

The Difference Safe Spaces Make: The Obstacles and Rewards of Fostering Support for the LGBT Community at HBCUs

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Abstract

In the last decade, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students have become very visible at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), but this visibility is not reflected in some colleges' student programs and activities. Only a few notable HBCUs, such as Howard University and Spelman College, have made a concerted effort. Acknowledging that the LGBT community is significant and exists, and fostering such support, comes up against a steep wall of religious tradition and doctrines, and conservative administrations. It is imperative that HBCUs address LGBT issues and create and support a safe space for students to articulate their identity. Meanwhile, many LGBT students on these campuses find voice and understanding in Black scholars and writers such as Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* and Charles Michael Smith's *Fighting Words: Personal Essays by Black Gay Men*.

Keywords

education, social sciences, higher education, sex and gender, sociology, Black studies, sociology of race and ethnicity, educational administration, leadership and policy, sexuality, religious studies, humanities

In the past, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) relied on their history and tradition to attract the best African American students. As doors opened at majority institutions, HBCUs had to form strategic initiatives to demonstrate what they offered to attract diverse students, so as to increase their incoming freshmen class. In addition to dealing with recruitment and diversity challenges, they must also deal with a population of students that already exists within the student body: lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students. In the last decade, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students have become very visible at HBCUs, but this visibility is not reflected in some colleges' student programs and activities. Only a few HBCUs, such as Howard University in Washington, D.C., and Spelman and Morehouse College in Atlanta have made an attempt to recognize these students. What I mean by visibility at this point and throughout this project in reference to LGBT students on campus is the fact that they are simply not recognized or acknowledged in the governing and activities of the university. We are a long way from the visibility of having outward LGBT representation among faculty, administrators, and in athletic programs, which would be true visibility.

Also, only a few HBCUs are on the LGBT-Friendly Campus Climate Index, and of the 106 federally designated HBCUs, only 21 or 22% hosted LGBT student organizations.

Acknowledging that the LGBT community is significant and exists, and fostering such support, comes up against a steep wall of religious tradition and doctrines, and conservative administrations. HBCUs must foster a sexual discourse of resistance to hetero-patriarchy to create and support safe spaces for LGBT students to articulate and envision their identity as part of the general campus community without alienation or fragmentation. The purpose of this article is to assess and critique the need for unified involvement in creating an accepting and empowering atmosphere for LGBT students at HBCUs.

All first time students in general find college stressful, but LGBT students usually stand "outside the dominant cultural 'codes of heteronormativity'" (Morris, 1998, p. 276). They often disrupt the binaries of normalcy in social institutions and structures that make their environments much more stressful (Butler, 2004; Dilley, 2005; Johnson & Henderson, 2005; Luhmann, 1998; Means & Jaeger, 2013; Meiners, 1998; Terney & Dilley, 1998). LGBT students are often bullied and

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harassed because of their sexuality or their perceived sexuality by other students who can navigate within dominant cultural codes (Mays & Cochran, 2001; McCabe, Bostwick, Hughes, West, & Boyd, 2010; McMurtrie, 2013; Petrosino, 2003; Rankin, 2004; Savin-Williams, 1994; Wells, 2009; Yost & Gilmore, 2011). According to R. L. Miller (2008), college is a critical time when many LGBT students explore their sexuality, but they often find very little support in coping with both their academic demands and sexual identity on campus (Choi, Han, Paul, & Ayala, 2011; Poytner & Washington, 2005). Thus, these students face the most problems when it comes to discrimination during their undergraduate years (Rankin, 2004).

Tomlinson and Fassinger (2003) posit that campus climate plays a crucial role in the psychosocial development of LGBT students because of homophobia and heterosexual normalcy. The lack of safe spaces that provide support for LGBT students lead to higher rates of distress, alienation, and discrimination (Mays & Cochran, 2001; McCabe et al., 2010) compared with their heterosexual counterparts, forcing LGBT students to navigate on their own and often making them more susceptible to depression and suicidal behavior (Kisch, Leino, & Silverman, 2005). After analyzing 15,977 college students who participated in the National College Health Risk Behavior Survey (NCHRS), Kisch and colleagues (2005) found that LGBT students were 2.6 times more likely to consider or attempt suicide compared with heterosexual students. Thus, there is a critical need to provide a positive environment for LGBT students, especially at HBCUs.

Current Status of HBCUs and LGBT Population

HBCUs have been slow to meet and respond to the needs of the LGBT community on their campuses. According to Harper and Gasman (2008), some are known for having unsupportive environments. Others are known for making some progress by allowing LGBT student organizations on campus but with relatively little to no inclusion in larger campus politics. And yet, some have attempted to take bold steps to normalize their campus environment by integrating the LGBT community within the larger community of the university as a whole. According to the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School's study (Gasman, 2013), "The Changing Face of Historically Black Colleges and Universities," HBCUs are beginning to change their attitude toward LGBT students. Howard University has had an on-campus support organization for LGBT students since the 1980s. Spellman College served as an example for HBCUs when it sponsored a national conference in 2011 on HBCUs and LGBT issues. They also have student organizations as well. Putting them well ahead of most HBCUs, Bowie State University opened its Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Allies Resource Center in 2012. Morehouse offered its first

LGBT course in 2013 taught through Skype by a Yale faculty member, which focuses on Black gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender history. Thus, slowly, HBCUs are beginning to recognize and validate other sexualities and identities.

Conceptual Framework and Method

This project answers the following question: Why do LGBT students find the campus climate difficult to negotiate at HBCUs? This article is an evaluative study that analyzes the LGBT experience using multiple fields of inquiry that include archival study of the Black church and homosexuality; HBCUs and social conservatism regarding homosexuality, which includes campus climate for students and faculty, and administrators' perception and tolerance; and exclusion in class and course curriculums and personal narratives. This project is framed around Jones and McEwen's (2000) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI), which posits that the MMDI "is a fluid and dynamic one, representing the ongoing construction of identities and the influence of changing contexts on the experience of identity development" (p. 408). The model explains a person's identity status within a particular time frame and shows how individuals experience various identities at both the core and external levels. The core identity is the internal self-identity that is "somewhat protected from view" (p. 408) and includes one's personal characteristics, values, and attributes. Race, gender, and religion are examples of socially constructed labels that make up external identities (Davis, 2008), which may vary in terms of their importance and complexity to the individual. Some of the aspects of both identities become intersecting circles; therefore, "one dimension may be understood singularly; or it can be understood only in relation to the other dimensions" (Jones & McEwen, 2000, p. 410).

The prioritization and placement of these identities determines the level of salience that external identities have in relation to the core identity. The context in which MMDI is experienced affects whether or not the dimensions become more or less salient "as they interact with contextual influences such as family background, sociocultural conditions, current life experiences, and career decisions and life planning" (Jones & McEwen, 2000, p. 410). The ignoring of these identities by HBCUs fosters a problematic environment for their LGBT population.

The Black Church and the Veil of Resistance

When HBCUs do not account for the way LGBT students negotiate their identity, their environments render LGBT students and faculty invisible and marginalized. The same occurs within the Black church as well. As a result, the LGBT community at HBCUs and some Black church members seek other ways to negotiate their place and space within unreceptive environments. The environment of HBCUs for LGBT

students can be both hostile and rejecting to neutral and unbecoming (Kirby, 2011; R. L. Miller, 2007; Poynter & Washington, 2005). Neutral means that they are neither acknowledged nor denied. The backbone of resistance to the quest for inclusivity for the LGBT community at HBCUs and the birthplace of social conservatism practiced by administrators is the Black church, the most recognized central, oldest, and influential institution in the Black community (Cantey, Bland, Mack, & Joy-Davis, 2013; Kirby, 2011). A number of HBCUs were founded by churches or church organizations (Baptist, Christian Methodist, African Methodists Episcopal, United Methodist, and Presbyterian; Cantey et al., 2013). But even more critical, “the Black church is the spiritual ark that also preserved and empowered Black people socially, psychologically, and physically during slavery” and other difficult times (R. L. Miller, 2001, p. 1).

The Black church not only greatly influences regular churchgoers but also indirectly influences the lives of Blacks who are not churchgoers through its ideology and imagery with which many were raised. This continues to influence their later beliefs and practices in other areas of their lives. Thus, the Black church and HBCUs become two powerful pillars in the Black community that perpetuate and foster homophobic environments against the backdrop and in support of their Christian values (R. L. Miller 2007; Patton, 2011; Schulte, 2004). Through interviews and commentary, producer Clay Cane’s (2015) long overdue online BET (Black Entertainment Television) documentary *Holler If You Hear Me: Black and Gay in the Church* discusses and analyzes the spiritual abuse and violence some Black churches heap upon their LGBT members, forcing them to participate in their own oppression to be a part of the church family. However, it is important to note that Black churches are not the only source of homophobia in the Black community.

According to Ward (2005), three different types of explanations have been posited that make up the roots and character of homophobia in Black churches within the United States: religious belief, historical sexual exploitation, and race survival consciousness. “All of these are intimately related to the history of slavery, underscoring the complex background influence of racism in the genesis of homophobia” (Ward, 2005, p. 494).

The first of these perspectives, religious belief, relates homophobia to literalist theological view in which theological and biblical scholars move Christian groups toward greater biblical integrity on homophobia by giving contextual clarity to passages long adhered to as justification for homophobia (Ward, 2005). Many Black religious figures see this view as a White hegemonic approach. Black ministers and congregations, who have been distrustful and rather immune to White-dominated approaches, however, have rejected such biblical scholarship and revisionism. Therefore, one can argue that homophobia in the Black church is directly related to the “authority given to a perceived literal

interpretation of scripture” (Ward, 2005, p. 495). Douglas (1999) suggests that it is understandable in the context of their historical experience why Black people use the Bible to condemn homosexuality when one considers how enslaved Blacks sought refuge and found freedom in the literalness of scripture.

When considering the second explanation of these perspectives, historical sexual exploitation, one needs to consider the historical stereotypes that developed during and after slavery, the mammy, jezebel, and the hyper-sexual brute to name a few. The media has basically reincarnated these characters through the domineering matriarch, the welfare queen, and the criminalized, violent, and sexually promiscuous Black man, which indicates how ingrained these images are and what they suggest in the psyche today. What is problematic about this, according to West (1993), is that institutions in the Black community have historically and purposefully ignored addressing the fundamental issues of sexuality, particularly in public, out of fear that it may confirm stereotypes that some Whites have long held. This out-of-sight-out-of-mind mentality leads these institutions to let social and cultural problems fester beyond repair, especially in the name of religion.

In terms of the third explanation of homophobia in the Black church, many African Americans feel that addressing such an issue is not worthy due to what Crichlow (2004) calls “race survival consciousness” (p. 32). Lemelle and Battle (2004) argue that Blacks adopted the immoralism of homosexuality of Western culture during slavery, colonialism, and imperialism, which caused a melding of both Western and traditional African religious beliefs. Thus, the urgency of racial consciousness of survival and preservation among Blacks who sought to construct Black masculinity as they struggled against White domination has combined with homophobic religious moralisms (Ward, 2005). The deposits of this joining and what Ward (2005) calls “religion-driven homophobia and bio-nationalism” have been that Whites and homosexuality are both understood to connote weakness and femininity; conversely, Black masculinity has been constructed in hyper-masculine terms (p. 495). Anything that threatens this construct will be ignored, not only in the Black church but in other areas of African American life as well. These explanations of homophobia shed light on the difficulty that many Black churches have when dealing with homosexuality among their congregations and within their own ranks, and in turn, as the central social institution of the Black community, addressing issues such as HIV.

Although a number of cases speak of the prevalence of homosexuality in the church in all aspects, the Black church doctrine usually casts a silent veil over these internal issues while condemning it externally. One case in point is the lawsuit filed in 2010 against Bishop Eddie Long who was the bishop of the New Missionary Baptist Mega Church in Lithonia, Georgia. Long was sued by several males who accused him of allegedly gaining their affection with gifts

and a loving father relationship when they were teenagers, then allegedly leading to a sexual relationship. Despite the fact that evidence was mounting, Long vehemently denied the accusations when he addressed his congregation. Eventually, he settled out of court with each alleged victim for an undisclosed amount of money. What is most interesting is that the majority of his congregation stood behind him without any type of investigation or probational removal. What is even more disturbing is that the church did not take this opportunity to deconstruct old damnation rhetoric against queer identities to establish an inclusive forum of discussion. Instead, the silencing effect was implemented, as staff writer Patrick Johnson (2010) makes clear in *The Christian Science Monitor* in his response to the Long situation:

. . . Black theologians say the mega church leader's decision both to deny the charges and claim fallibility in the eyes of God is part of a pervasive "don't ask, don't tell" reflex in the Black church, where outwardly stated condemnations inhibit frank discussions about sexuality of any sort. It's a situation that leads many Blacks, by force of culture, religion, and tradition, to live double lives: one in the church, and one at home.

Here Johnson is commenting on the direct homophobic rhetoric that is part of everyday day life in some Black churches. Long was considered one of the most anti-gay pastors. I have personally attended churches where derogatory gay and lesbian terms were used in highflying sermons to make clear that homosexuality is an abomination. As the authority figure of the church, the minister usually goes unchallenged, even when members are aware that he is gay or has committed other "sins," members of the choir are gay, and many in the congregation are gay. No one in the church questions such religious dogma within the church. Strikingly enough, "some Black gay men remain in traditional Black churches that are unabashedly homophobic and endure the oppression" (Ward, 2005 p. 499). Thus, the Black church doctrine toward queer identities leaves many in the LGBT community in psychological turmoil as they try to reconcile with who they are and to feel loved by God at the same time without shame. As Griffin (2006) posits,

. . . to be cut off from the Black church is really being cut off from the Black community, the Black family, because "aint no place else" you can be just by virtue of being Black and be somebody. You're a child of God; you're someone with dignity; you're someone who holds the promise of a new world, of God's kingdom will be done. To be cut off from the Black church is to be cut off from your lifeline. (p. 188)

Although many aspects of the Black church are becoming commercialized, it is still the primary place where African Americans receive religious and personal therapy to cope with the vicissitudes of life. To maintain this lifeline, many LGBT people, after years of self-discovery, create double

lives as to participate in their religious community and secretly maintain their sexual identity. This is the result of the disembodied belief system, hate the sin, love the sinner that many pastors preach (Samuel, 2015) according to Rev. Kenneth Samuel of Victory for the World Church in Stone Mountain, Georgia, during his interview in the documentary *Holler If You Hear Me: Black and Gay in the Church*. According to Samuel, one cannot separate one's existence as homosexual from one's individual personhood and humanity that this disembodied belief system purports, which creates a contradiction in faith for many in the LGBT community. As a result, the LGBT community has started its own churches such as The Vision Cathedral Church in Atlanta where they can worship God as a complete individual. When LGBT people are forced to live a covert existence, it leaves little room for compassionate and inclusive discourse on queer identities in the Black church.

In response to the silent veil used by the Black church, Douglas (1999) calls for a "sexual discourse of resistance" that challenges the Black church to become a voice for those who are marginalized, outcast, or oppressed because of who they are (p. 139). She emphatically asserts, "for the church to be homophobic and heterosexist is for the church to be Antichrist" (Douglas, 1999, p. 140). According to Gary Lemons (2010),

for as clearly as Brown maps the deadly effects of these twin evils in her book, the New Testament charts the life and life-saving "acts" of Christ to demonstrate that sinners are those who foster racism, sexism, and homophobia and those who nurture racist, sexist, and heterosexist structures and systems—likened to the Antichrist. (p. 76)

Thus, Lemons is calling for a more liberating biblical discourse. Such a discourse is needed if the Black church is to once again be the political, social, and cultural force it was during the Civil Rights Movement to adequately address issues in the Black community (sexuality, HIV, crime, etc.) rather than becoming a paragon of commercialized jargon and showbiz religion used to put on a show for its parishioners who leave high off rhetoric and low on long-term empowerment. This type of abusive discourse may also lead heterosexual men "who might not normally express hyper masculinity to feel pressure to do so as a result of repeated, impassioned church-inspired homophobic messages; ' . . . indeed, it may even vindicate their beliefs and fears about homosexuality,'" which makes them less tolerant in other aspects of their lives (Ward, 2005 p. 498).

The Battle for Voice and Identity Against Social Conservatism

As always with any suppressed group, a way of expression is found regardless of acceptance from the dominant populace. The participants in E. Patrick Johnson's (2008) study, *Sweet*

Tea: Black Gay Men of the South, several of whom were alumni of HBCUs, describe how Black gay men are “incorporated into the fabric of student life . . . and how sometimes they are cordoned off into their own discrete organizations” (p. 285). These formal and informal existences are noticeable in fraternities and sororities, gospel choirs, fashion shows, and within other social networks. The lack of acknowledgment of the LGBT community on the campus by universities as a whole and the secret societies that Johnson speaks of suggest that HBCUs are contradictory environments when it comes to recognizing the existence of queer identities.

What prevents these sexualities from becoming a recognized norm is the social conservatism that exists on the campuses of many HBCUs, even those that have managed to establish social groups and organizations for Black queer students. This conservatism is usually accompanied by social practices that attempt to regulate and eradicate sexual diversity. One example that articulates this practice is the incident in 2002 at Morehouse College in which a supposedly gay male student was beaten to death for allegedly making a pass at another male student in the shower. This incident forced the issue of homosexuality to the surface and forced administrators to move beyond a position of tolerance to a position of recognizing and understanding the diverse sexualities that existed on the campus. Prior to this, Morehouse was reluctant to address any notion that challenged their vision of masculinity embodied in the “Renaissance Man,” which Morehouse established as the type of man all their students would become during and after their tenure at the college.

Harper and Gasman’s 2008 National Black Male Achievement Study explores 12 HBCUs and 76 participants in an attempt to examine how Black male students characterize, respond to, and make sense of environmental politics (Harper & Gasman, 2008). The study notes one particular written policy toward sexual behaviors of one HBCU where “sexual misconduct is defined as including, but not limited to sexual intercourse, adultery, rape, sodomy and homosexual acts” (Harper & Gasman, 2008, p. 353). This language basically equates consensual sex between adults with rape. According to the study, homosexuality was cited as sexual misconduct in a number of other documents reviewed. A number of participants in the study spoke at length about institutional resistance to same-sex relationships, mostly from faculty and administrators. James, a Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University student, describes the resistance to the ways in which LGBT people are treated in the larger Black community: “this campus is like the rest of Black society; it is not accepting of gay culture. And so, they are definitely on the outskirts of this campus. They are not included” (Harper & Gasman, 2008, p. 342).

Other participants in the study noted how LGBT students had been rendered invisible despite the presence of gay Black males who outwardly express themselves through feminine aesthetics. It was noted, however, that these students were usually not part of, or functioned within, heterosexual Black

male peer groups; they regulated themselves to other students with the same expressive style. This type of peer bonding and exclusion was especially noticed at Morehouse, the only single-sex HBCU in the study. Participants in the Morehouse study group noted that a significant number of gay men attended the college, but dialogue and meaningful interaction between these students and heterosexuals were routinely avoided. For example, “Ross, a senior, characterized Morehouse as “a very heterosexual place, and he observed that gay male students were not befriended by many heterosexual males on campus” (Harper & Gasman, 2008, p. 343). Another Morehouse student had strong concerns about how the institution was handling heterosexism and homophobia:

Seeing how this is an all-male school, seeing how we’re in the middle of Atlanta, and that Blacks are notoriously homophobic, how are we going to manage it? Are we just going to sweep it under the carpet? That’s what’s usually done. (Harper & Gasman, 2008, p. 343)

According to the study, a number of participants reported that structured conversations about LGBT issues were not facilitated by administrators or faculty unless a student was harmed or the issue received a lot of media attention.

A perfect example that supports the participants’ observations is another situation that disrupted the vision that Morehouse prescribed for Morehouse men to develop when an organization that represented an aspect of the LGBT community called “The Plastics” was formed. Issues surrounding “The Plastics” received a lot of media attention. It is important to mention that this was not an official university organization. “The Plastics” can best be described as a group of males who function as interstitial figures and disrupt the border of feminine aesthetics through clothing styles and mannerism to develop their own distinct identities. Because of this group of students, as well as those male students who wore more urban attire such as do-rags, hoodies, and saggy pants, Morehouse instituted a broad dress code policy that banned such clothing in 2009, both in classrooms and at formal events. The most telling statement that resulted from the incident is listed in the Morehouse College, Division of Student Services (2013) as Appropriate Attire Statement Number Nine: “wearing of clothing associated with women’s garments.” This statement attempts to protect the foundation of the university: masculinity, or rather the university’s prescribed notion of masculinity.

“The Plastics” inferred that the ban of feminine attire violated their freedom of expression (King, 2010). Of course, Morehouse could and did cleverly argue that the new dress code was dealing with the larger issue of defining what best represents a Morehouse man. According to Morehouse Vice President of Student Affairs at the time, Dr. William Bynum,

The university respect[ed] the identity and choices of all young men at Morehouse; however, “the Morehouse leadership development model sets a standard of how [they] expect[ed] the

young men to dress, and this attire [that ‘The Plastics’ used for expression] does not fit within the model.” (King, 2010)

The model is based on the tenth president of Morehouse, Dr. Robert M. Franklin Jr.’s, call for the college to produce “Renaissance Men with a social conscience and a global perspective to uplift and serve” (Morehouse College, Division of Student Services, 2013). His vision centered on what he called the “Five Wells: well read, well spoken, well-travelled, well dressed and well balanced” (Morehouse College, Division of Student Services, 2013). Although Morehouse’s leadership model does include internal qualities of what a Morehouse man is, the foundation of the leadership model is a fundamental outward and physical manifestation of masculinity based on a performance of masculinity. The policy does a good job teaching the general student body the importance of dress and appearance, but it forces some gay males to conform in a way that may go against who they are and how they should act.

In essence, by using clothes as a prescription for masculinity, Bynum is articulating that to be a leader one must possess notions of prescribed masculinity (talking, walking, and dressing a certain way) by following a strict norm of hetero-fashion that has little to do with intellect, respect, confidence, and responsibility. Although these qualities are more empowering constructs of masculinity, they will not always come in the package that Morehouse prefers. Simultaneously, this dress code defines “The Plastics” and other transgender persons as incapable of being leaders at Morehouse and as an unrecognizable gender. Certainly no one is questioning Morehouse’s right to set standards for Black men by requiring a dress code, which ensures order and continuity, but the statement that speaks against wearing women’s garments further marginalizes certain students and creates a culture of homophobia on campus, while instilling such warped homophobia in future leaders who will certainly face diverse sexualities in the workplace. Of course, Morehouse is in a peculiar situation as an all-male college; anything other than heterosexuality goes against the very foundation the college is built on. The college faces the difficult challenge of trying to include different sexualities without emasculating itself in the eyes of heterosexual and conservative supporters and fostering a platform that may intentionally lead to more gay and transsexual students applying to the university who may lean toward feminine aesthetics. However forming an appropriate dress code for those gay students with “so-called” feminine aesthetics would have been much more inclusive rather than issuing a broad statement that speaks against such an aesthetic with very little explanation.

The major argument for dress codes is based on the theory that learning socially appropriate manners and wearing appropriate attire to specific occasions and situations are critical factors in the total educational process. It is true that limited modalities of dress limit distractions, but there is something much more deliberate going on: control. The control of one’s image that matches and perpetuates what society has deemed as normal ways of dressing and acting for men

and women. There is no room for in-betweenness or extremism. These dress code (and sometimes hair-style) restrictions not only fight against the criminalization of urban wear by police profiling and gangsta rap, but also draw from a Victorian discourse of rigidity when it comes to male and female attire. This is especially true on the campus of some HBCUs, as indicated by the conservative dress code policies of Oakwood University, Edward Waters College, Paul Quinn College, Norfolk State University, Virginia Union University, and Hampton University. All these universities filter their dress codes through the lens of gender-specific codes.

These gender-specific codes position the male body as always cloaked in fabric whereas the female body is more revealed with tight fitting outfits, regardless whether it is business or casual dress, as objects of desire (Penney, 2012). In other words, whereas a tight short mini skirt and low cutting halter-top may violate the dress code for women, tight business suits and heels do not. This standard of dress is part of a much broader view in the tradition of western dress practices. Diana Crane (2000), a feminist scholar, notes that “for approximately the past one hundred years, the expression of sexuality in men’s clothes has been largely taboo, while women’s clothes throughout the period remained sexually expressive” (p. 194). Laura Mulvey (1975), another feminist scholar, adds to Cranes’ notion by positing that this western tradition of dress is organized around the principles of “the male gaze and the female’s to-be-looked-at-ness” (p. 6). Thus, male patriarchal privilege enforces concealment for men whereas women are revealed as their objects of desire. Because sexuality and female liberation have become more visible in society in general, these tightly structured dress codes have met with resistance. As early as the 1980s, a number of designers of urban male wear experimented with more fitted and skin-tight clothes for men by presenting the male as a sexual object. Today you have hip-hop moguls such as Kayne West, P. Diddy, Pharrel Williams, and other designers moving beyond urban street wear to high fashion where skinny jeans, which were once considered off limits for urban males, are now very popular. You only need to look at the performers of the 2014 BET Hip-Hop awards to see how much. Such clothing presents important symbolic “challenges to hegemonic masculinity” (Crane, 2000, p. 195).

It has been difficult for males who choose to do so to flip the script, so to speak, and reveal their bodies with tight clothes; this might signal their own desire and interest in their own or another male’s sexual objectification and violate the established gender-specific codes of hip-hop fashion, which greatly influence young Black men’s attire in general. To remedy this, Black males usually sag their skinny jeans or if they are wearing form fitting pants, they usually wear a long shirt-like garment that sometimes comes to their knees as not to draw attention to their form. Tight clothes that draw attention to the male form are perceived as dangerous and threatening not only to the perceived notion of masculinity but also to the entire western patriarchal order because of the potential of de-phallicization.

One must be aware, however, that arguments presented by Crane and Mulvey have not and do not always hold true for African American males. For example, the body of Black male slaves, according to Roach, was always presented nude during the slave auction to show strength and work potential (Roach, 1996). It must be noted, however, that Black males did not have ownership of their bodies during slavery. The history of Black male style in the States has also included a number of interpreted examples of flamboyant and body-focused dress styles, even when framed within a definitive heterosexual context. For example, the form fitting style of Black dandyism was prevalent in the 19th century (M. L. Miller, 2009). Dandy is defined as a man who affects extreme elegance in clothes and manners. The clothes may be loose or fitted. Dandyism has experienced a revival of sorts with the appearance of music artist Jidenna and his hit song “Classic Man” (Mobisson, Kwabena, & Wonder, 2015), which celebrates elegant dressing and well-groomed hair (sometimes finger waves), good manners, and taking care of your business. A similar style was echoed during the disco era of the 1970s, which consisted of form fitting bell-bottom pants for both men and women. It is important to note that the standards of dress concerning Black males are sometimes inflected by race, class, and a number of other factors. The critiques presented here are just helpful ways to understand the ways in which these gendered specific codes of hip-hop are situated within the broader cultural context of the United States.

Nonetheless, because of the challenges to these dress codes and other incidents involving LGBT students, Morehouse College in particular must be given credit for a number of forums on homosexuality and masculinity offered each semester. For spring 2013, Morehouse’s Sociology Department offered the first course for the Black LGBT community for the university titled “A Genealogy of Black LGBT Culture and Politics” (Lee, 2013). Dr. Jafari Allen, a Morehouse alumnus and professor at Yale University taught the course by video-conference. This is progress, but a more powerful statement of purpose could have been made with a newly developed or revamped course/curriculum on campus. And, the video-conference course in some ways still positions the university leaders as distancing themselves from the issues rather than actively engaging in them as faculty and administrators. Nevertheless, the offering of this course is progress for the university, but it is only a charge for Morehouse and other HBCUs to mend the psychic distance between tolerance and acceptance and move beyond an ideology of neutrality to a more thoughtful, intentional engagement of issues relevant to the Black LGBT community on their campuses.

Creating Empowering Environments for LGBT Students

Such intentional and inclusive engagement would allow all identities and sexualities to navigate and be fully recognized

by the university. LGBT students, staff, faculty, and administrators are instrumental in creating friendlier environments according to Morrow and Messinger’s (2006) survey of 20 institutions. This can be accomplished by allowing LGBT students and organizations to present informational workshops at convocation and throughout the semester. Guest speakers and experts may also be invited to take part in these workshops. Students may be allowed a day each week or each month to express themselves as they really see themselves in decent fashion, a decency that needs to be defined through a collaboration between the university and LGBT students. Such special days can coincide with events on campus by these students to share their world, their joys, and pains with the university community through entertainment events and discussion forums. This allows a conversation about sexualities to begin and a culture of existence, acceptance, and tolerance to take root. Once again, dress codes alone only further marginalize LGBT students, making them the targets of homophobia.

Morehouse is used here as an example of only one institution of social conservatism in practice. A number of HBCUs are facing the same problem. But what is impeding the acknowledgment, acceptance, and tolerance of LGBT students are the administrators of HBCUs. HBCUs themselves fail to recognize and are ignorant of the fact that LGBT colleagues exist among their ranks. These are colleagues who could potentially support and foster such change; however, LGBT faculty members are less likely to support any initiative that goes against administrators without true protection of their jobs in place. Other administrators who may want to support such agendas may refrain because offering their support may be viewed as a critique of their own sexuality, regardless of whether or not they are gay. As a result, LGBT students have very few support mechanisms to support their cause.

Although all universities have the stipulated policy that they are “equal opportunity employers who do not discriminate against religion, sexual orientation, and people with disabilities etc.,” and some now include gender identities, the statement for the most part fulfills a requirement for legal purposes rather than an embodiment and belief in the statement. During my 13-year tenure at an HBCU, before recently joining the faculty of a majority institution, there was never any recognition of LGBT faculty by the administration. When I arrived at my current institution, I immediately noticed that all invites indicated faculty members and their “significant others or partners were welcomed” to social functions. This was not only the tone from top administrative offices but also the tone across the board. It appears that the administration made a concerted effort to send a positive message to LGBT faculty and an attempt to be inclusive. Such statements do not automatically mean that the atmosphere is what it should be, but LGBT faculty pay special attention to the type of language used when addressing this particular issue to detect any hints of awareness.

Without faculty and administrative support, fostering changes such as creating formal safe zones or safe spaces, forming student organizations and finding an advisor, and hosting official programs and events to create and promote networks of visible people on campus who identify openly as advocates and/or allies for LGBT students and the issues that concern them will be a challenge for colleges and universities. A full-time professional member to support such issues or even to teach is less likely to be hired, advisory committees will not be formed to cast a watchful eye, and no experts on sexualities and identities will be brought to the university as part of its lecture series in a hostile, unsupportive administrative climate. On the campuses of many HBCUs, LGBT students have to settle for using the Ombudsman's office or counseling center, which may not have professionals capable of dealing with their particular issues. In essence, to make progress and have a significant impact on LGBT issues, HBCUs must strive for diversity among their administrative ranks and promote inclusivity in their policies and procedures.

One of the main problems, however, is that many HBCUs do not understand and are not informed about the complex culture of the LGBT community to begin to articulate their needs. At the HBCU where I worked, some administrators and faculty were afraid to even use the word homosexual or gay. It was always whispered as some dark secret or totally ignored despite the fact that most were aware that there was a significant LGBT community among faculty and students. Thus, many of the administrators do not have or understand the language needed to foster understanding of the LGBT community on their campus. It is no wonder that some administrators at HBCUs who are in the closet prefer to navigate their sexuality below the radar and not engage in any university activity that questions their identity in a climate that may be hostile to non-heterosexuals.

There is one aspect of the university where a progressive and transformational process could have an immediate impact on a university's culture on all levels: the curriculum. Although many HBCUs administrators are still seeking knowledge about LGBT students, the LGBT students have empowered themselves by seeking out Black pioneers in queer studies. Because these students have such a thirst for knowledge about themselves and a confirming desire to see themselves represented, they tune into anything that is about them: movies, music, TV shows, out and coming out celebrities. What is even more impressive is that these students are turning to past and contemporary literature in Black queer studies that lets them know who they are and that they were never alone. These students are reading Rudolph Byrd and Guy-Sheftall's collection of critical essays *TRAPS: African American Men on Gender and Sexuality*, Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson's *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, James Earl Hardy's *B-Boys Blues*, and Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, and a plethora of other critical essays and literature that can give them the voice and language to articulate their political and social struggles, and their identities.

Ergo, it is no coincidence that many of the transformations that take place at HBCUs in regard to the LGBT community occur in women and gender studies departments, or in the case of the institution where I was, a single course: Introduction to Women Studies. This course was mostly designed and taught by one of my colleagues, an African American female, who is a very nurturing scholar. My colleague and I noticed a generation of Black female students in general from all backgrounds dealing with abuse, pregnancy, sexuality, and a host of other problems in addition to trying to get a degree on our campus. I noticed many of the males going through similar issues with the maintenance of masculinity. We both have always used our African American literature classes to empower our students by helping them understand their very complex space and place in the world as African American men and women; however, she found that a women and genders course was needed to address the complex issues of women, gender, and sexuality. It is through this course that heterosexual and LGBT students found voice and understanding through literature. When she proposed a major in women and gender studies, she met administrative resistance and political lip service, as administrators blew her off for so-called more pressing concerns of recruitment, retention, and finances without realizing that many LGBT students, because of their thirst for knowledge about themselves and the creative enterprises they used to express their identity, often possess an intellectual confidence and stability that universities value in students. Because of the social conservatism that was rampant on campus, she was only able to retain the one introductory course.

The response that my colleague received from administrators sheds light on how many HBCUs approach queer identities as something new when in reality it is only more noticeable now because more LGBT students are coming out of the shadows of heterosexual hegemony and normativity into the fray of acknowledgment and existence. This is where curricular changes through course content and development that foster a commitment to addressing Black queer identity can be most effective at decolonizing the university's curriculum, especially in African American studies programs and courses that already exist but give little attention to queer studies in African American culture despite their own struggles to promote institutional transformation at HBCUs and majority institutions. As Ferguson (2010) posits,

In this way, the histories of Black gender and sexual formations would cease to be marginal issues at HBCUs and become foundational to the liberal arts education at Black colleges and universities . . . in order to produce a social and intellectual climate that would engage the Black LGBT community [and the university as a whole] in the most intelligent way possible. (p. 69)

As mentioned earlier, it is not surprising that transformational changes concerning sexuality on the campus of HBCUs usually occur in women and gender studies departments and

courses because Black women have laid a solid foundation for the struggle for sexual autonomy through a plethora of literature and critical essays readily available. Essex Hemphill (1991), a Black gay poet, situates the importance of this established Black feminist foundation in the introduction to his anthology *Brother to Brother*. He called the Black feminist movement for sexual autonomy and visibility the second renaissance in African American literature:

Black women, [according to Hemphill], opened up new dialogues and explored uncharted territories surrounding race, sexuality, gender relations, family, history, and eroticism. In the process, they angered some Black male writers who felt they were being culturally castrated and usurped, but out of necessity, Black women realized they would have to speak for themselves—and do so honestly. As a result of their courage, Black women also inspired many of the Black gay men writing today to seek our own voices so we can tell our truths. Thus, we are at the beginning of completing a total picture of the African American Experience. (p. 40)

Here, Hemphill is calling for Black queer aesthetics to be channeled through the struggle of Black feminists to bring about university-wide institutional and communal change to develop “a politics of decolonization that protects and promotes gender and erotic autonomy as an extension of the institutional imagination of Black studies and Black feminism” (Ferguson, 2010, p. 71).

The classroom has a direct and positive impact on communal and institutional change. The challenge is to educate teachers in a way that allows them to recognize the complex issues of race, culture, gender, and sexuality, and how such awareness of these issues is important to teaching the whole identity of a student. Often however, these dynamic intersections are ignored or repressed in the classroom. In general, multicultural education discourse is well established, “but stereotypic representations and repressive silence persist in the sphere of practice” (Asher, 2007, p. 65).

From my experience in talking with students about identity issues in their classes, they indicate in most cases how teachers ignore homophobic slurs by pretending not to hear them or by addressing the noise that disturbs the class but not the content of the message. “Such practices promote and reify the stereotypical binaries of ‘us’ and ‘them’ [and] continue to essentialize identities, and deny multiplicities and nuances” (Asher, 2007, p. 65). The problem is that multicultural education has most often focused on race, while practically failing to address differences of race, gender, and class. When framed through the lens of Fanon’s (1967) notion of the White male gaze, multicultural education as we know it today fails to shake patriarchal foundations of the “master’s house” (Lorde, 1984), much less dismantle it, making it even more difficult for it to be used as a model for discourse on sexuality.

Institutions in general must foster among their teachers “critical, self-reflective ways of teaching that promote equity

and democratic ways of being” (Asher, 2007, p. 66), or as Doll (1998) says, “queering the gaze” (p. 287). For Nieto (2004), this type of multiculturalism directly affirms, focusing on both similarities and differences present in school and society. “It is about asking and telling about—and, of course, listening to and seeing the differences, contradictions and in-betweenness from which one tends to shy away” (Nieto, 2004, p. 66). The best way to begin to implement such a pedagogical approach is to create a safe space for students to express both their difference and resistance to social transformation, so that they can be engaged rather than ignored. “By encouraging educators to examine disjunctures, ruptures, break-ups, and fractures in [their] own and other’s educational practices, [they can in turn ‘queer’ theory, practice, and the self unfamiliar” (J. Miller, 1998, p. 370). It is this act of unfamiliarizing that fosters a safe space in the classroom because students are not bound by so-called “normal” binaries. Such an examination by faculty can breakdown the institutionalized rejection of difference. Audre Lorde (1984) makes the implications of such rejection clear:

Institutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people. As members of such an economy, we have all been programmed to respond to human differences between us with fear and loathing. (p. 115)

Here, Lorde is commenting on how institutions ignore the MMDI and try to erase difference and enforce silence by creating a perceived norm about race, gender, and sexuality, and disregard any in-between locations of being. By promoting such normativity, institutions and teachers fail to see how we are all implicated in these relations, and fail to take advantage of the opportunity to introduce students to other ways of being to promote tolerance rather than waiting for them to encounter this “otherness” on their own, which may lead to fear, anger, defensiveness, resistance, and even hatred toward such “others.” According to Lorde’s (1984) framework for defining difference, patriarchal consciousness “conditions us to see human difference in simplistic opposition to each other: dominant/subordinate, good/bad, up/down, superior/inferior” (p. 114). Thus, differences are conceptualized and responded to in a way that homogenizes difference, that is, pretend that everyone is the same. “When teachers and students end up closeting or repressing certain aspects of their hybrid identities, they end up . . . erasing part of themselves and limiting the overall educational experience [for all students]” (Asher, 2007, p. 69). The façade of normalcy must be disrupted to get past cultural relativism to learn through conflict (Kumashiro, 2000).

Toward a Conclusion: Self-Liberation

At the core of improving understanding, tolerance, and acceptance of queer identities is taking a liberal approach in

social and cultural institutions. It is in these social and cultural institutions that our youth are socialized and prepared to navigate society. Institutions must promote what Lemons (2010) calls a “vision of sexual discursive transgression by crossing homiletical boundaries between theology, autobiography, and scholarship” (p. 75; on Black feminist pedagogy) to offer a “critique of homophobia and heterosexism in the Black church, [and other institutions], at the intersections of race, gender, and spirituality” (p. 76).

When we fail to diversify our curriculum on the basis of religions doctrines and personal beliefs, we foster and perpetuate a system of hate, misunderstanding, and marginalization. We are also teaching people to hide who they are and attack others who are “supposedly different” according to society’s standards.

When we teach, [preach, and lead] beyond the fear of internalized heterosexism [and biblical damnation], we may find that the classroom [the pulpit and office] can be a place of redefinition and revision where teacher and student, [and pastor, congregation, administrators, and faculty] can cross the borders of gender, race, and sexuality to affirm education and [religion] as the practice of self-liberation. (Lemons, 2010, p. 85)

The late Marlon Riggs (1999) articulates this notion of self-liberation:

An inheritance from Black Cultural Nationalism of the late sixties and Negritude before that, today’s Afrocentrism, as popularly theorized, premises an historical narrative which runs thus; before the white man came, African men were strong, noble protectors, providers, and warriors for their families and tribes. In pre-colonial Africa, men were [just] truly men. And women—were [just] women. Nobody was lesbian; nobody was feminist. Nobody was gay. (p. 292)

Here, Riggs is calling for a deconstruction of the mechanisms of homophobic oppression and of “white racism’s history of and tendency to hypersexualize, pathologize, demonize and mystify Black sexuality” (Thomas, 1996, p. 66). Only then can Black social and cultural institutions such as HBCUs be fully liberated and transgress textual, social, cultural, and religious boundaries.

President Barack Obama gave a very liberating speech when he told the Morehouse graduating class of 2013 to love and support their loved ones and set examples of what it means to be a good man, a good citizen. But it is not so much what he said to the all-male graduating class at an all-Black male college, but how he said it:

Keep setting an example for what it means to be a man. Be the best husband to your wife, or your boyfriend, or your partner. Be the best father you can be to your children, because nothing is more important. (“Transcript: Obama’s,” 2013)

Obama’s inclusive comments deconstruct the notion of heterosexual patriarchy when it comes to masculinity by redefining

notions of prescribed masculinity. Society must embrace a more inclusive and liberating approach in the operation of all social institutions because the LGBT community is part of every facet of our society, and they recognize the transforming power that they hold. Those who resist may soon find that they are the ones who are marginalized, “for it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence, and there are so many silences to be broken” (Lorde, 1984, p. 14).

An evaluation of the literature indicates that universities must include issues concerning the LGBT community when governing the university. Because when universities do not, LGBT students are forced into a perpetuated societal norm that essentializes their experiences. As a result of this essentialization, LGBT students are placed outside the heterosexual/nonheterosexual binary and are viewed as abnormal (Abes & Kasch, 2007). Such placement and view only cause more misunderstanding to the university community as a whole and internalized homophobia for some LGBT students. Thus, campus communities need to have more educational opportunities that allow for conversations about gender and sexuality to combat the myths and stereotypes that have been perpetuated about the LGBT community. The literature also indicates that safe space groups, organizations, and training help to provide much-needed peer support for LGBT students. And because “the majority of social activities during the undergraduate years are heterosexually based” (Wall & Evans, 1991, p. 30), the ways in which institutions exclude or marginalize members of their community must be examined to provide more representative experiences. Overall, research shows how important it is for HBCUs, and universities in general, to understand sexual identities in broader terms. Because even within the LGBT community, there are even more complex identities to address, especially when it comes to transgender students. To improve campus climates, there must be a space or spaces that allow for the natural expression and exploration of multiple identities. The more educated the campus community is about LGBT students and issues, the more natural it will be for them to talk about such issues.

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