

# Losing Herself to Save Herself: Perspectives on Conservatism and Concepts of Self for Black Women Aspiring to the HBCU Presidency

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*Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) often come under criticism for being havens of conservatism (Harper and Gasman 2008). This conservatism can be found intertwined in some HBCUs' presidential hiring processes. Focusing on the lack of gender parity in the HBCU presidency, through a Black Feminist Theory lens, I argue that HBCUs using these practices for the selection of Black women presidents create a conflict of self for aspirants who do not authentically subscribe to or perform conservatism. The philosophical ideas of authenticity, self-esteem, and self-respect are explored to explain how these expectations create barriers to aspirants achieving their goals and their authentic selves. Subjecting Black women leaders to these practices oppresses aspirants' need for authenticity and leads to the replication of these conservative ideologies. I conclude that these barriers, in turn, narrow the HBCU presidential pipeline and perpetuate a lack of gender parity in HBCU leadership.*

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Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are heralded for their nurturing and familial environments. These environments play a substantial role in their students' successes. Yet HBCUs have also been subject to criticism for their tendency to have environments full of socially conservative ideals and practices. Though this may not be true for all HBCUs, some HBCUs have been reported as having policies and unwelcoming campus cultures affecting students outside of a certain ideal the school wishes to uphold (Harper and Gasman 2008; Ezzell and Schexnider 2010). Limitations on free speech and self-expression at HBCUs has been explored by various scholars and media outlets (Harper and Gasman 2008; Patton and Simmons 2008; Patton 2011; Ball 2013; Williams 2013; Mobley and Johnson, 2015, 2018). Political issues, differential treatment, and ostracism due to perceived sexual

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orientations and dress presentation including clothing, accessories, and hair are beginning to be a popular discussion topic (Harper and Gasman 2008; Patton 2011; Ball 2013; Patton 2014; Mobley and Johnson, 2018). Some HBCUs have established conservative dress codes that must be followed in order to attend the institution (Harper and Gasman 2008; Patton 2011; Ball 2013; Patton 2014; Mobley and Johnson 2018). Though HBCUs are not monolithic, a number of HBCUs participate in a culture of social conservatism<sup>1</sup> (Harper and Gasman 2008). This conservatism is not relegated to a specific sector of the HBCU community; private and public, church-affiliated and non-church-affiliated HBCUs are included.

This conservatism could derive from various places, but a historical understanding of HBCUs gives insight into the ancestry of some of these conservative ideals. Many private HBCUs were funded by industrial philanthropists and White missionary groups who wanted to educate American Negroes—recently freed slaves. Though their intentions seemed noble, further exploration shows that simply educating Black people for the sake of education was not the motivation. Either from religious belief or an intertwining of capitalist and racist beliefs, these funders also used these institutions to “teach” Black people how to be citizens (Anderson 1988). Black persons having only ever been slaves, in the White perception, were savage, uncivilized, untrained, and a threat to the balance and good of American society. It is important to note that this idea denies and ignores the value of African culture and civilization. This benevolent racism was nestled in conservative and religious ideals that continue to pervade some HBCU campuses’ cultures and ethos.

The question is, “Why would Black Americans, and HBCUs specifically, continue to operate with seemingly outdated and anti-Black practices?” The answer is neither straightforward nor simple. Historically, a number of Black Americans felt that this type of social conservatism was necessary for Black survival (Watson 1998). A number of Black Americans still hold that belief. These remnant beliefs find themselves interwoven within some HBCU practices because “there are intimate connections between Black communities and HBCUs which are facilitated by the sharing of peoples, ideologies, and cultural norms” (Douglas 2012, 384). Practices can find themselves so deeply entrenched in a culture that their operation may have moved from functional or logical motivation to being subconsciously habitual until brought to consciousness through naming. It could also be argued that these conservative practices are tied to politics of respectability.

The politics of respectability have been used in Black communities as a way to counter negative images of Black Americans, regulate Black behavior, provide role models of what proper behavior looks like, and to uplift the Black community (Higginbotham 1993; Griffin 2000; Patton 2014). Introduced by Evelyn Higginbotham, the term refers to the attempts by members of a marginalized group, in this instance Black people, to show their values as being continuous and compatible with mainstream and often conservative values rather than challenging the status quo. The politics of respectability, combining conservative and radical impulses, covers a variety of aspects of Black life including but not limited to speech, public behavior, and dress (Higginbotham 1993).

Respectability sets the standards of proper behavior. White middle-class notions were imposed through their intermingling with nationalism. This was and continues to be done through the implanting of middle-class values and behaviors (White 2001; Patton 2014). “The politics of respectability constituted a deliberate, highly self-conscious concession to hegemonic values” (Higginbotham 1993, 193). Implicit in the gospel of respectability was the message of assimilation through the adoption of often White middle-class mores and behavioral patterns (Higginbotham 1993). Paradoxically, respectability also functions as resistance to negative stereotypes derived from White society. Engaging in the politics of respectability, at times, served as a reasonable intervention for Black people attempting to shield themselves from the effects of living in a racist, anti-Black society. As Black people fought to be seen legally as members of the US citizenry as opposed to property, their fight to see that transition at a societal level was extremely slow—some would argue that it *still* has not been fulfilled. Exhibiting “respectable” behaviors and engaging in other markers of respectability served as a tool among many to be used to ensure survival. For Black women specifically, engaging in the politics of respectability could be used to assert womanhood and femininity in a way not afforded to Black women by White society. Being seen as “respectable” at times seemingly worked to protect Black women from dangers both interracial and intraracial.

However, “this ideology re-inscribes oppression by adhering to hegemonic standards of what it means to be respectable” (Patton 2014, 731). Therefore, this conservative ideology is a tool to encourage Blacks to be “better”—better being translated as assimilating to a representation that is less Black and more akin to Whiteness.<sup>2</sup> In other words, in an effort to dispel negative Black stereotypes and represent the best of Blackness, the elimination of and distancing from Black cultural aesthetics was necessary as they were considered too Black (Njoku, Butler, and Beatty 2017). “The politics of respectability equated non-conformity with the cause of racial inequality and injustice” (Higginbotham 1993, 203). “Seemingly well-intentioned, in many instances Black respectability politics [is] alarmingly problematic because it [maintains] complicity within White supremacy, racism, sexism, and capitalism” (Njoku, Butler, and Beatty 2017, 787). Though well-intentioned, there are many instances where Black respectability politics are distressing and problematic because they reify sexism, racism, capitalism, and White supremacy (Njoku, Butler, and Beatty 2017).

Conformity is central and insisted upon in the politics of respectability. “Such politics leaves little room for those who choose not to conform” (Griffin 2000, 34). As Black people developed an African-American nationalism, this nationalism drew on the ideology of respectability to develop a cohesive political movement (White 2001). Since HBCUs have often been viewed as an extension of the Black family, located at the center of the struggle for Black equality and dignity (Allen et al. 2007; Douglas 2012), it is understandable that a number of these institutions would view engaging in the politics of respectability as a vehicle by which to conquer this struggle. However, as Nadrea Njoku and her colleagues note, “The admonishment and condemnation of certain cultural esthetics and behaviors further marginalizes Black poor

people, Black LGBTQ people, and Black women who refuse to yield to the paralyzing power of Black respectability politics” (Njoku, Butler, and Beatty 2017, 787).

This expectation of conformity matched with conservative HBCU environments can prove difficult for students who do not align with the predominant culture to successfully navigate their campuses. However, college campuses do not consist merely of students. Faculty, administrators, staff, and other stakeholders are vital parts of the “machine” that make a higher education institution function. If a conservative environment is one that is difficult to navigate for students who do not conform, how much more difficult is it for those who are considered enforcers of this culture? What happens when those who should perpetuate an ideal instead desire to deconstruct it? Griffin notes, “Today after a century of practicing a politics of respectability, a century of being concerned with presenting ‘positive images’ of Black life, we have so policed our own intellectual efforts that often we find ourselves caught up with narrow representations that in no way allow for the full complexity and humanity of Black people, particularly Black women” (Griffin 2000, 34). This conservatism is ingrained within numerous elements of some HBCU campus cultures and therefore may be consciously or subconsciously embedded within hiring processes. Conservative ideology-laden hiring practices at HBCUs can manifest in overt ways, such as cohabitation clauses in contracts or expectations regarding dress and hairstyle, to covert issues such as the exercise of subtle bias. This raises the question, if a person who does not conform, particularly a Black woman, would like to find herself at the helm of one of these institutions, how does she navigate her desire to ascend and her dissonance in relationship to this existing culture?

#### BLACK WOMEN AND HBCU LEADERSHIP

The number of Black male HBCU presidents far outweighs that of Black women; approximately 30% of HBCU presidents are women (Gasman et al. 2013). Furthermore, Gaëtane Jean-Marie and Virginia Tickle found that approximately half of the nation’s 106 HBCUs had never had a female president of any color in the history of those institutions (Jean-Marie and Tickle 2017). And of those that had at one point been led by a female president, many had only one woman president in more than 100 years of existence. Often these women serve only in an interim or acting capacity (Jean-Marie and Tickle 2017). Though HBCUs were some of the first colleges to offer access to women (Allen et al. 2007), men and women have not had equitable experiences (Jean-Marie and Tickle 2017). Specifically, Black women have had complicated relationships with being in leadership roles at HBCUs. Though tensions exist when discussing gender issues at HBCUs, these challenges must be explored generally and specifically when attempting to understand possible contributing factors of the “underrepresentation of Black women” in HBCU leadership (Bonner 2001; Jean-Marie and Tickle 2017, 105).

When exploring early HBCU Black women deans’ experiences, it is apparent that Black women in HBCU leadership often navigated spaces rich with racial pride but

riddled with gender discrimination. “It was difficult for women, in general, to receive respect from male colleagues and for deans of women to be viewed as professionals” (Herdlein, Cali, and Dina 2008, 292). Early Black women HBCU administrators such as Lucy Diggs Slowe insisted on living off campus (which was not the norm), and that she be perceived as an educator and not merely a “watchdog” or disciplinarian, (295). Lucy Diggs Slowe was the first Dean of Women at Howard University, an HBCU located in Washington, DC. She would serve in this position for numerous years as well as found two professional organizations for women administrators in higher education. As Dean of Women, Slowe felt it was important to be seen as a professional and not merely a “house mother” (296). She simultaneously believed that overemphasizing ideals of feminine purity, being a lady, and performing passivity was damaging for young Black women (Perkins 1996). Her ideas were not the norm for society or HBCU communities. Others like her, such as Owena Hunter Davis, Dean of Women at Johnson C. Smith University in North Carolina during the 1900s, would push back at the conservative nature and ideals being imposed on young HBCU women (Herdlein, Cali, and Dina 2008).

These progressive HBCU women deans would establish a precedent for women administrators and eventually for the women presidents who would follow. However, there is still much work to be done regarding gender parity in the HBCU presidency. Gender parity for college and university presidents continues to be a challenge across higher education. In 2016, women comprised only 30% of all college presidencies (ACE 2017). Furthermore, only 5% of women college presidents are women of color (ACE 2017). Black women often reach the presidency at a higher rate in the HBCU sector than in other institutional sectors (Gasman et al. 2013). “However, ascending to the presidency is fraught with challenges that seek to limit the power and authority of female presidents” (Jean-Marie and Tickles 2017, 107). If there are challenges and barriers that create difficulty for Black women not only to reach the HBCU presidency but to do so without compromising their authentic selves, these challenges should be explored.

This lack of representation of Black women in the HBCU presidency does not mirror HBCU student-body demographics, in which Black women are the majority. Across all HBCUs, women make up 62% of the student population (NCES 2018). Though Black women are enrolling in great numbers at HBCUs, they are not reaching the presidency similarly. Though there are studies exploring Black women’s experiences aspiring to the college presidency, there is a lack of literature focusing on experiences of those specifically seeking HBCU presidencies. (Bonner 2001; Bates 2007; Alexander 2010; Oikelome 2017) Though there is a dearth of literature on Black women HBCU presidential aspirants, researchers have explored women HBCU presidents (Cole and Bernstein 1987; Waring 2003; 2004, 2006; Jean-Marie and Tickles 2017). These studies briefly mention the sexism and racism that Black women uniquely experience in the HBCU context but mostly focus on the unique needs and functional roles of Black women HBCU presidents. We need to understand the effects that certain experiences have on Black women HBCU presidents’ concept of self, self-esteem, and authenticity. Understanding this begins a discussion

regarding how certain practices and philosophies can affect Black women aspiring to the HBCU presidency and why there are distinct barriers to diverse representations of authentic Black women HBCU leaders. Due to some HBCUs' persistent conservative nature (Harper and Gasman 2008), the question is are there certain rules and expectations of Black women presidential aspirants, explicit or implicit, that must be fulfilled in order for them to successfully reach the presidency within conservative HBCU environments? To explore this question, this essay will engage in a philosophical and conceptual discussion regarding how sexism in socially conservative HBCUs can affect the authenticity, self-concept, and self-esteem of the Black woman.

#### BLACK FEMINIST THEORY

Foundational to the discussion of the relationship between Black women presidential aspirants' self-concept and authenticity, and the conservatism-laden HBCU campus climate is Black Feminist Thought (BFT). BFT focuses on the Black woman's standpoint (Collins 2002). The analysis of Black women's work is a core theme in BFT. Focusing specifically on Black women's work, BFT emphasizes two themes:

- (1) How Black women's paid work is organized within the intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender. (Collins 2002, 45)
- (2) How Black women's unpaid family labor is simultaneously confining and empowering for Black women. (46)

This philosophical essay's framework focuses on the first theme, specifically highlighting the condition of Black women's employment and experiences with discrimination.

BFT consistently evolves as the experiences and status of Black women continue to change. In recent years, Black women have increased in their inclusion and visibility in various sectors. However, Patricia Hill Collins proposes that increased "visibility should not be mistaken for access, equality, or empowerment" (Collins 2016, 134). Though there have been small shifts in societal norms, BFT serves a purpose beyond surviving societal norms. BFT pushes to "dismantle unjust intellectual and political structures" (134). BFT also works to build new knowledge, centered on Black women, to improve and create new practices concerning this group.

BFT brings to light how often, when Black women worked, their personalities proved just as important if not more so than the actual work they were doing. For example, when examining Black women who performed domestic work, women who were submissive or who successfully presented themselves as obedient servants were more highly valued by employers regardless of the quality of their work (Collins 2002). Likewise, examinations of the middle-class Black woman and her work find the Black woman in a complex position. Some scholars describe this position as the new "mammification" (Omolade 1994). Black women in this position struggle with feeling alienated by the majority culture in which they work and with not being able to identify with a base within the Black community (Omolade 1994; Marsh 2012;

Scott 2013). Black women whose work lands them at the intersection of race, class, and gender often gain access to economic power, yet they must also find approval from the Black community with which they identify and to which they feel responsible. However, this quest conjures the question of where self-affirmation falls within these Black women's journeys.

A major instrument of power for structures and elite groups is the authority to define societal values. Often, in the larger American societal context and in popular culture, Black women are portrayed as mummies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas (Collins 2002). Married with these portrayals are issues of image, aesthetics, and physical appearance with which Black women must engage daily. The manipulation of images surrounding Black womanhood's image can reinforce the aforementioned stereotypes or create new ones.

Scholars have found that, historically, when a group of marginalized or disenfranchised people in the US desired to ascend in social ranking and power, they emulated the culture, physical features, markers, and values of the White middle class (Harris 1993). Whether it was owning a suburban home, sending children to finishing schools, or wearing a certain clothing style, the more successful one was at displaying this affect, the more likely she was to be given the blessing of being "appropriate" and "civilized." Hence, we see the creation of the "Black lady" caricature (Collins 2002). The "Black lady" refers to the middle-class professional Black woman who represents a modern version of respectability politics (Shaw 1996). "These are the women who stayed in school, worked hard, and have achieved much" (Collins 2002, 80). It is important to note that often embedded in this image is the assumption of heterosexuality and Christianity. In some cases, there is an understanding that the "Black lady's" respectability is grounded in her assumed asexuality (Collins 2002; White 2010; Harris-Perry 2011). When viewed in the full spectrum of manipulated images around Black womanhood, we see that the "Black lady" is interconnected with the "Black welfare mother" image. One trope cannot exist without the other. The "Black lady" image affirms the distorted "Black welfare mother" image as a part of a bad culture and as a choice the Black woman makes as opposed to a state that results from a variety of factors. As a consequence, typifications of a desirable Black woman and an undesirable Black woman are created. The desirable Black woman representative is provided access to spaces and resources that her undesirable counterpart is not. However, with the gain of most forms of capital, including social capital, risk is involved.

Aesthetics and presentation play roles in the intersection of oppression for Black women. The objectification of women features the determination of their worth based on their looks (Collins 2002). Though all women are subjected to this prejudice, a majority of Black women's experiences are unique in that they do not hold the privilege of presenting phenotypically as White in a culture that values Whiteness over Blackness (Collins 2002). Racial politics regarding aesthetics often appear in discussions pertaining to standards of beauty; Black women possessing more African features are deemed less beautiful than those with more European features (Patton 2006). Attitudes regarding White features as the standard of beauty are hegemonic in

nature; Black women may try but cannot escape engaging with this oppression daily (Collins 2002; Patton 2006; Opie and Phillips 2015).

Racism and colorism are intertwined in the tapestry of US culture. Skin color and hair texture have been points of contention for Black women aspiring to navigate various fields of endeavor nestled in racist US culture (Patton 2006). Black women cannot escape this evaluation of aesthetics even within historically Black institutions and organizations. As a result of living in such a society, all persons consciously or subconsciously carry prejudices and prescribed standards of beauty. It is unsurprising that sometimes these prejudices manifest in Black communities and that members of these communities practice oppression on one another (Collins 2002).

The evaluation of aesthetics for Black women, from both inside and outside of Black communities, creates pressure for Black women to attain prescribed beauty standards. Black women find themselves having to alter their natural state and self in order to be “beautiful” or “presentable.” What effect does this altering have on the Black woman’s concept of self? The argument could be made that if Black women must alter their natural state or natural physical attributes in order to ascend to highly visible levels of power and leadership within Black organizations and institutions, then they are compromising the authenticity that makes them leaders. In this instance, Black women can become leaders of their own communities as long as their Blackness is modestly cloaked in something akin to White middle-class femininity masked as conservatism.

In attempting to dispel myths about Black women and making them more acceptable to wider society, some HBCUs have also fostered Black women’s subordination (Collins 2002). Though Black women learn skills of independence and self-reliance within Black organizations such as HBCUs, these organizations can also be places where Black women learn to put the interests of the race above their interests as women (Collins 2002; Cole and Guy-Sheftall 2009). Some HBCUs have become places where the cult of true womanhood has been perpetuated (Perkins 1983), not just with students but also with administrators. Navigating this pervasive culture does not occur without effect for Black women who must engage in order to achieve personal and professional goals. This essay’s argument focuses on these spaces that subscribe to and perform “conservatism.”

#### CONSERVATISM AND CONTROLLING IMAGES

As discussed earlier in this article, a number of HBCUs participate in a culture of social conservatism (Harper and Gasman, 2008). Though many of these practices directly affect students, the campus culture of conservatism can also affect all of those within the campus ecosystem—including upper-level administrators.

“Women who ‘fit’ the social construction of the stereotypical woman may have a better chance of getting [the] jobs as opposed to those who do not fit the standardized model of beauty” (Patton 2006, 36). This uniquely affects Black women as hegemonic Whiteness has constructed the standardized model of beauty to be based on



White women—not Black women. Couched in conservative ideals, the push for assimilation to Whiteness in phenotype or physical attributes, presentation, ideology, and philosophies concerning societal constructs creates a framework of Whiteness through which those aspiring to upper-level administrative positions are viewed and evaluated. Riddled with racist and sexist notions, this framework can create internal conflict for Black women who aspire to the HBCU presidency. This internal conflict can, in turn, create obstacles for these Black women and challenge their authentic selves.

This suppression of authenticity can generate issues in these Black women's concept of self, specifically in the areas of self-esteem and self-respect. This crisis of self can lead to constrained leadership. In essence, a hierarchy of "good" Black leaders and "bad" Black leaders is created. This philosophy can limit leadership cultivation and candidate pools. As a result, HBCUs, institutions that were, in large part, presumably founded to encourage the freedom of humankind, find themselves possibly creating internal bondage for Black women leaders. This essay argues that this bondage specifically affects Black women aspirants' authenticity, self-esteem, and concepts of self.

#### AUTHENTICITY

Arguments exist that there is a universal agreement on desirable traits for leadership (Northouse 2013). Trait theory assumes that there are commonly shared values and desires for leadership. This assumption neglects that various communities construct specific values and characteristics that they expect their leaders to possess and perform. When searching for or allowing a leader to rise from within the community, these community-defined values and expectations are communicated. Values and expectations may be explicitly stated, instilled via socialization, or communicated through a combination of methods. Those who desire leadership within these communities must reflect these communities' values and appear to authentically subscribe to them. Leaders are not selected simply for their abilities but also to be proper role models. Anita Allen explains that the role model usually consists of one or more of the following:

- (1) An ethical template for the exercise of adult responsibilities
- (2) A symbol of special achievement
- (3) A nurturer providing special educational services (Allen 1997)

When positioning someone as a role model, the person's identity is compromised. An individual's identity or inner roots aid in reaching an authentic sense of self. To have to manipulate one's speech, dress, and physical attributes can create dissonance with one's inner roots and, in turn, creates challenges in the realization of an authentic sense of self. Black women engaging with the "role model" ideal must meet expectations of both acceptable Blackness and femininity. This creates a struggle between the Black women they are "supposed" to be and the Black women they are.

This is not to say that Black women who authentically resonate with these institutions' conservative values do not exist. Black people, and Black women specifically, are not monolithic in ideals and beliefs. Even so, Black women who have proven to be effective leaders but do not authentically perform Whiteness or White, middle-/upper-class femininity, veiled as social conservatism, must make a decision whether to operate in an inauthentic representation of self in order to ascend to the presidency at HBCUs steeped in these ideals.

#### CONCEPTS OF SELF

While these Black women presidential aspirants have to vacillate between the presentation of their authentic and inauthentic selves, they must also grapple with their concept of self and self-knowledge. "The self is the basic unit of personality and personal identity. It is who and what we are" (Allen 1997, 104). The concept of self-knowledge, the idea that one can "know thyself," indicates that there must also be an opposite action. If one can "know thyself" then one must also be able to forget oneself. It is important to note that forgetting oneself is a temporary, short-term action whereas losing oneself is a long-term loss of self-awareness (Allen 1997). This essay focuses on the concept of losing oneself.

Sometimes, Black people will feel a need to detach themselves from stereotypical markers of Blackness in order to reach a more desirable societal status. Markers can include hairstyles, clothing, affiliations, church membership, close friends, and residence. Aesthetic manipulation is also used as capital on the social capital market. For Black women, having more Eurocentric appearances can positively affect workplace experiences (Opie and Phillips 2015). Though the attempt may appear superficial in nature, to be successful in this exercise, part of the self must be compromised at the least and lost at the most. Losing oneself may cause remorse or regret for Black women; it may not (Allen 1997). Regardless, its occurrence creates struggle and conflict.

Communities generate prescribed norms for their members. Norms can be general, or gender- and class-specific (Allen 1997). In conservative HBCU environments, these prescribed norms can include but not be limited to religious practice, clothing, hairstyle, and sexual orientation. Black women who aspire to reach the highest level of visible and symbolic leadership at these HBCUs must make decisions regarding their relationship to these prescribed norms. Three options are presented:

- (1) Authentically accept, embrace, and embody these prescribed norms
- (2) Authentically reject and rebel against these prescribed norms
- (3) Superficially accept and perform but authentically reject these prescribed norms

Black women who choose the first option are likely to find a good fit within these conservative HBCUs. The community values and norms bolster and support these Black women's authentic selves, allowing them to fully integrate and thrive. Black

women who choose the second option must make decisions as to whether they will reject and rebel against the community norms from within, remove themselves, or wait for expulsion. Either way, these women are still operating within their authentic selves. Black women who choose the third option have chosen to forget or lose themselves. These women must choose to live in an inauthentic state of being or take the chance of losing membership in a community that affirms their value—an important base of self-respect (Moody-Adams 1997). These women may find themselves living a double life, one person in public and another in private, separating into two selves and causing internal conflict.

Over time this internal conflict can create feelings of shame, pain, and confusion. Allen describes:

Forgetting yourself, in the sense of forgetting your race, ethnicity or nationality, can give rise to a sense of shame, dislocation, and loss. The very same cultural assimilation and “forgetting” that is socially stabilizing for communities, is potentially morally destabilizing for alienated, ambiguous, individuals and subgroups. No one wants to be forced out of communion with who and what they believe they really are. (Allen 1997, 113)

These Black women aspirants have an inner desire, embedded within a part of their identities, to be in leadership positions at HBCUs. Black women aspirants who do not authentically identify with or present the prescribed norms of conservative HBCUs must pick between their multiple identities—the anti-“Black lady” image or the HBCU presidential aspirant.

Picking or valuing one identity over the other puts one in a direct conflict of self. How do people decide which identity is more valuable than the other? Do they dictate this value themselves? Or is this value dictated by the communities with which they identify? Black women have had to engage in similar practices when asked to pick between their gendered identity and their racial identity. The expectation of choosing between or prioritizing their intersecting identities points to the unique brand of gender discrimination and silencing that Black women experience. Often, when prioritizing their gendered identity, Black women are accused of undermining the progress of the Black race and being unsupportive of the Black man (Collins 2002; Cole and Guy-Sheftall 2009). The latter criticism chides Black women for not affirming Black male patriarchy, conflating this with ignoring the oppression of Black people as this oppression is commonly seen only through the lens of the oppression of the Black man—rendering the Black woman genderless and invisible. Black women must jump back and forth between multiple identities, hiding and denying certain identities in order to successfully navigate their various communities. These Black women exist in limbo (James 1997). Black women HBCU presidential aspirants who find the demands asked of them to succeed professionally in conflict with their authentic identities receive messaging that they cannot engage with their multiple identities within their individual communities—they must choose one as the priority. The argument can be made that, when this choice will cause these women to be unsuccessful in an area of their lives, in actuality their choice was stolen. The

decision has been made for them. These Black women are partitioning themselves to survive—losing themselves to save themselves.

This exercise of losing one's self ultimately has effects on one's concept of self-respect. The concept of self-respect has two fundamental components:

- (1) The conviction that one best affirms one's own value by using one's own abilities and talents to contribute to one's survival.
- (2) A willingness to do whatever is in one's power to develop one's abilities and talents. (Moody-Adams 1997, 252)

Michelle Moody-Adams espouses that one who fails to act on the conviction of the first component of the concept of self-respect, or lacks this conviction, fails to affirm or have self-respect. Regarding the second component, people who lack a desire to develop their abilities and talents, in order to contribute to their own survival, also lack self-respect. Self-respect can be affected in multiple ways. One way is when people are put in positions where their efforts to succeed using their own talents and abilities are unsuccessful. A severe mistrust of their abilities develops, leading to frustration and disappointment. This can lead to the belief that their efforts are pointless and ineffective for their self-preservation and survival (Moody-Adams 1997).

Black women working toward the HBCU presidency where socially conservative values are deeply embedded in hiring processes may find that their talents and abilities are not enough to attain their goal. Though these women could be completely qualified, their inability to perform conservative aesthetics, which one could interpret as performing Whiteness, thwarts their ability to attain the presidency. The conviction of their own abilities and talents aiding in their success and survival, one of the main components to establishing one's concept of self-respect, is placed within a system that compromises these Black women's abilities to affirm this conviction. This compromise reduces their willingness to contribute to their survival, which is the second key component to the concept of self-respect. Their reduced willingness to contribute to their survival, in turn, can lead to a lack of self-respect.

Moody-Adams argues,

when a scheme of discrimination is rooted in a complex network of degrading and dehumanizing fictions about its victims it can be truly dangerous to self-respect. The more entrenched this network of fictions, the more likely discrimination is to pose a threat to the self-respect of those subjected to it. Such a scheme demands of those whose choices it restricts that they learn to reconcile two conflicting messages: (1) that self-respect is affirmed and experienced through participation in a particular set of social practices, but (2) that one is nonetheless effectively excluded from these practices. (Moody-Adams 1997, 255)

For persons subjected to this scheme of discrimination, it is important to find alternative ways in which to affirm their worth. For those who are unable to do so, their self-respect is weakened (Moody-Adams 1997). Moody-Adams makes a case that the ability to participate in these practices could lead to the self-respect of these women

being affirmed. However, this essay argues that for these Black women presidential aspirants, this is not the case. For these women, to participate in the social practices set forth by the system of which they are a part, or of which they desire to be a part, would be in direct conflict with their authentic selves, and would not effectively affirm their own abilities and skills but rather disaffirm who they are and negatively affect their confidence in their life's plan, otherwise known as their self-esteem (Moody-Adams 1997). "Severe diminutions in self-esteem may nonetheless have devastating effects on self-respect" (Moody-Adams 1997, 254). By not participating in these practices, these women are more likely to find constructive alternatives to affirm their conviction in their talents and abilities. Therefore, their exclusion from these practices would aid in the maintenance of self-respect.

When self-respect is called into question by social norms, some persons will try to maintain self-respect by proving themselves "superior" to the group that has been identified as unfavorable (Moody-Adams 1997). In response to being relegated to this unfavorable group via exclusion, some Black women who choose to participate in upholding these social norms and practices may try to prove superiority to the unfavorable group—hence becoming participants in the oppression of other Black women. This ability to prove superiority aids in their maintenance of self-respect. Women engaging in this exercise, who do not authentically subscribe to established social norms, may find themselves eternally existing in a state of limbo while trying to maintain self-respect. Conversely, some women will make the choice to detach from the system altogether. For these women, detachment may be best for self-preservation.

#### CRITICAL OBJECTIONS AND RESPONSES

Although this culture of conservatism may be present in the hiring practices of conservative HBCUs, the formulation and enforcement of standardized hiring policies and procedures should nullify any overt or covert discriminatory practices that may preclude a presidential candidate from attaining the presidency. Furthermore, the argument could be extended to include the idea that though there are unique institutional cultures, there is a universally understood formal process of hiring a president that most, if not all, colleges and universities employ regardless of institutional culture or organizational identity.

Though there are formal processes for presidential hires that are generally accepted and duplicated across the higher education community, believing that the presence of these formal processes would nullify the impact of institutional culture and specifically a culture of conservatism would be naïve and unfounded. Most, if not all, institutions have formal presidential hiring practices. However, though formal processes exist, it would be short-sighted not to acknowledge the ways in which culture and value systems are enmeshed in these formal processes. Though board members are aware of their call to be objective, it is still true that members bring their own values to the decision-making process of presidential selection (Commodore 2018). I found

in my study of private AME-affiliated HBCU boards that various values presented themselves, consciously or subconsciously, when members engaged with the work of the board, specifically the selection of the president. In other words, “As objective as trustees pronounced to be, their value systems were present during the decision-making process” (Commodore 2018, 17). This being the case, the ways in which the values that are in relationship with a culture of conservatism at some HBCUs could prove problematic for Black women presidential aspirants who do not authentically subscribe to those values but must perform as such for job attainment. Likewise, more must be understood about these underlying values and how they are used in evaluating presidential candidates, and ultimately all institutional employees. This essay considers the ways that, for institutions explicitly or implicitly guided by conservative values expressed through a performance of a politics of respectability, these practices could color the journey and experience of Black women seeking the presidency at HBCUs.

The argument could be made that the culture of conservatism and related attitudes embedded in a number of HBCUs exists simply because there is already an established and accepted culture of such. Because this culture and attitude exists and appears to be agreed upon by the community, these HBCUs are justified in including conservatism in the institutions’ hiring processes.

In selecting a leader to represent the institution, the institution should desire a president who will act and speak in a way reflecting the institution’s values. Institutions, specifically private institutions, have a right to set a certain campus culture, aesthetic, or ethos. Important to setting that ethos is to make sure people are in place that will continue to enforce, reinforce, and reproduce these cultural norms. James Snead argues that repetition is a natural part of Black culture (Snead 1981). Using this premise as a foundation, HBCUs desiring to hire a particular phenotype or personality for the role of the president is a community norm to be expected by candidates.

Furthermore, an argument can be established that HBCUs with socially conservative practices are not in conflict with Black women aspirants’ quest for their authentic selves, but rather these Black women are deviant from the accepted and expected norm in these spaces. Therefore, these Black women should expect to meet resistance in attempting to fit their deviant behavior into the existing system. Institutional culture is important to an institution’s life and identity. Therefore, culture must hold the promise of continuity and its internal identity must not be altered (Snead 1981). Not only must the repetition of practices occur but also the repetition of symbols—the HBCU president is often a symbol of values embodied in a person. Therefore, to communicate the strength and continuity of a campus culture, a president must reflect said culture.

This essay offers the counter that though culture is important, it should also evolve. If a culture does not evolve and adapt, it can cause a barrier to the progress of a group of people. This is not to suggest that culture must completely change to progress. Tradition has value and purpose. Traditions often aid in the identity development of persons within a group. Traditions and progress can coexist but require a

critical understanding and view of one's culture and practices. HBCUs can look to their own histories as an example. The early history of many HBCUs includes White male presidents. Contemporarily, you will be hard-pressed to find the same. Though the original mission and ethos of these institutions has not changed greatly, society has changed and along with it, ideas of who would and could be a suitable college or university president. Snead presents the idea that repetition is not only a part of Black culture but also a method by which to reinforce and reproduce culture (Snead 1981). Members of groups that share a culture must ask if these components, traditions, and ideas that make up the culture should, in fact, be reinforced and reproduced, especially if this reinforcement and reproduction are causing oppression to group members.

Black women's experience of both racism and sexism is not foreign to the HBCU context. Dr. Johnnetta B. Cole, president emerita of both Spelman and Bennett Colleges, speaks to this when discussing why it took so long for Spelman College, a historically Black all-women's college, to select a Black woman president. Cole states,

it is that those of us who have been the victims of discrimination are not immune to engaging in it ourselves. That those of us who are women have been known to say, "Well, actually, I'd sort of prefer a man in that position." It is not unheard of for folk of color to say, "We're just not ready yet." (Cole and Bernstein 1987, 54)

This double standard and questioning of women candidates continues currently. A recent example came to light when details regarding a no-cohabitation clause, prohibiting the university president from having extended overnight visits with anyone with whom she was in a romantic relationship, was found in the contract of now-terminated Alabama State University president Gwendolyn Boyd, the institution's first woman president (Elliot 2014). This requirement has not been proven to have been made of Boyd's male predecessors. Another example of expectations for Black women presidents can be found in the embattled board relations that occurred with Florida A&M University's (FAMU) first female president, Elmira Mangum. Mangum was publicly chided for her "language and tone" and was expected to check in with board members with a frequency never required of her predecessors (Woodhouse 2015). Current HBCU leadership have publicly expressed that women presidents are better than their male counterparts at "nurturing friends" and "developing relationships" (Stuart 2015). Beliefs such as this one can put pressure on Black women aspiring to the HBCU presidency to appear friendly and overly focused on relationships in ways not expected of men. Furthermore, when these women reach the office of president, they are judged more harshly for not having an accommodating personality and penalized in ways men are not (Forsyth, Heiney, and Wright 1997). Holding Black women to the "Black lady" image or the accommodating characteristic akin to the "Mammy" caricature (Collins 2002) in order to be considered proper leaders reinforces a culture that values Black male patriarchy over the ability of Black women to operate in authenticity. Additionally, holding Black women to this image reinforces

elements of respectability politics that cater to and reinforce dominant hegemonic ideologies (Patton 2014).

Arguments could also arise against the presented premise that social conservatism is akin to Whiteness. Over time, conservatism has taken on many definitions and has varied depending on context. Conservative ideals are generated from a variety of places that are not bound by race. Conservative ideals that come from a religious foundation also exist concerning women's modesty. Many private HBCUs were founded by missionary groups and church denominations, therefore it is arguable that these institutions would expect their leadership to espouse similar values. The argument extends that institutions founded on Christian principles and that garner funding from religious groups and churches should be expected to have a culture saturated with religious principles. For public HBCUs, which often interact with state and local governments for funding and support, the argument could be made that the "face" of the university, the president, must be someone who possesses the values, speech, and presentation to easily navigate these politically charged arenas and that these values should be of a "respectable" nature. In order for the culture to be continuous and reproduced, inauthentic believers and carriers of these values cannot be allowed at the helm. Therefore, holding presidential candidates to a standard of conservative ideals, even if in performance only, allows a vetting and filtering of those who do not authentically believe in the institutions' core values.

Dissenters could further argue that to imply that conservative ideals are akin to Whiteness overreaches and falsely describes conservatism in a one-dimensional manner. This dissent would be founded on the idea that the description of conservatism in reference to conservatism at HBCUs falsely alludes to the idea that conservatism cannot be authentic to Black culture. This allusion can lead to a fallacy that there is no diversity of thought within the HBCU community and ultimately within Black communities. By saying it is improper for HBCUs to hold and enforce these conservative values, the premise of this essay strips these institutions' right to authenticity while trying to establish the same right for the individual Black woman. Ultimately, this is contradictory.

The response to this dissent is that though conservative ideals may result from a variety of sources, when looked at closely these sources and their historical uses are aligned to hegemonic Whiteness and a deliberate concession to mainstream values that are derivatives of a racist, sexist, and heterosexist society. Even with the argument that these practices are merely examples of Christian conservatism, one must also discuss the way Christianity was wielded in American society as a tool to "civilize" freed US slaves and perpetuate White supremacy. The establishment of some HBCUs by missionary groups occurred not just to educate Blacks but to teach them how to be better citizens (Anderson 1988), to be more like "good" White citizens, though the belief was that they could never fully achieve this goal due to their inferiority.

For Black women, this meant being more like respectable White women. The belief that Black women were sexually promiscuous, unattractive, unfeminine, lacking moral character, emasculating, and unrefined was common and prevalent. Middle- to



upper-class heterosexual White women were seen as the epitome of femininity (Perkins 1983). Often these model White women were associated with some sort of religious activity or sect of Christianity. Therefore, many conservative values of femininity—actions, physical presentation, and phenotype—are based on “model” pious White women. This being the case, a relationship exists between conservative ideals and an expectation for these Black women to mirror White women to be acceptable. This expectation can be as superficial as straightened hair, clothing that makes these Black women appear less curvaceous, or things more deeply rooted in identity, such as speech, gender-role beliefs, and sexual orientation. Black persons may be unaware that they are perpetuating racist ideals due to these ideals being normalized in US culture. But this does not make the practice of measuring the value of Black women with the measuring stick of White femininity any less prevalent.

The discussion of aesthetics is a subject that brings about various explanations and arguments. Aesthetics as a means of capital to aid in attaining the HBCU presidency is problematic for Black women. Dissenters would argue that problematic or not, the reality is that aesthetics play an important role in the HBCU presidency. Though a White person may be talented and skilled enough to be an HBCU president, in the current racial climate married with the racial history and identities of many HBCUs, hiring a White president would not be prudent. In fact, it would likely alienate a variety of stakeholders who are important to the health and life of the institution. An HBCU president must be able to successfully access and command the respect and attention of various constituencies, including those that possess very conservative dress codes and cultures. The point could be made that an individual’s authenticity is not as important as an institution’s pertinent interests and needs. One aspiring to the presidency accepts the responsibility and expectation of putting the university’s needs above personal needs. This would extend to the areas of authenticity and self-expression.

Nevertheless, aesthetics are political in nature and therefore political in interpretation. Though it may be true that certain arenas have certain dress codes and cultures, to assume that one cannot adapt to these various arenas as needed is questionable at best. Aesthetics are superficial. Some believe that a universal code exists regarding what certain aesthetics communicate; in reality, such a code does not exist. Aesthetics themselves do not speak to a person’s authentic belief and value systems. An example would be that of a Black women’s hair in a natural state with a tight curl pattern. In some communities, this is communicated as a positive characteristic. In others, some view Black women with natural hair as radical or deviant. The assumption of radical values because one’s hairstyle deviates from the Eurocentric standard of beauty is unfounded. Black women HBCU presidents with natural hair have existed. That is not the argument at hand. Rather, when casting a critical eye to the landscape of Black women HBCU presidents, the question is raised whether women who present and perform in this manner are visible *en masse*? To highlight the unique intersectionality of race and gender Black women must navigate, it should be recognized that Black men, though having options of large afros or locs,<sup>3</sup> often do not have to succumb to value judgments about their ability to represent the school

or do their job well based on their hair texture. This strong controlling image is attributed mostly to Black women.

In their study exploring the negative influence of Afrocentric hair on ratings of Black women's dominance and professionalism, Tina Opie and Katherine Phillips found that when evaluating whether an employee was exhibiting "professionalism," more Afrocentric hairstyles caused employment candidates to be deemed less professional than those with more Eurocentric hairstyles. Researchers also found that "Afrocentric hair cause Black more so than White participants to rate the employment candidate as less professional" (Opie and Phillips 2015, 7). In fact, Opie and Phillips suggest that not only were Black persons acquiescing to external pressures to adhere to Eurocentric professional standards but that they may also be conforming to in-group standards about what was and was not professional.

This essay pushes back on the notion that a woman's clothing or hair choices are valid indicators of her values, skills, abilities, or professionalism. To ascribe a moral character to a Black woman based on dress is reinforcing controlling images of Black women that aid in their oppression (Collins 2002). Institutions founded to further the idea of persons being judged by their character, determination, and intelligence and not their skin color, and yet who engage in the practice of making judgments of character based on a woman's clothing, have contradictory beliefs. Though it is important to confront controlling images pushed forward by those external to the Black community, it is equally important to examine and confront the ways that these controlling images are perpetuated and reproduced within the Black community (Collins 2002). Ascribing certain moral, character, and professional characteristics and assumptions to Black women's aesthetics causes "Black women [to] walk a tight-rope" as they may desire to present in a more Afrocentric manner but fear negative consequences and repercussions if they do (Opie and Phillips 2015, 12). This causes Black women to ask themselves if the performance of their authentic self is considered valuable at these conservative HBCUs. Or will they compromise authenticity and perform conservatism in order to not be excluded from the community, though they are otherwise qualified for the position? This hampering of authenticity could lead to negative outcomes, such as a lack of authentic Black women leaders in HBCU presidencies or a continued lack of gender parity while using controlling images and limited understandings of Black women to engage in Black women's continued oppression (Collins 2002; Opie and Phillips 2015).

#### WHAT LIES AHEAD

Black women have made many strides in American society and in higher education. HBCUs played and continue to play a major role in this success. Though large strides have been made, advances still need to occur. Black men are still more likely than Black women to successfully reach the HBCU presidency (Gasman et al. 2013). Though the reasons why there is an unequal representation of Black men and women in the HBCU presidency could be many, all possible reasons should be explored. This

essay begins the conversation of urging higher education researchers to learn more regarding the paths and experiences of Black women aspiring to and attaining the HBCU presidency. Increased research regarding the experiences of HBCU women presidents would provide a better understanding of the ways in which their senses of self and self-concept are affected during their journeys and years of service. This research would be best approached through a Black feminist lens in order to speak to the unique intersection of race and gender at which Black women find themselves.

Another area for future research would be a more in-depth exploration of HBCU hiring practices, specifically for the presidency. A deeper understanding of values and frameworks regarding Black women, leadership, and the role of respectability politics in relation to the work of HBCU boards of trustees, as well as various other institutional stakeholders, would aid in a nuanced understanding of the culture and construction of ideals regarding Black women HBCU presidents. Though the hope is that all HBCUs hire good leaders, increased conversation regarding what makes a “good” HBCU leader, ways that ideal is constructed, how it is implemented, and if its method of implementation has adverse effects on Black women is crucial to fortifying the HBCU presidential pipeline.

The conservative nature of some HBCUs has become a pervasive part of the campus culture and hiring process. Alison Bernstein and Johnetta Cole speak to this conservative nature on HBCU campuses, saying, “The distinction that we draw is that traditionalists understand that these traditions and cultural inheritances are very important and why they are, whereas a conservative could be someone who just says. . . That’s the way it was, and that’s the way it should be, unchanged now and forever more. I don’t explain it, I just do it. Don’t touch it. A conservative wants it just because it was” (Bernstein and Cole 1987, 55). This mindset can limit the ability of Black women to ascend to the presidency as it brings about conflict with their authenticity, self-esteem, and self-respect. These institutions, which pride themselves on being places that empower Black students, must question whether their practices do the same for their employees. Holding Black women to a standard of Whiteness, under the veil of social conservatism as a point of access, is problematic and can drastically shrink the pool of potential HBCU leadership.

This essay raises the question whether Black women who are able to successfully attain these positions are operating in their authentic selves or are they existing in limbo? And if those in leadership are not operating in their authentic selves, is this true leadership and the type of leadership that is desirable and most effective for HBCUs? As future researchers wrestle with these questions, the hope is that the answers lead to an increasingly dynamic HBCU presidential pipeline. Collins explores how Black women, throughout time, have used consciousness in search of freedom from all manners of bondage, including that of controlling images (Collins 2002). Through this exploration, it is made apparent that freedom comes in many forms. HBCUs, through their own journeys, came to fruition as places where free men and women came and still come to raise their consciousness, learn, and walk boldly in their freedom. In that same spirit, HBCUs should strive to ensure that they are also places where Black women leaders can come and be free.

## NOTES

1. Conservatism is any political philosophy that favors tradition (in the sense of various religious, cultural, or nationally defined beliefs and customs) in the face of external forces for change, and is critical of proposals for radical social change. Some conservatives seek to preserve the status quo or to reform society slowly, while others seek to return to the values of an earlier time.

2. I discuss *Whiteness* throughout this paper in terms of aesthetics that are more akin to White features as well as performance that is often related to or seen as related to White performance. This includes passing, dress, and presentation. My discussion falls into the same vein as Harris 1993.

3. Short for or replacing the somewhat negative term “dreadlocks,” locs is a hairstyle where the hair that one would normally comb or shed locks on itself, creating ropelike strands. Hair is not combed during the locking process, which is what causes the strands to coil around themselves into fused units.

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