

STUDIES^{IN} AMERICAN CULTURE

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2023

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46.1 – October 2023

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The PCAS, organized in 1971, is the largest, and from the view of those who have visited several regional meetings, the most thriving of the regional associations. Members of the organization come primarily from Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, Washington, D.C., and West Virginia. Its activities are financed by conference registration fees and sponsoring institutional support. Young and diverse, this energetic organization has brought together scholars who share an interest in inquiring into all sorts of mass phenomena through a wide variety of disciplines and approaches. Its journal, *Studies in Popular Culture*, is a firmly established academic publication, and scholars working with topics in popular culture are invited to submit papers for consideration.

The PCAS thus offers an opportunity for the coming together of scholars from colleges, universities, community colleges, and the general public, who have something worthwhile to say on matters involving mass society. It affords these individuals an occasion for direct response to their cultural context. The result of such coming together has been a rich and exciting event. We welcome you and invite you to partake of the richness, diversity, and friendship of our conference.

ABOUT THE ACAS

The ACAS is an organization for those interested in the interdisciplinary study of the larger, capacious culture. It should attract those interested in the field of study which goes under names such as American Studies, American Cultural Studies, etc. Structurally, it mirrors the place of the American Culture Association within the Popular Culture Association and is represented on the Executive Committee of the PCAS. The ACAS does not stress popular or Southern culture, though it is hospitable to both. Instead, the ACAS examines all aspects of American culture, from traditional to avant-garde, from high aesthetics to outsider subject positions, from elite to subaltern.

Its journal, *Studies in American Culture*, invites scholarly submissions focused on the rich diversity of topics in the dynamic field of American cultural analysis.

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A Story to Tell: The Importance of the Narrative Form at HBCUs

TAMARA D. HILL & COREY STAYTON

We all have a story to tell. English professors recognize how central storytelling is to understanding not only the world around us but also how vitally important it is to shaping identity. The stories we tell about ourselves reflect who we think we are. We are in a constant state of writing and rewriting our personal narratives but also creating and recreating our realities, which help us to know something about ourselves. In English courses at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU's) all over the country, the narrative mode in composition takes on a greater significance. The narrative mode, executed in these spaces, allows African American students and students of color to place themselves at the center of their own stories and realities without what Dubois describes in *The Souls of Black Folk* as double consciousness: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (9). Through the use of the narrative mode, English courses at HBCU's often allow for student's stories to be told without fear of the white gaze, to be able to express themselves in a space where the trauma of race can be explicated and reimagined from an empowered position.

All the rhetorical modes provide students with a diverse set of tools and strategies to communicate effectively in writing. By teaching the narrative mode, students develop the ability to construct engaging stories, which enhances their overall writing proficiency. Teaching the narrative mode in English courses at HBCUs not only allows students to place themselves at the center of their own stories but also, we believe, enhances their overall writing proficiency. Narrative writing helps students develop creativity, descriptive language, and storytelling techniques that are valuable for various writing tasks. Narrative captivates readers, fosters an emotional connection, and encourages critical thinking about the structure and development of stories. The narrative mode also has a unique power to captivate and engage readers by incorporating storytelling elements, such as plot, characters, and conflict. Students can create vivid and memorable experiences for their readers through this form of writing, which fosters an emotional connection and allows writers to communicate their ideas and experiences in a more relatable and compelling manner. The narrative mode also encourages students to think critically about the structure, pacing, and development of their stories. They must make deliberate choices regarding plot progression, character development, and the use of literary devices. This process

of crafting narratives promotes analytical thinking, decision-making, and the ability to assess the effectiveness of their writing choices.

Narratives also have the power to foster empathy by enabling students to step into the shoes of different characters and explore their experiences, thoughts, and emotions. This process cultivates a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives and promotes empathy and tolerance among students. By immersing themselves in the lives of others through storytelling, students can develop a greater appreciation for different viewpoints and foster a sense of social consciousness. Narrative writing is not only relevant to creative writing but also extends to various professional fields. Effective storytelling is highly valued in journalism, marketing, public relations, and content creation. By teaching narrative writing, educators equip students with transferable skills applicable to a wide range of disciplines and careers.

A comprehensive writing pedagogy should include instruction on all of the modes, including argumentative, expository, and persuasive writing. A well-rounded approach exposes students to diverse writing styles, enabling them to adapt their skills to different contexts and purposes. Particular attention is given to the narrative form because some academic disciplines or specific writing courses often prioritize other modes over the narrative mode based on their relevance to the subject matter. Teaching the narrative mode at HBCU's takes on a unique significance because it allows African American students to reflect and express their life experiences in a relatively safe cultural space. Given that a vast majority of media representations of African American experience lack a certain depth, the narrative form allows students to express the interior of their own lives, adding depth and a sense of agency to their writing.

The COVID-19 pandemic was devastating, to say the least. Millions of people died and the pandemic established a new normal for classrooms within weeks. In-person learning was suddenly replaced with learning management systems (LMS) and Zoom meetings. Many students were traumatized physically, socially and emotionally. Some studies suggest students continue to suffer psychologically: "The pandemic caused widespread harm to students' mental health and social and emotional well-being" ("The State of the American Student"). When African American college students narrate their COVID-19 experiences, what does that look like in academia? Are their experiences perhaps marginalized or seen as an opportunity to empower and reshape their stories? The answers to these questions are essential in illustrating how personal experiences can shape identity through the framework of narration.

As higher education has expanded, the concept of the personal narratives has become less of a requirement in college English courses because the curriculums have been modified to encompass and teach the skills that are necessary for the careers that students will pursue after graduating from college. For example, there is more of an emphasis on Composition and Rhetoric than traditional rhetorical strategies for undergraduate English courses which are usually characterized as Composition I and Composition II. Students are encouraged to

participate in discourse communities and apply literary genres in Composition I and II rather than emphasizing composing traditional rhetorical essays.

In many high schools, teachers move students toward preparation for academic discourse. Their paths to college are often determined by AP classes, earning academic/athletic scholarships, testing requirements and the extracurricular activities that will make their college applications stand out from their classmates. During the course of their college matriculation, what they are instructed to write in their history or psychology classes and more specifically their English classes often do not allow them space to fully narrate their personal experiences. While they may be encouraged to tell portions of their personal stories, many students may have a fear of being bullied or ridiculed which will deter them from revealing their most vulnerable stories to anyone, especially their classmates.

As English college instructors, we also, unintentionally, tend to lead our students away from their personal narratives and focus more on the rigors of research papers, process analysis, MLA citation and the argumentative stance for ongoing debates. However, we believe the personal narrative as a writing process gives students and, more specifically, African Americans, the opportunity to express their collective experiences as well as share their ideas of identity, joys, pain, family, isolation, relationships, transitions, and rites of passages as they enter the collegiate world as young adults. Correspondingly, their personal narratives are not only an emotive release but a means for their positive racial self-identification in a society that seeks to prioritize and monetize humanity in the midst of a pandemic. This happened in college composition courses around the country. What makes this worthy of note is the importance the narrative form has in the cultural space of an HBCU.

At many HBCUs, such as ours, writing assignments ask student authors to present their racial identity through constructing personal narratives with detailed examples of their triumphs, discoveries, losses and the fear of the unknown as COVID-19 established a new normal for all as the pandemic was truly traumatic for millions of people. Indeed, many families suffered a loss of stable employment during the pandemic which, in many instances, caused displacement or homelessness. These aforementioned factors also impacted African American students who had hopes of attending college in the very near future—during the pandemic many watched what they once knew as normal simply disappear.

COVID-19 changed how we would function at work or relegated us to work from home. College students could not attend classes face-to-face as students and teachers were told to stay at home and work online. Our main concern as a society was how we were going to manage a global pandemic and establish a sense of normalcy. Online education was thrust upon students and teachers alike, which created a host of economic and educational challenges. Parents attempted to stay employed, manage their households, take care of loved ones and keep their children academically on track as the pandemic wreaked havoc on our communities and institutions.

The impact was no less severe on African American students in high school who were preparing to graduate and attend college. How were their last years in high school different than those traditional students who came before them? The promise of having and completing their education was disrupted during the pandemic because many African American students lacked the technology at home that they would need to continue their education. Additionally, there were school districts that could not provide laptops for every student to use for online learning due to lack of funding. Many superintendents sought donations to purchase computers so that their students could continue their education online. To illustrate how the pandemic impacted students who did not have the technology to maintain their academic progress, Steven Rodas writes:

The Camden City School District (CCSD) has steadily worked to better facilitate remote learning for students during COVID-19 school closures. On Friday, the district announced that with the help of \$400,000 in donations from the Camden Education Fund, Townsend Press and the Campbell Soup Company it will continue in that mission by purchasing laptops for high school students across all six district schools. In all, 1,550 Dell Chromebook 3100s, as well as licensing fees for the Google platform, will be provided to students grades nine to twelve from Camden High School, Woodrow Wilson High School, Big Picture Learning Academy, Brimm Medical Arts, Creative Arts Morgan Village Academy, and Pride Academy. (Rodas *TAPinto*)

Parents had to continue working while their school-aged children had to learn online at home to maintain their attendance. Many African American high school juniors and seniors did not know if they would soon be able to transition into college and enjoy the “Black College Experience.”

High school students, no matter their ethnicity, go through many “rites of passage.” For example, students are learning how to drive and obtaining a driver’s license; students are going to the prom and homecoming, and, most importantly, they are focusing on completing requirements to graduate—many are expecting that they will be able to transition to college. The rite of graduation signifies leaving “childhood” behind in order to embrace the reality of young adulthood. Unfortunately, as a result of the pandemic, many African American high school students as well as those making the transition to their freshman year of college had important “rites of passages” disrupted or altogether cancelled.

African American students discussing their lives during the COVID-19 pandemic will historically acknowledge how their narratives identify their strengths, anxieties, and demonstrate how the altering or removal of their “rites of passage” impacted their social interactions during this period. Examples of passages include but are not limited to “a bar mitzvah or Baptism of an individual in a Christian church,” according to the *Open Education Sociology Dictionary*. For some high school students who were either in their junior or senior year, college was on the horizon, particularly for those who had taken the required standardized exams and had begun to fill out college applications before

the end of the academic term. These tasks begin their rite of passage with college as the next step in their lives. Graduating African American students could look forward to multiple ceremonies that celebrated their participation in Honors Clubs and on sports teams. Such positive life experiences could be developed into stories for themselves, family and friends.

Acceptance letters from colleges declaring “Welcome to Clark Atlanta University” or “Welcome to the Mecca” confirmed the rite of passage. After high school graduation, many HBCU-bound students would expect to spend their summers working and preparing for college life and finding their classes via the Internet. Unfortunately, COVID-19 stripped away these traditional “rite of passages” for African American students who have graduated from high school. Students entering HBCUs during the pandemic had their expected path to college transformed into an extended stay at home with college classes suddenly being taught through Zoom, Microsoft Teams or Ultra Blackboard sessions. Gone were the expected collegiate social interactions. Many African American students were uncertain if they would ever have the college experience of Dwayne Wayne, Whitley Gilbert and Denise Huxtable in the popular television show “Different World.” In the show, Dwayne, Whitley, and Denise attend a fictional HBCU, Hillman College. The show represents aspects of HBCU social experiences, providing one frame of reference for expectations about what going to college is like.

Why was attending college so important to African American students even during the pandemic? For first generation students, particularly, college represented a milestone (another rite of passage). Such students understood the importance of validating the legacies of their families through gaining acceptance at a HBCU. Additionally, they were also determined to make their families proud because, for many, their grandparents, cousins, aunts or uncles had sacrificed and assisted in some way to help them earn their place there at HBCU. Attending a HBCU spoke to students’ understanding of the legacies of the institutions and how they wanted to become a part of a tradition long reaching back long before they were born.

If you couple students’ desires with the expectations fostered by “Different World,” by family experiences, and by stories students have heard about HBCUs, you can comprehend how the focus of so many high school students were never deterred from entering a HBCU despite the trauma of the pandemic. Thus, as educators, we ask students attending our respective institutions to share examples of their COVID-19 social experiences through writing narratives about their “rites of passage,” providing a means for young Black students to reflect on their existence in a society that often does not really “see them” or want to hear their narratives. Francoise Baylis, in “Black as Me: Narrative Identity,” writes:

My true self is the one who senses and understands the meaning and responsibility of these stories—stories that are ‘acquired, refined, revised, displaced, and replaced’ over time through introspection and continued lived

experience. My racial identity is something that I negotiate and re-story on a regular basis. This re-storying takes place in what is sometimes an intimate and sometimes a forlorn space between myself and others—or in more academic terms, ‘between personal agency or self-construction and social discourse within a larger contextual setting.’ (145-146)

Following Baylis, we argue that HBCU students must “negotiate and re-story” their narratives “on a regular basis” in order to initiate a space for themselves in a society where their racial identity is often questioned or barely accepted. Their narratives help to inform who they are as individuals and shape their identity in the world. These reflective texts illustrate African American students’ joys, pains and how they were traumatized during their rites of passages as they attempted to transition from high school to college during COVID-19.

Central to such “negotiat[ing]” and “re-storying,” from our perspective, is classroom engagement with the narrative mode of writing in freshman writing courses. The keys of the narrative allow one to unlock many doors. For example, in “Narrative and the Shaping of Identity,” J. Golden distinguishes how narratives give “meaning” to individual’s lives:

Narrative is one of the fundamental ways human beings organize their understandings of the world and their place in it. This narrative organization happens at many levels and across many disciplines, as recent work in economics, science, psychology, history and law, as well as education, has shown (Nash, 1990). More informally, the stories that people tell—to each other, to themselves—shape the meanings that they give to their own lives and to their communities. The shaping of identity is intimately tied to the storylines that a particular society makes available and desirable to its members: from an early age children give evidence of their desire and ability to tell stories (137).

In many cases, the personal narratives of freshmen in College composition courses can be more expansive and emotionally engaged—more revealing—than narratives by middle school and high school students. Our teaching experience of using narrative mode writing assignments has taught us how well freshman authors can insightfully communicate the subjective significance of key events in their lives as they remember them and detailing their sequence in chronological order which gives shape to their individual identities and communities. By having students use the narrative mode to analyze the events that occurred in their lives while in high school within the context of COVID-19, the students produce compelling writing, writing that invites the empathy of readers and the comprehension of the students’ disparate social situations. In *Narratives of African-American Students: Bringing Diverse Voices into Classrooms*, Dorota Celinska explains the phenomena of how narrative exchanges begin when we are children, telling stories to our friends and family and how they influence our lives. According to Celinska, “Importantly, children’s socially-based narrative themes constitute an important mechanism for communicating their social and cultural identities” (2). During classroom narrative exchanges students

contribute to classroom communities. As a result, classroom narratives allow children to “play with social and cultural lines influenced by age, sex, class, race, ethnicity” and become “vehicles for bringing diverse voices into the classroom itself” (Dyson 168).

All the same, it is through these student narratives about COVID-19, that we become privy to their experiences as young African Americans who endured the pandemic and who are still dealing with its aftermath. Additionally, we are learning about their individual urban cultures, their greatest personal challenges at that time and most importantly, their ability to provide us with “windows” to their lives that was, at times, traumatic for not only them but their families as well.

In what follows, we present four texts of students writing in the narrative mode, reflecting on their personal experiences and the absence of some of the rites of passage from high school to college. These texts present students’ narrative exposition—their own words, their own stories, their own “negotiat[ing]” and “re-storying.”¹

COVID-19 Social Interaction Narratives

Student #1

Never would I have thought that my high school experience would have been altered the way it was. March 13th, 2020 will be the one day I will always remember in my life. That was the last day I spent my time in a classroom. The last time I was able to socialize with my peers daily, the last time I was able to lie and say I was using the bathroom just to roam the halls. It was the day for a lot of lasts, and I was not expecting the last day for me last to be until 2021. When Covid 19 first started, I spent a lot of time in the house with my mom because we were able to bond much more. We also spent a lot of our time strictly around family and even then, we were wearing masks. It took my mom about seven months to let me go out and socialize with friends. Even when I got my job at Wendy’s of May that year, my mom was still anxious about letting me work because she did not want me to be exposed or catch Covid19, but eventually she relented.

Not being able to socialize with my friends via social media kind of sucked especially because it was the summer right before our senior year in high school. We wanted to go on trips, explore the city more and most importantly we also wanted to take our senior pictures but those were postponed. Since my family is from the Virgin Islands, we go down there at least twice a year, during summer and at Christmas. Since we could not go down that summer was very depressing for both my mother and me. Although some countries allowed visitors, our island was not. Since we do not have the best top notch for health, it was a risk that the island was not willing to take.

When it was time to go back to school, we started a week later but we were virtual. Not a single body was in the classroom. Even though we finished the rest of our Junior online, we were really expecting to be back on campus. I was emotionally and mentally out of it my whole first semester of my Senior year. I felt like I did all that hard for absolutely nothing. All those years to celebrate my Senior year online, what a bummer! What didn’t make it any better was that the teachers were in the same boats as us. They had no idea what to do or how to feel. Even with taking our Senior pictures, it was still very strict as to what we

could and could not do. Socialization was very limited as well. Although around this time I was able to spend time with my friends from time to time, I was still unable to at times because a lot of my friends' parents still felt uneasy about it.

Now the second semester of my senior [year] got a tad bit better because I was able to celebrate my birthday with some friends. Around this time, I was also able to go on college tours which is something I thought it was going to miss out on as a senior. We even got news that we would be walking across the stage in May. I was so excited! I could not wait. It was a bummer that we could have only six tickets, but it was live, so my family that couldn't physically be there showed up, but it will still be a moment that I will never forget. Due to the fact that I live in Atlanta, GA, Covid19 was basically non-existent to the people after the first 30 days, so as far as my summer there was nothing to be overly concerned about. However, I did get the vaccine to be extra cautious. With coming to college, Covid19 did play a factor in some things but not as bad as not having a senior year to experience that I had been looking forward to that year.

It is no secret that many parental relationships with teenagers can be troubling at times and their relationship between this student and parent was no different. At first, their relationship was strained or contentious, but the context of the virus ultimately made them become more loving and tolerant of each other than before. By the force of nature, they bonded over common interests and the anxiety of the virus that was running rampant outside the safety of their four walls. In this narrative, the student expresses how the absence of senior-year high school activities helped shape her identity because of the restrictions she experienced.

Student #2

To begin, my experience before the pandemic was already dismal. My high school career was cut short because I had decided to graduate a year in advance. In total, I spent three years trying to escape, therefore, I had no time to think about the social or academic events that my school had to offer. I graduated in the year 2020 right when the pandemic was at its peak. Prior to the pandemic, I never attended any homecomings that the school had hosted. I was not interested in associating myself with other people that attended my school. As far as prom, only upper-class students could attend this event. I made it to Junior year safely which technically would have been my first year of prom.

However, the school wanted to do an online prom and I thought that there was no reason in me going because it would be a waste of my time and money. Finally, for my graduation ceremony, I had the choice to walk but I chose not to because I just needed my diploma. Unfortunately, my family was adamant about that event if nothing else and they all decided to throw a graduation party for me. In the end, I was not able to take part in prom, homecomings, or have a proper graduation ceremony. Meanwhile in conjunction with supposedly happy events, my family was slowly one by one starting to contract Covid19. So, my immediate family and I could no longer be around my extended family members until they were all clear on their quarantine.

Nevertheless, my youngest sister ended up catching Covid19 from one of the daycare workers at the daycare she went to after school. My mother was overly concerned about my sister because she was asthmatic and in poor health.

Sure enough, my sister went through all the horrific symptoms of Covid19. She was coughing, throwing up, dizzy, and she could not eat or sleep. It was a sad sight to see that my little sister was holding on for dear life and was in this state for several weeks. Meanwhile, my other sister and I had to clean the house until it was spick and span from top to bottom. Thankfully, due to my sister and I taking precautionary measures, neither of us got Covid19. My sister was supposed to be released from her quarantine but, she ended up being sick for a longer amount of time. She still tested positive for Covid19 and had to be placed back into quarantine.

Finally, after a month of battling the symptoms and ER trips, my sister regained her health. My sister also unfortunately, lost her taste and now her hair continues to fall out. Fast forward two years later and my mother and I both contracted Covid19. My mother got it from one of the kids at her job and then she passed it to me. Prior to this, I had been vaccinated twice already. So, my symptoms were not as bad as my mom's because her vaccination doses were from Johnson and Johnson. If I recall correctly, Johnson and Johnson had to have their shots recalled out because it caused people to have blood clots. My symptoms were just dry cough, and I was exhausted and physically drained. So, my experience with Covid19 was negative, but I was blessed enough to not have any deaths in my family, because my sister, mom, and I were all able to overcome Covid19 and, for that I am truly blessed and forever grateful.

In this narrative essay, the author laments the virtual prom school administrators established as a COVID-19 precaution in lieu of a normal in-person prom. Traditionally, this rite of passage involves students dancing, taking pictures, reminiscing, and celebrating together. This student author, academically ahead of her class, is angry that her rite of passage was interrupted and ruined by the pandemic. But, her transitions in her narrative (her use of “however” and “nonetheless”) point to a more painful impact of the virus as she elaborates on how the COVID-19 caused her sister to suffer because it was passed from her mother to her. While some specific details are troubling in the narrative, the reader can empathize and follow the writer's train of thought of living with the fear of, perhaps, losing her entire family to COVID-19 while she is still at such a young age. Here was the vibrant young person with COVID-19 who had endured the dry coughing, dizzy spells, and vomiting but who recalled those vivid details narratively as if the experience happened yesterday. No doubt many readers recall their own uncertainty and anxiety during the pandemic.

Student #3

For me, Covid19 started in the middle of my junior year. Imagine being at the peak of your high school career, and then suddenly it all disappears!!! The year 2020 was supposed to be my year. I was getting more involved, meeting new people, and building new relationships. I had seen articles and stories about Covid19 in China, but never in a million years did I think it would come here. Covid19 did not seem serious at first because it was just like a rumor that came and went. At some point, things began to get serious and scary. We were sent home one-day thinking we would return in two weeks, and two weeks quickly turned into a year. At first, it was not so bad. I thought no school, not too much homework, and I could stay in my bed all day.

Still, at some point, things started to get a little dull. I would be up every morning to check the news to see if we could go back to school, but the cases just kept rising and rising, and every week our superintendent would send us a message saying, “we were not able to come back yet?” Things became harder and harder because I could not pay attention in class. I was not doing my homework because I just felt down all the time. I had to find things to keep me occupied or I would literally drown in my thoughts. Being in one space, with no one to talk to or interact with, was the complete opposite of what I was used to doing. I was used to being out all the time, being with my friends, or going out with my family. Even if it was just driving around, I was never inside for too long. Unfortunately, during quarantine, I went through a breakup, which really sent me over the edge.

At this point, it was summertime, but all I could do was wallow in my thoughts. It is easier going through things when you can do activities that will get your mind off of a breakup. But I was stuck in the same routine every day: wake up, eat, watch tv, sleep, eat, and repeat. This time was very bad for my mental health. It gave me too much time to reflect on myself and all my flaws. Things started to get a little better when I was able to go out a little. I could only be in the car, but I was able to see some of my friends. However, I was optimistic that things would be back to normal by my Senior year. It was the year I had waited for my entire life, prom, graduation, Senior week and it was supposed to be like a movie. In reality, I did not get to experience any of those things. It still saddens me when I talk about it. It feels like when you are the next person in line for something and then the place closes in your face. Senior year was supposed to be the best year ever. I was supposed to make bonds that were unbreakable and create memories that I would never forget. For the entirety of my Senior year, we were never in school in person. Hybrid classes were offered, but we were all split up by last name, so no one ever showed up. My school did not offer us prom, so the students’ parents chipped in to make one for us. Even though we did have “prom,” it will never compare to what our actual one was supposed to be like. They even tried to have a “Virtual Spirit week,” but nothing is ever the same virtually. Additionally, the worst part about going through this pandemic had to be our graduation.

Graduation is supposed to be a time when you and your peers can look back at your younger selves and see how much growth has happened. It is supposed to be where you can all say goodbye and have that one moment where you can say, “We made it.” There was no moment and there was no goodbye. My school split everyone up by last name, having twelve graduations with twelve students in each one. Every speech, song, and video had to be repeated twelve times. They took the magic out of what were supposed to be the most memorable moments of my life. After high school ended, I was used to this “Covid19 world.” My mentality is completely different. I feel like being inside for so long increased the anxiety I already had. At this point in my life, I feel like I have never been so socially awkward. Every little thing ticks off that voice in my head saying that I am being judged for something, whether it’s the way I dress, the way I walk, the way I talk, or the way I do anything. I lack motivation in everything I do sometimes, and I feel like I need to be validated for everything. I think it will take a long time for me to get back to the mindset I originally had. Although I do not know exactly when things will be completely back to normal, I am optimistic that we will get there.

Student #4

In March 2020 when Covid19 first struck the world, I was in my junior year of high school and had just turned 16. Covid19 had taken me and the rest of the world by surprise because we never thought we would ever live through a global pandemic in our lifetimes. Likewise, we had to push forward and try to rework our lives to accommodate our new reality. For me it was starting online school instead of in person because this continued well into my senior year. At the start of the pandemic a lot of my teachers did not really know what they were doing, so they just gave us assignments on Google classroom, and we had to learn it on our own. In terms of school events, I did not really miss anything from Junior year except Field Day and the end of school year carnival, but I had experienced those events during my Freshmen and Sophomore year, so I was not too upset about missing those events. In addition, there was also the school play that I was supposed to be in that was canceled due to Covid19 that I was looking forward to because my school was putting on a production of "High School Musical." However, we made it to Senior year and that is when we started feeling the effects of what Covid19 had done to our communities and the entire world.

In the beginning of the year for Seniors, my school holds an information session that details the events that are going to happen for us, our expenses and other activities. This event was scaled down to a pamphlet and a 15-minute video due to Covid19. Then of course homecoming was canceled due to Covid19 restrictions. Missing this event was especially hard for me because I did not go to my school's homecoming dance or game my freshmen through junior year, so senior year would have been my last chance to do so but I couldn't because of Covid19. Our Senior trip was also canceled due to Covid19 which was something else we were looking forward to because we would have been going to a ski lodge and spending a weekend there. Other than that, my school tried their best to make our Senior year somewhat normal for us. We still had our yearbook put together even though most of the events we did were virtual such as Spirit week and Senior Appreciation. But we ended up creating new kinds of themes for the pages in the yearbook that needed to be replaced and we enlisted the help of the students to do so by having them send in their photos through Google to be used in it. Our Senior Council also put together events that help to ease the impact of losing out of a senior year. The first event was a Senior Sunset at the beginning of the school year which was a couple of us going to the beach and watching the sunset because it was just something to celebrate the start of Senior year.

The second event was the prom but in New York the DOE (Department of Education) announced that the schools themselves could not throw a prom due to the number of students in the graduating class for each school. As a result, the Senior Council put together one on their own. It was really fun, and I had a good time but only a very low number of students could come out of a graduating class of 614 so that was a bit of a bummer. At the end of it all, I had an enjoyable senior year, hugely in part to my school caring enough to try and still do things for us during our that time in our lives.

Based on the all the students' essays and the idea of the narrative strategy as a means to relate events or experiences that are good, bad, or indifferent, the negative emotions or behavioral responses that are espoused are a part of the normal process for conveying trauma and releasing it in a manner that does not mentally drain the individual. To sustain this perception, Donald Meichenbaum asserts the following:

Repeated positive emotional responses to negative events expand and build psycho-social relationships and behavioral responses. In short, the ability to engage in non-negative thinking results in trauma-exposed individuals changing the 'stories' they tell others and tell themselves. They are to 'uncouple' the intense negative emotions from the memories of past traumatic events. They are able to embed and contextualize these landmarks emotionally charged events into a life story autobiographical account. (3)

We contend that through the practice of writing narratives, students can change their relationships with others, themselves, their bodily reactions and memories. Historically Black University and College English Composition classes have had a long history of teaching the rhetorical modes to students. This practice has, in turn, contributed to the development of students' long-term writing skills in diverse careers, including healthcare, engineering, psychology, the media, or business. Narrative discourse seems to provide a cathartic pathway to engage positive or negative emotions, and the HBCU classroom provides a safe space for this productive release. The supportive classroom environments have motivated students to share their stories with their classmates, feeling less anxious about how they and their experiences will be perceived.

In conclusion, the narrative mode in English courses at HBCUs provides a vital platform for African American students and students of color to tell their stories without the constraints of the white gaze. Teaching narrative writing cultivates creativity, critical thinking, and empathy while empowering students to reshape their narratives and identity. While personal narratives have become less emphasized in many college English courses, they hold significant value, particularly for African American students navigating their educational journeys. The COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted the importance of personal narratives, as it disrupted traditional rites of passage and posed unique challenges for African American students pursuing higher education. COVID-19 deeply impacted everyone's socioeconomic abilities, people lost loved ones, and the world itself had to negotiate a new normal. Moreover, freshmen African American students attending HBCUs who got the chance to write narratives in our classes about how the pandemic impacted their high school experiences could feel included and valued in a safe place. They could explore narratively COVID-19's many negative impacts, including anxiety, familial traumas, and altered rites of passage. The goal was for students not to feel judged or to feel alienated. Students exploring the impact of COVID-19 on rites of passage at our HBCUs could see that their stories and experiences were often very similar to that of their peers. Few students in January 2020 likely anticipated the impact of a global pandemic—an event that removed so many from their loved ones and friends and interrupted opportunities, particularly between spring 2020 and spring 2022, to attend proms, to obtain driving licenses, and to walk across graduation stages. The deep thinking evident in our freshman students' composition narratives demonstrates students' abilities to connect meaningfully with their emotions, convey their personal losses and their

struggle to find normalcy as HBCU college freshmen. As co-authors and English professors, we recognize those students that communicated their thoughts about their COVID-19 experiences and how the narratives have contributed to their independence, self-esteem, and resilience as they continue to matriculate at HBCUs. It is their story to tell, no one else, and they survive in the HBCU environments because they are welcomed and valued.

NOTES

- ¹ The student authors have provided us with written permission to include their texts while keeping their identities anonymous.

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