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The New Howard Woman

Dean Lucy Diggs Slowe and the Education of a Modern Black Femininity

Abstract: In the opening decades of the twentieth century, Lucy Diggs Slowe charted new territory as the first African American dean of women. Serving in this administrative role for fifteen years at her alma mater, Howard University, Slowe introduced and shaped an extracurriculum to realize her unique ideal of educated Black womanhood, “the New Howard Woman.” In a departure from the hyperscrutiny of nineteenth-century codes of respectability, the New Howard Woman drew from the self-defining qualities of the New Negro and the New Woman, while correcting for their exclusive focus on Black masculinity and white femininity, respectively. This paper examines how Slowe’s advocacy of Black women operated on two intertwined principles: the universal right to grow into one’s potential and the obligation of each person to contribute her talent to social amelioration. Given her unwavering conviction that Black women were as much members of modern society as other race-gender groups, Slowe’s tenure provides a unique and needed window into an underexplored history of interventions to render college campuses inclusive and responsive environments for democratic learning and living.

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A new day has dawned for the women of Howard University and through them, for the University itself. For, is not that inevitable law, that a good woman is “the foundation stone of all civilization,” at work in the University? There is a new force in Howard University that will bring help, inspiration, guidance, culture into the life of the women here. Already a coveted view down the long avenue of time has revealed the New Howard Woman

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as she is conceived by Dean Lucy Slowe, the new force on the University faculty that must make itself felt far down through the future.

Dean Slowe is the answer to a spiritual need in the life of the women here. . . . We, the women of Howard University, welcome Dean Slowe with eager, open arms and consecrate ourselves to this sacred task of evolving the New Howard Woman.

—“The New Howard Woman,” *Howard University Record* 17, no. 1
(November 1922): 49

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So opened an article in the alumni magazine *Howard University Record*, in its first issue of the 1922–23 academic year. Its student author, junior Mamie Geraldine Neale, wrote prophetically about a new administrator, Dean of Women Lucy Diggs Slowe, as well as her significant, almost immediate impact on the campus. Calling a meeting on October 10, just eight days into the new academic year, Slowe had gathered all the women students to introduce herself as well as her bold vision for them—that they would embody an educated feminine ideal she termed the “New Howard Woman.” This cultural figure who was “intellectually alert, physically alert, and of extreme culture and refinement” was simultaneously modern, African American, and a woman.

The necessity of coining the phrase the “New Howard Woman” reflected what Slowe and contemporary feminists of color recognize as the fact of Black women’s “intersectional invisibility” (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach 2008). Because of her existence at the convergence of marginalized race and gender, Slowe had to creatively and persistently challenge the societal expectations that Black women operate within a circumscribed space that maintained both white racial arrogance and male privilege. As she would articulate throughout her tenure, Slowe believed in the necessity of a progressive and feminist Black womanhood committed to both individual growth and social usefulness. This modern responsibility was to be shared by all college graduates, irrespective of race or gender.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, several discourses in circulation could define the priorities and purpose of educated Black women: racial respectability, the New Negro, and the New Woman. Although introduced in the late nineteenth century, notions of racial respectability long remained prominent within Black middle-class circles, especially with regard to women. However, in a decided break from deferential

Victorian-era codes, the new century saw both educated Black men and white women increasingly renegotiate their subordinate status within white patriarchy by insisting on the primacy of their self-definition as modern subjects, that is, as New Negroes and New Women, respectively. Because neither the New Negro nor the New Woman assertions of modern subjectivity spoke directly on behalf of educated Black women, Slowe's announcement of the *New Howard Woman* defiantly extended a modern personhood to college-bound Black women.

Racial Respectability and the Black Woman's Sphere

At first glance Slowe's focus on the "culture and refinement" of the *New Howard Woman* appears to adhere to notions of respectability, a late nineteenth-century, Reconstruction-era assertion of racial virtue. Upholders of respectability countered the characterizations of Blacks as fundamentally inferior beings with the argument that the race suffered from cultural inadequacies that could be remedied through moral training and the emulation of white Victorian middle-class codes of behavior. It was through such actions that middle-class Blacks sought to "mitigate racial friction" with whites and elevate themselves out of situational ignorance and impermanent deficiencies (Higginbotham 1994, 39).

Codes of racial self-surveillance extended throughout the twentieth century, and in most historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) materialized as a "dual education" of simultaneous "instruction in academic subjects and respectability" (Simmons 2012, 431). This moralistic curricular focus shaped the advice shared in the 1920s by students at Spelman, the historically Black women's college. Conceding the fact that they would always encounter an evaluative audience, they stressed the importance of monitoring their behavior "not for ourselves alone but for the sake of lessening conflict with others whom we meet" (Lowe 2003, 41, emphasis added). As the African American educator Jeanne Noble (1956, 24) concluded, respectability's concerns over comportment reflected the fact that an individual Black woman was expected to compensate for "her foremother's sex role as a slave." In this way, racial uplift and codes of respectability maintained that it was Black women's work—as a kind of "res(ex)pectability" labor (Reid-Brinkley 2008)—to disprove white beliefs by individually refuting the pejorative controlling images that assailed their virtue, intelligence, and social worth.

Despite its charge to all Blacks to demonstrate their social fitness, racial

respectability discourse singled out Black women for heightened responsibilities. After the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, granting them the right of the franchise, Black men increasingly aligned their own aspirations for first-class citizenship with the adoption of white men's patriarchal models of self, family, and community (Perkins 1983). Pursuing a "restorative patriarchy" to offset the emasculating effects of enslavement, Black men idealized Victorian gender feminine norms and expected that Black women would abide by them (Chatelain 2015, 79).

Because of its focus on the (re)establishment of Black men to masculine codes of power, racial respectability largely confined Black women's acceptable uplift labors to role modeling and teaching as opposed to leadership (Chatelain 2015, 79). As a result, a majority of respectable Black women operated within the constraints of what Smith Crocco and Waite (2007, 73) term "the black woman's sphere—motherhood, teaching, and the helping professions." Although not solely limited to domestic duties, the Black woman's sphere effectively restricted the influence of African American women to "serving but not leading, unless . . . leading other women" (90). In other words, codes of respectability did not expect Black women to have independent vision, determine the kind and scope of their own contributions to others, or chart the course of their lives.

Although racial respectability spoke directly to educated Black women, it held them to standards of behavior that by the early twentieth century both Black men and white women college graduates were publicly denouncing as outdated and regressive. In the place of Victorian ideals, both groups claimed "a distinctly modern ideal of self-fashioning" (Patterson 2008, 2). A broad umbrella, modernity referred to a series of social transformations—including imperialism, mass education, industrialization, migration, and urbanization—that left individuals with a newfound visibility and responsibility to determine their own destinies and shape the environment in which they lived. In ways unknown to previous generations, these cultural changes also encouraged discontinuities from the past, often in the name of personal growth and social amelioration.

The New Negro: A Masculinist Racial Agent

In the years between the two world wars (1918–39) educated Black men began turning away from nineteenth-century codes of respectability to adopt a self-defining, self-determined masculinity (Chapman 2012). As articulated by Dean Slowe's contemporary and Howard University

colleague, the philosopher Alain Locke, what he termed “the New Negro” markedly pivoted away from the Reconstruction-era ideology of racial uplift, which he characterized as an offensively feminine posture of deference and dependence. Writing the lead essay in his 1925 anthology, *The New Negro*, Locke ([1925] 1968, 3–4) asserted:

The Old Negro, we must remember, was a creature of moral debate and historical controversy. . . . The Negro himself has contributed his share to this through a sort of protective social mimicry forced upon him by the adverse circumstances of dependence . . . and [seeing] himself in the distorted perspective of a social problem. His shadow, so to speak, has been more real to him than his personality. . . . Little true social or self-understanding has or could come from such a tradition.

Locke’s intentionally gendered distinction between the Old and the New Negro signaled an end to an apologetic approach to Blackness and relations with whites. As he emphasized, the New Negro “lays aside the status of a beneficiary and ward for that of a collaborator and participant in American civilization” (15).

Locke’s New Negro conceptualization of Black men as powerful social actors offered little recognition of Black women as cultural leaders. By asserting a masculine selfhood as the defining trait of citizenship, the New Negro erased much of Black women’s labors and presence. Thus, as the “alleviation of black men’s oppression” took center stage in the racial strivings of African Americans, Black women’s advancement was displaced from their self-presentations to their relationship with and “subordination to strong, benevolent, capable black patriarchs” (Chapman 2012, 57). In other words, the New Negro’s counterpart was not an equal but a deferential “race woman” relegated to a parallel yet “invisible talented tenth” (Waite 2001), her efforts focused on strengthening relations of marriage, family, and community. In the revealing words of the activist-educator Elise Johnson McDougald ([1925] 1968, 372, 380) in her own contribution to Locke’s *The New Negro* anthology, “The modern Negro mother . . . [is] self-directed but as loyal and tender as the much extolled, yet pitiable Black mammy of slavery days. . . . True sex equality has not been approximated.” As she would express in an earlier version of this manuscript, the struggle of Black women continued to be a “double task” against both racism and sexism (Johnson McDougald 1925).

Slowe’s *New Howard Woman* embodied many of the assertive qualities

of the New Negro, as both viewed the race problem in terms of human rights and white racism rather than as a reflection of Black deficits. However, the New Howard Woman rejected the patriarchal tendencies of both racial respectability and the New Negro. Instead she sought, like the New Negro, to be an active, equal participant in social processes. In so doing, much of Slowe's construction of the New Howard Woman's public role in social usefulness drew from the discourse of New Womanhood fostered by the first two generations of white women alumnae and the emergent dean of women profession.

The New Woman: Educated for Social Usefulness

Driven by the "experiment" of coeducation, the New Woman was a discourse of white womanhood and citizenship. In the wake of the Civil War, given the depletion of the college ranks through death, permanent injury, and reversals of fortune, men's colleges intent on keeping their doors open pursued young women's tuition dollars (Alberg Graham 1970, 1284). The brisk pace of coeducation in the late nineteenth century attests to its financial expedience and pragmatic response to social pressure: in 1870 more than half of colleges were men-only (59 percent); however, by the turn of the twentieth century, 70 percent of institutions were coeducational (Newcomer 1959, 37).

Despite anxiety about the social consequences of their entrance into a historically male sphere of activity and preparation, young white women eagerly and excitedly pursued courses of study commensurate with their abilities. Contending "that education was a right of personality rather than of sex," feminist advocates of New Womanhood asserted that women had "two sides—the woman side, and the human side" (Freeman Palmer 1891, 33) and that it was the development of the latter qualities that would render them "well-equipped member[s] of a modern democratic community" (Talbot 1910, viii). Belonging to the first (1870–90) and second (1890–1910) generations of alumnae, New Womanhood proponents were pioneers in men's occupations, political activists, and founders of new careers such as settlement work and the profession of deans of women.

By 1920 college had become a social expectation among the white middle class: women had increased their proportion of the student body from 21 percent in 1870 to 47.3 percent, and over 80 percent attended coeducational institutions (Newcomer 1959, 46, 49). However, they remained an unwelcome group in higher education. Discouraged from fields considered

inconsistent with conventionally feminine qualities and life pursuits, young women were allowed limited access at best to student activities such as the newspaper, athletic teams, and Greek life—all of which developed leadership skills and built a sense of community among peers (Turk 2004). Such institutional efforts to contain women in ways that were deemed “compatible with their femininity” (Smith-Rosenberg 1985, 203) were so successful that in 1900, of the sixty-one thousand women enrolled in coeducational institutions, almost 75 percent were pursuing courses of study in either education or home economics (Nidiffer 2001b, 26). What the historian Margaret A. Lowe (2003, 115) terms “curricular segmentation” reflected a tacit anti-coeducation policy so that despite their growing numbers, women still attended male-dominated campuses where conventional gender attitudes about women’s proper place of deference to men’s interests prevailed.

New Women in Higher Education: Deans of Women

Deans of women are the largely unrecognized founders of the field of student affairs and the foremothers to contemporary women’s center directors and women’s studies faculty (Nidiffer 2001a, 152). A profession established by New Women college alumnae, deans of women were the first women administrative leaders on coeducational campuses. Defining themselves as experts in women’s education, deans of women insisted on the need for three distinct learning-living environments: “that for men alone, that for women alone, and that for men and women together” (Mathews Rosenberry 1915, 159). As “the only officer in the university who deals with a woman student as a complete human being,” deans of women focused their administrative attention on the extracurriculum—women’s lives on campus but outside the classroom—as a space of unique and underutilized educational potential to develop young women as “living and growing persons” (Slowe 1931, 112).

While strategically nodding to feminine conventions, deans of women more importantly insisted on young women’s right to develop well beyond these gendered limitations. As Anna Louise Pierce (1928, 1), dean of women at the New York State College for Teachers, wrote in her detailed manual about the position:

While we want to preserve all the grace and beauty of the feminine type of woman we no longer desire to cultivate the sentimental, dependent type.

The present purpose of thoughtful educators is to develop women possessing the virtues of strength, of courage, of initiative, of ability to fend for themselves, of honestly facing the problems of living and of assuming full responsibility for doing their share in the world's work.

Although hired to supervise the residential lives of women students, deans of women quickly organized into a self-defining profession. In 1916 they founded the National Association of Deans of Women, and Teachers College, Columbia University began offering graduate courses. A majority of deans of women reported directly to campus presidents and understood that without their activism, higher education institutions would “continue to be in the future as the vast majority have been in the past—institutions for men” (Mathews Rosenberry 1915, 14). In contrast to cultural imagery, the dean of women was not a meddling chaperone but an advocate for a financially necessary and structurally minoritized population. Although they strongly eschewed some of the modern aspects of youth culture—which one dean described as “the vices and bad habits of smoking and drinking . . . using coarse and common language . . . [and] indifference to the niceties of living” (Pierce 1928, 1)—most deans of women understood the problem in higher education as centering much less on women's propriety than on what Slowe (1933, 352) herself pointedly identified as “essentially the problem of educating ‘the weaker sex’ in colleges with ‘the stronger sex.’” It was from a critical distance to the paternalistic visions of campus presidents and faculty, college men, and young women's families that deans of women positioned their work (Schwartz 1997).

Although recognizing the importance of academic coursework, most deans took an expansive view of education that incorporated the extra-curriculum, women's lives outside the classroom. Thus it was to young women's housing, clubs and student organizations, campus-wide events, physical health, and vocational development that deans of women directed a majority of their efforts and innovations. As one dean explained:

The prescribed curriculum alone cannot fully educate its students in citizenship, since what a woman is in her leisure hours largely determines what she is in her relation to her fellows. It is the dean's work, therefore, to provide for the leisure hours of the students and to teach such extra-curricular subjects as social usages, social initiative, social cooperation, good uses of leisure time, and other desired qualities of good citizenship. (Thornton 1922, 306)

Many deans held that by supporting the growth of individual women's talents, they would be able to usher in "the coming of a new social order" in which college women—as modern subjects—would take on the needed work to align the twentieth century with the country's democratic principles and away from the struggle, divisiveness, and injustices of the nineteenth century (Sturtevant 1924: 119).

New Women and Race

As a self-defining, socially useful modern feminine subjectivity, New Womanhood appealed to women around the world and from diverse cultural and racial backgrounds. However, the dominant expressions and concerns of New Womanhood were rooted in white, middle-class women's opportunities (Patterson 2008). As a result, the major agents in both the deaning profession and "women's" education largely maintained and reinforced the white-Black color line of the new century, failing to conceptualize educated womanhood in ways inclusive of Black women.

Despite their matriculation in token numbers at predominantly white coeducational and women's colleges, Black women—particularly liberal arts graduates—promoted a similar aspiration of individual development for social purpose that parted company with much of the compliant rhetoric of both racial respectability and New Negro race womanhood (Perkins 1997). A noteworthy proponent of a racially inclusive notion of New Womanhood was Anna Julia Cooper. Born into slavery in 1858 and one of the first Black women graduates of Oberlin College (1884), Cooper was a longtime school educator and administrator committed to liberal arts learning (Waite 2001).

Like her white peers speaking on behalf of white women, Cooper emphasized Black women's individuality and human qualities over their traditional gendered obligations or racialized limitations: "Let woman's claim be as broad in the concrete as in the abstract. We take our stand on the solidarity of humanity, the oneness of life, and the unnaturalness and injustice of all special favoritisms, whether of sex, race, country, or condition. . . . [We are] demanding an entrance not through a gateway for ourselves, our race, our sex, or our sect, but a grand highway for humanity" (Lemert and Bhan 1998, 204, 205). In such extension of the ideal of new womanhood to Black women, however, Cooper found support generally lacking among Black men, whom she described as "drop[ping] back into sixteenth century logic . . . when they strike the woman question" (85).

Although liberally educated Black women may have viewed themselves as modern beings, they were often pushed to confine their growth and labors to care and community work through the twin pressures of white dominance and Black patriarchy (Perkins 1997).

Lucy Diggs Slowe: A New Howard Woman

When she was recruited to become Howard's first dean of women in 1922, Slowe herself embodied much of the personal growth and social initiative celebrated by the tenets of New Womanhood. She was a cofounder of the first African American sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha, and served as its inaugural president. After graduating as valedictorian from Howard in 1908, she became a well-known progressive high school educator in Baltimore and Washington, DC. In line with the physical education movement that many New Women embraced, Slowe was an avid tennis player while an undergraduate and played competitively from 1916 to 1924; in 1917 she became the first Black woman to win a national sports championship (Miller and Pruitt-Logan 2012, 74). Focused on expanding her horizons through education, Slowe earned her master's degree in English literature in 1915 through summer work from Columbia University, which was also the site of the first graduate program for the profession of deans of women (Phillips et al. 1927). It was there that she was introduced to the deaning profession and a number of white women leaders who would become lifelong colleagues and friends. As a result of this professional trajectory, when she was offered the job of dean of women at Howard, Slowe understood her selection as recognition of her "fourteen years of experience in educational work" and her subsequent capacity to represent "the women's point of view . . . in all matters affecting the education of students."¹ As the first African American woman member of the National Association of Deans of Women, Slowe, along with a majority of the profession, viewed the work of deaning on coeducational campuses as creating new women-centered geographies of learning and living to incubate young women's alternative visions of self and social possibility in the twentieth century.

A Tradition of Their Own: The Howard Women's Dinner

Slowe's introduction of the ideal of the New Howard Woman to an assembly of women students in October 1922 quickly and dramatically took form in the signature tradition she pioneered a month later: the women's dinner. Excluding from attendance all men except waitstaff, the women's dinner

was held the first Friday of every November during Slowe's fifteen-year-tenure. As it brought together women students, alumnae, faculty, and guests, the event sounded the keynote for the efforts of the women's department and showcased the pride Slowe had in women and their community-building efforts independent of men (Slowe 1937). This was a public act of collective self-definition that powerfully challenged the women to reimagine themselves as individuals within a dynamic community.

To prepare the ground for the event, three days after calling the women together Slowe had reached out to male students. Titling her address "What a Howard Man Ought to Be," she laid bare her agenda, asserting, "Young men, I came to do a job!" She encouraged them to become "Ideal Howard Men," individuals who would gain not only knowledge but "character, the proper attitude toward women, and the social graces" ("The Dean of Women" 1922, 51–52, emphasis added). In these overtures, Slowe made clear that Old Howard, her alma mater, would need to become a training ground for a new Black community where women and men would share the responsibilities of modern personhood.

Two articles in the December 1922 issue of the *Howard University Record* detail the event's genesis and reception by both the women and the men on the campus. Proposing the idea for the dinner just "a few short days before the event," Slowe led "a corps of efficient and enthusiastic workers of the students and alumnae" to successfully plan it. In addition, two days before the dinner and likely bolstered by their numbers and shared purpose, the organizing committee sent the following letter to inform the men on campus of the upcoming women-only event:

November 1, 1922

To the Men of the University:

The women of the University are having a dinner Friday night, November 3, in the new dining hall. One of the requirements for admittance to this dinner is that you be a member of the female sex. This naturally bars all men in the University, with the possible exclusion of the waiters, from the floor of the dining hall.

We are indeed sorry that you must miss so much fun, but you may retaliate on us whenever you desire by having a men's dinner. If you had thought of this first, you could have had the laugh on us, but your thoughts are evidently

concerned with more weighty matter [sic] than eating. Just to show you how much fun we women can have when you men are not present, we are going to invite you to stand in the balcony of the dining hall to look down on us. From this, your point of vantage, you can force us women to do the usual thing: look up to you. This will more than compensate you for missing our dinner.

Be this as it may, we cordially invite you to come to the balcony at any time after 8 o'clock on Friday evening to see "a twentieth century wonder," Howard women enjoying themselves without the company of the men.

Very truly yours,

THE WOMEN'S COMMITTEE ON THE FIRST ANNUAL
HOWARD WOMEN'S DINNER ("The First Annual" 1922, 88)

Adopting a tone that was both confident and teasing, the women reveled in their event's gender-exclusive design. Their criteria for inclusion were not "natural" but contrived, yet their reference to dispassionate logic evidenced a playfulness with the rationale of exclusion traditionally used against women. In limiting the men's involvement to being spectators whom the women predicted would watch the gathering in awe, the committee both nodded to the self-importance that men typically assumed around women while rejecting the ideological basis for it.

In truth, the dinner was not simply a women's gathering but a *women-centered* event that challenged the gender silence upheld by both racial respectability and the discourse of the New Negro. Described preemptively and confidently as "a twentieth century wonder of Howard women enjoying themselves without the company of the men," the dinner gleefully created a space for a New Howard Womanhood not beholden to old gendered patterns of control and subservience. The dinner allowed for the emergence of a visible, joyous, collective, and defiant Black womanhood—displaying what the student article a month earlier had termed a "new consciousness" that would require and even demand an updated set of relations with men.

The first student article described the gathering of 250 women students and alumnae as "brilliant in every aspect." Detailing the exuberance that the women experienced and elicited from each other in this new campus tradition, the text conveyed a spirit of celebration quite unlike what one might expect under the strictures of respectability or race womanhood:

It was the meeting of youth and experience when the alumnae threw off their cares and problems and entered into the spirit of the occasion by giving yells and singing the college songs. The enthusiasm at the dinner was tempered by a far deeper significance than was indicated by the jollification. *The affair served to help awaken a woman's consciousness which is one of the first steps toward the evolution of the "New Howard Woman."* ("Howard Women" 1922, 86, emphasis added)

In addition to noting the women's significant freedom of expression and community, that the article incorporated Slowe's phrase "the New Howard Woman" reflected a degree of student investment in her vision and work. The second student article provided additional details about the impact of the gathering on the women in attendance:

There were songs, "screams," as Dean Slowe is wont to call feminine attempts at yelling, and wonderfully inspiring speeches directed by the remarkably gifted toastmistress, Miss Bertha McNeil, and the students who would sing "Stand Up" to whomever they wished to speak. From Dean Slowe's speech that set forth her high conception of the women's "job" in the University throughout the entire list there was help and inspiration.

Rather than operating with invisibility, hypervisibility, or surveillance at their own event, these Black women were carefree. The women's dinner was a new and well-received "pleasure geography," in which Howard women were fully present in mind and body (Simmons 2015, 190).

The inaugural dinner attracted "the President and some of the Deans," all of whom stood in the balcony in accordance with the letter of noninvitation. Adding the statement, "As painful and unheard of as it was, the dinner was planned without including the men" ("The First Annual" 1922, 88), the student writer recognized the unprecedented nature of the women-only undertaking, which Hilda Davis—another student in attendance and a future Slowe protégée—would later recall as "women in all their glory enjoying themselves among themselves."² Coming together, across cohorts and formal campus standing, the Black women were able to claim space as a visible, audible, and self-defining group, in sharp contrast to the exclusions they experienced on both a deeply masculinist campus and in the highly racially segregated context of Washington, DC.

Three anonymous letters reprinted in the *Record* provide insight into the

reaction “from the excluded and offended ‘males’” to the gathering. The first addressed his letter to “My Doubly Dear Ladies” (1922, 89) and adopted a sneeringly chivalrous tone to register his marked disapproval of the dinner: “We may be led to expect many strange things when the ‘spare rib’ sex announces its declaration of independence. . . . This is not the wonder of the twentieth century. It is but the age old propensity of the one feminine to lure and beguile simple minded masculinity by the display of vanity and pride. It is as old as Eve and the red apple” (emphasis added). The naysayer minimized the women’s fun and labors by placing their actions in a framework of biblical patriarchy with its view of women, from Eve onward, as untrustworthy and deceitful to their core. Dismissing what he mockingly termed the “Adamless dinner,” this author clearly understood and rejected the event as a challenge to hegemonic gender relations, which presumed men’s essential and defining value in women’s lives.

In marked contrast was the second letter, written by a man who actually attended the dinner from the balcony. Addressing the women as “Dear Friends” (1922, 89) he applauded their initiative as an “inspiration . . . to all Howardites.” Apparently not threatened by this show of women’s community, he predicted that the tradition would become a significant contribution to “the cause of Greater Howard” and thus hoped that it marked “the beginning of a new day” for the campus as a whole. Evincing a similar enthusiasm, the third letter writer—a faculty or administrative peer—addressed Dean Slowe directly. He reported enjoying reading the women’s letter to the men and commented explicitly on her “touch that gives your communication a laugh, a lilt, and a genuine touch of the human.” Although unable to attend the dinner, he reassured her, “I shall be there in spirit, and certainly wish you every success in this new and very promising movement” (“My Dear Miss Slowe” 1922, 89–90).

The student author of the article did not comment on the men’s letters, but her conclusion spotlighted the sentiment of campus women and roundly attributed the dinner’s success to Slowe: “That force [Dean Slowe] of which we spoke in the last issue of the ‘Record’ is at work, silent yet powerful. The whole affair gave the women a new conception of what it means to be a student or an alumna of Howard University. We look forward with pleasure to the second annual Howard Women’s Dinner and many other such affairs that must create and develop a new force for a Greater and Better Howard” (“The First Annual” 1922, 90).

In Slowe’s second year women student editors of the *Record* continued

to welcome and highlight her efforts and their impact on the campus. The first issue of the 1923–24 academic year included an article in the Undergraduate Life section that recalled the pronouncement from a year earlier of “a new force” that was Slowe and offered an update describing her as “calmly, quietly, unostentatiously, but nevertheless forcefully, definitely, surely” at work to bring into existence “this structure of a womanhood, physically, mentally, and spiritually fit.” In addition to recalling the three domains of womanhood that Slowe had specified in her initial gathering with the young women in October 1922, the article asserted that Howard women were renewed in their “desire to cooperate and see this structure of womanhood grow” (“Undergraduate Life” 1923: 86). Despite such evidence of student support, in the subsequent issue of the *Record* that celebrated the second dinner, there are indications of the conventional context within which the “force” was operating. In a section titled “Counterweights” was printed the following joke:

Professor (in Law): “What are the women of the United States trying to become?”

Student: “Married women.” (“Counterweights: His Part” 1923, 93)

The women students, however, would persevere in upholding Slowe’s alternative vision for them, and in the second issue of the *Record*, Mamie Geraldine Neale, now a senior, reported on the second women’s dinner. Of the talks given, Neale highlighted the remarks of a woman faculty member who “left this germ of thought with the group: great women all over the world today are thinking of women” (“The Second Annual” 1923, 148). Slowe’s own address was titled “The Obligations of the College Woman to Society,”³ and with much enthusiasm from students, she “struck again the note that she has so often sounded: that the ideal college woman is a woman whose body is strong and vigorous, whose mind is keen and alert, whose heart is trained” (“The Second Annual” 1923, 148).

For the fifteen years of Slowe’s tenure and extending three decades after her death in 1937, the women’s dinner maintained an iconic “counterpublic” (Simmons 2015) that allowed for Black women’s celebration of self and gender. Despite the dinner being well-established and well-received as tradition, some men continued to question the gender-exclusivity of the event. In 1930 an unnamed woman author in the student paper, *The Hilltop*, addressed this criticism in an article titled “If Women May Speak” and defended the logic behind the women’s dinner: “This has been labeled as

undemocratic by some enterprising young men, yet cannot the women enjoy themselves with no men present, as the latter often do without the women, without being branded as undemocratic?”⁴

The last dinner over which Slowe would preside, which took place in November 1936, attracted almost five hundred “women students, alumni and well-wishers” and was the second largest in the dinner’s history.⁵ Another particularly poignant indication of the significance of the event for Howard women was the fact that the committee received regrets from an 1871 alumna, whose “health prohibited her attendance.”⁶ Although not a student at Howard during Slowe’s tenure, this woman recognized the powerful opportunity the dinner offered for women to establish new identities in the context of a supportive sisterhood. Coverage of the event in the Black press in November 1941 described it as still “emphasizing the spirit of sisterhood among Howard women.”⁷ At that dinner, alumna Hilda Davis, then dean of women at Talladega College, recalled the gendered significance of the dinner’s founding: “In those days Howard University was essentially a man’s university which included women in its student body and faculty. Dean Slowe’s philosophy included the idea that women were beings in their own right and as independent beings had a purpose and function.”⁸

Creating Space for Leadership:

The Importance of the Extracurriculum

Despite the support she received from students, Slowe understood the women’s dinner to be a stark departure from the much more deferential posture that Black communities and higher education institutions expected from women. Like her white peers, she insisted that college women were both suited to and needed for a much wider range of professions than those for which they were currently prepared by their families of origin or the colleges they attended. However, the case for Black women at HBCUs was unique: founded in the decade following the Civil War to produce preachers and teachers, these schools—Slowe believed—urgently needed to update their work to address the conditions and problems of “the modern world,” the twentieth century.⁹ With regard to women students in particular, Slowe (1933, 354) asserted that HBCUs had yet to recognize the cultural impact of industrialization and suffrage and, as a result, failed to “prepare Negro college women for intelligent participation and leadership” in a society in which they worked and legally had the right to vote.

In a series that began with an invited address about Black college women for a lecture series on race and education at Teachers College in 1931, and then included two papers published in 1933 and 1937, Slowe expressed most clearly her critique of Black women's education and the necessity of deaning efforts. As institutions that operated with nineteenth-century logics, HBCUs expected a compliant posture from Black women that reinforced cultural attitudes that Slowe found troubling and deeply out of step with societal trends and needs. Raised in racially segregated communities barred from voting, amid sexist conservatism that viewed women not as their own individuals but as "the female of man," and reared with a religious background of "patient waiting," young Black southern women, argued Slowe (1933, 356, 357), came to college equipped with troubling habits of acceptance and deference. Consequently she characterized these matriculants as too well-schooled in "the psychology of inaction rather than that of active curiosity" (357) and unfamiliar with "aggressively attacking problems with a view to changing unsatisfactory conditions."¹⁰ Because she believed Black women should have "freedom of choice in how they would contribute to social betterment" (Evans 2007, 68), Slowe emphasized their need to experience college as citizens and individuals rather than as helpmates to men.

Slowe (1933, 355) explicitly tied the need for women's leadership in society to requisite developmental experiences that would allow for "exercising initiative, independence, and self-direction while in college." To lay bare the anachronistic nineteenth-century thinking of twentieth-century Black communities and schools, Slowe cited what were likely the comments of Howard's first African American president, Mordecai Wyatt Johnson (1926–60) (Perkins 1996, 97). Throughout his tenure Johnson stood at odds with many of her efforts to develop the educational and vocational opportunities of Black women. About the unnamed administrator, she wrote:

One college president said that he wanted the women in his institution to be trained to be good wives and mothers. . . . Since these women are educated in schools almost exclusively administered by men, they cannot develop social consciousness, unless these men are willing to accept the changed status of women in the modern world. . . . In far too many of our schools women students are hampered by useless rules and regulations designed to control their conduct, but not designed to give that necessary opportunity for making independent choices without which real

freedom of action cannot be developed. When a college woman cannot be trusted to go shopping without a chaperone she is not likely to develop powers of leadership.¹¹

Modernity granted individuality and social responsibility to all on the basis of their personhood, not their group membership. Slowe conceptualized higher education institutions as environments to cultivate individuals, who were liberally educated, socially aware, and capable of putting their talents into action for the common, democratic good. As she regularly insisted, “Education must fit Negro women, as it must fit all women, for the highest development of their own gifts; but, whatever those gifts, they will not be able to exercise them unless they understand the world they live in and are prepared to make their contributions to it” (Slowe 1933, 358). She criticized the way Black women’s education was diverted from trends more widely accepted for Black men and whites of both genders, largely based on ongoing discriminatory attitudes, not innate ability or potential.

Along with her white women dean peers, Slowe (1937, 279) approached the extracurriculum as a critical educational space for students to experience “that fellowship which comes only by working together for a common, constructive purpose.” As Slowe elaborated in an undated address, it was in their leisure activities that students developed their character: “I believe that one can find the good men and women much more easily through the extra-curriculum activities than through curriculum activities. Outside of the classroom where restraint is removed, where no marks are given and no credits earned, the real man or woman is revealed; and here, in my judgment, the college has one of its greatest opportunities for education.”¹² The value of the extracurriculum was to “bring about a group consciousness among Howard women” by sponsoring activities of “cultural, spiritual and educational value.”¹³ It was a student-centered form of “college work” that was not synonymous with “college life” or the contemporaneous focus on dances, “heterosociability,” and recreation tied to the first modern sexual revolution, a point of some contention for some Howard women students (Haidarali 2013, 25). In guiding Howard women in what she termed “the constructive use of leisure time” (Slowe 1937, 279), Slowe broadly contended that “college [was] no place for the frivolous social butterfly who cannot or will not contribute to society something worth while when she is trained.”¹⁴ Seeking women who were serious about their growth into leaders, Slowe refuted the claims made by the New Negro

and the New Woman that “self-discovery, self-acceptance, and self-fulfillment [were] luxuries of the individual self” that Black women had to forgo (Evans 2007, 72; see also Lindsey 2013).

Concluding Thoughts: Remembering for the Future

Slowe’s tenure, stature in women’s higher education, and expansive vision of Black feminine possibility which she articulated at HBCUs and among white peers operated from a “resistant imaginary” (May 2015, 34) in order to ensure that higher education was responsive not just to gender but to racialized experiences of femininity. She envisioned the New Howard Woman as a leader and agent in her own right, alongside rather than in the shadows of either New Negro (men) or New (white) Women. Like these modern subjects, the New Howard Woman embodied a twentieth-century willingness to lean into her self-actualization and social usefulness. As a result, Slowe’s vision of educated Black womanhood ruptured many dominant expectations of what Black women should do, be, and think in the company of both whites and Black men.

Recognition, visibility, and voice were key themes in Slowe’s work on campus and in higher education as an unapologetic advocate for educated Black womanhood. Recalled one alumna, Dean Slowe “got us really interested in being women and demanding our rights as women. . . . You know everything was very male-tailored until Lucy Slowe came” (Haidarali 2013, 16). As late as November 1955, Howard alumnae recalled the impact of Slowe’s ideal of the New Howard Woman and the institutional landscape that she encountered and successfully reshaped:

Here [at Howard University] she found an educational jungle inhabited mainly by men not altogether convinced, that women were designed to do their equal share in the world’s work. . . . It was Lucy Slowe’s task to bring to this university the conception of the Howard coed, who studies and gets her work, because that is what she is here for mainly. . . . Because Lucy Slowe set up that ideal on this campus and persuaded the students to follow after it, tonight we have this dinner.¹⁵

The New Howard Woman was a Black feminist invested in creating an unprecedented educational geography that would transcend racial or gendered limitations on human ability in order for Black women college graduates to contribute their unique labors to needed social progress.

Slowe died of kidney failure at age fifty-two at the start of the 1937–38

school year (Perkins 1996). Her life partner, Mary P. Burrill, and other close associates understood her passing as the result of a level of exhaustion she experienced from years of persecution by President Johnson and the Board of Trustees around their resistance to her work for Howard women. Despite her national standing, in the last years of her tenure Slowe was subjected to a series of humiliating decisions: the loss of management of the women's dorms, a slashing of her staff and budget, the lack of regular salary increases, and a protracted attempt to force her to occupy campus housing so as to reduce her to the status of a matron. Slowe and her many supporters—other deans of women, as well as Howard women students and alumnae—persistently and publicly challenged the Johnson administration's actions. However, one wonders about the toll of this fight on the pioneer. Three months before her death she reflected on the departure of a colleague and wrote in a letter to her former assistant, "I don't blame him in the least for making the decision to leave. It ought to be very refreshing to him to get into a different atmosphere and to work in a place where there is some consideration for human beings."¹⁶

This colleague and Howard alumnus was not only Slowe's former high school teacher but the eulogist at her funeral. Recently installed as president of Morgan State College, Dr. Dwight O. W. Holmes spoke to her legacy when he stated, "She will live as long as Negro girls go to school."¹⁷ I am less sanguine about his prophesy. The educational historian Carolyn Bashaw (1999, 2) characterizes the profession of deaning as "the best-kept secret in the history of higher education," a fact that reflects a kind of erasure that is all too common in the experiences of minoritized groups. Thus it is my hope that by remembering—in the case of this paper, by establishing a countermemory of the history of Black women's education from its location in the gaps between the histories of other race-gender groups—that we begin to recognize Slowe's leadership efforts to free Black women from the "double bind of white supremacy and respectability" (Simmons 2015, 5), and consciously build on her important contributions. Her words and example remind us that coeducation is not simply a struggle for inclusion; it is also—perhaps more fundamentally—"a struggle of memory against forgetting" (hooks 1999, 147).

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Notes

- 1 Slowe letter to Executive Committee of the Howard University Board of Trustees, March 24, 1933, Box 90–5, Folder 113, Lucy Diggs Slowe Papers.
- 2 Hilda A. Davis, "Howard Women's Dinner Speech," November 7, 1941, Box 90–1, Folder 9, Lucy Diggs Slowe Papers.
- 3 "Annual Howard Women's Dinner," November 9, 1923, Box 90–5, Folder 111, Lucy Diggs Slowe Papers.
- 4 "If Women May Speak," *The Hilltop*, May 15, 1930, 4.
- 5 "500 Dine at H.U. Women's 15th Dinner," *Baltimore Afro-American*, November 14, 1936.
- 6 "H.U. Women Hold 15th Annual Dinner," *The Hilltop*, November 11, 1936, 1, 3.
- 7 "Howard Women to Hear Mrs. Anne A. Hedgeman," *Baltimore Afro-American*, November 8, 1941.
- 8 Hilda Davis, "Howard Women's Dinner Speech," November 7, 1941, Box 90–1, Folder 9, Lucy Diggs Slowe Papers.
- 9 Slowe address to Teachers College, "The Education of Negro Women and Girls," March 11, 1931, Box 90–6, Folder 130, Lucy Diggs Slowe Papers.
- 10 Slowe, "The Education of Negro Women and Girls."
- 11 Slowe, "The Education of Negro Women and Girls."
- 12 "What Contributions Can a Program of Social Activities Fostered by the Institution Make to the Moral and Social Development of Students in Negro Colleges?," n.d., Box 90–6, Folder 147, Lucy Diggs Slowe Papers.
- 13 "Women's Activities," *The Hilltop*, October 27, 1932, Box 90–5, Folder 111, Lucy Diggs Slowe Papers.
- 14 "College Women Form National Organization: Dean Lucy Slowe Is Elected Temporary Head in D.C.," *Baltimore Afro-American*, April 13, 1923.
- 15 "Mrs. Murphy Addresses Howard Women's Club," *Baltimore Afro-American*, November 19, 1955.
- 16 Slowe letter to Joanna Houston, July 21, 1937, Box 90–3, Folder 65, Lucy Diggs Slowe Papers.
- 17 "In Memoriam, Eulogy by Dwight O. W. Holmes at the Obsequies of Lucy D. Slowe," October 25, 1937, Box 90–1, Folder 1, Lucy Diggs Slowe Papers.

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