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Internalized Oppression: Exploring the Nuanced Experiences of Gender and Sexuality in Historically Black Colleges and Universities

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Abstract

In the American South at the turn of the twentieth century, quality education was scarce and legislative laws were put in place to ensure that African American individuals remained far away from Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). As a result, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) became a catalyst for change in this “separate but equal” society. This article will explore the significance of HBCUs in elevating Black Americans throughout the twentieth century, while also assessing the conservative nature of the institutions and their inflexibility towards the various nuances of African American communities. While it is not particular to HBCUs, a tolerance of toxic masculinity and severe conservatism has resulted in starkly different Black experiences for cis-gendered heterosexual men, in contrast to cis-gendered women and other members of the 2SLGBTQI+ community. By investigating various experiences within HBCUs, this article will explain the unifying and uplifting benefits for Black individuals in these institutions, as well as its many divisive components. My research will strive to analyze and properly convey the various nuanced experiences throughout HBCUs and assess the variety of factors that have led to these underrepresented interactions. This article will provide an understanding of how HBCUs have and continue to reflect American society but also demonstrate their role in various Black communities and their representation of non-dominant Black groups from the late nineteenth century to the present.

On December 6, 1865, an act that freed African American enslaved peoples at the end of the Civil War was at last ratified by three-fourths of the states in the Union and became an official part of the nation's Constitution. This amendment, labelled the Thirteenth Amendment, was once deemed the final step for African American emancipation in the United States. Despite this legal shift toward basic human rights, the fight for freedom certainly did not stop there.¹ The Reconstruction Era that followed uncovered major obstacles for newly freed African American individuals as their lack of education strained their attempts to find work and racial segregation in the South prohibited the attendance of Black individuals at most colleges and universities. Conceptualizing education as the ultimate emancipator, African American communities and their white allies focused on building post-secondary institutions for Black individuals that would help integrate people of color into a racially stratified American society.²

These schools, also known as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), became the center of the Black American struggle for equality, helped to improve the overall condition of Black communities, and prepared the next generation of Black leaders. HBCUs and their teaching's supported a subsequent shift from basic knowledge foundations to higher-level thinking, thus aiding in the establishment and expansion of the Black middle class.³ There are currently more than 100 HBCUs in the United States. These schools, that once started as a response to racial segregation in the South, remain an important aspect of African American culture and community uplift.⁴ Nonetheless, while these schools were integral to African American integration efforts throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, their vital role in African American society became increasingly harmful for those who did not fit within the dominant perception of the "respectable African American."

In response, HBCUs' fundamentalist approach and singular focus on racial uplift, created a toxic environment that perpetuated blatant heterosexism, which ultimately impacted the experiences of heterosexual women and members of the 2SLGBTQI+ communities. By analyzing the role of racial discourse, religious conservatism, extra-curricular groups, and Black feminism within these schools, this article will help to deconstruct the underrepresented and nuanced experiences that intersect gender and sexuality within Historically Black Colleges and Universities, throughout the United States, from the late nineteenth century to the present.

While the same issues of toxic masculinity and harmful conservatism were also present throughout Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) during the same time period, it is important to note that the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality continues to form a multilayered level of discrimination that, ultimately, white individuals may never experience.⁵ Furthermore,

¹ Michael Vorenberg, *Final Freedom: The Civil War, the Abolition of Slavery, and the Thirteenth Amendment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1–2.

² Walter R. Allen et al, "Historically Black Colleges and Universities: Honoring the Past, Engaging the Present, Touching the Future," *The Journal of Negro Education* 76, no. 3 (2007), 263.

³ Michael L. Lomax, "Historically Black Colleges and Universities: Bringing a Tradition of Engagement into the Twenty-First Century," *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* 11, no. 3 (2006), 7.

⁴ "Historically Black Colleges and Universities," National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) U.S. Department of Education, Accessed April 14, 2022, <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=667>.

⁵ Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Policies," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989), 139–167.

while educational literature concerning racial identity, sexual identity, and sexual orientation of students has been emerging, this literature is largely from white, Euro-American perspectives and excludes the Black experience.⁶ As a result, the underinformed and under-researched perspectives of the various and complex Black experiences further perpetuates denials of racism in the current culture of the United States and wrongfully pinpoints the Black struggle for equality as a singular mission. To combat this lack of research and understanding, this work will offer a more inclusive perspective into the nuanced experiences of HBCUs within gender and sexuality and will help to uncover some of the main contributors to these experiences.

HBCU Responses to Racial Discourse

A common thread throughout a great deal of the racial discourse of the twentieth century can be seen in the language surrounding Black women and their “excessive” sexuality. In tandem, the impact of this discourse and the desire to create notable Black leadership pushed HBCUs to focus their efforts on elevating middle-class African American men to fields of prominence. As is stated in marble at Morehouse College, the nation’s only all-male HBCU, “(I)t is also expected that once a man bears the insignia of a Morehouse Graduate, he will do exceptionally well. We will expect nothing less.”⁷ While the men who walked HBCU grounds were held to a high regard, African American women were forced to “adopt a politics of silence and respectability” further taking the brunt of racial discourse to benefit the male leaders within their communities.⁸ As a result, educated Black women of the middle class were either funneled into domestic positions, forced to raise and educate new “respectable” generations of Black men, or take extremely low-paying positions. Even though many formally educated Black women sought to utilize their education to work for racial betterment, they soon discovered that their contributions were expected to be in “traditional female spheres – the home, the church, and social service areas.”⁹

This fixation on the policing of Black women’s morals to mend unequal race relations meant that a racial discourse of the “respectable” woman began to dominate African American social thought as a way to uplift the communities as a whole. Leaders, like Booker T. Washington, enforced this rhetoric. After his death in 1915, African American women grew increasingly concerned about the trajectory of their role in education and the working world.¹⁰ In a black and white photograph at the Tuskegee Institute, women participating in a physical education class are shown dressed in long skirts, an inadequate uniform for proper physical

⁶ Bruce Allen Carter, “‘Nothing Better or Worse Than Being Black, Gay, and in the Band’: A Qualitative Examination of Gay Undergraduates Participating in Historically Black College or University Marching Bands,” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 61, no. 1 (2013), 27.

⁷ Saida Grundy, “‘An Air of Expectancy’: Class, Crisis, and the Making of Manhood at a Historically Black College for Men,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 642, no. 1 (2012), 43–60.

⁸ Erica Lorraine Williams, “Women’s Studies and Sexuality Studies at HBCUs: The Audre Lorde Project at Spelman College,” *Feminist Studies* 39, no. 2 (2013), 521.

⁹ Linda M. Perkins, “‘Bound to Them by a Common Sorrow’: African American Women, Higher Education, and Collective Advancement,” *The Journal of African American History* 100, no. 4 (2015), 722.

¹⁰ Linda M. Perkins, “‘Bound to Them by a Common Sorrow’: African American Women, Higher Education, and Collective Advancement,” 722.

activity and a further demonstration of pushing feminine stereotypes on Black women to form a respectable image.¹¹

Fortunately, change-makers like W.E.B. Du Bois supported the educational progress of African American students and frequently highlighted the accomplishments of African American women.¹² This can also be seen through various correspondences with Black feminist leaders like Lucy D. Slowe. Even though individuals like Washington could not see a Black female future, those like Du Bois understood the vitality of Black women to the future of Black civil rights.¹³ Despite the efforts of individuals like Du Bois, there were various civil rights, intellectual, and male-dominated advancement organizations that took their positions on the advisability of women's higher education.¹⁴ As a result, educated women were redirected into the domestic sphere, received little help from white feminist movements, and were later forced to form their own Black feminist resistance against heterosexist, male-dominated schools and political organizations.

For 2SLGBTQI+ communities, a significant lack of discourse surrounding their role in twentieth-century society insinuated that queer individuals were non-existent or invisible in the public sphere until the late 1960s. Far from obscurity, the most visible queer community of the early twentieth century, as headlines in the *Baltimore Afro-American* suggest, was a working-class community centered in African American neighborhoods.¹⁵ As it is now understood, the 'queer' individual is undeniably present in Black history, but was often portrayed as a threat to Black respectability. Members of the 2SLGBTQI+ communities were silenced and suppressed as many individuals and their combination of race, sexuality, and gender, labelled them as a threat to the development of Black equality in a white-dominated society. Despite these challenges, 2SLGBTQI+ student populations certainly existed and continue to exist at HBCUs, still, the more pressing question is surrounding their ability to be open and comfortable on campus and in their learning environments.¹⁶

The Role of Religion in HBCUs

In HBCUs, narratives surrounding 2SLGBTQI+ communities were framed through the homophobic rhetoric that flourished due to Christian underpinnings. Historically, religion has proven to be a common unifying entity for communities in crisis or distress. Nevertheless, it has proven to be quite problematic and oppressive for others. As religion proved to be an emancipator during the nineteenth century and helped many African American individuals to

¹¹ Appendix i.

¹² Linda M. Perkins, "'Bound to Them by a Common Sorrow': African American Women, Higher Education, and Collective Advancement," 722.

¹³ W. E. B. Du Bois, (William Edward Burghardt), 1868-1963, Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to National Association of College Women, March 10, 1926, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

¹⁴ Linda M. Perkins, "'Bound to Them by a Common Sorrow': African American Women, Higher Education, and Collective Advancement," 721.

¹⁵ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 10.

¹⁶ Robert T. Palmer, Shorette II C Rob, Marybeth Gasman, Betsy O. Barefoot, and Jillian L. Kinzie, *Exploring Diversity at Historically Black Colleges and Universities: Implications for Policy and Practice* (San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, 2015), 10.

achieve a form of agency during the Reconstruction Era, its prominent role in the HBCU education system does not come as a surprise. In fact, most HBCUs in the United States were formed by Christian religious organizations and therefore, most HBCUs operate with a Christian ethos even when they are publicly funded.¹⁷ Unfortunately, many of these religious organizations have reputations for fostering homophobic attitudes within the Black community.¹⁸

Historically, Christianity represents a deeply patriarchal religion that focuses on the successes and experiences of men on their journey to holiness. Not only does a large portion of American Christian rhetoric continue to emphasize the sin of homosexuality in modern day, but it also reinforces heterosexual men at the forefront of American society. This combination of indoctrinating homophobic policing and patriarchal systems perpetuates a pattern of toxic masculinity that has historically encouraged harmful behavior against 2SLGBTQI+ members and other female students throughout Black communities. Therefore, it is demonstrated in these Black institutions that a strong Christian affiliation within many HBCUs created, and continues to perpetuate, a more conservative climate around issues of gender and sexuality.¹⁹

It can also be argued that within HBCU religious platforms, the fervor in which racial identity was celebrated and emphasized above all other identities instilled rigid gender roles. In the living present, Black churches continue to have undeniable influence over HBCUs, even among public HBCUs. Similar to the roots of racism in the formation of many PWIs, the roots of conservatism and heterosexism in HBCUs echo a similar pattern. As a result, queer individuals throughout the twentieth century were silenced out of necessity and fear. Attending an HBCU as a member of the 2SLGBTQI+ community meant that your everyday lifestyle was enveloped within the Christian practice. This was most prominently displayed through student culture, such as campus events and graduation ceremonies that included Christian prayers and hymns.²⁰ Queer students faced the moral dilemma of aiding the ultimate Black cause for equality, while the institutions support of homophobic religious rhetoric put at risk their true selves and their peers within the 2SLGBTQI+ community.

Extra-Curriculars and their Impact on Students Attending HBCUs

Despite a strong presence of heterosexism, several extra-curricular activities and organizations became a space of unity for suppressed groups within HBCUs. Not only a way to be heard by their peers, as well as the public, Black women and queer individuals were able to navigate these tense social spaces of education through their skills, talents, and the power invoked by community gatherings. Unfortunately, like the nuances of individuals within schools, the deciding factor between positive and negative experiences within extra-curricular activities varied depending on the school, the activity itself, and the types of students it attracted to these groups.

¹⁷ Robert T. Palmer, Shorette II C Rob, Marybeth Gasman, Betsy O. Barefoot, and Jillian L. Kinzie, *Exploring Diversity at Historically Black Colleges and Universities*, 11.

¹⁸ Emily Lenning, "Unapologetically Queer in Unapologetically Black Spaces: Creating an Inclusive HBCU Campus," *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, no. 39 (2017), 285.

¹⁹ Erica Lorraine Williams, "Women's Studies and Sexuality Studies at HBCUs: The Audre Lorde Project at Spelman College," 523.

²⁰ Emily Lenning, "Unapologetically Queer in Unapologetically Black Spaces: Creating an Inclusive HBCU Campus," 284–285.

A survey conducted by Bruce Allen Carter in 2013 dove into the experiences of four African American gay band students attending HBCUs in the southern United States. Carter emphasized that the experiences of 2SLGBTQI+ students in the twenty-first century were unquestionably difficult during formative years with heightened suicidal ideation, cyberbullying victimization, and truancy. As well, Carter highlighted that the combined experiences of a racial minority who also identifies as a member of the 2SLGBTQI+ community only heightens the obstacles to navigating social spaces. Carter deduced that there were similar external and internal socio-cultural elements present in all participants' descriptions. These elements include: negotiating the discourse of the 'strong' male African American; the discourse of deficiency and rejection, the discourse of passing (being assumed heterosexual); the myth of a singular coming out; coping strategies; the role of family and church; and the significance of being a member of an HBCU marching band.²¹

Carter expounded that while the arts have traditionally served as places of refuge for members of the 2SLGBTQI+, this has not always been the case. While an individuals' experience within a band setting is often positive, the discourse surrounding their activities both within and outside of the music world is not always considered a safe space. Carter investigated and concluded that a combination of heterosexual norms, musical legitimacy, and HBCU educational values perceive the culture of bands as a threat to both Black men and women alike as it further emphasizes the dominant perception of "sexual deviance" amongst Black individuals in America.²² Carter's study demonstrated that traditional places of liberal refuge like the arts, and more specifically, band, do offer a sense of community and unity with more like-minded individuals. Nevertheless, Carter's study also contributed to the notion that racist discourse plays a large role in the treatment of 2SLGBTQI+ individuals internally on campus and during their interactions in the public sphere.

In other ways, extra-curricular activities also served as a foundation for more nuanced civil rights activism. For many Black women, attending all-female sororities at HBCUs became a safe space for nurturing relationships, as well as for the exchanging of political ideas and forming organizations. Because of individuals like Lucy Diggs Slowe, the first Black woman to serve as Dean of Women at Howard University (1922–1937), Black sororities and the female student experience at HBCUs saw improvement. Slowe sought to promote the growth and development of female college students as individuals, particularly those interested in entering the new and growing fields opening to women.²³

Today, Howard University's Alpha Kappa Alpha (est. 1908) and Delta Sigma Theta (est. 1913) are the oldest Black sororities in the United States. Upon further inspection, it is evident that their importance to Slowe's efforts helped to change the trajectory of Black female roles in American society. As a founder of Alpha Kappa Alpha, Slowe sought to elevate and improve the employment opportunities for all college-educated African American women. As a result of Slowe's work, two important organizations were formed: the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) and the National Association of Women's Deans and Advisors of Colored

²¹ Bruce Allen Carter, "Nothing Better or Worse Than Being Black, Gay, and in the Band," 37–39.

²² Bruce Allen Carter, "Nothing Better or Worse Than Being Black, Gay, and in the Band," 27.

²³ Linda M. Perkins, "'Bound to Them by a Common Sorrow': African American Women, Higher Education, and Collective Advancement," 733.

Schools.²⁴ These Black sororities, in conjunction with the NACW, offered back-to-school nights for high school girls, encouraged them to attend college, and offered scholarships to students already enrolled.²⁵ In an article she wrote for *The Journal of Negro Education*, Slowe highlighted, “Negro women...must be prepared for the responsibilities of citizenship if they are to discharge their duties to the government under which they live, and if they are to be capable of watching their own interests, and of using their ballot in preserving and promoting these interests.” As is expressed in her actions as well as her words, Slowe encouraged women to live and think for themselves, and she saw education as the platform by which to inspire political and social activism among women.²⁶

Black Feminism

Amongst both PWIs and HBCUs, there has been a common deficiency of informed curriculum to explore, as well as to share the histories of women and 2SLGBTQI+ communities. Historically, Black feminism has had the longest engagement with issues surrounding Black sexuality. Moreover, Black feminism and the introduction of Black women’s studies are regarded as the first to incorporate research of queer sexuality into Black studies. In Erica Williams’s article entitled, “Women’s Studies and Sexuality Studies in HBCUs,” the author articulated the importance of the Black feminist movement to the discussion of sexuality and gender in HBCUs. She also emphasized that if HBCUs are to embark on a project of institutional change to become more open and inclusive, spaces for 2SLGBTQI+ students, faculty, and staff must first commit to ‘the insights of black feminism.’ With the establishment of the National Association for Colored Women (NACW) in 1896, educated Black women sought to utilize their education to work for racial betterment, but as addressed earlier, they were instead relegated to the domestic sphere. As society transitioned into the twentieth century, NACW members sought to elevate lives and improve the employment opportunities for all college-educated African American women. Williams discussed that from the 1920s to 1940s, the encouragement of Black female college students to think beyond the public or private school teacher was ambitious, and the ideas of the NACW inspired the unimaginable for many African American women.²⁷ Individuals like W.E.B. Du Bois further aided this movement for Black female advocacy and education, and worked alongside these strong female advocates like Lucy D. Slowe.²⁸

In addition to advocating for Black women in the sphere of HBCUs and African American communities, Black feminism became a strong catalyst for change alongside the limited reach of white feminist movements. Highlighting the singularity of the first and second wave feminist movements, Black feminism showed that the mission of white feminists excluded

²⁴ Veronica G. Thomas and Janine A. Jackson, “The Education of African American Girls and Women: Past to Present,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 76, no. 3 (2007), 363.

²⁵ Erica Lorraine Williams, “Women’s Studies and Sexuality Studies at HBCUs: The Audre Lorde Project at Spelman College,” 733.

²⁶ Emily J. Steedman, “Lucy Diggs Slowe, 1883-1937,” Maryland State Archives, Accessed April 14, 2022. <https://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc3500/sc3520/015500/015532/html/15532bio.html>.

²⁷ Erica Lorraine Williams, “Women’s Studies and Sexuality Studies at HBCUs: The Audre Lorde Project at Spelman College,” 521.

²⁸ W. E. B. Du Bois, (William Edward Burghardt), 1868-1963, Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to National Association of College Women, March 10, 1926, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

women among other races and members of the 2SLGBTQI+ community. As Linda Perkins explored, the National American Women's Suffrage Association (NAWSA), headed by Susan B. Anthony & Elizabeth Cady Stanton, held conferences in southern cities that prohibited the attendance of African American women and supported avowed white supremacists for national and local elective offices. Evidently, African American female leaders were not shocked by the action of the NAWSA as Anthony and Stanton, as well as other NAWSA members, had continually campaigned against the passage of the fifteenth amendment, therefore opposing suffrage for African American men.²⁹

Combatting the singularity of white feminism, Black feminists engaged in political mediums like *The Women's Era* newspaper, which was geared towards educated, middle-class African American women. At the time, the newspaper's purpose was quite radical in tone, as it expressed the views of both African American women and men, and condemned white women for refusing to speak out on feminist issues that targeted women of color, such as lynching and the frequent sexual assault of Black women by white men.³⁰ Evidently, individuals like Lucy Diggs Slowe and writers like those from *The Women's Era* were paramount to the voices of Black women. While the merging of these two separate movements did not occur until the late twentieth century, the significance of its many stages and elemental figures is critical to the reflection of women's history as modern feminist movements continued to evolve.

Conclusion

In his inaugural address in 2013, President Barack Obama stated, "Our journey is not complete until our gay brothers and sisters are treated like anyone else under the law...for if we are truly created equal, then surely the love we commit to one another must be equal as well."³¹ In the past decade, this new understanding of legal 2SLGBTQI+ acceptance has been demonstrated through tolerance, but tolerance is simply not enough to facilitate a safe and welcoming campus. In fact, the journey forward does not require the basics of tolerance, but rather the allyship of support and open conversation. As is explained by Robert T. Palmer, the transition from high school to college can be particularly challenging for queer students as they are faced with academic struggles, but also wrestling with the development of sexual identity. Palmer and his co-authors outlined that developing campus resources for members of the 2SLGBTQI+ community, such as student-run 2SLGBTQI+/ally organizations, safe zones, as well as resource and research centers, will make a difference within campus environments and will help to move HBCUs towards a more welcoming space. To move forward and further close this gap of unacceptance and inequity within HBCUs, it is critical that schools focus their research and campus development on intersectionality; therefore, acknowledging the complexity and multiplicity of identity amongst Black America.³²

²⁹ Linda M. Perkins, "'Bound to Them by a Common Sorrow': African American Women, Higher Education, and Collective Advancement," 724.

³⁰ Linda M. Perkins, "'Bound to Them by a Common Sorrow': African American Women, Higher Education, and Collective Advancement," 725.

³¹ Barack Obama, "Inaugural Address by President Barack Obama," National Archives and Records Administration, National Archives and Records Administration, Accessed April 14, 2022.

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/01/21/inaugural-address-president-barack-obama>.

³² Robert T. Palmer, Shorette II C Rob, Marybeth Gasman, Betsy O. Barefoot, and Jillian L. Kinzie, *Exploring Diversity at Historically Black Colleges and Universities*, 81–82.

For both Black women and Black members of the 2SLGBTQI+ community, HBCU institutions have not served the same purpose as it has historically done for heterosexual men. While society outside of HBCU campuses have petitioned and campaigned for elemental rights throughout the twentieth century, including gender rights and queer rights, Black individuals within these communities were faced with the race question and seemingly left behind. Rather, they were forced to incite their own modes of change, and while many HBCU institutions have previously been quite unhelpful, glimpses of hope have proved important. Prominent historical figures like Lucy D. Slowe, W.E.B. Du Bois, and contemporary scholars like Bruce Allen Carter, have all attempted to fill the gaps of many nuanced and hidden narratives. Despite this, more work still needs to be done. By analyzing the role of racial discourse, religious conservatism, extra-curricular groups, and Black feminism within these schools, one can begin to deconstruct the underrepresented and nuanced experiences of gender and sexuality within Historically Black Colleges and Universities throughout the United States from the late nineteenth century to the present.

Appendix: Images

- i) Tuskegee Institute, *Women's Class in Physical Education*, Image/Jpeg, Tuskegee, Alabama.



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