

“WOKE” in Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Saliah Jackson

North Carolina Central University, Durham, North Carolina, USA

Kameron Pillow

North Carolina Central University, Durham, North Carolina, USA

Zy’Asia Carter

North Carolina Central University, Durham, North Carolina, USA

Joseph M Green (Corresponding author)

North Carolina Central University, Durham, North Carolina, USA

Email: joseph.green@nccu.edu

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Abstract

This research paper aims to examine and critique the impact and contribution of HBCUs in advancing societal issues and education while fostering a heightened understanding of social justice for today’s HBCU students. The purpose of this research is to discuss, expose, and share the impact HBCUs have had on the “WOKE¹” movement and social justice in the United States of America. The discourse centers on the development of scholars and activities who have been nurtured by and at HBCUs. The primary sources and events have been summarizing, focusing on the cause and effect of the injustice minorities face from the modern Civil Rights Era to the present day. The information/data demonstrates core components that have shaped American HBCUs from their establishments/foundation. Those ideals still evoke the same emotion of individuals who effort toward higher education decades ago up to today’s HBCU student bodies that embrace societal images upon their school. It also demonstrates how HBCUs have shown their ways of waking to societal limits in multiple forms of action to be heard through their oppression. Some sources broadly state approaches to reinstating these essential values, while some indicate the efforts to prove the name of HBCUs compared to PWIs. Some sources even show how our institutions solidify our government. This paper expresses how HBCUs in our nation keep students aware of the delinquent acts around them from social injustice and racial inequality.

Keywords: HBCUs, Woke, Social injustice, Racial Inequality, Cultural Immersion, Cultural Historical Practices

1. Introduction

The most influential parts of what we call our United States of America have become one nation from the darkest moments and events that we acknowledge in our historical studies through our institutions. What we, as people, fail to realize in our harsh reality is that history repeats itself. Who believes this takes place presently solely depends on whom you ask this question. Whether you are an observer or are primarily unaware of today's current events, we can analyze how much of our historical events are recurring. Society's racial and social images of our black communities have remained the same since the prolonged Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s. When digesting the events of this era, it is imperative to note the strenuous efforts of the black population to validate their equality to the government and non-minority population. It is also important to remember the behavior and actions of numerous historical figures to present us the luxuries we have naturally as minorities that they struggled to have. Victories and losses they endured throughout the many events to give the community opportunities that we, as human beings, just as the Caucasian man, deserve. Why is it important to acknowledge the racial matter in the modern-day just as minorities did in our past? We still face the problem of societal discrimination in many forms and wear our skin color with discretion. Being woke is the first step to being ahead of negative impressions. It gives us the perspective to know where we are in these issues and how we can use our voices, actions, connections, and unique contributions to know what we already know as a race to the rest of the nation. We should carry these efforts on for generations. Attending an HBCU gives the black community the option to become something through education and the wider population. It is a part of something bigger than an institution; a sense of belonging drives HBCUs today. What drove these institutions started from another source of emotion that only the black population could feel. HBCUs have always presented their hardship in a state because it is in their fabrication.

2. Statement of the Problem

Contemporary American social life (living) has presented significant issues and challenges for Black Americans. These issues and challenges have been witnessed in work, recreation, entertainment, education, and wellness. Nevertheless, HBCUs have provided safety training spaces for people of color -- i.e., Black people and Black students -- today with a vehicle to discuss and develop approaches to combat the significant obstacles to a fulling life in America (the good life).

3. Hypotheses & Research Questions

A hypothesis is a tentative assumption or concession made for the sake of argument and investigation. It is a crucial guidepost that directs research and forms the basis for evaluating research outcomes. Furthermore, a hypothesis is "a proposition, condition, or principle which is assumed, perhaps without belief, to draw out its logical consequences and by this method to test its accord with facts that are known or may be determined. The role of hypotheses in scientific research is to suggest explanations for specific facts and to guide the investigation of others."¹

The hypothesis to be tested in this research project/study examines key constructs that impact the social justice ideology (development and growth) of HBCU students and their expressions of justice in America. The research questions under investigation focus on *whether or not* individuals who study and are trained at HBCUs develop/foster and manifest a sense of justice in America supported by pride in the legacy of African American Resilience and essential everyday life experiences. This study will endeavor to answer the following *research questions*:

- I. How have HBCUs shaped and impacted contemporary democracy in America?
- II. What makes the role of HBCUs unique compared to PWIs in addressing social justice?
- III. What role, perceived or unperceived, does individual expectation have in the success of HBCUs and the development of a just society?
- IV. To what extent does HBCU's culture impact the decision-making approach of its students, both positively and negatively?

4. Historical Background

In the years before the civil war, educational opportunities for African Americans were rare. Since the days of slavery, constraining black education was used to suppress black activity and fears of slave rebellion. The denial of education then only intensified Black people's desire for it. After the emancipation, black education was regulated to poorly fund segregated schools. During this period, Blacks started to see the crucial side of segregation and discrimination.

"HBCU" stands for historically black colleges and universities. The first HBCU was founded in 1837. The Institute for Colored Youth was the first higher education institution for black people. As blacks, we have had to fight for the right and want for higher education. We have faced and are still facing many challenges regarding getting higher education, keeping higher education, and receiving funding for higher education. Historically black colleges and universities were established to meet and serve African Americans' educational needs and provide a stable and nurturing environment for low-income families and first-generation college students. Before establishing historically black colleges and universities, there were no formal established higher educational systems for African Americans. African Americans faced many challenges such as

social injustice, police brutality, racism, poverty, discrimination, and more; therefore, currently, black students and HBCUs have no choice but to wake to their history, some of the same histories we are starting to see repeat itself today.

The fight for educational rights started with *Brown v Board of Education* in 1954. This was one of the critical foundations of the Civil Rights Movement that helped establish that “Separate but Equal” education was not equal at all. Although *Brown vs. Board of Education* did not achieve school desegregation on its own, it fueled the emerging Civil Rights Movement in the US. The year after the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat, which leads to other boycotts, sit-ins, and demonstrations. This resulted in things such as Little Rock Nine, which portrayed a vivid contrast between the angry forces of white supremacy and the quiet, dignified resistance of African American students. This also resulted in the sit-in movement from four black students at Agricultural and Technical College of North Carolina (now NC A&T State University) in Greensboro, North Carolina; on February 1, 1960, the students sat down at a lunch counter and ordered coffee. They were refused any service due to the policy of the counter, which was “White’s Only.” The four students sat and stayed until closing time and returned the following day with even more students. This event was covered heavily by the press, and this sit-in ignited many different forms of peaceful protesting against segregation in hotels, libraries, on beaches, etc., from young black people.

Many events and legendary individuals have led to the shaping of HBCUs and helped shaped the democracy of HBCUs. This is one of the main reasons we can be current in being “Woke” to our HBCUs' things going on around us. The fact is that HBCUs assumed a vital part in changing how America was to comprehend and imagine what it intended to be black after the Civil War. These HBCUs have served as a breeding place for the future generations of freedom fighters throughout the years. It was HBCUs, for instance, where the diligent design educational techniques that birthed the mass fights and common distress of the 1950s and 1960s arose, a reality that numerous individuals today may neglect to appreciate sufficiently. HBCUs affected the personality of the black freedom struggle. They prepared the leaders and filled in as key destinations of trade where goals about the best ways toward opportunity came to completion. Take Howard University, an HBCU established in 1867, for instance. Without this school, our comprehension of balance and access would be vastly different.

5. A Brief History Woke Expression in Society

When one thinks of the historical movements and the progression of woke culture throughout the decades in the United States, there have been seminal flashpoints of activity in the social consciousness of America. In the late 1930s, Billie Holiday’s ‘Strange Fruit’ expressed her understanding of the dehumanization of black people, particularly in the southern states in the United States. During this time, the lynching of black people was not unheard of; actually, the public killing of black Americans happened often, and those who performed these unthinkable acts went unpunished. Ms. Holiday’s words were meant to open eyes to the reality of the ills of this country. This practice was frequently displayed in pictures and stories which appeared in local newspapers. Likewise, in the 1930s, Carter G. Woodson’s classic work “*The Mis-Education of the Negro*” focused on the awakening. He wrote, “when you control a man’s thinking, you do not worry about his actions.” The educated and conscience person can see and perhaps understand the hidden agenda which impacts society. During this same period, one A. Philip Randolph expresses this awaken via his wondrous works to liberate his people. Likewise, el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz’s words, teaching, speeches, and actions exposed who and what people could be when they realized the inter awaken within them. His work focused on the liberation of black people in American and other people of color, and, before his death, he believed that this awakening for all people to create equity, fairness, love, peace, and liberty should and could be obtained by all. The great artist Joan Baez’s inspirational work in the 1960/’70s helped expand this idea of advanced thinking in terms of social justice to diverse groups. In his song “Keep on Pushing” (1964), artists like Nina Simone and Curtis Mayfield asked people to keep on pushing to move up a little higher. This idea was supported in the actions and works of many. Dr. Huey P. Newton and Dick Gregory also worked to move social consciousness through community programs and marches.

The 1970s, following the assassination of prominent leaders, saw the rise of consciousness and the belief in the beauty of black people. Marvin Gaye’s “What Is Going On” (1971) asked society to recognize the reality of life for many disenfranchised people of color in America and, in Gaye’s case, other ills of the world including unjust wars and environmental damage our planet.

The 1980s brought a decade of continued respect for one’s culture. Filmmaker Spike Lee’s groundbreaking work *School Daze* (1988) posed the question of are we as people are genuinely advancing. The widely celebrated film ended with a call of the times: “Wake UP,” meaning people had not been focused on the real challenge of society but instead focused on the historical differences that hampered the ability to move forward.

The 1990s saw the rise of increased social action and art like Nikkie Giovanni’s “Racism 101” (1994) and rap group Public Enemy’s “Fear of a Black Planet” (1990) asked people what they were in fear of and shared that traditional and American heroes were not the icons and heroes of all. “Elvis was a hero to most, but he never meant much to me” (Fight the Power – Public Enemy. 1989). These lyrics express the idea that others have not been credited for their contributions when understanding imagery and original works. The late 1990s saw people such as Mos Def/Yasiin Bey, also known as Dante Terrell Smith, bring history and truth to focus on their work. In the film, the groundbreaking blockbuster *The Matrix* (1999) presented the provocative idea that we (all people) are blind to the meaning of our lives, and the only way to understand or

awaken and see reality truly is if we “select from the blue pill or the red pill,” and the choice is ours to make. This choice will allow people to see that they are not awake but, in fact, asleep.

This sense of conscience was again a point of interest with the viral news and social commentary in the 2000s. Take, for example, public intellectual Professor Melissa Harris-Perry’s show on MSNBC in 2012. The MHP Show was a widely watched thought-provoking news, education, and social justice discussion that included guests and local, national, and international significance stories.

Of course, this idea of the deeper meaning of injustice and exploitation of certain groups in America was front and center in the critically acclaimed “The Chappelle Show” (2003 – 2006) by actor, comedy, and writer David Chappelle. Several factors made “The Chappelle Show” one of a kind; it is raw/real humor, including its understanding of mainstream American and its marginalized groups. However, Chappelle’s understanding of consciousness and his ability to share, expose and display that to an audience who otherwise had not been exposed was what made him and the show a valid genus. Chappelle and former professional athlete Colin Kaepernick were both honored by Harvard University for their contribution and work in social justice. Mr. Kaepernick took a significant stand on principle on one of the most prominent stages in American society and arguably the most popular sport in the United States to protest Black Americans’ unlawful killing.

This brings us to the final two examples of wokeness and consciousness today. The award winning film *Get Out’s* (2017) main premise was black people have been placed in the “sunken place” while their bodies are being inhabited by others. The films lead song “Redbone” by Childish Gambino expresses the verse “now stay Woke . . . people creeping so don’t let them catch you sleeping.” This, again, figures the idea that in order to be aware and engaged you have to be awake in the subconscious. Finally, *Woke*, a television show shown on Hulu (2020) chronicles the life of an entertainer who’s totally awake and with this knowledge is led by a reality that others he encounters don’t see and how he able to move in and among this knowledge.

5.1. Cancel Culture

Cancel culture is a modern form of ostracism in which someone is thrust out of social or professional circles – whether it is online, on social media, or in person. Those who are subject to this ostracism are said to have been “cancelled.”

More than often, critics question the relevancy and value of historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) to modern-day society. These disapprovals exist despite the fact that it is all around reported that HBCUs play a significant part in encouraging the scholastic achievement of understudies and advanced education in STEM disciplines. Also, HBCUs have a solid history of making critical commitments to the racial diversity of expert occupations like law, legislative issues, business, and medication. What is frequently ignored and rarely examined by critics is the huge role HBCUs have played in creating people who are communally drawn in and the role HBCUs have played in empowering understudy investment on issues identified with social equity.

One of the benefits HBCUs have in cultivating community commitment among their understudies is their solid history of filling in as incubators of social equality action. Activists’ methods of city commitment have consistently been a piece of the social texture of HBCUs and fills in as an update that these organizations have and will keep on producing the up-and-coming generation of leaders who will participate in change developments that have a huge effect on society. However, we face new and arising issues of social injustice identified with access and value that cut across race, nationality, class, sex, and sexual direction. Now, like never before, HBCUs are all around situated to undertake a crucial part in assisting with making everything fair for these different groups of people.

6. Theoretical Framework

Social justice is a political and philosophical theory which asserts that there are dimensions to the concept of justice beyond those embodied in the principles of civil or criminal law, economic supply and demand, or traditional moral frameworks. Social justice tends to focus more on just relations between groups within society as opposed to the justice of individual conduct or justice for individuals. Historically and in theory, the idea of social justice is that all people should have equal access to wealth, health, well-being, justice, privileges, and opportunity regardless of their legal, political, economic, or other circumstances. Rawls Theory accentuates a theory of justice where everyone is justified and the best positions are set for a society that is significantly developed and looking to gain the best from connecting and relating with each other. Everyone must be satisfied in their position and economic positions should not be differentiated. Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an academic movement made up of civil-rights scholars and activists in the United States who seek to critically examine the law as it intersects with issues of race, and to challenge mainstream liberal approaches to racial justice. CRT examines social and cultural issues as they relate to race, law, and social and political power.

7. Methodology

In order to achieve the objective of this study, the researchers have undertaken a systematic analysis into the impact of HBCUs on their students, most of which come from backgrounds that include individuals from underrepresented minority (URM) Black and Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC). The purpose of the paper is to discuss, expose and share the impact HBCUs have had on the WOKE movement and social justice in the United States of America. The primary research methodology in conducting this research is the case study approach. This method is similar to archival research in that it

allows for in-depth study. However, its findings are limited by the inability to make generalizations to other phenomena. The researchers utilize three (3) data collection and analytic techniques: case study, content analysis, and archival study. Case study is a research methodology that helps in the exploration of a phenomenon within a particular context through various data sources. Content analysis and archival study allowed the researchers to evaluate official documents to ascertain the true substance of the climate surrounding the cases under investigation. These techniques allow the flexibility to follow events that may not be clear to individuals unfamiliar with governmental activity. Comparative analysis will be utilized to extricate similarities and contrasts in the respective cases. Information pertaining to each case will be reviewed and historical data will be analyzed. Content analysis is a research tool used to determine the presence of certain words, themes, or concepts within some given qualitative data (i.e. text). Using content analysis, researchers can quantify and analyze the presence, meanings and relationships of certain words, themes, or concepts. Qualitative case study is a research methodology that helps in the exploration of a phenomenon within some particular context through various data sources, and it undertakes the exploration through a variety of lenses in order to reveal multiple facets of the phenomenon (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

8. Literature Review

Our black institutions have played a bigger role in many aspects socially more than we realize. It's more than protest when precisely analyzing the scale that HBCUs have put themselves on. They have made a representation for themselves on their own that statistically has helped black students on the path to academic success with the resources present. According to *Higher Education as a Field of Study at Minority Serving Institutions*, the government has previously "focused on how the field of higher education has developed at Predominantly White Institutions" (1991, as cited Barnett, S. Freeman, M. Freeman, 2016). It continues to state that there is a scarcity of "literature that addresses the role that Minority Serving Institutions played in developing a more diverse higher education workforce (2008, as cited Barnett, S. Freeman, M. Freeman). It is equitably accurate to see the pattern of the depiction of undervaluing towards HBCUs persist even after decades. They have been questioned on the credibility these well-established schools possess despite the graduate programs, accelerated programs, and curriculums they have to offer. Likewise, the action and image of protest have been diminished by media coverage, disregarding the true objective of expressing inequality turned into a probable reason for violence and heinous acts. It is imperative to note that these same sources are the same crowds that impersonate the black community the most. Our culture is even up for grabs as we develop the trends in society. Who is the heinous group here? As a trendsetting population, we can continually expand our horizons in terms of speaking on our suppression. We have social media and protest and other effective methods of creating ways to get our voices projected. According to, *HBCUS' ROLE IN SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT*, it is suggested that we take it as far as national meeting and "...consider writing opinion essays about social justice issues or their student's responses to these issues (L. Esters, M. Gasman, 2015). As some figures representing HBCUs have stated, it takes quantitative measures from other leaders and student bodies from these black institutions.

What does this information prove overall? It describes the discrimination against minority institutions that we, as HBCUs, already understand. Approaching the issue is what has mattered to HBCUs. The knowledge of how we approach is still growing, and we will one day be in African-American historical literature. Every black University has critical civil rights events or similar in its curriculum in some form. Being a student of an HBCU, social injustice awareness is in the atmosphere through the promotion of social injustice events, readings taught to classes on our own institution's history, and many advocates present on campus for the student's interest. There are interest meetings for almost any field of concern for the student body, and there is a number that includes being more involved in the community. Being a North Carolina Central University student speaks for itself, with "Truth and Service" being a community-engaged institution. FAMU has shown its fight for racial injustice by teaming with other law schools and coming together as a program to combat racism in the wake of the George Floyd murder. Although it is a team effort from many names, HBCUs have a purpose to serve and broadcast these national headlines that need attention to show to the unjust population of the world. In other words, it starts with the black community because we know the adversity we face. Students are the answer to taking advantage of the opportunities given to them when it comes to being advocates for our misfortune.

The injustice has started with our system from the beginning. The habits the police and government have promoted over the years have contributed to the rest of the discriminating world. Through events like George Floyd's murder, minorities continue to express their understanding of justice and injustice, i.e., awaken. Recently an event at the University of Oklahoma, involving a fraternity chapter went under fire after a video of them citing racial slurs went viral. It was reported that they were permanently expelled from the university but were peacefully escorted to their locations at the time by police. Despite the media coverage and sympathy from the University, it is precise to assume the act of preservation from the officers towards these students who were guilty of their actions. Regardless of the worldly dangers their actions brought upon themselves, the issue was based on the principle of "who" they were. Speaking in the context of PWIs comes the conversation of how our nation's PWIs are identified versus our HBCUs. The State of Maryland received a lawsuit against Maryland's four HBCUs. Coppin State University, Bowie State University, Morgan State University, and The University of Maryland Eastern Shore have expressed their concerns about inadequate funding and reported duplicating their educational programs from other PWIs in the state. Over the last decade, these HBCUs have not only fought for a form of credit but the right to be credited for things that belong to them. Amongst failing to give credibility to minority-serving universities, the outsiders fail to give us credibility and support us as a fundamental institution.

In the media, the importance of HBCUs in the black community has been a topic of discussion for decades. Many people feel that HBCUs do not equip students with the necessary skills to enter into the real world. As time passes, many HBCUs are evolving, and many students believe they are trying to appeal to the “white man.” The core values of HBCUs in the 20th century centered around the civil rights movement. As we enter 2021, we see a shift in how HBCUs navigate the recurring social justice and racial issues that many African Americans face today. HBCU administrators and staff have to be prepared to have those uncomfortable conversations with their students to help them navigate how to move in society as an educated minority in a world that is meant not to see them succeed.

Across the United States, many HBCU students consider themselves culturally “woke.” Many student body presidents have written public letters addressing their support and need for criminal justice reform within our society. Professors at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, are finding ways to allow students to use their voice effectively. The professors are shifting the way students typically convey their writing styles. One of the challenges the professors knew would arise is that many students’ previous education never equipped them to take risks within their writing. Students mainly were taught to stick to Standard Westernized English instead of pushing the language barrier (Lockett & Rude Walker, 2015). The curriculum the professors at Spelman are implementing expands students’ linguistic abilities to not stick with the norm. The curriculum allows the students to sharpen their writing abilities and be comfortable tackling the obstacles in the world.

To get students’ attention in the 21st century, people have learned that they have to appeal to the language in which students speak. This generation has a heavy focus on social media influence, so the media is a significant indicator of how people think and feel. When a student is passionate about an issue or topic, the majority of them run to social media to get other people’s reactions. Once they build up a good following of supporters, then they march. Many of the marches that took place throughout 2020 started on social media. Once a person posted a flyer, the post began to circulate. The Black Lives Matter movement started as a hashtag on social media, and from there, it took off and became its brand.

9. Results and Discussion

This essay discussed the overview of HBCUs and their impact on the social and racial issues given to us historically and presently. We analyzed the establishment of these institutions from the perspective of the adversity brought upon us and its opportunity for black communities nationally. We iterated the discriminatory treatment HBCUs received compared to the nation’s PWIs and how we as authentic institutions have continued to confront the differences. We have demonstrated the actions in which HBCUs have taken to present these issues to our many undergraduate and postgraduate students to enlighten and awaken them and how past generations allowed us modernly to have a voice through their strenuous efforts of making a change for our lives. We have brought the many campaigns to attention that today represent more than hashtags and protests, but a non-violent movement that we today still have to prove to the outsiders. We proposed ways our HBCUs can continue to highlight these recurring issues and what some institutions have chosen to do to uphold our prestigious image while making these issues known to the PWI population.

10. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper was written to expose the reader to the different impacts of woke culture at HBCUs. Being exposed to ongoing violence in the world against your people, all while trying to tackle everyday life as a college student, is stressful. Nevertheless, many students take the WOKE movement and social justice reform personally and take it on as it is their responsibility to be the change they want to see in the world. Countless years of seeing the same injustice treatment happening to African Americans needs to be abolished, and with the abundance of woke students thriving from HBCUs, those stories will always live on. HBCUs give students a place to decompress, express their anger, and express their hate for how the world is treating them and the people who look like them. By creating a safe space for students, HBCUs will always be at the forefront for nurturing woke students and helping them navigate the way they move through society as a whole.

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Endnotes

¹ Woke ([/'wook/ WOHK](#)) is a term that originated in the United States, referring to a perceived awareness of issues that concern [social justice](#) and [racial justice](#).^[1] It derives from the [African-American Vernacular English](#) expression stay woke, whose [grammatical aspect](#) refers to a continuing awareness of these issues.