

All Eyez on Me: Undergraduate Black Women Student Leader at HBCUs Visual Reflections on their Leadership Experiences

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Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) continue to serve as major sources of education and social mobility and serve as places of refuge for undergraduate Black women student leaders' development (Allen & Jewel, 2007; Commodore et al., 2018; Dominique, 2015; Hardaway et al., 2022; Lee-Johnson, 2019; Njoku & Patton, 2017). While HBCUs continue to serve and meet the needs of their students, undergraduate Black women's experiences are often not elevated in the areas of student leadership (Hardaway et al., 2021; Lee-Johnson, 2021). This paper analyzes pictures from five undergraduate Black women who were in elected student leadership positions at their respective institutions. Findings suggest that many of their experiences are based on serving others, being their authentic selves, and unapologetically accepting who they are as leaders.

Keywords: Leadership, Black Feminism, Critical Visual Methods

Leadership is a common research topic for students and women, even when the concept is not applied to students' experiences at HBCUs (Bass, 1990; Northouse, 2018). Historically, the study of leadership suggests that leaders have traditionally been White males (Guthrie et al., 2013).

However, since the beginning of time Black men and women have always been leaders (Masango, 2002; Taylor, 2016). Black women have always been leaders in various capacities and multiple entities, and many of their leadership experiences have begun before pursuing any formal title (Rajack-Talley, 2021). Amidst the student leadership literature, few studies have solely focused on the leadership experiences of undergraduate Black women, especially those who attend HBCUs (Hardaway et al., 2021; Lee-Johnson, 2019). This study utilizes Black Feminist Thought (BFT) and Critical Visual Methodology (CVM) as a critical approach where the intersections of power, race, and gender are explored through lenses of empowerment and discovery. Black feminist thought (BFT) is a critical social theory that encompasses bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that address problems that Black women in the United States face as a collective (Amey, 2020 pg. 161; Collins 2000/2009). Critical visual methodology (CVM) is a visual methodology that interprets how images are encoded with meaning and how they relate to issues of power and ideology (Jung, 2014; Pink, 2007). This study uses BFT and CVM to highlight how the participants view their identity and can explore it in an HBCU setting as both theories analyze internal and external perceptions of self through the drawings of the participants. Both critical theories and methodologies that explore power, race, gender, and visuals to analyze the drawings of the participants. Additionally, visual elicitation is used for this study because it allows participants the opportunity to explore their own thoughts of what leadership represents to them. Visual elicitation is a visual sociological method that uses a visual object to drive interactions between the research and participants (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004).

The objectives of this paper are: 1). Explore how undergraduate Black women at HBCUs visually describe their leadership through pictures. 2). Provide more insight into the leadership experiences of undergraduate Black women at HBCUs since many elected leadership positions have been dominated by Black men at their respective campuses.

Literature Review

Role of HBCUs Educating Black Women

HBCUs were founded as an opportunity for Black women to pursue higher education when other schools would not provide a chance for them to learn (Commodore et al., 2018). However, many early articles written about African Americans at HBCUs are male-centered and minimize the presence of Black women at these institutions (Gasman, 2007b). Since the beginning of their inception, Black women have always been in the “majority” who attend HBCUs, except for in 1947, when enrollments went up at colleges because of Black male veterans returning from the war (Gasman, 2007a). HBCUs serve as environments for women to thrive, but there are often limited opportunities for the development of Black women’s leadership skills.

Black Women's Experiences at HBCUs

HBCUs for Black women often provide a sense of community, mentorship and support, personal and academic growth, but lastly a place where many launch their careers in leadership. Currently, on HBCU campuses, where Black women attend, they graduate in higher numbers than Black men and according to the National Center for Education Statistics, Black women represent more than 64% of the undergraduate population (Irwin et al., 2023; Nealy, 2008). In addition to graduation rates, Black women obtain more STEM degrees from HBCUs than Black men (Nealy, 2008; Perna et al., 2009).

HBCUs are aimed for Black women to thrive, however, that does mean they do not experience challenges while being students there. Fleming (1984) conducted a study of the experience of Black students in higher education in the United States. In her study, she found that Black women on predominantly Black campuses including HBCUs often minimized themselves when Black men were dominant in leadership roles. However, this begs the question if women are not asserting themselves in the attainment of leadership positions, or are they not afforded the same opportunities as their male counterparts? A more recent study of African American women on HBCU campuses shows that these women are equally as involved as the men on their campuses but that they felt like more attention is placed on Black men because there were so few of them on campus (Bond, 2011; Harper et al., 2004). Fleming's (1983, 1984) work informs this study because, since her work, few research studies have been done qualitatively on undergraduate Black women's experiences at HBCUs and provides a point of comparison for the findings of this study. We need to understand why Black women choose to attend either private or public HBCUs, and how they view themselves as leaders on these campuses.

Student Leadership

Comparable to students of color and women of color, there are a minimal number of studies that explore Black student leadership development (Domingue, 2015). However, more attention has been devoted to students of color experiences in leadership on Predominantly White Institution (PWI) campuses (Komives et al., 2011). Fuertes & Sedlacek (1993) indicated that higher education has assisted in student leadership development for White men, but has not provided a similar environment for women, Black, Hispanic, and disabled students. Servant leadership is another model, often commonly used when Black women and leadership is written about. Servant leaders are often seen as leaders who serve others first (Guthrie et al., 2013; Greenleaf, 1977). Servant leadership is not an example of savior interpretation (Guthrie et al., 2013). This section will review several studies that focus on student of color leadership development, focusing specifically on Black student leadership experiences on college campuses. However, there is a dearth of literature that focuses on undergraduate Black student leadership, specifically Black women at HBCUs.

Research on leadership for Black students often highlighted Black students' involvement and leadership in race-based student organizations, Black-Greek letter organizations, and incidents of racism and leadership on PWI campuses (Kimbrough & Hutcheson, 1998). Additionally, some

of the studies around students of color in leadership positions and organizations on PWI campuses focus on identity development and student involvement (Flowers, 2004; Kuh et al., 2008).

Undergraduate Black Women Involvement on Campus

Scholars suggest that Black undergraduate women at PWI's become involved in student leadership positions to combat the marginalization they experience at these institutions. For instance, Croom et al., (2017), conducted a qualitative study around the motivation of undergraduate Black women's participation in race and gender organizations on their PWI campus. The study found that the women joined many of these organizations to build community on campus because of the racism and sexism that they experienced on campus (Croom et al., 2017). Similarly, Henry (2023), and Domingue (2015) conducted studies around undergraduate Black women's experiences in leadership on predominantly white campuses, found that due to their race and gender they often were the subject of stereotypes around Black women, oppression, and received little to no support from their institutions. Hotchkins (2017), ethnographic study of undergraduate Black women student leaders on PWI campuses found that Black women leaders used "buffered leadership" in order to deal with racial interactions with White males. Many of these women leaders often found themselves assimilating to their peers and the PWI campus culture, while still experiencing oppression, and lack of support from their institutions.

Black Women and HBCU Leadership Experiences

Since their inception, HBCUs have provided a loving, protective environment for their students (Njoku et al., 2017). For Black women, HBCUs have been a place where their Blackness is often celebrated, and there is evidence that they have better satisfaction and cognitive outcomes than Black women at PWI's (Allen, 1997; Conrad & Gasman, 2015; Fleming, 1984; & Njoku, 2017). HBCUs have their own notion of success that is more communal and more embracing of different ways of being Black and a woman (Conrad & Gasman, 2015). HBCUs may likely offer important environments for Black women to thrive as leaders. However, Black women at HBCUs are often met with more problematic, gendered experiences such as: being steered into careers that are deemed as respectable for women, having more restrictive rules that were meant to protect them, and even being encouraged to be the campus queen¹ instead of the student government president because of their gender (Njoku et al., 2017). We are not arguing that Black men do not have some negative or complicated experiences on HBCU campuses regarding gender (Davis, 1999; Harper & Harris, 2010); we do argue that Black women in leadership positions on HBCU campuses have a hard time being heard and being seen (Domingue, 2015). Relatedly, Hardaway et al., (2021) and Lee-Johnson (2019) in their studies of undergraduate Black women leaders on HBCU campuses discovered that when in specific leadership roles, such as Student Government

¹ The Campus Queen on a HBCU campus can be very fluid on many campuses they are the face of the university and represent their standards for higher learning.

Association Presidents, the women had very gendered experiences. The women in all these studies navigated their leadership experiences seeking guidance from Black women on their respective campuses.

An HBCU could be considered a meaningful environment because they are considered a place of Black refuge for Black students (Mobley, 2017). Meaningful environments (like an HBCU) are essential in developing students of color leadership capacities (Guthrie, 2010). After all, HBCUs are the locations from which some of the world's top activists and leaders emerged (Gasman & Commodore, 2014; Lee-Johnson, 2019; Mobley, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

Black Feminist Thought

We use Black Feminist Thought (BFT) to understand ways that Black women's lives may be shaped by multiple, intersecting identities (Collins, 2000/ 2009). BFT is a critical social theory that examines the individual and collective experiences of Black women within interlocking systems of oppression (Collins, 2000/2009). BFT allowed us to contemplate the often-ignored experiences of Black women, and how Black women have created or maintained ways to find liberation, empowerment, and independence in a society that has often stereotyped and oppressed them (Collins, 2009; hooks, 2000; Zinn & Dill, 2016). Our use of BFT specifically allows us to cross-examine the experiences of Black undergraduate women leaders at HBCUs through visuals. For example, the women in this study defined what leadership meant to them through the pictures they drew. BFT consists of six distinguishing features (Collins, 2000/ 2009). Distinguishing feature one examines the dialectical relationship between oppression and activism. In other words, Black women's lived experiences with multiple forms of oppression urges them to partake in social justice projects. Feature two highlights how individual Black women respond differently to common challenges shared amongst Black women. Feature three, examines the dialogical relationship or the linkage between thought and action. In feature four, BFT posits that Black women intellectuals inside and outside of the academy are crucial to the advancement of BFT. This feature highlights Black women's self-definition and valuation. Feature five, acknowledges that dialogue, reflection, and change is crucial to advancing BFT forward. Lastly, feature six acknowledges that Black women's multiple intersecting identities locate them in various social justice projects which prompt coalition building (Collins, 2000/ 2009).

For the purposes of this study, we are focusing on the fourth distinguishing feature; how individual Black women respond differently to common issues. Under this feature, Black women's self-definition is a value that embraces empowerment. In other words, Black women are positioned as creators of knowledge who have the power to share their wisdom and their own narratives. In the context of this study, we are interested in understanding how Black women in elected leadership positions at HBCUs describe themselves as leaders on their campuses. Hence, BFT is the appropriate framework to analyze the findings because it allows Black women campus leaders

to define what leadership means to them, a perspective that is lacking in “traditional” “white patriarchal” leadership literature.

Methodology

Research from Black feminist lenses align with critical visual methodological approaches as they both highlight and center marginalized perspectives, multilayered oppression, and power relations (Jung, 2014; Moss, 2002; Palermo, 2022; Pasque et al., 2012). Critical visual methodology (CVM) is employed in this study to uncover and visually illustrate how HBCU settings impact and cultivate Black women’s complex identities around leadership in their subjective everyday lives and spaces (Jung, 2014; Pink, 2007; Rees, 2010). Visual methods “attempt to transfer power to research participants by putting them in control of what is (not) shown (Rees, 2010) and by inviting them to produce knowledge together” (Jung, 2014, p.988). CVM is applicable for this study as it explores the power relations Black women at HBCUs experience along with cultural significance and social practices (Palermo, 2022).

Critical Visual Methodology

Critical visuality provides counter-visuals and, in doing so, centers what has been intentionally hidden and made invisible. Moreover, it centers what is possible across power relations within historical, geographical, cultural, and social contexts (Callahan, 2015; Kumar, 2018; Margolis & Pauwels, 2011; Palermo, 2022; Rose, 2016). For this study, CVM analyzes different visuals, visual production, visual consumption, and visual interpretation through the intersectional lenses of race and gender.

Gillian Rose, a British professor and contemporary scholar in CVM, developed a model to interpret images and text. Rose (2016) highlights four types of analysis for the different stages of visual production and viewing. The four sites are: “The site(s) of production of the image,” “the site of the image itself,” “the site of its circulation,” and “the site where it is seen by various audiences” (Rose, 2016, p. 24-25). This study focuses on the site of the image itself and focuses on answering the following questions: Who? When? Who for? and Why? Once the images were collected, the themes to look for under BFT were self-defining and self-valuation. Using CVM, the following questions were asked: What was drawn? How was it represented- words, images? In what ways do the images reflect the larger apolitical, economic, and social constraints placed on Black women in postsecondary education? The images were analyzed in a three-tier process. The first process assigned low-level codes using a BFT frame to the images. The second level organized the codes under the guiding CVM questions. The last level includes a written summary of each of the 5 drawings.

All four sites contain three modalities: technological, compositional, and social (Rose, 2016). The technological modality is tools that help enhance the consumption of the image such as visual technology. Compositional modality focuses on the materials needed to make the image. This study focuses on the social modalities that look at the “range of economic, social, and political

relations, institutions and practices that surround and image and through which it is seen and used” (Ownby, 2013; Rose, 2016, p. 26). Social modality considers how the hand-drawn images of Black women leaders in higher education see themselves through the lens of economic, social, and political behaviors in relation to institutional practices and behaviors and the larger society (Rose, 2016).

Iconography

Iconography is a form of CVM that focuses on image analysis. Often used interchangeably with iconology, iconography helps to answer the question: What do images represent and how (Van Leeuwen, 2001)? Iconography focuses on how the image looks (Rose, 2016) and clarifies the representational and symbolic meanings of images. CVM, particularly iconography, looks at how drawings are used to see how Black women in leadership positions align with their institution’s values, mission, expectations, and perceptions of Black women as leaders.

Data Sources

Data for this project stem from a larger, critical life story project about undergraduate Black women from private and public HBCUs and their journeys to leadership from elementary school to college. In the larger study, 45 women participated in the two focus groups, and all of the women turned in photos as participation. This study analyzes five of the 45 photos. In this analysis, the overarching research question reads as follows: How do undergraduate Black women leaders at HBCUs view themselves as leaders? Within the data collection, the participants in this study were asked to illustrate responses to the following questions: *What does leadership look like to you? What things do you unapologetically bring into your leadership? How are you valued as a Black leader on campus?* BFT and CVM are utilized to uncover the meanings of the images. Each of the drawings used in this study were drawn by the participants, during the focus groups.

Participant Selection

Purposive sampling was used in this study to identify Black women to participate in this study (Creswell,2013). The requirement for the study was that they: 1.) self-identify as cis-gender; 2.) currently enrolled or had graduated from an private or public HBCU within the past 3 years; and 3.) currently serving in an elected student leadership role.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Name	Leadership Role	Institution Type	Classification
Tianna	SGA Events Coordinator	Private HBCU	Senior
Pam	SGA President	Public HBCU	Senior
Maxine	Campus Queen	Private HBCU	Senior
Kim	SGA Vice President	Private HBCU	Senior
Freddie	Campus Queen	Private HBCU	Senior

Data Collection

The drawings in this study were collected at a Student Leadership Conference held annually for over 500 student leaders of both men and women. All participants met the following eligibility criteria: a.) identified as African American or Black woman; b.) were currently enrolled at an HBCU at the time of the study; and c.) were in a leadership role on their respective campus. Data was collected through individual, face-to-face, life story interviews (and two focus groups where the drawings took place).

Data Analysis

Once the images were collected, the themes to look for under BFT were self-defining and self-valuation. Using CVM, the following questions were asked: What was drawn? How was it represented- words, images? In what ways do the images reflect the larger political, economic, and social constraints placed on Black women in postsecondary education? The images were analyzed in a three-tier process. The first process assigned low-level codes using a BFT frame to the images. The second level organized the codes under the guiding CVM questions. The last level includes a written summary of each of the drawings.

Intertextuality and Reflexivity

This study incorporates intertextuality and reflexivity. We incorporated intertextuality by finding the meanings of the drawings in comparison to the other drawings. “The notion of intertextuality contemplates the idea that the meaning of words or images in texts are not a pre-given, but rather constructed and negotiated by authors and readers” (Jung, 2014, p. 991). For this study, the drawings were put into multiple categories based on themes present and absent, allowing multiple meanings to be drawn.

Additionally, reflexivity was incorporated in this study, as the authors discussed how their awareness and identities impacted this work, and our positionality as researchers throughout the data collection and analysis process was discussed, and how that impacts the interpretation of the visuals. The authors of this paper all identify as cisgender Black women, two of which are HBCU alumna. All four authors analyzed the drawings within social, political, geographical, and cultural contexts and understood how power relations impact the multi-layered and nuanced analysis of the drawings.

Findings

The participants in this study drew pictures to represent their own definitions of leadership and qualities that make their leadership styles unique. The larger study examined forty-five pictures, for the purposes of this paper we analyzed five images created by five participants. Two themes were developed: 1.) Authenticity and 2.) I always put an S on my chest.

Authenticity


Our first theme examines the way that Black women in our study classified themselves as leaders. In many of the pictures drawn by these women themes of authenticity, confidence, and being unapologetic came forth. Thus, this theme represents Black women being their complete selves in their roles as leaders. Maxine, a campus queen, drew a picture of a crown with Black women holding hands under a crown and the word “authenticity” written. To this student leader, being authentic meant being upfront about her flaws while constantly working to be the best version of herself. Maxine wrote above her image: “I can only be myself” and “every day give the best version of only me...” (Maxine, 2018, personal communication). In her drawing Maxine expresses the complexities of being a leader; she does not have to be poised or put together all the time. Using a BFT lens, Maxine chooses to embrace her “flaws” and presents all her identity in her position. Maxine rejects the pressures to always be “on” and ready. She gives herself room to grow and that her authenticity allows others to look up to her and follow suit. Her image of a crown with women holding hands further symbolizes community that she has with other women and women leaders on campus.

Authenticity

Ⓐ Nay sayers, Gods test of faith, patience, and persistence

Ⓑ Authenticity. I can only be myself. And everyday give the best version of only me. Flaws & all, I am human but still allow myself room for improvement & new understanding

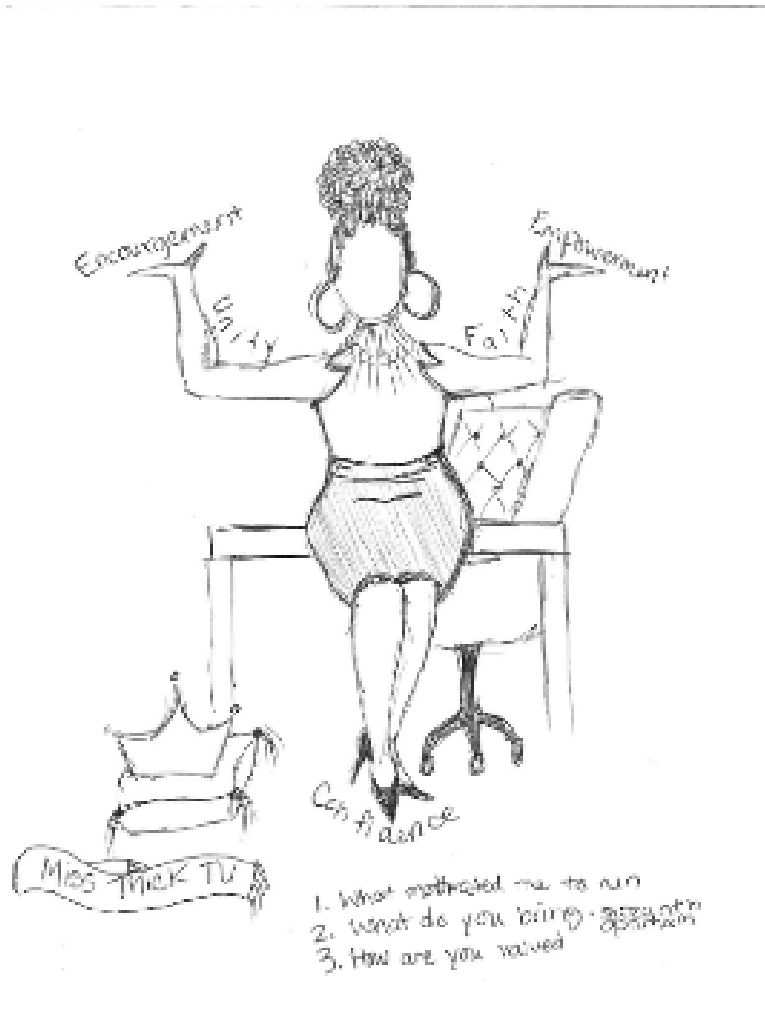
Ⓒ Role model to my peers
A go-getter
Ambition builder



My crown is an ode to authenticity And crowning of mentees that look up to me and need molding guidance

Tianna, SGA Events Coordinator, refers to herself as a “Miss Thick TU” because unlike what her women leaders on her campus may perceive to be, she is a full-figured leader unlike some of her peers. In her picture, she views herself as a leader with confidence, faith, empowerment, unity, and encouragement. She holds her head up high, as she sits on a desk with those saying who she is with those words. She is unapologetically proud of who she is and proudly wears her high ponytail, and hoop earrings. Tianna brings strength and optimism to her role and the confidence she has allows her to assert herself into spaces she may traditionally have been invited to as a leader.

Miss Thick TU



Both Tianna and Maxine, in accordance with their images view themselves as authentic leaders on campus. They both use their leadership positionality to be inspirational to other students on campus. Their identities of leadership represent the fourth distinguishing of Black feminist thought “empowerment.”

I ALWAYS wear an S on my Chest.

Our second theme focuses on servant leadership styles. As servant leaders, the participants were responsible for being a role model, representing others, and including the voices of other people in their role as leaders. The images drawn conveyed a commitment to service, community, and being a superwoman while embodying Black superwomen schema (Abrams et al., 2014). Many of the women conveyed the notion of serving others in their visual images. For example, Gina, a Miss Junior, campus queen for her class envisions herself as a Superwoman Queen with a scepter in her hand. Surrounding the Black superwoman figure contained are the words “humility, power, respect, kindness, love, community.” We interpreted her picture to mean that as a servant

leader, her job is to serve with humility, kindness, and respect while also loving the community which she serves. Bringing unity, while serving others, and for others. Her picture also conveys that there is a lineage of Black women leaders behind her. We also interpreted the scepter to mean she has the power and authority in her role as a leader. In ancient history, the scepter or staff has been to represent authority and power (Wikipedia,2024).

Black women leading with Scepter



Another example of servant leadership expressed in the images is the notion of helping others reach their highest potential. In one image drawn by Pam, an SGA president, the acronym POWER is written across the paper. The acronym stands for “Presenting Opportunities Where Everyone Rises”. This acronym is powerful in that it conveys that as a servant leader, her responsibility is to cultivate the leadership skills of others by bringing out the talents of others. Additionally, Pam also draws a blank face and a set of lips to express how others perceive her facial expressions as stoic, lacking warmth, or “mean” but that contradicting her values of being an affable person. Pam’s drawing raises an important point of analysis of Black feminism in qualitative inquiry, in that we need more interpretations of body language and facial expressions (Evans-Winter, 2019).

P.O.W.E.R

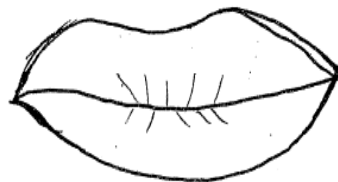
P.O.W.E.R

- Presenting opportunities where everyone rises.

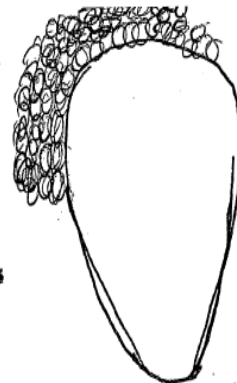


P
Presenting
O
pportunities
W
here
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veryone
R
ises

WITTY!!



- Sassy, but
always fighting
for what's right



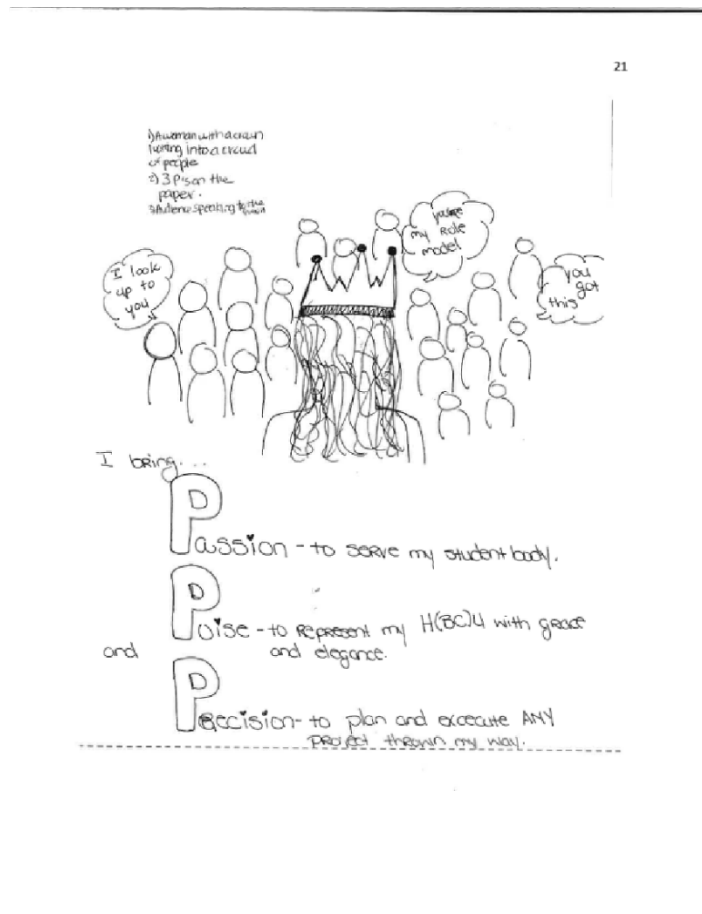
- Blank face
because I always
show no appear
ance. I don't
mean, I'm
the nicest

BRAVE!!



Freddie, campus queen, drew herself as a queen looking into an audience of people saying encouraging words to her. To Freddie, people perceive her as a role model. She types the words Passion, Poise, and Precision. We interpreted her picture to mean that she must always remain “put together” because people are always watching her. This connects to BFT in that her picture implies that Black women must always be on top of their game.

PPP



As much as the women were free to be themselves, they were also restricted in what this freedom could look like in any given situation. The drawings created by the participants sent multiple and at times complex and diverse messages reflecting their larger positionalities in education and society. The photos drawn by Maxine, Pam, Freddie, and Kim reveal that as Black women leaders their main duty and priority is to serve their community. To these women, serving their communities meant being role models, cultivating the talents and skills for others through providing opportunities, and developing the next generation of leaders. These women's visions of leadership reflect a Black feminist style of leadership that centers on the importance of community, accountability, and empowerment.

Scholarly Significance

Much of the reason we decided to title our paper “All Eyez on Me” was because these Black women recognize that as leaders on campus and in life, the spotlight is often on them. Many of them in this study were the first “women” to hold these positions, so the way that they viewed themselves as leaders was and could be heavily influenced by the way that others perceive them.

The title represents everyone's eyes including themselves and how they view themselves as leaders.

This study contributes a creative and visual methodology of Black undergraduate women's self-definition of leadership through a Black feminist perspective. As indicated in the findings, Black women campus queens and student government president's at HBCU's. The images drawn by participants in this study, is consistent with BFT (Collins, 2000/2009) values of empowerment, community uplift, and self-definition and valuation practices that highlight the authenticity of Black women's voices. Lastly, this study introduced an innovative way of integrating BFT with visual methodologies, more research in education could use this method to articulate Black women's self-definitional practices through visuals.

This study is unique in that Black women are defining leadership in their own words, and not by others. Furthermore, this work highlights the voices of Black undergraduate women leaders at HBCUS, a group that is far too often overlooked and ignored in the literature. This study uncovers a Black feminist style of leadership, whereby Black women at HBCU's lead with a style of leadership that values humility, empowerment, and serving their communities. Additionally, this study has implications for how institutional contexts inform how Black undergraduate women embody their roles at student leaders.

Undergraduate Black women in leadership positions need mentors to help them unpack all the responsibilities associated to them as being Black women leaders on HBCU campuses specifically. Black women in these educational spaces need to be empowered with the ability to recognize, analyze, and resist all forms of leadership that encroach on their identities and disempower them.

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