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“A New Era of Black Thought”: Revisiting Gil Scott-Heron and the HBCU Protest Novel

Magana J. Kabugi

In 1972, spoken-word artist and poet Gil Scott-Heron published his second novel, controversially titled *The Nigger Factory*. As the student arm of the Civil Rights Movement started to shift its intellectual concerns from integration to questions of Black Power and self-determination, Scott-Heron’s novel burst onto the literary scene like a stick of dynamite. Literary critics and newspapers didn’t quite know what to make of the novel, which focused on a student government president and a fringe opposition group both vying for control over a student protest at a fictional historically Black college. Raw, direct, and full of rage, the book eventually went out of print and lapsed into obscurity for decades. Nearly forty years after its debut, the book was reintroduced into the literary scene by British publisher Canongate Books, and has sparked new scholarly conversations about Black student protest and the relationship between HBCUs and their stakeholders. Through literary analysis and notes from past experiences of teaching the novel in the classroom, I examine how the social milieu surrounding *Factory* has both changed and endured, and how this novel can help us to contextualize protests for racial equity happening currently at both HBCUs and PWIs.

*Keywords*: African American studies, higher education, literature in english, North America, literature in english, ethnic and cultural minority

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“A New Era of Black Thought”: Revisiting Gil Scott-Heron and the HBCU Protest Novel

In my first year as a doctoral student at a predominantly white institution (PWI) in the South, Black undergraduates at the university raised objections to the administration’s response to a bag of dog feces that had been left on the steps of the university’s Black cultural center. This incident followed multiple other instances of Black students at the institution being racially profiled by campus police, microaggressed by white faculty members and fellow students, and treated invisibly by many members of the campus community. During that fateful 2015-2016 academic year, students at more than eighty other colleges and universities around the country, including Yale University and the University of Missouri, were involved in antiracist marches, protests, and strikes that garnered extensive media coverage (Trachtenberg, 2018).

At my institution, students organized a town hall meeting in the university chapel. As I and my fellow Black graduate students listened to the undergrads rightfully expressing frustration with the disconnect between the university’s professed commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and the repeated occurrences of anti-Blackness on campus, I also observed students’ desire to understand how university infrastructures interacted (and often clashed) with radical protest and student demands. This desire became increasingly palpable when the university released a statement saying that an investigation into the incident had uncovered no evidence of malicious intent, and therefore the case would be closed. It was yet another instance, like so many around the country, of administrators and students failing to see eye-to-eye on critical matters of race and racism.

As a scholar and teacher interested in the cultural history of Black freedom movements within higher education, I aim for my teaching and research to illuminate the connective tissues between literary texts, historical events, and the present for not only students, but also a broader public. Thus, this article poses the following question: in what ways can Gil Scott-Heron’s 1972 novel _The Nigger Factory_, about a protest gone awry at a small historically Black college and university (HBCU) during the Black Power movement, help to generate critical conversations among students about the emotions, experiences, and ideas that fuel protest, and the ways in which institutional structures can either advance or stymy social change? Though Scott-Heron’s novel is set at an HBCU, its lessons are applicable within both HBCU and PWI contexts.

Gil Scott-Heron: Fighting Social Injustice with the Pen

At historically Black Lincoln University of Pennsylvania in 1969, a 19-year-old Gil Scott-Heron asked the dean of students for permission to take a leave of absence to complete a novel he had been working on. Sarcastically, the dean advised Scott-Heron to use his time off to see a psychiatrist instead. Despite the dean’s disparagement, Scott-Heron was able to negotiate time off (Fiege, 2010). During that sabbatical Scott-Heron published his first novel, _The Vulture_, and a few years later he published _The Nigger Factory_. Writing served as a way for Scott-Heron to critique what he saw as an elitism complex within Black higher education. His prior schooling experiences had given him the vantage point from which he wrote. At the age of 12, he had been enrolled in an elite private school, which crystallized the two very different worlds he inhabited—one largely white, urban, and privileged; and his home environment, which was Black, rural, and low-income (Croom, 1994).

For Scott-Heron, literary production was intrinsically a political act, and he preferred to
articulate his politics through the written word and music. An avid writer and reader during his elementary and high school years, he enrolled at Lincoln, which like many other HBCUs in the 1960s, was a space of ferment that fostered radical activism among Black students. Lincoln was famous for producing African independence leaders such as Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria and Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, civil rights figures such as Thurgood Marshall, and writers such as Langston Hughes. The university’s radical orientation towards Black liberation politics would significantly shape Scott-Heron’s educational politics, as well as his conscious decision to maintain an intimate relationship with the HBCU sector for most of his adult life. At the time Scott-Heron enrolled, the Lincoln campus was alive with the energy of the Black Power and Black Arts movements.

While on leave from Lincoln, Scott-Heron returned home to New York and launched his own solo musical career. In between writing The Vulture, Scott-Heron signed a contract with Flying Dutchman Records and released his first LP, Small Talk at 125th and Lenox in 1970; on this album appeared the first recording of his now-famous spoken-word poem “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised.” The success generated by his musical career pulled Scott-Heron further away from returning to Lincoln, and he ended up not finishing his undergraduate degree. Despite not returning to Lincoln, Scott-Heron remained intellectually invested in HBCUs as solution factories for Black communities. This investment is particularly visible in The Nigger Factory, published in 1972 by the Dial Press.

Politics, Protest, and Power: An Overview of the Novel

Scott-Heron’s Factory is a classic example of what Lavelle Porter calls the “Blackademic novel.” Blackademic, according to Porter, is a portmanteau of the words “Black” and “academic,” and captures the unique experiences of Afro-descended scholars within the Western academy. He writes, “These works constitute a documented record of how Black intellectuals have brought the fight [for justice] to the Ivory Tower and have insisted on making space for themselves.” (Porter, 2020) Set on the campus of a fictional HBCU, Sutton University, located in Virginia’s southeastern Tidewater region, Factory tells the story of students who try to “make space for themselves” in a place that should be already affirming for them, but instead takes them for granted. The novel chronicles the downward spiral of a student-led uprising against a domineering president over restrictive policies that students feel are contradictory to the institution’s mission.

Factory is told through the perspectives of its young Black male protagonists who head rival political factions: the student government president, Earl Thomas, is a methodical and calculating policy wonk who drafts a list of demands on behalf of the student body; the demands call for the university president, Dr. Ogden Calhoun, to make several structural changes to the campus, including changes in personnel, investment of university resources in the surrounding Black community, and the establishment of a formalized Black studies department. But while Earl is planning to roll out the demands in a way that is palatable to the president, an opposing group of student athletes known collectively as MJUMBE (Swahili for “messenger” or “representative”), led by football player and fraternity man Ralph Baker (who goes by Baker), seeks to articulate the same demands through a grassroots coup d’état rather than through Earl’s tactics of diplomacy and negotiation. These opposing groups are competing for the attention of President Calhoun, an exemplar of the
stereotypical authoritarian HBCU president sketched by white sociologists Christopher Jencks and David Riesman in their 1967 *Harvard Educational Review* article “The American Negro College”: conservative; wedded to protocol, tradition, and power; and incapable of connecting with students radicalized by contemporary liberation movements. (Jencks & Riesman, 1967)[1] Calhoun treats the university as his own personal domain and rules the campus with an iron fist. He cares more about the optics of the student protest in the eyes of the outside white world than the students’ actual impetus for protesting. Almost immediately the novel sets up a three-way battle between Calhoun, Earl, and Baker over the identity and future of Sutton University.

**Critical Conversations in the Classroom**

In Alice Walker’s novel *Meridian*, there is a quote from the main character that artfully summarizes the value of critical conversation as a vehicle for collective learning in the classroom. Meridian, the protagonist, says, “I imagine good teaching as a circle of earnest people sitting down to ask each other meaningful questions. I don’t see it as a handling down of answers. So much of what passes for teaching is merely a pointing out of what items to want” (Walker, 1976). One of the “meaningful questions” that often emerges whenever I teach *Factory* is “why?” Specifically, “why this title?”

One of the most obvious and jarring elements of this novel that readers will immediately notice is Scott-Heron’s prominent and repetitive use of the “N-word” slur in the title and throughout the book. The constant use of the slur is partly Scott-Heron’s attempt to arrest the reader’s attention, but he also uses it to illustrate how, in his view, universities (and particularly HBCUs) lull young Black people into thinking that earning a college degree automatically translates into equal opportunity and fair treatment in American society. The author’s note at the beginning of *Factory* frames this fallacy as the existential dilemma facing Black students in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement. He writes:

> Black colleges and universities have been both a blessing and a curse on Black people. The institutions have educated thousands of our people who would have never had the opportunity to get an education otherwise. They have supplied for many a new sense of dignity and integrity. They have never, however, made anybody equal. This is a reality for Black educators everywhere as students all over America demonstrate for change.... Black students in the 1970s will not be satisfied with Bullshit Degrees or Nigger Educations. They are aware of the hypocrisy and indoctrination and are searching for other alternatives. With the help of those educators who are intelligent enough to recognize the need for drastic reconstruction there will be a new era of Black thought and Black thinkers who enter the working world from colleges aware of the real problems that will face them and not believing that a piece of paper will claim a niche for them in the society-at-large. The education process will not whitewash them into thinking that their troubles are over. They will come out as Black people. (Scott-Heron, 2010).

In Scott-Heron’s view, HBCUs offer the allure of a racism-free environment that negates the pressures and indignities that confront Black students in white spaces, such as carrying the burden of speaking for one’s race in a class or having one’s presence or qualifications constantly questioned by white peers and faculty. But what Black students don’t think about, Scott-Heron argues, is that they are eventually going to be released back into the same hostile society that HBCUs aim to fortify them against. Hence,
“HBCUs can no longer be considered as wombs of security when all occupants realize that we are locked in the jaws of a beast.”

Here Scott-Heron is not arguing for HBCUs to abandon their appeal or mission, but rather for them to be more conscious of how they prepare students to reenter the “jaws” of the larger society. Only then will a “drastic reconstruction” of Black higher education occur, and students will “come out as Black people,” or adopt an ideological and intellectual orientation focused on the advancement of Black people. The late theorist and writer bell hooks calls this process “critical awareness,” or the way in which marginalized students gain confidence in their own voices enough to challenge Paulo Freire’s concept of the “banking system” of education, which sees students as empty vessels waiting to be filled (hooks, 1994). Scott-Heron’s hardline position should be understood within the context of what I call a “crisis of identity” that the HBCU sector encountered in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s following the desegregation of many formerly segregated PWIs. Many HBCU stakeholders wondered if racial integration would render HBCUs obsolete, or at the very least, diminished. Thus, many Black thinkers (including Scott-Heron) were intentional about the seriousness with which HBCUs approached their mission. [2]

It goes without saying that the book’s title can be quite jarring for a student even listed on a syllabus. As with several controversial texts that contain the N-word in the title (such as popular works by novelist Joseph Conrad and legal scholar Randall Kennedy), the title and the repeated use of the word can easily evoke discomfort, irritation, or even trauma in a Black reader, or discourage a non-Black reader who might be interested in engaging with the novel but hesitant to discuss it around Black people. Both scenarios have occurred in my experiences teaching the novel at the undergraduate level.

During one class session, a Black student (whom I’ll call Jamari) became visibly teary-eyed during a discussion of the book’s title. Though I had established ground rules at the beginning of the class that disallowed non-Black students to say the word and allowed Black students to say it only in moments of necessary emphasis, Jamari still felt uncomfortable, and later felt slightly embarrassed about his discomfort being seen by his peers. Discussion of the word and the title can be tricky, and opinions among Black students about its usage among Black people vary from semester to semester, but I’ve found that once firm rules about vocabulary and classroom decorum are set, generative and productive conversation tends to follow. For graduate students of higher ed and student affairs, the language of the book can provide the backdrop for conversations about the power of words in promoting DEI on campus.

**Black Women and Black Power in the Novel**

In addition to its narrative voice, *Factory* mobilizes several literary themes that appear throughout Scott-Heron’s work, most notably the perspective of the young Black male—militant, hot-blooded, eager to create meaningful change, and often struggling to figure out his relationship to the freedom struggle, the Black community, and the world at large. Earl and Baker are mirroring caricatures of distinct Black activist approaches within the Civil Rights movement: Earl is the telegenic, well-spoken, moderate face of the student movement, an acceptable ambassador to the college administration. In contrast is Baker, a militant, charismatic leader and compelling orator in his own
right, but also one who refuses to abide by the rules of what he calls Calhoun’s “plantation.” Scott-Heron’s descriptions of Earl and Ralph’s physical characteristics are also suffused with colorist symbolism: Earl is described as a tall, muscular, “bushy-browed Indian-looking man,” while Baker is described as a bald, dashiki-wearing “six-foot two-hundred-pound football player” and a “powerful Black barrel” who is a member of Omega Psi Phi, a historically Black fraternity that is frequently associated with hypermasculinity within the Black popular imagination (Scott-Heron, 2010). Most of the supporting cast is also male, from Earl’s best friends Lawman and Odds to Baker’s MJUMBE associates Abul Menka, Jonesy, Speedy Cotton, and Ben King.

In contrast, the appearances of women in Factory are far less frequent. Of the five major women characters in the novel—Sheila, Baker’s girlfriend; Angie, Earl’s girlfriend; Miss Felch, Dr. Calhoun’s white administrative assistant; Mrs. Dora Gilliam, Earl’s landlord; and Gloria Calhoun, the first lady of Sutton University—it’s Mrs. Gilliam and Gloria Calhoun who have the most impactful roles in the novel. Sheila and Angie serve mostly as vehicles for showcasing Earl and Baker’s inner feelings, vulnerabilities, and flaws. In the case of Sheila, her main appearance occurs midway through the story to highlight Baker’s insecurities about his new self-created role as MJUMBE’s leader. As the student government association’s secretary, Sheila has access to the association’s files, which contains drafts of Earl’s demands to the administration. Baker wants access to these demands, and Sheila wants to prove her devotion to him, so she gives him the keys to the cabinet where the demands are stored. Baker, however, sees the relationship within purely sexual terms, and has little investment in Sheila otherwise.

Meanwhile, Angie Rodgers, Earl’s significant other, feels similarly fragile, though not as easily manipulated as Sheila. As a young single mother raising a young son, Angie sees in Earl a caring and cooperative partner. Angie serves as a sounding board for Earl’s concerns, and provides an avenue for him to settle down and be a family man of sorts when he needs to separate himself from the student movement battlefield. Sheila and Angie are mirror images of each other—soft-spoken, supportive, nurturing, trusting, but also vulnerable and emotionally delicate. They are more literary window dressing within the overall framework of the novel rather than driving actors, meant to be humanizing anchors for the young men they’re dating. Sheila and Angie’s appearances in the story are scarce, and when they do appear, their interiority is given minimal attention.

As understated as their roles are in the novel, Mrs. Gilliam and Gloria Calhoun are the most significant and underrated anchors of the Sutton community because of their investment in the welfare and mental health of the students. Mrs. Gilliam, the 60-something owner of the boarding house where Earl rents a room, represents the wisdom of the elder who did not attend college but carries a wealth of life experience with her, often dispensing advice that goes over Earl’s head. Gloria Calhoun is a highly educated, locally engaged, and deeply sensitive community leader who finds herself caught between the restless students and her husband’s detachedness and overbearing personality. Both Mrs. Gilliam and Gloria Calhoun are voices of conscience for Earl and President Calhoun, respectively, though neither man gives much regard to either woman’s powerful contributions to the novel. Mrs. Gilliam, along with another of her tenants, the itinerant handyman Zeke, try to convince Earl that securing his degree is a better way of making an impact for the Black community rather than trying to force a change within an institution that has its own equilibrium (which includes the power to disrupt Earl’s
education by suspending or expelling him). To highlight how Earl has been stressing over his leadership in the student movement and neglecting his own self-care, Mrs. Gilliam asks:

How’re your grades? I bet you don’t have a point in none of ’um. When was the last time you wrote yo’ mother? I bet she don’t know nothin’ ‘bout this foolishness. You still ain’ been to see Dr. Bennett about that tooth I gave you stuff for... you see what I mean? Neglectin’ yo’ own good for a bunch that won’t even help you. I know that Sutton crowd. They always have upper-class students who’re too lazy to work. (Scott-Heron, 2010)

Both Mrs. Gilliam’s assessment of Sutton students and Gloria Calhoun’s criticism of President Calhoun later in the novel touch upon Scott-Heron’s preoccupation with the disconnect between college presidents and their constituents. This becomes increasingly clear later in the story when we explore the interiority of Gloria Calhoun more closely. Through her backstory and her unfulfilling relationship with her husband, Gloria serves as the mouthpiece for the novel’s frustrations with administrators, faculty, and students who have abandoned their commitments to Black self-improvement and have settled into a hypocritical status quo. The lines of communication between the Calhouns have grown strained over the years because of their busy work schedules, and Gloria finds herself watching the evening news to learn about how her husband is handling a student strike that arises on campus, even though both Calhouns live in the same house.

The present state of the couple’s relationship is a stark contrast to the early days of their marriage prior to the Second World War, when Ogden was an outspoken young Black psychology professor. Ogden’s vocal stances on Black psychology get him booted from his department chairmanship because of the university’s fear that he will be seen as a Communist sympathizer. Ogden’s heroism in the face of Congressional intimidation fills Gloria with pride in his intellectual heroism; years later, however, she feels that his authoritarianism reflects his need to still prove himself to those who snatched away his title years earlier. She berates him for deciding to call in the national guard on the protesting students, saying:

...there are boys out there ready to die for what they believe in. Boys that are takin’ a stand that you would have taken when you were their age. But, God that must have been a long time ago. And they have to face this, this death, because you’re an old man. Not really old. Not too old to see as I see, but all you have been able to see for a long time has been yourself. (Scott-Heron, 2010)

With that, she announces that she’s leaving him, and storms out of his office. The words of Mrs. Gilliam and Gloria Calhoun turn out to be prophetic. The student protests reach a fever pitch, but President Calhoun refuses to budge from his unwillingness to answer all of the students’ demands. Students call a strike and stop attending classes; Calhoun closes the university and institutes a readmission program. Students rebel and start rioting; furniture is thrown through a dormitory window and a campus van is detonated. The novel ends with Calhoun calling in the Virginia National Guard to maintain law and order on the campus, effectively crushing the last embers of the student revolution.

MJUMBE member Ben King, still hungry for one last fight, remains inside the Omega Psi Phi fraternity house and starts shooting at the guardsmen, resulting in a melee of bullets. One of the bullets hits a grenade inside the house that Ben had intended to throw, and Earl watches in horror from the
outside as the frat house bursts into flames, presumably with Ben trapped inside. Just as Mrs. Gilliam had predicted earlier, most of the students at Sutton, not wishing to jeopardize their chances of being readmitted and receive their diplomas, decide to flee campus rather than stand up to the Virginia guardsmen. Earl and Ben have to learn the hard way (in the case of Ben, costing his life) that they alone have to watch the revolution crumble. Gloria Calhoun’s assessment of her husband comes true as well—President Calhoun would rather crush his students with the same mechanisms of law enforcement that would crush Calhoun himself if the roles were reversed. By exercising his leverage as an authority figure who has not only settled into the status quo, but staunchly defends it, Calhoun embodies the college president who obliviously carries out the ideology of white supremacy. At the book’s end, the reader is left questioning whether the students or Calhoun ended up “winning,” and whether the upheaval will lead to any real structural change at Sutton, or if the status quo will remain in place.

Calhoun’s decision to ignore his wife’s counsel, despite her perceptiveness and her credibility within the Sutton community, is not a coincidence. Implicitly, Scott-Heron draws attention to the discrepancy between public perceptions of Black men and Black women as leaders. Various Black liberation movements such as the anti-slavery abolition movement, Civil Rights, Black Power, and anti-apartheid are commonly conceptualized as being dominated by charismatic male figures such as Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Huey Newton, Stokely Carmichael, and Randall Robinson; the Black Lives Matter movement is the rare exception of a Black movement that is widely recognized as both woman-initiated and decentralized. However, Black women have always been foundational figures within Black liberation movements.

In addition to what Moya Bailey (Bailey, 2010) calls misogynoir, or the unique form of misogyny and racism directed at Black women, respectability politics—a term coined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (Higginbotham, 1993) to describe the forms of dress, speech, and behaviors in which Black people have historically comported and presented themselves in the American public sphere in order to prove their own humanity—has played a significant role in the downplaying of Black women’s roles in liberation movements. The novel also emphasizes this inequity through Earl’s decision to urge all of the women students to flee the campus before the arrival of the National Guard, rather than letting them decide whether or not they want to ride out the coming storm.

**Gil Scott-Heron and the Factory Legacy: 50-Plus Years Later**

Despite its fiery rhetoric and relevance to the current events of the moment, Factory failed to make even a moderate splash upon its release by Dial Press in March 1972. When it did get reviewed in major outlets (almost always by white critics who failed to understand the Black student movement in the first place), it elicited a combination of outright disgust, bewilderment, uncertainty, and enthusiastic support. White novelist L.J. Davis, whose review was reprinted in a number of major papers including the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Washington Post*, wrote that although the author’s note was “callow and distinctly off-putting,” the novel “can be read as much for its message as for its promise,” and that Scott-Heron ultimately sees “into the human heart.” (Davis, 1972).

*Kirkus Review*, not quite understanding the book’s larger aims, was far less generous, calling *Factory* “an offensive novel by a young Black writer who should know better, full of machismo,
didacticism, conventional liberalisms, not helped any by the absolutely mundane pseudo-reportorial style and Uncle Remus dialect... [A] very patronizing morality tale.” (The Nigger Factory, 1972) Though Scott-Heron’s use of African American Vernacular English as the main form of character speech was his way of having the voice of the Black, Southern masses serve as the voice of the novel, Kirkus misinterpreted and dismissed the linguistic decision as essentially minstrelsy. Another white reviewer, Frank DeMarco of the *Tampa Tribune*, having had no familiarity with HBCUs or radical Black politics, wrote, “Such a novel presents a difficult challenge to the white reviewer... can he assume that the characters are authentic?... There is no way that I can know. They seem authentic.... Yet—are they not, perhaps, just a bit stereotyped?... I doubt that any white person, or Black non-student, could say.” (DeMarco, 1972) DeMarco goes on to praise the novel assuming that the characters are indeed “authentic,” without elucidating what exactly constitutes “authenticity” in a Black character. The reception of the novel in the Black press isn’t documented as extensively, but there were Black-owned newspapers that promoted *Factory*, such as the *New York Amsterdam News*.

Scott-Heron didn’t publish any more novels after *Factory*. Shortly following the novel’s release, he spent a stint in Washington, DC as a professor of English and creative writing at Federal City College, an HBCU that later consolidated with two other HBCUs in the city, Washington Technical Institute and the District of Columbia Teachers College, to create the University of the District of Columbia. The original edition of *Factory* went out of print, though copies of it remained on the shelves of Black bookshops for decades, and the novel remained popular among enthusiasts of Black political fiction.

In my past experiences teaching the novel both at an HBCU and a PWI, I’ve found that *Factory* elicits a wide range of observations and analyses from students upon their completion of the book. Some students felt that the book ended too abruptly without a satisfying conclusion that connected all of the story’s loose ends; others felt that the unexpected ending was a logical conclusion to a student protest that was plagued with disorganization and fragmentation. Some felt that the exclusion of women students from the strategic planning aspects of the movement spelled its doom from the very beginning. However, these assessments have often served as entry points for generative conversations about why the Sutton student movement failed and what actions could have been taken, either proactively or reactively, to correct those problems. These discussions not only challenge students to think structurally about social movements and protest, but also critically assess their own unique leadership styles and ways of managing conflict in various settings, such as group assignments for class or leadership roles within campus organizations. Many students connected these discussions to real-life differences in opinion between Black figures, such as King and Malcolm X, Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright, and others.

In recent decades, *Factory* has re-emerged from its shell after several decades out of the literary spotlight. Following Scott-Heron’s death in 2011, the novel has seen a resurgence of interest within publishing and in the academic realm. In 2010 the British press Canongate Books (which has reprinted several 1970s-era Black literary works) brought the book back into print, making it accessible to a new generation of students and connoisseurs of Black Power literature. In the words of the radical Trinidadian-American scholar-activist Acklyn Lynch, there must be a continued willingness to be “bold and daring in recommending and effecting change. This change should provide us with a
philosophical direction which moves us to redirect our creative energies in the building of our communities, people, and our nation.” (Lynch, 1972)
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[1] “The American Negro College” introduced many white readers to HBCUs for the first time upon its publication in 1967, and while hurting the HBCU community with its numerous inaccuracies and untruths regarding overall inferiority of HBCUs and the supposed incompetence of HBCU administrators. The authors ironically state that “Few who write about the conditions of American Negro life can entirely escape the racist assumptions which are so much a part of American culture,” while at the same time making those same “racist assumptions” themselves. The article is overly preoccupied with the white perception of HBCUs. The fallout from the article within the Black community, and particularly from HBCUs, prompted the journal to subsequently publish response articles from four Black leaders in higher education to rebut the damage incurred by Jencks and
Riesman’s piece. Jencks and Riesman themselves also apologized for the negative impact of their work decades afterward.