

ANTONIO L. ELLIS AND CHRISTOPHER N. SMITH

7. UNHOOKING FROM WHITENESS

Are Historically Black Colleges and Universities Good Enough?

INTRODUCTION: WHITENESS VALIDATES YOU

This chapter shares two counternarratives. The first counternarrative shares Ellis's experiences as an African American who received his primary education from predominantly Black schools and his postsecondary education from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). However, while studying in K–12 schools and while completing his bachelor's degree from an HBCU, he was strongly encouraged by African American teachers and professors not to attend an HBCU for graduate studies. They contended that people who received bachelor and graduate degrees from HBCUs are less likely to be as employable as persons who studied at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). Unfortunately, Ellis took the advice of these teachers and professors seriously. Therefore, after Ellis completed his undergraduate work, he remained committed to gaining admission into a PWI.

The second counternarrative relates Smith's experiences as an African American who received his primary education from predominantly white schools and his postsecondary education from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). While completing his post-secondary education he noticed a lack of respect afforded to his education from an HBCU compared with his secondary-school classmates who were attending PWIs. Additionally, when discussing his aspirations for graduate studies he was confronted by more negative attitudes concerning HBCUs, coupled with consistent pressure from African Americans and non-African Americans alike to seek a graduate degree at a PWI. Even after attaining two degrees, Smith struggled with the notion that HBCUs could not compare to PWIs, and he found himself at a fork in the road when applying for doctoral programs.

A COUNTERNARRATIVE BY ANTONIO L. ELLIS

K–12 Education: My Hunger for Whiteness

While receiving my primary education from the Charleston County Public Schools in the inner City of Charleston, South Carolina, my Black peers and I were constantly informed that we had to be as good as White children at schools located in the wealthier neighborhoods. Although the urban schools that we attended received

hand-me-down books, computers, and appliances from the White schools, we were still expected to intellectually compete with them. As an African American male with a speech impediment, I constantly struggled internally to understand why Black students were treated differently than White students. However, because of my speech impediment, I did not feel physically capable or mentally empowered to verbally challenge institutionalized systems of inequality. Over the last 50 years, the general consensus has been that people with speech and language disorders are disadvantaged both socially and academically (Logan, Mullins, & Jones, 2008; Hartlep & Ellis, 2012). As a result of my feelings of powerlessness, I continued to marvel at the perceived lifestyle of Whiteness and secretly desired to obtain it. Charleston is a city that is arguably rooted and grounded in Whiteness. The majority of the local key decision makers have traditionally been White. For example, Mayor Joseph P. Riley was elected as the mayor on December 15, 1975. He is currently serving his tenth term in office, making him one of the longest serving mayors. Consequently, throughout my K–12 schooling journey, I never saw diversity within the ranks of my local mayoral leadership.

HIGHER EDUCATION: I OBTAINED MY GOAL OF WHITENESS

After graduating from Burke High School in Charleston, I attended Benedict College in Columbia, South Carolina. Benedict College has been one of the fastest growing of 39 United Negro College Fund (UNCF) Schools. Of the 20 independent colleges in South Carolina, Benedict has the largest undergraduate student body and is the second largest overall. The College has students enrolled from every county in South Carolina. More than 3,200 students currently study at the school, and it is distinguished by its continued commitment to facilitate the empowerment, enhancement, and full participation of African Americans in a global society. While studying at Benedict College, not only did I develop academically, but I also developed a higher self-esteem, a deeper commitment to serving my community, and a passion for continual success throughout life. In 2004, I completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in Religion and Philosophy at the college. Because of the firm academic foundation that Benedict provided during my matriculation, I applied to graduate school at the Howard University School of Divinity. Howard University is a federally chartered, private, educational, nonsectarian, historically black university located in Washington, DC. It has a Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education status of RU/H: Research Universities for high research activity.

While studying at Howard University, I felt deeply within the core of my being, as if my education was not good enough because I was attending graduate school at an HBCU. I mentally and emotionally held on to the advice that previous educators had given me regarding attending HBCUs for both my undergraduate and graduate studies. Regardless of being taught by leading theological and religious scholars at Howard, I still felt inadequate at the time. As a result of my feelings of inadequacy, during my final semester at Howard in 2006, I applied for admission to the

Georgetown University School of Liberal Arts, where I pursued a graduate degree in liberal arts education. Established in 1789, Georgetown University is the nation's oldest Catholic and Jesuit university. The university website states, "We provide students with a world-class learning experience focused on educating the whole person through exposure to different faiths, cultures and beliefs...Georgetown offers students a distinct opportunity to learn, experience and understand more about the world." According to the university website, as of Fall 2013, the racial demographics were 48% White, 21% African American, 18% Asian, 9% Hispanic/Latino, and 4% other races. I finally obtained my goal of Whiteness.

BLACK, MALE, AND SPEECH IMPAIRED AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION

After being admitted into Georgetown University, I finally felt as if my education was meaningful and legit. During my first day on campus, with haste, I purchased university paraphernalia. After being accepted into a PWI, I also felt delighted to be accepted by the dominant culture (Whiteness). While attending classes with White students, I subconsciously noticed that both Benedict College and Howard University prepared me to be competitive at a PWI. As a result, during my first semester at Georgetown University, I didn't earn any grade less than a 3.0 on their 4.0 scale. Following a successful semester at Georgetown, I scheduled a meeting with the associate dean of the school of liberal arts. The purpose of this meeting was to inquire about merit based scholarships and work-study opportunities that were offered by the department. On the day of the meeting, I arrived at the associate dean's office thirty minutes early so that she would view me as a punctual person. I was determined to maintain and increase my connections to Whiteness. Upon my entering the associate dean's office, the administrative assistant greeted me and asked for my name and the time of my scheduled appointment. Due to my speech impediment, I experienced fluency challenges while trying to say my name and the time of my appointment. Thereafter, with some discomfort, I reached into my book bag for pen and paper and wrote out the information that the administrative assistant requested.

Approximately thirty minutes later, the associate dean called me into her office. She closed her office door and proceeded to ask me to tell her about my experiences at Georgetown so far. Again, because of my stuttering disability, I experienced challenges verbally communicating. While I was struggling to communicate with her verbally, she asked in a cruel tone of voice, "What's wrong with you?"

At that point, I felt as if my approval by Whiteness started to dwindle. I hastily started to write a note to her explaining that I was speech impaired. While I was writing the note, she stormed out of the office and was gone for about five minutes. When she returned I gave the note to her and nervously awaited her response. After reading my note she said, "I will contact your professors. If you cannot get your words out, then Georgetown is not the university where you need to be. Perhaps,

you should consider applying to an online school. In order to be a success in our program, you must be able to speak aloud during classroom discussions.”

At that point, I experienced multiple emotions and thoughts consecutively. My self-esteem plummeted and my self-confidence was broken. While I always wondered about what people authentically thought about my speech impediment, this was the first time someone blatantly discriminated against me because of it. Prior to my leaving the associate dean’s office, she said, “I am going to remove you from the program. Would you like advice for some online programs that would better accommodate your needs?”

My eyes filled with tears, I responded by writing, “no ma’am, thank you for your time.” While walking across campus for the final time as a student, I realized that my combination of being Black, male, and speech impaired made me a triple minority. Regardless of being admitted into Georgetown and earning competitive grades, I still was rejected by Whiteness.

UNHOOKING FROM WHITENESS: TAKING ANOTHER LOOK AT HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

After the associate dean of the Georgetown University School of Liberal Arts removed me from the program in December 2006, I was forced to take a semester off because it was too late to apply to start any academic program in spring 2007. In addition, I needed time to mourn my disconnection from Whiteness and to figure out which academic program I would apply to next. I wrestled with two questions. Should I apply for admission into another PWI? Should I apply for admission into another HBCU? I also started to spend a considerable amount of time thinking about ways to advocate on behalf of African American males who are speech and language impaired. The insensitive rejection by Whiteness impregnated me with a passion to prevent my peers from experiencing the pain I was currently experiencing. Based on my reflections on my experiences at HBCUs and at Georgetown, I intentionally decided to return back to Howard University to pursue a master’s degree in educational administration and policy, with a special focus in special education. In light of being unethically rejected from a PWI by an educational administrator because of my disability, I developed a desire to become an educational leader to combat unjust racial and disability discrimination in K–12 and higher education institutions.

POST GRADUATION: ROUND TWO OF PROMOTING WHITENESS

Upon my return to Howard University, I became more involved in my education than some of my colleagues who were pursuing graduate degrees in educational leadership only for career advancements. My return to study at Howard University was driven by a deeply rooted commitment to social justice. In addition, I returned to Howard with an appreciation for the nurture, acceptance, and care that I didn’t

receive from Whiteness. During the 2008 spring semester, the Howard University department of educational administration and policy (now educational leadership and policy studies) received a United States Department of Education grant. As a result, the principal investigator of the grant and my professor, Dr. Saravanabhavan, invited me to attend the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Meeting, which was held in Manhattan, New York. This was my first time attending an academic conference. I met so many educators and established great relationships with graduate students from national and international universities, including one of the editors of this book, Dr. Nicholas Hartlep.

While at this national meeting with over 5,000 registered, I noticed that less than 10% of the presenters were from HBCUs. In addition, over the four-day span of the meeting, I only met two people who graduated from an HBCU; however, they were teaching at PWIs. In the midst of conversations during the meeting, I informed faculty and graduate students that I was interested in becoming a professor after I earn a doctoral degree. My peers were only interested in teaching at PWIs. When I mentioned the possibilities of teaching at an HBCU, I received responses that reflected the advice I received about HBCUs before I was admitted into Georgetown University. The consensus was “HBCUs don’t pay enough; HBCUs don’t have enough research funding; HBCUs are not research oriented; HBCUs are not respected academically; HBCUs aren’t good enough.” However, based on my unhooking from Whiteness, those negative comments regarding HBCUs increased my commitment to those institutions. The education that I was receiving from Howard University was state-of-the-art and second to none. My professors were competent practitioners and researchers, who graduated from leading schools such as Howard University, Harvard University, Yale University, Morehouse College, Temple University, Duke University, Princeton University, Spelman College, and University of Chicago, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, among other nationally respected colleges and universities.

MISLEADING ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

As demonstrated in the previous section, there are several assumptions about HBCUs. However, based on my experiences at these prestigious institutions, these assumptions are misleading. This section will showcase a few successful HBCU graduates in order to serve as a counternarrative against the ideology:

Lonnie Rashid Lynn, Jr. (also known as “Common”) attended Florida A&M University earning a degree in business administration before some recognition by *The Source* magazine propelled his career into rap and acting.

Toni Morrison is a Nobel Prize-winning author of such esteemed classics as *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. She graduated from Howard University with a degree in English in 1953.

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Gloria Ladson-Billings, Ph.D., is the Kellner Family Professor of Urban Education in the Department of Curriculum & Instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the 2005–2006 president of the American Educational Research Association. She graduated from Morgan State University in 1968.

John Harkless, Ph.D., an award-winning Associate Professor of chemistry at Howard University earned a Bachelor of Science degree in mathematics and chemistry from Morehouse College in 1995.

Reverend Jessie Jackson, the civil rights activist often regarded as among the most important of black leaders, graduated from North Carolina A&T University in 1964.

Colbert L. King earned a government studies degree from Howard University. King used his writing prowess to earn a Pulitzer Prize during his tenure as a columnist for the *Washington Post*.

Jerry Rice graduated from Mississippi Valley State University. He's not only recognized as the greatest wide receiver in NFL history, but as being among the greatest at any position, winning three Super Bowls with the San Francisco 49ers as well as an AFC Championship with the Oakland Raiders.

Herman Cain, a successful businessman and 2012 republican presidential nominee graduated from Morehouse College in 1967. He studied mathematics.

Spike Lee graduated from Morehouse College in 1979, where he also lensed his first student film, *Last Hustle in Brooklyn*.

Thurgood Marshall, a graduate of Lincoln University, who became the first African American Supreme Court Justice.

Wayne A.I. Frederick, M.D., entered Howard University as a 16 year old to pursue his dream of becoming a physician. He earned a dual B.S./M.D. degree, and went on to enter a surgical residency at Howard University. He was named one of America's Best Physicians by *Black Enterprise* magazine. Frederick currently serves at the 17th President of Howard University.

UNPACKING HBCU SUCCESS STORIES

These selected success stories of HBCU graduates are counter to what I've been told about HBCUs over the past two decades. The Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended, defines an HBCU as "any historically black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of black Americans, and that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association" (Diamond, 2003). HBCUs offer all students, regardless of race, an opportunity to develop their skills and talents. These institutions train people

who become domestic and international experts in various fields of study, as shown in the counternarratives.

UNHOOKED FROM WHITENESS: EMBRACING MY BLACKNESS

This section reveals my epistemological foundations as an African American male, who became comfortable with my Blackness after losing my appetite for Whiteness. I am reminded of my lived experiences in academic environments as an African American male who stutters, particularly my experience with the associate dean at Georgetown University. Now, as an emerging scholar in the field of education and as one who aims to lay a new foundation within the academy, I am challenged to revisit my epistemological commencement as a way to evaluate my sources of knowledge, my perspectives on the world, and, more importantly, my beliefs about educational spaces for African American males who are speech and language impaired, particularly those who stutter.

Although I share a very similar background with this population of males, we endure different experiences due to our separate locations, support systems, parental involvement, safety nets, advocacy, and self-perceptions. In light of experiencing marginalization, discrimination, and arguably racism at Georgetown, I am propelled to embrace my blackness, HBCUs, and speech and language impairment. As a child who avoided verbal communication because of my blackness combined with a stuttering disability, I navigated school buildings in urban communities in which I was raised in silence. As an African American male emerging scholar—one who has received one of the highest academic degrees from an HBCU—I represent the potential brilliance embedded within my peers who are marginalized within White educational spaces. I was blessed to have had a high school band director—Mr. Linard McCloud (Burke High School)—and pastors—Bishop Brian D. Moore (Life Center Ministries, Charleston, SC) and Rev. Dr. Howard John-Wesley (Alfred Street Baptist Church, Alexandria, VA)—who, in my early development and young adulthood, recognized my potential abilities and nurtured my dreams. Because of their involvement in my life, I have been able to supersede boundaries that many people set for me because of my stuttering disability. My high school band director demanded that I never give up in the face of adversity and what I perceived to be hopelessness. Therefore, I am motivated by a fierce sense of self-empowerment, a desire to empower others who are marginalized, a passion for educational achievement, and a sense of responsibility to mobilize those who are silenced and are unable to speak up for themselves.

My desire to advocate for marginalized groups has a sturdy religious and social justice base. My first advanced degree is in theological studies. I sought a theological degree hoping to gain a better understanding of my experiences as a stutterer. During my matriculation in divinity school, I gained a deeper understanding of my experiences by studying the writings of contemporary authors such as Cain Hope

Felder, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Gregory Carr, Marcus Garvey, Reinhold Neihbuhr, W.E.B Du Bois and Fannie Lou Hamer. Regardless of their various perspectives, each of them dedicated and committed their lives to standing on behalf of minority groups who were marginalized by Whiteness. Therefore, my spiritual, religious, and theological base represents an extensive number of social and Black Nationalist movements that were dedicated to altering racism, feminism, dominance, sexism, ageism, and White supremacy within the U.S. context.

It's my belief that one of the most influential tools for providing positive change in the life of disenfranchised populations is education and the acquisition of knowledge. However, there is a large possibility that an educational structure embedded in fluency-dominated cultures, where the "gift of gab" is used to maintain social and economic power, can be seen as an advantage to White Supremacy. Regardless of race, those who are non-fluent often live in poverty and are positioned at the bottom due to the lack of reasonable accommodations, patience, and acceptance by those who are more fluent. However, being a Black male and speech impaired does not make this phenomenon any better within a democratic society that is dominated by White Power. Educators in urban environments rarely, if ever, highlight African American males who stutter and have excelled in various careers so that male students who stutter can gain inspiration. To only teach a child, particularly an African American male who stutters, the accomplishments and contributions of White non-stutterers creates a sense of doubt and hopelessness that he cannot achieve his goals in life. He will never be White, and his stuttering possibly may not be cured. Human beings tend to be motivated by what we can see, hear, taste, touch, and smell.

My greatest accomplishment thus far has been my presence in urban school buildings, higher education classrooms, and academic conferences. As an educator and advocate, I feel that it's my ministry, obligation, and duty to motivate students who live the same realities that I did as a child and into adulthood. My obligation is to assist them in developing strength and boldness to pursue their dreams in the face of multiple adversities. I have had the privilege and honor of meeting some of the most talented, intelligent, and bright minds who have been silenced by fear, just as I was prior to unhooking from Whiteness. These Black children possess an undeniable glow that demands attention and validation, which I wholeheartedly give. While spending time in school districts that are classified as urban, I constantly reflect on my own experiences and realities. It's because of the struggles of my students that I realized the significance of my own life history; therefore, I now embrace healing through advocating for my peers (children and adults) who face the same obstacles.

The personal relationships that I developed with African American males who stutter via my work as a researcher, educator, and peer have been extremely rewarding. I have come to understand and embrace the significance of our lives and relationships. I was reared in communities that are somewhat identical to theirs, and I understand and identify with their struggles, concerns, pains, and cultural codes. Using my personal stories, experiences, and humor, I have worked

diligently to relate to their everyday lives. In light of my upbringing as a student influenced by social and political movements like the Civil Rights Movement and that of the Black Panther Party, I feel a fierce sense of urgency in eradicating systems of inequality, suppression, oppression, and White Supremacy. Therefore, my intellectual contribution to the field of education will also be to give support to the expansion of novel, innovative, and critical theoretical frameworks. West (1993), in his article “The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual,” refers to a new “regime of truth” that challenges scholars of color to analyze and critically examine the unique experiences of African Americans, including those who are hooked to Whiteness.

I developed a deep commitment to transforming schools such that more African Americans will graduate and become productive and respected citizens in society. Therefore, my research focuses specifically on revealing their stories and developing systems of support, and offers possibilities that may work toward helping them to be successful in academic environments and in the larger society. An examination of these “possibilities for success” is meant to be a catalyst and prototype for disrupting educational institutional practices in regard to how African American students are included and/or not included. My goal is to deconstruct and challenge the *status quo* of educational spaces that have produced decades of negative stereotypes of African Americans, persons with disabilities, and HBCUs. Dillard (2000), Scheurich and Young (1997), and West (1993) all urge Black scholars to be bold enough to embrace their stance as African Americans within the academy and to deliberately focus on the mobility of Black people if they desire to do so. In the midst of investigating and crafting educational scholarship that gives direct attention to African American students and debunking myths about HBCUs, I hope that additional research paradigms and supportive peer reviewed scholarship will emerge to interrogate Whitewashed opinions about our beloved institutions, while shedding light on the success stories of African Americans and HBCUs.

RECOMMENDATIONS: WHERE DO HBCUS GO FROM HERE?

Currently, no HBCUs offer graduate degrees in higher education. Therefore, these institutions are not represented among the producers of higher education administrators. African Americans who want to pursue graduate degrees in higher education are forced to attend PWIs because they have no option among HBCUs. While studying at Howard University, I was constantly told by my professor, Dr. Lois Harrison-Jones, that “if you are absent from the table, then you just may be a part of the menu.” HBCUs are absent from the table in this regard; therefore, African Americans are learning how to be higher education professionals from the perspective of Whiteness. At a recent educational leadership and policy meeting held at Howard University, Dr. Melanie Carter stated, “A graduate degree in higher education program at an HBCU would require designing a culturally-based curriculum grounded in the theory and practice of higher education leadership and policy.” It’s imperative that HBCUs develop sustainable graduate degree

programs in higher education that would produce culturally relevant leaders throughout the nation.

A COUNTERNARRATIVE BY CHRISTOPHER N. SMITH

Struggling from Birth

The greatest struggle in my life has been to accept that skin tone does not equate to intellectual deficiency. As the son of a military officer and a stay-at-home mother, living in middle class society, benefiting from all the “privileges,” it could be easily assumed that my life was easy. However, that assumption grossly misconstrues the harsh racial realities that existed and still do within the context. While growing up I was faced with constant comparisons to my white classmates from kindergarten through high school. I was taught that to succeed I must be better than them in all areas. I was told that I must perform better academically; I must be more athletically skilled; and socially I could not reveal myself as too confident, or I would be perceived as a threat. I was in a constant fight with identity; oscillating between the dominant white ideologies of self, the family expectations that were deeply rooted in Americanized Christianity, the popular black culture that was burnt into my mind through media, and the uncultivated connection to an ancestry that I only heard about in part during Black History Month. These mandates weighed heavy on my self-confidence and self-perception; at one point in time I even remember regretting being black.

Matriculating through middle and high school was particularly difficult. During these phases of my education, I was confronted regularly with race-based stereotypes. As a “black” pre-teen I was not expected to be intelligent nor to strive to succeed academically. Incessantly I was teased by African Americans, European Americans, Latin Americans, and Asian Americans alike concerning my chosen style of dress, music selection, and vernacular. To many I didn’t act “black” enough, and I didn’t do “black” things. To others I was not “white” enough, nor did I relate to “white” interests. I was an anomaly, and this pressure pushed me towards becoming extremely apprehensive with conversing with all cultures. In middle school I found no home with anyone; I was never “enough.”

In high school the narrative did not alter. Attending school within Fairfax County Public Schools, one of the top counties in the nation educationally and economically, at a high school with one of the most competitive athletics programs in the state intensified the consistent pressure to conform. When I enrolled in advanced placement class, I was shunned by the other African Americans for trying to act “white.” While in these courses I was conditionally accepted by the other races as an equal. However, that conditionality came with the price of accepting ignorance and sometimes outright disrespect toward my own character and to those of my same skin tone. I became the “token” at the price of my self-respect, and I hated it. Participating

in multiple sports did not make the pressure any lighter. In the athletic realm I was consistently pressured to fit the stereotypes of black athletes: mainly registering for learning disabled courses, engaging in sexual activities with numerous women, and focusing all my energy on becoming a “stud.” I literally felt like a slave and no matter where I turned, I could not escape.

Not even my family was a source of refuge. My parents, who had grown up during the civil rights era and came from inner city circumstances, had no real insight or understanding into what I was facing on a daily basis. My parents were not aware of the covert racism and discrimination I was facing from all sides. They assumed everything was ok because we were not in the “hood” and we were receiving the “best” education possible. My siblings really were no support either. They had simply decided to assimilate into the dominant white culture and really had no desire to point out the inequity. This identity and oppression whirlwind produced some of the most depressive and suicidal times in my life.

The First Counter Punch in a Lifelong Battle

During my senior year of high school, I was accepted into a multitude of universities, both HBCUs and PWIs. I specifically chose to attend Howard University, an HBCU located in Washington DC; much to the dismay of many, including members of my own family. There were constant remarks about the inadequacy of HBCUs in all areas. I was constantly advised to attend a PWI for post-secondary schooling, so I could be more competitive and “well versed” in my subject of choice. However, it was my journey in higher education that finally brought about the personal equilibrium that I had been searching for my entire life. It was in this that I began my journey in “unhooking from whiteness.”

Howard University was when the narrative changed. There was where I, for the first time in my life, was surrounded by people of color from all over the world just like me. I at last came into contact with individuals and learned of people of color who were socially and intellectually striving to better themselves outside of the stereotypical “white” and “black” cultural narratives that I had experienced while growing up. Learning about other people of color worldwide currently and historically who had contributed to the human legacy—learning of individuals like Kelly Miller, W. E. B. Du Bois, Stokely Carmichael, Huey Newton, Angela Davis, and many more provided me a positive reference point. Reading about the history of Africa and other lands from the perspective of people of color drastically altered my self-conception for the better. I felt so fulfilled with the undergraduate experience that it led me to pursue my first postgraduate degree at Howard University as well. For the first time ever I did not feel like an anomaly; I felt at home. However, this comfort and confidence was short lived and restricted to the Howard University halls.

Whenever I left Howard the same stereotypic comparisons, ignorance, and outright disrespect was prevalent. In conversations with other African Americans

from my hometown and in even within the District of Columbia, I came to find a general lack of respect afforded the academic programs at Howard. Particularly, my past high school classmates would often snicker at the thought of or outright deny that Howard University was providing me any type of academic progression. Though I knew it was a lie, I allowed these voices to dampen my excitement and to make me long for becoming validated by attending a PWI for my doctoral studies.

When the Fork Appeared

When applying to doctoral programs, there was a bit of apprehension and the hooks of whiteness began to reappear. I often struggled with deciding between attending Arizona State University and Howard University. Arizona State University has accumulated many accolades, and I truly felt that a degree from there would have given me a better chance at postgraduate employment. However, when I applied for their doctoral program, I was flatly rejected, and they offered instead to enroll me into their master's program. Arizona State felt I could "benefit" from the course work offered and that I was not prepared enough for their program. That was a shock and a blow to the pride in my educational accomplishments I had earned. It was as if my education was subpar to them, like my hours of studying under some of the most accomplished and prolific scholars of color were inadequate.

However, it was in that moment that I realized my attendance at an HBCU for a doctorate was a necessity. I have a responsibility to myself and others like me to exemplify what an HBCU education can do. The PWI advocating and HBCU bashing ideology never settled well with me; actually, I found it to be quite contradictory. If for 18 years of my life I have been learning through the filter of whiteness, would it not make sense that in order to be "well versed" I should spend the same amount of time learning from another filter? I found that attending HBCUs did exactly the opposite of what I had been told. When I appear at conferences and interact with academic colleagues, I quickly come to understand how my education has made me more holistically aware in my field of study. Counter to popular belief, it's my HBCU education that has allowed me to have the opportunity to excel, work on multiple publications, and attend multiple conferences while earning a 4.0 GPA in the doctoral program in sociology.

The depth and width of academic and personal growth that I've attained, I solely attribute to my education at HBCUs. PWIs and HBCUs alike have a lot to offer. However, if we as a human race are going to begin to see ourselves transcend racial stereotypes and racist inclinations, we too must begin to challenge the manner in which we think about education. When people rely on surface appearances and false racial stereotypes, rather than in-depth knowledge of others at the level of the heart, mind and spirit, their ability to assess and understand people accurately is compromised. This reliance must be altered so that educated people, no matter where they matriculated, can be lauded for their accomplishments and afforded the opportunities they have worked to earn.

CONCLUSION

This chapter is not intended to promote HBCUs or to speak negatively of PWIs; however, it *is* intended to debunk and resist dominant notions that HBCUs are less credible academic institutions. HBCUs offer culture, a rich history, and rigorous academic programs. Most importantly, they prepare students for leadership and life beyond graduation. While HBCUs represent only three percent of the nation's institutions of higher education, they graduate nearly 20 percent of African Americans who earn undergraduate degrees (Perna, 2001). In addition, these institutions graduate more than 50 percent of African American professionals and public school teachers (Brown & Davis, 2001). HBCUs hold a unique legacy to the specific needs of young African American minds and continue to demonstrate the most effective ability to graduate African American students poised to be competitive in the corporate, research, academic, governmental, and military arenas. I urge all HBCU scholars to unhook from Whiteness by publicly defending the worth, value, and importance of our institutions. We must tell stories that explicate White ideology and unlock possibilities for challenging their hegemony, just as auto-ethnographic stories by and about people from oppressed communities offer strategies for challenging domination. Unhooking from Whiteness is not popular or convenient; however, it's necessary for the preservation of our communities and educational institutions.

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