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Explorations of Respectability and Resistance in Constructions of Black Womanhood at HBCU

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Somewhere in her college experience she must have an opportunity to develop poise, to increase her self-esteem and to establish a sense of her worth and dignity as an individual. She must experience peace and beauty in her environment and she must be accorded the respect and courtesy, which is so lacking in her life on the outside. The education of the Negro woman should give her an opportunity to exhaust to the fullest her powers of expression and creativity.

Willa Player, The Negro College and Women's Education (1947)

Dr. Willa Player believed that historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) should serve as spaces for African American women: to develop self-worth. At HBCUs, Black women are supposedly granted a retreat from a “world of preju-dice [that] is capable of robbing her of the belief in her own innate capabilities, of shattering her ambition and destroying her self-confidence” (Player, 1947, p. 365). The interplay of campus environment, student experience, and the construction of black womanhood, as suggested by Player, had been relatively unexplored since Fleming’s (1983) study of the making of matriarchs at HBCUs and predominately white institutions (PWIs).

Inquiry into the construction of black womanhood—the behaviors and practices associated with being Black and woman—has shed light on the complex issues of race, gender, and class faced by Black women (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; Dill, 1979; Hooks, 1981, 1989, 2000). Moreover, black feminist scholarship has problematized several topics related to constructions of black womanhood, including respectability (Higginbotham, 1993; White, 2001), strength (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Jones and Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Morgan, 1999; Wallace, 1978), the gender and femininity performance in popular culture (Collins, 2004;

Emerson, 2002; Hooks, 1981), and the promiscuity or the hypersexualization of Black women (Collins, 2000; Morgan, 1999). However, literature in higher education lags behind other fields when it comes to Black women, effectively silencing the wealth of narratives that Black women college students possess (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Most postsecondary institutions fail to account for complexities that shape Black women's lives, and as a result, support for this population is limited if available at all. Moreover, research emerging from the study of HBCU campus environments is void of a Black feminist lens that centers Black women undergraduates. This chapter is inspired by the existing interdisciplinary work of Black feminist scholarship and picks up where Fleming (1983) left off—by adding to the limited information on gender construction among Black college women (Croom and Patton, 2015; Marsh, 2013). In particular, we explore Black womanhood and the manner in which Black women undergraduates construct and resist gender in HBCU campus environments.

Black Womanhood

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins (2001) paints multiple constructions of Black womanhood. Black womanhood is primarily a response to stereotypes placed on Black women, the powerlessness of Black women to control stereotypes, and the power they exercise despite prevailing stereotypes. For Collins, Black women's realities contentiously exist between factual and mythical contexts. The factual context refers to what they see and experience through their personal lens (e.g., what they know to be true), and the mythical context is comprised of expectations and stereotypes of the Black women manufactured through the matrix of domination. Collins (1991) explains, "Controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, and poverty appear to be a natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life" (p. 68). Stereotypes in which Black women are imagined as promiscuous, lazy, antagonistic, and immoral serve white power elite interests and marginalize Black women (Collins, 2000). Black women who fall outside the boundaries of respectability—and are therefore assumed to be reinforcing stereotypes to those outside the Black community—are at fault for stifling racial progress (Collins, 2000; Higginbotham, 1993; Jewell, 1993; White, 2001).

Black women must regularly choose how they respond to the influence of stereotypes in constructing Black womanhood. One strategy designed to rearticulate Black womanhood beyond stereotypes is to engage in respectability politics. Coined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993), "politics of Black respectability" promote cleanliness, polite manners, self-restraint, sexual purity, and frugality to disrupt negative perceptions of Black people. Black respectability appeases two audiences: Black people who want to be respected and viewed as respectable, and White people who need evidence of educated, civilized, and hardworking Black people (Harris, 2003). For Black women, respectability politics are rooted in heteronormative femininity and a desire to be viewed as respectable.

Through enacting or resisting respectability politics, Black women confront and disrupt controlling stereotypes by redefining their own versions of womanhood (Collins, 2001). Through daily raced and gendered behaviors, they build self-worth, demand respect, and disrupt stereotypical tropes such as Mammy or Aunt Jemima, the Black matriarch, Jezebel, and Sapphire (Collins). Lorde (1978) likens these acts of self-definition to acts of liberation. Acts of self-definition can shift discourses of black womanhood from victimization to empowerment.

Through self-definition, Black women exert control over their bodies, language, and attitudes to manipulate their public selves and reflect images they choose to present. Engaging in self-definition signifies Black women's choices in a social terrain shrouded with stereotypes designed to strip away choices. Collins (2001) argues that a personally empowered definition of self that opposes ruling stereotypes is simultaneously defined by these stereotypes, an ever-present tension in constructing black womanhood.

The media also proliferates and influences Black women stereotypes (Boylorn, 2008; Collins, 2004; Hooks, 1992), but African American institutions (e.g., churches, families, and schools) created for and maintained in Black communities also transmit racist and sexist images of Black women and girls (Collins, 2000; Ward, 2005; White, 2001). While painful to examine in a "racially charged society always vigilant for signs of disunity—the question of how organizations of black civil society reproduce controlling images of black womanhood and fail to take a stand against images developed elsewhere is equally important" (Collins, 2000, p. 95). These entities dispel myths of black inferiority but also foster the subordination and objectification of Black women. HBCUs represent spaces where stereotypes about Black women are fueled (Bonner, 2001; Collins, 2004). Bonner's (2001) study reveals sexism toward faculty and staff at HBCUs and calls for additional gender-related studies. Collins comments that HBCUs cradle students from the prejudices of predominantly white colleges, while also setting standards for women students based on the cult of true womanhood and white elitism.

HBCU Environments

HBCUs have always filled an educational void in black communities. Emerging through a history of racial discrimination and segregation (Brown and Davis, 2001; Brown and Freeman, 2004), with goals rooted in community solidarity (Allen, Epps, and Haniff, 1991), HBCUs have a reputation for promoting racial uplift (Gallien and Hikes, 2005). Literature on HBCUs often depicts a restrictive, sexist, and "in loco parentis" context (Anderson, 1988; Ihle, 1992). Harper and Gasman (2008) found some HBCUs exhibited highly conservative environments in which sexuality, sexual orientation, and dress were governed through policies requiring students to dress and behave "professionally." Students were discouraged from expressing dissenting views from faculty and staff and disclosed accounts of university personnel meddling in their personal matters.

When HBCU environments exhibit a conservative environmental press, the extent to which students are able to express their individualism is limited. For example, in 2009, Morehouse College introduced a dress code policy that sparked national controversy over the institution's presumed attempt to suppress gender nonconforming and gay students (Mungin, 2009). While the vice president of student affairs publicly stated that he discussed the policy with the campus's LGBT student organization, gay, bisexual, and trans* students spoke of discriminatory experiences at Morehouse (King, 2010). Patton's (2014) critical discourse analysis found the policy promoted the punishment of gay, gender nonconforming students, or those dressed in "street clothes," while men who dressed in alignment with the policy were deemed acceptable. Patton's analysis revealed how Morehouse engaged politics of respectability by affirming heteronormative masculinities. Similarly, this chapter explores the performance of heteronormative femininities in the construction of black womanhood among Black undergraduate women in HBCU contexts.

Theoretical Framework

Black feminist thought (BFT) centers Black women in historical and contemporary contexts while challenging white patriarchy. Utilizing Black women's voices as a starting point for self-definition and naming one's own reality, BFT reveals connections between Black women's oppression and their activism to disrupt white supremacy and sexism (Collins, 2001). BFT acknowledges heterogeneity *and* shared experiences among Black women. Black women's lives exist in dynamic and mutually shaping conversations with one another. Given the ever-changing and evolving nature of Black women's lives, regrettably too much time has elapsed since Fleming's (1983, 1984) research on Black undergraduate women and the HBCU campus environment.

Constructed Campus Environments

In addition to using BFT, we emphasize the role of the constructed environment at HBCUs. Strange and Banning (2001) argue that environments exert a powerful influence on individuals and have the capacity to shape behavior. Constructed environments rely on "subjective views and experiences of participant observers, assuming that environments are understood best through the collective perceptions of the individuals within them" (p. 86). These environmental perspectives also emphasize collective perceptions of the environment and can determine the extent to which individuals feel a sense of safety and belongingness (Strange and Banning, 2001).

Every campus is comprised of shared perspectives that exist on the macro-level as well as the micro-level. These shared perspectives exude a certain "press" or climate that shapes how individuals react and interact with one another. At HBCUs, for

example, the macro-level press might be geared toward black pride and racial uplift. Similarly, the macro-level press could exude a highly academic climate prompting students to engage in significant studying and other academic related activities. Conversely, subcultures within HBCUs, such as sororities or fraternities, create an influential environmental press focused on involvement in social activities, community service, and strict expectations of physical appearance for members.

In addition to environmental press, HBCUs individually and collectively are rooted in a strong campus culture, which is embedded in events and narratives that influence the historical and present context of the campus. Culture represents the traditions prevalent on campus and includes tangible artifacts (e.g., statues, paraphernalia) and intangible artifacts (e.g., common sayings and shared language) (Kuh and Whitt, 1988). Culture influences interactions campus (e.g., class-rooms, residence halls, or student unions) (Renn and Patton, 2011). Together, BFT captures the experiences of the Black women, while constructed environmental perspectives contextualize their experiences within HBCU environments.

About the Studies

The studies presented in this chapter stem from two independent research projects conducted by each author. Through dialogue, we agreed our collective findings would contribute diverse perspectives on Black women's constructions of black womanhood. Each study was conducted separately, but they have several commonalities. For example, we grounded our projects in critical qualitative methodologies that center participants' voices and acknowledge the role power plays in shaping experiences. Moreover, critical frameworks such as BFT (Collins, 2001), respectability politics (Higginbotham, 1993), and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) are central to data collection, analysis, and findings. All participants identified as Black and attended or graduated from an HBCU, allowing us to consider the role of HBCU environments in students' experiences. Each study involved extensive interviews with participants, theory-driven data analysis, and identification relevant themes in alignment with our respective research questions. Below, we describe each study and explain how we place our data in conversation to address our research question: How does the constructed environment of HBCUs support diverse expressions of black womanhood?

Nadrea's study focuses on Black women alumnae from one conservative historically black college in the south and their conceptualizations of black - womanhood. Seventeen participants reflect on constructions of black womanhood as undergraduates, specifically highlighting their HBCU environment. Lori's study draws from research on Black lesbian, gay, and bisexual students attending HBCUs. For this chapter, transcripts specifically from women participants, all of whom attended conservative HBCUs in the south, were examined. Analysis focuses on participants' sexual identities as lesbian and bisexual and the filtering of their voice, both broadly and specifically, within HBCU environments.

In order to arrive at the findings in this chapter, we discussed our personal - constructions of black womanhood and influencers such as family, education, peers, and membership in historically black sororities (Nadrea is a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha and Lori is a member of Delta Sigma Theta), as well as the campus ethos of our undergraduate institutions. Through dialogue, we grappled with our own positionalities as researchers and as Black women with various intersecting identities. We shared our studies and identified common threads using the research question and theoretical frameworks as analytical guides to arrive at the findings.

Findings

We found that the HBCU sites in our studies have two opposing constructed spaces. These environments were both constrictive and supportive of diverse expressions of black womanhood. On the macro-level, the sites had a conservative environmental press—reinforced by faculty, staff, and peers—in which expressions of black womanhood promoted a politics of respectability, appeared to feed controlling stereotypes, and supported heteronormative expressions of femininity. However, the larger population of Black people campus promoted a strong sense of self-concept and cultural history among students. This led to selection of micro-level subcultures where students retreated to experiment with, refine, and articulate their constructions of black womanhood. These subcultures included those established with institutional support (e.g., sororities or student government) and those created in resistance to the constructed campus environment aimed at policing their womanhood.

Throwing “Shade”: Policing the Constructions of Black Womanhood

To contextualize our theorization of gender policing in HBCU contexts, we use the black queer vernacular concept of *shade*. Patrick E. Johnson (1995), a performance scholar, classifies shade, and its predecessor *reading* (e.g., to “read” someone) under the umbrella signifying the “direct or indirect tactics in verbal dueling” (p. 124). In the black queer community, signifying through the verbal act of “read-ing” is synonymous with putting “a person in their place” (p. 125). However, the nonverbal and indirect way of correcting a person in offense is referenced as *throw-ing shade*. Johnson explains:

To throw shade is to ignore a person altogether, even if the person is in immediate proximity. If a shade thrower wishes to acknowledge the presence of the third party, he or she might roll his or her eyes and neck while poking out his or her lips. People throw shade if they do not like a particular person or if that person has dissed them in the past. The effect of throwing shade in this manner is also a type of dissing, because it is considered disrespectful not to acknowledge someone’s presence. (p. 126)

With this in mind, we return to our studies and the HBCU campus environment to describe how the use of shade or throwing shade operates as a policing mechanism to control and ignore the presence of diverse conceptions of black womanhood. Given the conservative environmental press present at HBCUs in our studies, faculty, staff, and peers threw shade at expressions of womanhood that disrupted heteronormativity and/or challenged stereotypes of Black women. Indirect shade was thrown at and observed by participants who engaged in unacceptable expressions of womanhood. Participants discussed how their outward expression via clothing choices raised significant concerns on campus because black womanhood was often filtered through feminine attire. For example, Ashley, a lesbian participant in Lori's study, explained her unwillingness to abide by conventional gender norms in her clothing because it was not a reflection of who she truly was. She shared:

It is like a fashion show here. That is one thing about the Black women I don't like: the show. With that aspect it is hard having my [sexual] orientation...It [expectations of Black women] garbage. Most women, on this campus, if you take a survey and ask them if they would like to walk around in basketball shorts and a sweatshirt, they would because it is comfortable. The heels and tight jeans are not comfortable. Some people go through that, walking around in the heels and tight jeans, but that is not me.

Rachel, a bisexual student and participant in Lori's study, explained the confusion among peers as they grappled with her masculine clothing and the seemingly contradictory sound of her feminine voice. She explained:

[It was] really confusing because when people tell me how I dress, like last year, they would say they were confused. Some of them just thought that I was a tomboy that didn't want to wear heels. And others thought "yeah she's a lesbian" but it was so many different [opinions] because a lot of people saw how I dressed, but they talked to me and apparently something between the way I talked and how I dressed differentiated between me being lesbian or straight. So they really didn't know. They were like, "well she really doesn't sound like a lesbian but she looks like a lesbian."

These experiences made participants hyper-aware of the gaze directed toward them. The gaze went beyond confused questioning and could be felt in other's body language. Paulie, a gender nonconforming lesbian alumna in Nadrea's study, self-described her college-age look as "tomboyish" but not masculine enough in dress to prompt questions from peers; thus, her sexual identity was shielded from the public gaze and judgment. However, other lesbians who were strikingly antirespectable—overweight, masculine in presentation, and cruising campus in large groups—received askance body language from staff. Paulie stated, "you could see [the Dean] kind of stiffing up, kind of bristle at the sight of Toni or the other

kinds of heavy set women that [were gay].” Paulie’s quote demonstrates how displays of nonheteronormative black womanhood were off-putting and uncomfortable for some on campus. The confluence of body size, nonfeminine attire, and the sound of one’s voice prompted policing of participants’ bodies and resulted in them receiving shade on campus.

Covertly operating under the guise of othermothering (Collins, 2001; Hirt, Amelink, McFeeters, and Strayhorn, 2008), participants also described direct acts of shade they received from faculty and staff who attempted to police their gender expression. Within Nadrea’s study, Bee described how one of these “othermothers” stopped her on campus to critique her appearance and requested that she rethink her attire. On one particular day, after a long night of studying, Bee rolled out of bed with hair uncombed, and an administrator admonished her look with probing questions: “Why do you look like that? Where are you going? Don’t you need to go back [to your room] and try it again?” The campus administrator is insinuating that Bee’s public presentation was unacceptable and in need of editing. While scholarship on administrators at HBCUs would reference this administrator’s approach to Bee as othermothering, it also reflective of throwing respectability shade to police Bee’s appearance. Instances in which faculty, staff, and peers threw shade either ignored or marginalized participants’ expressions of black womanhood because of their misalignment with the politics of respectability and heteronormative gender performance. Interestingly, participants came to understand what traditional black womanhood meant through questions, gestures, and reactions rather than verbalized descriptions. These interactions not only demonstrated what black womanhood was, but also what it was not.

Existing literature on HBCUs suggests this shade-driven environmental press is the result of a mission to prepare students for success in a white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal society that has historically and consistently marginalized conceptions of black womanhood. On the other hand, this same preparation is problematic in its restriction and restraining of queer or gender nonconforming expressions of black womanhood. Ultimately, there were examples in which the HBCU campus environments in these studies hindered the authentic development of varying expressions of black womanhood in lieu of the larger goal of producing one or only a few acceptable shades, more suitable for consumption on campus and within the larger public.

Coloring Outside the Box: Campus Subcultures, Classroom Spaces, and the Permission to Construct Womanhood

Our findings also indicated that HBCU campus environments can serve as grounds for resistance and experimentation with black womanhood. Students primarily experimented within subcultures. Student subcultures that affirmed heteronormative femininity, such as sororities and student government, operated in public spaces because they represented respectable black womanhood. These

groups—described in Nadrea’s study as “prissy,” “refined,” and “girly girls” who “had it together”—allowed participants to experiment with womanish acts in public. Specific to Nadrea’s study, “The Yard”—the center of campus where each sorority had their own spaces to gather as a separate community—served as a place where women battled for the best outfit, highest heels, and the silkiest roller-wrap. This was also a space for first-year and sophomore students to observe and aspire toward similar shades of black womanhood in terms of sorority membership and what membership meant for their sexual identity. In Nadrea’s study, Angele detailed her admiration for the sorority girls campus in her first year. Describing them as the prototype of what a “freshman girl” aspired to, she said:

The “Monicas” or the “pretty Christinas” or, you know, you had the “Melissas,” like you had these women that you kind of looked at just like “oh, you’re so beautiful!” ...this like picture of what I guess [is] a polished individual...I mean, I remember looking at the AKAs... oh, my god...they were so well kept and put together...

Angele’s recollection of how these women impacted her aspiration to be “a - polished individual” illustrates the influence they had in shaping expressions of black womanhood. Feasting on both a young woman’s impressionable state and her desire to join a sorority, these images were socializing mechanisms for first-year students and influenced some women’s sensemaking of sororities and the perceived restrictions they placed on black womanhood. Rachel, a participant in Lori’s study, explained:

Everything has a Greek aspect to it...And a lot of people don’t see their sexuality being accepted in Greek organizations...And me personally I am interested in being Greek...and earlier this year when I made that decision to go forth and conquer, I found myself hiding my sexuality. I honestly did. And...I stepped aside and I thought about what I wanted to do and I’m like “ok if I’m gonna be Greek they’re either gonna accept me for who I am or they’re not. I’m not gonna hide it.”...I feel that like all these people they’re really hiding their sexuality because they want to be Greek. That’s just what it is. It’s just not accepted because so many people want to be Greek and they feel that it’s not accepted in those organizations. And I just feel that that’s so unrealistic...

Nadrea’s participant also expressed similar sentiments. Jessi, a gender - nonconforming lesbian, was particularly interested in the service aspect of sorority membership. Reflecting back on a failed attempt to pledge a sorority, she stated:

I think my biggest concern with [pledging], should I have been inducted into the organization, I knew that I was going to have to maybe modify a

few things, you know...I was fine with it but I think that, ultimately, you know, I wouldn't have been able to just conform.

While sororities certainly provided space for one enactment of black womanhood, they were also exclusive and restrictive in nature. Despite their exclusivity in terms of sexual orientation and gender presentation, Rachel and Jessi maintained an interest in sorority membership because they were the gateway to involvement, networking, and community service. They remained aware that members might not accept their gender-queer, lesbian, and bisexual identities.

When participants needed a space for constructing womanhood, they used particular classroom spaces or more private settings. Regina, a participant in Nadrea's study, commented that during her first year, she spent the weekends "at the club; somewhere in the streets." Being in the streets involved adult or more womanish activities such as drinking, which was prohibited on Regina's dry campus. However, the consequences of exploring womanhood in this manner were steep for first-year women who were attempting to act like grown women, particularly by violating curfew. She describes the conundrum of coming back to campus drunk and trying to return to the residence hall unnoticed by the "dorm mothers":

We went to the 24-hour room [a room attached to the library that stays open] trying to get our life [or strategize and get ourselves organized], to figure out how we were going to get in the dorm and then we tried to sneak up the back way and got caught and Michelle was drunk, I was drunk. It was just a mess...

After getting caught, Regina recounts the consequences—the dorm mother's threat to call her mother. "[The dorm mother said] I'm calling Miss Audrey. 'Oh, please don't call her.' So I called [a family friend] and asked [them] to sign me out." Regina's experimentation with black womanhood involved alcohol consumption (as a grown woman act), which yielded circumstances that violated campus policy.

In the classroom, women's studies courses were a powerful influence for participants in constructing black womanhood. Rachel, a participant in Lori's study, discussed how women's studies courses provided her with a sense of empowerment. She learned things "you wouldn't learn in the media...or an African studies class...They just really empower women...and being exposed to this and knowing that they have done actual research on this and have credible scholars...that has really influenced me."

In Nadrea's study, sexual and behavioral expressions were prominent in residence halls. Lesbian women gathered to experiment and affirm their own conceptions of black womanhood. Paulie spoke extensively about movie nights and dorm-room dance parties where lesbian students expressed themselves freely.

While admittedly shy about the experience, she describes being invited to such a private party as a first-year student:

I come down there and like the lights are dim and, literally, there was just like wall to wall lesbians like, you know, masculine presenting, androgynous, and like very feminine presenting. And I was just like okay, like hey, you know, is this like some sort of initiation, this is kind of weird. All of my social anxieties [were] bubbling up but I think it was more so of a “hey, in case you didn’t know who all was here, we are your people.” There wasn’t any pres-sure. I hung out for like a little bit but I excused myself cause it was a lot...

Paulie’s experience, while overwhelming, illustrates a radical campus space where women could perform their own expressions of womanhood. Paulie could, at least for a moment, engage with a cadre of women who were otherwise silenced on campus.

The residence halls also served as a space for constructions of black womanhood through experimentation with hair. They operated as the local beauty salon where students could get their hair done. Some women got their hair pressed by the resident beautician. Bee, Rene, and Regina from Nadrea’s study describe the distinct scent of singed hair filling the hallways. Paulie proudly shared how her third-floor neighbor was the first to braid and then help lock her hair. Regardless of sexual identity and gender presentation, hair salience was a prominent aspect in showcasing black womanhood.

The participants in both studies dealt with expectations surrounding their performance of black womanhood and the extent to which it was accepted or frowned upon. Among the women in Lori’s study, participants characterized black womanhood as resistance. This act of resistance was often explained as “doing me.” Staci, one of Lori’s participants shared:

There was a time when I would just dress up [in feminine clothing] because it was like “well I don’t want people to look at me.” But now it’s kind of like I really don’t care. Whatever I wear is what I wear.

Dana, a participant in the same study, balked at the heteronormative standards of black womanhood on campus and stated, “I’m gonna be me regardless.” Conversely, she also described her HBCU experience as one in which she was allowed to explore her identity. She explained:

I was able to come into my sexuality more openly coming to college because I was on my own. I don’t have to answer to anyone and I feel like I’m going through that transition in life where you become, from adolescence to adulthood, when you um, you know, decide who you’re gonna be, what you’re gonna be...

Other participants in Lori's study described aspects of black womanhood in terms of possessing a certain level of confidence in which one avoids throwing shade. Asya noted:

A lot of girls my age or even older feel the need to, how they say, "hate" on another girl, jealousy. I feel like if you have insecurities about yourself then you do that, but if you have security about yourself then you don't need to hate on anybody else. I pride myself on being confident, knowing that I will never hate on someone like that. I don't need to.

Renee, a participant in Lori's study, sums up the multilayered and dynamic con-structions of black womanhood at HBCUs, whether acceptable or not:

I mean you can't judge a book by its cover. You can't just see a person and just [say] "she's this,"... You can't just judge a book by its cover. You can never just look at a book and tell what it's about. You always have to open the book because looks are deceiving.

Discussion and Implications

The studies and findings highlighted in this chapter reveal some of the diverse ways in which Black undergraduate women constructed and resisted singular definitions of black womanhood. The findings are reflective of BFT's contention about the heterogeneity among Black women and the assumption that black womanhood is dynamic but also connected to the history of Black women and the stereotypes used to define them. HBCU environments, particularly those with a conservative environmental press, serve as a space for racial uplift and promote a heteronormative notion of black womanhood that can be empowering for some women yet is also linked to the politics of respectability. Thus, students who abided by heteronormative standards and displayed feminine gender performance could access sororities and other social networks in college because they had their "act" together (e.g., nice hair, high heels, tight jeans, involved on campus). These women were viewed as the norm. When they failed to have their act together, they received shade from peers and administrators who had different expectations of how they should present themselves in public.

Black undergraduate women residing beyond traditional prescriptions of black womanhood, or those who were lesbian, gay, or gender nonconforming, experienced shade as well and dealt with the policing of their gender and sexual identities. Peers threw shade in everyday conversations that demonstrated their confusion about participants' masculine attire. Administrators threw shade through their subtle facial expressions and nonverbal behaviors, as well as blatant comments directed at students.

Some HBCU environments, such as those in this study, were also spaces in which participants engaged in acts of resistance by caring less about what others thought of them and embracing their own view of black womanhood, one in which confidence rather than throwing shade was important. Spaces such as residence halls and women's studies classrooms allowed for greater exploration and performance of different versions of black womanhood rather than the heteronormative version imbued through the campus milieu. In conclusion, Black women and black womanhood never represent a singular process or experience. HBCUs can use the findings of these studies to examine their campus environments and the extent to which the environmental press constricts or contributes to diverse constructions of black womanhood. The findings could be used to inform programs and policies designed to create and promote healthy, diverse, and empowering constructions of black womanhood among students on campus. In conclusion, these findings reveal an intricate connection between heteropatriarchy, sexism, racism, and the ways in which black women conform to and resist these structures prior to, during, and upon graduation from college.

Note

1 The authors use African American and Black interchangeably in this chapter.

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