

Pageantry & Politics: Miss Howard University from Civil Rights to Black Power

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Howard University

Few realize that, historically, the women elected to serve as “Queens” of Howard University, were often reflections of political, social, and cultural issues of the time. This parade of beauty, intellect, and charm, was an unofficial barometer of where the University as well as the country stood on matters that pertained to cultural politics, institutional identity, and evolving definitions and standards of beauty. This article, written by a former Miss Howard, examines the embedded traditions, historical significance and controversies of this iconic position from the Civil Rights Era through the Black Power Movement, to argue that an in-depth analysis of the Queen’s role over these tumultuous years reveals a little-known, yet important narrative in the trajectory of Howard University.

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Before there was a title of Miss Howard University, there was the clear designation of the epitome of refinement, astuteness and sophistication: The Howard Woman. These women who were afforded the opportunity of education were in stark contrast to labels by White America such as “mammies” and “matriarchs,” which were placed on Black women as a result of the slave era. (Watson & Martin, 2004, p. 102). At Howard, the university’s commitment to educating and uplifting women is as historic as the institution itself. In 1870, the first seven graduates to receive certificates from the Normal Department were all women. (Logan, 1969) In 1915, Howard women participated in the National Suffrage Parade (Howard University, 1916). In the January 22, 1924 inaugural edition of the university’s student newspaper, *The Hilltop*, there were several articles which underscored the role of women in modern society. “Shall Women Debate at Howard,” discussed the importance of women receiving practice in public speaking (“Shall women debate at Howard?” 1924, p. 4). “Colored Women Physicians” reported that 90 women at Howard had earned degrees of doctor of medicine (“Colored women physicians,” 1924, p. 5). *The Hilltop* also addressed the topic of feminism:

In the rapid evolutions of the present decade no transformations have been more timely nor yet more apparent than the modern feminist movement in America. Even in the hotbed of conservatism, the Solid South, the docile, gullible type of womanhood which was wont to enjoy real satisfaction in the back seats of the male circus, is fading into oblivion and giving rise to the self-assertive, independent and even radical modern woman. . . . (“Girls in modern life,” 1924, p. 2)

During this same year Howard initiated a legendary pastime—homecoming. Homecoming at Howard, and other historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), is an epic celebration of grandeur, style, and collegiate comradery. Even before it was given that designation, there was the “Original Negro Gridiron Classic” dating back to November 1894, when Howard and Lincoln University gathered for a football or “gridiron” game (“This year’s Howard-Lincoln classic promises to be the best since 1926; Hilltop reviews entire history of annual tilt between two schools,” 1938, p. 1). The first game drew two thousand spectators, and became an instant classic. “It has become the outstanding athletic and social event for Negroes in America . . . What the Harvard–Yale game and the Army–Navy struggle are to White Americans, the Howard–Lincoln classic is to Negroes,” stated *The Hilltop* (“30th anniversary Howard–Lincoln classic tomorrow,” 1924, p. 1).

So in 1924, on the 30th anniversary of the Howard–Lincoln classic, the first official Howard homecoming was held to welcome returning alumni. Organizers aimed to inaugurate what it aimed to become one of the greatest events of the school year, and to “arouse in the heart of the old ‘grads’ fond memories which persist and produce homesickness until he finds himself back again at his Alma Mater . . .” (“30th anniversary”, 1924, p. 1). Five years later marked a pivotal year in the history of the United States. The Stock Market Crash of 1929 (“Stock market crash of 1929|American history,” n.d.) led to the beginning of the Great Depression and the rise of Hitler and Nazi Germany. In the midst of global turmoil, academia managed to remain center stage at Howard University: the Master of Science degree program began, the law school initiated courses for a civil rights curriculum, and undergraduate students who were afforded a higher learning opportunity were fastidious about their education. During that same year, *The Bison* yearbook staff held a popularity contest with a threefold purpose: (a) to find the most popular coed on the campus, (b) to provide portraits for the feature section of the 1929 *Bison* which would contain full page pictures of the winners, and (c) to provide subscriptions and finance for the 1929 *Bison* (“Bison popularity contest grows,” 1929, p. 1). On April 29, 1929, the results were announced: Mazie Hubbard, ‘29 from Sedalia, Missouri, was crowned “Miss Howard.” A prominent photograph and write-up on Hubbard was the largest photo centered on the top half of the front page. To the left of the queen’s photograph, there was a smaller snapshot profiling the student council president. To the right, another small photograph and feature write-up about *The Hilltop* editor (“Mazie Hubbard wins popularity contest,” 1929, p. 1). Hubbard and her runners-up were also given full-page features in the yearbook.

Eight years passed before another Miss Howard was selected to represent the university. This time, it coincided with the biggest event of the year—the 1937 much-anticipated homecoming game featuring Howard and Tuskegee Institute. *The Hilltop* also announced the “Queen of the Gridiron” competition (“‘Queen of the Gridiron’ to be selected for Tuskegee clash,” 1937, p. 1). The contest allowed any female student to vie for the title, with the winner again being selected by popular vote. Eleven women were on the ballot, and 323 students cast votes. Ada Deans, a history major and member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, received 103 votes and was crowned the first ever “Queen of Gridiron.” Two years later, Deans was also voted “May Queen” by the female student body in its annual contest. *The Hilltop* paid tribute to her, along with 1939 Gridiron Queen Dorothy Walker and other class favorites in a full-length page which included a poetic verse:

Behold an aggregation of Howard queens and candidates for the honor whose beauty, poise, sophistication and virtues officially stamp them as ladies eligible to wear the regal diadem in any men’s country. Shakespeare once said, “Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown,” but Shakespeare was not referring to the bevy of beauties who assume college royal titles and responsibilities . . . Socrates called beauty a short-lived tyranny. Plato a privilege of nature. Theophrastus, a silent cheat. Theocritus, a delightful prejudice; Carneades, a solitary kingdom; Aristotle, that it was better than all the letters of recommendation in the world; Homer, that it was a glorious gift of nature; and Ovid, that it was a favor bestowed by the gods. We are inclined to agree with Aristotle, in particular, and insist that beauty, like a bank note has a definite face value both socially and commercially.

No Foolin!—The Editors (“Speaking of queens . . .,” 1939, p. 5)

Deans was followed in 1938 by Marjorie Adele Davis (Borders) of Hartford, Connecticut, who was a student of famed Howard professors Dr. Alain Locke, the first African American Rhodes Scholar, regarded as father of the Harlem Renaissance, and preeminent 20th century sociologist, Dr. E. Franklin Frazier. These first gridiron queens enjoyed lives full of careers and service. Ada Deans Chapman became the founding librarian of Howard’s School of Engineering and Architecture. She also made history as foreman of the federal grand jury that investigated the 1972 Watergate Hotel break-in (“Obituaries,” 2004, p. B6). Marjorie Davis Borders was a member of the first class of the Howard University School of Social Work, and was a founding

member of the Hartford Chapter of Jack and Jill, Incorporated, and Charter Member of the Connecticut Caucus of Black Women for Political Action (“Borders, Marjorie Adele,” 2009).

In November 1987, this author was crowned “Miss Howard,” representing the School of Communications, after a highly competitive pageant with fellow queens of various schools and colleges at the university. As in years past, the Miss Howard Pageant marked the beginning of a highly anticipated homecoming week filled with a flurry of activities that culminated in a rivalrous 1987 football game against Morehouse College. One of the festivities was a “Former Queen’s Reception” where I had the fortune of meeting several of the original Gridiron Queens. Then elegant seniors, Ada Deans Chapman, Marjorie Davis Borders, and others, shared vivid memories, challenged me to represent them well, and expressed gratitude for being welcomed “back home.”

After being featured at the parade and homecoming game, the ladies were guests of honor at a celebration at the home of former Washington, DC Mayor, Walter E. Washington. The 1940 Gridiron Queen, Marion Reid Flagg, recalled her experiences to the *Washington Post*, “My mother once said to me that if Howard asked me to push a grain of sand from one end of the campus to the other, I would. That’s how much I love Howard” (Nelson, 1987). Their experiences as gridiron queens were so noteworthy, that when Chapman and Borders passed away, their titles as Howard Gridiron Queens were aptly noted in their published obituaries (“Obituaries,” 2004).

Thirty years later, I too share similar words of advice with current and former queens, and am still approached by alumni who kindly recall their memories of me as their “Miss Howard.” The experience is one of the underlining reasons which inspired me to study the history and impact of Howard queens. The research led me down an intensive and interesting road of discovery about how the former queens exemplified grace and gravity during the university’s controversial transition from Civil Rights to Black Power. The findings I ascertained provide an inventive and unique study into the cultural and social history of the university, evidencing that the position not only contributed to the cultural construct of the institution, but also evolved into an important opportunity for student ambassadors of Howard University.

THE HOWARD WOMAN

The balancing act of selecting a Howard queen who was beautiful, bore a broad responsibility, and recognized the struggle and advancement of the people who would walk through its carefully crafted gates, is a conundrum which has resurfaced throughout the decades. An article in *The Washington Post* entitled, “Homecoming at Howard Univ.: Pageantry, popularity and positive images,” addressed the duality of the role:

At Howard, the tradition commands special devotion. In most schools a queen reigns with her beauty and popularity alone, but as perhaps befits the special consciousness of a Black university, Miss Howard was asked to shoulder a heavy load of special and sometimes conflicting images. (McQueen, 1980)

Howard University, founded in 1867 is regarded as “the Mecca” of higher education, because of its bevy of distinguished alumni, faculty, and history as a bastion intellect and opportunity for African Americans. The university’s roots run deeply into the soil of American tradition (Logan, 1969). From its inception during Reconstruction, through the new millennium, the university continues to be regarded as the “Capstone of higher education.” It boasts of the largest number of Black scholars in the world, and was the first and only HBCU established by an act of Congress.

The importance of academic perspicacity combined with social grace for women at Howard University was redefined by its first Dean of Women, Lucy Diggs Slowe. A pioneering advocate for women, and a 1908 graduate, Slowe expounded that “The New Howard Woman,” was to be “intellectually alert, spiritually alert, and of extreme culture and refinement” (Miller & Pruitt-

Logan, 2012, p. 95). She was considered the “curator of class,” who ensured Howard women were polished and professional. Slowe was the founder of the National Association of College Women (NACW) which advocated for the rights of female faculty and students (Mjagkij, 2001). Slowe held women’s dinners each November, and each December organized a Candle Light Service, which was led by and for women at the university. Slowe was also markedly one of the illustrious founders of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, the first Black woman sorority founded at Howard University in January 1908 (“Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., Our founders,” n.d.).

Slowe was a warrior for women at Howard; synonymous to a pugilist who took her scars with pride. Her battles for women extended from the classroom (an English professor) to the board room, where her verbal and written spars with President Mordecai Wyatt Johnson became infamous. Slowe continued to be a torchbearer for women at Howard until she succumbed to a brief illness on October 21, 1937. Her sparring with President Johnson had become so onerous, that her family requested Dr. Johnson take no part in her funeral services (Miller & Pruitt-Logan, 2012).

POMP & POPULARITY

The elections for the title of Gridiron Queen at Howard were extremely fierce, routinely bringing in more votes than garnered for student leadership of the university (“Gridiron election,” 1960). The majority of the women selected were members of sororities; namely Alpha Kappa Alpha and Delta Sigma Theta, both of which were founded on Howard’s campus. To provide a clearer understanding of the vital impact of the selection process, the comprehension of the impact of Howard University as a closely knit community is necessary. For the coeds who attended the university, Howard was more than an institution of higher learning; it was a municipality to itself, and its residents, or students, shared the intrinsic properties by which a community is identified: A defined space, one in which daily activities takes place; and a general sense of belonging (Neal, 2012). Students took great pride in being members of the academic brotherhood. However, with this designation also came disparagement by those who regarded that sense of pride as preeminence. In 1946, *Life Magazine* featured a photographic essay entitled, “Howard University: It is America’s Center of Negro Learning.”

In this educational wilderness the Negroes’ only refuges are a handful of so-called ‘Negro colleges’ with varying standards, many of them low. There is just one Negro university in the U.S., Howard University in Washington, DC. To those who believe that the Negro needs only time and reasonable opportunity to take his proper place in American society, a glimpse of Howard is a brilliant revelation . . . (“Howard University: It is America’s center of Negro learning,” 1946, p. 114)

Showing posed photos depicting enchanting college life, the article commended the University for having strong academic programs and alumni, but also criticized what it called the “normal ills of collegiate snobbishness” (“Howard University: It is America’s center . . .,” 1946).

The complicated issue of comeliness for Howard University coeds is one that has been much-debated since the university’s founding, and one that was often the point of introspection for students selecting the university queen. The article, “Are We Grading on the Curves” in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, asserts that scientific and cultural research indicates that “pretty gets an A,” and that a person’s attractiveness affects the way people are perceived and respond to each other, from courtrooms, to job recruiters (Perlmutter, 2004). The author also argues that “patrolling, training, assessing, and assigning value to student appearances through dress codes, etiquette training, and beauty pageantry has and continues to be a facet of higher education” (Perlmutter, 2004).

At Howard University, beauty and fashion were not just part of student life, but were part of the fabric of the institution. The fashion statements made daily “on the yard,” and especially during special events such as homecoming, were just as renowned as the university’s reputation for its outstanding graduates and faculty. Miss Howard subsequently was the defining symbol of

aptitude and fortitude for the university which prided itself in being the best from academics and athletics, to the allure of its chosen queen. As the student body transitioned into a more socially conscious era, the title for the campus queen also shifted, and controversy began to swell over the purpose of the position, selection process, and eventually the title itself.

THESE ARE CHANGING TIMES

With “Truth and Service” as its motto, Howard University is historically renowned for “planting the seeds and nurturing theological and intellectual strains of resistance to the racial oppression of African Americans in the U.S.” (Gourdine & Brown, 2016, p. 20). In the 1920s, student protests led to the appointment of the university’s first Black president, Mordecai Johnson. Coeds also protested against discriminatory practices of downtown Washington, DC establishments in the 1930s. In 1943, Haitian President Elie Lescot visited the campus and spoke on the racial consequences of World War II (“Lescot speaks at Howard to Colored group,” 1943). Howard Law School’s notable graduates include Thurgood Marshall, who argued the famous, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) case before the United States Supreme Court, which led to the desegregation of public schools. Marshall later served as the first African American Supreme Court Justice.

The year 1960 marked the beginning of a new decade and new direction for Howard as President, Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, retired after serving 34 years. Howard became the focal point of a growing movement, as one of the major engineers of change in society (Howard University, n.d.). The university was receiving national attention for participating in marches at the White House. The first course on nonviolence, “The Philosophy and Methods of Non-Violence” taught by Howard’s Dr. William Stuart Nelson drew worldwide attention (Logan, 1969). The university, during this time, welcomed leadership from Jackie Robinson and Malcolm X, to John F. Kennedy, Jr.

The sociological culture began to transcend from unity and shared community to Afrocentric and revolutionary attitudes exhibited by the students. They continued to organize and exert student agency, ultimately changing the trajectories of themselves and the nation (Klemenčič, Bergan, & Primožič, 2015). As sit-ins were being held by students at HBCU North Carolina A&T University, Howard students continued their revolutionary efforts. Nineteen-year-old Howard leader and activist Stokely Carmichael participated in the Freedom Rides in the South and sparked campus demonstrations focused on students’ rights. Also in 1959, the title and selection of gridiron queen was scrutinized publicly for the first time:

... For many years now at Howard, the Gridiron Queen election has generated more steam than that generated for Student Council and Student government elections. More votes are cast for the former than for the latter. . . Martha Brooks. “The majority of the students show by their actions that they are more concerned about being entertained than being justly represented in their government. The question of placement of values is very poignant on this issue.” (Brown, 1959, p. 2)

In 1961, the queen’s title changed from Gridiron Queen to Homecoming Queen. The student body continued to vote for the winner, but the Homecoming Steering Committee, comprised of 36 members, called for a new grade requirement for the candidates, which was announced in *The Hilltop* in a poetic verse: “The H.S.C. did now revive, the minimum of two-point-five. Now all the gals that like to run, Must have this score to be ‘The One’” (Kovak, 1961, p. 3). Wilma Monteith, a senior sociology major with a 3.6 grade point average, was crowned “Miss Homecoming” by Howard University President Dr. James Nabrit, Jr.

As the shifts in political awareness and social responsibility permeated the academic landscape, the very nature of The Howard Woman, and thus, Miss Howard, also experienced a transformation. This revolutionary transformation took place in the 1960s, as did Howard’s stance on civil rights and academic freedom. During this time students began to challenge some of the sociological issues of the era including concepts of race and class, political awareness, and Black empowerment.

Students began speaking out more on the role of racism and concentrated poverty in Black America. They began making demands and having publicized debates with the administration. With the backdrop of the shocking assassination of President John F. Kennedy in November 1963, students voted to create a "Bill of Rights." In 1965, campus controversy ensued after *The Hilltop* reporters were denied entry and not permitted to cover the Charter Day exercises featuring Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Articles with titles such as "Black Renaissance Sparks Afro-American Committee," and "Due Process Subject of Campus Controversy" were the commonplace.

In 1966, the introspection on the social norms and definitions of Black beauty reached a boiling point. An editorial by the publishers of *The Hilltop*, which began by posing the rhetorical question of why some alumni might not return for the much-anticipated homecoming festivities:

Homecoming is not what it used to be . . . a merely bustling event, actively participated in by the same people who are usually prominent on campus, enjoyed by the so-called fashion-conscious who go out of their way to be 'be clean' for the football game, and highlighted by a round of private parties and semi-formal fun . . . Perhaps these people thought Homecoming was exclusive of one-sixth of the campus; maybe, to them Homecoming was for "certain people" and even more appalling to many was the thought of a girl who does not choose to straighten her hair being the "Bearer of the crown." And now the product of white brainwashing are even more chagrined because the "natural look" has won the "sacred crown." ("For whom is homecoming?" 1966, p. 2)

The article was referring to the selection of its new Centennial Queen, honor student Robin Gregory, who in 1966 became the first Miss Howard to sport a "natural" or afro. Under the theme, "Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow," Gregory, representing the College of Fine Arts, was victorious against four other competitors and wore the crown atop her natural style. The selection of Howard University's first natural-wearing queen was a clear prognosticator of the transference of what was also beginning nationwide.

Gregory did not fit the profile of the usual pageant princess. The Washington, DC native was a member of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, the Non-Violent Action Committee, and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. She discussed her involvement in the documentary, *Eyes on the Prize*:

I felt it was real important at that time because the Black Power movement was new... That we as a people began to accept ourselves, you know, just as who we were. Because over the years there was a tremendous amount of shame. You know, we were made to feel ugly, essentially because of media images and things people told us; and we did everything we could do so that we wouldn't look like who we are, which was, you know, descendants of African people. (Hampton, 1987)

Paula Giddings, historian, author, and professor of African American studies at Smith College, was a student in the auditorium during Gregory's coronation. She vividly described the spontaneous celebrations that erupted when Gregory, sitting on her throne with her afro in silhouette, was revealed on stage. The students erupted in the chant, "Ungawa! Black Power!" A human chain was created, and the line billowed out of the auditorium and into the streets of Washington, DC. With the selection of Robin Gregory the Black Power Movement at Howard University was born; this just a few months after graduate Stokely Carmichael first introduced the chant "Black Power" at a rally in Greenwood, Mississippi.

Black colleges and the Black Church were critical to Black communities and crucial to the sustenance of the Civil Rights Movement. By end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s, the demonstrations which marked the movement were becoming more radicalized, and protestors wanted to actualize the results of their efforts (Gourdine & Brown, 2016). By exercising agency, the Howard students were, in turn, impacting the trajectory of their historic institution.

As word of Gregory, a leader in the university's growing Black Power Movement and new Howard queen made national headlines, it also led to closer scrutiny by the student body regarding the women would succeed her. The changing face or fro of the queen signaled this political shift.

HEAVY IS THE 'FRO THAT WEARS THE CROWN

In February 1968, just two years after student activist Robin Gregory made history as the first Miss Howard to sport a natural afro, protests by more than one thousand undergraduate and graduate students, who were calling for a “Black university,” shut down the campus and made national headlines. Their mantra—“We’re going to get things straight in ’68!” (Jeffers, 1968, p.1). After a five-day takeover, students ended their protest with the agreement by the Administration that a Black studies course would be offered at the University. Two months later, riots erupted on the streets of Washington, DC following the April 4th murder of Civil Rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who had visited the campus numerous times (“Was it riot or insurrection?,” 1968, p. 2).

By fall, the demand for Howard to be known as a “Black university” was growing. The theme for homecoming was, “Our Possible Dream, a new expression of the University to project an awareness that Black is beautiful and that [it] is beautiful to be Black” (Rice, 1968, p. 1). The homecoming committee chairman said the festivities would be overwhelmed by what he called an “odor of Blackness.” That proudness was shared with questions about whom the next queen would be: “Who will reign? With the indulgence of a Black theme, will she be Black? Will her crown be cushioned by an Afro?” (Rice, 1968)

That year’s Miss Howard contest took on political fervor mirroring a presidential election. The 1968 homecoming included four candidates, most sporting afros. The queen campaign lasted for four days, and included daily exhibitions which were described as demonstrations, staged midday in front of the fine arts building. The candidates discussed issues ranging from Black unity, to student autonomy, and campus involvement in the community. The ladies held nightly conferences in the dorms, where they answered questions from coeds on prevalent issues, such as, the role of Black women in America, and the relevancy of homecoming.

Under the “Black is Beautiful” theme, speech pathology major, Helen McCrary (Slahuddin), who was actively involved in the movement on campus, won the majority of votes by the student body, declaring her as the 1968 Homecoming Queen, and the second Howard queen to wear an afro. She also took a stand on Black issues at the university. McCrary was chair of the public relations committee of the “Towards a Black University Conference,” and was a leader in the student protests of 1968 (Vanterpool, 1968).

Now a practicing attorney, Slahuddin teaches Black and Latino youth their history and culture, and sponsors an annual trip to Africa. In response to a questionnaire from the author for the purposes of this discourse, she described her experience including taking part in the student protest that year:

In the midst of change we protested the university’s lack of relationship with the Black community . . . We were radical and enthusiastic about change. The year I was elected was the first year that the nominees went out to speak to students in the dorms and other venues. There were articles in the Muhammad Speaks and other Black papers. We campaigned on Black Power. No one was nominated or supported by a Greek organization and that was a major change. . . .

I remember participating in protests against South Africa’s Apartheid; Wearing my crown and sash! We as a student body also staged sit-ins and took over the A (administration) Building. We were demanding that African American Studies be a requirement for all freshman students. We believed that all HBCUs must first and foremost be an advocate for learning our history. Of course we won! I was approached to run because we were trying to change the concepts of beauty and thought about Black women. Natural hair, independent thinking, Africa! It is what I do today . . . (*Miss Howard Survey*, July 10, 2014)

Some sociologists contend that *beauty* emerges in situations in which subject and object are juxtaposed and connected (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2012). According to Black feminist thought, *Black beauty* is positively affected by the productive work of Black politics,

and the constructive strategies used to unite Black with beauty and beauty with culture (Watson & Martin, 2004). This concept was an underlining construct for the next contest.

The theme of the 1969 homecoming was “The Dawning of a New Age,” with a headlines on the event reading, “Homecoming theme will signify a new age of ideas and hopes” (Walker, 1969, p. 5). Articles such as, “Homecoming candidates’ personalities profiled” (Crawford & Ross, 1969, p. 1), emphasized their stances on how they would be involved in the local and global communities. Gaynelle Henderson, an afro-wearing transfer student senior from University of Syracuse in New York, was crowned the 39th queen of Howard University. As what was becoming the tradition of recent years, the woman wearing the crown was wrought with questions about whether she should serve as the symbolic representation of the university. Henderson defended her title, saying her position could be used for leadership. “We can’t get anywhere until different people get together as one people” (Stewart, 1969, p. 1). The following May, Henderson, whose campaign theme was “Out of Many, One People,” was invited to visit Jamaica, the country that shared the same motto. Besides taking the opportunity to relax, Henderson said the invitation by the government would offer her an opportunity to see Black people in a different environment, and learn about the country’s politics and culture. She invited her fellow students to join her.

A QUEEN BY ANY OTHER NAME

In 1970, following the previous year’s homecoming which called for devout “Blackness,” a leadership conference sponsored by the student government resulted in a radical change in the celebration of homecoming. The group suggested that the tradition be widened to include Black cultural events, exhibits, and symposiums, and focus on the football team. It was suggested that the usual queen title and tradition be disbanded, and instead replaced with a “Miss Homecoming” designation that would be given to a financially challenged high school student who would be sponsored by an alumni scholarship.

The 1970 homecoming committee took their proposal to the student body. Sixty-two percent of students surveyed agreed with making changes to the weeklong celebration; and more than 80 percent favored eliminating the homecoming queen title. One student argued, “No[t] one Black woman could diplomatically be chosen to epitomize Howard’s women” (Bowens & Jackson, 1970, p. 5). Another referred to homecoming as “Whitey’s game” (Williams, 1970, p.10). Consequently, under the “New Direction” theme, the football team, not the student body, selected its own Gridiron Queen. Business major Cheryl Jones, who sported an African head wrap at halftime, was one of only three women who vied for the 1970 title of “Gridiron Queen.”

The next year’s homecoming, “A Salute to the Black Woman,” took on an even more inimitable turn. It was 1971, when Black activist Angela Davis, considered to many a heroine of the Black Power Movement, was imprisoned in California. The Black Liberation Flag, which contained the colors red, black, and green, was flown for the first time over a public building, Malcolm X College in Chicago (Pinkney, 1976).

It was against this backdrop that the homecoming steering committee decided no one but the imprisoned Davis was worthy enough to claim the title of Howard’s queen. Subsequently, Davis would be considered “Queen Mother,” and a contest would be held for the “Angela Davis Honorary Court” (Lark, 1971, p. 12.) The top vote-getters would represent the color of the Black Liberation flag: red (first place), black (second place) and green (third place). The contestants had four days to hold public events and social activities (Pop, 1971). The move was controversial and the committee faced harsh backlash from those who said they were disrespecting the Black Liberation Flag (“Homecoming: Disrespect or honor,” 1971, p. 8) Despite the pushback, the competition continued, and Edith Smith, a zoology major who also took part in protests on campus, received the most votes and was crowned “Miss Red.”

Now an anesthesiologist, Dr. Edith Smith Cheek Williams, said she wore the Red title with pride. “I remember feeling that such an honor had been bestowed upon me” (*Miss Howard*

Survey, August 13, 2014). Her mother, also one of her sorors of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, traveled from Baton Rouge, Louisiana to help her plan for Homecoming Day.

The following year, as the student body was promulgating self-love and Black empowerment, leaders were examining ways in which to even further step outside of norm. In October 1972, a press release announced that the homecoming theme would be, "Howard University in Exposition" ("Homecoming plans announced," 1972, p. 4). The underlying goal was to raise funds for Howard's Sickle Cell Anemia Research Center.

The committee also announced a new designee, "Miss Expo," who would be chosen primarily based on her fundraising ability to help fight the disease. The student body supported the idea: "I hope that the 'Miss Expo' will truly represent Howard in its deepest expressions for Blackness," stated Sophomore Melvina Whitehead. "The idea of raising money for sickle cell anemia is very praise worthy. Right On, Miss Expo!" Graduate student Linwood Wooldridge commented that the contest "is an opportunity for Black people to stop emulating the white value system which teaches us to judge an individual's beauty on "supposedly good" physical attributes. . . ." ("Speak out," 1972, p. 10).

Six candidates competed, and raised \$4,500 for sickle cell research. Leonora Simpson raised more than \$2,000 and was crowned "Miss Expo." She was escorted at the game by activist and Howard alumnus Stokely Carmichael, who also gave a lecture on Pan-Africanism during the festivities ("Stokely Carmichael returns as guest lecture Oct 17 at Howard University," 1972, p. 1).

LOOKING BACK, MOVING FORWARD

The year 1973 signaled the end of the Vietnam War, and the election of the first Black mayors in Los Angeles and Atlanta. It also generated a shift in the political and socio-cultural climate at the Howard. The complicated combination of politics and pageantry remained, with Black beauty and self-love remaining a rallying theme. As the Black Power Movement began to decelerate, the question of the "Howard Woman" resurfaced, nearly 50 years after the topic was first addressed in the inaugural issue of *The Hilltop*.

"The Black Coed" article in *The Hilltop Magazine*, posed the question, "Is there a 'Howard woman'? Does she encompass the emotions, aspirations, and insecurities of all Black women? Is she the 'cream of the crop,' the 'bottom of the barrel' or both?" (Reed, 1973, p. 4). The title of Homecoming Queen resurfaced in 1973 and in 1974, the "Miss Howard" title returned.

As the university celebrates its sesquicentennial, the tradition of "Miss Howard" remains. She is now joined by a "Mr. Howard" and a Royal Court comprised of class and school/college queens, all of whom follow a year-long platform of community service. Despite cyclical questioning of the queen's purpose to the university, students continue to exalt the position and expect from their queen the foundational qualities of truth and service upon which the university was founded. She, in turn, encompasses roles of beauty queen, leader, and emissary.

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