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Keeping the Spelman Sisterhood and Becoming a Morehouse Man: An Intersectional Critical  
Discourse Analysis on Gendered Policies at HBCUs

by

Tiara Giddings

Under the Direction of Veronica Newton, PhD

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2022

## ABSTRACT

Since their inception, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have provided safe spaces for Black students who have been institutionally excluded from predominantly white academic spaces and denied access to an education based on their racial status. While HBCUs are credited for their Black-centered curriculums and campus cultures that allow for student development without fear of racial violence, HBCUs established to serve a primarily female or male student body must consider how their founding principles and institutionalized practices address the needs of students of diverse gender identities and gender expressions. Using an intersectional critical discourse analysis of campus policies and procedures, I investigate the extent to which Morehouse College and Spelman College acknowledge gender diversity among their student bodies. The findings of my research reveal that Morehouse College and Spelman College strictly adhere to their cisgender foundations and missions by perpetuating gender binary discourse, respectability politics, and cisheteropatriarchy through policies, practices, and traditions. My research calls for substantial, clearly defined, ongoing institutional efforts that center trans students and create trans affirming campus environments that dismantle the interdependent systems of oppression at the Colleges that uphold trans student oppression.

INDEX WORDS: Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Trans students, Intersectionality

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2022

Keeping the Spelman Sisterhood and Becoming a Morehouse Man: An Intersectional Critical  
Discourse Analysis on Gendered Policies at HBCUs

by

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May 2022

## DEDICATION

This is for *all* Black people whose very existence is questioned every day. In the words of Issa Rae, “I’m rooting for everybody Black.”

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This has been a journey like no other, but it is one that I was not on alone. To my family, friends, and faculty, thank you for your unwavering guidance, love, and support. To my parents, I am so blessed to have you both in my life and I could not have survived without you. To those who were genuinely interested in my work even if you were uncomfortable, thank you. To those who asked me how things were going even when I didn't want to talk about it, thank you. To those who knew I didn't want to talk it and just asked me how *I* was doing, thank you. While my name may be on this project, please know that it is only with you all and God by my side that this has all been made possible.

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To my beloved Spelman College, I will cherish you forever. Now let's transform the institution into a space where all of my Spelman siblings are free to be their authentic selves.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....</b>	<b>V</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES.....</b>	<b>VIII</b>
<b>1 INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2 CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2.1 The Social Construction of Gender .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2.2 Black Masculinities and Black Femininities.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2.3 Respectability Politics.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>2.4 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>2.5 Educational Policy and Trans Student Experiences.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>3 CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>3.1 Overview of Research.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>3.2 Research Questions.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>3.3 Theoretical Framework.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>3.4 Methods .....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>4 CHAPTER THREE: FINDINGS - MOREHOUSE COLLEGE .....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>4.1 Description of Policy and Procedures .....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>4.2 Gender identity Admissions and Matriculation Policy: Developing Black Men ..</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>4.3 Defining the Morehouse Man .....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>4.4 Creating Barriers through Dress Codes .....</b>	<b>33</b>



4.5	A Man in Full: Respectability Politics and Manhood .....	39
4.6	Institutional Transnormativity .....	41
4.7	Erasure of Nonbinary Identities and Expressions .....	45
4.8	Reinforcing Cis-Pronouns and the Gender Binary .....	47
4.9	LGBTQIA+ Student Experiences .....	50
4.10	Conclusion .....	55
5	CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS- SPELMAN COLLEGE .....	57
5.1	Description of Policy and Procedures .....	58
5.2	Leaders of Their Race .....	59
5.3	“Accepting” Trans Students into Spelman.....	64
5.4	Keeping the Spelman Sisterhood Exclusive .....	69
5.5	Trans-Violence on Campus.....	72
5.6	Dressing for Success: Patriarchal Expectations and Respectability Politics .....	75
5.7	LGBTQIA+ Student Experiences .....	81
5.8	Conclusion .....	86
6	CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION .....	88
6.1	Sociological Implications .....	92
6.2	Creating Trans Affirming Campuses .....	96
6.3	Limitations.....	100
	REFERENCES .....	102

**LIST OF FIGURES**

Figure 4.1 Senator Raphael Warnock on Morehouse College’s Official Website .....	33
Figure 4.2 2021 New Student Orientation Dress Code .....	35

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Since their inception, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have provided safe spaces for black students who have been institutionally excluded from predominantly white institutions. Black men and women were denied access to an education based on their status as second-class citizens. Questions regarding the function and relevancy of HBCUs in a post-civil rights era have arisen based on the assumption that there is no longer a need to combat overt racism at institutions of higher education. HBCU advocates cite high levels of mentorship from faculty, the academic and occupational success of graduates, and discrimination black students continue to face at predominately white institutions (Cantey et al. 2013; Bettez and Suggs 2012; Albritton 2013). While HBCUs are credited for successfully creating an environment that fosters black intellectuality without the racist hostility, HBCUs who serve a primarily female or male student body are faced with questions regarding their acceptance of varying gender identities and expressions.

In September 2017, Spelman College President, Mary S. Campbell, penned a letter to the community stating amendments to the Spelman College Admissions and Enrollment Policy.

Along with the Spelman leadership team and the Board of Trustees, the policy states:

Spelman College, a Historically Black College whose mission is to serve high-achieving Black women, will consider for admission women students including students who consistently live and self-identify as women, regardless of their gender assignment at birth. Spelman does not admit male students, including students who self-identify and live consistently as men, regardless of gender assignment at birth. If a woman is admitted and transitions to male while a student at Spelman, the College will permit that student to continue to matriculate at and graduate from Spelman (Campbell, 2017).

This new policy took effect in for the 2018-2019 academic year. This policy appears to be an effort to take into account the evolving definitions of gender identity in an attempt to ensure that Spelman College reflects the changes impacting society largely. This new policy

serves as a step to include all students who identify as a woman but neglects to address current students who identify outside of the binary and the challenges they face within an environment who has not considered the complexities of their gender identity in policy and practice.

Additionally, Morehouse College, the nation's only historically Black men's college began admitting trans students in the fall 2020 semester. Dr. David Thomas, Morehouse College president, states the decision to admit trans students who self-identify as men, regardless of the sex assigned at birth, was driven by an evolving understanding of gender and the need for the institution to produce a clear admissions policy (Kline 2019). While the LGBTQ community and allies applaud the college for adopting a transgender policy, some activists and current students criticize the policy's clause regarding students who transition while at the college. Contrary to Spelman College's policy that allows students who transition to graduate, "if during a student's time at Morehouse, a student who transitions from man to woman, that student will no longer be eligible to matriculate at Morehouse" (Gender Identity Policy 2019). Critics of the policy assert that the policy is unfair and hostile to trans women and fails to understand the physical, emotional, and psychological gender journey students experience while in college (Kline 2019).

Although HBCUs promote racial uplift and collective identity to challenge negative depictions of black masculinity and black femininity, discourse of racial and gender unity at Spelman College and Morehouse College complicates the experiences of trans students at these institutions that are systemically cisgender. In a time where binary gender categories and pronouns do not adequately describe all individuals, HBCUs who serve a primarily female or male student body must consider how their founding principles and institutionalized practices are directly challenged by diverse gender identities and gender expressions.

## 2 CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 The Social Construction of Gender

In the United States, a fixed, biological defined, binary gender system is imposed. Dominant discourse provides information about acceptable ideas, attitudes, and practices regarding gender in which individuals who are assigned female or male at birth are expected to adopt feminine and masculine gender identities, respectively. Expanding conceptualizations and understandings of gender theorize gender as a socially constructed category that is created and defined when individuals perform feminine and/or masculine traits (Butler 1990; West and Zimmerman 1987; Fenstermaker and West 2009). Within gender performativity, individuals construct their gender identity, or the ways individuals understand themselves, based on context (Hart and Lester 2011). Trans individuals perform a gender that is different than their sex assigned at birth, informing their adoption of a different gender identity such as gender-variant, gender non-conforming, or genderqueer (Bilodeau 2005; Hart and Lester 2011).

West and Zimmerman (1987) suggest that individuals are held accountable to the gendered behaviors deemed appropriate according to one's assigned sex category. Biological sex does not determine gender but influences the gender category others ascribe to individuals based on socially agreed upon criteria of which constitutes masculinity and femininity. The dichotomous constructions of masculine and feminine social actions such as physical appearance, behavior, and style of dress are crucial to the process of doing gender and assessing gender. While individuals have the ability to accomplish gender in multiple ways, individuals "engage in behavior at the risk of gender assessment" (West and Zimmerman 1987). For example, a trans individual with an androgynous gender identity may experience social stigmatization and negative sanctions because the way they do gender does not clearly align with

the expectation associated with male or female sex categories. Doing gender is unavoidable and individuals are assessed based on the normative conceptions of gender and held accountable for their gender performance in any interaction (Fenstermaker and West 2009).

Conceptualizing gender as an accomplishment forces one to move beyond the individual level and see how interaction and institutions maintain, reproduce, and legitimize social arrangements of sex and gender categories (Fenstermaker and West 2009). The accomplishment of gender interacts with class, race and other indicators. Gender is not only done differently in societies, situations, and across time, but is also accomplished differently when it intersects with class, race, sexuality, and religion (Charlebois 2011). Social context must be taken into consideration in understanding how gender is performed and assessed because people inhabit many different identities and the emphasis (or muteness) of these identities is situational (Fenstermaker and West 2009). Additionally, the performance of race, class, and gender does not require categorical diversity among participants and may be in its most extreme form in spaces of categorical indifference (Fenstermaker and West 2009). Students may be held more accountable for their gender performance at HBCUs; more specifically at HBCUs where gender is institutionalized and whose student body is primarily comprised of one sex.

## **2.2 Black Masculinities and Black Femininities**

The study of masculinities and femininities from a social constructionist perspective is useful for examining gender expression as learned, rather than biologically determined. The social construction of masculinities and femininities acknowledges that gender performance is fluid, contextual, and constructed through socialization. Therefore, there are various forms of masculinities and femininities that are situated in sociocultural contexts (Harris, Palmer, and Struve 2011). In the United States, hegemonic masculinity is the culturally idealized and socially

constructed idea of manhood defined by and centered on whiteness, heterosexuality, and middle-class status (Connell 1995). Hegemonic masculinity is structured around race, class, and sexuality and implies a hierarchical gendered structure that marginalizes women and non-white, non- heterosexual, non-middle-class individuals (Connell 1995; Pelzer 2016). Hegemonic masculinity is constructed in relation to subordinated forms of masculinity and femininity and scholars have studied how white hegemonic masculinity upholds institutional oppression and violence by defining black masculinities and black femininities as deviant (Anthony 2014; Haley 2016; Collins 2002; Muhammad 2010).

The institutional transition from slavery to post-emancipation was a historical process in which the hierarchy of people was reconstituted and reasserted to stifle black political and economic advancement (Haley 2016). Black male deviancy is historically reflected in representations of black men as beasts who are inherently violent, hypersexual, and in need of discipline (Collins 2002). As racism changed in society, class informed representations of black masculinity to justify new forms of racism. Images of black men incorporate a combination of physicality, low intellectual capacity, lack of restraint, and violent tendencies used to deny black men access to the societal privileges. Furthermore, black womanhood was constructed as antithetical to white constructions of femininity in which “Black” automatically rejected black women’s membership to normative womanhood. Black women were viewed as unruly, with a propensity to fight and the inability to control their children, all characteristics that hindered their ability to perform their perceived natural duties as domestic servants and mothers (Haley 2016). Black women were often viewed as lacking the traits of normative femininity characterized by submissiveness, maternalism, purity and morality (Haley 2016).

The legal system became a vital tool for powerful white men to ascribe characteristics to black bodies that would construct a distinction between black and white femininities and masculinities. The legal production of black deviance resulted in black people being arrested more often and enduring extended periods of captivity (Haley 2016). Arrest and incarceration were strategies employed to control blacks' freedom and public image by assigning political, cultural, and social meaning to black bodies. Images of black people were propagated to impose a public ideology of black inferiority and black intrinsic deviance that justified prejudicial thinking, discrimination, and racial violence (Haley 2016; Muhammad 2010). The media, law, and science defined the natural qualities and tendencies of black people that reflected the fundamental differences between black femininity and masculinity, from the perspective of whites (Muhammad 2010).

Societal changes require new ideological justifications for racism through controlling images of black femininity and black masculinity. In the post-civil rights era, racial desegregation needed new images of racial difference to align with a dominant color-blind ideology (Collins 2002). Black femininity and black masculinity became co-constructed with social class reconfiguring the controlling images of black women and men to justify the changing norms of racism (Collins 2002). Class differentiated images of black culture became prominent in which the black working class were contrasted with black respectability used to characterize the black middle class. Poor and working-class blacks were portrayed as being authentically black and lacking American values. In contrast to the speech patterns and behaviors of the poor and working class, the middle- and upper-class blacks did not embody authentic blackness and were depicted as assimilated and ready for integration (Collins 2002).



Depictions of black women as “bitches” and “bad black moms” work together to rationalize unjust social relations. The term bitch became associated with poor and working-class women to demonstrate their lack of white middle-class submissiveness and passivity (Collins 2002). Their aggressiveness created problems seen as unsuitable for racial integration. Thus, their undesirable behavior justified the gendered racism they experienced in education, school, housing, and other public settings (Collins 2002; Haley 2016). The stigmatization of black women as bitches influences the ideology that poor and working-class black women are unfit mothers who pass down their undesirable traits to their children. These depictions justify practices such as racial residential segregation. Black mothers, specifically, poor and working-class single mothers, face resistance when desiring to move into predominately white neighborhoods. Their children are deemed undisciplined and unsuitable to interact with white children (Collins 2002).

Collectively, controlling images “construct a ‘natural Black femininity’ that in turn is central to an ‘authentic’ Black culture” (Collins 2002). Controlling images associated with poor and working-class black women become scripts of what a woman should not be. To uplift the race and achieve middle class status, black women must reject “authentic” black womanhood and avoid exhibiting poor and working-class black femininity (Collins 2002; Simmons 2012; Lefever 2005). Representations of middle-class black women are produced to counter poor and working-class black femininities. For example, the controlling image of the modern mammy distances black women from their characterization as aggressive but ensures they maintain a temperament suitable for work. The modern mammy is a modernized model of middle-class black womanhood that requires a balance of loyal servitude to white and male authority and

aggression necessary for success in middle-class occupations (Collins 2002). Here, aggression must be directed carefully to avoid exhibiting working class, “authentic” black womanhood.

Contemporary controlling images of black men include the “thug” or “gangsta.” While all black men are suspicious of criminal activity and deviance, this representation is more often attached to poor and working-class black men (Collins 2002). Regardless of which body criminality is attached to, black men’s bodies are used to symbolize fear. These controlling images of black men is designed to scare whites (and sometimes blacks) into believing that racial integration of specifically poor and working-class black men is dangerous (Dancy 2011; Collins 2002). This draws attention away from structural factors that deny black men access to education and jobs and supports institutionalized practices such as mass incarceration. Struggles against structural constraints are reduced to individual, biological, and cultural explanations in which black men are transformed from being victims of violence to the causes of violence.

In contrast to images of working-class masculinity as violent and hypersexual, middle-class black masculinity was constructed as nonthreatening and loyal to dominant societal values. Controlling images of middle-class black men include “black buddies” or “black sidekick,” who are black men who demonstrate clear deference to white authority and adopt a safe, black identity (Collins 2002). An important feature of the black buddy controlling image is sexual restraint. Heterosexual marriage serves as a symbol of safe containment of black men’s sexuality, appropriate social relationships, and black men’s commitment to assimilation to white patriarchal standards (Dancy 2011; Collins 2002). Another controlling image of black middle-class masculinity is represented by the “sissy,” “punk,” or “faggot,” which are an effeminate representation of black masculinity in contrast to “authentic” black masculinity (Collins 2002; Harris, Palmer, and Struve 2011). The controlling images “the black sidekick” and the “sissy”

construct middle class black men as less manly or less masculine. The black buddy is viewed as emasculated through his subordinate status among whites, while the “sissy” exhibits characteristics that suggest a sexual identity symbolizing a chosen emasculation (Collins 2002).

Moreover, authentic and respectable forms of blackness are constructed as class opposites, creating structure, economic and cultural difference among working-class Blacks and middle-class Blacks. Culturally, poor and/or working-class black men and women are represented as criminals, bitches, and bad mothers who do not value hard work, marriage, academic success, and clean living, and are in need of constraint and discipline (Haley 2016; Collins 2002; Muhammad 2010). Representations of middle-class black men and women as sidekicks, sissies, and modern mammies affirm that middle-class black people are different from middle-class whites. However, these middle-class representations of black femininity and black masculinity are respectable and are less threatening to the white power structure (Collins 2002; Lefever 2005). All in all, social mobility is constructed in terms of the willingness of poor and/or working-class black people to reject authentic blackness and assimilate to dominant white standards. Structural issues including joblessness, poor education, and segregated neighborhoods are explained solely as individual issues of values, morals, and behaviors based in cultural difference embedded in racial assumptions about Blacks (Simmons 2012; Collins 2002).

### **2.3 Respectability Politics**

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham coined the politics of respectability in her work on women within the Black Baptist Women’s Movement (Higginbotham 1993). Higginbotham explains politics of respectability as a mechanism used by Black women to provide a sense of agency in constructing the representations of black women, counter the racist representations of black sexuality, intellect, and character, and protect from objectification and exploitation of black

women's bodies (Higginbotham 1993). The raced and gendered behaviors of the politics of respectability are designed to align with acts of self-definition in which women exert control over their bodies, behaviors, attitudes, and language to reflect an image they choose to present. However, the politics of respectability limits the framing of blackness and adheres to hegemonic white-centric ideologies. Njoku et al. (2017) asserts that while Black Americans strive to counter the negative stereotypes associated with their race, this effort works within the parameters of white supremacy, racism, and sexism. Griffin (2006) further emphasizes this assertion by stating, "...after a century of practicing a politics of respectability, a century of being concerned with presenting 'positive images' of Black life, we have policed our own intellectual efforts that often we find ourselves caught up with narrow representation that in no way allow for the full complexity of Black people..." (34). The denunciation of certain expressions or behaviors that do not align with a perceived respectable image, further marginalizes and stigmatizes populations in the black community who choose not to conform.

The politics of respectability shapes the opinions, practices, and experiences of Blacks, while also determining what actions are appropriate to gain racial equity (Harris 2014). Black institutions of higher education promote notions of respectability as a means of uplifting the black community. Despite differing visions of black education through the industrial model or the liberal arts model, black institutions were devoted to training its students to live respectable lives; or in other words live according to white middle-class standards. Respectability has been central to the constructions of black womanhood and black manhood because respectable behavior requires adherence to dominant culture's ideals of gender roles and norms. A respectable environment is enforced at HBCUs to socialize students into presenting an image that is antithetical to the racial stereotypes and stigmas held against Blacks (Evans 2008). Black

elites emphasize gendered notions of racial uplift as a means of expanding and stabilizing the black middle class. To instill the ideals of respectability, HBCUs offer a hidden curriculum centered in normative expressions of femininity and masculinity (Mobley and Johnson 2018; Njoku and Patton 2017). The institutionalization of black respectability creates spaces that are unwelcoming of nonnormative gender expressions and performances.

Social class and gender norms of respectability politics distinguish identities and performances that resist or conform to HBCU institutionalized standards. This is evidenced through the distinction of what Morehouse considers a “Morehouse Man.” Morehouse students have a clear understanding of a “Morehouse Man”, which is a prototype of the college’s ideal of manhood, embodied through distinct speech, walk, dress, and behavior informed by hegemonic ideals of masculinity (Grundy 2012). A pervasive rhetoric of leadership and exceptionality at campus events such as weekly convocations, ceremonies, and guest speeches, praises students as expectational because of their evasion of social problems commonly associated with low-income black men (Grundy 2012). Notions of exceptionality not only encourage students to embody black male respectability, but it also institutionalizes an ideology that marginalizes low-income black men. This institutionalized model of masculinity is enforced not only through policies and practices, but also by students on campus policing each other’s gender and class performance through forms of aggression, intimidation, humiliation, and violence.

Black men’s gender is heavily policed and restricted by stringent gender roles and hegemonic masculinity. Patton (2014) situates the Morehouse College Dress Appropriate Attire Policy in the context of the politics of respectability to examine the potential effects it has on students at the institution. This policy served as a strategy to resist the negative images associated with black men. Patton performed a critical discourse analysis on the policy which

utilized language that criminalizes a type of dress that is not deemed respectable, warranting sanctions against those who represent such images that conflict with white, hegemonic standards. Coleman (2016) highlighted the gendered inferences of the policy suggesting that the policy attempts to use clothing to protect the college's foundational notion of masculinity through its ban of "women's garments." The policy encourages students to dress in a certain manner to uphold a respectable performance of masculinity, therefore, designating trans students incapable of being true "Morehouse Men" (Coleman 2016).

Njoku and Patton (2017) find in their respective studies that faculty, staff, and students at HBCUs police students who engage in expressions of womanhood deemed unacceptable. Confluent displays of nonheteronormative black womanhood including unfeminine attire, body size, and voice pitch prompt the use of "shade" including facial expressions, other forms of nonverbal communication, and blatant statements from others to regulate and dismiss diversity within black womanhood. Queer and trans students learn the boundaries of black womanhood through the policing of their misalignment with the politics of respectability and normative gender performance.

Institutional policies and practices at HBCUs that perpetuate the politics of respectability, function as a form of resistance to racism, while simultaneously limiting and marginalizing the diversity of gender expression that exists among its student body. There is a continued need to understand the policies and governance of these institutions. Critically examining the cisgender norms and expectations at HBCUs is essential to assessing the extent to which these campus environments are trans-affirming and inclusive of diverse gender identities.

## **2.4 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)**

Public education for former slaves was met with great opposition post-emancipation. Racial bias and discrimination included: legislative inaction on policies involving schooling for Blacks, violent attacks, and destruction of school buildings (Drewry and Doermann 2003). This response to educating blacks within the public sector led to the heavy influence of private organizations to fund schools for Black people. Private northern freedmen's aid societies and religious missionary groups including the American Baptist Home Mission Society and the American Missionary Association of the Congregational Church actively worked with the Freedmen's Bureau in support of providing education for black people (Drewry and Doermann 2003).

Northern founders and teachers shaped the formal curriculum and culture of black colleges. Funding from these missionary organizations influenced the missions of Black colleges to uplift black freed men and women by converting them to their white principles of Christianity, creating a class of ideal American citizens with "moral character," and preparing them for wage labor (Albritton 2013; Cantey et al. 2011). All institutions emphasized the goal of moral and intellectual development of its students, similar to schools in New England and other northern cities. Black colleges, however, uniquely included institutional statements of racial progress as a central feature of their mission. In the early twentieth century, major debate arose over whether black schools should implement an industrial or a liberal arts curriculum, to promote and accomplish racial progress (Albritton 2013). In some cases, such as Hampton Institute, industrial training was central to the curriculum. Hampton's white founder, General Samuel Chapman Armstrong envisioned freedmen as industrial workers in the new South and implemented an education model that would "uplift through labor" (Drewry and Doermann 2003). Industrial

education would train students to work in agriculture, mechanics, household services.

Armstrong's industrial model attracted both northern and southern whites who supported a model of education that would improve Blacks' service skills without altering the socioeconomic and political structure of society (Drewry and Doermann 2003).

The majority of private institutions continued to value an academic education suggesting that racial progress required the development of community leaders. Therefore, it was essential that schools provide an education that did not limit them to the agricultural and mechanical opportunities available in a segregated society (Drewry and Doermann 2003). W.E.B. Du Bois was the leading supporter for a liberal arts curriculum in black colleges, advocating for an expansive curriculum that trained Blacks in other areas such as philosophy and science (Albritton 2013). He believed that Washington's economically focused and accommodating perspective would not allow Blacks to gain political, social, and economic equality (Drewry and Doermann 2003). W.E. B. Du Bois actively demanded the need for Blacks to receive an education that would equip them with the tools to oppose segregation and challenge Jim Crow (Albritton 2013). Despite the notable opposing views on curriculum at black colleges, most institutions offered a blend of liberal arts and industrial training courses.

Spelman College leadership believed that educated Christian womanhood required not only religious and academic training, but also industrial. Spelman taught classes in cooking, housework, laundry, and sewing to prepare students to become useful wives and mothers (Case 2017). Industrial training aligned with respectability politics' emphasis on domestic life to protect black women from the objectification of white men and rearticulate them as feminine, clean, and chaste (Njoku et al. 2017). Spelman faculty and board members viewed the blend of industrial and academic education to benefit black women's efforts toward racial progress



(Lefever 2005). Spelman's rationale for the implementation of industrial training was rooted in heteronormative and cisnormative femininity to not only to train black women for work, but to also create moral character in these women as mothers (Case 2017; Njoku and Patton 2017). Spelman's curriculum extended beyond domestic training and included programs for respectable female professions such as teachers, nurses, and missionaries. Teaching was not only viewed as a respectable profession for women, but also as an opportunity for students to utilize the training they received at Spelman to shape the values, beliefs, and behaviors of future black generations and uplift the black community (Case 2017).

By the early 1900s, Morehouse earned the reputation as an institution that mentored black men to exhibit a high standard of intellect, moral character, Christian values, and dedication to advancing the rights of black community (Giles 2006). Morehouse presidents, including John Hope, aligned themselves with black leaders such as Ida Wells- Barnett and W.E.B. Du Bois whose philosophies promoted a liberal arts curriculum at Morehouse, and an institutional mission of preparing leaders of the black community (Giles 2006). Morehouse offered a range of studies including algebra, geometry, philosophy, and Latin, but there was a heavy focus on training preachers and teachers (Brawley 1970). During Hope's tenure, students were required to write and memorize an original speech each year in the chapel in order to graduate. This method was vital to perfecting student's public speaking skills for their training as preachers and teachers (Giles 2006). Hope's implementation of an education model that emphasized the embodiment of academic and religious excellence were advanced further during Benjamin Mays' presidency. Mays ensured that Morehouse students received more than a liberal arts education and placed a particular focus on developing the identity, character, and status of students. Mays saw it as his personal duty and responsibility to shape Morehouse students into "democratic citizens" who

were sensitive to the injustices of society and willing to participate in correcting them (Williams 2001).

The condition of publicly funded schools for Blacks made private institutions such as Spelman College and Morehouse College appealing for black educational, social, and economic progress in the South. Many black leaders accepted the ideas of racial uplift as both a Christian value and a political tool (Case 2017). The curriculum at Spelman and Morehouse were linked to moral, intellectual, material, and political uplift of the black race. For Blacks, a college education was a cultural marker of upward mobility and a means to better societal conditions for the race. Notions of cisnormativity have always been linked to racial uplift ideologies (Grundy 2012). Spelman and Morehouse graduates internalized the school's message of moral improvement and viewed their respectable Christian womanhood and manhood as a part of their quest for social and racial justice and evidence to whites that Blacks are fit for full citizenship rights (Simmons 2012).

## **2.5 Educational Policy and Trans Student Experiences**

Policy development and implementation are essential to creating trans-inclusive campus environments, especially at single-sex college and universities. Policies function to clarify expectations for all campus community members and establish standard approaches to the operations of the institutions (Lawrence and Mckendry 2019; Leonardi and Staley 2018). However, educational policies do not exist in a vacuum and are informed by social, historical, ideological, and political contexts (Persinger, Persinger, and Abercrombie 2019; Leonardi & Moses 2021). Policy developers and higher education professionals engage in policy initiatives that are power-laden and further the interests of those in positions of privilege while maintaining the subjugation of other communities (Leonardi and Moses 2021). Traditional higher education

policies enforce the status quo and violence against trans and gender nonconforming students (Beemyn 2005). Because marginalized communities are often excluded from policy development, Spade (2011) asserts that we must question the limitations of policies and the subsequent consequences for how individuals collectively understand and address the needs of trans people (Farley and Leonardi 2021; Leonardi and Moses 2021). Spade's cautionary conclusions align with other scholars who agree that educational policies aimed to advance the rights of trans students do not provide sufficient clarity on trans students acceptance and do not pay adequate attention to the systemic and ideological underpinnings of trans oppression (Farley and Leonardi 2021). Therefore, as higher education increasingly recognizes gender diversity among students, the implementation of gender-based policies may operate to uphold unjust and unequal structures of the institutions in which they exist (Brown and Klein 2020; Spade 2011; Leonardi and Moses 2021; Farley and Leonardi 2021).

Trans students are faced with difficulties negotiating their gender identity within or outside of the binary, especially in college settings, where the norms are cisgender. Genderism which is the cultural enforcement of a rigid gender binary, is pervasive throughout institutions of higher education, producing negative interpersonal and institutional experiences for trans college students (Dungan, Kusel, and Simounet 2012; Perifimos 2008). Many trans students experience harassment, bullying, and physical and sexual violence by other students, teachers, and staff (Seelman 2014, Beemyn and Rankin 2011; Dungan, Kusel, and Simounet 2012; Rankin et al. 2010). Trans students report hearing overtly transphobic language on campus as well as covert disapproval through looks and attitudes, causing students to feel unwelcome on campus (Dungan, Kusel, and Simounet 2012).

The confluence of transphobia and racism inform the experiences of trans students of color, specifically Black trans students who fare worse than their white trans counterparts. Trans students of color experience harassment at significantly higher rates, suggesting that their racial and gendered identities create additional challenges at their institutions (Grant et al. 2011; Rankin et al. 2010). Black trans students at predominantly white institutions attest to their exclusion from black spaces on campus such, as black cultural centers because of their inability to be openly trans and discuss trans and queer issues. Student organizations and programming within these cultural centers are structured around cisnormativity, indicating genderism on college campuses. The intersection of students' racial and gendered identities heavily determines how trans students of color navigate campus spaces on campus (Dungan, Kusel, and Simounet 2012).

Trans students' experiences are not limited interpersonal interactions as these students face additional bias in other spaces on campus. Bilodeau (2005) suggests that institutional practices across college campuses including classrooms, residence halls, LGBT organizations, and admissions marginalize students by labelling students as either male or female, privileging cisgender identities, upholding a system of accountability that increases the likelihood that students who deviate from gender norms would be punished, and fostering widespread invisibility and isolation of trans students. Women's colleges and all-men's colleges present additional challenges for trans students because these colleges were founded on the premise of serving one gender (Schneider 2010). The variability of gender, gender identity, and gender expression directly challenges the mission of these institutions and complicates the experiences of students whose identity or expression does not align with hegemonic gender norms established through policy and practice.

### 3 CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Overview of Research

Gendered organizations such as men's and women's colleges employ gender as an organizing principle within the policies and practices. Historically Black men's and women's college simultaneously employ race and gender as organizing principles of the institutions. As these institutions change, their raced and gendered organization is not undone, but instead race and gender is redone in new forms using discursive structures and policies (Nanney and Brusma, 2017). Therefore, it is important to understand how these colleges institutionalize how race and gender are constructed, determined, and used to regulate the functioning of the college and who belongs within this space. Little research on trans policies in higher education explores the organizational effects on trans students of color, and Black trans students specifically. Moreover, most of this research takes place at predominantly white campuses, further ignoring the complexity of Black trans student experiences across contexts.

There is a need to understand how dominant ideologies of gender and race permeate predominantly Black spaces such as HBCUs and marginalize members who fall outside of the gender norm. This research works to unveil the complexities of race and gender at Historically Black Colleges and Universities to illuminate the social and structural influences of whiteness, patriarchy, and cisnormativity in spaces that have been neglected in current literature. This study is among the first to problematize and interrogate how systems of oppression operate simultaneously at Historically Black Colleges and Universities through an exploration of newly adopted trans admissions policies.

### **3.2 Research Questions**

The following research questions will be explored in this study:

1. Do single-sex Historically Black Colleges and Universities recognize gender diversity among their student body?
2. How do policies include and/or exclude trans identities and bodies?
3. How do policies reinforce respectability politics of Black masculinity and Black femininity?

### **3.3 Theoretical Framework**

Intersectionality first emerged in the writings of slaves and formerly enslaved women in the nineteenth century who recognized how gendered and racialized power structures prevented black women from having access to the privileges and protections of womanhood (Robinson 2018). Kimberlé Crenshaw later coined the term intersectionality in a set of law review articles critiquing single-axis assumptions within anti-discrimination laws that treated race and gender as exclusive categories, obliterating the multidimensionality of Black women's experiences (Crenshaw 1989). Crenshaw argued for a focus on the intersections of race and gender to highlight the salience of considering multiple forms of identity when examining how social interactions are constructed (Crenshaw 1989).

Intersectionality challenges scholarship that emphasizes race and gender as separate aspects of experience and examines the interconnected and inseparable nature of identities, the connection between these identities and larger sociohistorical and political contexts, and the need to examine identity within complex systems of power (Wijeyesinghe and Jones 2013). A critical aspect of intersectionality is that systems of power and oppression cannot be understood by focusing on a single identity or, by focusing on multiple identities, as the sum of independent

identities (Crenshaw 1989; Wijeyesinghe and Jones 2013). The intersectional experiences of black trans students are greater than the sum of racism and transphobia, and a singular analysis of this group does not adequately address the marginalization of black trans individuals (Wijeyesinghe and Jones 2013).

An intersectional framework insists on a structural analysis by examining the relationship between identity, power, and social structure. Social categories such as race and gender are socially constructed and susceptible to change on both the institutional and individual levels. Although these categories are not fixed traits of individuals, they are deeply embedded in societal institutions. The pervasiveness and stability of these constructs illustrate how these ideas are organizing principles of society and identity (Wijeyesinghe and Jones 2013). Collins (2000) underscores the importance of intersectional paradigms to identifying the organization of oppression. Race, gender, class, sexuality (and other categories) operate through interrelated domains of power. The structural domain organizes oppression; the disciplinary domain manages oppression; the hegemonic justifies oppression; and the interpersonal domain influences everyday lived experience, each working together to produce particular patterns of domination (Collins 2002). For example, within the structural domain, policies and procedures of the U.S. legal system minimally provide anti-discrimination protections for trans individuals in employment, housing, and healthcare, creating vulnerability to violent experiences. Within the hegemonic domain, binary understandings of sex and gender are assumed to inherently link sex assigned at birth with gender, influencing the ways black trans individuals are viewed. Within the disciplinary domain, black trans individuals are heavily policed for their social position outside of the gender binary.

Black trans students' intersectional experiences in classrooms, residence halls, counseling centers, and social activities and events are shaped by the history, norms, beliefs and practices of higher education largely, and each institution more specifically, reflecting systems of power embedded in society (Wijeyesinghe and Jones 2013). HBCUs, specifically Morehouse College and Spelman College have unique norms, values, and practices that not only distinguish them from PWIs but also from other HBCUS. These norms, values, and practices are both racialized and gendered and are embedded in cisnormative notions of Black masculinity and Black femininity. The experiences of black trans students at Morehouse and Spelman, who primarily serve a female or male student body, uncovers the institutional power of cisgender, patriarchal, and traditional gender roles embedded in higher education. All in all, intersectionality and the matrix of domination not only allows us to explore the complexities of black trans student identities but also allows us to investigate how institutions of higher education operate to perpetuate racialized and gendered oppression.

For this study, I not only use intersectionality as a theoretical framework, but also as a methodology. An intersectional analysis operates at the societal/structural level to reveal the ways systems of power operate in development, organization, and maintenance of inequalities. For example, in this study, an intersectional analysis uncovers how large- scale factors and institutional practices such as dress codes constrain black trans students' identities and expressions. The goal of this research is to uncover how the institutional practices and procedures at Morehouse College and Spelman College inform the experiences of Black trans students that are also informed by other intersecting identities such as class, sexuality, and religion.



### 3.4 Methods

To investigate how single-sex HBCUs address the fluidity of gender identity among their student body, I performed a critical discourse analysis on their school's missions and policies that directly reflect the institution's perspective on gender. A critical discourse analysis requires the researcher to connect micro and macro level discourses. This methodology unveils the relationship between the discourse within the texts to macro level issues of power, racism, patriarchy, and hegemonic masculinity and femininity. Critical discourse analysis examines the way social power and inequality are established, maintained, and resisted by text within a social context (van Dijk 2004). I used the critical discourse analysis to uncover the connections between the language used and the exercise of power within these policies, guidelines, and practices.

First, I selected data sources and prepared the data for analysis. Because the basis for conducting this study is Morehouse and Spelman's recent amendments to their admissions policies to consider trans students for admissions, the Spelman College's *Admissions and Enrollment Policy* and Morehouse College's *Gender Identity Admissions and Matriculation Policy* were the first documents selected. The remaining texts, Morehouse College's *2019-2020 Student Handbook* and Official website ([www.morehouse.edu](http://www.morehouse.edu)), and, Spelman College's *2019-2020 Student Handbook and Resource Guide* and Official website ([www.spelman.edu](http://www.spelman.edu)), were selected based on their public availability and their intended purposes to outline the policies and procedures of the Colleges.

I explored the backgrounds of the texts including the genre, framing, the overall slant and style, and the intended audience of the text (Mullet 2018). First, I read each text with the intent to simply comprehend the text. I did not use a critical lens in this first stage to gain an

understanding of how an ordinary reader would interpret the text. Second, I revisited the text at as a whole. Recognizing the genre allowed me to understand why certain statements appear in the text, the purpose the statements serve for the producer of the text, and what information has been left out (Huckin 1997). The framing of the text refers to the presentation of the text and the perspective of the producer. I focused on the emphasis and de-emphasis of certain concepts and presuppositions, or taken-for-granted ideas, in the text that insinuated the absence of an alternative. After analyzing the text as a whole, I narrowed my analysis to focus on sentences, words, and phrases. I explored the text for connotations that conjured particular imagery that reveal the hidden meanings and implications of the policy for students at the institution. I examined each text for agent-patient relations to determine who initiates actions while others are depicted as being recipients of those actions (Huckin 1997). This allowed me to examine how power relations are situated in text in terms of who has the power and who is devoid of power within the policies.

Next, I imported each text into NVivo 8.0, and I identified overarching themes in the texts through inductive coding. Preliminary themes were refined through a comparative process that involved constant revisiting all of the texts from each institution and combining, dividing, or eliminating themes until a final set of themes was identified. Lastly, I interpreted the meanings of the major themes and placed them within the broader context of the extent to which Morehouse College and Spelman College are inclusive of diverse gender identities and presentations speak and the ways in which institutionalized race and gender ideologies that inform the experiences of trans students at the Colleges.

Additionally, I performed a secondary analysis on interviews conducted as part of the study by researchers at the Atlanta University Center Library entitled, “Navigating the Network:

An Exploratory Study of LGBTQIA+ Information Practices at Two-Single-Sex HBCUs” (De la Cruz, Winfrey, and Solomon 2022). This study was originally designed to explore the information practices of LGBTQIA+ students at Morehouse College and Spelman College, to begin an investigation into areas where academic libraries could improve their services. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Boards at both Morehouse College and Spelman College. A total of 14 students were interviewed – nine Spelman College students and five Morehouse College students. All participants self-identified as members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Among Spelman College students, three participants identified as bisexual women, one as trans queer, one as lesbian woman, one as pansexual woman, one as cis queer woman, one as demisexual woman, and one as gender fluid. Among Morehouse College students, four participants identified as gay men and one as queer man.

Spelman College and Morehouse College IRBs gave researchers permission to deposit anonymized transcripts from this research in their online institutional repository. All transcripts were cleaned of identifying information including names, specific campus locations such as residential dorms, and leadership roles in student organizations. Participants were made aware of all of the research practices in place to ensure confidentiality and all participants signed informed consent forms (De la Cruz, Winfrey, and Solomon 2022). I extracted the interview transcripts from the repository, imported them into NVivo 8.0, and analyzed the interviews using inductive coding to identify themes within the interviews.

#### 4 CHAPTER THREE: FINDINGS - MOREHOUSE COLLEGE

This study focuses on HBCU's Black women's and men's colleges who were founded with the expectation that all of its students identify as cisgender. This foundational premise structures these colleges to be trans exclusive across institutional operations, such as admissions policies, language within student handbooks, and access to student resources. My research sought to examine the extent to which Historically Black Colleges and Universities are inclusive of varying gender identities and gender expressions among their student body. In this chapter, I present the findings of the critical discourse analysis conducted on *Morehouse College's Gender Identity Admissions and Matriculation Policy*, the *2019-2020 Student Handbook*, and the College website. Three major themes emerged from the analysis: (1) developing respectable Black men through the construction of the Morehouse Man; (2) institutionalized transnormativity; and (3) the erasure of gender nonconforming identities and expressions.

Morehouse College, which uses gender and race as its central identity and function, could adapt to the evolving conceptualizations and understandings of gender identity and gender expression. In other words, the College could allow for gender diversity, beyond cisgender identities, but the policies set forth reify cisnormativity among students. Since Black trans students' presence on campus, disrupts white supremacist and cissexist ideologies embedded within the institution's culture, Morehouse College could create an environment that is inclusive of intersectional Black identities. Black trans students should be allowed to exist freely, articulate their experiences, and generate anti-racist, anti-cissexist, trans-centered knowledge on the campus and in spaces outside of campus. However, since Morehouse College's mission is to produce 'Morehouse men,' which is coded language for middle-class cishetero Black men, they have been resistant to modify their policies to be trans-inclusive. To examine how cisgender

masculinity is constructed and restricted at Morehouse, I use intersectionality as lens to guide my analysis of their student guidelines to examine the regulations around gender, race, class and cisnormativity.

#### **4.1 Description of Policy and Procedures**

Morehouse College's Official website is a far-reaching, easily accessible media platform that provides information to prospective students, current students and college community members, and anyone seeking to learn more about the institution. The website also provides access to documents regarding policies and procedures of the College such as *Morehouse College's Gender Identity Admissions and Matriculation Policy*, *2019-2020 Student Handbook* and the *2021 New Student Orientation Program*. The *Gender Identity Admissions and Matriculation Policy* was developed after 15 months of engagement with faculty, staff, students, and alumni in response to what Terrance Dixon, Morehouse Vice President for Enrollment Management considers, "a rapidly changing world that includes a better understanding of gender identity" (Vera and Hackney 2019). The *Gender Identity Admissions and Matriculation Policy* is an important communication of the College's gender identity expectations for incoming and current students and a policy that is guided by the school's cisgender ideology.

The *Student Handbook* contains a vast amount of information about the College and speaks to the gendered culture of the College. More specifically, the fine print at the bottom of the cover page of the *Student Handbook* includes the statement, "Morehouse College publishes the Student Handbook annually to inform students about their rights, responsibilities, and privileges on campus." The *New Student Orientation Program* states the programmatic, behavioral, and decorum expectations for first-year students during a week-long orientation prior to the start of the academic year. In the following sections, I discuss how race and gender are

described and discussed in each of the documents mentioned above. More specifically, I unpack the importance of Black masculinity and cisnormativity in each document and how it reflects the racial and gendered organization of the university.

#### **4.2 Gender identity Admissions and Matriculation Policy: Developing Black Men**

It is important for the institution to clarify who will be considered for admission into the college. Institutions of higher education, especially gender specific colleges and universities, grapple with how expanding understandings of gender impact their student body. Morehouse uses the *Gender Identity Admissions and Matriculation Policy* to state its rules regarding gender expressions and gender identity at the College. In the first reading of the *Gender Identity Admissions and Matriculation Policy* without a critical lens, the policy and procedures regarding admitting trans students appears to be accepting and reasonable stating, that it is “intended to support an individual’s right to self-identification.” This statement of purpose suggests that while gender identities are imposed on people at birth, the College recognizes and supports a student’s right to describe their own gender identity. Yet, Morehouse College simultaneously works to maintain its foundation mission and reputation, which is to serve Black male students and to develop Black men. An analysis of the policy reveals tension between Morehouse intending to adopt a trans inclusive policy while discursively and performatively ignoring prospective and current trans student identities and needs.

Upon analytically examining the *Gender Identity Admissions and Matriculation Policy*, I made several observations of the way gender is paradoxically stated and discussed in this document. The authors foreground the reputation of the college in the first sentence of the document by stating that Morehouse is, “the only private historically black liberal arts college for men in the United States.” This implies that the meaning and purpose of the College was

intended for cisgender Black men. The authors continue this premise in the second sentence stating the mission of the college is to “develop men with disciplined minds to lead lives of leadership and service.” By foregrounding the college’s cishnormative history, reputation, and traditions, the institution has essentially carved out a narrow definition of gender identity and expression rooted in binary gender norms. This statement erases trans students’ existence on campus as well as potential students whose gender identity is not cisgender.

Moreover, the last sentence of the opening section of the Gender Identity Admissions and Matriculation Policy stating the College “support an individual’s right to self-identification” is in contradiction to the previous statement which implies cisgender expectations. From the perspective of a current or prospective student they may interpret this statement as the institution’s recognition of everyone’s rights to identify the way they choose, despite society’s imposition of gendered expectations based on one’s assigned sex at birth. However, this statement of self-identification is immediately followed by a declarative statement that the institution will “ensure the continued pursuit of the College’s distinctive mission”, of making boys into men, specifically a Morehouse Man.” Although not stated explicitly, this policy presupposes that the institution was founded as a college serving cisgender Black men of and that then Morehouse is not designed to serve individuals whose gender is not cisgender. While the policy appears to recognize the agency of individuals to self-identify, it is contradictory in its ideas surrounding gender. It is clear that this institution remains dedicated to discursively disregarding nonmasculine and nonbinary identities and using exclusive gendered language to institutionalize the concept and traditions of developing Black men to Morehouse Men. I will further discuss and unpack the concept of the Morehouse Man in the next section.

### 4.3 Defining the Morehouse Man

During his tenure, President Benjamin Mays (1940-1967) wanted students to gain more than a liberal art education. Mays emphasized the development of students' identities and statuses through the institutionalization of the concept the *Morehouse Man* (Giles 2006). The concept of the *Morehouse Man* is rooted in the racial uplift ideology, which states that for Black people, a college education was a cultural marker of upward mobility. Black people who received a college education were traditionally viewed to be in position for improving the race (Gaines 1996). HBCUs have served as indoctrinators of Black middle-class ideology that conflated the advancement of Black people with an emphasis on the patriarchal family as the foundation of racial progress (Gaines 1996). The racial uplift ideology emphasizes patriarchy and centers black male leadership as a tool for class mobility and racial advancement (Grundy 2012).

President Mays emphasized the concept of the *Morehouse Man* for students to challenge the ideas of black manhood, exercise self-expression, transcend dominant depictions of Black men, and for these men to become leaders committed to the racial uplift of their communities (Rovaris 2005, Patton 2014). The concept of *Morehouse Man* is indicative of the gender socialization process that takes places at Morehouse where “doing” black manhood is laden with expectations for performances of racial respectability and middle-class identity (Fenstermaker and West 2009). More recently, former President Robert Franklin (2007-2012) outlined specific characteristics that Morehouse Men are to exhibit with the “Five Wells,”

(1) *well-read*, with the knowledge and capacity to demonstrate their intellect and “contribute to any conversation;” (2) *well-spoken*, with the skills and charisma to express themselves verbally and in written contexts with ease; (3) *well-traveled*, with experiences beyond their comfort zone and physical location that extend to other countries and experiences that instill them with a global worldview; (4) *well-dressed*, in terms of presenting their best selves in public and having an understanding that all



students represent the public face of Morehouse and should conduct themselves as future leaders; and (5) *well-balanced*, meaning that students should exercise a healthy lifestyle that encompasses care for one's mind, body, and spirit (Patton 2014)

"The Five Wells" provides a description of Morehouse's conceptualization of what it means to do proper manhood. There is an emphasis on performative respectability within "The Five Wells" that conflates what it means to do proper manhood with being and behaving according to middle-class standards (Grundy 2012). Morehouse provides ideological instruction on who has rightful access to the Morehouse brand and subsequently, the rightful display of black masculinity and manhood.

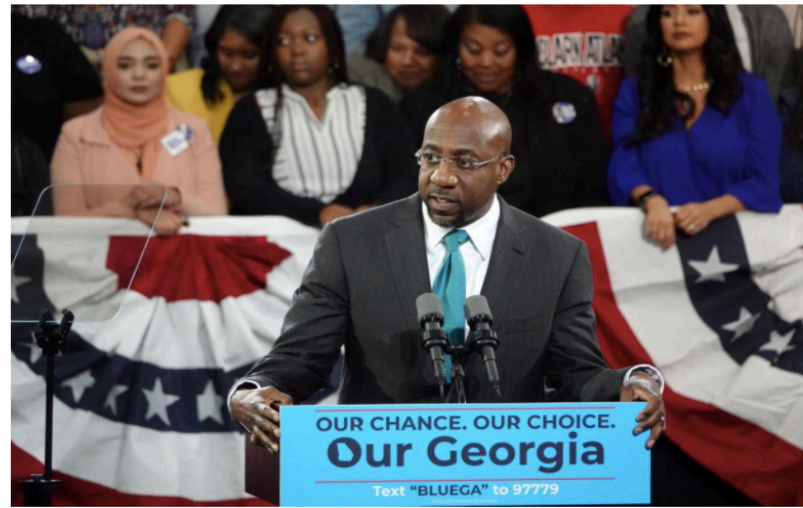
Although Robert Franklin is no longer the President of Morehouse College, the *Student Handbook* documents his tenure as a time that "led the institution forward with his vision of further elevating public confidence in the College's continuing stature as a premier institution providing a high-quality education along with enhancing the intellectual and moral dimension of Morehouse's mission and mystique." Morehouse prioritizes their public image under the white gaze to ensure that the institution creates a distinct group of students who abide by middle-class Black conceptions of manhood in order to acquire enough social, economic, and political capital to symbolically infiltrate white spaces. These classist ideological practices assert negative views of Black people that suggest insufficiencies in black cultural norms and behaviors. In fact, Morehouse minimizes the effectiveness of their anti-oppressive efforts to counter racial stereotypes of Black people by employing strategies such as cisnormative standards of dress, that are not inclusive of all Black people and ignore the existence, humanity, and contributions of trans and gender nonconforming people.

Morehouse remains committed to the Morehouse Man image which is a cis-heteronormative standard of black masculinity characterized to represent the power of their

history in educating Black men (Njoku et al 2017). Morehouse advertises their institutional image of Black male respectability through the promotion of Martin Luther King, Jr. Spike Lee, Samuel L Jackson, and other accomplished alumni in politics, business, education, and other areas (Grundy 2012). The “History” section of the College’s Official website lists the names of those previously mentioned as among many “who proudly represent the Morehouse ideals.” The Morehouse Man has become a nationally recognized title for Morehouse alumni to delineate Morehouse students from those at other institutions, PWIs and HBCUs alike.

Morehouse briefly defines a Morehouse Man in the Student Handbook but includes a more detailed description on the College’s Official website. This description is included on the website as the first subsection of the ‘About’ section, signifying the importance of their concept of manhood to the Morehouse brand. The Morehouse Man image is at the forefront of the institution; it is prioritized over other factors including the history, facts, and leadership of the college, that would provide an outsider a more holistic understanding of the college. The college includes an image of Senator Raphael Warnock, a 1991 graduate of Morehouse College at the top of the website page. The photo captures Senator Warnock on the 2020 Georgia Senate Race campaign trail, dressed in a suit and tie, speaking to a crowd of supporters. This image provides a visual representation of Morehouse Man, foregrounding the importance of gender presentation to the cisnormative conceptualization of the concept.

### A MAN IN FULL



Senator Raphael Warnock '91

*Figure 4.1 Senator Raphael Warnock on Morehouse College's Official Website*

The photo of Senator Warnock dressed in a suit reflects the middle- class gender norms in place at Morehouse. The College begins to socialize students to perform middle- class black manhood during New Student Orientation. New Student Orientation (NSO) is an event designed to prepare students for their time at Morehouse and provide information over a week- long period about campus resources, programs, and services. However, NSO is different than most campus tours and orientations for students at PWIs. At Morehouse, first year and transfer students are required to arrive on campus a week before class begin for an intensive orientation. NSO consists of a series of ceremonies and rituals that indoctrinate new students into the Morehouse traditions where students come to understand themselves to be institutionalized into Morehouse's construction of manhood and masculinity (Grundy 2012).

#### **4.4 Creating Barriers through Dress Codes**

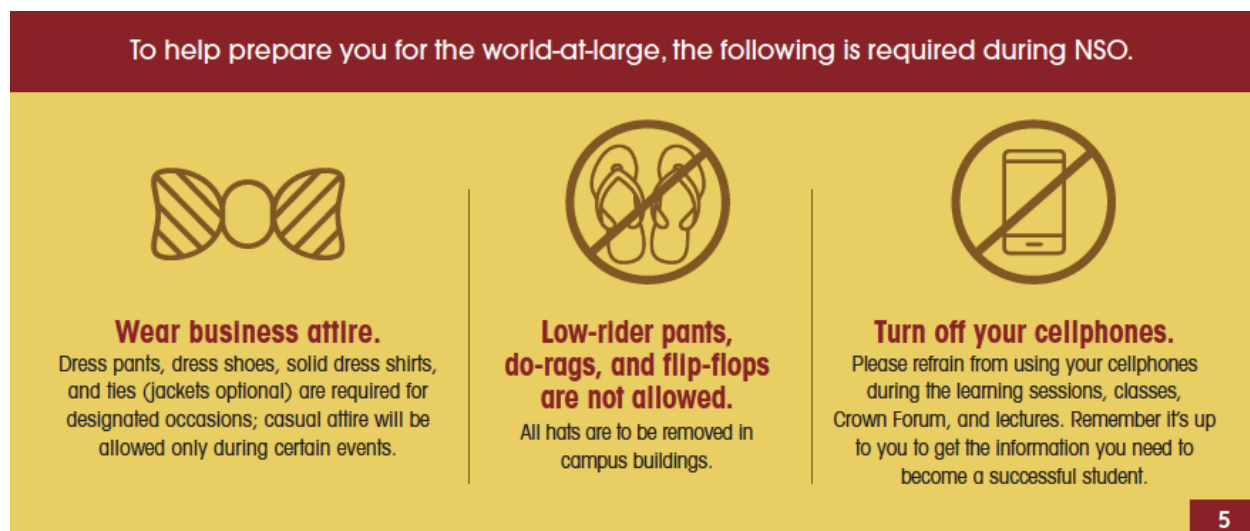
The *2021 New Student Orientation Program* which is available on the College's Official website provides first year students with important information for new students as they prepare

to arrive to campus and embark on their journey as new students at Morehouse College. Following the opening letter from President David Thomas and a welcome message to new students and their families, the program includes the dress code students are to follow during NSO week. Before listing the articles of clothing that are considered appropriate, the College provides a justification for the dress code by stating that students are required to wear business attire, “to help prepare [students] for the world-at-large.” Because the dominant norm of U.S. society is a “hetero, cis, white, post-secondary educated, upper-middle-class male,” the dress code at Morehouse is designed to help prepare students for white dominated spaces and preserves the racialized, gendered, and classed, and sexual status quo (Glickman 2015).

The *New Student Orientation Program* lists Morehouse’s gendered concepts of business attire which includes dress pants, dress shoes, solid dress shirts, and ties. The emphasis on business attire reflects the idealized forms of masculinity, class, and respectability that the college promotes. Dress shirts, pants, and ties closely resemble the characteristics of Black male respectability embodied by the image of the Morehouse Man. While the rituals and traditions at Morehouse originated at a time where gender non-conforming and non-binary individuals were overlooked and rendered invisible to a greater extent, the dress code for NSO continues to reinforce the gender binary through attire.

Moreover, dress codes that reproduce the gender binary presuppose that there are inherent differences in what is considered appropriate dress for men and women (Glickman 2015). Despite Morehouse’s acknowledgement that gender is a fluid concept in the *Gender Admissions and Matriculation Policy*, the intentional exclusion of articles of clothing associated with women’s business attire such as a skirt suit, reproduce the dominant gender binary discourse and implicitly communicates that individuals and the bodies of individuals who fail to

conform do not belong at Morehouse because their gender identity and presentation do not meet the institutionalized criteria to participate in the journey of becoming a Morehouse Man that begins during NSO.



*Figure 4.2 2021 New Student Orientation Dress Code*

Additionally, the dress code in the *New Student Orientation Program* includes additional stipulations on articles of clothing. The dress code for NSO restricts, “low rider-pants, do-rags, and flip flips.” The bans on these articles of clothing reveals the classed and gendered performative expectations institutionalized in an effort for Morehouse to continue to ensure adherence to the Black middle-class respectable masculinity. Adherence to the concept of the Morehouse Man is achieved by constructing certain types of masculinities as outside of the Morehouse brand (Grundy 2012). “Low rider pants” and “do-rags” evokes imagery of contemporary controlling images of the “thug” (Collins 2004). These images of working- class Black masculinities have an inherent association to the perception that Black men are inherently violent and prone to criminal behavior.

By banning these articles of clothing, Morehouse is encouraging its students to distinguish between acceptable performances of black masculinity and those framed as unacceptable and subordinate black masculinities. Although these stereotypes rooted in white hegemonic masculinity, Morehouse subscribes to these controlling images and deemed these performances of masculinity not worthy of being included at Morehouse, a community of respectable Black men. In an effort to maintain a particular institutional reputation and resist the historically controlling images of Black men, Morehouse utilizes the principles of respectability politics to pronounce their hierarchical affluence over Black working-class and poor people. Morehouse produces a myth of upward social mobility and assimilation into white society through the dismissal of clothing that is constructed to represent poor and working-class Black men and adoption of different gender-specific social scripts of dress in order to learn how to become a true Black man (Patton 2014).

Below the statement regarding the restriction on low-rider pants and do-rags in the dress code found in the *New Student Orientation Program*, the College states its policy on hats, “All hats are to be removed in campus building.” Although this is a brief statement on the College’s position on wearing hats inside, Black respectable cisheteronormative standards of dress are further emphasized in the *Student Handbook* to address why the college requires students to remove their hats in buildings. The response to the question included in the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) section regarding institutional rules for removing hats, begins with a description of the origin of the folkway, followed by its present application to the behavior of students at the college. It states, “This custom developed into a contemporary behavior that continues to be considered good manners.” While the question only addresses one form of article of clothing, this is an opportunity for the college to pronounce its intention to police dress codes

utilizing Black respectability politics principles. The *Student Handbook* states, “As an institution committed to developing leaders who have internalized good manners and rules of social behavior, Morehouse expects and requires students to remove their hats when entering buildings and classrooms and observe other rules of good social behavior.”

The college states its expectation for students to internalize a set of behaviors that will prepare them to assume leadership roles. Students must subscribe to behaviors of respectability politics that are pleasing to the white gaze and abide by white, hegemonic standards of gender. The adoption of these conservative principles of Black respectability politics supports the ideology that these behaviors place them above Black poor and working men, who would otherwise engage in unacceptable social behaviors. Wearing of hats inside again evokes images of poor and working-class Black men who are deemed to lack the values associated with middle-class white people and a threat to racial integration (Collins 2004). As an “act of both courtesy and deference,” Morehouse constructs an image of the respectable Black man in opposition to poor and working-class Black people allowing Morehouse students to separate themselves from other Black people who are viewed as unassimilated, “untamed” and in need of discipline (Collins 2004). By denouncing these behaviors, Morehouse students demonstrate they deserve to be accepted as full citizens and occupy white controlled spaces. The dress code leaves little room for variation in expressing oneself through dress creating restrictive class and gender boundaries to emphasize normative gender performances (Patton 2014).

The policy regarding hats not only highlights the deference to white hegemonic standards but it also speaks to the institutions power to utilize this ideology to construct and impose a raced and gendered subscription of leadership. The dress code for NSO bans do rags, and hats indoor spaces on campus. The *Student Handbook* also describes on ban religious or cultural head

garments indoors. This policy is very restrictive and does not permit religious exemption. More specifically, the *Student Handbook* states, “While the College recognizes and appreciates this [religious] diversity, it requires that all students, regardless of their religious customs, adhere to established College practices.” Morehouse is more concerned with enforcing Black respectability politics on its students, creating an environment that does not respect the religious diversity of its students and their identity informed by more than the intersections of their race and gender. The ban on religious head garments demonstrates Morehouse’s allegiance to its Christian paternalistic foundations.

Furthermore, Morehouse works to maintain its historical institutional identity and enforce the heteronormative construction of the Morehouse Man such as the description and imagery of the concept on the college’s website. The inclusion of the image of Senator Warnock on the campaign trail, provides viewers and readers a contemporary embodiment of the Morehouse Man who exhibits all the qualities attached to the title throughout the institution’s history– a well-spoken, well-dressed, leader committed to the uplift of the race and global community. Moreover, Senator Warnock’s photo which was captured after the implementation of the *Gender Identity and Admissions Policy*, further insinuates that although the institution has lifted biological requirements for admission, Morehouse students are expected to resist the racialized and gendered examples of inappropriate attire and/or appearance outlined in the *New Student Orientation Program*. While students have the agency to resist rigid, white, middle-class, cisgender standards of manhood, Morehouse functions as a disciplinary regime that controls the bodies of their students. Dress codes and other forms of discipline are created and maintained to produce 'docile bodies' (Foucault 1977). Students at Morehouse are disciplined to adopt and comply with gender norms rather than resist. Therefore, forced compliance to dress codes is a



strategy Morehouse has institutionalized to maintain the cultural norms and cisgender privileges that Black cisgender people are afforded. By complying with dominant systems of privilege Morehouse contributes to the maintenance of trans oppression.

#### **4.5 A Man in Full: Respectability Politics and Manhood**

On the College's Official website's section describing The Morehouse Man, the heading "A Man in Full" is positioned directly above the image of Senator Warnock. Becoming a full man requires a Morehouse student to utilize their gendered performances and presentations to exhibit their ability to behave in respectable ways so that they do not succumb to dehumanization. Black people believed that adopting Black respectability politics would demonstrate to white people and the broader society of the full humanity of Black people (Njoku et al 2017). Respectability politics is central to the discursive practices at Morehouse. It is evidenced in the language used to discuss gendered and classed expectations of students. It is not until a student successfully adheres to these hegemonic standards that they fully realize their status as a Morehouse Man. The student has adequately validated their full manhood and full humanity by appealing to the white gaze and norms. As white men have used rhetoric of masculinity to defend the privileges of whiteness and manhood in social, political, and economic spheres, Morehouse has historically responded to white male supremacy similarly to that of many Black leaders by using patriarchal strategies of racial uplift to gain economic, political, and social power for Black men (Estes 2005).

In order for a student to attain the status of a Morehouse Man, there are a set of criteria that students must meet that come with a set of expectations. Once students meet those high expectations, they become a Morehouse Man who is, "an academic, intellectual, and professional success." Morehouse further suggests that the success referenced in the previous statement is

“more than typical successes.” They define success as “continuously improving themselves and their communities.” This aligns with the founding of HBCUs to develop the intellectual and moral character of Black people to uplift their communities. In the interest of racial progress, Morehouse asserts that only respectable Black students are able to achieve success. In this context, success requires restricting self-expression to fit into cisheteronormative expectations. As an institution, Morehouse suggests that their role is not only to provide an academic space for students to obtain a degree, but a place where male students will be prepared to leave the institution to improve themselves and be leaders in their communities. This is why Senator Warnock image was specifically chosen for this section as he demonstrates a Morehouse student who has utilized the tenets of Black manhood and masculinity to improve the conditions of people in Georgia and across the United States through his achieved status of a United States political leader.

As Morehouse Men are expected to be successful, the description ends with a declaration of Morehouse’s responsibility to develop Morehouse Men. At the time of their founding, HBCUs were the only institutions that provided Black people with access to an education. However, Black students now have the opportunity to attend an array of institutions, no longer restricted by de jure (and de facto) segregation laws. Therefore, there is a recognition that students can obtain a degree from another institution that will provide opportunities for social, economic, and political advancement. However, the description places a specific responsibility on Morehouse to “ensure that when a Morehouse Man walks through [doors opened with a degree], they enter as a man of strong mind and character.” The special interest in the character of its students speaks to the determination to ensure Morehouse students gain a dual education – a degree in an academic field and in the hidden curriculum of respectability (Simmons 2012).

It is only after a Morehouse student has matriculated through the college, internalized the dominant ideologies of the institution, and embodied the characteristics the institution sought to develop, are they considered a “full man.” According to the College’s website, a Morehouse man is “a man who knows all he’s capable of. A man who knows himself. A leader. A man in full.” This leads Morehouse students to assume that men are the “natural” leaders of any movement, organization, and the Black community at large. Despite the contributions of Black women, femmes, and other marginalized groups within the Black community in the fight against white racism, Morehouse continues to frame the college experience of students at Morehouse in patriarchal terms of claiming or defending manhood rooted in traditional assumptions about race, gender, and sexuality. The idea of ‘a man in full’ is problematic because it maintains limited constructions of humanity, citizenship, and manhood. The institution is subscribing to classed, racialized, gendered discourses of masculinity as well as operationalizing cisnormativity throughout their campus culture to maintain the foundational premise of transforming the race through uplift politics.

#### **4.6 Institutional Transnormativity**

*The Gender Identity Admissions and Matriculation* policy states that the college is open for admission to applicants who self-identify as men, regardless of the sex assigned at birth. This admissions component of the policy as stated can appear that the college has an understanding of the evolving nature of gender and will implement the policy to be inclusive all genders for admission into the college. However, within the ‘Policy’ section of the policy, there is the first iteration of how power is used to institutionalize transnormativity. Transnormativity is “the specific ideological accountability structure to which transgender people’s presentations and experiences of gender are held accountable” (Johnson 2016). Transnormativity reifies binary

cisnormative assumptions of sex and gender, deeming certain trans individuals' identities and behaviors as legitimate and further marginalizing trans identities that exist outside of the binary. Morehouse exerts their power to set gendered standards and enforce these standards across the college community. Morehouse discursively creates an environment that ignores the ways in which one's position within the matrix of domination produces divergent experiences of racialized cissexism for black trans students at the institution. This is evidenced in the ways transnormativity is embedded in the policies and procedures of the College.

Institutionalized transnormativity is discussed in the '*definitions*' section, which defines the follow terms transgender, transgender man, transgender woman, and transsexual. This section presents itself as informative to the reader, however the definition they provide are very limiting. For example, there are definitions for transgender man and transgender woman, but other trans identities, such as genderqueer, nonbinary, gender nonconforming, are not mentioned or included. Their definition of trans assumes that there are only two sexes, male and female, that are connected to two genders, man and woman (Butler 2006). Therefore, trans individuals are only recognized as those "whose gender identity is different from the sex they were assigned at birth," but are expected to transition from one socially acceptable gender identity to another – trans man or trans woman. A trans person's transition from one sex to another is inextricably linked to their transition from one gender to another (Butler 2006). In other words, men are only to transition as cis-women and women are to only transition to present themselves as cismen. The omission of nonbinary trans identities and inclusion of the term transsexual reifies the persistent belief that trans people are experiencing or have the desire to have gender affirmation surgery and that they only want to present their gender according to cisgender presentations of femininity or masculinity. This limits students who are genderqueer, gender nonconforming and

those who self-define their gender. In other words, this policy takes away the agency of Black trans students.

Furthermore, the culturally held belief of the connection between a trans identity and biological transition is supported in the policy by the inclusion of the definition of transsexual, a dated term unreflective of the changing understandings and expressions of gender that Morehouse perceives to adopt. Transnormative assumptions include the expectation that all trans people transition medically (Johnson 2016). While cisgender people's gender performance is policed according to white dominant cultural norms, medicalization is used to evaluate trans identities within academic, social, and legal settings (Johnson 2016). Transnormativity structures the social arrangements in which trans people are held accountable regardless of adherence to binary notions of gender and intent to transition medically. Bradford and Syed (2019) suggest that transnormative assumptions also imply that all trans and nonbinary people must conform to transnormativity in order to progress trans social justice. I extend this to HBCUs established to serve a single sex, where institutionalized transnormative and cisnormative assumptions operate to ignore the realities of Black trans students while privileging Black cisheteronormative identities. Thus, transnormative assumptions within this Black cisheteronormative space are framed to prioritize the advancement of Black people as a race over fighting for liberation for Black people of all genders and classes. Black liberation must include the goals and political rights of Black trans people in the fight for justice. These exclusionary practices mimic those of Black men in the Black Liberation Movement and white women in the Women's Movement, placing Black women on the margins (Hull, Scott, and Smith 1982). These policies reify the hegemonic normative notions of gender and class within Black communities and Black spaces, which allows for the Othering Black trans folks.

Additionally, The *Gender Identity Admissions and Matriculation Policy* marginalizes trans individuals who reject binary gender identities and embodiments. The policy states, “if a student transitions from a man to a woman, the student will no longer be eligible to matriculate at Morehouse.” This statement not only subscribes to a binary gendered system, but also emphasizes the transnormative underpinnings of the policy suggesting that a trans person seeking admittance or wanting to remain enrolled must fully transition from one gender, woman, to the oppositely constructed gender, man. These transnormative assumptions validates some trans students while rendering trans and nonbinary people who do not subscribe to binary gender norms invisible. By only identifying transitions from man and woman, the college ignores nonbinary individuals. As a result, a student who for example, is born with intersex anatomy, was assigned male at birth and given male legal documents and has a genderqueer identity cannot be admitted to Morehouse and will be dismissed from the college (Nanney and Brunsma 2017; Spade 2015).

This pervasive belief forces trans students who do not align with these standards to negotiate aspects of their identity and expression or assimilate into the campus culture or resist at the risk of violence, discrimination, or being dismissed from the institution. Goldberg and Kuvalanka (2018) found that trans students navigated their gender identities by contemplating gender affirmation surgery and other body alterations. Students in this study considered whether to pursue body alterations when evaluating the benefits of freely expressing their gender and risking discomfort through public visibility. Student narratives attest to the need to acknowledge diversity among trans people largely regarding the use of biomedical interventions. Because race and gender are organizing principles at Morehouse College, accountability may be more pronounced at the college.

#### 4.7 Erasure of Nonbinary Identities and Expressions

After the public announcement that Morehouse was considering admission to individuals who identify as men regardless of their assigned sex at birth, questions were raised regarding how nonbinary and gender nonconforming students would be affected by the policy. President David Thomas responded to these concerns stating, “For gender nonconforming students who come to Morehouse because it is a men’s college and they identify in some aspect of their identity with that but are not necessarily what we call gender-conforming, they are welcome to apply and matriculate at Morehouse” (Toole 2019). These sentiments suggest that students are permitted to freely explore their gender while at the institution, even if their identity and/or presentation does not align with societal and institutional expectations. However, the *Gender Identity Admissions and Matriculation Policy* only acknowledges binary transitions from man to woman. The policy states, “once admitted, students are expected to continue to self-identify as men throughout their matriculation at Morehouse. If a student transitions from a man to a woman, that student will no longer be eligible to matriculate at Morehouse.” Here is the dismissal of nonbinary identities, rendering these individuals and their experiences as nonexistent at the institution. While the *Gender Identity Admissions and Matriculation Policy* is framed to be fully inclusive, it does not recognize nonbinary identities and presentations.

The requirement that student continue to self-identify as men throughout their matriculation at Morehouse ignores the fluidity of gender. Students inability to openly explore their gender identity while at the College produces an accumulation of stressors that may force a student to leave an institution, not because they want to but as a result of burden of managing their gender presentation in a cisnormative and transnormative, highly gendered climate (Goldberg, Kuvalanka and Black 2019). The experience of nonbinary students at Morehouse are

excluded from the constructions of a Morehouse Man making their gender exploration hyper visible. Trans students face environments where their existence is challenged, and their safety may be at risk through microaggressions such as misgendering. For students at Morehouse, the institutionalization of manhood and masculinity, makes misgendering inevitable. *The Gender Identity Admissions and Matriculation Policy* does not allow for gender identities and expressions that are not man or masculine. Therefore, while students at coeducational institutions may experience misgendering, nonbinary students at Morehouse will inevitably be misgendered. Because students are expected to identify as men throughout their matriculation, correcting faculty, staff and other students regarding their identity and pronouns, put students at risk for increased discrimination, violence and expulsion. The institutional culture at Morehouse as an institution that serves men and the transnormative standards of the Gender Identity Admissions and Matriculation allows the College to justify their failure to acknowledge the complexities of a trans students' gender identity exploration and transitions without consequence.

Morehouse recognizes experiences produced by intersections of race and gender. In fact, this recognition drives the mission of the college to overcome negative stereotypes of Black men constructed based on the racialized notions of gender. However, Morehouse's expectation that all applicants and enrolled students live and identify as men, regardless of sex assigned at birth, reinforces institutional standards that nonbinary identities do not belong at the institution in order to maintain its status as a men's college. The marginalization and exclusion of nonbinary students from discourse at Morehouse implies that race and gender, criteria for admission and matriculation at the college, are defined by cisgender Black men's and Black women's experiences. Therefore, while trans students at the institution may have similar experiences of racism as Black men and Black women, transphobia and cisheteronormativity produce differing



experiences that are neither acknowledged nor addressed in institutional discourse. As a result, Black trans students' Blackness and nonnormative gender identities places their needs and perspectives at the margins.

#### **4.8 Reinforcing Cis-Pronouns and the Gender Binary**

The *Gender Identity Admissions and Matriculation Policy* reinforces the cultural standard that trans and gender nonconforming students need to assimilate to the racialized gender binary standards established to preserve its status as a college for Black men. By doing this they state their policy on gender pronouns. The policy states, "Morehouse will continue to use masculine pronouns, the language of brotherhood, and other gendered language that reflects its mission as an institution designed to develop men with disciplined minds who will lead lives of leadership and service." The framing of gender binary discourse at Morehouse, reads other gender identities and expressions as unintelligible and therefore, nonexistent and unrecognized. Morehouse' assertion to continue to use masculine pronouns and other gendered language is a mechanism through which the gender binary system at Morehouse is upheld. The intentional use of gendered language ignores the existence of trans students, specifically nonconforming students, whose bodies and identities are silenced through such practices.

By accepting one's right to transition, but deliberately implementing practices such as the continued use of masculine pronouns, Morehouse fails to demonstrate that they understand that an individual's gender identity within the binary does not suggest that an individual's gender pronouns also exist within the binary (Thorpe 2015). At Morehouse, the failure to consider the complexity of a student's trans experience and acknowledge each aspect of their identity, they are not fully recognizing and respecting the student's identity and agency. This also speaks to their lack of understanding of gender, gender identity and gender expressions. The critical

attention to the use of gendered language and its inherent binarism at Morehouse reveals the ways the institution limits a student's ability to truly self-identify. While the college uses performative language to suggest that they respect an individual's right to self-identify, the assertion to use masculine gendered language renders trans students, specifically nonbinary students linguistically invisible.

The disregard of students who self-identification and/or presentation is not a man or masculine is what Yoshino (2006) terms covering, or the hegemonic practice of expecting, encouraging, and pressuring subordinate groups to alter the way they express their identities to assimilate into the dominant society. Yoshino (2006) suggests that discrimination does not target subordinate groups as a whole, "rather it aims at the subset of the group that refused to cover...[or] assimilate to dominant norms." Francis and Jaksch (2019) further highlight the way that institutions of higher education engage in covering practices that pressure students to adopt normative gender presentations to protect themselves from the exhibitions of genderism. I extend the application of covering theory to the single-sex HBCU context to describe the institutionalized racial and gendered mechanisms at Morehouse College and argue that the gender binary discourse at the college specifically targets nonconforming gender presentations.

A black and trans identity at an HBCU designed to serve a student body comprised of a single sex, disrupts not only the logics of white supremacy and cissexism, but also Black politics of respectability. As a result, Morehouse College engages in covering practices such as the deliberate institutional use of masculine pronouns, language of brotherhood, and other gendered language to sustain its reputation for constructing and sustaining respectable forms of Black masculinity among its students. These mechanisms enforce Black respectability politics deeply rooted in racial stereotypes that suggest that Black people lack the intellectual capacity and moral

compass to access full citizenship without subscribing to hegemonic gender ideal types (Njoku et al. 2017). The covering practices at Morehouse create a campus environment that promotes gender performances that are deemed socially appropriate and heightens policing of gender performance that are nonnormative in order to guard the institutional reputation and mission for racial advancement. Cisgender students and trans students who pass as cisgender, enjoy the protections of their identities and performances that align with the normalized and institutionalized binary understandings of gender. Nicolazzo (2017) suggests that when gender binary discourse and genderism become institutionalized, it becomes part of the background for those who are a part of the institution. Therefore, gender fades to the background, becoming unmarked, causing nonnormative practices of gender to be a form of labor (Nicolazzo 2017). At Morehouse, both race and gender are institutionalized by creating or upholding a racialized binary understanding of gender framing trans students as the “problem” and not belonging in this space.

Through the *Gender Identity Admissions and Matriculation Policy, Student Handbook*, and College’s Official website, Morehouse constructs gender and determines what a student must do to evidence their gender identity, placing the power with the institution as arbiters of gender identities. If a student chooses to openly explore and express their gender in a way that does not align with the institution’s gender expectations, it creates a challenge for trans students as they may be hyper visible and vulnerable to the labor of justifying why they belong at the institution. Furthermore, if a student’s gender identity comes into question and is deemed to not align with the standards of the College outlined in the *Gender Identity Admissions and Matriculation Policy*, the President has the power to appoint a three-person committee to determine whether or not the student will remain enrolled at the College – this is another

example of institutionalized transnormativity. This process requires the student to perform an act of labor of developing a written appeal “address[ing] why the student desires continuation at Morehouse, a school explicitly designed for men, and any hardship to be incurred by forced withdrawal.” The student is required to educate those who are in a position of power about their gender identity and justify their existence in this space. “In the event that Morehouse College Gender Identity Admissions and Matriculation Policy the impacted student disagrees with the decision of the committee, the student may make a final appeal to the President of Morehouse.” If a student disagrees with the decision made by the committee, the student can make an appeal to the President who has the ultimate power to decide the student’s status.

#### **4.9 LGBTQIA+ Student Experiences**

In this section, I discuss the findings from my secondary analysis conducted on the interview transcripts of the study, “Navigating the Network: An Exploratory Study of LGBTQIA+ Information Practices at Two-Single-Sex HBCUs” (De la Cruz, Winfrey, and Solomon 2022). The voices of LGBTQIA+ students in this study speak to the themes that emerged in my critical discourse analysis including gendered expectations of dress and behavior and the erasure of nonnormative gender identities and expressions. Participants also provide insight into the ways dominant ideologies and discourses at the College inform their personal experiences of gender policing and exclusion from institutional and social spaces, as well as a lack of queer representation and support.

LGBTQIA+ students spoke of their perceptions of Morehouse prior to officially enrolling into the institution with particular attention to cisheteropatriarchal expectations of Black masculinity present at the College. Most of the students specifically reference expectations of performances of dress. Taylor, a gay student states, “My thoughts are that they would, uh, the

moment I got there they would automatically discriminate against me: how I dress, how I portray myself in terms of my expression. I thought as though they would want me to be this sense of a cis man in a way.” Morgan, a gay man provided further clarity on the expectations of specific articles of clothing that students are expected to wear and not wear stating, “I heard about, um, their prejudice against trans people and how men aren’t supposed to wear women’s clothing. So that was my only issue that I heard about before I came here.” Prior to attending the institution, students were aware of the dominant gender binary discourse as stated in the *Gender Identity and Matriculation Policy*, at Morehouse that assumes inherent differences in what is considered appropriate dress for men and women manifests in standards of dress at the College. Students also discussed the ways in which their gender expressions are policed by other students and alumni. Taylor described an interaction with an alum:

I had one incident, I will say, that happened during Homecoming, is when I was walking through the tents and then I saw an alumni come out and he said, “Change that.” Like that very day I was wearing a crop top, I was wearing short shorts, I had eyeliner on that day too but I had... I feel like he was offended because it was the Morehouse shirt I had turned into a crop top.

Taylor provided a first- hand account of the way alumni serve as gatekeepers of the Morehouse brand and highlights the vital role alumni play in upholding the cisnormative standards of middle-class Black masculinity at the College by policing of nonconforming bodies. Taylor’s experience demonstrates how gender binary discourse and cisheteronormativity inform the accountability structures at Morehouse that encourage students to comply with gender norms and limit resistance. Trans and gender nonconforming students must negotiate whether to freely express their gender or face the risk of discomfort, hypervisibility and public scrutiny.

LGBTQIA+ students not only have to consider if their gender expression reflects the institutional

brand, but also whether or not alumni as well as faculty, staff, and peers will accept and respect their gender identity and expression.

Participants not only described incidences of gender policing but also the boundaries of identity and performance within student organizations. Students specifically discussed how LGBTQIA+ students' negotiation of whether or not to authentically identify and express their gender or conform to normative standards of Black masculinity, extends to their participation in student organizations. Jay, a queer man, states:

I will say that a lot of people that are at Morehouse, the queerness at Morehouse is a lot more discrete and um you know down low as far as the um people who are involved with different organizations. Um, you can be queer at Morehouse but not explicitly so. So like um, it can be known that you are queer but if you're, um, if you have a certain position at Morehouse it's not looked good upon to be openly queer.

LGBTQIA+ students have the right to identify as they sit fit, but students must hide parts of themselves and police their own outward presentation to become a member of student organizations. Christian, a gay student, ascribed a lack of understanding of the expanding notions of gender identity and expressions to the reason why student organizations are not inclusive of gender diversity among their peers. Christian states:

Simply because it's like still kind of not talked about. It's something that not a lot of people express, or like... it's a lot of... People don't understand it, necessarily. Like that somebody may dress in women's clothing but is still a man, or they go by different pronouns. It's just — they don't understand it and I feel as though that since they don't understand it, they don't want anybody to be a part of those type of organizations.

At Morehouse, hegemonic ideologies of genderism and transnormativity create barriers for students to fully integrate into the College and become active participants at the institution. Furthermore, limited constructions of Black masculinity and a lack of education on the history and experiences of Black LGBTQIA+ individuals, only legitimizes knowledge constructed by those privileged and empowered by intersecting systems of race, gender, and sexuality.

LGBTQIA+ students' limited ability to participate in student organizations restricts their power to bring about effective change within the current structures of the College. Jordan, a gay man, described the regulated power LGBTQIA+ student have based on their limited representation in Student Government Association, "the official medium for addressing student concerns and the chief avenue for promoting campus livelihood and involvement" (*Morehouse College Student Handbook*). Jordan states:

They have a lot of power on campus to inflict change and whatnot. And I just know a lot of things that go for the LGBTQAI+ community doesn't really go into full effect in the SGA. A lot of our concerns are not really answered or um they get voted out. with. Because with them, even when they're discussing LGBTQAI+, I feel like there's only one representative of our community in there, rather than, you know, a presence. I guess they feel like one is enough. But I also feel like if you really want to represent a community, there really needs to be more than one person.

Although there is diversity within the organization based on the mere presence of an LGBTQIA+ student in the organization, the small number of queer students creates an unequal power structure that ignores and erases the concerns of LGBTQIA+ students. Furthermore, the inclusion of a few LGBTQIA+ students does not sufficiently account for the complexity and multiplicity of queer experiences and needs. Limited representation may reify other systems of power by suggesting that there is a singular experience of oppression. LGBTQIA+ students who do occupy positions within student organizations can also experience exhaustion from feeling as if they are responsible for being the spokesperson for the community.

Students also discussed the College's priority with upholding and indoctrinating respectable images Black masculinity. Morehouse's dedication to their reputation of developing cisgender Black men manifests in a lack of support for LGBTQIA+ students. Jordan states:

Now I will say the problem that I have with Morehouse is that they do not really support the LGBT community, as in what they say. They may say—it's pretty much a whole lot of talk to me...And they preach moreso the man in the business attire with his suitcase—that's probably empty—and um, deep voice, tall. You know? Like, I guess the stereotype

of what a man is supposed to be. And [pause] It's kind of like that separate but equal type thing. Um, did I say that right, separate but equal? Ok. So, um well I'm gonna break that down a little bit more. So, their acceptance is tolerance. They don't really fully accept us. They tolerate us.

Jordan references the Supreme Court decision in the Plessy v. Ferguson case that upheld racial segregation under the law in the United States and maintained a hierarchical racial structure that ensured equality for Black people was never realized. Jordan's use of the 'separate but equal' analogy alludes to Morehouse's exclusionary practices and implies that while LGBTQIA+ students are enrolled at Morehouse, the structures of the institution do not support queer students enough to disrupt the ideological and organizational status quo at the College.

Despite the ideological and institutional mechanisms in place that hold students accountable to the dominant gender norms at Morehouse College, students described the ways in which they challenge the oppressive systems at the institutions. After describing incidences of gender policing from peers who suggested he change his clothing to something more conservative, Taylor says, "Conservative, you know what I'm saying? A viewpoint [laughs]. Hiding who you really are. Conserving yourself for the benefit of the public rather than yourself. And that's not what I do. I do it for myself. But yeah." Taylor concluded that conservative dress requires that he hide his identity and expression to appease the cisnormative gaze of the College. In spite of the expectations of conformity, Taylor asserted that they will not succumb to this pressure and instead, will express themselves in way that affirms who he understands himself to be.

Students not only described the ways they personally resist the intersecting systems of power that oppress LGBTQIA+ students at Morehouse, but participants also encouraged students to continue to attend Morehouse and transform campuses spaces. Jay gave the following advice to prospective students, "I would say that they shouldn't be afraid to come to Morehouse and be



able to express themselves...Morehouse and Spelman are both very traditional institutions, but the students who come here, of course, are going to make the changes that need to be made on the campuses.” Jay acknowledged that Morehouse is foundationally and historically limited in their constructions and acceptance of Blackness but affirms that there are students on campus that are working to bring about change within these oppressive structures.

As Jay recognized the students who are already working to bring about systemic change at Morehouse, Jordan encouraged LGBTQIA+ students to not only attend the College but to also assume leadership roles. He states:

I challenge people, you know, upcoming freshmen to be a leader, be consistent with yourself for other people. You know, still show that respect and whatnot, but show that you’re not going to be pushed around or you not going to let someone say something crazy to someone else. Just be that leader, be that individual that knows what’s right or not. And I’m stressing *be yourself*.

Jordan’s definition of a leader does not align with Morehouse’s definition of leadership rooted in normative conceptions of Black patriarchy within respectability politics. His emphasis on LGBTQIA+ students ‘being themselves’ implicitly challenges queer students to exist in their social locations of marginalization as a form of resistance to the cisheteropatriarchal structures that work to maintain a restricted conceptualization of Black leadership, that does not include LGBTQIA+ students.

#### **4.10 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I presented the findings from my analysis of *Morehouse College’s Gender Identity Admissions and Matriculation Policy*, the *2019-2020 Student Handbook*, and the College website. Morehouse frequently references their very specifically raced and gendered mission and distinguishing history throughout the documents. Language of “discipline” and “leadership” is used throughout campus policies and procedures, demonstrating how Morehouse’s mission is

rooted in racial uplift ideology that stresses respectable, middle-class decorum and service to the community. Morehouse also advertises their institutional image of Black manhood by promoting prominent alumni who serve as representations of the cultivation and embodiment of Morehouse's ideals of Black patriarchy and masculinity. The institution wishes to maintain its status and pursuit of "developing men with disciplined minds," by asserting their power and authority to determine who qualifies to be admitted and matriculate at the institution and placing parameters on who aligns with the Morehouse brand by policing gender expression.

Furthermore, Morehouse subscribes to controlling images of Black masculinity, which are rooted in hegemonic masculinity, to deem certain performance of masculinity not worthy of being included at the College. LGBTQIA+ students describe their recognition of the institutionalized gendered expectations prior to attending the College and the ways these standards inform their experiences of gender policing, exclusion, and acts of resistance.

While Morehouse College recognizes that gender is a complex process that involves a transition for some individuals, the College discursively does not recognize nonbinary identities and presentations and ignores the identities and need of trans students largely. Additionally, Morehouse subscribes to Black respectability politics which proports a cisheteronormative standard of Black masculinity, demonstrating the College's lack of interest in being gender inclusive of those who fall outside of the binary. All in all, Morehouse creates an environment that reproduces the oppression and marginalization of Black trans students at the College, within the Black community, and society at large.

## 5 CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS- SPELMAN COLLEGE

Women's colleges and universities in the United States have historically served as safe spaces for students to self-explore, develop the skills and confidence to assume leadership roles, learn to think critically, and foster strong social networks (Farmer et al. 2020). However, genderism, or the rigid adherence to the gender binary, is upheld at women's colleges through transphobic attitudes held by individuals and institutional policies and practices (Farmer et al. 2020). In this chapter, I present the findings of the critical discourse analysis conducted on the 2019- 2020 *Spelman College Student Handbook and Resource Guide*, the *Admissions and Enrollment Policy*, and the Spelman College Official website. Four major themes emerged from the analysis: (1) developing respectable leaders of the race; (2) keeping the Spelman Sisterhood exclusive; (3) erasure of nonbinary and nonconforming identities and expressions; and (4) establishing standards of dress.

Spelman College's unique racial and gendered history makes it an ideal reference for other institutions of higher education to gain a greater understanding of how to transform highly gendered, trans exclusionary campuses into trans affirming settings. However, despite the College's espousal of gender equity through the implementation of the new *Admissions and Enrollment Policy*, culturally embedded assumptions at the College regarding gender are deeply rooted in trans oppression. My review of institutional documents uncovered the use of gendered language to discursively construct policies, practices, values, and identities regarding gender. Ultimately, the College engages in discourse that excludes students of diverse genders and inadvertently renders trans students linguistically invisible.

## 5.1 Description of Policy and Procedures

The *Admissions and Enrollment Policy* was developed by Spelman College's Transgender Taskforce, a group of faculty, staff, and student leaders to determine how Spelman would move forward with addressing trans students in higher education largely and at the College more specifically. Informed by the recommendations of the Taskforce, the College implemented the *Admissions and Enrollment Policy* for the 2018-2019 academic school year to consider trans students for admission and matriculation at the College. The *Admissions and Enrollment Policy* outlines the expectations regarding student's sex assigned at birth and gender identity as well as the ideological and cultural parameters in which students can transition to be accepted into and remain affiliated with the College.

The Division of Student Affairs at Spelman College develops the *Student Handbook and Resource Guide* to provide students with information on campus policies, the code of conduct, the rights, and responsibilities of students. While the Official website is a platform that is accessible for anyone interested in learning more about the College by providing general information about College such as the history, academic offerings, student life and engagement services, and study abroad opportunities, the *Student Handbook and Resource Guide* is specifically designed to convey gendered ideologies of the College to students. The *Student Handbook and Resource Guide* states the College encourages students to pay close attention to the information because Spelman, "expect[s] students to be responsible for their own behaviors, in addition to holding their peers accountable for being good citizens." Therefore, the information provided in the *Student Handbook and Resource Guide* is designed to not only serve as a guide to ensure student success on campus but to also empower students to hold their peers

accountable according to the race, class, and gender informed policies and procedure outlined in the document.

## **5.2 Leaders of Their Race**

Spelman College was founded to develop Black women who would educate and uplift Black southern communities. Spelman emphasized character reform and moral education as a means to racial progress (Case 2017). Spelman instilled white middle-class values of modesty, self-discipline, sexual purity, and Christian morality. While these values were tools of white supremacy to create a model of “true womanhood,” Spelman founders and faculty believed that respectable and chaste femininity would provide protections against negative images of women entering the public sphere (Case 2017). Further, educated Black women were highly esteemed for attaining a formal education for racial uplift through social, economic, and political progress (Carlson 1992). Black leaders and community members supported Black institutions like Spelman who were key markers of respectability that would improve the conditions of Black people and challenge the ideas of inherent Black inferiority (Case 2017). Spelman graduates accepted the school’s message of self-improvement as a mechanism to construct their own definition of respectable Christian womanhood - “educated, refined, well-mannered, sexually pure, and race-conscious” - and endorse themselves as “leaders of their race” dedicated to social and racial justice (Case 2017).

Spelman continues to prioritize its history and status as a leading institution in black higher education that produces a privileged class of Black women leaders. Each of the opening sections of the *Student Handbook and Resource Guide* - the “Spelman College Mission and Purpose,” “Spelman College History,” and “Traditions & Symbols” - reference Spelman’s over 100- year dedication to educating a select segment of the Black community trained to transform

the social and human capital acquired at the institution into resources for the service of the community (Brown and Davis 2001; Case 2017). In the “Spelman College History” section, authors recognize the changes throughout the College’s history but suggest that Spelman’s “basic aims and mission have remained the same- to educate and inspire young women to achieve academic excellence and intellectual, creative, and ethical leadership.”

The *Student Handbook and Resource Guide* foregrounds the College’s mission to establish the expectation that students conduct themselves in a manner that represents the ideals, history, and purpose of the Spelman. The heading of the “What It Takes to Be a Spelman Sister” section of the *Student Handbook and Resource Guide* suggests that there is a responsibility placed on students to adopt a particular set of qualities and values. One of the values listed in the “What It Takes to be a Spelman Sister” section is ‘community.’ The description of ‘community’ begins, “As a member of Spelman College, you have voluntarily entered into an institution with a strong intellectual and cultural heritage.” The term voluntary insinuates that with the increase in access to higher education, especially for Black students, there are a range of colleges and universities available for students to consider. Therefore, when a student attends Spelman, they willingly enter a space with institutionalized traditions rooted in cultivating respectable black femininity through a combined academic and moral education (Case 2017).

The description of community continues, “Each Spelmanite is a member of an elite community of learners who are expected to exhibit thoughtful academic study and discourse, and ethical and socially responsible behaviors on and off campus.” The authors presuppose that Spelman is an exclusive community. Here, “elite community” is not synonymous with the middle- and- upper classes. Spelman has produced and attracted a Black middle-class that continues to comprise a large percentage of the student body. However, “elite community” refers

to members of the Spelman community connected through a shared belief that an education from Spelman and respectable personal conduct leads to improved social status, irrespective of a student's class status prior to entering the College (Case 2017). Further, the expectation that students exhibit "ethical and socially responsible behaviors" implies that there are Black people who do not demonstrate respectable social behavior and students should strive to display behaviors that would allow them to resist racism and sexism.

The "Black lady" controlling image refers to the middle-class professional Black woman who represents modernized respectable Black womanhood (Collins 2002; Commodore 2019). The "Black lady" counters ideas of Black women's promiscuity and manipulative withdrawal from the workforce which are attributes primarily associated with working-class Black women (Collins 2002). Working-class black controlling images insinuate an inferior culture and gender- and class- specific versions of Blackness that women should avoid in order to access spaces and resources that improve their social standing (Case 2017). The language used in the "What It Takes to Be a Spelman Sister" section of the *Student Handbook and Resource Guide* shows the College's belief that a student's affiliation with Spelman requires them to neglect attributes associated with Black working-class femininities and adopt Black middle-class femininities characterized by controlling images such as the "Black lady" to evidence their right to equality within the Black community and larger society.

Bridges and Pascoe (2014) utilize the term hybrid masculinities to describe how socially privileged men combine elements of both gender-egalitarian and patriarchal models to develop a morally superior sense of self and distinguish themselves from other men. I extend Bridges and Pascoe's (2014) concept of hybrid masculinities to evidence an analogous process of hybrid femininities at Spelman. Spelman promotes a hybrid femininity that combines conformity to

white-middle class ideals of femininity and a commitment to academic achievement in preparation for community and global leadership. This hybrid femininity is an achievement-oriented, socially, and politically involved, respectable feminine ideal that allows students to detach themselves from negative markers of Blackness, distinguish themselves from other women, and internalize a sense of superior morality. Spelman emphasizes their mission and history of fostering Black women's academic excellence and leadership skills for the benefit of students, the community, and society. However, there is also an intense focus on student's behaviors to maintain the ideal of Black respectable, Christian, womanhood. This focus on behavior is to prepare students to maneuver through society balancing between being appropriately in order with white authority while maintaining a level of ambition and carefully channeled aggression to achieve middle-class status for the benefit of the community (Collins 2002).

The "socially responsible behaviors" mentioned in the "What It Takes to Be a Spelman Sister" section of the *Student Handbook and Resource Guide* are detailed in the "Community & Off-Campus Settings" section. This section begins with a sentence referencing Spelman's reputation of academic excellence and "dedication to community leadership and service." By foregrounding the mission and history of the College, the authors background students' personal identities and agency. The authors state, "we ask that you remember that you represent the College at all times. Consequently, two things are especially important- how you look and what you say." The authors utilize students' affiliation with the College to restrict the individuality of students, police their identities, and place parameters around appropriate behaviors. Spelman students are expected to adopt respectable expressions of Blackness that align with the College's



history, values, and reputation of producing Black women who adopt identities that will elevate the race.

The “Community & Off-Campus Settings” continues to promote the belief that Spelman students are morally and behaviorally superior. This position gives students power and authority within the local community and beyond. The College asserts this belief by stating, “There is always some level of interest in what a Spelman student has to say and how she feels about a given issue or topic.” As leaders of the Black community and students at Spelman, it is presumed that they have acquired a certain level of knowledge that deems them as proprietors of community and societal issues. Because there is a particular keenness to a Spelman students’ thoughts and opinions, the College asserts that students must be aware of how they present their thoughts. Students are not only held accountable by their peers, faculty, staff, administration, and students but also by the Black community and society at large. Because accountability extends beyond Spelman’s campus, students are expected to maintain a respectable gender identity that ensures dominant white comfortability (Toliver 2019).

The authors continue, “As you meet, greet, and share your thoughts and opinions, please refrain from using profanity, slang, and crude language as they are not acceptable at community service locations, internships, and other public locations.” Slang is often considered an element of ‘Black English’ or African American Vernacular English (AAVE). The grouping of slang with profanity and crude language suggests that Black patterns of speech are of a lower standard and therefore, inappropriate to use in public spaces. The negative framing of slang is rooted in a monolithic construction of Blackness and its association with working-class, less formally educated, Black people. This framing of AAVE ignores the ways AAVE’s deviation from standard English

is important to developing a cultural identity and bringing about a sense of communalism within the Black community, regardless of social location (Silva 2017; Rocque 2019).

Further, the guidelines to refrain from using slang misses the opportunity for Spelman to educate students on the ways language can challenge oppressive structures by celebrating all forms of Blackness and the contributions of all Black people to society. For example, Spelman can acknowledge the ways the term ‘sis’ is not only deeply rooted in the Black church as a religious title but also in Black queer communities, representing kinship and power among those who are impacted by misogynoir and who challenge the attachment of femininity to female bodies (Rocque 2019). However, Spelman contributes to the marginalization and degradation of Black people largely, and Black femmes and queer folx specifically, who are major cultural and linguistic producers. The conservative guidelines at the College align with hegemonic whiteness and racist, sexist, and heteropatriarchal values that are not accepting of varying displays of speech and behavior that exists among Black people.

### **5.3 “Accepting” Trans Students into Spelman**

In 2017, President Schmidt Campbell sent a *President’s Letter to the Community* entitled, “Spelman Admissions and Enrollment Policy Update” that is posted on the College’s website. In the letter, President Schmidt Campbell states, “Spelman is taking into account evolving definitions of gender identity in a changing world and taking steps to ensure that our policies and plans reflect those changes in a manner consistent with our mission and the law.” The new

*Admissions and Enrollment Policy* states:

Spelman College, a Historically Black College whose mission is to serve high-achieving Black women, will consider for admission women students including students who consistently live and self-identify as women, regardless of their gender assignment at birth. Spelman does not admit male students, including students who self-identify and live consistently as men, regardless of gender assignment at birth.

In the first reading of the “Spelman Admissions and Enrollment Policy Update” and the *Admissions and Enrollment Policy*, it appears that Spelman has taken into consideration the fluidity of gender by accepting students whose gender does not align with the social expectations attached to their sex assigned at birth by extensively seeking out the perspectives of students, faculty, staff and alumnae and following in the steps of other women’s colleges in the United States to consider trans women for admission into the College. However, a critical review of the policy and other procedures reveals that Spelman is not inclusive of varying gender identities and expressions, specifically those that fall within and beyond the gender binary.

President Schmidt Campbell’s “Spelman Admissions and Enrollment Policy Update” encourages readers who have additional questions regarding the *Admissions and Enrollment Policy* to visit the “Admission Frequently Asked Questions” page on the College website. In the “Admission Frequently Asked Questions,” the College provides clarification on the language regarding what it means to consistently live and identify as a woman. The College’s response states, “A candidate must self-identify as a woman on the application and supporting application materials should verify this self-identification.” Although it is understandable for the College to be sure to maintain the legal categorization as a women's college, the criteria for students to consistently live as women ignores that gender identities shift over time as well as the expressions people use to describe their gendered senses of self (Nicolazzo 2017). The requirement that a prospective student self-identifies as a woman not only fails to consider the complexities and fluidity of gender identity, but it also expects students to operationalize or express their gender within binary terms.

Additionally, this policy shows the disregard for trans and nonbinary students that whose gender identity does not fit in the gender binary during their time in college. In other words,

students' gender identity is limited to binary terms, from the application process to graduation. In the previous chapter, I discussed the issue regarding the erasure of nonbinary students at Morehouse College. It is important to reiterate that the omission of nonbinary students in campus policies places nonbinary students on the margins, reinforces the expectation that students assimilate to a racialized gender binary, and renders trans students' identities, experiences, and needs as nonexistent on both the interpersonal and institutional levels. Unlike Morehouse College whose policy states that students who transition from man to woman are no longer eligible to matriculate at the institution, Spelman includes a clause in the *Admissions and Enrollment Policy* that states, "If a woman is admitted and transitions to male while a student at Spelman, the College will permit that student to continue to matriculate at and graduate from Spelman."

Spelman College recognizes the burdens and challenges that that transferring schools can produce for students, specifically Black students from lower income backgrounds. Furthermore, students of different genders may not have the financial and social support of their families based on their gender identity and/or expression. However, the language used to describe gender transitions within the policy is still problematic because it conflates sex and gender. The *Admissions and Enrollment Policy* describes some students that may transition while attending the College as, "a woman [that]...transitions to male." The term woman describes a gender identity while male describes a sex assigned at birth. The entanglement of these terms demonstrates that the College does not have a clear understanding of gender as they are unable to identify the differences between sex and gender identity.

Furthermore, the College's requirement that students self-identify as women when applying for admission holds a transnormative assumption that trans students only transition

from one binary, socially intelligible category to the other. In other words, the College provides a restrictive definition of gender that fails to consider the expansiveness of trans identities and the legitimacy of nonbinary identities. Therefore, Spelman is unable to adequately address and support members of their campus community that are directly affected by the *Admissions and Enrollment Policy*. Spelman appears to be open to identity exploration, but the College's failure to sufficiently address the complexities of sex and gender increases the chance that students exploring their gender identity while matriculating at the institution may experience a heightened level of ignorance (Goldberg and Kuvalanka 2018).

However, the clause within the *Admissions and Enrollment Policy* that permits students to continue to matriculate through the College after they transition to a gender other than woman, should not be viewed as an indicator of inclusiveness of trans and gender nonconforming students at Spelman. Concluding that Spelman is trans- inclusive solely based on the consideration of trans students for admissions, ignores the experiences of trans students at an institution that negates the existence of trans students, despite the performative nature of the College's new *Admissions and Enrollment Policy*. For example, Nicolazzo (2016) states that transphobic policies, practices, and other institutional norms on campus can force students to negotiate disclosing their gender identity or passing as feminine to not be seen as unintelligible or deviant by other students, faculty, and staff. Therefore, Spelman must extricate the various ways trans students identify, express, and embody their gender whether it be within or outside of the gender binary. The College cannot ascribe gender identity to trans students, nor can they create fixed categories in which a student can describe their gender identity. Instead, Spelman must relinquish their power and implement an institutional culture that acknowledges, respects,

and protects the array of gender identities, expressions, and embodiments of its students (Thorpe 2015).

President Schmidt Campbell's "Spelman Admissions and Enrollment Policy Update" also references the Transgender Policy Task Force, a team comprised of faculty, staff, alumnae, and trustees assembled to develop policy recommendations regarding the admission and enrollment of trans students to present to the President and Board of Trustees. The College website includes a page "Transgender Policy Task Force" that provides additional details about the responsibilities of the Task Force and resources including articles, terminology, and hyperlinks to admission policies at other women's colleges in the United States. Bryn Mawr was one of seven colleges included on the list of policies at other women's colleges. Bryn Mawr's policy states,

In light of our mission and these understandings of gender, Bryn Mawr College considers as eligible to apply to the undergraduate college all individuals who have identified and continue to identify as women (including cisgender and trans women), intersex individuals who do not identify as male, individuals assigned female at birth who have not taken medical or legal steps to identify as male, and individuals assigned female at birth who do not identify within the gender binary ("Transgender Applicants")

Bryn Mawr's policy demonstrates knowledge and recognition of sex and gender, and gender diversity among students. Therefore, the inclusion of and reference to admissions policies at other women's colleges such as Bryn Mawr on the "Transgender Policy Task Force" page on the College website and in President Schmidt Campbell's "Spelman Admissions and Enrollment Policy Update" demonstrates that Spelman's exclusion and omission of nonbinary identities is intentional. Spelman was exposed to admission and matriculation policies at other institutions that recognize the differences between sex and gender and the ways in which colleges can maintain a woman-centered focus without excluding individuals that exist within and outside of sex and gender binaries.

#### 5.4 Keeping the Spelman Sisterhood Exclusive

President Schmidt Campbell affirms Spelman’s “fervent belief in the power of the Spelman Sisterhood” in the “Spelman Admissions and Enrollment Policy Update.” She states, “Students who choose Spelman come to campus prepared to participate in a women’s college that is academically and intellectually rigorous and affirms its core mission as the education and development of high-achieving Black women.” While it is important for Spelman to continue to advocate for the relevance of their existence as a historically Black college and women’s college in a society that continues to systematically oppress Black women, President Schmidt Campbell’s reference to Spelman’s mission of developing Black women maintains the social privileging of cisgender and binary, socially intelligible gender identities and ignores the existence of nonbinary students. The cisnormative and transnormative discourse, policies, and practices at Spelman may cause trans students to be susceptible to discrimination and ultimately asserts that trans nonbinary students are not part of the Spelman Sisterhood (Bilodeau 2005; Goldberg and Kuvalanka 2018).

In the *President’s Letter to the Community* “Welcome Back!” President Schmidt Campbell’s mentions students’ responsibility to act with civility, tolerance, and respect for all members of the Spelman community. Civility and respect are two terms that are listed in the *Student Handbook and Resource Guide* section, “What It Takes to Be a Spelman Sister” and represent the values and principles of the College. Another concept mentioned in “What It Takes to Be a Spelman Sister” is diversity. The description of diversity states that categories of difference including gender and gender expression “are not always fixed: they can be fluid. The overall goal of diversity is that each Spelmanite learn to respect the individual rights of her sister and recognize that no one individual or culture is intrinsically superior to another.” There is a

recognition of the fluidity of identities and conditions as well as how people are hierarchically ranked within society that produces differential experiences of access and opportunity based on categories of difference. The description of diversity suggests that Spelman respects the individual rights of students and does not succumb to ideologies of superiority. While the authors positively recognize the importance of diversity and the complexity of identity and experience, the sole use of feminine pronouns in the definition of diversity contradicts the sentiments of fluidity and creates mixed messages regarding the existence, acceptance, and belonging of trans and gender nonconforming students on at Spelman.

The lack of clarity regarding the acceptance of trans students into the Spelman community are further exacerbated in the College's conceptualization of the Spelman Sisterhood. In President Schmidt Campbell's "Welcome to Spelman College!" letter to new students, she identifies the Spelman Sisterhood as "the core of campus life." She lists different occupations, religions, and sexualities that are represented among current students and alumni and concludes, "Out of all of that diversity comes the unifying principle of Sisterhood that makes the campus a vibrant and dynamic community." As the Spelman Sisterhood is a central component of the traditions and practices at the College, it is understanding that it would be bring about questions regarding trans students' place within the Sisterhood. In the "Admissions Frequently Asked Questions," there is a question regarding Spelman's intentions to uphold the values of sisterhood. The response states, "Yes. All Spelman students are a part of the Spelman Sisterhood and our core beliefs in the bonds of sisterhood remain." By this statement, it appears that although the term sisterhood is often used to describe an association or community of women linked by the commonality of being assigned female at birth, Spelman has expanded their definition of sisterhood to include all Spelman students regardless of their sex assigned at birth, gender



identity, and gender expression. However, the *Student Handbook and Resource Guide* states that the “Spelman Sisterhood represents a community of women who share in the educational and social experiences of Spelman College.” By specifying a gender in the phrase “a community of women,” the College contradicts the “Admissions Frequently Asked Questions” response that states all Spelman students are a part of the Spelman sisterhood. While the mixed messaging in the “Admissions Frequently Asked Questions” and the *Student Handbook and Resource Guide* calls into question whether Spelman students who do not identify as women are in fact a part of the Spelman Sisterhood, the contradictory statements implicitly suggest that cisgender students at Spelman are undoubtedly part of the Spelman Sisterhood.

Ultimately, the mixed messaging regarding the inclusion of trans students at the College is indicative of Spelman’s desire to uphold its reputation as an institution that produces elite, educated Black women who become leaders within the Black community. Swann (2020) argues that Spelman’s opposition to queer identities is rooted in their attempts to protect their reputation in the Black community by utilizing and propagating respectability politics and homophobia. I extend Swann’s argument to suggest that Spelman presents a dialectic image in which their efforts to “save face” are dependent on the audience. The intentional exclusion and disregard for trans students aligns with the values of respectability politics and transphobia prevalent within the Black community (Patton 2014). On the other hand, the implementation of the new *Admissions and Enrollment Policy* and public denunciation of violence against trans students discussed in the next section are performative gestures that allow Spelman to maintain its status as a high-ranking liberal arts women’s college that appears to be addressing the shifts in higher education that call for consideration and inclusion of trans students. Furthermore, Spelman’s exclusionary policies and practices are an example of intraracial interest convergence. The

Spelman contexts pivots from Derrick Bell's (1980) conceptualization of interest convergence which posits that, "the interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites." Here, the accommodation of trans students at Spelman through the development and implementation of the *Admissions and Enrollment Policy* occurred not through a desire to rid the institution of its trans oppressive practices but because it converges with the cisgender College's interest of maintaining a positive public image.

### **5.5 Trans-Violence on Campus**

The "Admissions Frequently Asked Questions" page on the College website states that Spelman fully supports trans students and will be sure that procedures are in place for students throughout their matriculation through the College. Housing accommodations are often a concern regarding trans students in higher education and the College addresses these concerns by including a question regarding housing on the "Admissions Frequently Asked Questions" page. The College states accommodations will be handled on a case-by-case basis because, "The College believes that all residential students are entitled to a safe and comfortable living environment." In the first reading of this response, it appears that Spelman is considering the range of circumstances that contribute to trans students' lived experiences. Further, one would agree that while a student is on campus, the College is responsible for ensuring the safety of all students. However, a critical analysis of the College's response to their handling of housing accommodations in the "Admissions Frequently Asked Questions" on the website and the "Housing & Residence Life" section of the *Student Handbook and Resource Guide* reveals that the College is more concerned with the safety of its cisgender students than its trans students.

The "Housing & Residence Life" section of the *Student Handbook and Resource Guide* includes information such as the visitor policy, misconduct violations, health and safety

inspections, occupancy violations, and roommate conflicts. The only time the safety of the students is mentioned in this section is in reference to health and safety inspections that are performed at least once per semester “to ensure safety devices are working properly and to address unsafe conditions.” There is no reference to the safety of students even when addressing roommate conflicts that result from a resident “purposely behaving in a hostile manner toward her roommate(s).” Therefore, the College’s sole discussion of the safety of students in housing when it involves trans students, evokes stereotypes of individuals on the male to female spectrum, specifically stereotypes that characterize trans women as sexually predatory.

The discourse regarding the safety of students parallels the justification for anti-trans legislation regarding bathrooms. The rhetoric used to justify legislation such as the bathroom bills were based on the idea that trans women are a threat because they are presumed to be men posed as women with predatorial, uncontrollable sex drives, ignoring trans women’s womanhood (Lenning, Brightman and Buist 2021). Therefore, the justification for bathroom bills and Spelman’s explanation for handling housing accommodations to ensure students are safe and comfortable are similarly framed to protect cisgender women from ‘deceitful’ trans individuals (Lenning, Brightman and Buist 2021). Further, this framing of transwomen at Spelman contributes to transmisogynoir or, the oppression of Black trans feminine people where anti-Blackness, transphobia, and misogyny intersect to form a unique system of oppression (Wentling 2019). The discourse regarding trans students reveals how the institutional practices at Spelman enact transmisogynoir that often leads to discrimination and violence.

Transmisogynoir contributes to what Lenning et al. (2021) call the trifecta of violence, or the relationship between violent ideology, violent policy, and violent acts. As it pertains to trans students at Spelman, the trifecta of violence is comprised of transmisogynoir that results in

discriminatory and exclusionary policies that embolden cisgender students to commit violence against trans students (Lenning, Brightman and Buist 2021). There are three clear examples of the trifecta of violence at Spelman that are addressed in three of President Schmidt Campbell's *President's Letter to the Community* found on the College website. Two incidences of violence occurred in spring 2018, before the new admissions policy was implemented. LGBTQ+ students at Spelman reported that someone slipped hateful notes under their dorm room doors that included messages such as, "Keep your tran out of our bathrooms. Thanks!" "We don't want you freaks! No queers!" and "#DIE We don't want you here" (Baldacci 2018). In another instance, a trans student was knocked to the ground as he exited a residence hall. In the fall of that same year, fliers with the words "Black Trans Lives Matter" were defaced in an academic building.

In the "Welcome Back!" *President's Letter to the Community*, President Schmidt Campbell denounced the violent behaviors towards trans and queer students and claimed that the College reviewed each of the incidences, solicited input from the community, and ultimately were unable to identify who was responsible for the violent acts. In response to the incidences, the College escalated hate speech to a major campus offense as opposed to a residence hall violation, installed 30 additional cameras at the entrances and exits to the residence halls, and Public Safety will issue a campus wide alert and enhance patrols on campus in the event of a campus assault. While it is beneficial for the campus community to have these policies and procedures in place, many of the measures are reactive instead of preventative. This allows for the continuance of the trifecta of violence at Spelman that ultimately upholds institutionalized oppressive systems at the College.

It is expected that the President of the College condemns the violent actions of cisgender students toward trans and queer students. After LGBTQ+ students received hateful letters

President Schmidt Campbell issued a response stating, “Spelman abhors your behavior. Spelman will continue to open its arms to embrace all of our Spelman students whatever their gender identity, sexual orientation, or gender expression. Spelman is love, justice, and respect. You, the perpetrator, are not Spelman” (Baldacci 2018; Grindley 2018). President Schmidt Campbell also made a declarative statement in a later *President’s Letter to the Community* “Campus Incident,” regarding the defacing of a sign posted on campus that affirmed Black trans lives declaring, “Let me be clear: Black trans lives matter at Spelman College.” While President Schmidt Campbell condemns the violent acts of cisgender students toward trans and queer students and asserts the humanity of trans students at the College, it is unclear whether it is believed that trans students actually belong at Spelman. Some Spelman students criticized President Schmidt Campbell and other Spelman officials’ lack of response to the incidences regarding hateful notes until local news stations began to cover the incidence (Grindley 2018). It is also important to note that the *President’s Letter to the Community* regarding the hateful notes placed under the doors of trans and queer students is longer available on the College website. This brings into question whether President Schmidt Campbell and the Spelman community truly oppose the anti-trans behaviors of some of their cisgender students. Further, the anti-trans violent behaviors speak to cisgender students’ belief that their gender inherently positions them to serve as gatekeepers of who belongs in the Spelman Sisterhood.

## **5.6 Dressing for Success: Patriarchal Expectations and Respectability Politics**

In the last part of my analysis, I discuss how Spelman’s dress code for students perpetuates middle-class values and respectability politics, which do not account for gender diversity among students. In the mid-twentieth century, as clothing styles and the social appropriateness of those styles changed, respectable attire remained recognized and pursued

within the Black community. Spelman regulated standards of dress by advising students to wear “simple tailored dresses, skirts, sweaters, and blouses” with “low-heeled, comfortable shoes” and to avoid clothes “that look like second skin” and excessive makeup (Ford 2013). These expectations for dress were enforced to express a Christian, middle-class, and modest presentation that reflected a cultural ideal of racial uplift. While Spelman currently promotes a hybrid model of femininity that empowers students to exist in white- controlled spaces, be global citizens, and assume leadership roles, the College continues to uphold white patriarchy by policing dress and speech and enforcing adherence to traditional notions of womanhood within and outside of the Spelman community.

In the “Dress for Success” section of the *Student Handbook and Resource Guide*, attire is framed to be associated with the common stressors of college life. In order to deal with those stressors, the College encourages students “to be very practical...[because students] will want to be comfortable more often than that [they’ll] want to be stylish.” This insinuates that certain styles of dress are not comfortable and won’t allow for students to navigate college, therefore, students must compromise style for comfortability. Authors continue, “clothing that exposes any part of your anatomy or that does not provide appropriate coverage is a distraction.” Appropriate coverage is subjective, and this language evokes the controlling images of Black working class women as hypersexual. Women are expected to perform femininity in adherence with sex essentialism and the white patriarchal notion of male dominance (Butler 1999). Women are told that clothing should accentuate their bodies enough to “appease the white cishetero male gaze without appearing too liberated in their self-expression” (Cumberbatch 2021). Spelman promotes a Black femininity that is shaped by anti-Black, classist, and binary dominant notions of femininity. Spelman contributes to a history of imposing a reshaping of Black feminine identities

from their perceived deviance, hypersexuality, and misalignment with true white centered femininity.

Spelman characterizes behaviors that deviate from respectable forms of gender expression as distracting to faculty, staff, and peers. The expectation that students mute key aspects of their gender expression upholds oppressive ideologies that suggest the inferiority of particular forms of Black feminine identities. Instead of valuing all embodiment of Blackness, these expectations also work to ensure that those who present themselves in a way that does not conform to institutional standards, continue to be framed as a distraction to the goals of racial uplift and progress. It is also important to consider the fact that if faculty and staff are distracted from upholding the touted mission of College to educate and foster Black leadership, then it should be questioned whether or not they are actually equipped to prepare students to become global citizens. The responsibility to remain focused should be on those in positions of power, not those whose identity expression is considered distracting due to a history of devaluation and exclusion (Cumberbatch 2021). By placing the responsibility on students to conform to these standards of dress, the College makes those who challenge Black, respectable gender- specific norms, most uniquely, trans and gender nonconforming students, an anomaly at the institution and easy targets for othering. The authors conclude the statement by stating that clothing that does not provide the College's perception of an appropriate level of coverage, "is not the way to be taken seriously in the classroom or anywhere else on campus." Spelman subscribes to the notion that a woman's clothing is an indicator of her values, skills, and professionalism, and ascribes moral character to Black women based on dress (Collins 2002; Commodore 2019).

Interestingly, the expectations for conservative and limiting expressions of dress in the "Dress for Success" section of the *Student Handbook and Resource Guide* is restricted to

Spelman and the Atlanta University Center (AUC) – a consortium of institutions including Morehouse College, Clark Atlanta University, and Morris Brown who have a cross-registration system and often engage in co-curricular activities. The language used throughout the *Student Handbook and Resource Guide* regards Spelman students as global citizens, however, the expectations regarding clothing in the “Dress for Success” section are confined to Spelman and the other AUC campuses. The “Dress for Success” closing sentence reads, “Remember to keep in mind that you represent the historic Atlanta University Center Consortium institutions and its rich history, so your attire must be suitable for each occasion.” Spelman students are socialized to practice modesty and respectability aligned with white middle-class femininity across all AUC institutions. Each institution collectively enforces respectability as a tool for Spelman students to dispel stereotypical images of Black women, making them more acceptable to wider society and equipped to become global leaders and leaders of their own communities (Commodore 2019). Although Spelman empowers students to achieve academic excellence, the College teaches students to put the interests of the race above the interrelated, co-constructed components of their identities that inform their personal expressions of dress (Cole and Guy-Sheftall 2009).

Throughout the history of Spelman College, the institution has implemented standards of dress in an effort to espouse a human, civilized, and respectable presentation of gender. However, Spelman ignores the lived realities of trans and gender nonconforming students whose identities and expressions are not represented in the behavioral expectations of the College. The *Student Handbook and Resource Guide* includes an entire section devoted to one of the most recognizable and cherished traditions at the College - the “White Dress Attire: A Spelman Tradition.” This section begins by highlighting the origins and longevity of the tradition that dates back to 1900, followed by a discussion on each component of the white attire guidelines.



The authors recall the color white being the most available and affordable fabric at the time the tradition began. Also, at the onset of this tradition, hosiery only came in two colors, beige, and tan. The tradition requires students to wear solid, white dress or suit; white sweater or jacket if dress/blouse/shirt is sleeveless; neutral-toned hosiery, closed-toes, black shoes. Jewelry and other accessories such as pearl post or stud earring, single strand pearl necklace, small wallet, clutch purse, or small shoulder bag, are optional.

Despite the expansion of fabrics and hosiery available today, students are still expected to wear the white dress attire, “in the spirit of this tradition.” For rituals and other traditional ceremonies, first-year students and seniors are expected to wear the white dress attire, symbolizing their entrance into and rededication to Black respectable womanhood. The white dress attire tradition is evidence of the ways discourse becomes a social practice. At Spelman, the ideological effects of racial uplift discourse are manifested in the form of traditions (Gaines 1996). Traditions like the white dress attire reflect Spelman’s values of respectability that have become deeply entrenched in the culture of the College and operate as normal aspects of the institution (Commodore 2018). According to the College website, students are allowed to wear pants and pants suits. However, the *Student Handbook and Resource Guide* does not include pants within the white attire guidelines. Therefore, what is considered appropriate for the occasion is unclear and emphasizes the precedence for students to wear dresses, also creating a conflict for students who do not believe dresses are an accurate display of their gender identity. The white dress tradition is regulated by faculty, staff, alumni, and other stakeholders. For example, alumnae return to campus to celebrate Founders’ Day and enforce the white attire guidelines by walking down the lines of students prepared to enter Sister’s Chapel for the formal ceremony and pulling out students who are not properly dressed (Swann 2020).

Alumnae policing of the white dress tradition and the continued enforcement of wearing dresses despite the option of wearing pants or pant suits, can be tied to the concept of othermothering. Othermothering illuminates the cross-familial patterns of care found in Black culture (Case 1997; Collins, 2000; Hirt et al 2008). Out of necessity, Black mothers often depended on other women in the community to help take care of their children. The concept of othermothering originally focused on Black women's relationships with children in the community. However, Black women also came to heavily influence the culture of educational institutions (Hirt et al 2008). The institutional guardianship component of othermothering refers to the ways educational institutions significantly serve as a primary setting for othermothering and Black colleges serve as sources of cultural and intellectual capital (Hirt et al. 2008). As such, Spelman alumni's policing of white dress attire are efforts to protect and preserve the College's traditions and sustain the belief of their effectiveness as tools for racial advancement. Additionally, the cultural advancement component of othermothering refers to the ways the ethic of care is guided by the idea that morality improves the lives of the race as a whole (Hurt et al. 2008). Cultural advancement occurs as individuals receive advice and mentoring from more experienced representatives of the Black community. Alumni involvement in formal traditions provide current Spelman students tangible models of Black respectability and demonstrate their vested interest in the development of students through the transmission of a culture of modest, pure, and respectable displays of femininity.

Spelman is an institution founded to advance the idea that Black women should be judged by their character, hard work, and intelligence and not their race. However, Spelman contradicts this notion by judging the character of women based on their clothing choices (Commodore 2019). It is important to challenge the white constructed controlling images of Black women, but

it equally important that Spelman evaluates and confronts the ways the College perpetuates and reproduces these images in the Black community and society at large (Commodore 2019; Collins 2002). Spelman's institutional standards of dress can cause students to question if their performance of their authentic identity is recognized and valued at the College. With specific regard to trans students, as an institution that privileges cisgender identities, Spelman does not acknowledge the negative consequences of the dominant race and class- informed binary discourse at the College. Clothing choice is a personal choice for all students, but especially for trans students who face the risk of being hyper visible and a target for violence (Glickman 2015). In determining whether to follow or resist the attire guidelines, trans students not only have to consider if the guidelines reflect their gender, but also whether or not faculty, staff, peers, and alumni will recognize and respect their gender and expression.

## **5.7 LGBTQIA+ Student Experiences**

In this section, I discuss the findings from my secondary analysis conducted on the interview transcripts of the study, "Navigating the Network: An Exploratory Study of LGBTQIA+ Information Practices at Two-Single-Sex HBCUs" (De la Cruz, Winfrey, and Solomon 2022). The voices of LGBTQIA+ students in this study speak to the themes that emerged in my critical discourse analysis including gendered expectations of decorum informed by respectability politics, erasure of nonconforming gender identities and expressions, and the exclusivity of the Spelman Sisterhood. Participants also discuss the ways they are able to resist exclusionary discourses and practices by finding community and security among other LGBTQIA+ students.

Most of the participants discussed the institutionalized gendered expectations at Spelman College and the ways in which alumni and other students police gender identities and

expressions. Jamie, a trans queer student states, “whether or not you’re queer, Spelman definitely makes it seem like you have to be a certain way. And you have to dress a certain way, and look a certain way, and have a certain group of friends and be in certain things.” Jamie’s reflections show that the race and gendered structures at Spelman hold all students accountable regardless of their gender identity. Consequently, students feel like they have to not only conform to these standards of presentation but also who they associate with. References to social relationships are indicative of class-specific standards at Spelman that encourage students to distance themselves from certain Black femininities often associated with poor and working-class Black women. Students not only acknowledge the ideological principles of respectability dominant at the College, but also the mechanisms of accountability at Spelman to ensure adherence to institutional expectations. Riley, a bisexual woman, states:

Umm, well coming here I’ve realized that Spelman is very, very traditional. So if you wanna express yourself outside the box, or go outside the norm, I mean just, you know, be ready for like the looks from alum or like... the, you know just... sometimes you’re not gonna be accepted and sometimes people are gonna accept you.

Riley cautions students who wish to authentically express their gender expressions in ways that do not align with societal and institutional gender norms to prepare to receive nonverbal expressions of disapproval from alumni.

Students also described the ways hegemonic masculinity shapes the standards of Black masculinities at Morehouse. Tyler, a bisexual woman, states:

I feel like Spelman is more accepting because Morehouse, they’re like you have to be a man, you go to Morehouse, you have to be a certain image, you know? So, it’s not—their image isn’t a guy at school wearing a wig, you know, being transgender. That’s not what they want for their image. So, I think Morehouse could do a better job of being more accepting.

Tyler described a rigid gender binary system at Morehouse that does not allow for variability of gender expression outside of normative performances of masculinity. Aaren, a bisexual woman adds:

I don't really know too much about Morehouse, so I can't really say. But I know when it comes to a guy that's like you know within the community it can be a little harder, because people don't look at men in the same way that they look at girls. Like men that wanna transition, men that date men, or are sexually attracted to men, they don't look at them in the same way, so I'm pretty sure they have a completely different experience.

Aaren contextualizes Tyler's argument within the broader sociocultural contexts. Hegemonic masculinity, the culturally idealized construction of manhood that centers whiteness, cisness, and heterosexuality, not only imposes a hierarchical gendered structure that marginalizes women and femmes, but also non-white, non-cis, non-heterosexual forms of masculinities. Therefore, students at Morehouse who do not adopt normative forms of racialized masculinities are seen to compromise their ability to maintain gender dominance within the race and abandon the tools to navigate the racial power dynamics of larger social and political pecking order of masculinities in which Black men do not have racial power (Grundy 2021). While Tyler and Aaren specifically discussed the standards of manhood and masculinity at Morehouse College, their arguments can inform the experiences of trans students who attend Spelman College. Trans students on the man to woman spectrum may choose to attend Spelman as a means of affirming their gender identity. However, a trans students' ability to pass as a cis woman can determine how they are perceived by faculty, staff, students, and alum, and the specific gendered criteria used to assess the way they "do gender" (Fenstermaker and West 2009).

The participants described the ways LGBTQIA+ individuals are excluded and erased at Spelman College. As an institution who is dedicated to their history and founding principles, Jamie explained the extent to which Spelman enforces cisheteronormativity by neglecting to

acknowledge the queerness of the College's founders. Jamie states, "Spelman does not recognize how many queer people are on this campus, they don't even recognize on our Founders' Day that the college was started by lesbians. So, when you have that level of erasure, you have to like carve out your own place, because Spelman doesn't make one for you." The intentional and explicit erasure of the founder's sexualities manifests in the continued exclusion of LGBTQIA+ individuals within the Spelman College community. As a result, students are forced to create their own spaces that acknowledge their existence and rightful place at the College.

Spelman not only engages in historical queer erasure but their exclusion of LGBTQIA+ students extends to institutionalized terminology including Spelman Sisterhood. Courtney, a gender fluid student says"

So the sisterhood thing—not only is it like tradition, which is good and cool or whatever, but it also is kind of like hackneyed and old-school, because like honestly sisterhood—what?....you know everybody's gender isn't like... they don't—not everybody goes by like the gendered bodies thing, so like "sisterhood"? Like what?

Courtney critiqued the ways the idea of the Spelman sisterhood ultimately excludes students, specifically those who do not describe their gender identity in the feminine terms that is assumed through the concept of sisterhood. Shannon, a queer ciswoman further complicates the inclusion of all students within the Spelman Sisterhood by describing the way acceptance into the sisterhood insulates LGBTQIA+ students from oppression faced at the institution and society largely. She states:

This place is beautiful in that it is kind of like a fortress of identity [participant laughs]. So like the commonality of sisterhood and like black womanhood like that will insulate you. Not to like, you know, be negative, but there's kind of like a comforting feeling in that. So like even if you do like face intersectional oppression, which is terrible. I can't undersell that—it is really trash... umm, at least you have that commonality to fall back on.

The Spelman Sisterhood and underlying ‘commonality of black womanhood’ provides comfort in the midst experiences of oppression that intersecting identities produce. The social location of students within intersecting systems of oppression determines who is included in the sisterhood and who, therefore, can benefit from the comfort the sisterhood provides. The ‘commonality of black womanhood’ may create boundaries of who benefits from the community that exclude specific trans and nonbinary identities. On the other hand, the ‘commonality of black womanhood’ may create an inclusive space that acknowledges the range of experiences of individuals oppressed by racist, cissexist, patriarchal systems of power. This inclusive space can offer safe environments where LGBTQIA+ students can connect with other individuals who share an identity and become valuable sources of support (Nicolazzo 2017; Goldberg and Kuvalanka 2018).

Spelman College’s LGBTQIA+ student organization, Afrekete, and unstructured communities of queer students provide safe spaces for students to escape the judgmental cisheteronormative gaze and come to understand who they are as individuals. Riley states:

They’re so welcoming and they are so like accepting of whoever you might be—any of your views, where you’re coming from, like you’re not gonna get any type of judgment that you might get outside of the queer community. They invite you everywhere, there’s always open doors, you can always talk to somebody, they understand where you’re coming from...they make it a safer, like, a more comfortable experience in my opinion.

LGBTQIA+ communities of students at Spelman offer social, physical, and psychological safe spaces for each other that protect students from the dominant ideologies that justify physical and emotional violence against queer students. Safety found within the LGBTQIA+ community at Spelman College allows students to comfortably explore their identities, including finding the language and meanings that best describe their gendered senses of self. Furthermore, queer alum

remain active members in the LGBTQIA+ community on campus after they matriculate. Jamie discussed the ways current LGBTQIA+ students receive support from queer alum:

They usually share with us like how they have gotten initiatives passed in the past, and how they have become very visible on campus, and the different ways that they've gone about just making themselves visible. So, like for example they were the ones that told us a few years back, "Hey you should have a pride week." So, we started having pride weeks and we started um demanding like visibility at new student orientation, and demanding that we be in the RSO fair. Um so different things like that the alumnae have told us to do, and we use that information especially now when we are trying to negotiate with the school about LGBTQ rights. Um we're definitely taking the types of things that they've used in the past that have been effective and incorporating them into that.

While alumni are a vital part of the systems of social control at the institutions, queer alum serve as resources to bring about change in support of queer visibility and acceptance.

## 5.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the findings of my analysis on 2019- 2020 *Spelman College Student Handbook and Resource Guide*, the *Admissions and Enrollment Policy*, and the Spelman College Official website. My analysis revealed that genderism is systemic and ideological at Spelman College and is perpetuated through policies, procedures, practices, and responses to campus incidents. While the *Admissions and Enrollment Policy* may appear to advance the rights of trans students at Spelman, the College fails to address the complexities of sex and gender and reinforces structures in place at Spelman and across society that contribute to the oppression of trans individuals, including the erasure of nonbinary identities and anti-trans violence. Spelman consistently references the College's history, mission, and reputation to establish conservative expectations for students to adopt respectable expressions of Blackness and adhere to traditional notions of womanhood to prepare themselves to assume their 'rightful' place as leaders of the Black community.



Furthermore, Spelman's rigid adherence to the gender binary is informed by racism, classism, and other systems of oppression. The College upholds deeply embedded white heteropatriarchal values by policing gender identities and expressions through speech and dress. Traditions with guidelines of dress and other gendered expectations that guide the everyday operations of the College ascribe moral character to student's styles of dress and frames clothing an indicator of a student's dedication upholding the College's reputation and racial uplift. LGBTQIA+ students critique gender binary discourse and other exclusionary language at the College that suggest a monolithic experience among students and find community among queer students that helps them to navigate cisgender, trans exclusionary environment at Spelman that places LGBTQIA+ students at the margins.

## 6 CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

While the admissions policies at Morehouse and Spelman Colleges are an important symbolic marker of inclusion of Black trans students in the academy, my critical discourse analysis reveals that the policies create a façade of inclusion that insufficiently addresses campus environments that ultimately uphold trans oppression (Nicolazzo 2018). This study utilizes intersectionality to interrogate intersecting systems of oppression at HBCUs. Intersectionality is useful not only for an examination into policies but to uncover the nuances of policies that may initially appear inclusive. My study finds evidence that supports Spade's (2015) cautionary assertion that a narrow focus on policy change, even policies that claim to advance the rights of trans individuals, can ignore the ways that policies reify the gender binary and maintain structures that contribute to the subjugation of trans individuals (Farley and Leonardi 2021). My analysis revealed latent power relations and the convergence of multiple oppressive structures including race and gender, along with class, sexuality, and religion that negatively framed nonnormative gender identities and expressions and created exclusionary campus environments. My findings demonstrate the need for a continued commitment to unveiling power structures within higher education that illuminates the ways institutional policies, practices, traditions, and interact with one another to organize and maintain oppression at Morehouse College and Spelman College.

My study pays particular attention to the institutional dynamics that reflect and construct dominant social ideologies and inequities at Morehouse and Spelman Colleges. More specifically, my analysis highlights the ways these institutions are cisgender and perpetuate genderism, respectability politics, and cisheteropatriarchy through policies, practices, and traditions. One of the dominant ideologies at both Morehouse College and Spelman College was

the politics of respectability. The politics of respectability, a set of rules that were developed to aid Black people in their efforts of racial uplift by reclaiming their humanity and establishing themselves worthy of respect and protection (Higginbotham 1993), were essential to the perpetuation of genderism, or the rigid adherence to the gender binary in practices, policies, and norms at both Morehouse and Spelman Colleges. The Colleges define what it is to be men and women through an endorsement of certain types of Black masculinities and femininities that emphasize self-improvement, moral character, refined presentation, and community leadership (Grundy 2012). Performance and presentation are tenets of respectability politics that function to demonstrate assimilation to the white norms and establish Black people worthy of respect and protection, particularly among those who would assume leadership roles in the Black community and represent the race in white dominated spaces (Richardson 2019). Morehouse and Spelman Colleges frequently reference their school missions of developing Black men and Black women to become leaders to establish nonnegotiable expectations and practices, promote conservative performances of dress and speech, and justify the institutions' failure to acknowledge gender diversity among its student bodies.

The focus on gender presentation was essential to the cisnormative conceptualizations of the Morehouse Man and Spelman Woman. Students are socialized to adopt these statuses by demonstrating performances of middle-class Black femininity and masculinity through institutional traditions such as New Student Orientation at Morehouse College and the white dress tradition at Spelman College. However, these standards are not particular to these annual ceremonies and traditions. Students are continually indoctrinated into the norms and traditions of the Colleges to ensure that students come to understand themselves as part of the institutions' constructions and valuations of Black masculinity and femininity. LGBTQIA+ voices indicated

the pressure students feel to conform to these standards of decorum. Morehouse and Spelman Colleges actively engage in and perpetuate the surveillance of students' adherence to these expectations to identify and sanction those deemed noncompliant with binary gender performances. Dress codes and the policing of gender performance from peers and alumni are mechanisms of social control enforced to guard institutional reputations and missions for racial advancement. The Colleges' consistent policing of trans students systematically excludes these students from participation in traditions and practices that are seen as valuable to the cultural experiences at these HBCUs. Furthermore, students at Morehouse College who do not identify as men are at an additional risk of exclusion from an education that could provide access to other means of opportunity and mobility, according to *the Gender Identity Admissions and Matriculation Policy*. By focusing on clothing and dress, the College allows for the cisgender gaze to define the appropriateness of trans bodies (Farley and Leonardo 2021). This discourse evokes gender binarism, violence against trans students, and privileging of cisgender bodies. This also shapes a monolithic and transnormative narrative about trans individuals and reifies oppressive structures that narrow the inclusion of trans individuals.

Intersectionality as a framework not only allows for better understanding of individual identity of students but also situates the individual within larger structures of inequality (Njoku et al. 2017). The gender binary discourse and cisheteropatriarchal expectations within the policies, procedures, and practices at Morehouse and Spelman Colleges creates an environment that marginalize trans students and fail to foster a culture that allows trans students to be fully recognized as part of the campus communities. Previous research shows that in spite of pro-trans policies, trans bias is manifested in students' experiences with professors and administrators' refusal to use correct pronouns and chosen names, course offerings that ignore and render the

lived experiences of trans individuals invisible, hostility from cis students, and faculty who are uninformed about gender diversity (Farmer et al. 2020; Francis & Jaksch 2019). Furthermore, participants in Farmer et al. (2020), perceived that administrators adhere to the traditions and history of their institutions. My study adds to literature on institutional policy in higher education by revealing the ways that the history and traditions of single-sex HBCUs are central to the construction and reproduction of cisheteropatriarchal ideologies.

Respectability politics, one of the dominant ideologies at both Morehouse College and Spelman College also include antagonism toward queerness and do not include the freedom to live outside of the gender binary. Both Morehouse and Spelman Colleges present mixed messages regarding the acceptance and belonging of trans students and demonstrate their commitment to the cisnormative and transnormative discourse, policies, and practices that excludes students of diverse genders at their institutions. The development and implementation of the new admissions policies at Morehouse and Spelman Colleges do not guarantee that trans students are safe. The findings in this study supports previous research that documents trans student experiences with harassment, bullying, and physical violence by other students (Seelman 2014, Beemyn and Rankin 2011; Dungan, Kusel, and Simounet 2012; Rankin et al. 2010). Incidences of anti-trans violence at Spelman College referenced in the *President's Letters to the Community* demonstrate that trans policies do not automatically create shifts in institutional and campus cultures. LGBTQIA+ students at Morehouse College describe the ways institutionalized genderism and transnormativity at Morehouse College creates conditions that allow for anti-trans violence, specifically experiences of gender policing of both dress and behaviors by alumni and peers. Therefore, my study supports previous research that states that while nondiscrimination policies provide trans students with an institutional basis for sanctions against cissexist behavior

and practices on campuses, trans students still experience anti trans administration, pedagogy, and peer violence (Francis & Jaksch 2019). This research also demonstrates the continued need to utilize an intersectional lens to “understand the considerable intragroup differences that derive from shifting historical, political, cultural, and social contexts in which identities are embedded” (Jones and Abes, 2013) and explore the nuances of Black trans students’ experiences at HBCUs to reveal the ways trans students endure and resist the dominant power structures and systemic ideologies that guide the operations of the Colleges.

### **6.1 Sociological Implications**

Racial uplift ideology as a dominant ideology at Morehouse and Spelman is also indicative of the way racism is embedded in the structure of the United States. Racism has endured over centuries through the reproduction and maintenance of highly racialized processes within major institutions of society. Thus, racism is not just a surface level, prejudicial attribute of U.S. society, but a social and ideological reality reflected and embedded in U.S. institutions today (Feagin 2006: 2). The sociohistorical location of HBCUs makes them uniquely positioned to function as white institutional spaces (Moore 2008). White institutional space is “the integrated functioning of the racialized structures, cultures, and practices, as well as dominant ideologies and discourses of social institutions, which interact to create a totally whitewashed space” (Moore 2008). HBCUs were founded within a social context characterized by white ideological supremacy in which white missionary organizations and northern industrial businessman funded Black Colleges with the paternalistic goal of converting Black freed men and women to their principles of Christianity, creating a class of ideal American citizens with “moral character,” and preparing them for wage labor (Albritton 2013; Gasman 2010; Wilcox et al. 2014; Cantey et al. 2011). HBCUs were constructed as white institutional spaces where

students were taught to internalize a set of beliefs and pattern their behavior according to the norms of white people who sought to uphold a racist social order, protect their power, and reduce resistance to racial inequalities by educating Black people (Gasman 2010).

Race and gender continue to operate as organizing principles at Morehouse College and Spelman College. Raced and gendered practices at these HBCUs reinforce a white structure of power and privilege which are justified through racial uplift and gender binary discourses. These discourses hierarchically construct Black masculinities and femininities, promote respectable gender presentations, and convey who has rightful access to the Morehouse and Spelman brands. The patterns of thinking and practice that come out of these discourses assert the intellectual and moral superiority of students who exhibit respectable, normative displays of Black womanhood and manhood and challenge the right of trans and gender nonconforming students to exist at these Colleges. The interaction between practice and discourse through mechanisms such as traditions, dress codes, and gender policing reinforce white cultural norms and white racist practices that organize the structure and everyday experience at HBCUs.

The white institutional spaces of Morehouse and Spelman creates a setting in which the perspectives of cisgender, white people become the baseline for understanding oneself, one's place at these institutions, and one's place in the fight for racial advancement. The racialized and gendered structures, cultures, and dominant discourses at Morehouse and Spelman Colleges create predicaments in which trans and gender nonconforming students must negotiate how to identify and express their gender identity during their time at these HBCUs. Furthermore, trans students occupy a contradictory space of being both invisible and hypervisible at these Colleges that lead to both overt and covert forms of discrimination (Moore 2008). An intersectional lens to

critically examine HBCUs as white institutional spaces reveals the mechanisms by which white supremacy functions and is reproduced at HBCUs.

Morehouse College and Spelman College uphold and enforce a gender binary that harms trans students. These institutions must play an active role in destructing these white institutional spaces to create more welcoming, gender affirming campus environments (Goldberg et al. 2019). Efforts to create trans inclusive and affirming campuses must consider the history and culture of the institutions. A major challenge in deconstructing white institutional space is the fact that rejecting a white framing of Morehouse and Spelman will put the institutions in conflict with their histories, missions, reputations, traditions, and dominant ideologies (Moore 2008). To deconstruct white space, the Colleges must constantly interrogate the intersecting systems of power at the Colleges that marginalize Black trans and gender nonconforming students as well as the underlying normative ideologies and discourses that operate at the commonsensical level to constrain the interrogation and transformation of these oppressive systems (Moore 2008; Self 2021).

The deconstruction of white institutional space and dismantling of white supremacy is not based on developing respectable forms of Blackness among students to defy racial stereotypes and stigmas held against Blacks. Morehouse College and Spelman College must move beyond limited representations of Blackness bound in respectability politics. hooks (1992) argues that Black people must expand their dualistic thinking of good and bad representations of Blackness and critiquing of the status quo. Instead, we must change the image of Blackness, “creating alternatives, asking ourselves questions about what types of images subvert, pose critical alternatives, and transform our worldviews” (hooks 1992). I echo hooks and argue that Morehouse College and Spelman College must create campus environments that encourage



bonds across difference, transform the interlocking systems of inequality at the institutions, and allow trans students autonomy over their existence in these spaces despite systemic white cisheteronormativity.

Morehouse and Spelman College must take on substantial, ongoing, clearly defined institutional efforts grounded in intersectionality that centers trans students to create trans inclusive and trans affirming campuses (Francis & Jaksch 2019). These efforts should use a “trickle-up” approach to ensure that the needs of students who experience the greatest degree of marginalization are met (Spade 2011). By taking a trickle up approach, the Colleges will not only honor trans students who have to navigate and resist genderism and other systems of oppression, but it may also improve the well-being and success of students privileged by these same systems (Farmer et al. 2020). Because trans students were not centered in policy development and implementation at Morehouse and Spelman Colleges, trans students should be included in the evaluation and transformation of campus policies and practices. LGBTQIA+ students in this study provide insight into the ways queer students navigate the Colleges and provide evidence for the need to further assess trans students’ experiences and needs, the availability and accessibility of institutional trans resources, and the power-laden structures that uphold their oppression (Goldberg et al. 2019).

Furthermore, the efforts must include intracommunal conversations about Morehouse and Spelman Colleges’ assumptions of automatic intraracial alliances between cis and trans students, faculty, staff, administration, and alumni that ignore that ways major stakeholders within the College communities contribute to trans oppression, despite a shared racial identity. For example, alumni play a vital role in upholding the cisheteronormative standards of middle-class Black masculinity and femininity at the Colleges by policing of trans and nonconforming bodies,

reinforcing of middle-class binary, gender norms on campuses, and representing idealization of Morehouse Man and Spelman Woman. As models of Black respectability and gatekeepers of institutional traditions that preserve the Colleges' cisgender histories and reputations, alumni along with faculty, staff, administrative leaders, and governing boards must recognize how they participate in white supremacy via anti-black manifestations of respectability politics and other intraracial tensions informed by classism, patriarchy, and cissexism in customs and traditions (Mobley et al. 2021). Additionally, these stakeholders must acknowledge the ways Blackness converges with gender, gender identity, class, sexuality, and religion to reimage what Blackness is, embrace all forms of Blackness, and actively engage in the restructuring of the physical, psychological, and organizations components of these institutions into trans affirming spaces (Farmer et al. 2020; Mobley et al. 2021).

## **6.2 Creating Trans Affirming Campuses**

Morehouse College and Spelman College, like many HBCUs, are credited for their Black-centered curriculum and campus cultures that provide spaces of solidarity and belonging for Black students (Martin 2016; Washington and Gasman 2016). However, these Colleges engage in what Myers (2018) calls institutional betrayal, or “the ways organizations perpetuate betrayal trauma by remaining ignorant to instances of trauma experience by members of their community” (4). Institutional betrayal occurs when “trusted and powerful institutions act in ways that cause harm onto those dependent on them for safety and wellbeing” (Smith and Freyd 2014); this is what happens to trans students at these HBCUs. In my study, the discourse in institutional policies and documents at both Morehouse College and Spelman College create an environment that allows for institutional betrayal and violence against trans students through a privileging of cisgender identities, binary labelling and referencing of students, fostering

widespread invisibility of nonbinary students, and upholding a system of accountability that unequally sanctions students whose gender identity and/or gender expression does not align with traditional gender norms.

While it is important for the Colleges to have a specific trans admissions and matriculation policies, this study demonstrates that that is not enough. Morehouse College and Spelman College have developed and implemented trans admissions policies but contradictory language regarding gender diversity, gender binary discourse in institutional policies, and the promotion and perpetuation of genderism in traditions and practices, demonstrate the insufficiency in just developing policies. Furthermore, there is an omission of implementation and evaluation plans of the policies and a lack of trans inclusive policies across the Colleges. Generic statements without tangible steps and resources in place are not supportive of trans students and do not allow for an accountability structure. While effective implementation varies across contexts, the adoption of new admissions policies at Morehouse and Spelman Colleges should have been accompanied by an implementation plan that clearly laid out action steps and accountability processes that allow for regular evaluation and review of the policies (Lawrence and Mckendry 2019; Leonardi and Staley 2018).

The implementation plans should have also included a timeline to ensure that the Colleges are meeting the measure of equality for trans individuals the policy set out, as well as incorporating current and emerging issues impacting trans students (Lawrence and Mckendry 2019). Morehouse and Spelman did not efficiently and effectively publicize resources for trans students such as providing specific information regarding changing records that enable students and alumni to change their name and gender on records, policies on access to gender-specific facilities, and trans physical and mental health resources. The Colleges' marginal effort to

effectively implement supporting policies and transform the institutions demonstrates their lack of awareness of gender diversity, acceptance of trans students, and commitment to long-term systemic change that alters power structures that privilege cisgender identities and conformity to traditional middle-class constructions of Black femininity and masculinity (Goldberg et al. 2019).

To challenge white institutional space and create trans affirming spaces, the power relations that facilitate learning must be exposed to institute curricular changes (Moore 2008). The policies and practices at Morehouse College and Spelman College must reflect an institutional structure that encourages emancipatory educational praxis and empowers faculty to utilize their classrooms as spaces of access and inclusion (Jackel and Holmes 2019). Emancipatory education is an approach that “involves a way of thinking about, negotiating, and transforming the relationships in classroom teaching, the production of knowledge, the institutional structures of the school, and the social and material relations of the wider community, society, and nation-state” (Nouri and Mahdi Sajjadi 2014). In the tradition of Friere (1977), emancipatory education posits that educators and students should co construct knowledge because curriculum and the way curriculum are presented sends messages regarding what constitutes knowledge and what knowledges are important enough to learn (Jackel and Holmes 2019). Otherwise, educators who actively oppress and uphold the oppression of trans students, prevent the liberation of students (Friere 1977; Case et al. 2012).

As members of the oppressed group, trans students’ central role in emancipatory education emphasizes the value of shared power in knowledge production and fosters authentic community that honors trans students at the College and their position within and/or beyond the gender binary (Case et al. 2012). Furthermore, by inviting trans student perspectives into the

curriculum, faculty are deviating from traditional methods of information delivery and renouncing some of their power to challenge the ways curriculum systemically privilege dominant identities and decenter knowledges that comply with normative ideologies and practices. Morehouse and Spelman must be willing to involve trans students in the process of bringing attention to oppression at the Colleges and work to sustain a co-constructed liberated institutional space. By creating a liberated space and including trans students in the transformation process, Morehouse and Spelman will expand their positions as producers of knowledge and developers of Black leaders who contribute to the campus, community, and society.

My suggestions regarding faculty's role in transforming institutional spaces are not ignorant to the fact that many faculties adopt the same cisheteronormative ideologies dominant at these Colleges and in their classrooms. Therefore, in order to expect faculty to engage in pedagogy that centers emancipatory practices, faculty must participate in professional development that uncovers existing biases and equips them with strategies that will support trans students (Jackel and Holmes 2019). The aim is to supplement the beneficial student- faculty relationships particular to HBCUs that have already been credit for the important role in student success (Jackel and Holmes 2019) and encourage faculty to view their classrooms as sites of transformation that disrupt oppressive systems of inequality at the Colleges, community, and society. The Colleges can partner with already existing campus resources such as the LGBTQIA+ student organizations to learn more about practices such as asking for names and pronouns, avoiding cissexist and binary pedagogical approaches, and not making trans students hyper visible and at risk for anti-trans violence (Jackel and Holmes 2019). However, engaging trans students must not overburden them. Morehouse and Spelman must be careful not to cause

additional emotional and physical labor on trans students. Additionally, trans students should be sufficiently compensated for their time and labor and have the freedom to engage in the labor as they see fit (Goldberg et al. 2019; Nicolazzo; Jackel and Holmes 2019).

### **6.3 Limitations**

The COVID- 19 pandemic affected the functions and operations of all global institutions, including the United States higher education system. Restrictions included college campuses closings for the entire 2020-2021 academic school year. As colleges reopened, safety guidelines and measures remained in place at Morehouse College and Spelman College that restricted access to the campuses to current students, faculty, staff and other college community members. presented many challenges that limited my ability to recruit trans and gender nonconforming students to participate in interviews. To support my recruitment efforts, I applied to Spelman College's Institutional Review Board (IRB), but my study was not accepted. Spelman College's IRB decision letter stated that the College does not collect data on the number of trans students at the institution and therefore, my target sample size of 20-25 students from both Spelman College and Morehouse College was too low to provide adequate protection of confidentiality. While this appeared to be an attempt to protect the institutions reputation, Spelman College's IRB decision restricted my ability to conduct interviews with Spelman students. I received approval from Morehouse College's IRB and was able to conduct one interview. However, after only conducting one interview, my intended use of snowball sampling would have become burdensome for one student and this is a form of labor I did not want the student to engage in.

To supplement the findings of my critical discourse analysis, I conducted a secondary analysis on interviews with LGBTQIA+ students as part of a separate study. This study was guided by a different set of research questions which informed the questions asked of students

during the interviews. Additionally, the criteria to participate in the study was not solely based on gender identity but also sexual orientation. There is a perceived connection between gender identity and sexual orientation resulted in the acronym LGBT in which the experiences of transgender individuals are seen as part of a larger community, despite their unique identities and experiences (Schneider 2010). I challenge the common grouping of marginalized sexual and gendered identities because the assumption that the needs of trans students equate to those of LGB students, ignores and suppresses the experiences of trans students (Schneider 2010). However, the voices of LGBTQIA+ students in the study uncovered how societal assumptions of the link between gender and sexuality informs the gendered experiences of these students.

Lastly, the documents and platforms included in the intersectional critical discourse analysis for this study were limited to those that were publicly available. Consequently, my analysis did not allow for a full assessment of the Colleges gendered messaging that may be more explicitly discussed in platforms with restricted access to those members of the institution. Centering trans students and their voices in future research can supplement the findings of the critical discourse analysis in this research by offering access to documents only available to students and primary accounts from trans students of the ways these institutional policies and procedures impact their ability to navigate these spaces and achieve academic success.

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