawn chairs that they have personally brought for this daily gathering. One might see a local woman wearing a T-shirt declaring in bold print: "I'M NOT A GENTRIFIER—I'VE BEEN HERE." Howard students and young black professionals, either walking to the nearby subway station or heading in the opposite direction towards campus, briskly weave through this council of elders; neither group's presence fazes the other.

---

[168] Black Classic Press has reprinted works from a number of Black Power and Afrocentric scholars, including Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal's 1968 literary anthology *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing,* as well as works of Yosef Ben-Jochannan, Edward Wilmot Blyden, Dorothy Porter Wesley, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Bobby Seale. For more on Coates and Black Classic Press, see Joshua Clark Davis, "Black Bookstores and the Black Power Movement: An Interview with Paul Coates." *Black Perspectives,* 5 Jun. 2018. Web.
[169] W. Paul Coates. Personal interview. July 2019.

Just before Seventh Street bisects Florida Avenue and changes into Georgia Avenue, one will pass by a MetroPCS retail store with an oversized speaker outside the front door blasting go-go, reggae, and blues at ear-splitting decibels. Further up Georgia Avenue, a group of about ten to fifteen black men (known as the "Black Israelites") ranging from their twenties to their forties, dressed in bright gold and royal purple robes, will stand at a corner holding books of scripture that appear to be Bibles; their lead spokesman yells into a booming speakerphone, imploring passersby to join them on their pursuit of holiness and righteousness. A few blocks further north, Georgia Avenue runs past the Howard Theatre, a historic performing arts center; past the Howard University Hospital, a harbor of care for the dispossessed in one of DC's poorest neighborhoods; and on past the Howard Schools of Dentistry and Nursing, a family-owned Jamaican café, and a gentrifying high school named after Benjamin Banneker. By this point Georgia Avenue has become progressively steeper, turning into the legendary incline known as "the Hilltop" upon which the Howard campus sits.

The very existence of Howard and the Shaw community is an act of resistance, rendering blackness visible in its many iterations. Ta-Nehisi Coates makes these iterations of blackness come alive in his book *Between the World and Me,* in which he describes how Howard enabled to see that "the world was more than a photonegative of that of the people who believe they are white."[170] Simultaneously, Howard signifies the constant tug-of-war between black people who seek to assert their presence in the world, and white society that seeks to extinguish that presence. Often, Howard serves as a conscious and subconscious placeholder for black America's anxieties regarding erasure. This anxiety attracted national media attention in April 2019, when the seemingly innocuous act of dog-walking came to embody tensions between

---

[170] Ta-Nehisi Coates. *Between the World and Me.* Spiegel and Grau, 2015.

black Howard students and mostly white neighbors who viewed Howard's Yard as merely a public space for white amusement. Howard University president Wayne A.I. Frederick had to ban local residents from walking their dogs on the Yard after a number of news stories surfaced of residents' dogs relieving themselves on sacred campus spaces such as trees and plots of campus land belonging to fraternities and sororities. Students were also increasingly annoyed by white joggers yelling "On your left!" whenever they approached, evoking unpleasant generational memories of black people being expected to clear sidewalks for white passersby during Jim Crow.[171] In response to students' objections, a local white resident, Sean Grubbs-Robishaw, told NBC Washington in an interview that Howard is "part of DC so they have to work within DC If they don't want to be within DC then they can move the campus…. It's our community, and that's how it should be."[172] Grubbs-Robishaw's use of words such as "DC," "they," "our," and "how it should be" were unquestionably loaded: "DC" and "our" could easily be decoded to mean white people, while "they" could be decoded as black people and blackness. Blackness dissolving itself into the wishes of whiteness was "how it should be," according to the logic of his commentary.

Ta-Nehisi Coates's self-discovery at Howard and the pain of being told to "move your campus" are two sides of a dual dilemma that have plagued black people, particularly in the United States, for generations: how to acquire authorial agency and how to maintain it once one has acquired it. Before arriving at Howard, Coates's image of black people was merely a "photonegative" of whiteness, but after being challenged by his black professors to grapple with

---

[171] Tara Bahrampour. "Students say dog walkers on Howard campus are desecrating hallowed ground." *Washington Post,* 19 Apr. 2019. Web.
[172] Vinciane Ngomsi. "Howard Students Remind a Gentrifier He's a Guest in Their Home After Controversy Over Dog Walking on Campus." *Blavity,* 19 Apr. 2019. Web.

the works of novelists such as Toni Morrison and historians such as Chancellor Williams, a new world opens before Coates, one in which he and people who look like him are focalized. Conversely, the dog walkers represent the prospect of what can happen when black people lose their authorial agency and become nothing more than, or perhaps less than, a photonegative of whiteness.

Howard University Press offered a window into the possibilities of black authorship, inspiring another doctoral-level HBCU, Clark Atlanta University, to start its own academic press in 1999. Although HUP struggled to maintain longevity against the market forces of an inequitable scholarly publishing industry, the ideals of HUP—giving voice to black intellectual discourse and cultural production on a global scale—live on as HBCUs chart new paths using emerging publishing technology. Crystal deGregory, a Fisk-educated historian of HBCU culture and founder of the online think tank HBCUstory, combines various forms of multimedia (including news, social media, and images) with historical scholarship to engage the public in the importance of the HBCU mission. Other organizations such as the HBCU Library Alliance are also mobilizing the Internet to disseminate HBCU stories through the digitization of archives, manuscripts, photographs, and other forms of media related to black education. As social media, the Internet, and the field of digital humanities increasingly offer innovative new platforms for publishing content, HBCUs are in a unique position to fulfill James Cheek's vision of "creating knowledge to save the republic."

# CHAPTER 3

# AN "INTANGIBLE SOMETHING": MOREHOUSE COLLEGE AND THE MAKING OF MEN

> Our manhood, and that of our fathers, was denied on all levels by white society, a fact that insidiously expressed the way black men were addressed. No matter what his age, whether he was in his burgeoning twenties, or full of years, the black man was never referred to as "mister," nor even by his surname. No. To the end of his days, he had to absorb the indignity of being called "boy," or "nigger," or "uncle." No wonder then that every time [Morehouse President John] Hope addressed us as "young gentlemen," the seeds of self-worth and confidence, long dormant, began to germinate and sprout. The attitudes we developed toward ourselves, as a result of this influence, set Morehouse men apart. It was not unusual, for example, to be identified as a Morehouse man by complete strangers, because of this subtle but dramatic sense of self.
> —Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman*

## Introduction: What Does Morehouse Mean to America?

On a Thursday afternoon in November 2019, Lawrence Edward Carter Sr., professor of religion and dean of the Martin Luther King Jr. International Chapel at Atlanta's Morehouse College, was deeply concerned. During that day's Crown Forum event (a campus lecture series which students are required to attend), the young men of Morehouse seemed more restless and disengaged than usual. The program was dedicated to Howard Thurman, the late Baptist preacher and Morehouse alum, and the college officially renamed its honors program in his memory. Watching from his seat on the dais, the 78-year-old Carter quietly noted the students' preoccupation with their laptops, phones, and whispered conversations. At the end of the program, Carter walked to the podium and sternly told the students in the audience, "The only ones who have the power to destroy Morehouse are the men of Morehouse." He then instructed students to exit the sanctuary, or the "great nave," as he calls it, through the front doors; however, several disregarded his directive and darted through the doors on the left and right-

hand sides. “I sometimes wonder if Morehouse is losing its way,” Carter later remarked in a meeting with his chapel assistants, a close-knit cadre of freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors whom he mentors for service in the ministry, academia, and other arenas of intellectual life. Throughout the room, every inch of the walls was covered in framed portraits of famous historical personages, ranging from famed alumni such as Thurman and Martin Luther King Jr., to non-Morehouse figures such as University of Chicago founder William Rainey Harper and the Japanese Buddhist philosopher Daisaku Ikeda. “Look at these pictures,” Carter told the students in attendance. “These images are meant to influence your behavior when you leave this institution…. But what if none of this was here? What would happen if America were to lose Morehouse?”

Carter’s concerns for his students might seem typical, perhaps even over-reactionary upon first glance: the initial lack of appreciation for higher education’s ability to shape the individual and society is a standard feature of the undergraduate experience, regardless of the institution. But to truly understand Carter’s question, “What would happen if America were to lose Morehouse,” requires familiarity with Morehouse and its place in America’s past, present, and future. As the nation’s only historically black liberal arts college for men, Morehouse College occupies a unique position. Alongside Spelman, Howard, Fisk, Hampton, Tuskegee, and Clark Atlanta, Morehouse consistently ranks among the nation’s most prestigious HBCUs. Since its founding in 1867, Morehouse has been a major participant in the discourse of what it means to be a black man in American public culture and civic life. At the core of what is called Morehouse’s “mystique,” or its enduring appeal, is cultural production, which has historically been Morehouse’s main mechanism for shaping these discourses. Literature, oratory, visual imagery, commemorative space, and other modes of generational memory are central to cultural

production at Morehouse, and for decades have shaped the college's institutional culture and its impact outside of its campus borders. Though Atlanta's other HBCUs indisputably have storied histories of cultural production as well,[173] this chapter is mainly interested in the distinct ways in which Morehouse deploys cultural production to not only prepare young black men for leadership in the world, but also to sustain the college's own legendary sense of institutional mystique.

I argue that Morehouse's appeal within the black imaginary has been made possible through the curation of what I call the "campus canon," or an amalgamation of literary texts, cultural figures, ideological stances, and historical associations through which colleges and universities—but particularly HBCUs—define their identities and yield a particular kind of student. This form of institutional identity formation enables the HBCU to set itself apart and articulate a distinct organizational ethos. The campus canon is most visible at private HBCUs such as Tuskegee University in Alabama, whose campus canon is firmly anchored in the work of Booker T. Washington; and Bethune-Cookman University in Florida, whose central authorial figure is its founder Mary McLeod Bethune. Morehouse's campus canon has the advantage of having produced one of America's most iconic and easily recognized black public figures of the twentieth century, Martin Luther King Jr. The campus canon—or at the very least, the aura surrounding it—has enhanced the College's appeal to prospective black male students for

[173] Because the AUC developed in order to meet the needs of Atlanta's rapidly growing black middle and upper classes, its member institutions played a leading role in disseminating works of culture that defined not only black life in Atlanta but the national black experience. For example, James Weldon Johnson, a graduate of Atlanta University (now Clark Atlanta) penned the lyrics to "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," commonly referred to as the Black National Anthem, for the anniversary of President Abraham Lincoln's birth in 1900; Atlanta University issued special-edition sheet music that same year. W.E.B. Du Bois, an AU faculty member, wrote the manuscript for *The Souls of Black Folk* in his office in Fountain Hall, which was later ceded by AU to Morris Brown College.

generations. Benjamin E. Mays fostered this canon as president of Morehouse from 1940 to 1967; in more recent decades, Lawrence Carter has been instrumental in breathing new life into this canon for contemporary Morehouse students in his work as dean of the King Chapel. He also holds the title of "college curator" and has mobilized cultural production as a way of clarifying and reaffirming the mission and purpose of Morehouse after Mays and King. Since his appointment as chapel dean and college curator in 1979, Carter has created institutional traditions and aesthetic spaces within Morehouse that reframe the necessity and intrinsic value of HBCUs in an age of innumerable educational options for black students.

Following this introduction, my first section will provide a brief historical overview of the growth of Atlanta's black professional community, which necessitated the creation of the city's HBCUs; I also discuss the creation and existence of Morehouse in relation to the social and economic challenges facing its location in southwest Atlanta. Afterwards I close-read markers of Morehouse's institutional identity, particularly the "Morehouse Man" mystique and my theorization of the notion of a "campus canon" of texts, cultural figures, and ideologies that are central to the identity and institutional character of the college. My next section explores the career of Lawrence Carter, and examines how his cultural production has shaped the institutional character of Morehouse in the post-Civil Rights era. I conclude by addressing some of the controversies that have emerged in recent years regarding the campus canon, and I pose some critical questions about the future of the canon and its relationship to the Morehouse identity.

## The "Candle" on the "Red Clay Hill": Morehouse, the Atlanta University Center, and the West End Community

The official seal of Atlanta, Georgia contains the image of a phoenix rising from the flames of a fire, accompanied by the Latin word *Resurgens,* meaning "rising again." The city's rebirth following its destruction by fire at the hands of Union Army General William Tecumseh Sherman transformed Atlanta from a sleepy railroad juncture linking Chattanooga to Savannah into a thriving Southern hub for commerce and culture. The city's comeback also offered African Americans new possibilities to redefine black life. Atlanta, like the country at large, was a space of polarizing contradictions: in one respect, the city stood out as an anomaly among Southern cities. It was the Harlem of the South, a vibrant hub of black social networks, religious and educational institutions, commerce and economic progress. Just after the Civil War, the oil baron John D. Rockefeller decided to demonstrate his interest in the growing black-college sector by purchasing tracts of land in Atlanta's west side; from this developed Atlanta's historically black colleges, known collectively as the Atlanta University Center (AUC). An elite class of educated blacks started to coalesce around this educational hub.[174] The AUC faculty included some of the country's most prominent black intellectuals, such as Adrienne Herndon, E. Franklin Frazier, and most notably W.E.B. Du Bois, who left his untenured lectureship at the University of Pennsylvania in 1897 to become a professor of economics and history at Atlanta University (AU), then the only graduate institution for black students. AU defied the Southern color line through its racially integrated faculty and student body; this angered the Georgia legislature so much that the state often withheld badly needed funding from the school.

---

[174] Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63.* Simon and Schuster, 1988.

Despite the economically and culturally vibrant inner world that black people insulated themselves within, the reality of lynchings, riots, and other forms of racial violence persisted. Up until the reemergence of white supremacist rule across the South in the 1880s and 1890s, African Americans had enjoyed considerable participation in the city's political process; in 1890, however, an attempt at an all-black ticket in the city's municipal elections failed spectacularly.[175] Blacks comprised a disproportionate number of citizens who were targeted by police. As a way of justifying racist policing practices, Chief of Police John W. Ball attributed the prevalence of petty crime in the city to the "large negro population."[176] Local media played a leading role in constructing narratives of black deviance that struck a raw nerve in white readers; specific culprits included the city's newspapers of record, the *Constitution* and the *Journal,* which published unfounded allegations of black men sexually assaulting white women in the city.[177] These allegations sparked the infamous Atlanta race riot of 1906, which killed at least 25 African Americans and two whites, injured at least one hundred Atlanta citizens, and displaced many more black families.

In 1929, three HBCU presidents—John Hope of Morehouse College, Florence Read of Spelman College, and Myron Adams of AU—signed an agreement of affiliation between the three institutions, which created the Atlanta University System, the precursor to today's AUC. It was the largest cost- and services-sharing agreement in higher education at the time. According to the consortium's terms of institutional complementarity, Morehouse and Spelman agreed to

---

[175] Eugene J. Watts, "Black Political Progress in Atlanta: 1868-1895." *Journal of Negro History,* vol. 59, no. 3, 1974, pp. 268-286.
[176] Eugene J. Watts, "The Police in Atlanta, 1890-1905." *Journal of Southern History* vol. 39, no. 2, 1973, pp. 165-182.
[177] Allison Dorsey, *To Build Our Lives Together: Community Formation in Black Atlanta, 1875-1906.* U of Georgia P, 2004.

offer single-gender undergraduate education for men and women respectively, while AU agreed to offer exclusively graduate degrees. Vida L. Avery writes that the new system was so revolutionary at the time that metropolitan Atlanta's predominantly white institutions—the Georgia Institute of Technology, Emory University, the University of Georgia, and Agnes Scott College—attempted to form their own white version of the AUC, but to no avail.[178] The establishment of the AUC was a landmark event in the development of Atlanta's burgeoning black professional community. The AUC's birth also cemented Atlanta as a key site of African American cultural and higher educational life, adding the city to the ranks of Washington, DC and Nashville. Clark College and Morris Brown College, two church-affiliated liberal arts HBCUs, joined the AUC later, followed by the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) and the Morehouse School of Medicine. In 1988, due to the rise in black enrollment in graduate programs at predominantly white universities, as well as Atlanta University's plummeting enrollment number and related financial challenges, AU consolidated with Clark College to become Clark Atlanta University.

To this day, the AUC remains one of the most unique university systems within American higher education. Comprised of a diverse array of historically black institutions—liberal arts colleges (Morehouse, Spelman, and Morris Brown Colleges), a doctoral university (Clark Atlanta University), a medical school (Morehouse School of Medicine), and a theological seminary (the ITC)—the AUC functions almost as a city of campuses within a city. Nestled in a gritty section of Atlanta's predominantly black southwest quadrant, the AUC can appear to be a vast and complex maze of campuses to the unfamiliar eye. At times it is difficult to tell where

---

[178] Vida L. Avery, *Philanthropy in Black Higher Education: A Fateful Hour Creating the Atlanta University System.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

one campus ends and another begins (such is the case particularly with the Morehouse and Clark Atlanta boundaries) because of the schools' deep interrelatedness and shared history of commingled expansion. Though each individual institution is independent, they collectively comprise a consortium that allows students to cross-register for courses at any AUC member institution in the event that the student's own institution doesn't offer what the student needs. The member institutions also share a library, the AUC Robert W. Woodruff Library,[179] and co-sponsor educational programming to foster a robust shared cultural and intellectual atmosphere.

The AUC is situated in Atlanta's southwest quadrant, a predominantly black section that reveals two parallel black Atlantas. Much of the southwest's sprawling suburban neighborhoods are home to some of the country's wealthiest African Americans, prosperous black megachurches, and even Tyler Perry Studios, owned by the prominent screenwriter, producer and actor. This concentration of black wealth is a fairly recent phenomenon, spurred by white flight from Atlanta's city limits during the Civil Rights era and the simultaneous burgeoning of the black middle class. The closer one gets to the city center, however, the southwest's economic challenges begin to crystallize. Like many HBCUs, the AUC is located in a neighborhood, the West End, that has undergone considerable decay, crime, and economic decline over several decades due to systemic discrimination and neglect. West End is so close to Atlanta's downtown that the high-powered and prosperous city skyline can be seen towering over the rooftops of barbershops, salons, churches, and campus buildings.

Just as Atlanta rose from the ashes of war, Morehouse College and its earliest students rose from the crucibles of slavery and oppression to embark upon an experiment in the education

---

[179] Robert W. Woodruff was the Coca-Cola magnate and philanthropist whose name adorns numerous buildings and institutions throughout Atlanta.

of black men. Established initially as Augusta Baptist Seminary in 1867 in the basement of Springfield Baptist Church in Augusta, Georgia, the school relocated to Atlanta in 1879. The name of the college changed to Morehouse in 1913 in honor of Henry Lyman Morehouse, a white Baptist minister who convinced his friend John Rockefeller to donate substantially to the college. For generations Morehouse's institutional identity has been defined by what is known as the "Morehouse mystique," or as Benjamin E. Mays called it, an "intangible something." Mays, the Baptist minister, educator and civil rights leader who served as Morehouse's president from 1940 to 1967, became deeply immersed in the college's institutional ethos when he began lecturing at Morehouse in 1921. At the time, he was a doctoral student in religion at the University of Chicago, and had been personally recruited to teach at Morehouse by the college's first black president, John Hope, while Hope was in Chicago on a fundraising trip. Upon arriving in Atlanta, Mays was jarred by the city's rigidly enforced racial caste system, but came to recognize and appreciate the "intangible" quality of the Morehouse culture so much that he decided to return to the school when offered the Morehouse presidency later in 1940. In his autobiography *Born to Rebel* he writes:

> I considered it an honor to be president of a college that had done "so much with so little and so few." I found a special, intangible something at Morehouse in 1921 which sent men out into life with a sense of mission, believing that they could accomplish whatever they set out to do. This priceless quality was still alive when I returned in 1940, and for twenty-seven years I built on what I found, instilling in Morehouse students the idea that despite crippling circumscriptions the sky was their limit. There is still this intangible something at Morehouse College. If it is ever lost, Morehouse will become "just another college."[180]

Through its curriculum, Morehouse walked a fine tightrope by advocating a hybrid of radical and conservative philosophies of black liberation: young Morehouse men were taught, in Mays's

[180] Benjamin E. Mays, *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography.* U of Georgia P, 1971.

words, “that a man does not have to accept the view that because he is a Negro certain things were not meant for him. He can be free in a highly segregated society,”[181] while at the same time, the college drilled into students the importance of high performance and black excellence in a white society that believed in black inferiority and mediocrity by default. This emphasis on performance and excellence was cultivated in response to the college’s surrounding social and political climate: in *Born to Rebel*, Mays describes in detail the oppressive strictures and humiliations intended to circumscribe black people in Atlanta when he first arrived in 1921. Before the city developed its popular reputation as “the city too busy to hate,” the laws and customs of the city sought to silo African Americans in every walk of life: shopping, religious worship, leisure and entertainment, education, employment, and a myriad of other arenas. Thus, it became Morehouse’s imperative to drill into its students that there were no bounds on their determination, aspirations, and achievements. On the sliding scale of HBCU ideology, Morehouse occupied the midway point between the social conservatism of Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute and the radical militancy of Fisk that shaped Du Bois.

As a Chicago-educated, socially progressive Baptist clergyman, Mays indisputably left a “social gospel” imprint on the college that is still visible today. Social gospel theology, of which Mays and Martin Luther King Jr. were major proponents, focuses on, in King’s words, “the whole man, not only his soul but his body, not only his spiritual well-being, but his material well-being.”[182] Social gospel thought advocates the dismantling of political, social, and economic injustices through bold progressive action as necessary in moving societies and

[181] Kipton E. Jensen, *Howard Thurman: Philosophy, Civil Rights, and the Search for Common Ground.* U of South Carolina P, 2019.
[182] Martin Luther King Jr. “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence.” *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr., Volume V: Threshold of a New Decade, January 1959-December 1960.* Edited by Clayborne Carson et al. U of California P, 1992, pp. 419-425.

individuals closer to righteousness. Mays recalled with amusement in his autobiography a black Baptist newspaper's response to his appointment to the Morehouse presidency: the paper called Mays "a notorious modernist. He believes in everything in general and nothing in particular."[183] However, it was Mays's eye for the modern—and particularly modern approaches to black education—that enabled him to cultivate a distinct and eclectic institutional personality for Morehouse. His doctoral training gave him a keen sense of how black folks married creative expression with conceptions of justice, equality, and freedom. This keen sense is most visible in his 1938 book *The Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature,* which undertakes an expansive analysis of sermons, gospel hymns, poetry, slave narratives, Sunday School plays, and other literary and archival texts produced from 1760 to the late 1930s. Through these close readings, Mays uncovers a "black social Christianity," or an interpretation of evangelical Christianity within black cultural production that speaks to the oppressed and marginalized. Mays brought with him the idea of a social gospel tailored specifically to African Americans as he assumed the office of the Morehouse presidency.

**The "Morehouse Man"**

The "Morehouse Man" identity is the unique brand that Morehouse imprints upon its students and alumni. The Morehouse Man motif has been key in unifying students and alumni around a shared institutional identity. The camaraderie among Morehouse Men, both students and alumni, brings to mind Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, in which he describes the "imagined community" as a collective of citizens tied together by "the image of their

---

[183] Leonard Ray Teel, "Benjamin Mays: Teaching by Example, Leading Through Will." *Change,* vol. 14, no. 7, 1982, pp. 14-22.

communion."[184] In the case of Morehouse, no single graduate can know every man who has walked through the college's doors since its founding, but yet the very mention of the college's name invokes strong feelings of self-identification that transcend geographical boundaries. Whereas it's common to see Harvard paraphernalia worn by those who aren't Harvard graduates, the sight of a Morehouse T-shirt or baseball cap will, almost like clockwork, invite the question, "Did you go to Morehouse?" This self-identification also fosters a desire to want to pitch in, to strengthen the Morehouse mission through on-the-ground involvement, whether it's alumni networking with students, faculty having heart-to-heart talks with Morehouse students about the realities of being black and male in America, or other events with tangible impact on Morehouse students' lives. This community of Morehouse Men are also connected through a number of popular slogans that are often repeated within Morehouse circles about Morehouse-trained men, such as "You can always tell a Morehouse Man, but you can't tell him much," or references to "Morehouse Men and the women who love them."

Though there is no single definition of what makes a Morehouse Man (the meaning varies depending on one's generation and particular relationship to the college), there are some common threads that run through most understandings of the term: first and foremost, a Morehouse Man is one who has been molded by Morehouse, mainly as an undergraduate. To be a Morehouse Man is also an embodied attitude: it's in the way one walks, talks, dresses, reasons through problems, competes, and demonstrates leadership. Morehouse Men are always urged to reach for the highest echelon of whatever field they aspire to enter, whether it's graduate or professional school, politics, the ministry, or industry. The Morehouse Man is also taught to

[184] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* Verso, 1983, pp. 6.

mobilize his education in service of the black community and the larger world. The Morehouse faculty of the 1920s and the college's president, John Hope, were early architects of this institutional motif, and Mays sensed it as soon as he arrived on campus as a professor of mathematics in the fall of 1921. He incorporated this philosophy into his own teaching to the point where he became mired in a drawn-out grading dispute with Hope after a group of students in Mays's class cheated on an exam; Mays wanted to redo the entire exam, but Hope argued that such a decision would be unfair to the students who didn't cheat. Mays decided not to redo the exam, but his insistence on adhering to his principles impressed Hope so much that the president asked Mays to remain on the faculty for another year.

As distinctive as the Morehouse Man image is, there is some debate on whether or not the college's social gospel influence has somewhat diminished at the expense of modern-day capitalism and neoliberalism. The Morehouse Man, through advertising, has become one of the most easily identifiable visual markers of HBCU culture in American popular media within the last half-century; this image still has a powerful pull on young black men.[185] The August 1983 issue of *Ebony* Magazine is a prime example of this capitalist turn, when the magazine published a feature story on Morehouse's graduating class as part of its coverage on "The Crisis of the Black Male" in post-Civil Rights era America. The photographs throughout the story feature Morehouse seniors engaged in various scholarly activities and well-dressed in either business attire or semi-casual wear. A group photograph of the full graduating class on the steps of the

---

[185] Whenever someone asked me at eight years old where I eventually wanted to attend college, my answer was always, "Morehouse!" even though I didn't grow up in the Atlanta area and had never visited the campus or knew any alumni personally. I include this personal anecdote to underscore how the public-facing identity of the college impacted me even as a young child, as well as notable Morehouse alumni such as the late Atlanta mayor Maynard Jackson, who knew from an early age that he wanted to be a "Morehouse Man."

chapel, all in dapper black, grey, and tan suits leads the story. Other photographs include various Morehouse seniors conducting a science experiment in a lab, solving mathematic equations on a chalkboard, and playing a church organ; other pictures show well-dressed seniors in various reflective poses with books or briefcases in hand.[186] Each senior's goals for his post-graduation life only underscores the Morehousian influence: one student tells *Ebony* that he plans on attending Harvard Medical School; another 22-year-old seeks to work as a federal cost analyst and write a book focusing on "politics in economics"; yet another, the top business student in his graduating class, aims to begin his career at Chase Manhattan Bank in New York. Each of these young men, though unique in their own ways, uncannily evoke the styles of some of the era's most visible black businessmen: Reginald Lewis, Earl Graves, Robert L. Johnson, John H. Johnson, and practically any black corporate executive in the pages of *Ebony, JET,* or *Black Enterprise*. This aesthetic is key to the ideal of distinction that Morehouse seeks to instill in its students.

---

[186] "The Class of '83." *Ebony,* Aug. 1983, pp. 154-156, 158.

**Roderick Edmond** (l.), a 21-year-old Atlantan, majored in biology and will attend medical school at either Duke, Brown or Johns Hopkins Universities this fall. He plans a specialty in neurosurgery. **Galen Grayson**, 21, of Oakland, Calif., also a biology major, is president of the Health Careers Society. He plans to attend Harvard Medical School where he will concentrate on international medicine and public health.

**Paul Hinds** (above), a 23-year-old accounting major from Georgetown, Guyana, South America, finished with a 3.95 grade point average and plans to work for the Georgia-Pacific Corp. before earning an MBA at Georgia State U. His goal is to enter the import/export business.

**Hans J. Massaquoi Jr.** (left), a 22-year-old history and German major from Chicago, plans to enter law school in preparation for a career in international law. A winner of the coveted Merrill Overseas Study-Travel Scholarship, he studied a year at the U. of Freiburg in W. Germany.

**Kenneth Flowers** (below, left) 22, received a $10,000 Thomas Watson Fellowship to do research on Christianity in West Africa. Afterward, the sociology major from Detroit will attend Colgate-Rochester (N.Y.) Divinity School.

**Gregory Groover** (below), a 22-year-old sociology major from Freeport, N.Y., was president of the Student Government Assn. He is an ordained minister in the AME church and plans to attend Union Theological Seminary in New York.

**Tony D'Arceneaux**, 21, of Gary, Ind., has landed a job with the Northern Trust Bank in Chicago. D'Arceneaux, the senior class president, majored in finance and hopes to acquire his MBA from the University of Chicago.

August, 1983

Continued on Page 158

**Duane A. Cooper** (above), 22, received degrees in math and electrical engineering. The Atlanta native plans to enter the University of California at Berkeley in the fall to pursue master's and Ph.D. degrees in mathematics.

**Clifford Butler** (left), an economics major, will work as a cost analyst for the U.S. government at Fort McPherson, Ga. The 22-year-old Atlantan is working on a book which "concentrates on politics in economics," he says.

**James Davis** (right), 22, was class valedictorian, finishing with a perfect 4.0 average. The sociology major from Huntsville, Ala., will attend graduate school at Cornell University. He hopes to become a social program evaluator.

**Edgar Smith Jr.** (left), a 21-year-old marketing major from Southfield, Mich., was class vice president. He will work as a sales representative in the East Coast offices of R.R. Donnelley & Sons Co.

**James Abbington** (below, left), 23, of Gary, W. Va., majored in music and plans to attend the University of Michigan to pursue master's and Ph.D. degrees in organ performance and literature.

**Douglas Taylor** (below, right), a 21-year-old finance major from Indianapolis, was the top business student. He plans to work for Chase Manhattan Bank in New York.

Copyrighted material

**Figure 4.** In August 1983 *Ebony* published a photographic essay about the Morehouse Man, revealing how the black capitalist aesthetic had permeated the institution. Photography courtesy of Google Books.

There are countless critical perspectives on what exactly is the "intangible something" that drives Morehouse's culture, but understanding institutional "distinction" as a theoretical concept is one important step. Addie L. Joyner Butler's definition of distinction, in her 1977 book *The Distinctive Black College: Talladega, Tuskegee, and Morehouse,* is useful in framing "distinction" as a conceptual entry point for thinking about Morehouse's unique intangibility.[187] Butler proposes a framework, originally constructed by sociologist Burton R. Clark, for identifying "distinctiveness" in colleges and universities; she modifies Clark's original

[187] Addie Louise Joyner Butler, *The Distinctive Black College: Talladega, Tuskegee, and Morehouse.* Scarecrow P, 1977.

framework for the purpose of identifying black institutional distinctiveness. Using three HBCUs as case studies, Butler presents three institutional models, or "contexts," that embody distinctive qualities: the "new context," or the institution that disrupts the existing higher educational landscape through a groundbreaking and innovative new philosophical or operational model; the "revolutionary" context, in which an institution in crisis is transformed through the intervention of a dynamic and visionary leader; and the "evolutionary" context, in which institutional transformation happens over a more prolonged period of time, longer than the instantaneous nature of the new context or the "now or never" urgency of the revolutionary context. In all three contexts, leadership is vital in building or reconfiguring institutional culture.

Butler uses Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University), Morehouse College, and Talladega College as examples of the new, revolutionary, and evolutionary contexts, respectively. Tuskegee, whose philosophical ethos was rooted in Booker T. Washington's belief in black uplift through labor, thrift, and racial accommodation, was considered to be an innovative oddity at the time of its founding, and thus can be considered as an example of a groundbreaking, innovative "new context" institution. Butler argues that Morehouse was an admired but financially distressed institution whose future was in doubt until Mays took the reins and made it one of the country's leading liberal arts institutions for men, creating not only a "revolutionary" breakthrough within the institution but also within the HBCU landscape as a whole. Talladega College in Alabama gradually developed a reputation for high academic standards through steady presidential leadership, making it an ideal example of "evolutionary" distinction. Each of these schools, according to Butler, share a number of factors that converge to make the campuses distinct, such as personnel (faculty and administrators), curriculum and unique teaching methods, the external social base (donors, alumni, the local community, and

parents who send their children as students), the student body, and what Butler calls the institutional "saga," or the school's unique guiding ideology and self-image.

Of Morehouse's saga, Butler argues that Benjamin Mays transformed the college in a period of institutional demoralization. According to Mays, President John Hope and many members of the Morehouse faculty in the early 1920s, including sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, felt that the college was losing its way; its students were, in Frazier's words, "either revolting against the old ideals [of black education] or adopting a narrow and selfish individualism; hence the large number of students who are preparing themselves for the professions as a means to wealth and enjoyment, not as a means for deeper and more responsible participation in our civilization."[188] According to Frazier, the "old ideals" of black education, rooted in the paternalistic philosophies and assumptions undergirding old-fashioned "missionary education," were inadequate for the current challenges facing the black man. A new form of education that melded the best of the time-tested values with critical insight and scholarly interrogation was needed.

Though Butler argues for Morehouse as exemplary of the revolutionary context within black education, Mays's role as an architect of the college's cultural atmosphere demonstrates that the Morehouse eeasily embodies all three of the contexts. Mays made literary engagement the bedrock of Morehouse's institutional identity, and he regularly incorporated literary texts as a significant component in the shaping of the Morehouse Man ideal. Not only did Mays make literature central to the identity of the college, but literature that embodied a specific ideological orientation: the spirit of the social gospel which he received as a doctoral student at Chicago.

---

[188] Kipton E. Jensen, *Howard Thurman: Philosophy, Civil Rights, and the Search for Common Ground.* U of South Carolina P, 2019.

This development places Morehouse within Butler's "new context" because it ran contradictory to the educational practices of most black colleges throughout the South; it also places Morehouse within the "evolutionary context," because the corpus of literary texts that became closely associated with Morehouse expanded over time, thus influencing the culture of the campus.

Though the Morehouse model represented a new approach to black education in the earlier twentieth century, the college's attitude towards on-campus student resistance to administrative policy—particularly during the heated Black Power years of the mid-1960s through the early 1970s—has had a complicated history. Not unlike the Black Power protests that roiled Fisk and Howard, Morehouse also experienced a similar period of tension between administrators and student activists yearning for institutional reform. Almost as soon as Stokely Carmichael's cries for "Black Power" pierced the discourse of black cultural politics in 1966, faculty and administrators throughout the Atlanta University Center (such as AU's Samuel Dubois Cook and Spelman's president Albert Manley) put forward strong opposing arguments in hopes of dissuading students from jumping onto the bandwagon led by fiery figures such as Stokely Carmichael, Huey Newton and H. Rap Brown. Students, however, embraced Black Power ideology—and particularly the idea of the "Black University"—with a passion.

On April 19, 1969, Morehouse became the scene of a national breaking-news story when a group of AUC students, including theater major Samuel L. Jackson, stormed into a Morehouse board of trustees meeting and chained the doors shut, holding the assembled officials hostage for two days. Among the officials trapped in the room were President Gloster, Mays, and Martin Luther King Sr. The students, operating under the collective name Concerned Students, demanded that all white trustees be expunged from AUC governance, that more Africana studies

courses be added to the AUC's curriculum, and that the entire AUC be consolidated into one institution and renamed Martin Luther King Jr. University. King Sr. quickly released a statement to the media stating that there was connection between the King family and the protestors, and that the students were using his slain son's name as a cheap attention-getting tactic; the students ended up releasing him first. President Gloster released a statement to the media stating that he would resign before he gave in to the student's demands; the Associated Press erroneously reported that he was resigning while being held in student custody. The student protestors quickly realized their own strategic miscalculation when it became clear that Morehouse's trustees had no authority to make decisions for the entire AUC system with the flourish of a pen, and that the majority of the AUC student body agreed with Concerned Students' demands but not their tactics. Over the course of the two-day protest, the student group hemorrhaged members until the remaining holdouts released Mays, Gloster, and the trustees.[189] While the AUC member schools did add more ethnic studies-focused courses to their curricula and increased the number of African American representation on each of the college's board, no AUC merger beyond the original 1929 affiliation agreement transpired, nor did a renaming of the university system after King Jr. occur.

This incident reveals glaring fault lines between the Morehouse administration and Morehouse students on how student activism and the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. fit within the institutional campus canon. Mays himself had played a large role in shaping a campus culture that reminded young Morehouse Men day and night that they were the heirs to the global struggle for black liberation. In fact, nine years prior, Mays assisted AUC students as they

[189] John Herbert Roper, *The Magnificent Mays: A Biography of Benjamin Elijah Mays.* U of South Carolina P, 2012.

drafted "An Appeal for Human Rights," the iconic full-page public service announcement that decried segregation and discrimination in all walks of life in the city. Yet Mays's consternation following the events of April 19, 1969 reveal that the college had drawn an invisible red line regarding activism, and that students had crossed that line that day. The crossing of the line was so egregious to Mays that he chose Howard University's Moorland-Spingarn Research Center as the final home for his papers, rather than the Morehouse archives at the AUC Woodruff Library, perhaps out of a feeling that Morehouse had let him down, and that he had accomplished too much in his career to risk having his legacy potentially sabotaged by resentful student protestors.[190]

Despite the administration's exasperation with student demands, the 1969 student protest seems to have signaled a shift in Morehouse's willingness to serve as a space of incubation for Black Power thought, albeit via programmatic channels rather than spontaneous grassroots activism. In September of the following year, Morehouse and Atlanta University jointly hosted the International Congress of African Peoples, an annual Black Power conference attended by more than four thousand delegates; out of this summit came a resolution, spurred by Amiri Baraka, to form a national black independent political party.[191] One of the most memorable black studies events held at Morehouse in the post-Civil Rights era was the Nile Valley Conference, held at the King Chapel from September 26-30, 1984. The conference highlighted new directions in the study of Nile Valley civilizations that had emerged within the prior 10-15 years, and featured scholars such as Ivan Van Sertima, Beatrice Lumpkin, Asa Hilliard, and Cheikh Anta

---

[190] Ibid.
[191] Charlayne Hunter, "Congress of African People Ends Session in Atlanta." *New York Times,* 8 Sept. 1970.

Diop.[192] In addition to illuminating new Afrocentric scholarship and highlighting Atlanta as a powerhouse for black intellectual activity, the conference also demonstrated the powerful currency of Egyptology and Afrocentric thought within both mainstream black intellectual discourse and among the Morehouse student body. Lawrence Carter later recalled that Diop had delivered such a stirring presentation on "Africa: Cradle of Humanity" that Morehouse students years later named their sons "Cheikh" and "Diop" in tribute to the Senegalese historian.[193]

### The "Campus Canon" of Morehouse

The "campus canon" can be conceptualized as an assemblage of ideas, philosophies, authors, and literary works that anchor a college or university's institutional culture and identity. This canon has expanded over the decades since the college's founding, but has always maintained the same objectives: to empower and inspire black male students, and to propel them to think deeply about their own identities as black men and their roles in creating a more just and equitable global society. The campus canon of Morehouse College is culled from an eclectic array of philosophical schools of thought, authors, and specific texts: the African American sermonic tradition; indigenous African religious philosophy; John Hope and Mays himself; Howard Thurman; Martin Luther King Jr. and his father, Martin Luther King Sr.; Edward A. Jones's institutional history *A Candle in the Dark: A History of Morehouse College,* commissioned by Mays for the college's centennial celebration in 1967; literary scholars Benjamin Brawley and Hugh M. Gloster (who succeeded Mays as president of the college); and Brailsford Brazeal, dean of students in the 1930s. The canon also has ties to a number of

---

[192] Ivan Van Sertima, editor. *Nile Valley Civilizations.* Journal of African Civilizations, 1985.
[193] Lawrence E. Carter Sr. Personal interview, 13 Dec. 2019.

predominantly white universities and non-black figures who were important in the formation of the aforementioned black men: Crozer Theological Seminary and Boston University, where King Jr. received his bachelor of divinity and doctorate in systematic theology; the University of Chicago, where Mays received his doctorate in religion; and philosopher Josiah Royce, who developed the concept of the "beloved community" that significantly influenced Martin Luther King Jr.'s theology and is often mistakenly thought to have been conceived by King. The eclectic nature of Morehouse's campus canon and its intermingling with other cultural formations affirms Hortense Spillers' contention that "black culture is in conversation—in dialogue—with a number of other spaces along the cultural repertoire... [black culture] isn't simply talking to itself."[194]

Morehouse's canon is institutionalized largely through repetition and representation—oral, written, and visual. The likenesses and words of the King family, Mays, Thurman, and other Morehouse luminaries are ubiquitous throughout the campus, embodied in forms such as statues, portraits, framed photographs, christened buildings, quotes etched into marble, and meditations read aloud at campus gatherings. There are a number of key phrases, motifs, and quotes enshrined within the canon that encapsulate the college's philosophy of education and character-building. For example, the phrase "candle in the dark" is a popular utterance at Morehouse, and is the title of the college's official institutional history, which Edward A. Jones, professor of Afro-French literature at Morehouse from 1927 to 1977, penned for the school's centennial. The phrase appears in a quote that graces the book's first title page, which Jones attributes to a Chinese proverb: "It is better to light a candle in the dark than to curse the

---

[194] Hortense Spillers. "The Idea of Black Culture." *YouTube,* uploaded by UWaterlooEnglish, 24 Nov. 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P1PTHFCN4Gc&t=164s.

darkness."[195] Jones often deployed this quote in his own oratory.[196] The quote has appeared with slight variations in wording in a number of published texts and public speeches, though the earliest recorded appearance of the phrase in English-language literature is the cleric William Lonsdale Watkinson's sermon "The Invincible Strategy," from his 1907 anthology *The Supreme Conquest.* Telling his congregants about the virtues of focusing on good deeds rather than excoriating sinful behavior, he states, "Denunciatory rhetoric is so much easier and cheaper than good works, and proves a popular temptation. Yet is it far better to light the candle than curse the darkness."[197] At Morehouse, this popular phrase has taken on extraordinary currency within campus life. It is often used to tell black men to be the "light" in the metaphorical "darkness" of a racialized and oppressive society. In his 1996 inaugural address, Morehouse president Walter Massey mobilizes the image of the college as a candle that shines the way forward for "Americans of all colors and backgrounds."[198] The college's marquee fundraising event of the year, the Candle in the Dark Gala, is another namesake of this phrase; the annual gala features high-profile masters of ceremonies and celebrates the contributions of esteemed members of the Morehouse community and internationally renowned public figures central to the struggle for racial justice.

The words of leaders who helped to build Morehouse College into its present configuration, particularly Benjamin Mays, are perhaps the most reproduced and disseminated elements of the campus canon. His quotes relating to excellence are among the most popular,

---

[195] Edward A. Jones, *A Candle in the Dark: A History of Morehouse College.* Judson P, 1967.
[196] Louis W. Sullivan and David Chanoff, *Breaking Ground: My Life in Medicine.* U of Georgia P, 2014.
[197] William Lonsdale Watkinson, "The Invincible Strategy." *The Supreme Conquest.* Fleming H. Revell Co, 1907, pp. 206-218.
[198] Walter Massey, "Inaugural Address." Morehouse College, 16 Feb. 1996.

including this passage about the expectations of a Morehouse Man that is etched into Mays's tomb on campus:

> There is an air of expectancy at Morehouse College. It is expected that the student who enters here will do well. It is also expected that once a man bears the insignia of a Morehouse Graduate, he will do exceptionally well. We expect nothing less…. May you perform so well that when a man is needed for an important job in your field, your work will be so impressive that the committee of selection will be compelled to examine your credentials. May you forever stand for something noble and high. Let no man dismiss you with a wave of the hand or a shrug of the shoulder.[199]

The idea of "performing so well" is echoed by one of Morehouse's most prominent graduates, Howard Thurman, who entered Morehouse as an undergraduate in the fall of 1919. The tumultuous and bloody summer prior had seen nationwide race riots spurred by racial tensions between returning black veterans of World War I and resentful whites. At the beginning of Thurman's freshman year, he attended a convocation in Sale Chapel keynoted by John Hope. Hope's use of the honorific "gentlemen" to address the assembled young men resonated with Thurman, who grew up in deeply segregated Daytona Beach, Florida, and was called many things—"gentleman" least of them. Later, when he would reflect upon the essence of the Morehouse experience, he would frequently use the analogy of earning a crown to describe Morehouse's process of making students prove themselves, saying, "Over the heads of her students, Morehouse holds a crown that she challenges them to grow tall enough to wear."[200] This quote quickly became an institutional calling card. In the 1970s the quote headlined a Morehouse marketing brochure titled "The Quest for Quality," which introduced prospective students to the college. The quotation made a deep impression on Robert Mallett, a high schooler

---

[199] Saida Grundy, "'An Air of Expectancy': Class, Crisis, and the Making of Manhood at a Historically Black College for Men." *Bringing Fieldwork Back In: Contemporary Urban Ethnographic Research*, special issue of *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science,* vol. 642, 2012, pp. 43-60.
[200] "The Class of '83." *Ebony*.

in Houston, Texas in 1974, who later told the *Washington Post* of the image that the quote created in his mind: "I thought that was *baaad.*"[201] This campus canon lay the foundation upon which Lawrence Carter, dean of chapel at Morehouse's King Chapel, has spent the past four decades shaping students and defining the college's institutional culture through an assortment of visual, literary, and discursive practices.

**King Chapel, Lawrence Carter, and the Production of Culture**

On Sunday, February 19, 1978, during Morehouse's Founders Weekend celebrations,[202] students, faculty, administrators, visiting dignitaries, alumni, and other members of the Atlanta community gathered to participate in the grand opening of the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Chapel (later changed to "International Chapel" by Carter to reflect the chapel's global sense of community and mission). It was an upbeat time for Morehouse: that same year, President Hugh Gloster (who succeeded Mays following Mays's retirement in 1967) had founded the Morehouse School of Medicine, joining Howard University's School of Medicine and Meharry Medical College as the nation's third historically black medical school.[203] The new King Chapel was valued at $5 million; it housed a 2,500-seat auditorium and an exhibition hall called the Afro-American Hall of Fame, which showcased 200 sculpture busts of famous black Americans. The marble walls of the lobby were engraved with King's quotations. Andrew Young, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, delivered the keynote address. Also unveiled was Hugh M. Gloster Hall, an academic and administrative building adjacent to the chapel and named for

[201] Jacqueline Trescott, "The Men and Mystique of Morehouse." *Washington Post,* 9 Nov. 1987.
[202] Founders Week is an annual observance celebrating the founding of Morehouse.
[203] Sam Hopkins, "Morehouse Gets Green Light to Open Med School This Fall." *Atlanta Constitution,* 25 Apr. 1978.

Morehouse's president. As Carter recalls, the chapel was the product of Gloster's "cathedral mentality": the president initially envisioned the chapel looking similar to the chapel at Duke University, but the faculty "talked him out of it."[204]

The dedication of the King Memorial Chapel in 1978 was a decade in the making. Days after King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee in 1968, Hugh Gloster announced the creation of a fund for the building of a campus chapel in King's memory.[205] Throughout most of Morehouse's history, worship services and other religious programming was held in Sale Hall, where Thurman was first addressed as "gentleman" by John Hope in 1919. Sale was the central gathering site on campus for important events such as convocations and a special weekly lecture series developed by Mays called the Crown Forum, named after Thurman's famous "Morehouse holds a crown" quote. Mays himself delivered the Crown Forum lecture every Tuesday, and student attendance every week was mandatory. Much of King's intellectual formation happened in Sale during these Crown Forum events, as well as over dinner at the Mays's residence. As student enrollment rose over the years, however, Morehouse's lack of a full auditorium building equal to those at other schools, including Howard University's Cramton Auditorium, became increasingly apparent. The original 1968 chapel proposal included a request to the King family for Dr. King to be buried in a special crypt that would be housed in the chapel. Instead, Coretta Scott King would have her husband moved from his original resting place at Westview Cemetery, where many of Atlanta's prominent African Americans were buried, to a special crypt at the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolence, blocks from his childhood home near downtown.

---

[204] Lawrence E. Carter Sr. Interviewed by Denise Gines. 18 Apr. 2011.
[205] "King Memorial Chapel Proposed by Morehouse." *New Journal and Guide,* 20 Apr. 1968.

**Figure 5.** Martin Luther King Jr. as a Morehouse student in the 1940s, listening to a Crown Forum speaker in the old Sale Hall chapel. Image courtesy of the Martin Luther King Jr. International Chapel at Morehouse College.

King Chapel is one of the most visually impressive commemorative structures in the city of Atlanta, and the most prominent memorial to King in the world. The building sits on a hill overlooking the Morehouse football field and the main campus road, Westview Drive. The exterior of the chapel features a plaza flanked on either side by two imposing structures: on the left, a bronze statue of King pointing into the horizon, and on the right, the Howard Thurman National Memorial, a towering obelisk memorializing Thurman and his wife Sue Bailey Thurman. The design of the chapel plaza is potent with historical symbolism: to enter the front doors of the chapel, one must first pass by the Thurman Memorial, a testament to the strong

influence that Thurman had on King's development as a minister, thinker, and civil rights leader. The grand lobby of the chapel doubles as an art gallery, containing a number of fine oil portraits of famous African Americans and other global leaders connected to Morehouse, including members of the King family, Morehouse presidents, civil rights leaders, and religious figures.

At the time of the grand opening in 1978, no chaplain had been selected to head the chapel's programming. Over the course of the previous year, a number of candidates for the position had delivered trial sermons at Morehouse, including Lawrence Carter, who was then a young associate dean of Boston University's Marsh Chapel. At the time he was working on his doctorate in pastoral counseling and psychology. Gloster and the selection committee liked Carter's presentation, but they remained mired in indecision for another year. Gloster and Carter wouldn't cross paths again until April 1979, when Sandy Frederick Ray, pastor of Brooklyn's Cornerstone Baptist Church, died. Ray had been a Morehouse classmate of Dr. King's father, Martin King Sr. Ray's brother raised Lawrence Carter's mother-in-law, and thus was close to Carter's family. During his visit to the Ray home before the funeral, Carter socialized with a number of Morehouse-affiliated dignitaries present, including King Sr. and Gloster. Gloster informed Carter that the deanship at the Morehouse chapel had not yet been filled, and that the selection committee liked Carter's sermon the best. Gloster was struck by how many prominent people at the funeral Carter already had relationships with. The following day, Thomas Kilgore Jr., chairman of the Morehouse board of trustees, met Carter in front of the United Nations headquarters in Manhattan and informed Carter that Gloster had selected Carter to be the inaugural dean of King Chapel.[206]

---

[206] Lawrence E. Carter Sr. Interviewed by Denise Gines. 18 Apr. 2011.

The appointment was a homecoming of sorts for Carter, who fortuitously kept coming in contact with variations iterations of Martin Luther King Jr.—the man, his oratory, and his cultural memory—at various points in his life. Born in 1941 in Dawson, Georgia and raised in Columbus, Ohio, Carter was drawn to the church and the life of the clergy at a young age. As a high schooler, he would often walk into local churches and ask the presiding minister if he could examine the minister's study; more often than not the minister would say yes. One fateful day Carter walked into the Union Grove Baptist Church in Columbus, pastored by Morehouse alum Phale Hale; Hale allowed Carter to peruse the pastor's study and insisted that nobody was in the study at the time. Carter entered the study and was carefully examining the books on the shelf when he felt another human presence in the room; he turned and was dumbfounded to find Martin Luther King Jr. himself in the room as well, reading in a corner. King struck up a conversation and asked Carter if he was considering college; Carter said that his neighbors wanted him to attend Virginia Theological Seminary and College (now Virginia University of Lynchburg), a historically black seminary school that graduated a number of highly esteemed preachers. King tried to talk Carter into applying to Morehouse, but Carter said that Virginia eventually won out.

As an undergraduate, Carter came in close proximity to King again when one of Carter's professors took him to hear King deliver the speech "The American Dream" at Lynchburg's E.C. Glass High School in 1961. Carter would later recall how the speech showcased King's majestic oratory; it contained four crescendos that brought the audience to its feet each time, and each round of applause was progressively louder and longer than the previous one. Carter called his mother after the speech and begged her to let him transfer to Morehouse so he could learn from the same professors who had taught King. His mother refused because she couldn't afford

Morehouse's tuition. Carter resolved to receive his doctorate from Boston University, where King received his doctorate, since Morehouse was out of the question. Carter's goal to follow in King's footsteps became even more of an urgent imperative in 1968, when King was assassinated. That April evening, Carter and his then-fiancée (now wife) Marva Griffin, who was working on her own doctorate at the time, were watching a play on the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. Upon hearing the news after the play, they walked to Boston University's Marsh Chapel, sat in a back pew, and reflected quietly together in the dark. Gazing up at a portrayal of Jesus in a stained-glass window, Carter prayed, "Lord, help me to do something significant for Martin Luther King before I close my eyes."[207]

Carter's first professional opportunity to do the commemorative work that he prayed for came about when BU president John Silber asked Carter to serve as interim director of the university's Martin Luther King Jr. Afro-American Center until a permanent replacement could be found. Carter served in that role for three years. Carter's work as dean of King Chapel, however, has been the main vehicle that has enabled him to actualize his dream of keeping King's legacy alive. Through his preeminence as a national preacher, curator and public intellectual, Carter has played an important role in helping to shape Morehouse's public-facing image and its internal understandings of its own cultural identity and the ideologies that inform that identity. His approach to cultural production contains three main prongs: exploring rhetorical structure and style through intellectual engagement, visually curating intellectual space, and mobilizing the festschrift as a literary symbol of institutional identity.

[207] Lawrence E. Carter Sr., "King Collection: Oral History – Dean Lawrence Carter." *YouTube*, uploaded by MorehouseCollege, 14 Jun. 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xb7UvT7F3MM

**Cultural Production at the King Chapel: Dialogue, Visual Space, and the Festschrift**

Through discussion group meetings known as "Thurman Thursdays" (after Howard Thurman) and "sermon talkbacks," Carter's students receive rigorous training in the exercising of what Dana Williams calls the "critical apparatus" that is central to African American culture.[208] In short, these students are trained to not only analyze sermons for their social relevancy and soundness of theology, but to invite the speaker to peel back the public-facing layer of their final-draft sermon and take the students through the editorial maturation of the finished product. Carter's teaching of rhetorical style, argument, and discursive practice is rooted in his belief in the spiritual and intellectual development of the individual, or the person, and the similarities between drafting an argumentative piece with the process of undergoing multiple "drafts" of oneself in order to mature spiritually.

While working on his PhD at Boston University, Carter was immersed in Boston personalism, a subset of personalist philosophy that made a deep imprint on Martin Luther King's research and preaching. There is a myriad of variations of personalism, which makes it difficult to define as a category of philosophical and theological thought, but generally personalism examines the sacred inviolability of the person, the human individual. Theologian Robert C. Neville describes personalism as "an unrelenting rational approach to inquiry, openness to all sources," and "attention to the ordinary lives of people in the church."[209] BU was long considered as the intellectual hub of American personalism, though as a school of thought

---

[208] Dana A. Williams, "The Eloquence of the Scribe." *YouTube*, uploaded by College of Arts and Sciences, Howard University, 27 Oct. 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FwuXWOgI7DE&t=326s

[209] Harold H. Oliver, "The Twilight of Personalism at Boston University: The Testimony of a Participant-Observer." *In the Beginning: The Martin Luther King Jr. International Chapel at Morehouse College,* edited by Echol Nix Jr. Mercer UP, 2015, 121-131.

its influence began to wane when Carter arrived in Boston to begin his graduate studies. Nevertheless, Boston personalism had a profound impact on his thinking, pedagogy, and praxis. Traces of the Boston approach are visible in Carter's "Thurman Thursday" meetings and sermon talkbacks, in which visiting preachers will sit with students in the chapel's Lucius M. Tobin Library (discussed in greater detail below) and explain the creative processes involved in the formation of the sermon.

These programs are rooted in Johan Galtung's theory of structural violence, which Galtung describes as "subject-verb-object, with both subject and object being persons," and the "verb" being "visible as *action.*"[210] Within the context of preaching, Carter believes that structural violence to be, in his words, "one-way communication," in which the preacher (the subject) acts upon the congregation (the object) with no reciprocal participation from the audience other than affirmations of the preacher; thus, the congregation is acted upon and is rendered powerless in the relationship. By inviting speakers to account for their writing processes to students after delivering a sermon, the inherent structural violence of one-way communication is disrupted, and the sermon takes on an added dimension of personal significance for each student. This process enables students to challenge and probe the speaker while also reflecting on their own creative processes in developing sermons, essays or other forms of argument.

Equally remarkable is the physical space in which this critical engagement takes place: the Lucius M. Tobin Chapel Library, a compact meeting room adjacent to the chapel sanctuary that also houses Carter's study. Since Carter founded the Martin Luther King Jr. Chapel

---

[210] Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research." *Journal of Peace Research,* vol. 6, no. 3, 1969, pp. 167-191.

Assistants Pre-Seminarian Program (a four-year training program for undergraduates aspiring to join the ministry or pursue graduate studies in related fields) in 1979, the Tobin Library has served as a central hub for guest lectures, critical discussions, and other important events. The library is named for Lucius M. Tobin, the late religion professor at Morehouse who also served as pastor of Atlanta's Providence Baptist Church. When King applied to study at Crozer Theological Seminary, Tobin wrote him a letter of recommendation, albeit short, saying, "The applicant has not been in my class at Morehouse. I am informed that he is a little above the average in scholarship. In personality and ability he shows promise for the ministry."[211]

Though small in size, Tobin Library immediately grabs the attention of the first-time visitor through its striking use of portraiture, or what Hortense Spillers calls "commemorative space."[212] Every inch of the library's walls is covered in framed photographs of historically significant individuals, including Martin Luther King Jr.; Benjamin Mays; Frederick Douglass; William Rainey Harper, founder of the University of Chicago; Mahatma Gandhi; Buddhist philosopher Daisaku Ikeda; and countless others. Photographs of historic events in African American history and the history of Morehouse, also claim space on the library's walls: there are group pictures of Carter with his chapel assistants; events featuring the King family; profiles of prominent black churches around the country; and still captures of Martin Luther King Jr. engaged in civil rights work. Some of the portraits, such as King, Mays, and Hugh Gloster, are obviously included because of their significance to the college's canon; other portraits, such as

---

[211] Letter from Lucius M. Tobin to Charles E. Batten. *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr., Volume 1: Called to Serve, January 1929-June 1951,* edited by Clayborne Carson and Penny A. Russell. U of California P, 1992.

[212] Spillers, ibid.

William Rainey Harper's, are included because they embody Carter's highest ideals of leadership and servitude.

**Figure 6.** The Lucius M. Tobin Library, with its dense portraiture, at the King Chapel. Photograph by Magana Kabugi.

Many of the portraits are associated with anecdotes that come to Carter's mind as he points out pictures to friends and visitors. For example, a painting of Gloster brings to Carter's mind a sermon that Carter once preached in the 1980s at the height of the Reagan Revolution. The sermon strongly rebuked Reagan for his civil rights policies, particularly his position on South African apartheid, and brought the audience to its feet in thunderous applause. Afterwards, Gloster told Carter, "That was a wonderful sermon." Carter responded, "Thank you; in fact, I'm going to mail President Reagan a printed copy of the sermon tomorrow." Gloster warned, "I

wouldn't do that if I were you—the federal government has just awarded us a grant to build some new dormitories."[213] The photographic displays throughout the Tobin Library not only commemorate important figures in Morehouse's and the nation's history, but these images are intended to keep watch, in a sense, over students and remind them of their mission beyond Morehouse. Carter will often tell his students about the "impact that these pictures are supposed to have on your behavior when you leave this institution." In a sense, the pictures collectively form a photographic panopticon in which cultural memory is inscribed.

The student discussions and the visual curation of the Tobin Library are most evident to those who visit the King Chapel in person and participate in its programming; for others outside of Morehouse's walls, Carter has been able to animate the Morehouse mystique and the legacy of Benjamin Mays (and in turn, Martin Luther King Jr.) through the literary form of the festschrift, a collection of writings dedicated to a distinguished intellectual. In German *festschrift* translates literally into "celebratory text." Carter first had the idea of writing a festschrift in the early 1980s while annotating and curating Mays's personal papers at the Mays residence, including the more than one thousand editorials that Mays wrote for the black-owned *Pittsburgh Courier* newspaper. Carter was shocked in 1984 when Morehouse failed to include any biographical information in Mays's funeral program. Fourteen years later, Carter's festschrift commemorating the centennial anniversary of Mays's birth, titled *Walking Integrity: Benjamin E. Mays, Mentor to Martin Luther King Jr.,* was published by Mercer University Press. *Walking Integrity* is the literary personification of features an assortment of essays honoring Mays's civil rights and educational work. The table of contents spans a diverse array of highly esteemed black public intellectuals, including historian Randal Jelks, former Dillard University president Samuel Dubois Cook,

---

[213] Lawrence Carter. Personal interview, 13 Dec. 2019.

educational scholar Charles V. Willie (a Morehouse classmate of King), and historian Lerone Bennett Jr.

**Conclusion: The Future of the Campus Canon**

One of the biggest challenges confronting HBCUs in maintaining campus canons is the costs related to collecting, preserving, and disseminating archival materials that embody the history and culture of the institution. Morehouse's struggle in 2006 to acquire a number of valuable archival materials related to Martin Luther King Jr.'s life and career is a prime example of this ongoing problem. That year, a trove of King's personal papers and other ephemera—including telegrams, sermon manuscripts, correspondences, family photographs, his business-travel briefcase, and a blue spiral notebook in which he jotted down ideas while in jail—were scheduled to be auctioned at Sotheby's Auction House in New York for between $15 to $30 million. Coretta Scott King had passed away that January, and many of King's associates in Atlanta worried that the collection would be whisked away by a private buyer with no connection to the King family or investment in African American archival preservation. To add to the frustration, none of the AUC institutions had the funds, individually or collectively, to cover the collection's asking price. Mayor Shirley Franklin and Andrew Young organized a coalition of business leaders, philanthropists, civil rights leaders, and individual donors who successfully saved the collection from auction.[214] Today the collection is called the Morehouse Martin Luther King Jr. Collection, and contains approximately 10,000 items.

---

[214] "Morehouse College to Get MLK Collection." *National Public Radio,* 26 June 2006. Web. https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5511141

Morehouse's victory in acquiring the collection underscores the college's continuing role in preserving King's legacy and the college's canon overall. However, some of Morehouse's own have raised the question of whether the college is too immersed within its own canon. Standup comedian KJ Lee, a Morehouse graduate, lampoons the ubiquity of the canon at his alma mater, as well as the propensity of Morehouse people to invoke these figures repeatedly, in a comedy sketch titled "Things Morehouse People Say." Filmed in various locations around the Morehouse campus, such as in the cafeteria, in the campus bookstore, and in front of Graves Hall (an iconic dormitory), the video is comprised of constantly repeated catchphrases and names that can be heard around the Morehouse campus: "Benjamin Mays… Martin Luther King… Benjamin Mays… Spike Lee… Benjamin Mays…" Every shot in the video contains a catchphrase or name, and each shot is edited together in rapid-fire succession, intending to overwhelm the viewer. In between the catchphrases, Lee goes through the normal trials and tribulations of a college student, asking a bookstore clerk who is off-camera, "How much is this textbook? Well do I have to buy the whole book? Can I just photocopy the pages I need?" In other shots he repeats the phrase, "I'mma start my own business," which he implies is another oft-repeated phrase on campus.[215] Though done in jest, Lee's critique suggests that even though Morehouse students face the same challenges and have the same quirks as students at other colleges, Morehouse leads its young men to believe that the constant invocation of canonical figures is crucial to the making of a particular kind of distinguished black male.

Critiques of the campus culture have been made in less humorous ways as well. For example, though Morehouse and Spelman have historically been considered brother and sister colleges, there have also been tensions between the two, particularly regarding the treatment of

[215] "Things Morehouse People Say." *YouTube,* posted by Khiry KJ Lee. Video removed.

Spelman women by Morehouse men, and how Spelman women are received when they come forward with personal stories of abuse at the hands of Morehouse men. In 2017 there arose a heated debate about both schools' responses to reports of Spelman students being sexually assaulted, which culminated in the circulation of flyers on both campuses with the hashtag "#WeKnowWhatYouDid," listing the names of Morehouse athletes and fraternity men who allegedly committed these assaults. The entrance to the King Chapel was spray-painted with the message "Practice What You Preach Morehouse + End Rape Culture."[216] Coverage of the controversy in national media only further poured salt in the wound of the institutional relationship often referred to fondly by students as "Spelhouse."

In response to events such as these, Morehouse has announced a number of policy changes. As part of his initiative to rebrand the Morehouse Man through the "Five Wells"—"well read, well spoken, well-traveled, well dressed, and well-balanced"—Morehouse president Robert M. Franklin Jr. appealed to students in 2007 to take the lead in expanding their literary understandings of the black male experience.[217] In April 2019, the college announced it would "consider for admission applicants who live and self-identify as men, regardless of the sex assigned to them at birth," and that it would "continue to use gendered language that reflects our identity as a men's college."[218] Along with other HBCUs that are currently trying to reconcile long-held traditions with emerging practices, Morehouse continues to grapple with questions of whether its institutional culture leans too heavily on conceptions of black education rooted in late nineteenth and early twentieth century ideals. Mays himself commented on the dilemmas facing

[216] Caitlin Dickerson and Stephanie Saul, "Two Colleges Bound by History Are Roiled by the #MeToo Movement." *New York Times,* 2 Dec. 2017.
[217] Robert M. Franklin Jr., "A Message From the Soul of Morehouse." *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education,* no. 64, 2009, pp. 47.
[218] "Gender Identity Policy." *Morehouse College*. https://www.morehouse.edu/genderidentity/.

institutions as he reflected on his career in *Born to Rebel.* He admitted that the college didn't always have the answers or respond to changing developments with corresponding swiftness. He wrote:

> Though no one at Morehouse taught submission, neither did anyone encourage Morehouse students to attempt by force to overthrow or change the system…. Perhaps Morehouse could and should have done more. However, judging from the harvest, she must have—however indirectly—planted good seeds, and the field was unquestionably fertile.[219]

As the college embarks upon its next 150 years, these questions remain for future generations of Morehouse Men to answer.

---

[219] Mays, *Born to Rebel,* pp. 90.

CHAPTER 4

# IN SEARCH OF “EXCELLENCE”: GIL SCOTT-HERON’S *THE NIGGER FACTORY* AND DEBBIE ALLEN’S *A DIFFERENT WORLD*

> Black Americans and this university community must value *excellence* and *quality* more than we have ever in the past. In our determination to celebrate and affirm the Black presence as an integral, legitimate and unavoidable expression of the American presence in the world, we must be equally determined to make being Black synonymous with being excellent, to endow that which is black with an unmatched quality, and to express a dedication and a devotion that will be the envy of all men everywhere.[220]
>
> —President James E. Cheek of Howard University, 1972 Fall Convocation Address

## Introduction: Black Power and the Question of Excellence

The decade of the 2010s saw the rise of “black excellence,” a buzzword that has circulated widely within black popular discourse. The Olympic victories of gymnasts Gabrielle “Gabby” Douglas and Simone Biles, the critical acclaim garnered by the cast of the film *Black Panther,* and Jay-Z and Kayne West’s reference to “black excellence, opulence, decadence / Tuxes next to the president” in their 2011 song “Murder to Excellence” all underscore the fact that the phrase has undoubtedly become an emblem of pride and a rallying cry for black Generation Xers and Millennials. Black excellence has become so popular that it has spawned similar concepts such as “Black girl magic” and “Black boy joy.” Black excellence and its related terms have also migrated over to the realm of scholarly criticism, with Claudia

[220] Orde Coombs, “The Necessity of Excellence,” p. 37.

Rankine[221] and Kadian Pow[222] among a number of black scholars who have theorized black excellence in their own analyses of race, gender, power, and culture. The black higher education sector has also mobilized black excellence as a vehicle for conveying the HBCU mission. Throughout Nashville, for example, are advertisements for Tennessee State University bearing the slogan, "Excellence is our habit!" But where did the preoccupation with black excellence originate? What does it mean, in the words of Howard president James Cheek, to "make being Black synonymous with being excellent?" Though the concept of educational "excellence" didn't originate in the 1980s, it undoubtedly was popularized with the Department of Education's 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk,* commissioned by the Reagan administration.[223] Bill Readings, in his book *The University in Ruins,* argues that "as an integrating principle, excellence has the singular advantage of being entirely meaningless, or to put it more precisely, non-referential."[224] In our contemporary moment, a non-referential term such as "excellence" suddenly takes on powerful new meaning as a tool to fight stereotypes of African American mediocrity.

Five decades ago, however, the non-referentiality of "excellence" posed a serious problem to black intellectuals who sought answers to the challenges facing black America in the

---

[221] Claudia Rankine, "The Meaning of Serena Williams: On Tennis and Black Excellence." *Bodies Built for Game: The Prairie Schooner Anthology of Contemporary Sports Writing,* edited by Natalie Diaz and Hannah Ensor. U of Nebraska P, 2019, pp. 49-56.
[222] Kadian Pow, "Insider/Outsider: Olivia Pope and the Pursuit of Erotic Power." *Gladiators in Suits: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Representation in Scandal,* edited by Simone Adams et al. Syracuse UP, 2019, p. 175.
[223] *A Nation at Risk,* the report produced by the U.S. National Commission on Excellence in Education, dramatized the "rising tide of mediocrity" threatening the United States' global political and economic dominance. This report set in motion an educational reform movement, albeit one that reproduced the language of black students being "endangered" and "at risk" while largely ignoring the impact of structural racism and persistent discrimination on black student performance. For more on the report, see United States, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform.* National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983.
[224] Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins.* Harvard UP, 1996, p. 22.

wake of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, urban uprisings, and black student protests at colleges and universities across the country. In this moment of uncertainty, black thinkers seized upon black institutions—the family, the church, the university, the think tank, and even the academic journal—as necessary instruments in the project of unifying a fragmented community around shared ideals. In order for these institutions to be successful in organizing black communities, they needed to exemplify excellence on every level. The only problem: what did institutional excellence mean, who got to define it, and how did one untether "excellence" from traditionally white conceptualizations and reimagine it within a black radical context? What did it mean exactly to be "black" and reflect "black values"? This debate took on particular urgency within the black academy, and ironically ended up dividing some black institutions and publications. In 1975, an ideological split occurred between black nationalists and Marxists among the staff of the journal *The Black Scholar.* Then-editor Nathan Hare told Charlayne Hunter of the *New York Times*, "When I protested that not enough black nationalists were getting into the debate, they tried to put out the idea that nationalists didn't have any new thoughts and I felt that way about the Marxists."[225]

The split among *Black Scholar* is only one example of the various ideological fault lines between conceptions of blackness and black thought within the Black Power movement. As sociologist Troy Duster writes on the early days of the Black Power movement, "There was the ideal of only one version of blackness presentable to the outside world, and those assuming the leadership defined its substance and manner of expression…. the important question became, 'Are you black or aren't you?' and not, 'What kind of black are you?'"[226] The question of what it

---

[225] Charlayne Hunter, "Ideology Dispute Shakes Black Journal." *New York Times,* 11 Mar. 1975.
[226] George Napper, *Blacker Than Thou: The Struggle for Campus Unity.* William B. Eerdmans, 1973, p. 7.

means to embody blackness was particularly acrimonious at HBCUs. The struggle to define black institutional excellence often pitted HBCU student activists against presidents and administrators, and sometimes confrontations turned deadly, as they did at Southern University and A&M College in Louisiana and Jackson State College in Mississippi. At both institutions, student protestors were fatally shot by police. In a sense, the search for excellence became a matter of life and death: reaching a consensus could mean the difference between a thriving black community or the descent down an uncertain path.

The previous three chapters have examined the efforts of HBCU leaders—Walter Leonard at Fisk, James Cheek and Charles Harris at Howard, and Benjamin Mays and Lawrence Carter at Morehouse—to mobilize cultural production as a way of defining institutional distinction and identity from within the walls of the university. This chapter explores how two cultural texts—Gil Scott-Heron's novel *The Nigger Factory* and Debbie Allen's television sitcom *A Different World*—offer related yet differing outlooks on the meaning of HBCU excellence, and simultaneously effectuate change in the HBCU sector from the vantage points of literary fiction and television. I call these texts "insider-outsider" texts because of their unique dual positionalities within the HBCU community: they're "insiders" because they display an intimate familiarity with the HBCU space, its culture, and educational mission; they're "outsiders" because they are not works commissioned by institutions themselves, but rather serving to promote the institutions and provide aesthetic critique. The insider-outsider status of these texts afforded their creators more freedom and flexibility to be outspoken with their critiques of HBCU culture, whereas the presidents of Fisk, Howard, Morehouse, and other schools were bound by a number of risks, such as potentially alienating students, parents, government officials and donors. Both the novel and the sitcom enter the conversation on HBCU

excellence and identity at crucial moments: Scott-Heron's novel emerges during a time of intense HBCU soul-searching, black radical discontent, and intense white backlash at civil rights progress, while *A Different World* makes its entry during a ramping-up of the "Moral Majority" movement and PWI encroachment on black-studies territory that was formerly the exclusive domain of HBCUs.

Each section of this chapter will explore in-depth how both of these insider-outsider texts lent their voices to the conversation on HBCU identity in the post-Civil Rights era. The first section will close-read Gil Scott-Heron's *The Nigger Factory,* which chronicles a derailed student protest at a fictional HBCU. I argue that Scott-Heron's novel defines excellence as the capacity to raise racial consciousness in students, who then go out and replicate it through their race work in the larger community. According to Scott-Heron, the college administration, specifically the president, holds the responsibility of creating an environment of racial consciousness. I argue that this argument is made most legible by two understated female characters in the mostly male book: Dora Gilliam and Gloria Calhoun. Though they make few appearances and have few lines, the arguments they advance are the key to understanding Scott-Heron's underlying message about the role of the administrator in setting the standard for black educational excellence.

Following my discussion of Scott-Heron, the second section examines how, under the artistic direction of Debbie Allen, the popular NBC television *A Different World* situated HBCUs within the politics of being young and black in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and served as an outspoken (and at times contradictory) counterpoint to its more conservative sister sitcom *The Cosby Show.* I argue that *A Different World,* in contrast to Scott-Heron's novel, places emphasis on the role of the student, rather than the administrator, in fostering an environment of black

institutional excellence. I close-read Allen's creative choices regarding storylines, dialogue, set design, and other aspects of cultural production that not only imbued the program with flair and vitality, but also brought a new layer of meaning to the discourse surrounding HBCU excellence.

### Gil Scott-Heron's *The Nigger Factory:* Making "Black People"

At historically black Lincoln University in Pennsylvania in 1969, a 19-year-old student named Gil Scott-Heron asked the dean of students for permission to take a leave of absence in order to complete a novel he had been working on. Sarcastically, the dean advised Scott-Heron to use his time off to see a psychiatrist instead. Ultimately, Scott-Heron was able to persuade the dean to grant him time off, and during that sabbatical Scott-Heron published his first novel, *The Vulture,* about a teenaged drug dealer who is murdered by a group of his friends. Though scoffed at by university administrators, writing served as a way for Scott-Heron to critique what he saw as an elitism complex within black higher education. His parents (Gil Heron, a Jamaican soccer player, and Lillian Scott, an African American opera singer) divorced when he was young, and he was sent to live with his maternal grandmother in Jackson, Tennessee; she died when Scott-Heron was 12 years old. He then went to live with his mother in New York and was enrolled in an elite private school, the Fieldston School. This gave him insight into two different worlds—one largely white, urban, and privileged, and the other black, rural, and poor.

For Scott-Heron, cultural production was intrinsically a political act, and he preferred to articulate his politics through the written word and music. He was an avid writer and reader during his elementary and high school years, and decided to enroll at Lincoln, which like many other HBCUs in the sixties was a space of ferment for black student militancy. The institution was famous for graduating African independence leaders such as Nnamdi Azikiwe and Kwame

Nkrumah, civil rights figures such as Thurgood Marshall, educators such as Horace Mann Bond, and writers such as Langston Hughes and Melvin B. Tolson. The university's radical orientation towards black liberation politics would significantly shape Scott-Heron's educational politics, as well as his conscious decision to maintain an intimate relationship with the HBCU sector for most of his adult life. At the time Scott-Heron enrolled, the campus was alive with the energy of the Black Power and Black Arts movements. The poet-musician group The Last Poets performed on campus in 1969, which caught Scott-Heron's attention. Around the same time, he befriended fellow student Brian Jackson, an aspiring musician, and the two of them formed their own band, Black and Blues.

While on leave from Lincoln, Scott-Heron returned home to New York and started up his own solo musical career. In between writing *The Vulture*, Scott-Heron signed onto a contract with Flying Dutchman Records and released his first LP, *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox* in 1970; on this album appeared the first recording of his now-famous spoken-word poem "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised." The following year saw the release of Scott-Heron's second album, *Pieces of a Man,* featuring another rendition of "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised." The success generated by his musical career pulled Scott-Heron further away from returning to Lincoln, and he ended up not finishing his undergraduate degree, though in 1972 he was accepted into Johns Hopkins University and received a master's in the writing seminar program. His still-unpublished thesis, a 35-page fictional novella titled *Circle of Stone,* focused on a young black photographer in Harlem who decides to return to his hometown in Tennessee to reconnect with his roots and regain his footing. Despite not returning to Lincoln, Scott-Heron remained intellectually invested in HBCUs as solution factories for black communities. This investment is particularly visible in *The Nigger Factory,* published in 1972 by the Dial Press.

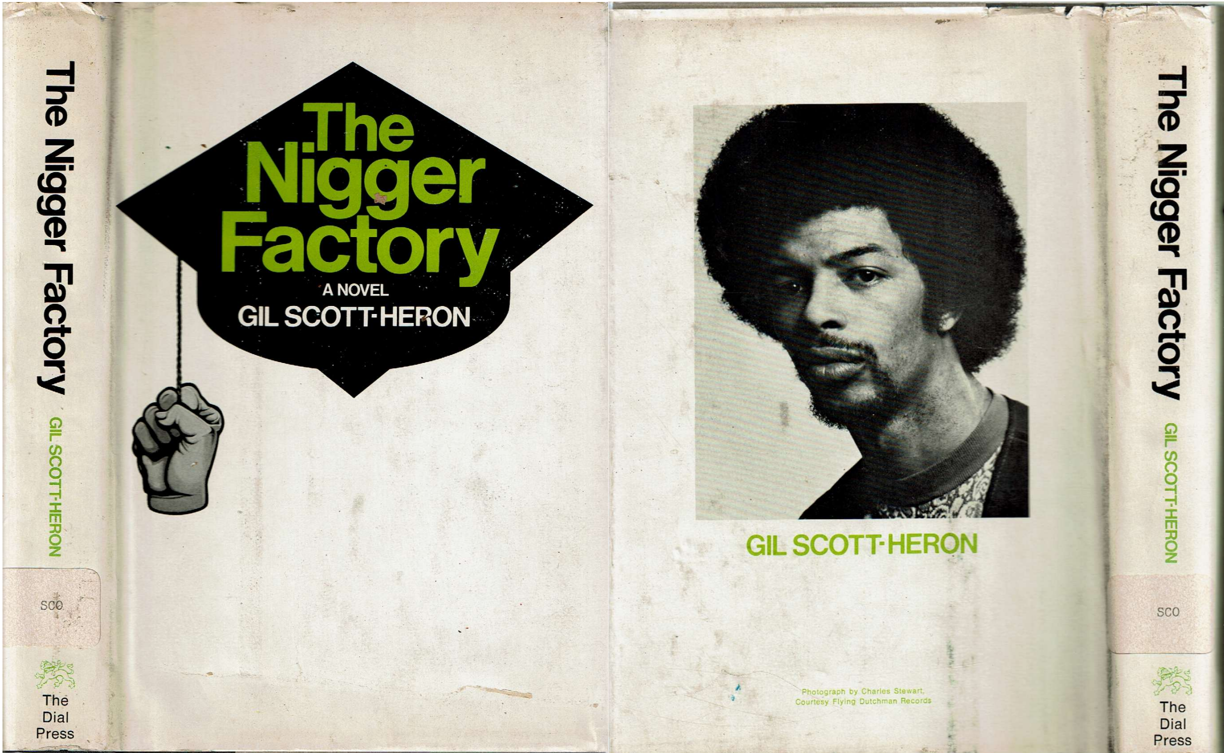



**Figure 7.** The front and back covers of the first edition of Gil Scott-Heron's *The Nigger Factory.* The black hand pulling the tassel in the front cover illustration symbolizes HBCU education tightening its grip around the black student's neck like a noose, killing the black student rather than enabling him/her to thrive. Photographs courtesy of mikeslibrary.com.

*Factory* is a classic example of what Lavelle Porter calls the "blackademic novel." *Blackademic,* as he explains, is a portmanteau of "black" and "academic." He writes, "These works constitute a documented record of how black intellectuals have brought the fight [for justice] to the Ivory Tower and have insisted on making space for themselves."[227] Set on the campus of a fictional HBCU, Sutton University, in the southeastern Tidewater region of Virginia, *Factory* tells the story of students who try to "make space for themselves" in a place

[227] Lavelle Porter, *The Blackademic Life: Academic Fiction, Higher Education, and the Black Intellectual.* Northwestern UP, 2020, p. 7.

that should already validate them, but takes them for granted instead. The novel chronicles the downward spiral of a student-led uprising against a domineering president and his administration. Like *The Vulture, Factory* is told through the perspectives of its young black male protagonists, who in this novel are heads of rival political factions: the student government president, Earl Thomas, is a methodical and calculating policy wonk who drafts a list of demands on behalf of the student body; the demands call for the university president to make several structural changes to the campus, including changes in personnel, investment of university resources in the surrounding black community, and the establishment of a formal black studies department. But while Earl is planning to roll out the demands in a way that is palatable to the president, an opposing group of student athletes known collectively as MJUMBE (Swahili for "messenger" or "representative"), led by football player and fraternity man Ralph Baker, seeks to articulate the same demands through a grassroots *coup d'état* of campus rather than through Earl's tactics of diplomacy and negotiation.

These opposing groups are competing for the attention of President Ogden Calhoun, an exemplar of the classic HBCU authoritarian president characterized by white sociologists Christopher Jencks and David Riesman in their 1967 *Harvard Educational Review* article "The American Negro College": upper-crust, conservative, and incapable of connecting with the sensibilities of a generation of young black Baby Boomer students radicalized by the era's black solidarity movements.[228] Calhoun treats the university as his own personal domain and rules the

---

[228] "The American Negro College" introduced many white readers to HBCUs for the first time upon its publication in 1967, and also hurt the HBCU community with its numerous inaccuracies and untruths regarding overall institutional inferiority of HBCUs and the authoritarianism and incompetence of HBCU administrators. The authors ironically state that "Few who write about the conditions of American Negro life can entirely escape the racist assumptions which are so much a part of American culture," while at the same time making those same "racist assumptions" themselves. The article is overly preoccupied with the white perception of HBCUs,

campus with an iron fist; he cares more about the optics of the student protest in the eyes of the outside white world than he's invested in the students' actual impetus for protesting. Almost immediately the novel sets up a three-way battle between Calhoun, Earl, and Baker for the identity and soul of Sutton University. It is also, by extension, a battle over the definition of black institutional excellence: Earl and Ralph are fighting for a university that champions a black agenda and the interests of the black public, while Calhoun is wedded to protocol, tradition, power, and an abstract concept of institutional distinction.

The most obvious and jarring element of this novel is Scott-Heron's prominent and constant deployment of the racial slur "nigger" the title and throughout the book. As with a number of controversial texts that contain the slur in the title (such as Joseph Conrad's *Nigger of the Narcissus* and Randall Kennedy's *Nigger*) the title alone can easily turn off a black reader or discourage a white reader who might be interested in engaging with a work of HBCU fiction but hesitant to discuss the novel around black people. The young black characters throughout the story also continually use the slur with the "-er" ending instead of the more colloquial "nigga," which has become an accepted term of use within some black discursive contexts. The constant use of the slur is partly Scott-Heron's attempt to arrest the reader's attention, but he also uses the slur to illustrate how in his view HBCUs deceive young black people. The author's note at the

---

and ranks the merits of specific black colleges with the same markers of prestige used to rank PWIs. The fallout from the article within the black community, and particularly from HBCUs, was so embarrassing to Harvard and the *Educational Review* that the journal subsequently published response articles from four black leaders in higher education that rebutted the damage incurred by Jencks and Reisman's piece; the authors themselves also apologized for the negative influence of their work decades afterward. See Christopher Jencks and David Riesman, "The American Negro College." *Harvard Educational Review,* vol. 37, no. 1, 1967, pp. 3-60. For the black educator response, see "The American Negro College: Four Responses and a Reply." *Harvard Educational Review,* vol. 37, no. 3, 1967, pp. 451-468.

beginning of *Factory* frames this deceit as the existential dilemma facing black colleges in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement. He writes:

> Black colleges and universities have been both a blessing and a curse on Black people. The institutions have educated thousands of our people who would have never had the opportunity to get an education otherwise. They have supplied for many a new sense of dignity and integrity. They have never, however, made anybody equal. This is a reality for Black educators everywhere as students all over America demonstrate for change…. Black students in the 1970s will not be satisfied with Bullshit Degrees or Nigger Educations. They are aware of the hypocrisy and indoctrination and are searching for other alternatives. With the help of those educators who are intelligent enough to recognize the need for drastic reconstruction there will be a new era of Black thought and Black thinkers who enter the working world from colleges aware of the real problems that will face them and not believing that a piece of paper will claim a niche for them in the society-at-large. The education process will not whitewash them into thinking that their troubles are over. They will come out as Black people.[229]

The novel squanders no time in rendering its political objective visible. According to Scott-Heron, the idea of the HBCU as a safe space for the black student is a double-edged sword: though it's definitely true, it is also illusory, giving black students a false sense of security. Black students are allured by the prospect of a racism-free environment that negates the pressures and indignities that confront black students in predominantly white educational environments, such as the burden of speaking for one's race in a class or having one's presence or qualifications constantly questioned by white peers and faculty. But what black students don't think about, Scott-Heron argues, is that they are eventually going to be released back into the same hostile society that the HBCU claims to be a buffer against. Hence, "HBCUs can no longer be considered as wombs of security when all occupants realize that we are locked in the jaws of a beast." Here Scott-Heron is not arguing for HBCUs to abandon their appeal or mission, but rather for them to be more conscious of how they prepare students to reenter the "jaws" of the larger society. Black universities have lost their gift of radical transgression, he writes, and have

[229] Gil Scott-Heron, *The Nigger Factory.* Canongate Books, 2010, p. x.

been "caught short while imitating the white boy," putting more energy into keeping pace with educational standards mandated by white academia rather than equipping black students with the tools necessary for dismantling the master's house. Only then will a "drastic reconstruction" of black higher education occur, and students will "come out as Black people." To be a "Black person" and to exemplify black excellence, as he argues, is to have an ideological and intellectual orientation focused on the advancement of black people; to be black and a holder of a degree is merely not enough. The end goal of a degree for a black student must ultimately be to place that student in a stronger position intellectually to uphold black causes and work towards equality.

Part of the work of reconstruction that Scott-Heron embarks upon in this novel is the animation of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), or "Black English," as it was popularly called by many black students and younger black scholars in the era of Black Power.[230] Visually and aurally, AAVE defines the sound and style of *Nigger Factory's* narrative. Depending on the reader's point of view, Scott-Heron's use of AAVE throughout the book is either expertly executed or poorly replicated, but his deployment of it is as political as the novel's overall message. For Scott-Heron, AAVE is the lingua franca of the black masses to whom he so desperately wants HBCUs to become re-attuned. As Zora Neale Hurston's ethnographic training and ear for black sonic patterns informed her writing, Scott-Heron's recreation of the speech of everyday black men, women, and children, particularly in the South,

---

[230] June Jordan's classic 1988 essay "Nobody Mean More to Me than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan," published in the *Harvard Educational Review,* is a pedagogical manifesto of sorts, and presents a model for teaching what she calls Black English (better known as Ebonics thanks to California's controversial 1996 decision to have AAVE taught as a language in schools) as an object of critical study in the classroom. See June Jordan, "Nobody Mean More to Me Than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan." *Harvard Educational Review,* vol. 58, no. 3, 1988, pp. 363-374.

is informed by his craft as a musician. The dialogue is written as if one was listening to actual conversation, with an almost lyrical quality. In a 1972 promotional blurb for the novel, the black-owned newspaper the *New York Amsterdam News* noted that Scott-Heron had "been influenced in his writing more by musicians than by other writers."[231]

In addition to its narrative voice, *Factory* mobilizes a number of literary themes that appear throughout Scott-Heron's work, most notably the perspective of the young black male—militant, hot-blooded, eager to create meaningful change, and oftentimes struggling to figure out his relationship to the freedom struggle, the black community, and the world at large. Earl and Ralph are almost mirror representations of the two main black activist approaches within the later years of the Civil Rights movement: Earl most closely mirrors Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights establishment—he's the telegenic, well-spoken, moderate face of the student movement, and an acceptable ambassador to the college administration. In contrast is Ralph Baker, a charismatic leader and compelling orator in his own right, but also one who refuses to abide by the rules of what he calls Calhoun's "plantation." Within this leadership paradox, Baker most closely resembles Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, and other fiery young insurgent voices of the era. Scott-Heron's descriptions of Earl and Baker's physical characteristics are suffused with colorist symbolism: Earl is described as a tall, muscular, "bushy-browed Indian-looking man," while Baker is described as a bald, dashiki-wearing "six-foot two-hundred-pound football player…. A powerful Black barrel" who is a member of Omega Psi Phi, a historically black fraternity often associated with images of hyper-masculinity.[232] The majority of the supporting

[231] Jean Carey Boyd, "Literary Dateline." *New York Amsterdam News,* 25 Mar. 1972.
[232] Scott-Heron, *Nigger Factory*, pp. 6, 14.

cast is also male, from Earl’s best friends Lawman and Odds to Baker’s MJUMBE associates Abul Menka, Jonesy, Speedy Cotton, and Ben King.

In contrast, the appearances of women in *Factory* are far less frequent. Of the five major female characters that surface throughout the novel—Sheila, Baker’s girlfriend; Angie, Earl’s girlfriend; Miss Felch, Dr. Calhoun’s administrative assistant; Dora Gilliam, Earl’s landlord; and Gloria Calhoun, the first lady of Sutton University—it’s Dora Gilliam and Gloria Calhoun who have the most impactful roles, and who are central to understanding the philosophy of excellence at the heart of the novel. Sheila and Angie serve mostly as vehicles for showing Earl and Baker’s inner feelings, vulnerabilities, and flaws. In the case of Sheila, her main appearance occurs midway through the story to highlight Baker’s insecurities about his new self-created role as MJUMBE’s leader. As the student government association’s secretary, Sheila has access to the association’s files, which contains drafts of Earl’s demands to the administration. Baker wants access to these demands, and Sheila wants to prove her devotion to him, so she gives him the keys to the cabinet where the demands are stored. Baker, however, sees the relationship as a mere pastime; he doesn’t have any actual feelings towards Sheila besides the occasional adrenaline rush of sex.

Meanwhile, Angie Rodgers, Earl’s significant other, feels similarly fragile, though not manipulated in the same way as Sheila. As a young single mother raising a young son, Angie sees in Earl a caring and cooperative partner. Angie serves as a sounding board for Earl’s concerns, and provides an avenue for him to settle down and be a family man of sorts when he needs to separate himself from the student movement battlefield. Sheila and Angie are mirror images of each other—soft-spoken, supportive, nurturing, trusting, but also vulnerable and emotionally delicate. They are more literary window dressing within the overall framework of

the novel rather than driving actors, meant to be humanizing anchors for the young men they're dating. Sheila and Angie's appearances in the story are scarce, and when they do appear, their interiority is given minimal attention.

As understated as their roles are in the novel, Dora Gilliam and Gloria Calhoun are perhaps the most significant and underrated anchors of the Sutton community, and best embody the ideals of HBCU excellence that the book argues for. These women represent two kinds of black women who have formed the core of black communities for generations: Dora Gilliam, the sixty-something-year-old owner of the boarding house where Earl rents a room, represents the wisdom of the elder who did not attend college but carries a wealth of life experience with her, often dispensing advice that goes over Earl's head. Gloria Calhoun is a highly educated, locally engaged, and deeply sensitive community leader who finds herself caught between empathy for the restless students and resentment of her husband's detachedness and overbearing personality. These two characters are voices of conscience for Earl and the university president, though neither man gives much regard to the women's greatest contributions to the novel. Mrs. Gilliam, along with another of her tenants, the itinerant handyman Zeke, try to convince Earl that securing his degree is a better way of making an impact for the black community rather than trying to force a change within an institution that has its own equilibrium (which includes the power to disrupt Earl's education by suspending or expelling him). To highlight how Earl has been stressing over his leadership in the student movement and neglecting his own self-care, Mrs. Gilliam asks:

> How're your grades? I bet you don't have a point in none of 'um. When was the las' time you wrote yo' mother? I bet she don't know nothin' 'bout this foolishness. You still ain' been to see Dr. Bennett about that tooth I gave you stuff for… you see what I mean?

> Neglectin' yo' own good for a bunch that won't even help you. I know that Sutton crowd. They always have upper-class students who're too lazy to work.[233]

Both Mrs. Gilliam's assessment of Sutton students and Gloria Calhoun's criticism of President Calhoun later in the novel touch upon Scott-Heron's preoccupation with the deradicalization of the black middle class in the post-Civil Rights era. This becomes increasingly clear later in the story when we explore the interiority of Gloria Calhoun more closely. Through her backstory and her unfulfilling relationship with her husband, Gloria serves as the mouthpiece for the novel's frustrations with HBCU administrators, faculty, and students who have abandoned their commitments to black self-improvement and have settled into a hypocritical status quo. The lines of communication between the Calhouns have grown strained over the years because of their busy work schedules, and Gloria finds herself watching the evening news to learn about how her husband is handling a student strike that arises on campus, even though they are both in the same house. The present state of the couple's relationship is a stark contrast to the early days of their marriage prior to the Second World War, when Ogden was an outspoken young black psychology professor. Ogden's vocal stances on black psychology get him booted from his department chairmanship because of the university's fear that he will be seen as a Communist sympathizer. The risk that Ogden takes in a Red Scare society inspires Gloria and makes her proud of his intellectual heroism; years later, however, she feels that he's become authoritarian and uninspired as a college president in order to prove his authority to those who snatched his title years before. She berates him for deciding to call in the national guard on the protesting students, saying:

> …there are boys out there ready to die for what they believe in. Boys that are takin' a stand that you would have taken when you were their age. But, God that must have been a long time ago. And they have to face this, this death, because you're an old man. Not

[233] Scott-Heron, *Nigger Factory,* p. 181.

> really old. Not too old to see as I see, but all you have been able to see for a long time has been yourself.[234]

With that, she announces that she's leaving him, and storms out of his office. The words of Mrs. Gilliam and Gloria Calhoun turn out to be prophetic. The student protests reach a fever pitch, but Ogden Calhoun refuses to budge from his unwillingness to answer all of the students' demands. Students go on strike and stop attending classes; the president closes the university and institutes a readmission program. Students rebel and start rioting; furniture is thrown through a dormitory window and a campus van is detonated. The novel ends with Calhoun calling in the Virginia National Guard to maintain law and order on the campus, crushing the last embers of the student revolution. MJUMBE member Ben King, still hungry for one last fight, remains inside the Omega Psi Phi fraternity house and starts shooting at the guardsmen, resulting in a melee of back-and-forth gunfire. One of the bullets hits a grenade inside the house that Ben had intended to throw, and Earl watches in horror as the frat house bursts into flames, presumably with Ben trapped inside. Just as Mrs. Gilliam had predicted earlier, most of the students at Sutton, not wishing to jeopardize their chances of being readmitted and receive their diplomas, decide to flee campus rather than stand up to the Virginia guardsmen. Earl and Ben have to learn the hard way (in the case of Ben, costing his life) that they alone have to watch the revolution crumble. Gloria Calhoun's assessment of her husband comes true as well—President Calhoun would rather crush his students with the same mechanisms of law enforcement that would crush Calhoun himself if the roles were reversed. By exercising his leverage as an authority figure who has not only settled into the status quo, but staunchly defends it, Calhoun embodies Scott-Heron's definition of the "nigger": the black man who obliviously carries out the white man's bidding by

---

[234]Scott-Heron, *Nigger Factory*, p. 232.

internalizing the ideology of white supremacy. At the book's end, the reader is left questioning whether the students or Calhoun ended up "winning," and whether the upheaval will lead to any real structural change or Sutton, or if things on campus will remain the same.

In spite of its fiery rhetoric and relevance to the current events of the moment, *Nigger Factory* failed to make even a moderate splash upon its release by Dial Press in March 1972. When it did get reviewed in major outlets (almost always by white critics who failed to understand the black student movement in the first place), it elicited a combination of outright disgust, bewilderment, uncertainty, and enthusiastic support. White novelist L.J. Davis, whose review was reprinted in a number of major papers including the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Washington Post,* wrote that although the author's note was "callow and distinctly off-putting," the novel "can be read as much for its message as for its promise," and that Scott-Heron ultimately sees "into the human heart."[235] *Kirkus Review* was far less generous, calling *Factory* "an offensive novel by a young black writer who should know better, full of machismo, didacticism, conventional liberalisms, not helped any by the absolutely mundane pseudo-reportorial style and Uncle Remus dialect…. [A] very patronizing morality tale."[236] Another white reviewer, Frank DeMarco of the *Tampa Tribune*, having had no familiarity with black colleges or radical black politics, wrote, "Such a novel presents a difficult challenge to the white reviewer… can he assume that the characters are authentic?... There is no way that I can know. They seem authentic…. Yet—are they not, perhaps, just a bit stereotyped?... I doubt that any white person, or black non-student, could say."[237] DeMarco goes on to praise the novel assuming that the characters are indeed "authentic," without elucidating what exactly constitutes

[235] L.J. Davis, "Novels." *Washington Post,* 12 Mar. 1972.
[236] "The Nigger Factory." *Kirkus Reviews,* 1 Mar. 1972.
[237] "Some Fascinating Spring Novels." *Tampa Tribune,* 11 Jun. 1972.

"authenticity" in a black character. The reception of the novel in the black press isn't documented as extensively, but there were black-owned newspapers who promoted *Factory* in black-owned newspapers, such as the *New York Amsterdam News.*[238]

After *Factory,* Scott-Heron didn't publish any more novels. Shortly following the novel's release, he spent a stint in Washington, DC as a professor of English and creative writing at Federal City College, a predominantly black college that later merged with two HBCUs in the city, Washington Technical Institute and the District of Columbia Teachers College, to create the University of the District of Columbia. Scott-Heron would thereafter publish two books of lyric poetry—*So Far So Good* in 1990, and *Now and Then* in 2000—as well as a memoir, *The Last Holiday,* also in 2000. The original edition of *Factory* went out of print, though copies of it remained on the shelves of black bookshops for decades, and the novel remained popular among enthusiasts of black political fiction. The image of black excellence presented in *The Nigger Factory* represents a stark contrast to its popular understanding today. Whereas the contemporary definition focuses more on the increase of black morale gained from seeing black people in high positions of power or artistic achievement, Scott-Heron demonstrates through the example of Ogden Calhoun (and through his wife's critique of him) that achievement alone does not determine black excellence. Rather it is, in the words of the radical Trinidadian-American scholar-activist Acklyn Lynch, a willingness to be "bold and daring in recommending and effecting change. This change should provide us with a philosophical direction which moves us to redirect our creative energies in the building of our communities, people, and our nation."[239]

---

[238] Boyd, "Literary Dateline."
[239] Acklyn Lynch, *Blueprint for Change.* Institute for Positive Education, 1972, p. 2.

## “A different world than where you come from”: *A Different World* and HBCU Excellence on the Silver Screen

By the late 1980s, America had been through a succession of major social and political changes: the Black Power movement had come and gone, the black middle class had expanded exponentially, President Ronald Reagan was preparing to hand over the torch of the conservative movement to Vice President George Bush, and the anti-South African apartheid movement was in full swing, with civil rights leaders such as Rosa Parks and Randall Robinson being arrested outside the South African embassy in the nation’s capital before television cameras. HBCUs also faced a challenging new reality: more black students were enrolled at predominantly white institutions than at HBCUs for the first time in the nation’s history. The hiring sprees that had brought energetic, militant young black faculty to schools such as Fisk and Howard in the early 1970s had slowed considerably. Many black graduate students finishing doctoral programs had stopped considering teaching at HBCUs, instead opting for the competitive salaries and generous research support dangled by PWIs. Black studies departments at a number of Research 1 institutions grew in prominence and recruited a new generation of young rising-star black faculty, such as Henry Louis Gates Jr. The generation of black youth born in the late 1960s and early 1970s had grown up in a world of increased options for black Americans, but also in a world of increased fragmentation among black communities. William Julius Wilson’s landmark study *The Declining Significance of Race* hit bookshelves in 1978, arguing what many HBCU administrators and faculty had worried a decade earlier in the midst of collegiate desegregation: that as more blacks entered the middle and upper classes and gained access to more professional and educational opportunities previously closed to them, the race-based black solidarity that had

been fostered over generations in historically black institutions such as colleges, universities, and neighborhoods would splinter and disintegrate.[240]

Despite these challenges, HBCUs were also experiencing a cultural renaissance, fostered in part by black celebrities such as director Spike Lee with his 1988 film *School Daze,* which launched HBCUs into a new realm of popularity and sparked curiosity from non-black audiences as well. Perhaps the biggest promoter of HBCUs in popular culture in the 1980s and early 1990s was comedian Bill Cosby through his NBC sitcom *The Cosby Show,* which ranked as the nation's number-one prime-time program for five consecutive seasons during its run from 1984 to 1992. As the patriarch of an upper-middle-class black family in New York City, Cosby's character Dr. Heathcliff Huxtable often wore sweatshirts and T-shirts onscreen that bore the names of HBCUs such as Wilberforce, Meharry, and Tuskegee. His HBCU representations were rarely directly mentioned on the show but were always visually prominent, thrilling HBCU graduates and intriguing viewers who were unfamiliar with the missions and histories of black colleges. One theme that Heathcliff Huxtable and his wife Clair (played by Howard alumna Phylicia Rashad) did promote directly and frequently, however, was the importance of education, and particularly higher education for African Americans. The show consistently linked education to the idea of excellence, whether it was the Huxtables' son Theo realizing that his difficulties in the classroom stemmed from his dyslexia, or the frequent acknowledgement that the family's eldest daughter, Sondra, was enrolled at Princeton. The second-eldest daughter, Denise (played by Lisa Bonet), enrolled at her parents' alma mater, Hillman College, a fictional liberal arts

---

[240] See William Julius Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions.* U of Chicago P, 1978.

HBCU located in Tidewater Virginia (the same locale as Gil Scott-Heron's fictional Sutton University).

Within the Huxtable universe, Hillman College is a legendary and almost mythical space. It's the place where Heathcliff and Clair met as students and became engaged. It's a place of black pride, challenging yet nurturing professors, stately green lawns, black manhood and womanhood. It makes its first appearance in the 1987 *Cosby Show* episode "Hillman," in which the family accompanies Denise to her first convocation and Heathcliff delivers the keynote address. In the "Hillman" episode, the culture of the campus comes alive as the Huxtables meet with the college's outgoing president, Dr. Zechariah Hanes, on the stately Southern porch of the presidential residence (actually filmed at Reynolds Cottage, the presidential residence at Spelman College in Atlanta).[241] Because of the immense success of the *Cosby Show,* Hillman College offered an ideal backdrop for a sister sitcom that would portray and promote black colleges, which at that time hadn't been explored on television. *A Different World* (named after a quote from Clair Huxtable, who tells Denise on an episode of *The Cosby Show* that college is "a different world" than the one she knows) premiered on NBC on September 24, 1987, immediately following *Cosby Show,* making 8 P.M. the "black block" of NBC's Thursday night lineup. Because of its outgrowth from *Cosby Show* (the Huxtables made frequent guest appearances in the earlier seasons), *Different World* became the second-most watched program in the country after *Cosby Show* and was the second-most popular program among African American viewers, also after *Cosby*.

---

[241] D. Michael Cheers, "'The Cosby Show' Goes to Spelman College for the Season Finale." *JET,* 11 May 1987.

**Figure 8.** A scene from the 1987 *Cosby Show* episode "Hillman" depicting a commencement day march into the Hillman chapel. The episode was filmed on the campus of Spelman College. At left is Spelman's Sisters Chapel, and at right is the president's residence, Reynolds Cottage. Photograph courtesy Amazon Prime.

Despite its popularity, however, *Different World* experienced numerous growing pains in its first season. Though Bill Cosby was the show's creator and its top executive decision-maker, he left the day-to-day operations and creative decisions to the show's white producer Anne Beatts (a veteran writer from *Saturday Night Live* and the high school-based comedy *Square Pegs*) and the mostly white writing team. Beatts lacked familiarity with HBCUs and was averse to any discussion of social issues on the show. Robin R. Means Coleman and Andre M. Cavalcante also note that the show lacked the traditional characteristics of African American humor, such "call and response, humor born of pain, and race-related comedy."[242]

[242] Robin R. Means Coleman and Andre M. Cavalcante. "Two Different Worlds: Television as Producer's Medium." *Watching While Black: Centering the Television of Black Americans,* edited by Beretta E. Smith-Shomade. Rutgers UP, 2012, p. 35.

With the exception of Lisa Bonet's Denise Huxtable, whom critics panned as a weak leading character, the rest of the cast was highly acclaimed: Kadeem Hardison played Dwayne Wayne, a love-stricken math whiz from Brooklyn who had an unrequited crush on Denise; Jasmine Guy was Whitley Gilbert, a spoiled and vain heiress from an aristocratic black Virginia family; Dawnn Lewis played Jaleesa Vinson, a mature 25-year-old returning to school after an unsuccessful marriage; and Darryl M. Bell was Ron Johnson, Dwayne's wisecracking and immature sidekick. The cast was talented and highly loved by viewers, but the dialogue was often anodyne and generic, and the Hillman College setting lacked the distinct cultural characteristics of HBCU life. Race and social issues were rarely discussed in the first season. Dawnn Lewis would later tell the *Baltimore Sun,* "That first year, we were basically doing *Square Pegs* in college. They made us do silly stuff, it was just a year of fluff."[243] The quality of the writing and the morale of the cast reached such a low point that Phylicia Rashad, who appeared as a guest star during the first season and got a firsthand glimpse of the problems on the set, urged Cosby to exert his influence on the set and make some much-needed changes. "'Okay,'" she recalled him saying to her, "'I'm going to send you out there with a broom.'"[244]

Instead of having Rashad take up the metaphorical broom herself, she and Cosby enlisted her sister, actress and producer Debbie Allen, to replace Beatts and give *A Different World* the creative overhaul necessary for the show's survival. An accomplished dancer, actress, producer, and director, Allen (along with her sister Rashad) was a graduate of the theater program in Howard University's School of Fine Arts, and Allen had made a name for herself through directing, producing, and choreographing a number of sitcoms and films, including the 1980 film

[243] Michael Hill, "Much-panned 'Different World' finds its legs." *Baltimore Sun,* 21 Jun. 1991.
[244] "Phylicia Rashad Interview Part 3 of 5 – EMMYTVLEGENDS.ORG." *YouTube,* uploaded by FoundationINTERVIEWS, 28 Aug. 2009.

*Fame* and its subsequent television series. Cosby provided Allen wide latitude to make whatever changes she deemed necessary to bring new life into *Different World.* Allen's first step as the new producer was to travel to Howard, Morehouse, and Spelman to conduct focus group meetings with students to better understand how black undergraduates perceived the show and what topics dominated the HBCU scene. As a personal friend of Cosby and his wife Camille, Spelman president Johnnetta Cole offered the Spelman campus as a filming location for various scenes depicting the Hillman campus.

*Different World* incorporated a number of dramatic changes in its second season as a result of Allen's leadership and artistic vision. Two additional major characters were added: Kimberly Reese, a pre-med student (played by Charnele Brown) and Winifred "Freddie" Brooks, a free-spirited freshman (played by Cree Summer). Aretha Franklin performed a new rendition of the show's theme song, and a new intro was filmed that incorporated HBCU culture and iconography: a marching band procession led by a dancing drum major, football players, basketball coach Walter Oakes, fraternities and sororities, and even Army ROTC trainees. The storylines changed as well: whereas the first season featured an episode in which the characters had to take care of eggs as part of a psychology assignment, Debbie Allen changed the tone of the writing to reflect more pressing, on-the-ground issues confronting HBCU students.[245]

---

[245] Even after her dismissal from *A Different World,* Anne Beatts never fully grasped why her artistic vision for the show was a poor fit. She thought the impetus for the creative reset was to introduce "controversial" social issues rather renew the focus on black culture. Regarding the success of the show's cultural pivot in the second season, Beatts told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1988, "I suppose [the show's new focus] is an interesting twist…. It really seemed that last year the push from [production company] Carsey-Werner and NBC was to keep it very light. I would have loved to do more controversial shows, but that was the philosophy—just like Cosby didn't do tough shows, we were to keep it light and comic and youth-oriented." See Diane Haitman, "Different Touch to 'Different World,'" *Los Angeles Times,* 6 Oct. 1988.

Sometimes Allen's ideas didn't sync with Cosby's, particularly when Lisa Bonet became pregnant and married singer Lenny Kravitz before the start of the second season. Allen decided to incorporate Bonet's pregnancy into the show and do a storyline about Denise finding out that she was expecting. Cosby, however, was conservative about the idea of a young woman in college having a baby, and didn't want Denise's character to be conflated with Bonet's real-life situation. (In retrospect, Cosby's conservatism on the topic of teen sex seems ironic, considering his known affairs at the time and his entanglement in a sexual assault scandal three decades later.) Allen and Cosby agreed that Denise would drop out of Hillman and move back over to the *Cosby Show,* and that *Different World* would refocus on the remaining characters.

Throughout its run, *Different World* adeptly captured how the HBCU functions as a site of black political and social critique, as well as its own definition of black institutional excellence. While Scott-Heron focuses on administrators as the key to a black institution realizing its obligation to black communities, *Different World* puts forward the idea of the student as the point of origin for this institutional consciousness. In the show, Hillman's president, Dr. Barbara Bracy, and the administration are rarely seen and only occasionally mentioned. Faculty and student affairs staff are seen only in relation to students, either teaching or helping students to think through personal or intellectual dilemmas. The show's student-centered focus is partly due to its targeted demographic, but also embodies the show's ideology of excellence—that the student lies at the heart of the institution.

One such episode was "Citizen Wayne," which first aired in the spring of 1989 and featured guest star Reverend Jesse Jackson, who was still riding high from his second run for the Democratic nomination for president the previous year. The episode chronicles Dwayne Wayne's struggling campaign for student council president against his more popular rival,

Theressa Stone, whose platform proposes an increase in the number of house parties held on campus. Dwayne pledges to cultivate a more civic-minded culture on campus, but his ideas aren't gaining any traction with students. While visiting Colonel Bradford Taylor, head of Hillman's ROTC program, Jesse Jackson suddenly arrives, shocking Dwayne. Taylor hadn't told Dwayne that Jackson is an old friend and that he's staying with Taylor during his visit to campus to deliver a human rights speech. This visit sparks new energy and excitement in Dwayne and his friend Ron, who is working as the campaign manager. Ron circulates posters of himself, Dwayne, and Jackson together with hands raised in victory; the caption on the poster declares "Dwayne Wayne: He *is* Somebody!" implying that Jackson has endorsed Dwayne's campaign.

In an attempt to do damage control, Dwayne takes down the posters and apologizes to Jackson for using his image in false advertising. Jackson is quietly disturbed by the poster's implication that Dwayne wasn't "somebody" before Jackson came to the campus. In his speech on campus, Jackson weaves Dwayne's story into his appeal to Hillman students to consider the power of singular impact. The speech is delivered in Jackson's classic sermonic style, reminiscent of his keynote address at the 1984 Democratic National Convention, and succinctly encapsulates *Different World's* focus on the student as the index of HBCU excellence. He states:

> The change in America that's taken place in the last thirty years has occurred because somebody thought that they could make a difference. The change did not come from Wall Street, or the White House, or the Congress or the courts. It always started with some young person who thought that they, in fact, could make a difference. Rosa Parks got on a bus one day. The sign above the driver's head read, "Colored seats from the rear, white seats from the front. Violators will be punished by law." She refused to go to the back of the bus, and she was arrested. Dr. King went to her rescue, a 26-year-old student. He told her, "It's better you walk in dignity than ride in shame." One person can make a difference. In 1957 nine students at Little Rock Central High in Arkansas went to school one day led by the Army; they refused to bow. They made a difference. In the next few years, young Americans died so that we might live: Medgar Evers was killed in cold blood about this right to vote. Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney—two Jews and an African American—were bulldozed to death with their eyes wide open in Philadelphia, Mississippi, about this right to vote. Jimmie Lee Jackson, a 15-year-old student [sic], shot

> and killed in Marion, Alabama, about this right to vote. Four darling little girls blown up in a church in Birmingham, Alabama, one Sunday morning, all about the right to vote. They made a difference! You must make a difference. Whenever students are sober, sane, and sensitive, and put hope in their brains and not dope in their veins, they can always make a difference. Because they died, your generation has the power. John Kennedy was elected by a margin of 112,000 votes, less than one vote per precinct; everybody counts. Nixon beat Humphrey by 550,000 votes. Carter beat Ford by 1,000,007. Fewer than three million votes elected three presidents in sixteen years. Today there are 3.2 million high school seniors alone graduating. They should come across that stage with a diploma in one hand and a voter card in the other. Twelve million college students must vote. You have the power; you must now have the attitude. It's not my aptitude, but my attitude that determines my altitude, or how high I will go. My mind is a pearl, I can learn anything in the world. Just because it rains I don't have to drown. I may have been born in the slum, but the slum is not born in me; I can rise above my circumstances. Hands that once picked cotton can now pick presidents! You want to free Mandela and free South Africa? Let's vote about it![246]

Upon first glance, "Citizen Wayne" is another example of a common narrative arc in television, and particularly in shows aimed at younger viewers: a famous guest star comes and dispenses wisdom that helps the young protagonist see his or her predicament from a new perspective, spurring the protagonist to resolve the problem creatively. But the rivalry between Theressa and Dwayne reflects an age-old divide that has surfaced at numerous moments within black intellectual discourse, a divide that Harold Cruse brings into full relief in his 1967 book *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*: the tensions between old-guard leadership and newer leadership that the old guard perceives to be misguided. Theressa, the new guard, represents what Dwayne (representing a more conservative position) sees as misguided energy. Though their political positions are exaggerated, Dwayne finds himself much like Harold Cruse and Martin Luther King Jr. did in 1967, struggling to navigate new and unfamiliar political terrain which the black community finds increasingly captivating. It's no surprise that both Gil Scott-Heron's *Nigger Factory* and *Different World* employ Martin Luther King as a measuring stick for interrogating

---

[246] "Citizen Wayne." *A Different World,* season 2, episode 21, NBC, 27 Apr. 1989. *Amazon Prime,* https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B074JHMFBZ/ref=atv_dp_season_select_s2

the future direction of the black liberation struggle and HBCU education. As the product of an HBCU and the nation's most visible crusader for human rights, King represents a magnum opus of HBCU curriculum; he demonstrates how black colleges can mold an unfocused yet gifted teenager, as King was, into a potent change agent and intellectual heavyweight. He is arguably an exemplar of black institutional excellence, laying the foundation upon which Scott-Heron and *Different World* ruminate on how HBCUs can carry on the torch in a new age of systemic issues confronting the black-college sector.

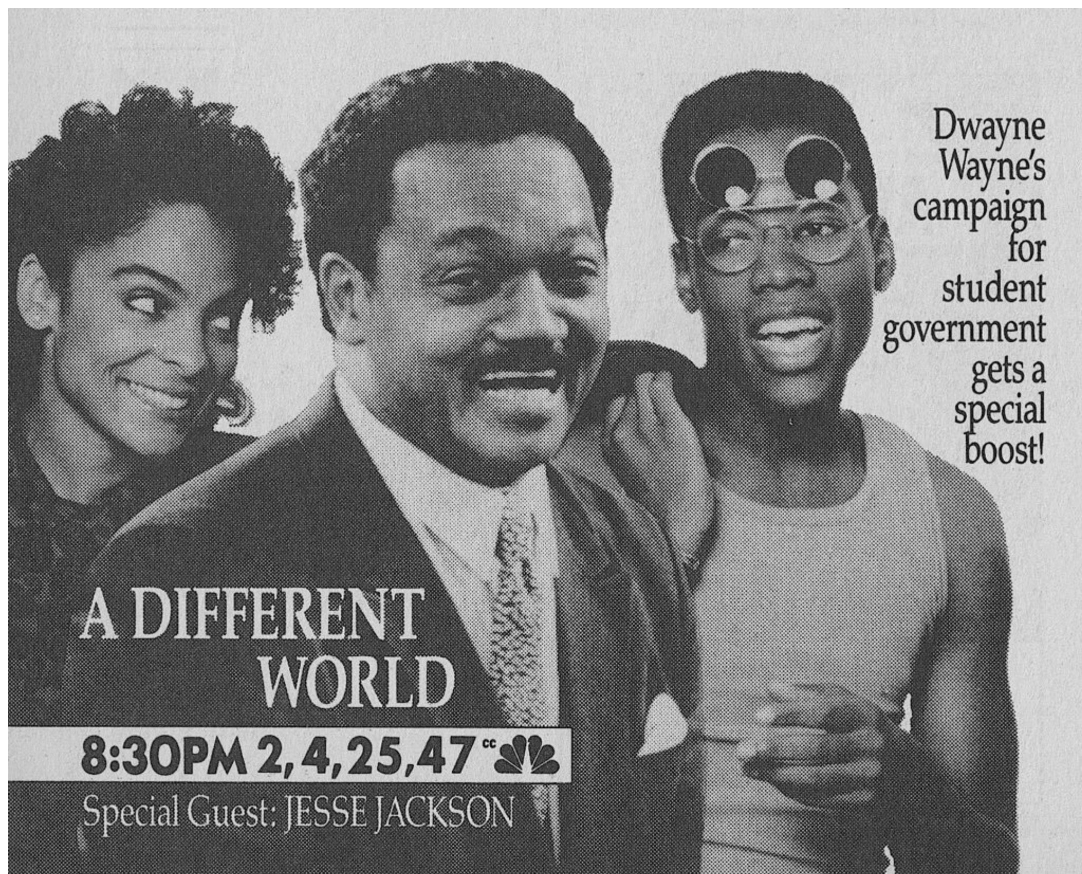



**Figure 9.** A 1989 advertisement for the "Citizen Wayne" episode of *A Different World,* featuring (from left to right) Jasmine Guy as Whitley, Jesse Jackson as himself, and Kadeem Hardison as Dwayne. The show ingeniously connected with young viewers and promoted HBCUs by mixing comedy and critical engagement with the era's pressing cultural and political issues. Photograph courtesy RetroNewsNow (@RetroNewsNow on Twitter).

Jackson's speech, however, brings another dimension to the divide between Dwayne and Theressa. His speech espouses a third ideology, one that unpacks the power of the black collective and distills it to the self-realization of the black individual (in this instance, the black student). Though black communities are unified through their shared fates, Jackson reminds students that black progress ultimately depends on the individual choices that they make—whether or not they decide to comply with or challenge unjust laws, whether they choose to vote, whether they decide to embrace or reject hopelessness and despair. Jackson's focus on the power of the individual becomes even more potent when considering the venue of the speech, Hillman College. As an HBCU, Hillman unlocks students' potential and mobilizes individual talent in service of the black community and the world at large. Through his appeal to students to "make a difference," Jackson delineates what it means for HBCU students to embody excellence, as well as the stakes of that excellence.

**Conclusion: The Continuing Impact of *The Nigger Factory* and *A Different World***

Almost five decades after the publication of *The Nigger Factory* and three decades after the last episode of *A Different World* aired on network television*,* both the novel and the sitcom serve as powerful entry points in the discourse of excellence in HBCU institutional culture. Admittedly, *Different World* has had more exposure because of its association with *The Cosby Show* and its resonance with African American college students of the Generation X years. During the show's run, applications to historically black colleges and universities increased dramatically; one only has to glance at the comment threads underneath *Different World* videos on YouTube to see a flood of testimonials from black viewers who say that the show inspired them to attend HBCUs. As civil rights organizations fought against white backlash, oppressive

South African apartheid, and the dog-whistle racial politics of the Reagan and Bush administrations, *Different World* reintroduced young black viewers to the HBCU ethos and provided a platform for youth to engage in discussions tackling the day's most pressing issues. The show has developed a massive cult following in the decades since it went into syndication, and even an online store named Hillman College has emerged in recent years, selling apparel bearing the fictional school's insignia and other paraphernalia relating to the show's characters.

Meanwhile, *The Nigger Factory* has started to emerge from its shell after several decades out of print and outside of the literary limelight. Within the last decade, and particularly following Scott-Heron's death in 2011, the novel has seen a resurgence of interest within publishing and in the academic realm. In 2010 the British press Canongate Books (which has reprinted a number of black urban-themed literary works of the 1970s) brought the book back into print, making it accessible to a new generation of students and connoisseurs of Black Power literature. The novel is asserting its presence within the academic realm as well: Lavelle Porter's book *The Blackademic Life,* a scholarly study of black academic-themed literary fiction spanning from the 19th to the 21st century, is the first published work of literary criticism that engages with Scott-Heron's novel, reading it against the critical backdrop of black intellectual history and educational philosophy. As a new generation of young HBCU presidents, faculty, administrators, and students continue to debate what it means to be black and "excellent" in a rapidly changing educational landscape, *The Nigger Factory* and *A Different World* remind us of the often-forgotten power of narrative, media, and fiction in defining HBCU identity.

# CONCLUSION

# BLACK COLLEGES AND THE CULTURAL PRODUCTION RENAISSANCE OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

These stately trees in majesty proclaim
Thy sacred deeds to everlasting fame.
Withstanding all the blight and test of time,
Are monuments to life's posterity,
And potent compass of man's destiny.
Thy campus carpeted in velvet green,
Challenges one to scale with purpose keen,
To conquer obstacles and gruesome strife,
The stony roads and craggy hills of life.
Give us the heart triumphant and humane,
Grant that we serve humanity mundane,
And, as the years roll by in ceaseless flow,
Ideals of Lincoln shall forever glow.

—Nnamdi "Ben" Azikiwe, "To Lincoln"[247]

Before he became the "father of Nigerian Nationalism," Nnamdi Azikiwe, known informally as "Zik," was a young Igbo man trying to navigate his way through the choppy waters of segregated higher education in the U.S. in the 1920s. While many young Africans over the following decades would enroll at predominantly white American universities and learn the harsh realities of racial politics and discrimination, Azikiwe's exposure to American higher education was filtered through the lens of HBCU culture, and opened him to the richness of the black intellectual world beyond his native Lagos. He started at historically black Storer College in West Virginia in 1925, where his tuition and room and board expenses were covered by an

[247] Waring Cuney, Langston Hughes, Bruce McMarion Wright, eds. *Lincoln University Poets.* Fine Editions P, 1954, p. 1.

athletic scholarship. He transferred to Howard and transferred again to Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, where he received his bachelor's degree in political science in 1930 and a master's degree in political science three years later.

His poem "To Lincoln," penned for the anthology *Lincoln University Poets*, can be read in multiple ways: in one sense, it's an ode to a black institution and the beauty and strength which it represents. But behind the bucolic descriptions of "stately trees" and "velvet green" quads, Azikiwe connects his own Nigerian experience and struggles with British occupation to the black American struggle. The "stony roads" of his poem recall James Weldon Johnson's "stony the roads we trod" in the Negro national anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," which Azikiwe would undoubtedly have heard at one point during his time at Storer, Howard, or Lincoln. Even after he would graduate from Lincoln and pursue a doctorate at Columbia University, the pro-black nationalism that informed his coursework at the HBCUs he had attended would continue to shape his journalistic and academic work. He would publish editorials in African American-owned outlets such as the *Philadelphia Tribune, Baltimore Afro-American,* and the *Associated Negro Press,* fusing together philosophies of black liberation that he would take back home and champion as Nigeria's first president following independence.

Literary works such as *Lincoln University Poets* underscore how HBCUs have championed the humanities and cultural production as foundational building blocks within radical black thought and pedagogy. The funding infrastructures supporting HBCUs also recognized this legacy. The radical liberal arts curriculum at HBCUs—and particularly classes in black literature, history, religion and philosophy, and African studies—lay the ideological framework for the wave of independence movements that spanned the black world. Cultural production and the humanistic fields functioned, in the words of the late Barbadian-American

novelist Paule Marshall, as a “triangular road” that connected America’s HBCUs to Africa and the Caribbean.[248] The creative projects that were launched at black universities such as Fisk and Howard in the post-Civil Rights era, such as Walter Leonard’s Du Bois campaign and the Howard University Press, also received considerable boosts due to influential African Americans working behind the scenes such as Ford Foundation president Franklin Thomas and program officer Benjamin Payton.

As the Black Power movement fractured and faded, grant funding ran out, leadership changed hands, and more black students started choosing PWIs increasingly over HBCUs, the curricular focus at HBCUs shifted to fields such as science, technology, and business administration, in the hopes that these areas of study would provide financial lifelines for institutions and propel students into lucrative post-graduate careers. A number of liberal arts departments at HBCUs have since consolidated or been restructured; fields such as English, religion, philosophy, history, and art are usually the most affected by these reconfigurations. At many institutions, entire programs have been cut altogether. For example, within the last decade, Fisk has eliminated its department of religious and philosophical studies; Benedict College has cut its programs in history, religion, and philosophy; and Morehouse has undergone a comprehensive restructuring of its academic departments and administrative divisions.

Though the humanities presence at HBCUs has been diminishing at the curricular level, the rise of digital media illustrates a shift in how cultural production is shaping the HBCU sector. Social media and the Internet enable students to take the lead in defining their institutions by creating and posting their own works of expressive culture. Essentially, students are the

---

[248] See Paule Marshall, “Coming of Age.” *The Brian Lehrer Show,* by Brian Lehrer, WNYC, 2009.

emerging frontier of cultural ambassadorship for the HBCU community. Typing the name of practically any HBCU into YouTube's search bar—Clark Atlanta, Morehouse, Spelman, Howard, Fisk, North Carolina A&T, Tuskegee—will produce a vast (and growing) archive of student-generated media that spans a number of genres: interviews with student leaders, marching band performances, faculty lectures, "vlogs" (video blogs) featuring current students advising prospective students on what to expect before applying or arriving to campus, comedy videos (such as "Things [Insert School Name] People Say,"), and do-it-yourself tutorials on everything from study habits to skin care to workout routines. A high school senior is more likely to be persuaded to apply to an institution by a current student's Instagram feed or YouTube vlog rather than the annual rankings and metrics published in *U.S. News and World Reports.*

At the outset of the 2020s, America still grapples mightily with the systematic racism upon which it was founded. The killings of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Mike Brown, Trayvon Martin, and countless others underscore not only the importance of black-led equity work, both on the ground and in the halls of academia, but also the role of the humanities and HBCUs in informing that equity work. HBCUs occupy a uniquely dichotomous positionality: in a society in which the American Dream, in the words of Ta-Nehisi Coates, "rests on [black people's] backs, the bedding made from our bodies," HBCUs serve as repositories of black culture and refuges for black intellectual discourse. Out of necessary, the liberal arts (and particularly, the humanities) at these institutions have been infused with the spirit of black liberation politics. As Dana Williams points out, the humanities deal chiefly with "the exploration, analysis, and exchange of ideas that inform the human experience and human

condition,"[249] and black colleges present an ideal opportunity in the twenty-first century to mobilize their strengths in liberal arts education to effect change for the nation.

The St. Vincent-born writer and editor Orde Coombs, in his 1972 poetry collection, *Do You See My Love for You Growing?,* summarizes the need for HBCUs in this critical moment. Coombs attended Yale, became a member of the secret society Skull and Bones, and became accustomed to moving within predominantly white spaces; however, the turbulence of the race riots of the 1960s, topped by Martin Luther King's assassination in 1968, challenged Coombs to probe the meaning of his life as a black man in America. "As I looked around," he wrote, "I began to see that the solutions to the problems of black people must rest, finally, in black hands."[250]

---

[249] Williams, "'The Field and Function' of the Historically Black College and University Today."
[250] Orde Coombs, *Do You See My Love for You Growing?* Dodd, Mead, 1972.

# REFERENCES

1993-1994 Annual Report of Howard University Press to the President of Howard University. Washington: Howard University Press, 1994.

Abigail Boggs and Nick Mitchell, "Critical University Studies and the Crisis Consensus." *Doctoral Degrees in W/G/S/F Studies: Taking Stock,* special issue of *Feminist Studies,* vol. 44, no. 2, 2018, p. 433.

"About UoN Press." *University of Nairobi,* https://uonpress.uonbi.ac.ke/feature/about-uon-press. Accessed 25 Feb. 2020.

Acklyn Lynch, *Blueprint for Change.* Institute for Positive Education, 1972, p. 2.

Addie Louise Joyner Butler, *The Distinctive Black College: Talladega, Tuskegee, and Morehouse.* Scarecrow P, 1977.

Advertisement for Howard University Press. *Commentary,* July 1, 1974.

Aggi Ashagre, "A Conversation With the Creator of #OscarsSoWhite." *National Public Radio,* 25 Jan. 2016. Web.

Alcione M. Amos, "Lorenzo Dow Turner: Connecting Communities Through Language." *Journal of Black Studies,* vol. 41, 2011, pp. 4-15.

Allison Dorsey, *To Build Our Lives Together: Community Formation in Black Atlanta, 1875-1906.* U of Georgia P, 2004.

Alvona Alleyne and Pam Mordecai. "Educational Publishing and Book Production in the English-Speaking Caribbean." *Library Trends,* vol. 26, no. 4, 1978, pp. 575-591.

Ann Allen Shockley, "Special Collections, Fisk University Library." *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy,* vol. 58, no. 2, 1988, pp. 151-163.

Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* Verso, 1983, pp. 6.

Benjamin E. Mays, *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography.* U of Georgia P, 1971.

Bert N. Adams. "Africanizing the African University." *Mozambique: Free at Last,* special issue of *Africa Today,* vol. 22, no. 3, Jul-Sept. 1975, pp. 51-59.

Bill Carey, "A Nashville Guest Starts a Riot." *Nashville Post,* 2 Apr. 2008.

Bill Preston Jr., "Freshman at Fisk Charged in Blaze." *Nashville Tennessean*, 19 May 1970.

Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins.* Harvard UP, 1996.

Blyden Jackson, "A Postlude to a Renaissance." *Southern Review,* no. 26, no. 4, 1990, pp. 746-766.

---, "Robert Hayden at Fisk: A Personal Note." *Robert Hayden,* special issue of *Obsidian*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1982, pp. 76-87.

Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery,* edited by William L. Andrews. W.W. Norton, 1996.

Caitlin Dickerson and Stephanie Saul, "Two Colleges Bound by History Are Roiled by the #MeToo Movement." *New York Times,* 2 Dec. 2017.

Carolyn O. Wilson Mbajekwe, *A Vision for Black Colleges in a Post-Brown America: Benjamin E. Mays, Frederick D. Patterson and the Quest for a Cultural Pluralism-Based Definition of Collegiate Desegregation.* 2006. Emory U, PhD dissertation.

Charlayne Hunter, "Congress of African People Ends Session in Atlanta." *New York Times,* 8 Sept. 1970.

---, "Ideology Dispute Shakes Black Journal." *New York Times,* 11 Mar. 1975.

Charles F. Harris. Interviewed by Shawn Wilson. 28 July 2005.

Charles V. Hamilton, "The Place of the Black College in the Human Rights Struggle." *Negro Digest,* Sept. 1967, pp. 4-10.

Christopher Jencks and David Riesman, "The American Negro College." *Harvard Educational Review,* vol. 37, no. 1, 1967, pp. 3-60.

"Citizen Wayne." *A Different World,* season 2, episode 21, NBC, 27 Apr. 1989. *Amazon Prime,* https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B074JHMFBZ/ref=atv_dp_season_select_s2

Claudia Rankine, "The Meaning of Serena Williams: On Tennis and Black Excellence." *Bodies Built for Game: The Prairie Schooner Anthology of Contemporary Sports Writing,* edited by Natalie Diaz and Hannah Ensor. U of Nebraska P, 2019, pp. 49-56.

*Color Us Black!* Directed by Dick McCutcheon. National Educational Television, 1968.

Corrie Claiborne, "Leaving Abjection: Where 'Black' Meets Theory." *Colorizing Literary Theory,* special issue of *Modern Language Studies,* vol. 26, no. 4, 1996, pp. 27-36.

Craven Crowell. "Fisk, Prof to Share Material Temporarily." *Nashville Tennessean*, 5 May 1970.

"Critical University Studies." *Center for Race and Gender, UC-Berkeley.* Web. https://www.crg.berkeley.edu/research/critical-university-studies/.

Crystal deGregory, *HBCUstory.* HBCUstory, http://hbcustory.org/.

Cynthia Lewis. Personal interview. 16 July 2019.

D. Michael Cheers, "'The Cosby Show' Goes to Spelman College for the Season Finale." *JET,* 11 May 1987.

Dana A. Williams, "'The Field and Function' of the Historically Black College and University Today: Preparing African American Undergraduate Students for Doctoral Study in the Humanities." *PMLA Profession,* November 2013.

---, "The Eloquence of the Scribe." *YouTube*, uploaded by College of Arts and Sciences, Howard University, 27 Oct. 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FwuXWOgI7DE&t=326s.

Daniel Aloi, "Alumni donate books chronicling the black experience." *Cornell Chronicle,* 22 March 2013. Web.

Daryl Cumber Dance, editor. *Fifty Caribbean Writers: A Bio-bibliographical Critical Sourcebook.* Greenwood P, 1986.

David K. Wiggins, "Symbols of Possibility: Arthur Ashe, Black Athletes, and the Writing of *A Hard Road to Glory.*" *Journal of African American History,* vol. 99, no. 4, 2014, pp. 379-402.

David Llorens, "Seeking a New Image: Writers Converge at Fisk University." *Negro Digest* June 1966, pp. 54-68.

Denk Smith, "Quarreling in the Movement: Robert Hayden's Black Arts Era." *Callaloo*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2010, pp. 449-466.

Diane Haitman, "Different Touch to 'Different World,'" *Los Angeles Times,* 6 Oct. 1988.

Donald Franklin Joyce. *Gatekeepers of Black Culture: Black-Owned Book publishing in the United States, 1817-1981.* Greenwood P, 1983.

"Dr. Walter Leonard Named New Fisk Univ. President." *JET*, 21 Oct. 1976.

Edward A. Jones, *A Candle in the Dark: A History of Morehouse College.* Judson P, 1967.

Emilia Ilieva and Hilary Chakava. "East African Publishing and the Academia." *Coming of Age:*

*Strides in African Publishing—Essays in Honour of Dr. Henry Chakava at 70,* edited by Kiarie Kamau and Kirimi Mitambo, East African Educational Publishers, 2016, pp. 106-128.

Ernie Suggs, "How 'Atlanta Compromise' divided black America and cemented Washington's legacy." *Atlanta Journal-Constitution,* 18 Sept. 2017. Web.

Ethel Payne. "Behind the Scenes: Author Weighs Suit, Wright Book Delayed by Legal Questions." *Afro-American.* 5 Apr. 1986.

Eugene J. Watts, "Black Political Progress in Atlanta: 1868-1895." *Journal of Negro History,* vol. 59, no. 3, 1974, pp. 268-286.

---, "The Police in Atlanta, 1890-1905." *Journal of Southern History* vol. 39, no. 2, 1973, pp. 165-182.

Fay Acker. Personal interview. 11 July 2019.

Fisk University Special Collections. "Fisk University Looks to the 1970s: Inauguration Address of James Raymond Lawson, Eighth President of Fisk University." Hemphill P, 1968.

---. "Minutes of the Executive Committee of the Fisk University Board of Trustees," 11 Dec. 1981.

---. "Minutes of the Fisk University Board of Trustees." 15-16 May 1970.

---. Letter from Richard G. Tune to Sherman Jones, 7 Nov. 1979.

---. Letter from Sherman Jones to Herbert L. Harper, 21 Sept. 1979.

---. Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 1979.

Fisk University, "Catalog of Fisk University, 1915-1916." Fisk UP, 1915.

"Gender Identity Policy." *Morehouse College*. Web. https://www.morehouse.edu/genderidentity/

George B. Hutchinson, *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line.* Harvard UP, 2006.

George Napper, *Blacker Than Thou: The Struggle for Campus Unity.* William B. Eerdmans, 1973, p. 7.

Giddings, Paula. Preface. *A Poetic Equation: Conversations Between Nikki Giovanni and Margaret Walker,* by Nikki Giovanni and Margaret Walker. Washington, DC: Howard UP, 1983, pp. vii.

Gil Scott-Heron, *The Nigger Factory.* Canongate Books, 2010.

Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report From Part One*. Broadside P, 1972.

Hamilton Bims, "Business as Usual at Flexible Fisk." *Ebony* (April 1974), pp. 67-74.

Harold H. Oliver, "The Twilight of Personalism at Boston University: The Testimony of a Participant-Observer." *In the Beginning: The Martin Luther King Jr. International Chapel at Morehouse College,* edited by Echol Nix Jr. Mercer UP, 2015, 121-131.

Henry Chakava. "Kenyan Publishing: Independence and Dependence." *Publishing and Development in the Third World,* edited by Philip G. Altbach, Hans Zell, 1992, pp. 119-150.

Henry N. Drewry and Humphrey Doermann, *Stand and Prosper: Private Black Colleges and Their Students.* Princeton UP, 2001.

Hollie I. West, "Howard: New Black Press." *Washington Post,* 4 Nov. 1972.

Hortense Spillers. "The Idea of Black Culture." *YouTube,* uploaded by UWaterlooEnglish, 24 Nov. 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P1PTHFCN4Gc&t=164s.

Howard Kaplan, "Stop-Loss: Restoring the Aaron Douglas Murals at Fisk University." *Smithsonian American Art Museum,* 14 Oct. 2008. Web. https://americanart.si.edu/blog/eye-level/2008/14/1070/stop-loss-restoring-aaron-douglas-murals-fisk-university.

Howard Thurman, "America in Search of a Soul," in *A Strange Freedom,* edited by Walter Earl Fluker and Catherine Tumber. Beacon P, 1999.

"Howard University must dare to challenge American philanthropy as no other black institution ever has before." Box 23. James E. Cheek Faculty-Staff File Folder. University Archives. Howard University Moorland-Spingarn Center. Washington, DC.

"Howard University Press Book Publishing Institute." Howard University Press, 1991.

"Howard University Self-Study Report, 1999." Howard University. Accessed 29 Feb. 2020, http://www.howard.edu/msche/selfstudy/default.htm.

Ibram H. Rogers, *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstruction of Higher Education, 1965-1972,* Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

"Interim Report of the Committee on the Status of Blacks in the Profession." *PS*, vol. 2, 1969, pp. 552–557.

Ivan Van Sertima, editor. *Nile Valley Civilizations.* Journal of African Civilizations, 1985.

J.F. Ade Ajayi, et al. *The African Experience with Higher Education.* Accra: Association of African Universities, 1996.

Jack Sirica, “Fisk Buildings Gain ‘Historic’ Status.” *Tennessean*, 10 Feb. 1978.

Jacqueline Trescott, “Catalysts for Change in the World of Black Writers.” *Washington Star-News,* 5 May 1974.

---, “The Men and Mystique of Morehouse.” *Washington Post,* 9 Nov. 1987.

James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935.* U of North Carolina P, 1988.

James E. Cheek, “To Seek a New Direction: Howard in the Seventies.” *New Directions,* vol. 6, no. 4, July 1979, pp. 43-46.

---, “Remarks by Dr. James E. Cheek, President, Howard University, at the Launching of the Howard University Press, National Press Club, Monday, April 8, 1974.” Howard University Press, 1974.

---. Interview with Larry Crowe. *HistoryMakers,* 6 November 2003.

James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson*. Penguin, 2008.

Janell Walden Agyeman. Personal interview. 16 Dec. 2019.

Jarrett Carter Sr., *HBCU Digest.* Carter Media Enterprises, https://hbcudigest.substack.com/.

Jean Carey Boyd, “Literary Dateline.” *New York Amsterdam News,* 25 Mar. 1972.

Jeffrey J. Williams, “Deconstructing Academe.” *Chronicle of Higher Education,* 19 Feb. 2012. Web. https://www.chronicle.com/article/An-Emerging-Field-Deconstructs/130791.

---, “The Need for Critical University Studies.” *A New Deal for the Humanities: Liberal Arts and the Future of Public Higher Education,* edited by Gordon Hunter and Feisal G. Mohamed. Rutgers UP, 2015.

Jelani M. Favors, *Shelter in a Time of Storm: How Black Colleges Fostered Generations of Leadership and Activism.* U of North Carolina P, 2019.

Jim C. Harper II, *Western-Educated Elites in Kenya, 1900-1963: The African American Factor.* Routledge, 2006.

Joe B. Richardson, *A History of Fisk University, 1865-1946.* U of Alabama P, 1986.

Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research.” *Journal of Peace Research,* vol. 6, no. 3, 1969, pp. 167-191.

John Herbert Roper, *The Magnificent Mays: A Biography of Benjamin Elijah Mays.* U of South Carolina P, 2012.

John Hope Franklin, “John Hope Franklin: The Fisk Years.” *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 49, 2005, pp. 74-83.

John Oliver Killens, “The Artist and the Black University.” *The Culture of Revolution,* special issue of *Black Scholar,* vol. 1, no. 1, 1969, pp. 61-65.

Jonathan Scott Holloway, *Confronting the Veil: Abram Harris Jr., E. Franklin Frazier, and Ralph Bunche, 1919-1941.* U of North Carolina P, 2002.

Joshua Clark Davis, “Black Bookstores and the Black Power Movement: An Interview with Paul Coates.” *Black Perspectives,* 5 Jun. 2018. Web.

Judith Cummings, “Fisk U. Cutting Faculty and Salaries.” *New York Times*, 14 July 1975.

June Jordan, “Nobody Mean More to Me Than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan.” *Harvard Educational Review,* vol. 58, no. 3, 1988, pp. 363-374.

Kadian Pow, “Insider/Outsider: Olivia Pope and the Pursuit of Erotic Power.” *Gladiators in Suits: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Representation in Scandal,* edited by Simone Adams et al. Syracuse UP, 2019, p. 175.

Katherine I.E. Wheatle, “Exploring the Context and Influences Behind the Founding of the Journal of Negro Education.” *Historical Perspectives with Current Studies on Testing and Trust in Education,* special issue of *Journal of Negro Education,* vol. 86, no. 1, 2017, pp. 3-12.

Katrina M. Sanders, *Intelligent and Effective Direction: The Fisk University Race Relations Institute and the Struggle for Civil Rights, 1944-1969.* New York: Peter Lang, 2005.

Keith Lamar Jennings, *The Destruction of a Black Institution: A Political Economy of Fisk University, 1977-1984.* MA Thesis. Clark Atlanta University, 1994.

Kelly Miller, “Howard University: The National Negro University.” *The New Negro,* edited by Alain Locke. Atheneum, 1992, pp. 312-322.

“King Memorial Chapel Proposed by Morehouse.” *New Journal and Guide,* 20 Apr. 1968.

Kipton E. Jensen, *Howard Thurman: Philosophy, Civil Rights, and the Search for Common Ground.* U of South Carolina P, 2019.

---, *Howard Thurman: Philosophy, Civil Rights, and the Search for Common Ground.* U of South Carolina P, 2019.

L.J. Davis, "Novels." *Washington Post,* 12 Mar. 1972.

Lavelle Porter, *The Blackademic Life: Academic Fiction, Higher Education, and the Black Intellectual.* Northwestern UP, 2020, p. 7.

Lawrence E. Carter Sr. Interviewed by Denise Gines. 18 Apr. 2011.

---. Personal interview, 13 Dec. 2019.

---, "King Collection: Oral History – Dean Lawrence Carter." *YouTube*, uploaded by MorehouseCollege, 14 Jun. 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xb7UvT7F3MM.

Layli Phillips and Barbara McCaskill, "Who's Schooling Who? Black Women and the Bringing of the Everyday into Academe, or Why We Started 'The Womanist.'" *Postcolonial, Emergent, and Indigenous Feminisms,* special issue of *Signs,* vol. 20, no. 4, 1995, pp. 1007-1018.

Leonard Ray Teel, "Benjamin Mays: Teaching by Example, Leading Through Will." *Change,* vol. 14, no. 7, 1982, pp. 14-22.

Lerone Bennett Jr. *The Challenge of Blackness.* Johnson Publishing, 1972.

Leslie M. Collins, *One Hundred Years of Fisk University Presidents, 1875-1975*. Hemphill's, 1987.

Lester C. Lamon, "The Black Community in Nashville and the Fisk University Student Strike of 1924-1925." *Journal of Southern History*, vol. 40, no. 2, 1974, pp. 225-244.

Letter from Lucius M. Tobin to Charles E. Batten. *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr., Volume 1: Called to Serve, January 1929-June 1951,* edited by Clayborne Carson and Penny A. Russell. U of California P, 1992.

Letter from Martin Luther King Jr. to Reverend Kelly Miller Smith, 9 June 1960, in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Volume V: *Threshold of a New Decade*, edited by Clayborne Carson.

Linda M. Perkins, "Merze Tate and the Quest for Gender Equity at Howard University: 1942-1977." *History of Education Quarterly,* vol. 54, no. 4, 2014, p. 522.

Louis R. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901-1915.* Oxford UP, 1983.

Louis W. Sullivan and David Chanoff, *Breaking Ground: My Life in Medicine.* U of Georgia P, 2014.

Lucius T. Outlaw Jr. Personal interview. 19 Sept. 2019.

Manning Marable, "Beyond Brown: The Revolution in Black Studies." *Brown, Black, and Beyond: African American Studies in the 21st Century,* special issue of *The Black Scholar,* vol. 35, no. 2, pp. 11-21.

---, *Black Leadership.* Columbia UP, 1998.

Margaret Wade-Lewis, *Lorenzo Dow Turner: First African-American Linguist.* Temple UP, 1988.

Marilyn Marshall, "Fisk Bounces Back." *Ebony,* May 1987, pp. 33-40.

Martha Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus,* U of California P, 2014.

Martin Luther King Jr. "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence." *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr., Volume V: Threshold of a New Decade, January 1959-December 1960.* Edited by Clayborne Carson et al. U of California P, 1992, pp. 419-425.

Michael Hill, "Much-panned 'Different World' finds its legs." *Baltimore Sun,* 21 Jun. 1991.

Michael Nelson. Personal interview. 21 July 2019.

"Morehouse College to Get MLK Collection." *National Public Radio,* 26 June 2006. Web.

Nancy Hopkins Reily, *Georgia O'Keeffe: A Private Friendship, Part 2: Walking the Abiquiu and Ghost Ranch Land.* Sunstone P, 2009.

Nathaniel Clark Smith and Paul Laurence Dunbar, "The Tuskegee Song (mixed voices)." Tuskegee Institute P, 1902. Musical score.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, "Education for a National Culture." *Barrel of a Pen: Resistance to Repression in Neo-Colonial Kenya,* Africa World Press, 1983.

O'Neil Hendrick, "Communists, SNCC, Black Power Blamed: A Look at the Civil Rights Move on Negro Campuses." *Madera Daily Tribune*, 22 May 1967.

Orde Coombs, *Do You See My Love for You Growing?* Dodd, Mead, 1972.

---. "The Necessity of Excellence: Howard University." *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning,* Mar. 1973.

Patrick J. Gilpin and Marybeth Gasman, *Charles S. Johnson: Leadership Beyond the Veil in the*

*Age of Jim Crow.* State University of New York P, 2003.

Paul Laurence Dunbar to Booker T. Washington, 23 Jan. 1902, typed letter. Booker T. Washington Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (6-7). http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/african-american-odyssey/images/06/0607001r.jpg.

Paul Laurence Dunbar, "On the Dedication of Dorothy Hall." *The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar,* edited by Joanne M. Braxton. U of Virginia P, 1993.

Paula Giddings. Interview by Judy Richardson, 12 Dec. 1988. *Eyes on the Prize.* http://digital.wustl.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=eop;cc=eop;rgn=div2;view=text;idno=gid5427.0788.058;node=gid5427.0788.058%3A1.19.

Paule Marshall, "Coming of Age." *The Brian Lehrer Show,* by Brian Lehrer, WNYC, 2009.

penULTIMATE, Ltd. "Margaret Walker Alexander, Friday Night. Oct. 21, 1972," Soundcloud. Web.

Peter Givler. "University Press Publishing in the United States." *Scholarly Publishing: Books, Journals, Publishers, and Libraries in the Twentieth Century.* John Wiley and Sons, 2002, 107-120.

Phylicia Rashad Interview Part 3 of 5 – EMMYTVLEGENDS.ORG." *YouTube,* uploaded by FoundationINTERVIEWS, 28 Aug. 2009.

"Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs): A Background Primer." *New America,* 21 Jan. 2015. Web. https://www.newamerica.org/post-secondary-national-policy-institute/our-blog/predominantly-black-institutions-pbis/.

Rayford W. Logan, *Howard University: The First Hundred Years.* New York UP, 1965.

Raymond Wolters, *The New Negro on Campus.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1977.

Renee Mayfield. Personal interview. 21 July 2019.

Richard Robbins, *Sidelines Activist: Charles S. Johnson and the Struggle for Civil Rights.* Jackson, Miss.: UP of Mississippi, 1996.

Robbie Banks, "The Savior Has Come." *Fisk Forum.* 8 Sept. 1977.

Robert C. Smith, *Ronald W. Walters and the Fight for Black Power, 1969-2010,* SUNY P, 2018.

Robert M. Franklin Jr., "A Message From the Soul of Morehouse." *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education,* no. 64, 2009, pp. 47.

Robin R. Means Coleman and Andre M. Cavalcante. "Two Different Worlds: Television as Producer's Medium." *Watching While Black: Centering the Television of Black Americans,* edited by Beretta E. Smith-Shomade. Rutgers UP, 2012, p. 35.

Ron Charles, "'We need diverse books,' they said. And now a group's dream is coming to fruition." *Washington Post,* 3 Jan. 2017. Web.

Russell Rickford, *We Are an African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination*. Oxford UP, 2016.

Saida Grundy, "'An Air of Expectancy': Class, Crisis, and the Making of Manhood at a Historically Black College for Men." *Bringing Fieldwork Back In: Contemporary Urban Ethnographic Research*, special issue of *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science,* vol. 642, 2012, pp. 43-60.

Sam Hopkins, "Morehouse Gets Green Light to Open Med School This Fall." *Atlanta Constitution,* 25 Apr. 1978.

Sekile M. Nzinga, *Lean Semesters: How Higher Education Reproduces Inequity.* Johns Hopkins UP, 2020.

"Some Fascinating Spring Novels." *Tampa Tribune,* 11 Jun. 1972.

Stephanie Li, *Signifying Without Specifying: Racial Discourse in the Age of Obama*. Rutgers UP, 2012.

Steven A. Holmes. "Struggling Through Crises at Howard University." *New York Times,* 14 Dec. 1994.

Susan Wagner. "Howard University Launches Its Own Press," *Publishers Weekly,* 4 Mar. 1974, pp. 48-50.

Ta-Nehisi Coates. *Between the World and Me.* Spiegel and Grau, 2015.

Tara Bahrampour. "Students say dog walkers on Howard campus are desecrating hallowed ground." *Washington Post,* 19 Apr. 2019. Web.

Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63.* Simon and Schuster, 1988.

Tewodros Abebe. "Office of the Provost: Future of Howard University Press." Received by Howard University Community, 25 May 2011.

"The American Negro College: Four Responses and a Reply." *Harvard Educational Review,* vol. 37, no. 3, 1967, pp. 451-468.

"The Class of '83." *Ebony,* Aug. 1983, pp. 154-156, 158.

"The Nigger Factory." *Kirkus Reviews,* 1 Mar. 1972.

"Things Morehouse People Say." *YouTube,* posted by Khiry KJ Lee. Video removed.

Tony Brown, "Fisk Trustees Should Quit." *Cincinnati Herald,* 17 Dec. 1983.

United States, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform.* National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983.

"University Press: February 7, 1919." Box 64: HU Medical Alumni Association Programs through HU Press Catalogues. HU Press Abstracts Folder. University Archives, Howard University Moorland-Spingarn Research Center. Washington, DC.

Vida L. Avery, *Philanthropy in Black Higher Education: A Fateful Hour Creating the Atlanta University System.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Vincent Harding, "Toward the Black University." *Ebony,* Aug. 1970, pp. 156-159.

Vinciane Ngomsi. "Howard Students Remind a Gentrifier He's a Guest in Their Home After Controversy Over Dog Walking on Campus." *Blavity,* 19 Apr. 2019. Web.

W. Paul Coates. Personal interview. July 2019.

W.A. Reed Jr., "Jesus Black Leader: Fisk Speaker." *Nashville Tennessean*, 8 Dec. 1969.

W.E.B. Du Bois, "On the Coming of John." *The Souls of Black Folk,* Penguin Classics, 1996, pp. 171-186.

---, "The Souls of Black Folk." *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings,* edited by Nathan Huggins. Library of America, 1987, pp. 347-547.

---, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880.* Free P, 1998.

Walter Bgoya and Mary Jay, "Publishing in Africa from Independence to the Present Day." (*In)Visibility in African Cultures,* special issue of *Research in African Literatures,* vol. 44, no. 2, 2013, pp.17-34.

Walter Dyson, *Howard University, the Capstone of Negro Education: A History, 1867-1940.* Howard University Graduate School, 1941.

Walter Leonard. Interview by Julieanna Richardson. *HistoryMakers,* 27 Jan. 2003, https://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/walter-j-leonard-39. Accessed 12 Feb. 2020.

Walter Massey, “Inaugural Address.” Morehouse College, 16 Feb. 1996.

Waring Cuney, Langston Hughes, and Bruce McMarion Wright, editors. *Lincoln University Poets*. Fine Editions P, 1954.

“What is an HBCU?” *White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities.* Web. https://sites.ed.gov/whhbcu/one-hundred-and-five-historically-black-colleges-and-universities/.

William Julius Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions.* U of Chicago P, 1978.

William Lonsdale Watkinson, “The Invincible Strategy.” *The Supreme Conquest.* Fleming H. Revell Co, 1907, pp. 206-218.

Zachery R. Williams, *In Search of the Talented Tenth: Howard University Public Intellectuals and the Dilemmas of Race, 1926-1970.* U of Missouri P, 2009.

Zora Neale Hurston, “What White Publishers Won't Print.” *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present,* edited by Angelyn Mitchell. Duke UP, 1994, pp. 117-121.