Toward an African Cosmology: Reframing How We Think About Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Jessica Exkano

Abstract
This article seeks to point out a discourse history of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in higher education, to explore the question, “Who is framing the narrative of HBCUs?” The article argues that a Western lens has framed the discussion surrounding HBCUs and points out the discursive history that propagates a “deficit” rhetoric. The article concludes with a discussion of how using an African cosmological lens can aid in excavating what communal meanings may be associated with HBCUs. It is the author’s hope that an exploration of “experience” aids others in finding ways to reframe how we think and subsequently talk about HBCUs.

Keywords
HBCU relevance, identity, experience, history, Afrocentricity, Asante

A recent scan of article titles concerning “historically Black colleges and universities” (HBCUs) might lend credence to skepticism about the future of these institutions and their continued relevance into the 21st century. For instance, a query on the Chronicle of Higher Education’s database yielded

1Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA, USA

Corresponding Author:
Jessica Exkano, Louisiana State University, 204 Peabody Hall, Baton Rouge, LA 70803, USA
Email: jexkan1@tigers.lsu.edu
the following titles: “Historically Black Colleges Grapple With Online Education” (April 5, 2002), “Predominantly Black and Historically Black Colleges Spar Over Federal Funds” (September 30, 2005), “Historically Black Colleges Tell Congress of Problems” (March 28, 2008), “Duncan Applauds Black Colleges but Urges a ‘Culture of Accountability’” (September 3, 2009), and “Less Than a Third of Men at Historically Black Colleges Graduate in 6 Years, AP Finds” (March 31, 2009).

Descriptors such as “grapple with,” “spar over,” “tell . . . of problems,” “lacks accountability,” and “graduates less” broadly generalize the culture of HBCUs as struggling, angry, incompetent, and witless. Also, negative media portrayal of universities serving traditionally underrepresented populations is not uncommon (Gasman & Tudico, 2008). In a case study on the media’s portrayal of Morris Brown College, Gasman (2008) argues that the media consistently portray HBCUs negatively and also use specific instances to paint broad generalizations over Black universities as a whole. She concludes,

Black colleges themselves need to be aware of the types of discourse embedded in past media coverage and how this can distort their stories. . . . They must contribute to a national discourse on “their” institutions rather than letting the mainstream media set the agenda. (p. 129)

Indeed, as both consumers and producers of knowledge, we must be aware of how our positionalities frame our thoughts, influence our actions, and affect our practice (Milner, 2007; Sultana, 2007).

Identity Construction and the Utility of HBCUs

Du Bois (1903) once posed that without the Negro college, Blacks would have been driven back to slavery. Du Bois recognized the need for Blacks to have an environment that allowed for autonomy and self-reflexivity after centuries of oppression. The Black college provided that avenue. However easy it may be through a 21st-century lens to question the continued relevance of HBCUs as a potential social panacea to states with dual systems of higher education, I posit that it becomes important to consider the way dominant historical narratives surrounding HBCUs have functioned. Utilizing a genealogical perspective (an approach that considers the historicity of the subject), I would like to consider and identify a major interruption in the construction of the narrative surrounding HBCUs. To be clear, I am not arguing about the relevance of HBCUs as it relates to the conversation of bifurcation of state funds and dual systems of higher education buckling under the weight of an
extremely dense legacy of segregation. When one understands that HBCUs were created in “less-than” circumstances, operated with “less-than” finances, and managed to educate the Black middle class in spite of a system that was never designed for it to succeed, the better questions surrounding HBCU relevancy become these: Is the broken system, which necessitated the dichotomy of dual higher education systems, fixed? Do Black students at predominately White institutions (PWIs) share the same experiences of affirmation and belonging they report at HBCUs (Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2010)? Until these meaning-making perspectives are taken into account, the construction of the rhetoric surrounding HBCUs will continue to disadvantage their function to African American communities. One can never truly understand the historical importance of Black colleges to African American people until one has unequivocally understood the experience of the people for whom the colleges were built. HBCUs remain relevant in redressing educational disparities, through advocacy of social egalitarianism, and by addressing the psychosocial needs of its constituents. This article addresses HBCU relevancy, posing questions such as the following: Who is telling the story of HBCUs? Against what are their existences being compared? Is there a need for HBCUs in a post–Brown v. Board society? Finally, what happens when the value of these institutions is considered through an alternate cultural lens of African cosmology? I argue that a Western dominant narrative has created the parameters of the discourse surrounding HBCUs, which functions as an ideological apparatus to control the way we think about, and act toward, HBCUs. Acknowledging the fact that these institutions vary in institutional mission and breadth, I suggest that in determining answers to these questions, a framework for a new discourse may be formed.

Theoretical Framework

Before suggesting a different narrative surrounding HBCUs, it is imperative to establish the historical context in which the current discourse is situated. In the way that theory guides our understanding of phenomena, a discourse allows for an understanding of the rules that make it possible to discuss a subject. In the first part of this article, I locate the dominant narrative of HBCUs in the parameters of a Western postcolonial discourse. Three Foucauldian principals help guide an understanding of discourse production: Power produces truth, truth is a social construct, and subjectivity is constructed in relationship to the truth (Rabinow & Rose, 1994). Through a postcolonial lens, we come to understand how Western consciousness becomes normative for society, through the process of domination.
and control at the political, economic, and social levels. A legacy of colonialism then, is the centering of European ideals, relative to the marginality of other worldviews, and the subsequent privileging of European values. As a result, a continuing antagonism exists between cultures that appear at the margins or borders of European thought (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1989). The discourse of a postcolonial society, then, is one of power to shape thought and create a standard against which others become measured. Certain American universities are no exception to this rule. The first part of this article shows how HBCUs’ national identities are a product of an antagonistic discourse of power.

How do we get back to the center? The second part of this article employs an Afrocentric framework to explore how best to reframe the discussion surrounding HBCUs. Afrocentricity is defined as “a consciousness, quality of thought, mode of analysis, and an actionable perspective where Africans seek, from agency, to assert subject place within the context of African history” (Asante, 2007, p. 16). At its heart, an Afrocentric perspective is concerned with centering the experiences of historically marginalized people who have become objects in their own stories. Central to an Afrocentric perspective is the role of agency, defined as the ability to act in a given situation. The agent can be said to be conscious, that is, to be aware of the mechanisms of domination and their apparatuses of marginalization, and can make decisions independently of oppressive context.

Taken together, Western domination and apparatuses of marginalization have led to African peoples’ dislocation, that is, the constitution of their reality through an oppressive lens of Eurocentric consciousness (Asante, 2007). A classic example of dislocation can be found in W. E. B. Du Bois’ (1903) often-cited “double consciousness” notion. He explains that the negotiation of identity is similar to being “born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (p. 3). He elaborates further on this dualistic self-nature: “One ever feels his twoness” (p. 3). Du Bois’s often-cited “double consciousness” is centrally posited as the axiological binary of self and other—not the self who lives as a subject, but the self as an object, negotiating the public sphere expertly “through the revelation of the other world” (p. 3). Thus, he identifies two realms of identity negotiation, his identity as an American (and, by extension, mainstream society) and as a person who negotiates existence through objectification (a type of reactionary social posturing). The latter perspective, in which one’s identity is never absent of paternalistic oversight, denies cultural, psychical, and physical agency. Other times, the negotiation of African
identity has been referred to as a “triple quandary,” that is, the negotiation of multiple realms of reality (Boykin, 1986). Consequently, an Afrocentric paradigm rejects the dislocation that objectification through a colonized gaze sustains, and its negative effects on the psyche.

As such, an Afrocentric paradigm incorporates five characteristics in which to situate any inquiry: (a) an interest in psychological location (Is one operating from the center or the margins?), (b) a commitment to finding the African subject place, (c) the defense of African cultural elements, (d) a commitment to lexical refinement (How does language create reality?), and (e) a commitment to correct the dislocations in the history of Africa (Asante, 2007, p. 41). This framework encompasses the intellectual tools necessary to decouple fact from fiction in the written, verbal, and social narratives of African experience.

The necessity of an Afrocentric paradigm, then, is its direct aim to emerge from the shadow of Western dominance and to present as valid other “social locations from which theorizing and critique are done” (Gordon, 2003, p. 13). Afrocentricity is not without a critique. In the way that Eurocentrism is hegemonic in its essentialist view, criticism suggests that Afrocentricity extends the same monolithic view, albeit from an African perspective (Howe, 1998). However, Asante (2005) asserts that Afrocentricity is not the polar opposite to Eurocentrism, but rather “the Afrocentrist is interested in centeredness as opposed to marginality, being as opposed to nonbeing, and an active instead of passive role for African culture and ideas in the world” (p. 200). Afrocentricity, then, offers an agential perspective from which to understand lived experiences.

As a social theory departing from traditional hegemonic discourses, it offers a radical reorientation from which to engage understandings of the world. An Afrocentric perspective is best suited to reframing the discussion on HBCUs because it (a) allows for an interrogation of dominant Western discourses that have framed narratives surrounding HBCUs, (b) creates a space for an articulation of the African subject, (c) presents as valid African cultural elements, and (d) honors a lexical commitment to African experience. Finally, Afrocentricity centers and situates the discussion on HBCUs in a culturally responsive discourse.

**A History of American Higher Education**

The Higher Education Act of 1965 defines an HBCU as “any . . . college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of Black Americans.” Currently these institutions exist
in a paradoxical bubble. Opponents against these institutions view them as vestiges of segregation and acknowledge their existence as a sign of institutionalized inferiority (Cassimere, 1975; United States v. Fordice, 1992). They cite these colleges as being subversive to the mission of integration and for being costly because they perpetuate bifurcation of state resources toward a dual system of higher education (United States v. Fordice, 1992).

Proponents for the existence of minority-serving institutions (MSIs) such as HBCUs contend these institutions are needed as much today as ever before. They assert that MSIs are needed because institutionalized oppression still exists. They also acknowledge the numerous contributions of HBCUs despite their record of being historically underfunded and underequipped and having survived in spite of having a “less than” legacy (Betsey, 2008; LeMelle, 2002). With a history written in Black and White, it certainly seems as if these institutions exist in shades of gray.

To better understand the modern dilemma of HBCUs, it is important to view their development in the context of American higher education history. Two things should be noted about the structure of early American higher education history: (a) learning institutions were intertwined with sociopolitical events and (b) those institutions produced leaders who would be the architects of dominant American ideologies (Thelin, 2004). Understanding the profound role higher education plays in the development of American societal norms will provide a better framework for understanding the impact of HBCUs as the impetus to Black social egalitarian development and the establishment of the Black middle class. Furthermore, understanding the unique establishment of the HBCU as the realization of the first “social contract” (Brown & Davis, 2001) between a historically disenfranchised people and the government or as the realization of the “American Creed” (Samuels, 2004) solidifies the HBCU as a permanent structure of significance in U.S. history.

Freedom from the hegemony of imperialist rule and a desire for the realization of democracy would lead to the arrival of America’s first colonists and the subsequent proliferation of building universities such as Harvard, William and Mary, Yale, Princeton, and others (Thelin, 2004). Educational historian John Thelin (2004) contends that during the American Revolution, “These buildings ascend[ed] to the status of national shrines because early on, their academic operations were fused with the larger events of social and political history” (p. 1). Whether intentional or not, these early institutions of learning, serving as hotbeds of political debate, were directly catapulted into a national revolutionary discourse. The Revolution, having successfully ensured American independence from oppressive rule, forever linked these institutions and their graduates to the movement toward independence, social
egalitarianism, and an identity independent of patriarchal oversight—all fundamental to American social values.

It may seem paradoxical that while theoretical ideas of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (under the assumption that “all men were created equal”) were being drafted into the Declaration of Independence, in practice the ideas were not originally extended to all of the population. Samuels (2004) acknowledges that “millions of Americans of African descent were trapped in the chattel bonds of slavery” during the drafting of the Declaration (p. 4). Thelin (2004) notes, “There is no record of colonial commitment to the collegiate education of Black students” (p. 30). In fact, popular discussion often centered on debating whether or not Blacks were even human (Watkins, 2001), much less educable. Although no formal system of higher education existed for southern Blacks prior to the Civil War, scattered opportunities for educational attainment in the North existed such as Berea College in Kentucky and Oberlin College in Ohio, which admitted Whites and Blacks (Roebuck & Murty, 1993). However, these institutions would be the exceptions and not the rule. Black populations were relegated to institutionalized servitude and would be afforded neither typical civil liberties nor the opportunity of a formalized system of higher education until some 100 years later.

During the postbellum period, the federal government’s Freedmen’s Bureau shared the responsibility for educating 5 million Blacks, with the rest split largely between the benevolence of church-related missionaries in the North and Black religious organizations (Roebuck & Murty, 1993). Although the benevolence of White organizations contributed to the proliferation of schools for Blacks, it should be noted that sometimes their motives to “uplift the freed slaves and their children through religion, education, and material assistance” (Roebuck & Murty, 1993, p. 23) were often “tinged with self-interest and sometimes racism” (Gasman & Tudico, 2008, p. 2; also see Anderson, 1988). Educational historian James Anderson (1988) notes that though these initial institutions were listed as “college,” they operated “in name only,” mostly existing at the elementary and secondary educational levels like most colleges at the time (p. 238).

Despite President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation of September 22, 1862, the assurance of “due process” in the Fourteenth Amendment, and the passage in the Fifteenth Amendment, which extended privileges to Black males (Roebuck & Murty, 1993), the South was reluctant to acknowledge higher education for Blacks for fear of disrupting the southern power structure (Anderson, 1988). Following a larger social shift toward industrialism, the Morrill Act of 1862 allowed for the creation of agricultural and mechanical colleges. Due to segregationist practices of southern states, a second
land-grant act, the Morrill Act of 1890, through strict regulation, appropriated funds toward the building of Black colleges in southern states with an emphasis on agricultural and mechanical instruction. The act stipulated that states practicing segregation in educational institutions forfeit federal funding unless they established agricultural and mechanical institutions for the Black population (Gasman & Tudico, 2008, p. 2). Although the act resulted in the successful implementation of 17 land-grant colleges for Blacks, it did so under the vestiges of segregation (Thelin, 2004). Roebuck and Murty (1993) note that the colleges were “unequal and did not offer four-year college programs” (p. 27). An unintentional legacy of the Morrill Act and its effect on the newly added 17 land-grant colleges and universities was the systematic inferiority of facilities, teacher salaries, and curriculum by the fund appropriators. Gasman and Tudico (2008) note, “Despite the wording of the Morrill Act, which called for the equitable division of federal funds, these newly founded institutions received less funding than their White counterparts and thus had inferior facilities” (p. 2). In fact, “as late as 1932, seventy-five Black colleges had either a negligible endowment or none at all” (Anderson, 1988, p. 249). These federally sponsored divisive practices paved the way for the Jim Crow era (Roebuck & Murty, 1993; Thelin, 2004), with ramifications extending well into the next millennium, some of whose lasting effects are noticeable to this day.

From the inception of American higher education, the goal and purpose have largely been the same: the attainment of economic sufficiency and social equity (Brown & Davis, 2001; Haveman & Smeeding, 2006; Richardson & Harris, 2004). This might explain the voracity with which Blacks pursued educational attainment after emancipation in 1865. By 1954, 90% of Blacks attending college, about 100,000 students, had matriculated at HBCUs (Richardson & Harris, 2004). HBCUs were single-handedly the driving force to establishing the Black middle class. For example, Meharry Medical College, located in Nashville, Tennessee, was instrumental in educating Black physicians and dentists and has been cited as a “national resource” (Roebuck & Murty, 1993) in providing Blacks access to the health services field. Meharry graduates compose just under half of Black faculty at U.S. medical schools and about a quarter of Black faculty at U.S. dental schools (Roebuck & Murty, 1993). Another instrumental HBCU in the establishment of the Black middle class is Xavier University, located in New Orleans, Louisiana. Xavier annually educates 15% of all Black pharmacists in the United States and matriculates more than 80% of premed students to medical and dental schools (Roebuck & Murty, 1993).
Despite the drop in the total percentage of students enrolled, HBCUs have significantly contributed (and continue to do so) to the education of Black professionals. Brown and Davis (2001) note HBCUs award 28% of the Black bachelor’s degrees, 16% of the Black first-professional degrees, 15% of the Black master’s degrees, and 9% of the Black doctoral degrees. Significantly, as of 1970, HBCUs had graduated at the undergraduate level 75% of all Black American PhDs, 75% of all Black army officers, 80% of all Black federal judges, and 85% of all Black doctors (as cited in Roebuck & Murty, 1993, p. 13).

The case which most often calls to question the continued existence of HBCUs is United States v. Fordice (1992). The Court ruled “program duplication in Mississippi on HBCU and traditionally White campuses to be wasteful, and culturally sensitive campuses could be attained through purposeful admissions practices” (Richardson & Harris, 2004, p. 373). The ruling is problematic in light of the value neutrality placed on Black institutions (Samuels, 2004). Ayers v. Fordice (1997) added more challenges to questions of HBCU relevancy, citing differing admissions criteria that were considered vestiges of segregation. In essence, the Court accused HBCUs of perpetuating the same discrimination against which they had sought legal restitution. However, HBCUs had never discriminated against the enrollment of students on the basis of color, as did PWIs. Although their missions explicitly stated their goals of educating Blacks, they did so out of response to being excluded against by PWIs. Furthermore, Richardson and Harris (2004) argue that the programs offered at HBCUs were never duplicates of those programs at PWIs, citing that several factors (funding, cultural environment, and pedagogy) influence the way in which degree programs are conceived and implemented. When a ruling negates special privileges to these institutions in light of desegregation, it undermines the uphill battle they have consistently endured in their mission to successfully educate the descendants of American Blacks. If these institutions, which started off “less than” continued to exist in “less than” circumstances, are suddenly placed on even keel with traditionally privileged universities, and are plagued by the potentiality of being dissolved into PWIs, then one can certainly argue the implications for the future of these institutions. As it has been shown, HBCUs have been situated in a discourse of systemic otherness, which makes them objects in discussions about relevancy. It is necessary to reframe the discussion surrounding HBCUs while being careful to avoid essentialism. The next section of this article aims to present difference as an equally valid perspective from which to theorize.
Toward an Afrocentric Cosmology

A good starting point for understanding different cultures is through the respective cultures’ cosmological lens rather than the critical gaze of the other. It is generally acknowledged that culturally dominant patterns often shape societal belief systems (Christian, 1993; Hilliard, 1978; Lee, Lomotey, & Shujaa, 1990). Central to a foundation of an Afrocentric cosmology, then, is the idea of centeredness—or location (Asante, 2005). Location is the conceptual apparatus of an Afrocentric cosmology, which situates the cultural critic in the tradition of those researched. Thus, to be centered is to operate or ascertain experience from an ontology rooted in an Afrocentric belief system. Once situated in the paradigm of Afrocentricity, the goal of theorizing is to psychically liberate, or understand the way discourses function to privilege or disprivilege, the experiences of Africans across the Diaspora (Modupe, 2003). Last, Afrocentric methods must stress the supremacy of the spiritual, the relationship between the spiritual and physical, and interconnectedness (Mazama, 2003). Howe (1998) cautions that claims about “New World African ‘survivals’” must necessarily demonstrate a relationship between African American cultural traits and those of “particular” African peoples (p. 233). In that regard, two concepts, land and place, become important in understanding the next claims of the article as it establishes the context for conceptualizing the role of discourse in centering the discussion of HBCUs’ identity construction in a culturally relevant manner.

Communalism

As stated earlier, Eurocentric social and cultural forces shaped the sociocultural landscape of America. The earliest realization of democratic participation in America was inherently exclusive and elitist (Thelin, 2004), which can be understood as individualistic. Traditionally, only White males who owned land were eligible to vote, necessarily excluding poor Whites, women, and Blacks. As a result, a Eurocentric ontology of individualism and materialism set the parameters of American cultural discourse (Harris, 2003). In a Western sense, land and subsequently identity have been historically associated with socioeconomic status, race, and democratic participation. A look at the meaning of land through a West African cosmology will provide an entirely different ontology from which to understand its function relative to African Americans’ lived experiences.

studying African belief systems “might illuminate” topics of African American interest. From an African cosmological perspective, land is associated with communal identity. Christian explains that “active remembering” of ancestors was crucial to a West African’s sense of being. When ancestors passed, they continued to live on through active remembrance of their relatives. Furthermore, ancestors are also associated with their land, or the piece of land they inhabit, as it is believed departed spirits inhabit rocks, trees, groves, and so on (Christian, 1993, p. 12). Drawing on Mbiti (1970), she explains furthermore, “The land provides them with the roots of existence as well as binding them mystically to their departed . . . it is feared that anything separating them from these ties will bring disaster to family and community life” (as cited in Christian, 1993, p. 12). Harris (2003) further elucidates an epistemological juncture between Eurocentric materialism and Afrocentric communalism. He says, “The Eurocentric notion of individualism rests on the assumption that being determines consciousness, and that it is this assumption which infuses materialism with a spirit it could never have” (p. 114). The difference, he points out in an Afrocentric ontology, “is one which is communal; therefore, individuals find their worth, and their most sublime expression of existence in relationship to a community, to nature, and in relationship to some supreme idea or being” (p. 115). Mazama (2003) succinctly adds, “Not everything that is significant is material” (p. 26). Cognitively and physically, an African cosmology highlights the fact that land was central to both identity and spiritual belief systems rooted in communality and collectivism. The Middle Passage transatlantic journey separated West Africans from their departed, their land, and, consequently, their identity.

**Place and Displacement**

A major theme of postcolonial societies is place and displacement and the ensuing identity crisis of dislocation (Ashcroft et al., 1989). If West Africans’ identity was constructed through place, how did they experience life on American soil? There are two ways to experience a journey. One way is through anticipation (cognitive) and preparation (physical). The other way is through sudden removal by brute force, whereby one is unable to psychically and physically prepare. The latter may explain the Africans’ ensuing experience on American soil—a topographical disorientation, a cognitive disorder whereby one is unable to orient to one’s surrounding by the use of landmarks or through strategies such as cognitive mapping. One might argue that on arriving on American soil, African people necessarily became subjected to new identity creation; however, Casey (2001) argues that habitus (lived
experience) mediates the intersections of place and self identity. Of the “geographical self,” the self that is always oriented in place, he says, “A given habitus is always enacted in a particular place and incorporates the features inherent in previous such places, all of which are linked by a habitudinal bond” (p. 686). The habitudinal bond to which Casey refers is the actual physical and cognitive practices associated with daily habitation of a place. Socially acquired dispositions and ways of knowing can be best understood as a structure (or schema) of the mind through which people come to understand their worlds (Scott & Marshall, 1998). Habitus comes to be understood as the embodiment of experience. This explains the ways of knowing through which the first Africans, and subsequent ancestors, experienced life in America. Cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner’s (2004) research suggests that “formal structures . . . persist stubbornly” despite changed conditions (p. 709). Simply stated, even though people leave a place, that place does not necessarily leave them. Through this lens, then, we come to understand that aspects of the traditional ethos of a people, their communal and spiritual ways of understanding themselves in relation to their world, persisted in spite of a changed locality.

Understanding the different ontological meanings of land and identity and notions of citizenship between Whites and those enslaved during the colonial period can shed light on gaps in the dominant narrative surrounding higher education access to Black individuals and what meanings were attached to their schools, and by whom. Through a Western lens, land and, by extension, ownership of that land and the wealth associated with being a landowner was central to democratic participation. Thus, when the Morrill Act of 1890 allowed persons of color college access, the appropriation of land toward educative purposes was viewed as a social contract, whereby disenfranchised African Americans were allotted land and could begin participating in the democratic sphere, albeit on borrowed terms as the land was owned by the state and universities were often administered by Whites for Blacks. However, if this social contract is to be understood through an African cosmological lens, the appropriation of land for schooling of people of color can be understood only as the first stage in their collective identity development.

Subjectivity

From colonial to turn-of-the-19th-century America, majority education had two aims: proficiency in letters and educating for public participation (Thelin, 2004). Specifically, Thelin (2004) writes that education for secular leadership entailed “the ability to debate in the public forum, and to write
Effectively on matters of political philosophy and law” (p. 27). This direct correlation between schooling and access to the public forum foreshadowed Pierre Bourdieu’s cultural capital concept. Expounding on the concept of **cultural capital**, Michael Apple (2004) notes that schools’ ability to transmit preferred knowledge (tastes, dispositions, values) in an already elite system like a university further reinscribes social stratification and the hierarchical reproduction of knowledge. Thus, for centuries, majorities held a hegemony over literacy and political enfranchisement and served as gatekeepers in most institutions. With literacy and political participation intertwined with foundational ideals of what it meant to be a subject (Maynes, Pierce, & Laslett, 2008), public schooling for Blacks was not merely a social contract but rather the commencement of their subjecthood. Maynes et al. (2008) explain the significance of literacy and the role it played in the development of an idealized self-concept in a global context: “The connection between writing and defining the self marginalized not only most women but also lower-class men, people from oral cultures, and other subaltern voices” (p. 20). In this regard, the early colleges matriculated specific students (White males), studying a specific curriculum (liberal arts), for a specific purpose (political agency). Because Blacks were systemically denied education prior to 1865, their voice remained largely absent from sociopolitical, literary, and philosophical traditions. Socially, Blacks were in the nascent stages of American public identity development, and only through participation in education were they able to begin to reconstruct their identity. Understood through a developmental lens, identity development occurs when people “begin to develop their core sense of self, values, beliefs, and goals. They become more independent, begin to deal with the complexities of life, and seek answers to the question, ‘Who am I?’” (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010, p. 50). According to the literature, HBCUs provide a sense of belongingness to their students and contribute to positive racial identity construction, while continuing to graduate students into traditionally underrepresented fields and positions (Awokoya & Mann, 2011; Gasman, Lundy-Wagner, Ransom, & Bowman, 2010; Perna, 2001; Perna et al., 2009). Through an Afrocentric lens, it can be argued that these institutions continue to do the important work of community and identity building.

**Conclusion**

The first Morrill Act was intended to begin the socialization process of dis-enfranchised Americans into society. Because of the resistance of secessionist states, the Morrill Act of 1890 was implemented with specific instructions...
that persons of color be allowed college access. This conundrum is where the frame should rest for a moment. Could legislators in a postbellum society anticipate our 21st-century experience as we know it today, a society some consider to be even postracial? Possibly. Could it have crossed their minds that the Morrill Act of 1890 was not only a short-term genesis of intellectual participation for African Americans but also, simultaneously, the cornerstone of institutionally racist dual systems of higher education? Again, it is possible. Conversely, could HBCU administrators have anticipated the exodus of Black students to PWIs in the wake of the Higher Education Act of 1965? What realities did this signal about the tastes and dispositions of a changing student population—a shift that was really indicative of the national discourse of all American students and increased higher education access options (Thelin, 2004)? It is important to reflect on these historical “tensions” when pontificating about the relevancy of legacy institutions in the midst of budget crises. Surely in an age of accountability, all universities must find ways to remain financially solvent. However, it should not be forgotten that HBCUs’ current financial woes are only exacerbated by their historical economic depravity.

The underlying rationale for continuing to question the relevancy of HBCUs is the direct lineage of Western understandings of wealth (materiality) and social access. Now that Blacks have HBCUs and have considerable participation in the social sphere, Western collective memory pauses at the first Morrill Act—the act that should have fostered an integrated educational system. Through a Western lens, an equitable society has been realized, so what is the continued need for vestiges of times past? Furthermore, because a Western lens conflates materiality with social access, in times of budget crises, a logical panacea to budget crises becomes dissolution of social structures viewed as financially wasteful. This is the logic that frames the HBCU relevancy discussion. Through an African cosmological lens of communalism, active remembrance, and understanding the importance of land and place as being central to our very identities, however, these same vestiges become the psychical and physical markers of our intellectual ancestors that give meaning and understanding to whom we are today. Remembering allows us to name what was lost on the Middle Passage: We remember the reconstruction of identity; we remember the political activism of students who matriculated through the doors of HBCUs; we remember the philosophical traditions within which Black consciousness developed, those spaces we probed to tap into Black intellectual thought. Our collective memory does not allow us to forget the second Morrill Act—the act that worked in establishing
HBCUs and, with it, a space that allowed for identity construction through a communal ethos that framed the Black American experience. Mazama (2003) reminds us that, “Not everything is measurable” (p. 26). Indeed, how does one begin to measure lived experience? I suggest that both historically and presently, experience has been the missing factor in the Western discussion surrounding HBCUs and their continued value to society. We can begin to account for this gap in discourse only when we employ a different lens, an Afrocentric lens. Through an Afrocentric lens, the discourse becomes one of meaning, vis-à-vis experience.

This article pointed out a history of higher education and situated the HBCU in a historical context. The article also discussed Western portrayals of HBCUs and from there explored the discursive history that propagates that rhetoric. The article concluded with a discussion of how using an African cosmological lens can aid in excavating what communal meanings may have been constructed with the emergence of HBCUs and how experience should be a component of discussion. Asa Hilliard (1978) reminds us that culture can be used as a tool to liberate or oppress. It is the author’s hope that this exploration aids others in searching “for ways to think, teach, and write that excite and liberate the mind, that passion to live and act in a way that challenges systems of domination” (hooks, 1994, pp. 2-3), in the larger aim of disentangling our narrative from the master narrative.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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**Bio**

**Jessica Exkano** is a PhD candidate in higher education leadership at Louisiana State University. Her research interests include cultural studies, cultural foundations of pedagogy, student socialization, and leadership.