Journal of American Studies of Turkey
41 (2015): 69-94

Massified Illusions of Difference: Photography and the Mystique of the American Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

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Abstract

The focus of this research centers on the public personas presented by American Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) through photographs. HBCUs often chose to present themselves in a manner likely to advance their stature to benefactors, donors, philanthropists, government officials, and potential faculty and students. The types of photographs employed by the HBCU promoted them as an institution that offered hope and promise to African Americans as depicted through the dominant visual tropes employed by white society. As such, the use of photography in this manner was an attempt to join the dominant white social and political structure through the medium's democratizing characteristics. However,

Fisk Jubilee Singers circa 1880 (Photograph Courtesy of Fisk University)

what has been consistently left out of these images is the HBCU's mission to promote and accentuate its specific alignment toward African American students.

Keywords

Historically Black College and University; African-American students; photography; massification; corporate identity

When the Jubilee Singers of the Fisk Free Colored School set out on their tour in 1871, George L. White, the school's singing instructor, well-understood that his "pioneer band of genuine Ethiopian Minstrels without the burnt cork" were a form of living advertisement for the fledgling (and ailing) institution (Richardson 25). In Tennessee, the troupe rejected their standard playlist of Negro spirituals. Instead, they performed "white man's music" to "prove they could do as well as whites." In October, the troupe turned north, but this tour was different than their local exhibitions. Instead of rejecting black spirituals, they steadily incorporated more of them into their repertoire. After introducing "slave songs" (Negro spirituals) as encores into some early performances, White noticed that musically adept audiences in the North often transcended the "white disparagement" most Southerners had of spirituals. Soon, White changed the program so that most, if not all, of the songs performed were Negro spirituals. By the end of 1872, the Singers had performed their spirituals in cities such as Cincinnati, Boston, Chicago, Columbus, and at the White House at the direct behest of President Grant. The group went on to tour Europe in 1873 and earned respect for black spirituals, the admiration of many on two continents (including Queen Victoria), and, eventually, $50,000 to get Fisk onto a solid financial footing (Richardson 28). This illustration of the Fisk Jubilee Singers is a telling one. Initially reluctant to sing Negro spirituals in fear of alienating potential Southern white benefactors, they eventually realized that their reputation and finances benefited when they changed to a notably "colored" form of artistic expression.

As the tour and the photographs demonstrate, the Jubilee singers did not just advertise Fisk University through their singing, they actively promoted it through their comportment, dress, manners, and public grace. During their tour, the Singers, the most public of Fisk's students, prominently posed in stately pictures wearing sophisticated Victorian

garb. The Singers' divas appeared in light, showy gowns draped perfectly over their legs and set down against the floor in a perfect line. The male choristers appeared sophisticated and suave while dressed in their best Victorian suits with their stiffened cuffs and collars. Unlike their music, which changed along with the tastes of their audiences, the *mise en scène* of their photographs always appealed to the dominant culture's sense of civilization and modernity.

Just as the Singers had used the dominant culture's tropes in its images, the types of photographs employed by America's historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) also use the dominant visual tropes employed by white society, and just as the Singers did immediately following the Civil War, HBCUs often chose to present themselves visually in a manner likely to advance their stature to benefactors, donors, philanthropists, government officials, and potential faculty and students. As such, the HBCUs' use of photography was often a strategic attempt to become part of the dominant white social and political structure through the medium's democratizing characteristics. However, what has been consistently left out of those images was the HBCU's mission to primarily serve African American students. Although HBCUs have attempted to use photography's democratic characteristics as a tool of promotion, these institutions have often succumbed to the massifying effects of the medium, which has ensured that the photographs presented by the HBCU have often co-opted and/or replicated most (if not all) of the imagery, symbolism, and semiotic hallmarks used to promote the most generic idea of the university by the dominant culture. Put more simply: if HBCUs were to serve the unique needs and characteristics of American blacks, why were the photographs they used as promotional devices so devoid of black-specific imagery?

Deconstructing the Photographs and their Meanings

We will attempt to systematically deconstruct the photographs in our study using one of the primary frameworks available to historians for this type of analysis developed by John Szarkowski (1966), and John E. Carter (1993). Although historians have long-known that photographs provided "data in regard to dress, artifacts, and everyday living […] that escaped written records," few historians bother to seriously look at them (Peters and Mergen 281-2). From the beginning, photographers and their

audiences were well-aware of the medium's ability to provide information unobtainable in any other manner, but history has been built on the analysis of documents. As such, many of the questions posed by historians do not lend themselves well to the information photographs provide.

Szarkowski believed that five elements described and qualified a photograph's visual components (286-7). First, a photograph has a subject (the "Thing Itself") which is coded into two-dimensions on the presentation medium. Second, a photograph has "Detail," which comprises the fragments of the visual whole the photographer chooses to encompass in his or her image. The third, the "Frame," defines the content of the picture and shows or creates relationships *vis-à-vis* the subject. The fourth element, "Time," relates to the fragmentary moment captured by the shutter that ensures that each photograph and the elements within it are distinct and separate from any other photograph taken prior or afterwards. The final element, "Vantage Point," describes the photographer's spatial relationship to the subject, which gives an image's viewer a definitive and unchangeable perspective on that subject. While these visual components are certainly necessary to understand the scene the photograph portrays, they are interpretively incomplete without understanding the circumstances under which the photograph were taken in the first place. Carter suggests that "knowledge about the circumstances under which photographs come into existence is at the center" of their competent use (55-66). We must understand the reasons a photograph came into existence, the audience for which it was intended (particularly their expectations and desires), and if a human is photographed, that subject's "message." By combining Szarkowski's elemental analysis with Carter's interpretive framework in our deconstructions, we can come to understand a meaning and presence a photograph conveys to its viewers. While the photographer of the HBCU and its associated individuals may or may not have had a comprehensive artistic *mise in scene* in mind, the use of the images in the manner we described relied on mass-printed media (with or without narrative copy) rather than artistic displays. The images of our concern were intended to be viewed in a similar manner as one would view an image used in an advertisement. This being the case, our analysis certainly considers the photographer's semiotic vision, but places emphasis on the intended audience since, in its commoditized form, the image is not intended for detailed deconstruction by its viewer.

Just as they were used by Fisk's Jubilee Singers, the photographs chosen for HBCU promotional materials would be worthless artifacts unless they had some sort of targeted audience with shared interpretive resources. Who is this audience and what are the images designed to portray to and impress upon them? We argue that the HBCUs are appealing to a type of extended group known as a "brand community" that has preconceived ideas that they project upon the universities. A brand community is defined as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand" (Muniz and O'Guinn 412-32). Although HBCUs are not "brands" in the commercial sense, their targeted appeals to a particular community and their reliance on narratives steeped in mythological images of racial pride, understanding, and solidarity are directed toward African Americans and their shared communal bonds, similar to the way in which music, movies, or products are marketed as "black." Photographs designed to promote a university have a commoditized presence meant to distinguish the institution among varied higher education institutional types. This branding process is intimately related to pervasive representations of a distinguishable segment of college-bound students of African descent. Moreover, for the branding process to be most effective, parents, other academics, potential donors, business partners, and community and political leaders who also harbor similar predetermined understandings of HBCUs must also be engaged. In other words, the HBCU, through images, is offering to this brand community a message that reinforces preexisting ideas about what that college or university will offer them as potential students, donors, or others who would choose to associate themselves with it.

Subsequently, HBCUs using photographs in this manner constantly walk the boundary between attracting those who "know" what an idealized space a university is supposed to represent (those who are institutionally or culturally exposed to the concept of the generic university), and those who would be attracted to distinguishing identifiers related to that one institution or institutional type only (e.g. religious universities, engineering universities, etc.). In order to better understand who comprises the viewing community and what they expect, photographs will be analyzed *vis-à-vis* their intended target against the criteria that distinguishes one brand community from another. At their core, brand communities are similar to the imagined communities as outlined by Benedict Anderson in

1983 (Anderson, 13-15; Muniz and O'Guinn, 413). Brand communities, like nearly all geographically disassociated communities, rely on an "intrinsic connection that members feel toward one another" which forms a "collective sense of difference from others not in the community" (Muniz and O'Guinn 413). Put another way, brand communities do not exclusively rely on geographic proximity in order to build their communal bonds. Instead, connections are formed by imagined based on perceived accomplishments, goals, attractions, emotions, and loyalties centered on a product, brand, or some other highly visible and endearing object, premise, ideology, or presence upon which social identifications can be formed Muniz and O'Guinn 38-54). This connection, shared rituals and traditions, along with a "felt sense of duty or obligation to the community as a whole" defines a brand community (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koening 413). In our case, the community of interest is defined by their relationship to the contemporary idealized image of the university, and, more specifically, the idealized HBCU that, though created in a segregationist era, provided indispensable psychological and material shelter while persisting as the primary avenue for the creation of the black middle class. Although the brand community associated with all of the promises of the "university" as a whole may not be affiliated with the "brand" presented by the HBCU, it is our contention that the brand community associated with the HBCU is a wholly-contained subset of the community affiliated with the dominant university since a great deal of the HBCU's identifiers are derived directly from and are in close association with the dominant, white university.

Massification and the Photograph

Massification, simply defined, is the homogenizing of distinctiveness brought about by mass consumption and cultural absorption. Massified objects or ideas break "down the old barriers of class, tradition, taste" and dissolves "all cultural distinctions [...] it mixes and scrambles everything together, producing what might be called a homogenizing culture" (Macdonald 62). By the mid-1890s, after the introduction of George Eastman's portable Kodak camera, photography become democratizing and was well on its way toward massification that essentially eliminated any esoteric artistic or technical training (no matter how slight) from the art form (Peterson and Di Maggio 497-506; Robinson 206-225).

Traditionally-trained artists who used photography as a medium bemoaned its democratization, saying the art form had become "so common as to be unremarkable" (Tagg 56). Photographs had ceased to be treasured, prized, and used as symbols of class status, and, instead had become "items of passing interest with no residual value, to be consumed and thrown away" (Tagg 56). Although photography's aesthetic traditions continued within an esoteric community of artistic photographers, the public at-large quickly traded images meant to distinguish class, status, or persona for photographs that were conveyors of commodified and massified ideals in favor of photobytes of information that were easily interpreted, digested, and understood.

The massification of photography meant that anyone trying to make a point could easily do so through photographs displaying commoditized *mise-en-scènes* that presented idealized images already known to the viewer. While the adage "a picture is worth a thousand words," a massified image is worth far more since it conveys a great deal of information that does not have to be explained to the receiver since that party is well-aware of the meaning conveyed. These meanings have probably been absorbed over the viewer's lifetime. For advertisers, few devices have been as powerful as the photograph. Systematic studies conducted in the 1960s demonstrated that potential customers recalled and identified photographs of products with eighty seven-percent accuracy, even after ninety seven days of their first and only viewing (Edell and Staelin 45-61). Study after study has concluded similarly—the photographic image is nearly unrivaled in its ability to elicit associative knowledge from an individual.

The Mythology/Mystique of the HBCU

The Fisk choir images from the late 1800s demonstrate that promoters well-understood the usefulness of photographs in conveying pre-digested messages. It is clear that promoters of the HBCU and its mission were quick to capitalize on the photograph to demonstrate the core ideals of their institutions and what they hoped to accomplish. However, this intersection of image and paragon could not exist without drawing upon the dominant cultural interpretations of their ideals. Thanks to the effects of democratization and massification, photographs used in this manner (non-artistic) would not be interpreted through the artistic analysis of an

art aficionado. But instead, these photographs were intended for mass public consumption. More specifically, the images were targeted at those who already understood and had preexisting cognitive definitions of the idealized university (both in its dominant and minority forms) and what is known as the "black college mystique." The cornerstone of this mystique was (and still is) the idea that despite racist conventions, inequitable distribution of vital resources or the legacy of *dejure/defacto* racist practices African Americans who attended black schools would ultimately be better positioned in mainstream American society. Moreover, a central part of that positioning results from vital insights and understandings about navigating/ assimilating into America that is best imparted through an education in a predominantly black context. Consequently, the photographs presented as examples of the HBCU could not appeal to a mass audience unless that audience, which included both blacks and whites, already understood what they were viewing. Then exactly what were the ideals that HBCUs hoped to demonstrate through these photographs and how could they be received by a culturally-dominant and culturally-minority audience in a manner that presented their message in a massified form?

Nearly four decades before Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, Alexander Twilight, a graduate of Middlebury College, became the first African American to receive a degree from a US college in 1823. However despite the fact that schools like Middlebury and Oberlin may have admitted African American students prior to the end of slavery, enrolling a limited number of African American students was a drastically different educational venture than establishing post-secondary institutions specifically for African Americans. Hence nineteenth-century African American educational pioneers like Anna Julia Cooper, John Russwurm, and Charles Reason had drastically different experiences being educated in European American schools than their predecessors like W. E. B. Dubois and Booker T. Washington who attended predominantly African American schools. Defining this difference—which we will refer to as the "black college mystique" in some regards and the "mythology associated with black colleges" in others—is difficult because there is no monolithic black college experience. However, there are certain stories and nostalgic events that relate specifically to the commoditized photographic representations that this article conducts inquiry into. Further, these collective accounts are an intricate part of the mystique and mythology that still pervades black colleges and universities today.

For instance, Booker T. Washington attended Hampton Institute, one of the nation's oldest HBCUs. His personal narrative recounted in his record selling autobiography *Up From Slavery,* represents an ongoing story of education at HBCUs. Washington, a former slave, arrived at Hampton Institute in Virginia penniless but with an unquenchable desire for education. The then principle and founder of Hampton and former Civil War Union Army general, Samuel Chapman Armstrong promised Washington if he were willing to subject himself to a rigorous form of manual training and moral development he would afford him room, board and a formal education.

Understanding the significance of the events surrounding this story is an indispensable part of understanding the mystique and mythology associated with black colleges. First the scarcity of resources that undergirds Washington's story has been an issue for HBCUs from their inception to the present. For a community fresh out of slavery, education was regarded as a vital element of survival in a rapidly evolving nation. So no matter the cost, it was considered both the school's and the entire community's responsibility to work to establish a means for education for economic, political, and social uplift. Next, the majority of HBCUs were established in the southeastern region of the United States where the bulk of the black population lived. The south was still reeling from the devastation and social upheaval associated with their losing the Civil War. And education was seen as a vital tool for helping to assimilate the nearly twenty million newly emancipated freedmen and women into the *New South*. Consequently, founding schools for African Americans in this region and in this era was deeply entrenched between the specter of John Brown and Jim Crow. Hence, a uniquely American legacy of race and racism could not help but drastically impact everything from the financing, staffing, curricular decisions (and most importantly for our project) the mass-marketed representations of HBCUs.

Lastly, taking account of Washington's complex relationship with Hampton founder Samuel Armstrong and his northern patrician contemporaries (whom historian William Watkins critically refers to as *The White Architects of Black Education*) is also a vital part of coming to terms with the HBCU mythology and mystique. Washington's attempts to walk a continuous tightrope between appeasing this extremely powerful class of white industrialists, while simultaneously appealing to the educational

aspirations of newly emancipated African Americans makes him a controversial figure within the black community. Some segments within the black community characterize Washington as a sellout or an Uncle Tom who sacrificed the political and social uplift of newly emancipated African Americans for personal gain; while others characterize him as the "Great Compromiser," who pragmatically accepted second-class citizen status for the newly emancipated as a first step towards full inclusion in America. Regardless of where one stands on this continuum considering Washington a friend, foe, or somewhere in between, recognizing his negotiation with whites who significantly controlled the financing and continued existence of African American higher education is an ongoing part of the legacy of black schools. This complex relationship and unending negotiations between white funders and black aspirations and more profoundly how HBCUs were conceptualized by and subsequently fit into the broader political economy of white America is beyond the scope of Washington's personal narrative, yet central to the representations of HBCUs. In fact, through this article we argue that the afore-referenced areas—constant financial instability, the establishment and continued functioning in a racist environment, and subsequently negotiating from a power down position with groups that have competing interests—led to an inordinate amount of energy being focused on legitimacy and validation by white society. This tenuous relationship between black institutions established in a segregationist and rapidly evolving America leads to ongoing discussions questioning the ultimate value of HBCUs. Is there a uniqueness or a mystique associated with black colleges beyond marching bands and black Greek organizations or is this mystique simply the residue of a race problem that the nation has long worked through? Or in a more pointed manner, what is the significance of the "B" or "Black" in HBCU—is it all mythology without meaningful connections to the lofty aims of combating the legacy of race and racism in America?

The millions of dollars and other resources provided by these northern industrialists were given with specific material and ideological expectations. Nostalgic tales of kindly white caretakers of newly emancipated blacks were extremely naïve at best. History suggests that black labor had been one of the most significant forces for America's unparalleled industrialization in the late nineteenth century. Therefore, a significant concern for the nation as a whole was how to incorporate the former slaves peacefully

into US society without disrupting the existing southern social, political and economic order. Education was offered as the cure-all to this dilemma referred to at the time as the “Negro Question.” The key however was it had to be the right type of education that would preserve the peace (i.e. the existing racist order) and transition the former slaves into an increasingly productive free yet still laboring class. Hence, the curriculum forwarded for black schools linked labor in tandem with education now infamously known as the “Hampton Model” or the “Tuskegee idea”—a heavy emphasis on industrial and moral and civic education with only rudimentary measures of academic subjects. And subsequently this socially docile and anapestic way of presenting HBCUs as non-revolutionary or subversive spaces heavily depends upon the apolitical photographic representations that this article critiques.

Some Early Examples

In the case of photographs and their relationship to the HBCU, Frances Benjamin Johnston’s Hampton Institute photographs serve as a starting point since these photographs “succeeded to an extraordinary degree in making even the deep-lying rhetorical structure of her Hampton images coincide with the dominant narrative” of post-Reconstruction (Wexler 342-390). An examination of many of the photographs used to promote HBCUs clearly demonstrates that nearly all of the photographers and editors who attempted to promote these institutions were of the “realist” strain when photographing the students, faculty, and staff. The tradition and standard established by the Johnston photographs developed in parallel with the commercialized and commoditized nature of the American university in both its dominant and historically-black strains.

Some of the best-known of all the early photographs used to promote HBCUs were those taken by Frances Benjamin Johnston (1864-1952) in 1899 and 1900. Johnston, a white woman born to politically-connected parents, initially trained as an artist in Paris and began photography in the 1880s after improvements in camera and film technology made the art form less of a specialized men’s practice and turned it into something more accessible to women. By 1890, Johnston’s photographs were well-published, allowing her to open her own studio in Washington, D.C. In December 1899, Hollis Burke Frissell commissioned Johnston to

demonstrate the success of the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Hampton, Virginia (Wexler 343). Her photographs were soon displayed at the *Exposé Nègre* (Exhibit of [American] Negroes) at the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1900. This same collection made its way back to America and eventually became the *Hampton Album* displayed by the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

When Johnston arrived at Hampton, the school enrolled over 1000 students (135 of them were Native American) and famously produced a great percentage of the black teachers who taught children in the South. Johnston, no doubt following the wishes of Frissell and other Hampton administrators who commissioned her, presented Hampton through photographs that “contrast the new life among the Negroes and Indians with the old, and then show how Hampton has helped to produce change” (Wexler 351). At least 159 prints were displayed in Paris of Hampton students, alumni, and their offspring that showed them in various settings in their homes, classrooms, around the grounds, and away from campus. Students are shown receiving lectures both inside and outside in geography, agriculture, “mechanical drawing,” and shoe making. Although little is known about their reception in Paris, Wexler’s photographs were favorably received and subsequently used for fundraising and promotional purposes by the university and included in articles written by Booker T. Washington on black education (Wexler 351). Johnston’s photographs visually represented “the process that was supposed to change [black] students from degraded slaves [...] into self-respecting, self-supporting Americans” (Guimond 30). The photographs make it clear that the change was, thanks to the Hampton idea, immediate and without compromise or intermediacy; the students had transcended “bondage” and “barbarism” instantaneously and almost miraculously (Guimond 35). Modern commentators wrote that the photographs illustrated the “triumphant advance of progress,” and a “new dispensation of freedmen” among whom “the sobriety of a Quaker ethic pervades her scenes like the mordant scent of fresh garden herbs” and “stand as a metaphor or parable in their sturdy dreaminess, their selfless absorption in self-improvement” (Kirstein 10). However these photographs were received in Paris, New York, or by those who subsequently saw them in magazines or university-published materials, all who viewed them were, in essence, viewing a world manufactured by Johnston and her subjects to demonstrate the “helpless yet not hopeless discrepancy in concept of

the white Victorian ideal as criterion toward which all darker tribes and nations must perforce aspire" (Kirstein 11).

Wexler points out that Johnston was careful to present Hampton as a productive, relevant, *in medias res* institution that gelled with the turn-of-the century popular perspective and ideology that "fondly believed that the black man's sufferings were over" (363). Wexler has argued that Johnston's "shooting script" stressed "black history as progress initiated by the action of the Hampton Institute," which were carefully demonstrated by her carefully chosen photographic *mise-en-scènes* that stressed "achievement over transition, accomplishment over struggle, and the gentler work of elaboration over the brutal labor of beginning" (Wexler 353-354). In this setting, Hampton became "much more attractive for…Americans to believe that contemporary black life was like at Hampton than to attend to evidence of catastrophic social disintegration such as the rising evidence of lynching and other racial violence" (Wexler 362).

In total, Johnston's images, staged but not necessarily "untrue," did not present "Hampton 'as it was' but Hampton as it had meaning for the culture" (Wexler 363). Johnston's photographs, as with nearly all of the photographs in our study, worked in two distinct ways, none of them notably "black" as they all stood on previously conceived notions provided by the dominant culture. Firstly, as explained, they coincided with the dominant, white narrative and mythology surrounding American colleges and universities and allowed the HBCU being photographed to participate, even if through illusion, with the greater promises offered by higher education. Secondly, Johnston's photographs inadvertently caused Hampton to propagate the very narrative with which its white founders sought inclusion, thus making it even more difficult for black institutions to develop a distinct narrative of their own.

Examples and Their Relation to the "Mystique" of the HBCU

By deconstructing selected photographs used by HBCUs to promote themselves, one can begin to understand the dichotomous nature of these images. On one hand, they were designed to promote the unique aspects of the HBCU, but on the other, they were hamstrung by the dominant cultural messages understood by those who were meant to view them. Although these photographs always feature blacks as prominent "details"

(in terms of their Szarkowski classification) their "message" (in terms of the Carter classification) is, more often than not, a message defined by the dominant culture. Indeed, these photographs are constructed from the outside-in, before the viewer has even laid eyes upon them. The question this poses, however, is what, exactly were viewers relating to when they see these types of photographs?

We have identified five messages that often appear in photographs used by HBCUs that draw upon the mystique of the HBCU but also the commoditized meaning of an image conveyed in its massified form. The five photographs we have chosen each represent one of the themes, however, in no way are these photographs exclusively limited to only conveying one of the themes. The first of these themes centers on racial uplift and black progress. When the picture is interpreted through this frame the receiver is left with the sense that the very process of attending an HBCU affords blacks deliverance from primitive ways of knowing and being. The second centers on community assimilation, which happens within the black community, but extends to the dominant community, as well. Subsequently the picture clearly communicates to consumers who are the intended assimilators (African Americans) and whose dominant beliefs they are being assimilated to (European Americans). The third theme

Photograph courtesy Library of Congress, Washington DC

concerns the "cultural massaging" that is offered by the HBCU in order to give its attendees and graduates an air of respectability within the minority and majority community. Fourthly, we see these pictorial representations of HBCUs offer a homogenizing influence that stresses intellectual and cultural orderliness, which allows both the institution and those associated with both external and internal acceptability worthy of "higher intellectual" pursuits. Finally, we believe that through this iconography the HBCU attempts to illustrate that its students will have participatory outlets within the university and surrounding community itself. This type of participation upholds the ideal of the HBCU being integrated with its surrounding community.

The first photograph, the oldest chronologically, is one from Johnston's *Hampton Album* and represents ("the thing," among other themes) homogenization and the orderliness it entails. There is little doubt that this image, taken before the total massification of photography, represents the most artistic of the five deconstructed in this study. This photograph, as described by Wexler, was part of "a myth on the eve of its explosion" (Wexler 362). As stated earlier, Johnston was a very deliberate photographer that well-understood that her photographs would be scrutinized on a world stage. The "frame" provided by Johnson within the photograph, entitled "Teacher and Five Students Studying Insects in the Laboratory," are uniformed students (at least two of whom appear to be Native Americans) within their classroom studying with a bearded, white instructor who in a wise sage like manner shepherds the students through their observations and subsequent recordings (this latter part encompasses the "time" aspect of the photograph). The details of the photograph include the uniformed students, instructor, chairs, table, desks, specimens, writing tablet, floor, two hanging lights, walls, a wire mesh, bookshelves and the bound volumes thereon, and the photographs on the wall above the bookshelves. The vantage point chosen by Johnston is similar to one who is directly observing and evaluating the class. Although this vantage point is intimate, it leaves us to see the classroom as if we are occupying the world apart, viewing as interested outsiders.

The stiffly-starched uniforms in tandem with the symmetrical room décor (three tables, four pictures, and six bookcases) in the background further emphasizes the orderliness and rigidly structured overtones that the picture is intended to display. This air of intellectual and physical

discipline is intended as a means to alleviate white fears that blacks would revert back to an imagined pre-emancipation savage state that would ultimately lead the ruin of the entire nation. Consequently education, and specifically the right type of education, was seen as an indispensable part of keeping blacks "civilized" and in line with prevailing economic, civil, and social norms.

One theme that is constant in this and similar pictures of education at HBCUs is the image of the black pupil at work with a Caucasian instructor teaching, demonstrating, or supervising. In this photograph there are six people in the picture, three of which are white and three black. The centerpiece of the picture is the white professor instructing his compliant black and Indian students while the other white men in the room sit across the table observing. It is also worth noting that the black students in the picture are all looking away from the camera; studious and apt pupils engaged in their learning, impervious to distraction. The anthropomorphized props intended to demonstrate the ability of an HBCU education to homogenize or provide orderliness to the most unruly members of the population—-black men. The fact that all of the subjects are distinguished by their uniforms further emphasizes the implicit message that under the proper discipline, former field hands could be transformed into gentlemen and scientists. Furthermore, it is implied that HBCUs can provide the structured environment necessary for this homogenizing transformation. Photographic historian James Guimond opined that in photograph such as these (there are others with similar *mise en scenes*), Johnston "was able to imply that daily life at Hampton was serene, orderly, and detailed--educationally ideal, in short--and that the students were disciplined, patient, and attentive" (40). In our own analysis we conceive of these *mise en scènes* specifically crafted to represent the pinnacle of black cultural homogenization, since this picture was taken during an era when a significant segment of the country did not consider blacks intelligent or disciplined enough to be scientists or soldiers. In total, photographs such as these represent a dynamic illustration of the power of the HBCU and its ability to transform its students.

Within the second photograph is coded (the "thing itself") the mythical ideal of cultural massaging to give students an air of acceptability and respectability. In this photograph, Dr. Burton Hurdle—a professor and former chair of the Department of History and Philosophy at the

Photograph Courtesy Virginia State University

Virginia State University—is framed within his office as he speaks with two students circa 1980. Details include the well-dressed, but sensibly casual professor, two students in casual (but not overly so) attire, and we presume Dr. Hurdle's books, desk, and other office accoutrements. Important are the ways in which each member is standing. At this moment (the time), the avuncular professor and students are obviously sharing a lighter moment where the demands of school and academics are replaced by the humanity and close connections between students and their professor. This arrangement places the viewer in at an intimate vantage point, one in which they are part of the casual conversation.

This picture depicts a fairly common image of two African American students (male and female) and a European American professor (in tie and sports jacket prominently displayed in the center of the two black students) presumably in the professor's office. Everything from the race and gender of the participants to their placement in the picture, and dress is steeped in the peculiar legacy of race and educational opportunity in American higher education. Meaning black men and women have traditionally attended coeducational institutions because the black community could not afford to establish separate schools. Next, HBCUs have traditionally been led by

and employed a significant number of white faculty, hence, the picture depicting a white professor clad in the trappings of professorship that oddly seem to parallel the trappings of the corporate world. Centrality in the picture, a red power tie and business attire locate whiteness and blackness in a familiar proximity—whites the teachers and blacks the ones being taught—despite the fact that the picture was taken in a predominantly black setting.

Further, the fact that HBCUs (much like numerous other access points into mainstream America) have historically been tied to white philanthropy and control, affords numerous images of white-dominated governing boards, administrations, and faculty (Anderson 23). From penitentiaries (black inmates/white wardens) and professional sports franchises (black athletes/white coaches) to entertainment ventures (black rappers and actors/white owners) this image of black bodies under the domain of burdened yet beneficent white leadership is a common trope in American life. The point of this particular reading of this image is that the legacy of white supremacy means that an all-black school with an all-black student body, faculty and administration lacks legitimacy. Hence, the visibility of whites in specific positions on black campuses signals the continued maintenance of the dominant white over black power dynamic. Our point here is to not suggest that social, educational, and economic uplift are not possible in these settings but we suggest that the supposed

Photograph Courtesy West Virginia State University

uplift through education at HBCUs is packaged in such a way that just as in the picture blacks are subservient to white genius.

This photograph, depicting students participating in a local "Negro" 4-H Camp circa 1950 is indicative of the community participation promoted by the HBCU in order to ensure that both the students and the university can connect with their surrounding community (and, though extension, the larger world beyond). This type of connection is important in that it solicits "town-and-gown" relations and ensures that the institution has demonstrated its commitment to progress and modernity. The details in the photograph present the students from the college, the children participating in the 4-H camp, and various staff members. The rustic meeting-house or dormitory in the background fits well within the organization's bucolic origins and focus. The students, in fact, do not stand out from the crowd, and there are no banners, shirts, or anything displayed that would indicate the college's presence at all. Of course, placed prominently in the background is the sign announcing that the camp is designed for African American participation. We, as the viewer, are observing the cordial relations and pride-in-participation of the entire camp as they pose for the sake of posterity. In this position, we are, once again, outside observers who are privileged to share in this moment if only to feel as if we are a part of the revelry, even if only for a moment.

This picture depicts a group of African American adults and adolescents that are participating in a 4-H camp that was hosted by Virginia State College in the 1940s. The infamous Jim Crow era signage over the heads of the individuals in the picture, "Negro 4-H Camp" does not so much direct the viewer to the fact that the individuals in the picture are black, because their racial and ethnic identity is for the most part readily observable. But instead, the signage directs the reader to the fact that the individuals being photographed are African American 4-Hers. While this observation may seem on the surface fairly mundane 4-H camps established for whites during this same era were not marked as "White 4-H Camps." Consequently, we found in this picture a visual representation of one of the central themes of the article—that the representations of HBCUs through these images provides a participatory outlet for blacks to become more American. Moreover, the location of activities like 4-H camps on HBCU campuses provided an outlet for African Americans to become more like the dominant culture through their participation at HBCUs.

A cursory analysis of the 4-H's website supports our analysis. Describing the establishment and purpose of the organization the website states:

> The seed of the 4-H idea of practical and "hands-on" learning came from the desire to make public school education more connected to country life [...] During this time, researchers at experiment stations of the land-grant college system and USDA saw that adults in the farming community did not readily accept new agricultural discoveries. But, educators found that youth would "experiment" with these new ideas and then share their experiences and successes with the adults [...] 4-H began to extend into urban areas in the 1950's. Later, the basic 4-H focus became the personal growth of the member. Life skills development was built into 4-H projects, activities and events to help youth become contributing, productive, self-directed members of society ("4-H History in Brief.").

Hence 4-H set out to bridge old and young with rural and urban under the auspices that the youth were more incorrigible. And subsequently that their intimate relationship with adults, the powerbrokers in the community would translate to their whole communities adoption of a specific vision of a civil society; which, in turn, suggests that just as the founders of 4-H intentionally used education to merge the binary between the rural and urban, between luddites and advocates of technology, and even between national and international interests at HBCUs. This meant the 4-H's ability to bring African Americans into, as they stated, "contributing, productive, self-directed members of society" could be accomplished through HBCUs, whose missions in general promised similar outcomes for its graduates.

This photograph featuring Irma Muse Dixon standing beside her office as Director of the New Orleans Department of Property Management taken in the late 1970, a few years after her graduation from Southern University at New Orleans (SUNO). Ms. Dixon, who went on to earn a Master of Social Work degree from Tulane University and who eventually

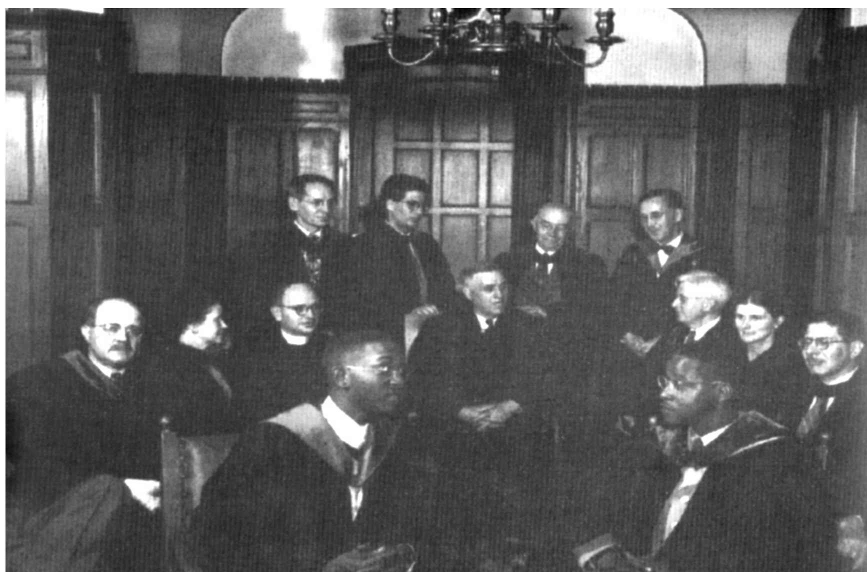
Photograph Courtesy of Southern University at New Orleans

became a fellow at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, went on to serve as the undersecretary for the Louisiana Department of Culture, the director of the New Orleans Department of Recreation, Bureau Chief within the Louisiana Office of Employment Training and Development, and furthered her career as a State Representative of Louisiana from 1988 to 1992. This image, taken in 1988, demonstrates some of the successes to be found if one were to look among the approximately 5,000 graduates from SUNO at that time. The photograph is simple—the thing is Ms. Dixon and her office, portfolio in hand, well-dressed, and refined. Her door is prominently labeled and the trappings of the office further the sense of space. The viewer is but a passing observer, standing just long enough to be acknowledged by the subject as she treads on to important appointments.

The elements of this photograph send a powerful message concerning successful appearances in America. Entry into the corporate world is made possible by the trappings of higher education, a tradition in which HBCUs fully participate. The dearth of women of color in governmental

and political spheres when this photograph was taken made this particular depiction of Ms. Dixon taking her place in the higher echelons of American political life a fetish object. It is no coincidence of all the graduates that could have been selected to demonstrate success, this specific image was considered most appealing. Why not a black female elementary teacher, administrative assistant, or social worker?

This picture demonstrates institutional desires to provide an avenue to community assimilation through stylized depictions of success and respectability gained by accessing America-possible through education at an HBCU. Everything from the subject's professional attire and accoutrements to her erect positioning in the picture communicates her supervisory position even if the reader overlooks the title "Director" prominently displayed on the door. Also, her leadership position juxtaposed against the rarified reality of black women in positions of power furthers an enduring trope about HBCUs; that they can convert those on the farthest margins of social acceptability into closer proximity to social respectability and economic stability. Hence, at the turn of the nineteenth century this meant newly emancipated African Americans were made civilized by education at schools like Tuskegee and Hampton and today black women who were once considered only educable enough to



Photograph Courtesy of Fisk University

be domestic workers can now become leaders in corporate America. The problem with simulacrum that we are referring to as inclusion through community assimilation, is that through these images and the discourses that they establish the representation of success has little if anything to do with black self-determination in an individual or communal sense. Instead, the highest measure of the effectiveness of HBCUs for lack of a better term is their ability to create black versions of the students that are being produced at predominantly white schools—complete with corporate aspirations regardless of their racial and gender identity.

This picture was taken in 1953 at Cravath Hall at Fisk University. The "thing itself" the inaugural initiation of the Delta of Tennessee chapter of The Phi Beta Kappa National Honor Society. Founded in December of 1776, Phi Beta Kappa is the oldest and most prestigious honors society in America. The Delta of Tennessee chapter was chartered in 1952 and was the first chartered at an HBCU. The details show the proud inductees, their sponsors, and representatives from the national organization. All are dressed in appropriate formal academic regalia and they are posed as if to be conversing with each other in this intimate setting. As the observer, we are placed within this intimate circle, and can almost listen in to the pride and satisfaction felt by all. The fact that Fisk, often referred to as the "Harvard of Black schools," was worthy of a chapter (nearly two centuries after the establishment of the organization) suggests the prevailing sentiment that black higher education had finally arrived. However, on the other side of the coin, this arrival was nearly two centuries behind that of white higher education.

By chartering a chapter at the fabled Fisk University, the home of W. E. B. Du Bois's Talented Tenth (those educated to serve as the vanguard of the race), Phi Beta Kappa lent its reputation to the school of those who were responsible for the social and economic uplift of the other ninety percent of African Americans. The idea that this communal and individual uplift would occur as a result of participation in higher education is an American ideal that crosses racial boundaries. However the racist undercurrents surface when one considers that this training for racial uplift had to be overseen by sage instructors that just so happened to represent the old guard, which was predominantly male, middle-aged, and entirely white to this point. The actual photograph demonstrates this imbalance, featuring thirteen individuals: eleven men and two women,

eleven of whom are white and the two new black initiates. The inclusion of a co-educational membership is no small matter but it is also worth noting that in the arrangement the women are in opposite corners and are less prominently displayed. The theme of placing a white male as the central figure in the picture is a mainstay and provides a visual representation that all human logic and reason evolves from Anglo-Saxon men. Hence in the end this picture represents the legitimating of the black intelligentsia at the hands of white scholars.

Conclusion

As with the photographs of the Jubilee Singers, HBCUs immediately and successfully seized upon the power of the massified image and the many meanings that it conveyed. While the Singers and their music may have been identifiably "Black," their dress and comportment was identifiably "white." Since the dominant artistic representation of the Black performing artist had been, up to that time had been the blackface minstrel, there would have certainly been a loss of social capital if the Singers would have attempted to change their dress and subsequent public image to synchronize their visual personas with the slave heritage of the Negro spiritual. While the Negro spiritual could be made acceptable, it was the only aspect of the whole that could be safely co-opted by the primarily white audience. Slave clothes, it seems, would not appeal to the visual sensibilities of the Singers' audiences. In the same vein, Frances Johnston's images explicitly demonstrated that both blacks and whites, alike, had a limited range associated with that the HBCU was and was not supposed to be. Historically Black colleges, then, quickly understood how they must advertise themselves in order to survive as a minority institution.

There is no denying that the HBCU is largely responsible to itself for its own perpetuation. Without students, donors, benefactors, parents, and willing business and community allies, no university could exist. Unlike the music of the Singers, the HBCU was acceptable only insofar as it demonstrated that it was an institution that could communally uplift, culturally assimilate, socially transform, and offer mainstream participatory outlets to blacks who sought opportunity and acceptability in the dominant society. However, this belies the fact that the HBCU has attempted to set itself apart from white universities by surrounding themselves in a

visible cloak of mythological difference centering on the mystique that the black college is somehow different and somehow black. In fact, a studied and structural analyses of the photographs used by HBCUs to promote themselves to both the black culture and the surrounding dominant culture indicates that their target is not, in fact, the internal black minority community, but the external, majority white community. Other than their skin color, the students and alumni depicted in these photographs, just like the Singers, are modeled as idealized college students, not black students in black institutions held to a different or unique standard. In effect, the HBCU, through these types of photographs, massified itself as an entity and appealed to students of African descent only through their skin color, and not through any notably African or African-American characteristics, including the mystique of the HBCU that is specifically targeted to those seeking something other than what they could receive at dominant, white institutions of higher education.

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