

THE SECOND CURRICULUM

by Jelani M. Favors

It was March of 1994, my freshman year in college. I was attending North Carolina Central University, a historically Black university in Durham, when I received news that rocked me to my very core. My father, at 45 years old, had died from a massive heart attack after returning to his office from an afternoon jog. The day that I buried my father was such a blur that it is often difficult to remember the details of the event that changed my life forever. There was a steady stream of well-wishers and several speakers who said kind words about my dad. But the countenance, cadence and rhythm of one particular speaker arrested me, and I homed in on what this short, elderly man had to say. His name was Dr. Wayman McLaughlin. He had taught both my parents when they were students in his philosophy classes at North Carolina A&T State University in the late 1960s. He had very clear and distinct memories of my father and in fact had contacted my mother after hearing about his passing. I transferred to A&T that summer because I wanted to be closer to my mother, who lived nearby in Winston-Salem, and because I wanted to continue the long family tradition of attending the school that had been a catalyst for the Greensboro sit-ins that were integral to the civil rights movement. But also because I wanted to study under this brilliant, mystical, kind-spirited man who had not only taught my

parents but generations of young Black students to think more deeply about their place and mission in the world.

Diminutive as he was, Dr. Mack—as all his students called him—cast a long shadow across the A&T campus. Dr. Mack operated in a long tradition of HBCUs providing a space for educators to promote, alongside standard course work, a “second curriculum” that espoused race consciousness, cultural nationalism and idealism. He was directly exposed to this tradition as a student at Virginia Union University, and after finishing grad school in 1958, he taught for over forty years at various HBCUs that included his alma mater, Grambling State University and Winston-Salem State University, before he finally settled in at A&T, where he would teach for over three decades. He had earned his doctorate from Boston University, where he was a classmate of and friend to Martin Luther King, Jr. In his MLK biography *Parting the Waters*, Taylor Branch described Dr. Mack as “closest to King in scholarship ability.” Dr. Mack earned his bachelor’s degree from Virginia Union, a HBCU known for its seminary, which trained generations of young Black ministers in Black liberation theology. Dr. Mack’s exposure to these environments and to people such as Dr. King sharpened his own intellectual framework, and allowed him in turn to broaden his student’s understanding of the human condition. In the process, he inspired generations of young folk to reimagine and reshape the world in the image of King’s “beloved community.”

At A&T, I took every class that Dr. Mack offered. He had an uncanny ability to hold his students spellbound by his stories and his wisdom, and his classes

(unsurprisingly) were among the most popular on campus. I once observed Dr. Mack, then 75 years old, climb on top of a classroom table to better command the attention of our class. He proceeded to lecture on the brilliance of George Washington Carver for several minutes—and then nervously asked us to help him down once he was done.

After the death of my father, I was emotionally broken and in need of a healing, supportive space. At A&T, Dr. Mack was one of a varied cast of faculty members who believed in me when I didn't believe in myself. Their personal and intellectual investment in me made an indelible imprint on my life by expanding my worldview, deepening my commitment to social justice, and sparking my desire to continue in their footsteps as a college professor. The late Eighties and early Nineties were a moment of renaissance for HBCUs. Black colleges dominated the Black popular culture landscape during this era, led by the *Cosby Show* spin-off *A Different World*, which glamorized the HBCU experience in prime time. Movies such as Spike Lee's *School Daze* provided a glimpse of both social and class tensions that often appeared on these campuses, but also the rich cultural pageantry that carved out room for "Black excellence" long before that phrase became fashionable. As these manifestations and interpretations of the Black college experience were captured and celebrated on television and the big screen, they were coupled with the surging energy of an ascendant hip-hop generation. There was no better space where young students could be unapologetically Black.

Black colleges have educated Black youth since the antebellum era. Today there are 101 HBCUs (down from their peak of 121 during the 1930s). From the outset, these schools have carved out a critical space for Black youth, serving as a powerful antidote to white-supremacist ideology and as a training ground for activism. HBCUs have stood in stark contrast to the history of predominantly white institutions, which gave credence to whiteness and firmly solidified racial hierarchy in the minds of their students long after slavery's demise. Throughout the nineteenth century, it was not uncommon in the white academy for scholars to teach students that intelligence was correlated to skull sizes and shapes, or to debate whether people of color deserved rights and protection under the law—as when a professor at UVA, Albert Taylor Bledsoe offered a defense of slavery in 1856 in which he argued that "the purity, the equality, and the freedom of all men is one of the most fatal delusions that ever issued from the brain of theorist or convulsed the world with horrible disorder."

That same year, a radically different model was being developed at a fledgling academy in Philadelphia. In 1856, the Institute for Colored Youth (ICY) hired Jacob White, Jr. as a faculty member. The year before, White had been a student at the school, which first opened its doors in 1837. In the spring of 1855, the governor of Pennsylvania stopped by for a brief tour of the fledgling institution when White took the opportunity to aggressively promote the idea of Black citizen-

ship. In addition to his question about the future of Black voting rights, White also pressed Governor James Pollock on when the state would “acknowledge the common brotherhood of her children.” While Governor James Pollock may have been stupefied by White’s defiance, his head principal Charles Reason and other ICY faculty were not. Indeed, White was among several figures who emerged from the ICY and other early HBCUs who fully embraced racial responsibility and used their gifts to build the early civil rights movement. The managers of the ICY had been deliberate in their attempts to instruct students in Greek, Latin, natural philosophy and elocution. The latter subject paired well with the school’s “second curriculum.” Black students at the ICY were exposed to a powerful counternarrative that not only blunted the forces of racism, but also equipped its students with the literary and intellectual tools to deconstruct white supremacy and serve as social and political change agents in the communities they were destined to serve. The incident between White and Pollock serves as a powerful illustration of the role that HBCUs would play in both providing a space where white supremacy could be interrogated and where Black youth would be encouraged to stand in the gap on behalf of the disenfranchised and disinherited masses. White would go on to teach at the ICY alongside early civil rights leaders such as Octavius Catto and Fanny Jackson Coppin and shape the political sensibilities of Black youth who would be tossed into the fiery furnace of a racially hostile world. The ICY would later relocate just outside of Philadelphia and rebrand itself

as Cheyney State University, the nation’s first historically Black college and university.

In the popular American imagination at the turn of the twentieth century, Black youth were seen as mischievous “pickaninnies,” bound for a life of servitude or criminality or both. One of the most significant leaders of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Booker T. Washington, used these derisive assertions against Black youth to his own benefit. Seizing upon the cultural-nationalist impulses found within the second curriculum, Washington became a champion of promoting and cultivating Black spaces, thus seemingly upholding the segregationist status quo. The result was the founding of Tuskegee Institute, an HBCU located in Alabama that embraced the moniker “pride of the swift growing South.” Under Washington’s leadership, Tuskegee became a leading proponent of industrial education for Black youth, a direction that pleased numerous “captains of industry” such as the Rockefeller and Carnegie families and countless other white Southerners, who believed that Washington was doing his part to shield them from unruly Black youth who dared to defy the existing social order.

Yet Black colleges located deep within the segregated South such as Tuskegee served as crucial spaces where the seeds of dissent could take root. Among their many contributions to the early civil rights movement, Tuskegee began compiling data in 1912 that chronicled the long history of lynching in the South that later civil rights organizations would use to support their demands for federal

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intervention against white terrorism. Moreover, Tuskegee, like all other HBCUs, revealed the power and potential of the subversive undercurrents that circulated within Black colleges. There students could connect to the growing militancy of the New Negro Movement that was blossoming among the new Black intelligentsia. Such developments supported W.E.B. Du Bois's assertion from his seminal 1903 study *The Souls of Black Folk*, that education "always will have, an element of danger and revolution, of dissatisfaction and discontent." In spite of white America's perceptions of Black youth as subservient and unlettered at the turn of the twentieth century, their exposure to an environment that provided affirmation and empowerment increasingly stirred their dissatisfaction with Jim Crow America.

As America's predominantly white institutions did very little to challenge racist assumptions and policies in American life, the power of the second curriculum as found within HBCUs produced a virtual who's who of the Black liberation movement. Du Bois, Anna Julia Cooper, Lucy Diggs Slowe, James Weldon Johnson, Mary McLeod Bethune, Thurgood Marshall, Ella Baker, Martin Luther King, Jr. and scores of other civil rights pioneers were directly shaped by this powerful curriculum that reinforced Black manhood and womanhood in the midst of a society that sought to diminish it. Not only did these institutions actively promote service and racial responsibility, they also radically reframed the purpose of higher education in America.

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The paradox that most routinely surfaced within HBCUs was how to confront the failures and hollow promises of a nation that professed "liberty and justice for all" but continued to deny Black citizens their rights. Questioning and seeking to amend these contradictions became a major byproduct of Black education. With the founding of the ICY in 1837 and the rapid proliferation of other Black colleges—established with the support of the emerging Black church and abolitionist missionary societies, as well as the forced hand of Reconstruction-era state governments that sought to uphold segregation in education—a distinct line was drawn within the academy. While elite American academic institutions set up barriers to inclusion and sought to protect and uphold the privileges of their white students, HBCUs pledged themselves to the expansion of American democracy from their earliest days. Octavius Catto, an 1858 graduate of the ICY, was assassinated in the streets of Philadelphia in 1871 for the part he and other ICY students and faculty had played in successfully lobbying for the Fifteenth Amendment that gave African American men the right to vote. In the years that followed Catto's murder, HBCUs continuously drilled their students in the importance of citizenship and democracy, in spite of the fact that these precious rights were denied to them on a daily basis.

As a student in Dr. Mack's class at A&T, lectures that dissected our country's long-tortured history with race were commonplace. These yielded fierce discussion and debate among my peers, but there was never any question that racism was a cancer eating away at the social,

moral and political fabric of our nation, only differences in opinion about how to cure it. This has long been a defining characteristic of the unique community established at HBCUs. From the very beginning, Black colleges have been laboratories for dissent, where students took on the race question directly in classrooms and campus newspapers, in dormitories and at events hosted by student organizations. Recalling his experience as a student at Atlanta University, civil rights activist James Weldon Johnson noted that “the atmosphere of the place was charged with it. Students talked ‘race.’ It was the subject of essays, orations and debates. Nearly all that was acquired, mental, and moral, was destined to be fitted into a particular system of which ‘race’ was the center.”

The HBCU model produced scores of unsung faculty who excelled at empowering their students and pushing them to assume their place in the larger freedom struggle. One example is that of Dr. Rodney Higgins, who was recruited to Southern University in 1946 by the university president, Dr. Felton Clark. When Clark asked Higgins if he would launch the political science department and serve as its first chair, he composed a letter to Clark outlining his thoughts and vision for how the political science department at Southern University would operate. “It is common knowledge that democracy is not only on trial, but very near conviction, unless new evidence is produced to liberate it,” wrote Higgins. “The adequate defense of democracy is a knowledge of democracy. Totalitarianism survives and flourishes under the veil of ignorance. The university must

set the standards for individual freedom, national development, and world citizenship.” With those words, Higgins captured the essence and distinct nature of the academic experience at HBCUs. For Higgins and countless others who were influenced by the racialized spaces of Black colleges, the purpose of the university was inextricably linked to rooting out white supremacy and other antidemocratic practices found deeply embedded within the soul of America. Higgins went on to establish one of the most prolific and radicalized academic departments on any college campus, forging the path for the study of Black political science. His students, including Jewel Prestage, Mack Jones and Alex Willingham, would go on to become some of the most prominent educators and researchers in the field.

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If we are to accept Higgins’s charge on what the university can and ought to be in our society, then we must reexamine the historic model set forth by Black colleges. Beyond the cultural pageantry of high stepping Black college bands and a robust fraternity and sorority life often associated with HBCUs, we find a permeating ethos and historical framework that generated the activist energies directly responsible for producing the most important social movement of the twentieth century. It was no coincidence that the sit-ins exploded on Black college campuses beginning in February of 1960 and provided the movement with the direct-action tactics necessary to tackle Jim Crow and amplify the struggle for

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Black liberation. It was a development that had been in the works since 1837—powered by a nurturing relationship between faculty and students, bolstered by the humanities and a discourse that encouraged their students to see themselves as agents of change. The result was the emergence of students such as Diane Nash, Stokely Carmichael, Ruby Doris Smith Robinson and John Lewis, and scholar-activists such as my teacher Dr. Wayman McLaughlin.

Long-smoldering controversies over the place of race in American education have flared up again in recent years. Today the furor centers on the subject of “critical race theory” and the “hard history” of race in America. But even Black colleges could not escape internal challenges and critiques about the place of political pedagogy within the academy. Indeed, during the late Sixties and Seventies, countless student activists argued that the second curriculum that defined HBCU spaces should be made first. In the midst of the Black Power movement they fought to decolonize the curriculum of Black colleges, all the while confronting the challenge of Black scholars being seduced away to predominantly white institutions for higher pay and resources that Black colleges could not offer. In spite of these challenges, as Black colleges moved into the last quarter of the twentieth century, they affirmed Du Bois’s earlier declaration that the very idea of carving out a welcoming environment to educate and celebrate Black youth was within itself radical and dangerous.

Our democracy, now as then, remains “on trial.” Black colleges matter—not just because they eschew intolerance, but be-

cause they embody the hope that current attempts to undermine our democracy will reignite the activists energies that produced some of the most important movements in American history. With the recent spate of philanthropic support that has accompanied the growing call for restitution for historically underfunded Black colleges, and the return of prominent Black intellectuals like Nikole Hannah-Jones and Ta-Nehisi Coates to teaching positions at HBCUs like Howard, there is reason to hope that these crucial institutions will remain viable and accessible for future generations. “That really is the community that made me,” Coates said after announcing his acceptance of a tenured chair in Howard’s English department. “I would not be who I am without the faculty at Howard.”

It’s been more than 25 years since I sat in Dr. Mack’s class and had the privilege of him calling me his “little friend.” I remember distinctly the nervous joy I felt, a few weeks into Dr. Mack’s class, when I knocked on his door to introduce myself. I was seeking his recollections of teaching my parents and whatever anecdotes that he could provide that would help me heal the pain of losing a father too soon. While he indulged my desire to walk down memory lane, he quickly turned toward seeking out a better understanding of who I was, why was I there, and where I was going. In my naïveté, I answered him literally, and was soon made to understand that the information he sought had far more to do with my position in relation to my ancestors, my knowledge of the sacred space that I occupied in attending an HBCU, and my future goals that dealt not with how I

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would advance myself, but how I would help uplift others. Though he is no longer with us, his lessons live through me and the thousands of students he taught throughout the years. He believed in the power and potential of humanity and transmitted a distinctly Black pedagogical tradition that emphasized democracy and citizenship for all. For generations HBCUs have taught students “how to

sail and where to anchor,” realizing that grappling with the questions of who we are, where we are going, and who can we help along the way are among the most significant educational experiences one can have. The fruits of that legacy are abundant and have profoundly shaped the moral character and political destiny of our nation.