

Institutions, Intuitions, and Inhibitions: Nuancing the Role of HBCUs on Black Women's Socialization Constructs

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Abstract

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) continue to be a hub and model for Black student success. For Black women, specifically, such institutional types have pronounced effects on personal identity and professional development. The theory of vibe serves as an entryway to better understanding how Black women view and internalize the impact of their HBCUs on their lives, as it indulges racialized feelings, places, and experiences beyond tangibility. These features and the capacity of vibe are important when considering that students engage with higher education through discourse and embodiment. Using interview data from the United Negro College Fund's Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute, we center the experiences and perspectives of 25 Black women HBCU alumnae. We examine various roles that HBCUs play in socializing Black women from pre-enrollment to graduation through their careers. Our analysis points to three findings: (1) Nurturing a Typology of Women, (2) Instilling and Facilitating Ethics of Care and Love, and (3) Affirming Black Womanhood(s). These findings highlight how HBCUs influence and support Black women throughout the trajectories of postsecondary education, their careers, and lifestyles. They also suggest the readiness of and need for HBCUs to incorporate the theory of vibe in their student-facing assessment cultures.

Keywords: HBCUs; Black women; vibe; socialization; higher education; feeling; emotion

“Something to be Said About Our Sisterhood”

Good morning, sisterhood... *our* sisterhood!

Something to be said

About that HBCU experience.

A place of love, a safety net....

You had that level of protection.

Remember the level of warmth?

Setting the tone

For what it's going to be like for Black women in this world.

What does it look like?

Nice?

Inclusive?

Where do I find myself mirrored?

Didn't lay down her Blackness.

Wasn't going to dim her light.

Necessary to help me become the woman that I am.

The HBCU experience

Our sisterhood.

Introduction

Ideas and theorizations of emotive inclinations serving as the impetus of Black women's practices and politics date back to the nineteenth century. In an 1895 address delivered at the First Congress of Colored Women, Victoria Earle Matthews stated, "Woman's part in Race Literature, as in Race building, is the most important part and has been so in all ages. It is for her to receive impressions and transmit them" (p. 21). Her words followed and supplemented those of Fannie Barrier Williams, just two years earlier, which initiated a call for the systemic and explicit study of Black women in America (Cooper, 2017). As a result of the congress, Black

women created an agenda to discuss and address issues of the Black community, a course of action precipitated by blatant and vile character attacks on Black women. Williams described this phenomenon as organized anxiety, which “roots the intellectual content of racial change within Black women’s bodies, identifying collective racial discontent and collective racial anxiety as forces that propelled institutional and social change” (Cooper, 2017, p. 39). Hence, Black women united, communicated, and related to one another through shared emotion.

Black women’s emotive drivers and displays are not just concerned with change-making and coalition-building in broad society, but they also transcend into their pursuits to and through higher education. Across the academy, Black women practice strategic emotionality (Doharty, 2020), toiling over whether to entangle and expose their emotions with their work. Black women students, specifically, engage in emotional labor and share feelings of anger, exhaustion, and alienation to navigate historically white institutions (HWIs) (Kelly et al., 2021). Black women students at HWIs also experience the emotional aftermath of microaggressions, dwelling on instances where they refrained from responding to their aggressors (Jones, 2021). Not all collective emotions are negative at HWIs, however, as Black women students in Tichavakunda’s (2022) study expressed joy through joining affirming organizations, shared accomplishments, and friendship with each other. Though these works and others (see Jagers, 2022; Jones, 2024) have contributed to a repository of scholarship on the emotional experiences of Black women at HWIs, there still presents an opportunity to expound upon related phenomena at other institutional types, namely Historically Black College and Universities (HBCUs).

HBCUs have long been considered the crux of higher education, particularly for Black students. As one of the most prolific and successful institutional types in educating, graduating, and priming Black students for economic mobility (Saunders & Nagle, 2018), HBCUs have positioned themselves at the forefront of socializing prospective, current, and former collegians. Socialization, from this vantage, is organizational and prompts actors on which behaviors and ideologies are suitable within contexts (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977). At times, such socialization is institutionalized through culturally affirming pedagogies and practices (Williams et al., 2021), and at other times, it occurs through curated spaces and places that foster learning, engagement, and community building (Mobley, 2017). At a more granular level, socialization occurs interpersonally and encompasses the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for student success (Weidman et al., 2001). Regardless of socialization origin or modality, “HBCUs

participate in a social contract, purvey social capital, and promote social equality” (Brown & Davis, 2001, p. 47)—key factors facilitating their relationship with and service to Black students.

Though we acknowledge HBCUs as rich sites for socialization, we know little about (1) specific messages, interactions, and internalizations that shape socialization experiences and (2) HBCUs’ specific impact on socialization at the intersections of race and gender. In Collins and Bilge’s (2020) revisitation of intersectionality and critical education, they underlined a tendency of the field to portray girls and women of color as a subcategory of gender. As a result, this dilemma creates a fraught educational backdrop for understanding the intersectionality that Black women, specifically, navigate that are based on gender and race/ethnicity; and it prolongs and obscures plights toward critical praxis and social justice (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine various roles that HBCUs play in socializing Black women from pre-enrollment to graduation through employment. We explored socialization constructs that these institutions explicitly and implicitly communicated to students; Black women’s intuitions as they engaged with and reflected on institutional experiences; and states of inhibition felt by Black women and simultaneously extinguished, stimulated, and exasperated by institutions. Our approach to this work recognized that HBCUs’ roles are multiplex and multipurpose.

Literature Review

Just as HBCUs play important roles in Black women’s identity formation, Black women negotiate their identity while navigating institutional definitions of womanhood. The experiences of Black women are deeply connected to their upbringing, and since HBCUs are often places where people from all over converge in one space, college campuses are often tasked with creating expectations of how students should behave if they are to be accepted members of their institution’s family. In the literature review, we highlight previous research on the experiences of Black women undergraduates at HBCUs and contributors to their socialization into Black womanhood.

Njoku & Patton (2017) explored constructions of Black womanhood at HBCUs, specifically looking at the ways Black undergraduate women build identity on HBCU campuses. They used Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 1991) to query how Black women’s conceptions of womanhood evolve on mostly conservative college campuses which often adhere to politics of

respectability (Higginbotham, 1993; White, 2001) and lean on prescribed gender norms to govern student behavior. Through the use of excerpts from several Black women who attended or graduated from different HBCUs across the South, Njoku & Patton (2017) questioned how Black women construct ideas of womanhood and resist *shade* in the form of verbal and physical communications, which aligns with and informs our inquiry of HBCUs' role in the socialization of Black womanhood. The findings in their article showcased how HBCUs have the capacity to stimulate two opposing constructed spaces that constrain and support Black women (Njoku & Patton, 2017). Similarly, Porter et al. (2019) addressed socialization, identity development, and Black women's agency to create and recreate their understanding of what it means to be an undergraduate on a college campus. Through focus group conversations, Porter et al. (2019) discovered that Black undergraduate women reflect on how their past and present environments impact their understanding of who they are in relation to others and the world.

Lee-Johnson (2021) took a different approach to understanding the experiences of undergraduate Black women by primarily focusing on Black women undergraduate leaders on HBCU campuses. She interviewed two Black women undergraduate leaders at an HBCU and found that while each woman played a different role in leadership, one, was the college Queen, and the other was the first SGA woman president in ten years, both students experienced minimal support from administrators and advisors when it came to serving in their positions. Students had to contend with Black respectability politics (Higginbotham, 1993) and the urge from adult campus leaders to always be *on*. Students felt as though they could no longer be their authentic selves while serving in a leadership capacity. She recommended that HBCUs evaluate their roles in supporting Black respectability politics and that campuses train students on how to navigate being a student leader and navigating tough situations.

Dunn (2022) explored the experiences of heterosexual undergraduate Black women as they build their identity as single women seeking a monogamous heterosexual relationship with Black men in an HBCU setting. While most of the women in the study were single, all students described their HBCU as a necessary and favorable place to find a mate that would help them gain status and serve as *relationship goals* to the Black community. Ultimately, Dunn (2022) found that one's background influences what Black women want and are willing to navigate in relationships, consequently impacting their identity formation at HBCUs.

The socialization of Black women collegians is complex. Black feminist scholars have interrogated aspects of Black womanhood and its development in postsecondary spaces by investigating its impact on leadership roles, relationships, identity, and resistance (Dunn, 2022; Lee-Johnson, 2021; Njoku & Patton, 2017; Porter et. Al., 2019). A commonality across all the studies was the inability of women to authentically express themselves in the face of respectability politics when it came to developing their womanhood through leadership roles, participation in extracurricular activities, and in relationships. From this perspective, respectability politics “emphasize reform of individual behavior and attitudes... as a goal in itself...” (Higginbotham, 1993, p. 187). Martin-Seaver (2024) frames respectability politics as an assimilationist body aesthetic practice and counters it with anti-assimilation practices, noting that the latter “take marginalized people as worthy sources of guidance on moral and aesthetic ideals” and “let black people theorize themselves and take themselves on their own terms” (p. 477). Our study delves into the perspectives of 25 Black women who are up to 50 years removed from their undergraduate experience, which offers a layered and diverse viewpoint shaped by their experiences since completing their undergraduate degree at an HBCU.

Theoretical Framework

We glean from the theory of vibe (Miles, 2023a) as a theoretical framework to inform our work. “Vibe is a perceptual, political, and affective tool and shorthand to understand and convey affective insights created from racialized experiences” (Miles, 2023a, p. 367). Three elements of the theory are key within context. First, vibe is “relational... [and] the aura and social climate produced when ideas, people, and spaces collide” (Miles, 2023b, p. 6). Second, vibe operationalizes “to name the often unsayable and perceptive ways Black people know, feel, and respond to the opacity and unquantifiable dimensions of social experiences” (Miles, 2023b, p. 6). Third, “as a sociological theoretical tool, vibe speaks to how macro-level social inequalities make [themselves] felt and known in micro-level experiences in ways that exceed language and rigid modes of measuring” (Miles, 2023a, p. 368). Undergirding sociological aspects of the theory of vibe is a complex and context-specific relationship between place, race, emotion, and carcerality. We understand the extensive nature of carcerality, noting that “the carceral system expands beyond the criminal legal system and structures the logics of most institutions...” (Miles, 2023a, p. 370). To this end, we use vibe as an exploratory instrument to grapple with institutional structures, strictures, and fixtures at HBCUs that appeal to and affect Black women.

We pair this theory with an endarkened feminist epistemology, which begins by recognizing Black women's expertise via lived experience as integral to knowledge production (Dillard, 2000). Dillard (2006) defines endarkened feminism as:

how reality is known when based in the historical roots of Black feminist thought, embodying a distinguishable difference in cultural standpoint, located in the intersection/overlap of the culturally constructed socializations of race, gender, and other identities and the historical and contemporary contexts of oppressions and resistance for African American women (p. 3).

Endarkened feminism offers a critical approach attuned to the lived experiences of Black women. Scholars have used it to explore Black women's financial socialization experiences navigating student debt (Henry, 2024), persistence practices in college amid Covid-19 (Turner, 2023), and literacy and space-making strategies in and out of education (Animashaun & Bell, 2023). Such a critical lens is necessary to engage the convergence of vibe at societal, institutional, and individual levels.

Methodology

We engaged in endarkened narrative inquiry (ENI) methodology as developed by McClish-Boyd and Bhattacharya (2021; 2024) to answer the following research questions: (1) What specific messages, interactions, and internalizations shape Black women's socialization experiences at HBCUs? (2) How do HBCUs impact socialization at the intersections of race and gender? ENI presents a methodology that centers the experiences of Black women and advances the legitimacy of our storytelling, thus placing significant value on knowledge systems that have historically been marginalized. Rooted in Black feminist thought, endarkened feminist epistemology, and womanism, ENI prioritizes aspects such as personhood, spirituality, healing, cultural relations, and intellectual engagement in the formation of narratives (McClish-Boyd, 2024). This approach extends traditional methodologies by incorporating elements of cultural responsiveness and spirituality, with a particular emphasis on reflexivity in the research process (McClish-Boyd, 2024).

Methods

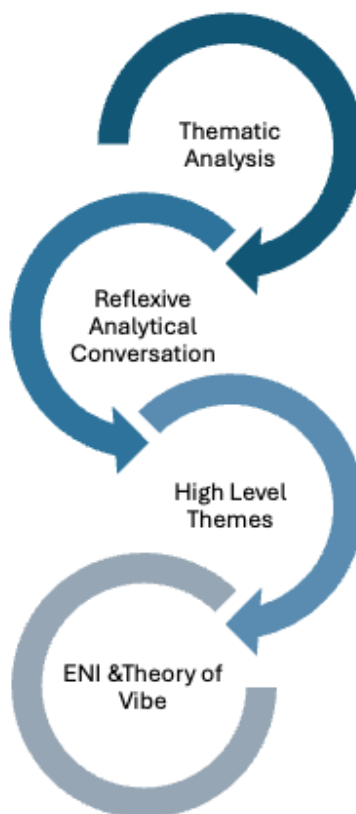
As part of a larger study on workforce development and mentorship experiences of HBCU alumni, 43 alumni interviews were collected, of which 25 identified themselves as Black women. The Black women participating in the interviews included those graduating as recently

as 2020 and as far back as 1960. They also represented students coming from varied socioeconomic and geographical backgrounds. These HBCU alumnae graduated from women's colleges, public and private HBCUs, including several transfer students who began postsecondary education elsewhere and completed their degrees at HBCUs.

We conducted a thematic analysis on the sample interviews which included an initial round of open coding noting the research questions. In alignment with ENI, we then engaged analytic memos followed by reflexive analytical conversation to interrogate our understandings of the emerging themes and how our positionality impacted that analysis illustrated in our memos and codes. A second round of coding followed this conversation to condense and solidify the codes. After the second round of coding, we had another analytical conversation to identify exemplars for the three themes we constructed from our analysis (as shown in Figure 1). In the following subsection, we discuss our positionality to this research topic and process.

Figure 1

Analytic Process for Engaging ENI and Theory of Vibe



Positionality

As co-authors and co-researchers, we bring a unique set of skills and expertise to this work. During the time of analysis, we all worked at one of the leading and largest nonprofit organizations that has a vested commitment to serving HBCUs. As three Black women in such a professional space, we orient our research around culturally competent pedagogies and Black feminist epistemologies. The first author centers her research on Black, rural students, practitioners, and communities and Black women's relationship to wholeness. The second author conducts advanced qualitative and mixed-methods studies that contextualize the role of HBCUs in higher education and integrates Black Intellectual Traditions such as Black Aesthetics into her research about Black student success. The third author centers her research on wellness and Black women educators and has built a research portfolio that focuses on womanism, teachers, and the spirit.

Because of our relationship to the work; our commitments to centering Black women in higher education, including ourselves; and our dedication to engaging in high-quality, creative, and ethical work, we embarked on a narrative inquiry journey that involved poetry. Using found poems (Richardson, 1994), we extracted participants' exact words to craft intro and outro poems to socialize readers to this work, as a literary and academic piece of writing, and to the broader work of understanding Black women's lived experiences at HBCUs. Conceptually, this practice aligns with Black women feminist scholars who advocate for greater attention to gendered racial identity and socialization, and it conveys Black women's experiences in spaces that have traditionally dismissed them (Brown et al., 2020).

Findings

Our findings underscored three key roles that HBCUs play in socializing Black women. The first finding, *Nurturing a Typology of Women* focused on the cultivation and production of personalities, dispositions, and character traits that aligned with the identities of specific HBCUs and the broad ecosystem of HBCUs, as an institutional type. The second finding, *Instilling and Facilitating Ethics of Care and Love* underscored HBCUs' roles in communicating and fostering emotive values in Black women. The third finding, *Affirming Black Womanhood*, foregrounded interactions between Black women and HBCUs to explicate how students and institutions mutually maintain socialization structures. It also illuminated how HBCUs served as a place and space to normalize various archetypes of Black womanhood.

Finding 1: Nurturing a Typology of Women

The first finding, *Nurturing a Typology of Women*, outlines the ways that Black women's experiences at HBCUs nurtured them into specific representations of womanhood. There was diversity in the types of women that their alma maters were nurturing them into becoming. For some institutions, this was reflected in how the school itself defined womanhood (e.g., Spelmanites and Bennett Belles) and then introduced their students to those qualities. Black women surveyed institutional cultures and climates at various checkpoints throughout their educational trajectories. One participant, Cree, understood HBCUs as racialized and radicalized organizations before she enrolled at an all-women's HBCU. She said:

Going there, I knew that there were going to be a lot of rules because that is really what the foundation of the organization was. Not rules, per se, but more like structure, and turning you into a disciplined woman.

Cree acknowledged the organization's foundation as a guiding principle for its current practice and implementation of rules. The vibes she internalized from the institution were essentially a byproduct of institutionalized ideologies of legacy, which served as a point of familiarity. Miles (2023b) stated that familiar places are "where life happens despite what the world has designed for Black people on the outside" (p. 45). Cree relied on the history of the organization to form and manage her expectations of rules and structure being interwoven into the fabric of the institution's design, functioning, and purpose. As a result, she anticipated being transformed into a disciplined woman as part of her socialization process.

Discipline and structure also manifested through more direct articulations of discourse. For example, Leticia stated:

Yeah, I just think they [Black faculty and staff] did a really good job. I think she [a Black woman staff member] particularly did a really good job of setting the tone for what it's going to be like for Black women in this world. Like if you showed up at the dining hall door with your pajamas on, she turned your ass right around. 'That is not how you show up here.'

Leticia recalled how her time at her HBCU primed her for Black womanhood. Specifically, she noted the importance of a Black woman who established wardrobe norms in public campus spaces. Leticia learned that the consequence of inappropriate attire was denial of entry. While reflecting on scholarship about housing projects and prisons, Miles (2023b) mentioned "... signs

at the entrance that feel like a warning..." (p. 45). From this standpoint, turning Black women away at the dining hall was a socialization practice, or signage post, intended to forewarn them of the repercussions of wearing improper attire in the world. Examples of such repercussions might include denial of certain types of employment and social organizations. Rosalind shared the experience of being socialized, assessed, and reprimanded through clothes. She said, "We always had to look a certain way on our campus. You couldn't walk out with your scarf on your head, or you couldn't be out in your pajama pants or slippers. We didn't do that on that campus." Noteworthy is that the exact way that Rosalind communicated such norms was through a series of *not* statements. Essentially, she knew that she could not wear scarves, pajama pants, or slippers because they fell outside the norms and boundaries of campus standards. She learned those standards, and inadvertently how to dress on campus, by rules that shunned and dissuaded Black women from dressing a certain way. Aside from showing disdain toward specific attire on their campuses, HBCUs, in contrast, endorsed a different type and style of attire off-campus for professional events. Rosalind continued by stating:

They were the best at showing us what our resume should look like, showing us how we should dress and prepare for an interview like our little dress suits from our stockings to the color, to our shoes. That's really impactful in my industry for one, because going into corporate America, you have to look the part.

Rosalind's institution had a clear vision and astute understanding of what it meant to mold women for the future. Socializing women, therefore, was less about policing and politicizing current versions of Black womanhood; rather, it was about imagining, cultivating, and manifesting a sense of futurity among Black women. Attire operated as a probe for professionalism and a pathway into the workforce. To this end, HBCUs "changed the texture of experience for the Black women [being] serviced... and ma[d]e breathable moments" (Miles, 2023b, p. 75) within carceral post-graduation student success ideologies. Because they recognized external pressures and expectations of Black women in corporate America, they adjusted their socialization strategy to ensure that Black women had the aesthetic tools and knowledges to succeed. The HBCU texture change transformed the negative connotation of respectability for the sake of assimilation and rephrased it as an instrument for student success in one's desired career field, essentially delivering on a promise of higher education.

Participants also underscored the role of idealism in socializing them into Black women. Mary stated, “So, it was more about the Bennett ideal and just standing on the shoulders of those who came before me. That was the influence for me. Not any particular person, not any person in particular.” No one woman or person impacted her perception of herself; rather, it was a combination of historical influence and the evolution of contemporaries who created an idealistic profile of who Bennett women were and characteristics of what they embodied. Like Mary, Freddie grappled with idealism but mentioned an institutional actor who exemplified that persona. She said:

And I would say she had the most influence on me of what the Bennett ideal was... You never saw her looking bad. It didn't matter what was going on. She drove up on campus, that Mercedes was shining every day. Her suits were always together. She never looked bad, always looked good. And she spoke very eloquent, and she was very eloquent. And she influenced a lot of what I aspired to be. She enhanced what my mother instilled in me as far as being a lady and being very sophisticated. And I would definitely say, I didn't have her as a professor or anything, but as far as the woman that she was, I admired it.

Freddie shed light onto some of the aesthetic features that an ideal Bennett woman embodied. She stated and suggested that they were poised, financially well, classy, well-kempt, and sophisticated. Additionally, their aura exemplified and extended her mother's, which was admirable. Interestingly, Freddie also insinuated that the level of composure that this woman, in particular, displayed was visible and venerable. Despite circumstances that may have surrounded her day, it meant something to continue to show up and look good while doing it.

As we thought about the conditions circumscribing the woman that Freddie mentioned and other typologies of Black women previously addressed, we considered a sub-concept of vibe called pain music, which often responds to carceral circumstances. Miles (2023b) offered that it was “a naming of what has been done to Black people— a description of the emotional weight of anti-Black spaces” (p. 56). HBCUs were tasked to bear and communicate the emotional burden of anti-Black spaces outside of their institutional contexts. In practice, this phenomenon created conditions for Black women that socialized them for the sake of, what appears to be, conformity and uniformity while simultaneously attempting to shield them from melodies of pain and harm. Put differently, this phenomenon exudes adages of Black women who *do not look like what they have been through*.

Finding 2: Instilling and Facilitating Ethics of Care and Love

The second finding, *Instilling and Facilitating Ethics of Care and Love* highlights how HBCUs provided safe and supportive spaces for Black women to express, share, and receive love and care. Often, participants engaged in community with other Black women whom they later considered to be extended members of their family. Cree stated:

I couldn't even put it in words that when I think about all the people who just opened up their homes, their vehicles. I had friends in college who was like, 'Just take my car. You need to go to the store. You need to get this, whatever.' It was nothing. One of my friends, her mom passed away, but her mom was my second mom. It was really difficult. Because she came and set up my apartment off campus. She came and got curtains and helped me ... It's just I haven't thought back and thought of it.

Cree felt overwhelming support from her college friends, so much so, that she had trouble describing and verbalizing it. However, she followed up with several examples of her network's willingness and eagerness to help her in times of need. A couple of the ways they cared for and loved her were by sharing their resources and serving in proxy roles for family. Cree did not take their kindness for granted, as her gratitude resurfaced through reflection. Her inability to clearly *put into words* the emotions she felt remembering the care she received reflects the essence of *vibe* where Black people express their experiences and emotions to make sense of social experiences and their impact on their lives.

Similar to Cree, Mary evoked this connection to care via mothering when she describes her mother recounting the *vibe* that she felt at one school over another which ultimately led to her decision to attend Bennett:

And we visited Bennett, and Bennett was just so warm. Right. It was just a vibe on the campus that I couldn't really put my finger on, and they really demonstrated sisterhood. And then it didn't help that they gave me more money than Spelman. And so, my mom's like, 'I just feel great about this school.' I'm like, 'You just don't want to pay the money.' And she was like, no, really, I really feel a good vibe about this school, and I didn't get that vibe at Spelman. And so, I did end up going up to Bennett and it was the best decision I ever made.

Captured in this quote is the notion of fit regarding the institution that women chose to attend and the importance of that fit in cultivating this feeling of *warmth* or *good vibe[s]* at one

institution over another. This acknowledgment of which school was the better fit may offer insight into a necessary element of instilling and facilitating the ethic of care that women evoked when describing their experiences at their alma maters. Mary illustrated the importance of how vibe can be transposed among communities, which in this case, are families, and also exemplified how “feelings know a specific version of place that plotting, charting, and quantification cannot get to,” (Miles, 2023b, p. 34) helping her to find a school that would offer her care and love that is recognizable.

Many of the women included in this study were alumni of HBCUs that were also women's colleges. Here, Jasmine shares how she makes the case for women's spaces to the young women that she mentors:

I tell all my girls, I work with youth, I tell them all like, 'I know you want to turn your nose up at all-women's spaces, but I can't say enough good things about them,' right, and I think having nothing but Black women on my hall, not having to explain why I'm washing my hair on Sunday night... or what that smell of fried hair smells like on my hallway... It felt like you belong... like home.

Although Jasmine is calling the spaces “women's spaces” as she describes them, it becomes apparent that Blackness is implied as part of that space. From her vantage point as an alum, she counsels other young women to consider the value of being in spaces that understand you and feel like home. As Miles (2023b) shares in his stories of navigating government housing and making a home, “home is the ways that we love on each other in the place that is ours” (p. 69). It is here that Jasmine makes it clear to young women considering where they belong to consider these Black women's spaces as loving and welcoming.

In addition to the impact of friends and family, the role of Black women institutional actors on Black women's socialization was especially important. One participant, Debbie, discussed how she viewed these figures, noting, “I don't know if I ever considered them mentors. More like my Bennett mothers, if you will.” This sentiment illustrates how a school where students felt welcomed and accepted could replicate the vibe of care that they felt with family, even amongst high-level administrators. Jasmine's experiences as a student and as an alum exemplify that sense of belonging and ethic of care coming together at a time when she was particularly vulnerable as she recalled:

I got this flu pretty bad, and one of the deans showed up on my doorstep with ginger ale and checked on me, and I remember going, 'Wow, that was weird,' because I didn't have an experience where an adult in a school setting had like doted on you in that way, right?

When a dean came to ask her how she was doing while under the weather, Jasmine seemed shocked to experience a communal ethos of care in an educational setting because no adults had *doted* on her in the past. Jasmine saw this type of care as an anomaly rather than the norm, signifying that this ethos of care was an element that might have been missing from her and other women's educational experiences before they landed in these environments.

While Millie describes herself as an urban kid from the South, she shared that Bennett College pushed her to grow up and confront different aspects of Black womanhood that she had previously taken for granted. The attentiveness of one of her major professors changed the trajectory of her life and well-being. Similarly to Jasmine, she identifies an adult in her life who had a vested interest in her wellness during her undergraduate education. Millie shares how that professor cared enough to notice when her mental health was suffering as she recounted:

My professor... I remember being in her office one day... and she was like, 'Something ain't right.' And I'm like, 'I'm good, but let's get this done'... Blah, blah, blah. And she was like, 'Sit down!'... She picked up the phone and called a counselor and she was like, 'You need to go talk to her right now. I don't know what's going on with you, but you need to go talk to her.' And I've been in therapy ever since, but that was the first time someone had ever shown concern for my mental health. So, in some ways, she saved a good portion of my life with that.

Upon reflection, Millie saw this as a pivotal moment in her undergraduate experience where the care that was extended to her was lifesaving. This type of proactive prioritizing of her well-being via her mental health highlights how integral this enactment of care can be to the holistic success and wellness of Black women at HBCUs and throughout the rest of their lives. This sense or vibe of communal care and love reinforces the earlier notion of fit or belonging. As another student, Carla stated, "I didn't feel like I was in this strange place, even though I didn't know anybody." This sentiment reinforces Miles's (2023b) characterization of belonging for Black people as "less about ownership than about how you exist in relation to what's central to that community," (p. 106) or in this case an institution. Faculty and administrators within these communities

continually showed up for students in ways that were central to building community that they could carry with them as alumnae.

Lastly, students used peer networks to support each other as they navigated the workforce, seeking out advice from their friends as they determined what places and opportunities would be the best fit for them. Rudy shares how she sought out guidance from her network stating:

Just taking those friendships and connections that I had in school, it really helped me to propel my career when I got out. Either just to lean on for advice or, well, how is this company? Should I apply here? Or then putting me in for a referral for certain jobs. Those things were key to just where I am now.

Like Rudy, many of the women interviewed relied on their peer networks as much as traditional mentors to gauge what opportunities to pursue, company culture, referrals to get in the door, and advice once they were there. While we found HBCU campus communities to create holistic and inclusive (peer, administrator, and faculty-based) mentorship, there were also many instances where Black women tapped into Black women's networks specifically. This observation suggested that Black women at HBCUs extended love and care through mentorship at all levels.

The power of familial support on college campuses is boundless. Several studies (Flowers et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2022; Dickens et al., 2023) have demonstrated the power that administrators, staff, and students have in making campus feel like a second home to those who may be feeling out of bounds. Building familial bonds and mothering within HBCU contexts is an integral part of the learning process. Mothering/motherhood, defined as an African-centered collective approach to taking care of children, whether it be through teaching children or rearing children that may or may not be your own, is evident throughout the quotes shared in this section. Oyewumi (2003) contends that motherhood goes beyond gender and acts as an ethic and ideology that transcends the sanguine and reflects how professors, staff, and administrators literally and figuratively wrap their arms around students and commit themselves to helping students thrive within the campus context and beyond. Just as Black parents tell their children that they are reflections of them, so carry themselves with pride, higher education institutions do the same. The love and care that young college students receive at this important juncture of their lives can be life-changing and self-affirming.

Finding 3: Affirming Black Womanhood(s)

The third finding, *Affirming Black Womanhood(s)* centers on HBCUs' capaciousness to foster an institutional environment that welcomes and affirms varying representations of Black womanhood. Through this vantage, this finding is nearly antonymous to the first finding, which categorized and generalized socialization constructs. Gina said:

Okay, so the thing about Bennett is that you're going to be involved with all types of women around the world, right? Bennett is not... it's for the global society of women of color. We hit up the African diaspora to the n-teenth power.

Gina applauded her institution for its commitment to supporting Black women across the African diaspora. She framed her comments in a way that asserted the all-women's HBCU as an institutional player navigating an international higher education landscape. She also claims a sense of placemaking that Miles (2023b) outlines as exceeding "the boundaries and limitations the South placed on Black people," (p. 94) as she extols the international reach of her alma mater. Her use of the phrase *n-teenth power* was a combination of the phrase, *nth power* and *umpteenth* which both indicate high, unquantifiable numbers but illustrates a vibe in which the interpreter can imagine the breadth of her college's reach. With that context in mind, Gina insinuated that Black women, via her institution, had the power to "rework spacial and social boundaries," (Miles, 2023b, p. 94) to give a small, Black women's college in the South more global access than might be assumed. This sense of placemaking could also be a contributing factor to how Black students felt affirmed in their Black womanhood as a member of Bennett College.

Interpersonality and relatability were also appealing characteristics of HBCUs that helped affirm Black women upon their arrival. Mary said:

It was just the fact that they knew me, and they were focused on me, and I just didn't feel like a number. And coming from a high school where it was predominantly white and I always felt like I had to... and I was a high achiever... I always felt like I had to fight to prove myself. It didn't feel that way. It just felt like, okay, this is Mary from Delaware. She's a good student and we would love to have you there. And so, it was just the fact that I was not just a number.

Mary expressed a desire to break away from quantifiable identifiers for students as she transitioned from high school to college. Prior to attending HBCUs, she had been reduced to

numbers, likely a combination of enrollment numbers, class rank, grade point averages, and standardized test scores. As Mary shifted into the space of her HBCU, she describes what Miles (2023b) characterizes as a “Black diasporic spatial imaginary” (p. 97) in which who she was and what she could be as a Black woman was transformed. Using *Mary from Delaware* as a pseudonym and nickname helped reaffirm that she was more than a number by adding context about place. Though it was a simple shift in discourse, it asserted Mary as someone who *is* as an ontological framing, as opposed to someone who exclusively *does*, as a laborer or performer. That comment showed how HBCUs, as Black institutions, were equipped to humanize Black womanhood in ways that predominantly white institutions were not.

Associated with this discourse of affirming Black womanhood(s) is Black women's abilities to center each other's beauty. Miles (2023b) noted that there was beauty in seeing “more in the landscape than what is was designed for” (p. 69) and attending to “the value and glamour in a space assumed to be abject” (p. 69). HBCUs provided affirmation through possibilities and opportunities for Black women to continuously reimagine themselves and find their purpose on their campuses and beyond. This affirmation of Black womanhood was encompassed by HBCUs' abilities to model, accommodate, and support varying personas, viewpoints, and interests. Leticia and Diahann realized how much their HBCU communities fostered agency through exploration. Leticia said:

I don't feel like people in Bennett really shoved things down your throat, like ‘You should be doing this, and you should be doing that.’ It was almost like, ‘If you're going to do this, think about this. Think about ... Be prepared to experience this,’ as opposed to telling you what to do next.

She was not socialized toward one specific activity; instead, her institution ensured she had multiple opportunities at her disposal. To support her, they presented her with conditional scenarios about various pathways, gave her advice, and helped manage her expectations.

Diahann shared a similar experience and stated:

Freshwoman year, you are assigned a big sister who is a junior, who's supposed to just show you the ropes. And so, my big sister was a big, big deal on campus. She was in SGA, she was a Delta. She was ‘Miss everything’ and I determined to be like her. And so, she basically was like, ‘Okay, I see in you what you might not see in yourself. And so, we're going to get you involved in these campus things. Let's explore your interests.’

Despite Diahann's determination to match her big sister's level of campus involvement, she still ventured to chart her own path. She attributed that level of agency to the advice and mentorship that she received. Diahann's big sister affirmed her desire to be engaged with her campus community, a future iteration of herself that was a campus leader, and her spirit of agency by exploring her own interests.

The structure of HBCUs also played a major role in affirming Black womanhood. These affirmations shed light onto HBCUs' social, cultural, and geospatial spaces, insofar as they reified how vibrant, lively, rich, and amenable these institutions were for all types of Black women. In the previous example, Diahann mentioned the normalization of *freshwoman* year at Bennett College, a discursive shift from *freshman* year that reiterated the centrality of women at the institution. She also highlighted little/big sister mentorship models that were embedded into students' experience and implemented campuswide, which invigorated her interests to get involved. Gina elaborated on the impact of involvement on her self-concept. She said:

Bennett just gave those additional opportunities to be involved, to be heard, to give opportunity, to understand and know your voice. And so, I think breaking out of that shell of being shy, I feel I'm much more of an outspoken person at this point, but that was really the area that helped me crack that in many ways.

Offering an array of such involvement opportunities served multiple roles. For example, they supported Gina's identity development, which is evident through her evolution as a shy individual to an outspoken one. They also communicated HBCUs' commitment to cultivating civic engagement. Finding, understanding, and using one's voice were skills that Bennett College fostered and Gina appreciated. The relationship between campus involvement culture and its yield on students suggests that institutions affirm Black womanhood through leadership.

Affirmation through leadership was not always relational, as sometimes, it was perceptual and even sentimental. The success, aura, and zeal of other Black women reverberated off each other in an act of mutual inspiration and motivation. Winifred stated:

Well, one, it was being able to see other Black women that were thriving. They were super engaged from an academic perspective. They just had such a... I don't know how to put it into words, but they just had such a positive perspective and outlook on things. There was a level of confidence that the women at Bennett displayed that just drew me to the school.

Winifred displayed a great deal of mindfulness through her comments. Bennett women, from her perspective, were thriving, engaged, positive, and confident Black women. Winifred reflects on these characteristics as akin to a style these Black women lived (Miles, 2023b). Before attending Bennett, she engaged with the school as a prospective student and realized that those characteristics were factors in her institutional choice. As an alumna reflecting on her experiences observing other Black women, she attributed their success to her own success. Winifred contemplated how their style of living fashioned a life that not only invited beauty into their worlds but also put it on display for those women coming after them (Miles, 2023b). Their thriving was contagious, and it helped her to believe in herself and her abilities. She, too, developed those mindsets, which instilled a *can-do* attitude in her and affirmed her as a Black woman.

The framing of affirmative Black womanhood continues to offer a counternarrative to our first finding, nurturing a typology of women. In addition to affirming Black women through structure, opportunities, and placemaking, women described how HBCUs see them as more than the archetypes or stereotypes associated with them. Instead, HBCUs acknowledge the concept of “living within double-time” (Miles, 2023b, p. 74) which assures Black women that there are societally “contradictory ways of being that are not contradictory” (p. 74). Notwithstanding that observation, it also continues how Miles (2023b) explored pain music, stating that one of its stylized manifestations points to a “Black-women-centered epistemology that allows the music to escape the violence of the carceral state through the ways it renegotiates and reimagines mainstream understandings of unruliness and disruptiveness” (p. 71). All this to say that Black womanhood is complex, but HBCUs operate as a site of placemaking that affirms the possibilities of Black womanhood. This backdrop responds to Tichavakunda’s (2024) call to examine how placemaking looks in contexts beyond HWIs and by stakeholders who are not exclusively engineering majors.

Discussion

Broadly, Miles (2023a; 2023b) pushed us to think critically about the relationship between ideas of carcerality, Black places and spaces, and the humanity that exists within and across them. Gill et al. (2018) offered a 3-pronged concept of carceral circuitry, which focused on circuits of people, objects, and practices intermingling across carceral spaces. In the context of our study, mentors who intervened to course-correct Black women’s paths on HBCU

campuses might be considered part of the circuit of people; tangible and visible symbols of Black women's wealth and success might be considered part of the circuit of objects; and Black surveillance and policing of Black women's bodies might be considered part of the circuit of practices. Though it may be expedient to reduce the relationship between HBCUs, their actors, and their practices to such circuits, we believe that carcerality, in the context of Black women alumnae at HBCUs, is much more complex. Okello (2022) reiterated that carcerality is a function of whiteness that has roots and remnants that are spiritual and emotional. He went on to state that it is "a process of surveillance and enclosure that intends to govern and, ultimately, bring under compliance Black ideological and material movements" (Okello, 2022, p. 406). HBCU actors share responsibilities in contending with such racialized compliance. In fact, their environments and cultures are well-primed to uphold such ideals while simultaneously empowering students to navigate, critique, and resist them. An example of this context is best captured in a comment from Reese:

They were really training us to fit into the world... Yeah, and we needed to know that. And we needed to know it from a voice that cared enough to tell it to us, and not feel like it was something that was meant to belittle us, or that it was meant to treat us in a certain way. It was absolutely crucial to have those conversations. And the school needed to take an extremely conservative position because the students were going to take an extremely liberal position. And we needed to have that tension so that we could work it out. It was definitely helpful. I don't ... In hindsight, I didn't have a problem with it at the time. I don't have a problem with it now.

As Reese reflected on the tension and contention between Black women students at her institution and alumnae regarding dress code and hair policies, she thought about some of the factors and conditions surrounding that context, which support our findings. For example, upholding the standardization of dress and hair for Black women is a way that HBCUs nurture a typology of women, our first finding. The act of the HBCU sending an institutional actor to serve as a mediator and microphone, evidenced by Reese recalling *a voice that cared enough* and did not *belittle*, was an example of HBCUs facilitating ethics of love and care, our second finding. Finally, making space for Black women to engage in critical conversations, ruminate in disharmony, foster agency, and develop political mindedness aligned with our third finding of affirming Black womanhood(s). Through these vantages, HBCUs socialize Black women in

ways that are multifaceted and multifunctioning within and beyond constructs of carcerality. Therefore, it is constructive to contemplate whether features of carcerality are expendable; whether carcerality harbors duplicitous overtures; and whether, as a term, it is discursively insufficient within context. Those forethoughts and considerations continue to plague us, but we find solace in agreeing that Black women in our study found their respective HBCUs to be “somewhere that Black skin doesn't feel like a prison” (Miles, 2023b, p. 106). We credit this to Black educational and institutional logics at HBCUs (Williams & Taylor, 2022) that largely take humanizing, asset-based approaches to socializing students.

As they began their undergraduate education, the Black women alumnae we interviewed were introduced to archetypes of Black womanhood that they were expected to transform into as a reflection of the histories and cultures of their institutions. For each of these archetypes, there were specific characteristics (aesthetic, moral, cultural, and professional) the women were expected to embody during and after their undergraduate experience. While some diversity was reflected in the archetypes of Black womanhood, dependent on the institutional culture, there were instances where the typologies of Black womanhood may not have aligned with all aspects of their personal identity. For example, there was little to no explicit representation of LGBTQ+ students, student parents, or non-traditional age students identified or mentioned in the interviews or by participants. This lack of representation could be a limitation of our study due to our sample size of 25 participants, or it could be that those elements of their identity were not mentioned because respondents did not feel it aligned with the projected archetypes of Black womanhood put forth by their institutions. While scholars such as Mobley et al. (2019), outline the challenges that LGBTQ students can face when tensions arise between their Blackness and their queerness, the mental health of nontraditional students at HBCUs was found to be higher than that of Black students at predominantly white institutions (Mushonga & Henneberger, 2020). These findings may be a reflection of the impact of the aspects of identity that HBCUs value and support versus those that are in contention with the historic cultural values of the institutions.

When women reflected on instances where they experienced love and care on campus, they spoke to how those experiences, while not solely defined by Black women, were heavily influenced by the Black women in their lives whether they were family, faculty and administrators, or friends and peer mentors. These specific acknowledgments highlighted the

existence of a sustained HBCU Black women's network in addition to the larger HBCU network they were a part of as a result of attending their respective HBCUs. For example, several of our participants mentioned that in addition to faculty and administrators, they were assigned a *big sister* who guided them in acclimating to the institution or met a friend who they looked to for advice as they navigated coursework, internships, and job prospects which Johnson & Jackson (2024) describe as part of the social capital development that gives HBCU students an advantage in postsecondary success. As it pertains to vibe, if it is "the aura and social climate produced when ideas, people and spaces collide," then we argue that HBCUs are producing a vibe that the Black women in our study found to be sustaining and advantageous as they pursued postsecondary success.

Implications

This study has important implications for HBCU campus leadership and administration, as it highlights how Black womanhood is suppressed, ignited, and uplifted on HBCU campuses. The literature and data collected all suggest that HBCUs play a powerful role in helping Black women navigate their understandings of womanhood, while also creating environments where Black women can be cared for and nurtured. Though Black women in our study represented multiple HBCU institutional types, there is still room to understand their intersecting identities beyond race and gender. For example, one of the Black women we interviewed identified as a teenage mother, and none of them self-identified as members of the LGBTQ+ community. Future studies may want to consider recruiting Black women who include further marginalized identities to better understand the experiences of Black women at HBCUs.

In terms of practice, this study also directly implicates how HBCUs might refine and reimagine assessment cultures with, on, and among their students. The discourse and conceptualization of vibe offers an accessible avenue for reaching students and capturing their nuanced experiences and feelings about their institutions. At the intersection of research and practice, vibe can be used as a metric to optimize and expand institutional climate surveys. Garvey (2024) stated, "how colleges and universities view the role of campus climate studies illustrates the difference between a quick compliance fix and an enduring campus-wide impact, and such views require careful and contextual consideration" (pp. 65-66). HBCUs can use the theory of vibe to better understand their students' diverse experiences on campus, gauge

students' feelings about their campus, and thoughtfully (re)engage and (re)center students in the data collection process by using discursive content that resonates with survey users.

Conclusion

Certain aspects of the traditional HBCU experience are signature to their identity, especially for new, first-year students. Upon arrival on campus students get their ID cards, move into their dorms, and parents work diligently to make sure their child will have everything they need. At a certain point during drop-off, university administrators will call all parents and students to a special location on campus, and they will have a parting ceremony. At the parting ceremony, the university promises to become a second family to the new student and assures the parents that their child will be loved and nurtured by this community for the rest of their lives. Parents cry and students tear up as they hug their loved one's goodbye. Finally, parents are asked to leave the campus so their students can begin the rest of their lives as members of their chosen HBCUs. On the ride home, parents may question if their child will be ok, hoping that they will fit in, flourish, and graduate on time, but for students, the work of learning themselves while learning their community and the world has only begun. However, if the HBCUs pass the vibe check, young Black women will be poised to discover what their version of Black womanhood is and how to navigate archetypes of Black womanhood within a space that embodies an ethic of loving care and prepares them for authentic success. Once we move beyond the traditional, perhaps even the familiar, we unearth the stories of students who respond to the task of charting their own paths within the structures and cultures of HBCUs. At that critical juncture, we find the Black women HBCU alumnae in our study — vibing, feeling, connecting, and loving to navigate college.

“Advice from HBCU Alumnae: Stay Connected”

There's college after high school, and the only choice is an HBCU

Get serious your freshman year

Network

Every day is an opportunity to be great and to be better

Take advantage

Endure

Do the things that you need to do to make yourself feel whole

Consider, how this degree is going to work for you

Expectations

There's an obligation and a responsibility to your community and to your family

Stay connected.

Stay connected to HBCUs.

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