Seeking Sanctuary: (Re)Claiming The Power Of Historically Black Colleges And Universities As Places Of Black Refuge

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ABSTRACT
Historically, Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have consistently functioned as engines of social change and racial uplift and are among the few places where Black culture is placed at the forefront, appreciated, and sustained. Today and in the future, it will be paramount for HBCUs to not only embody their eminent legacies of social change, but to also serve as fierce settings that will ultimately champion action-oriented change for Black communities and the society at large. This cannot happen if Black students with additional oppressed identities feel ‘othered’ or shamed among their own within these unique post-secondary environments. In these tentative moments following the election, this work provides a call and challenge to HBCUs to capitalize on their unique abilities to serve as spaces of refuge for Black students, so long as they embrace the full spectrum of Blackness present.

A call ‘to flesh’

There is a compelling moment that occurs in Toni Morrison's seminal work Beloved – set just after the American Civil War. During a powerful scene, the character Baby Suggs preaches to a group of freed slaves. During her sermon she pleads:

Here, in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick 'em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it … You got to love it. This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. (Morrison, 1987, p. 104)

In this moment, Baby Suggs issues a call. She fervently challenges racist ideology and bestows honor, pride, and courage upon those of us who live and dwell in Black skin. 'The self-renovating language of Morrison's “unchurched preacher” retrieves and honors the Black self that has been stifled' (Farshid, 2012, p. 500). Baby Suggs’ words have summoned me to (re)call a strength – really a formidable tenacity that Black communities as involuntary minorities have had to perpetually muster during the numerous eras of peril, uncertainty, and discord that we have endured since our unchosen arrivals on American soil. This passage from Beloved has conjured renewed meaning for me following the events that occurred on Tuesday, 8 November 2016.

The volatile election that our country just endured with the selection of a candidate whose campaign was built upon White supremacy, blatant racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and misogyny embodies an extreme vacillation from the very administration that precedes it (Remnick, 2016). So fearful of
the consequences to any affront to White privilege, millions of White Americans flocked to a political regime that supports and maintains the systemic oppression of those who are the most vulnerable in the American societal context (Morrison, 2016). The results of the election of the 45th president of the United States expose a flagrant resistance to the Black flesh that held office and made history prior to the contentious political and social condition that we find our country in currently. Van Jones passionately put into words what many felt immediately following the elections results and asserted, ‘This was a Whitelash against a changing country … It was Whitelash against a Black president in part. And that’s the part where the pain comes’ (Ryan, 2016, n.p.). The election of Barack Obama, the first Black president of the United States, presented the illusion of dramatic racial progress in our country, and it was eventually followed by White backlash or ‘Whitelash’ that has been pervasive in this country for centuries. Remarkable racial inroads within the American societal context have almost always been followed by this brand of White resistance. For instance, the Reconstruction period in the nineteenth century was countered with over a century of repressive Jim Crow segregation. In response, Black communities have fleshed – resisted, transgressed, and demanded to be seen and heard even in the midst of enduring struggle. We flesh!

Today, we now must flesh more than ever. The etymology of the word flesh derives from the Old English meaning ‘kindred.’ In Beloved, Toni Morrison made a bold request to Black communities with her invitation to flesh. It transcends place and time. She acknowledged that African Americans share a united kinship and humanity within our communities. In our pain and rebellion, we have fleshed. In triumph and love, we have fleshed. We live and experience our being in our flesh – flesh that is often misunderstood. During these complicated, unclear, and mystifying times I have been in a deeply contemplative state and pondered where my people who live, dwell, and revel in their Black skin may seek refuge. As an educator, I cannot help but reflect on where these spaces to flesh and be in communion could, should, and must now occur. Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) should undoubtedly be seen as viable options to serve as these spaces of sacred sanctuary.

A legacy of embodied resistance

HBCUs have a distinct educational history when compared to other postsecondary institutions in the United States (Brown & Davis, 2001). Far from a monolithic group, these institutions were established to provide higher education to Black students during an era when higher education opportunities were virtually non-existent for African Americans who wished to pursue higher learning (Anderson, 1988; Jean-Marie, 2006). HBCUs have consistently functioned as engines of social change and racial uplift and are among the few places where Black culture is placed at the forefront, appreciated, and sustained (Patton, 2016). Unfortunately, the relevance of these institutions is constantly challenged due to the racism/White supremacy that is prevalent and deeply embedded within higher education and society (Tobolowsky, Outcalt, & McDonough, 2005). There is a pervasive myth present within higher education dialogues asserting that HBCUs are inferior and or ‘lesser than’ historically White institutions (HWIs). This brand of uniformed reasoning is virulent and dangerous, especially considering that HBCUs have and continue to take the helm of educating underserved populations who do not traditionally have access to higher education.

Upon delving further into the fallacious ‘HBCU relevance’ myth, it would be negligent to ignore the fact that the definitions and institutional designations associated with HBCUs are racially coded and present glaring contrasts within education discourses (Patton, 2016). There is an underlying tension present where ‘elite’ institutions equate to wealthy and White, and all others fall below this ‘standard’ and are marked to distinguish them apart by social class or racial group association (e.g. the ‘Black’ moniker in HBCU) (Hutcheson, 2008; Patton, 2016). The name HBCU itself is a loaded designation. ‘It appears that scholars and higher education practitioners face an important but seldom asked question about naming higher education institutions (and experiences) and the consequences of (boldly) carrying out this act’ (Hutcheson, 2008, p. 43). We must not ignore the fact that the word Black is included in the naming of these schools and the inherent racial implications that this association creates. There are considerable effects ‘when race is tied to territory in a way that mimics the White’s only/colored only designations
of the past’ (Hooks, 1992, p. 15). HBCUs are viewed through highly racialized lenses within the broader societal context, and as a result of their status as minority serving institutions (MSIs), have been and are perceived as academically inferior (Minor, 2004). These prejudices impact the colleges and the students who choose to attend HBCUs. Notwithstanding the aforementioned, HBCUs represent spaces of historic and contemporary resistance. Their continued existences stand in direct opposition to the systemic forces that seek to malign their legacies and thwart their necessary survivals.

Deliberate and concentrated efforts of social justice resistance are deeply embedded within the cultural fabrics of HBCUs. Throughout their histories, HBCUs have been the locations where some of the world’s most influential leaders and activists have emerged (Gasman & Commodore, 2014). These institutions and their students were major forces during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and early 1960s, the Black Power movement of the 1970s, and even during the fight to end apartheid in South Africa in the 1980s and 1990s (Mobley & Johnson, 2015; Williamson, 2004). Contemporarily, they still are at the fore of advocating for change.

HBCUs must be intentional about directly accounting for the cultural climate and shifts in Black communities (and the wider society) so that HBCUs can not only prepare a new generation of agents for social change, but also continue to effectively produce students who are committed to service and social justice. (Douglas, 2012, p. 382)

Black colleges are constantly faced with numerous obstacles and new responsibilities that must be confronted if they are to remain viable (Douglas, 2012; Gasman & Tudico, 2008). Today, it will be paramount for HBCUs to not only embody their eminent legacies of social change, but to also serve as fierce settings that will ultimately champion action-oriented change for Black communities and the society at large. HBCUs are highly regarded for their missions that are dedicated to social justice and racial advancement. It is imperative that within the current societal climate that these distinct institutions live out the full potential of their compelling missions and fully support, embrace, and educate African Americans who have been and still are marginalized across the nation (Mitchell & Hilton, 2016). In the present, HBCU communities will have to be advocates for and support all Black identities and their intersections – especially those that lie in the margins (e.g. social class, sexuality, gender, gender identity, religion, etc.).

**The necessity for advocacy in the intersections**

There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle, because we do not live single-issue lives. Indigenous identities, much like other identities, simply cannot be separated out in this simplistic way. (Lorde, 2007/1984, p. 138)

As Black students encounter HBCU contexts, an essential facet of their experiences is that the fundamental nature of being Black is revered; HBCUs engrain this ideal in their students, the academic structure, and campus cultures (Mobley, 2015). However, on many of these campuses rather than emboldening their students to walk in their own truth(s) and fully embrace all of their authentic selves, many HBCUs compel students who do not ‘fit’ within a particular brand of Blackness to silence certain identities (Mobley & Johnson, 2015). This simply cannot continue to occur. Today, HBCUs and their students exist at a crossroad, an intersection of border spaces constituted by race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality (Anzaldúa, 1999). Blackness must be seen, empowered, and embraced intersectionally on these campuses. In order to achieve this aim, HBCUs must shed the intra-racial respectability politics that often permeate their campuses.

Pattillo (2007) contended that within Black communities there are ‘standards’ that are imposed through an emphasis on respectability, defined as the Black communities’ embodiment of conservatism, patriarchal family relations, and intellectual achievement’ (p. 104). This standard excludes ‘any Blacks who [do] not adhere to the most puritanical of structures (i.e. loose women, practitioners of ecstatic religions, as well as gays and lesbians)’ (p. 117). In framing her argument, Pattillo emphasized that the Black community enforces these norms intra-racially. In essence, members of the African-American community ‘seek to rehabilitate the race’s image by embodying respectability, enacted through an ethos of service to the masses’ (Pattillo, 2007, p. 104). This ethos is based on Eurocentric values and is deeply...
rooted in racial uplift ideology and a commitment to advance the Black community. When relating the idea of respectability to HBCU communities an inherent paradox exists. While these institutions seek to personify and enact the ideal of racial uplift and service to the Black community via higher education, they subtly send messages that if students do not adhere to these values that they may not belong.

Contemporary HBCU environments must begin to contend with the reality that their students must be served in more holistic manners. While it is still vital for HBCUs to facilitate the racial identity development process for Black students, these institutions must also face the realization that their students come to campus with many intersecting identities that must receive the same support and attention. More HBCUs must wrestle to live out their missions by moving beyond respectability politics and creating pathways where all African African/Black students are educated on campuses where they learn, live, and thrive. HBCUs must embrace Blackness, just Blackness, so no student has to question, Historically Black for whom? (Mitchell & Hilton, 2016, n.p.)

Free and bold and beautiful Blackness must not be stifled by the convergence of race, gender, gender identity, religion, sexuality, or class within HBCU contexts. For this to occur, these complex nuances must not be viewed as what Du Bois (2003/1903) described as, a ‘problem’ to be fixed. Blackness, full Blackness, must be embraced and challenged to shed light on the nuances and complexities that lie within Black communities. To not acknowledge these extraordinary distinctions is disrespectful of the past, negligent in the present, and an injustice for the future. HBCU communities must strive for and be beholden to intersectional Blackness. If not, then these formidable post-secondary spaces will personify and symbolically reiterate lived spaces of exclusion for forms of Blackness that are many times relegated to the margins within Black communities and the broader societal context – especially now.

In these tentative moments following the election, HBCUs have a duty. They must work with their diverse student bodies to help them unravel and appreciate the beauty in their differences. This cannot happen if Black students with additional oppressed identities feel ‘othered’ or shamed among their own. The queer or questioning student must be affirmed. The Muslim student has to be safe. The low-income student must not feel invisible. It would be wise for HBCU communities to capitalize on their unique abilities to serve as spaces of refuge for Black students, so long as they embrace and provide access to the full spectrum of Blackness that is present and apparent.

Notes
1. African American and Black are used interchangeably throughout this study to refer to persons whose ancestry denotes Black racial groups of Africa, as defined by the US Census Bureau.
2. Ogbu and Simons (2008) contended that ‘involuntary (nonimmigrant) minorities are people who have been conquered, colonized, or enslaved. Unlike immigrant minorities, the non-immigrants have been made to be a part of the U.S. society permanently against their will. Two distinguishing features of involuntary minorities are that (1) they did not choose but were forced against their will to become a part of the United States, and (2) they themselves usually interpret their presence in the United States as forced on them by White people .’ (pp. 165–166)
3. Van Jones is a Black political commentator, New York Times bestselling author, and former adviser to the White House’s Council on Environmental Quality during President Barack Obama’s administration.
4. I use historically White institutions instead of predominately White institutions to acknowledge and discern that the exact numbers/percentages of White students have less to do with overall campus populations than the ‘historical and contemporary racial infrastructure that is in place, the current campus racial culture and ecology, and how these modern-day institutions still benefit Whites at the expense of Black communities and other groups of color’ (Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2006, p. 322).
5. The Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended, defined an HBCU as: ‘any historically Black college or university established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of Black Americans’ (White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges & Universities Website, 2017).
6. Intersectionality is a concept that was developed by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1995), and is a critical manner of analysis often used to holistically glean understanding into how one reconciles myriad oppressed identities as they navigate several sociocultural systems of resistance and power (Nicolazzo, 2016). It is a way of knowing that provides distinct connections between one’s multidimensional identities and their lived experiences on one extreme, but also bestows a foundation that must recognize the historical, geographic, legal, political, and social contexts in which one perpetually exists (Bowleg, 2013; Crenshaw, 1995; Nicolazzo, 2016).
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