


# “Raising Hell”: Literacy Instruction in Jim Crow America

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 e have fallen into the morass again,” wrote W. E. B. DuBois in a July 1942 newspaper column, “As the Crow Flies,” published in the *New York Amsterdam Star-News*. DuBois lamented the slide in “Negro students” writing and speaking skills (“As the Crow Flies” 6). Throughout the column’s run from 1936 to 1944, first in the *Pittsburgh Courier* and later in the *Star-News*, DuBois made it his mission “to criticize and to warn” Americans that deficiencies in its segregated system of higher education undermined the fight for equal rights (DuBois, “As the Crow Flies” 3). His lament in the July 1942 piece came as the United States entered its eighth month of fighting in World War II. As DuBois’s article hit the newsstand, American soldiers battled Japanese forces at Midway, while more than three million German troops marched toward Moscow. The fighting threw into stark relief the racial injustice that pervaded American life: a million African American soldiers risked their lives to protect freedoms that they themselves did not enjoy.

English teachers across the country echoed DuBois’s concern that American students’ slipping literacy skills would have dire global consequences. In NCTE journals, teachers voiced the conviction that the Third Reich swept into power using a superior propaganda machine; the war would be won or lost on American teachers’ ability to prepare students to reclaim the power of mass media for democracy. NCTE issued a stream of books and pamphlets with titles like *Educating for Peace* (1940), *Teaching English in Wartime* (1942), and “Thinking Together: Promoting Democracy through Classroom Discussion” (1944) (Jacobs and DeBoer; Cross; Salt and La Brant). They told teachers that

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innovation in writing, reading, and speaking instruction would both save the country and make it a country worth saving.

During the war years, disparities in education and employment made the problem of literacy pedagogy even more urgent for African Americans. In 1942, three-quarters of the nation's twelve-million African Americans lived in states where Jim Crow laws segregated schools. Those schools received about one-third the funding of schools for white students, their teachers earned less pay, and students received fewer months of schooling each year. Economic opportunity in Jim Crow states was likewise diminished for African Americans: 40 percent were farm workers, most of those were sharecroppers; 30 percent worked in service industries; and 25 percent held other blue-collar jobs. Just 4 percent secured white-collar positions (Hill 11). In the face of twin wartime crises in education and employment, DuBois's column noted one school that offered a reason for hope. He championed the new Communications Center at Hampton Institute (now Hampton University), a historically black college/university (HBCU) on the banks of the Chesapeake Bay in Hampton, Virginia.

The Hampton Communications Center, opened in 1941, was a pedagogical experiment that addressed the literacy needs of African Americans in a country at war. It combined under one roof a suite of studios and laboratories dedicated to individual and classroom instruction in writing, speech, radio, journalism, and theater. The facility represented one of the earliest general education programs and, if we apply today's term, one of the earliest multiliteracy centers in American higher education. Like other HBCUs, its approach to general education is not recorded in the major histories of composition studies—we do not see it in the narratives of James Berlin, Robert J. Connors, or Sharon Crowley, for instance. Yet the Communications Center's story complicates their characterizations of general education's aim to, in Berlin's words, "safeguard the American way of life—the social stability provided by the democratic method" (92). As faculty at HBCUs around the segregated South knew, a general education curriculum that emphasized the literacies of democratic citizenship for African Americans required upsetting rather than safeguarding the "social stability" that disadvantaged their students.

It is my hope that this essay may serve as one site for motivating counter histories of writing centers that lend further nuance to research by Elizabeth Boquet, Neal Lerner, and Peter Carino. Each offers correctives to the popular lore that writing centers first arose during the open admissions era. Boquet traces "method-based" writing laboratories that evolved out of late nineteenth-century classrooms, followed by the flowering of "site-based," stand-alone laboratories in the 1940s (465–7). These stand-alone writing laboratories may entice us with their potential for narratives of extracurricular resistance to the regulatory project

of classroom writing pedagogy. However, Boquet argues, the evidence instead supports Lerner’s characterization of most early site-based writing centers as strongly allied to classroom writing pedagogy (466–7). Lerner’s archival research excavates the classroom origins of early method-based writing laboratory work from the 1890s to the 1930s (17–33) and follows its evolution through to the founding of the first site-based writing laboratory in 1932 at the University of Minnesota General College (76–90). Carino further enriches our understanding of the variety of sites by pointing to the communications-focused writing laboratories that followed in the 1940s to instruct students and soldiers mobilizing for World War II (107–8). Hampton’s own Communications Center’s story complicates these histories. It makes visible the work of an early multiliteracy center in the fight for fair hiring during the war. Further, it dates the emergence of HBCUs’ multiliteracy pedagogy more than a half-century before the New London Group met to formulate its pedagogy of multiliteracies.

Hampton’s Communications Center was just one of several innovative pre-Civil Rights era communications programs at HBCUs. In the late 1930s, Alabama State Teachers College (today’s Alabama State University) created writing and reading laboratories to offer individual support to lower-performing students in reading, writing, and speech courses. In 1938, Bennett College, an all-women’s HBCU in North Carolina, started its Remedial Clinic, which offered open hours when faculty would provide students individual help with reading, writing, speech, and math. A precursor to contemporary writing centers, the Bennett writing clinic was deliberately detached from any course in order to encourage students to voluntarily integrate it throughout their educations. In 1940, Bennett innovated again with its successful Radio Program. Every student was required to participate in some way—sound engineering, writing, producing, or performing—as it was part of her “training as a modern woman” in the field of communications. Radio Program broadcasts challenged African American and white listeners in the region to learn about African Americans’ lives and history (Turner). Then in 1947, Morgan State College began a communications laboratory. Though smaller in scope than Hampton’s center, it did include radio and recording studios where students produced programs for the NAACP and the Urban League (Rea). And, following in Hampton’s footsteps, it combined instruction in radio, speech, reading, writing, and theater.

Like the Hampton Institute, these HBCUs each enrolled student populations that experienced considerable educational disparities in the primary and secondary grades. They designed for them a literacy education that was practical and forward looking, incorporating the everyday literacies of mass communication while mobilizing the latest sound and visual technologies to prepare them for emerging professions in radio, television, and film that they hoped would open

up to African Americans. However, unlike these other programs, the Hampton Communications Center became politicized because it explicitly tied its project to the cause of fair hiring on the national stage.

While this fight for fair hiring was not new, the Communications Center staff saw new leverage for African Americans as the nation ramped up for war and desperately needed workers. To succeed, students would have to learn how to integrate white labor unions and compete for wartime jobs in industries that practiced hiring discrimination. Thus, the Communications Center, which taught these literacies, was a political project that some found threatening, as DuBois noted in his column:

All these things: Speech, writing, drama are matters of communication, of the expression of ideas, and civilization is based on this exchange. I know of only one Negro institution which is attacking this matter of communication: The teaching of English and human expression, at the base it ought to be faced, and that is the new Hampton under President MacLean. The Communications Center there is literally raising hell. ("As the Crow Flies" 6)

At Hampton, DuBois saw a center that inspired both innovation and controversy. If it survived its critics, it would, he predicted, transform English instruction and foster democracy at home and abroad. In taking up the Communications Center's cause, DuBois was advocating for a particular vision of postsecondary education for African Americans. In response, this present study asks why this vision raised hell. It examines competing ideas about literacy instruction for marginalized Americans, crystalized by the debate between DuBois and Booker T. Washington in the early twentieth century and extending to the curricular reforms spurred by World War II. What emerges, I argue, is an understanding of the 1940s as a turning point in multiliteracy pedagogy, as many HBCU educators shifted from industrial education that was designed to maintain social stasis to literacy instruction that gave students tools for organizing against Jim Crow segregation.

It is no stretch to suggest that the Hampton Institute Communications Center is the most widely publicized university writing laboratory, communications center, or multiliteracy center ever. During the war, African American newspapers and white newspapers across the country published articles and photos featuring students working in its radio studios, theater, and writing laboratory ("Hampton Institute Communication Center Makes Learning Fun"). Despite the attention that it received, the center is largely absent from composition studies histories. Given this incongruity, this essay asks, why did controversy about the Communications Center extend so far beyond the leafy confines of the Hampton campus in the 1940s? Why did it then fade from our disciplinary memory while other communications programs play prominent roles in our

histories? And, finally, how might its introduction into those histories complicate existing narratives about the roots of general education, writing centers, and multiliteracy instruction?

My research focuses on the period of the Communications Center’s heyday in the public eye: 1941 to 1943. Key events include Malcolm Shaw MacLean’s appointment to the Hampton Institute presidency in summer of 1940; the Communications Center’s opening in fall 1941; MacLean’s appointment to President Roosevelt’s Fair Employment Practices Commission in February 1942; and, finally, MacLean’s resignations from Hampton and the employment commission in January 1943. Rather than move chronologically through these events, this study proceeds iteratively. Each section addresses a different domain of history to add depth to our understanding of HBCU literacy programs and Hampton’s program in particular. Sections on mass media, race relations, Northern philanthropists’ influence on HBCUs, the war, employment, and government each function like a transparency. When layered on top of the story of the Communications Center, these transparencies reveal intricate relationships that resist the inevitably flattening of a strictly chronological account.

#### “WHERE ARE ALL THE PEOPLE?” METHODS AND MATERIALS

Composition studies historiographers like Jacqueline Jones Royster and Susan Miller have emphasized storytelling as a reparative method for constructing counter histories of underrepresented students and scholars. In this vein, the work mines popular press archives to recount the kinds of story and history that Jones Royster advocates for (163)—that is, to offer a microhistory of the Hampton Communications Center set against the Jim Crow South during World War II. Disciplinary historians have turned to microhistory as a way to capture the dynamic relationship between local sites of composition work and larger national history. In *Microhistories of Composition*, for example, Bruce McComiskey argues that the commitment to producing deeply contextualized histories of smaller sites—as opposed to the sweeping histories of composition studies of the 1980s and 1990s—affords the cultivation of local knowledge that speaks to larger disciplinary questions (9, 24). Admittedly, when presented on their own, local histories risk remaining isolated and fragmentary. To resist this limitation, microhistorical studies draw from a range of materials and methods to develop a conversation between local actors and the larger contexts in which they are embedded (McComiskey 14). The Hampton Institute Communications Center invites this approach to history, for archival materials dramatize the story of a small Jim Crow HBCU that took brief star turns on the national stage when local tensions erupted into larger controversy about the status of African Americans.

The narrative recounted here relies on popular press accounts more than do other composition studies histories. This reliance is, in part, a recognition that HBCUs received less attention in NCTE publications during the 1940s than did their counterparts at predominantly white institutions. The lens of the popular press, then, fills gaps in the scholarly record. However, the intention here is also to demonstrate that what might seem like an impediment to research—gaps in academic publications—in fact invites a differently vital method of history telling. Newspaper coverage of Hampton’s Communications Center, juxtaposed with articles about employment discrimination, battles overseas, riots at home, segregation, and other issues of the day, invites a thick description of the Communications Center that would be impossible for multiliteracy centers at predominantly white institutions. Newspapers animate stories of the people who brought the center to life and the sense of political purpose they expressed in their work. They help us answer the question McComiskey poses: “[W]here are all the people in these histories of composition?” (8). Likewise, in a way that scholarly records can fail to convey, newspaper coverage captures the feeling of public ownership and urgency that questions of African American literacies raised in the 1940s. These accounts invite us to populate history—to lend “greater corporeality,” in Royster’s words (163)—with educators who persisted despite the humiliations of Jim Crow.

To assemble its story, this research draws from digitized periodical archives assembled by the New York Public Library’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and hosted by *ProQuest Historical Newspapers* database. The Schomburg Center newspaper collection contains World War II-era issues of eight African American newspapers. Each of these venues offered evidence of the evolution of Hampton Communications Center’s public-facing narrative. Because this study relies on rich context, I made a practice of reading the newspaper articles that surrounded pieces about Hampton Institute: articles that celebrated African Americans’ achievements and connected the everyday racial, legal, and economic disparities they faced in their hometowns to larger national systems that reified those disparities.

Materials housed in the Hampton University Archives fill in the backstory of newspaper reports. The archives contain a folder full of documents about the Communications Center that would look familiar to writing program directors today: memos, budgets, and reports. However, some of the documents—a memo encouraging center staff to publish scholarship about their “pretty much unexplored field” and a study examining the feasibility of starting a film program—depict staff who were imagining an expansive project (MacLean, Letter to Bryno Bryngelson; Sailstad 4). I also examined the Hampton Archives’ more extensive trustees’, presidents’, and Alumni Association documents spanning

from the mid-1930s through the 1940s. They depict an increasingly contentious relationship among the trustees, alumni, and President MacLean, as MacLean allied himself with President Roosevelt’s war-time fair hiring effort. The documents also highlight the influence of moneyed Northern interests over Southern HBCUs in the first half of the twentieth century, demanding that we examine the North’s role in Jim Crow education.

**BUILDING A NEW COMMUNICATIONS CENTER,  
DISMANTLING AN OLD PEDAGOGY**

Malcolm Shaw MacLean started his career as a journalist and later went on to direct the innovative University of Minnesota General College. At Minnesota, he oversaw Francis Appel’s creation of the first site-based writing laboratory. In 1940, however, MacLean’s career would take a turn when Hampton Institute trustee Harold Seymour travelled to Minnesota to recruit him. Seymour explained that “Hampton was in trouble,” and President Roosevelt requested that MacLean step in to fix the situation. To sweeten the offer, Seymour explained, Roosevelt would send a navy commander to the school to help and would grant MacLean “some other assignments as well.” Hampton Institute, a storied school located near the Norfolk naval base and shipyard, was a locus for Roosevelt’s efforts to calm race relations and mobilize African American workers and sailors for the war effort. “Well,” MacLean would later write in his memoir, “somehow you don’t refuse that kind of an offer—with the support, and on the request, of the President of the United States” (*Never a Dull Moment* 78).

By the time he arrived at Hampton in 1940, MacLean had earned a reputation as a maverick educator. A playful *Chicago Defender* article about his inauguration compared MacLean to both Jesus Christ and Christopher Columbus (“They Call Him a Nut” 3). At the Virginia school, MacLean implemented ambitious reforms to extend general education to students educated under Jim Crow. It was a curricular shift for the institute, which had established its reputation on industrial education. The Communications Center was the showpiece of MacLean’s effort; it demonstrated the move toward a liberalized curriculum that would promote job opportunities in a war economy that suddenly could not afford to underemploy African Americans.

While MacLean provided the conception of the Communications Center, the center itself was a product of students’ own handiwork. Industrial arts students constructed the Communications Center in the spring of 1941. A piece published in Norfolk’s African American newspaper, *Journal and Guide*, suggests that their involvement was one reason the center was popular on campus:

The pride which Hampton students have for their Communications Center is the pride of good design and cooperative workmanship because it has been they themselves . . . student carpenters, painters, electricians, plumbers, and architects . . . who have remodeled an old, dilapidated, ramshackle infirmary building into one of the most unique and interesting educational structures in America today. (“No English Department” 11)

Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute was founded in 1868 to train newly freed African Americans—and, for a time, Native Americans—to learn the very trades that these student workers practiced. In plying their skills to build the Communications Center, Hampton students dramatized a transformation in the school’s mission.

Hampton founder Union General Samuel Chapman Armstrong brought to Hampton a missionary philosophy: he would uplift people through a “civilizing” faith (Rosa 209). However, Armstrong reassured white Northern donors, this form of uplift was not designed to grant African Americans status equal to white people anytime soon (Engs 76). Instead Hampton’s education would help students secure skilled-labor jobs without threatening the social or economic primacy of white, middle-class Southerners. Armstrong’s philosophy, which his protégé Booker T. Washington called “the Hampton Idea,” guided the curricula of many HBCUs in the decades following the Civil War. But by the 1930s, Hampton began to deemphasize industrial education in favor of general education. By 1941, one could argue that the plumbing, carpentry, and electric students who built the Communications Center were participating in the dismantling of their own industrial arts departments.

Once Hampton’s student-laborers had finished their work, fine arts students stepped in to design a new kind of learning environment. The center’s rooms featured a “distinctive home-like design,” according to a description in the NAACP’s magazine *The Crisis* (“College and School News” 43). Walls were painted “in brilliant blues and rich silver greys” and adorned by art students’ abstract paintings. The *Philadelphia Tribune* described studios, a writing laboratory, and discussion rooms that were created “to make students feel at home and relax in a ‘bull session’ atmosphere” (“Hampton Makes Learning Fun”).

To direct the center, MacLean recruited Robert J. Sailstad from the University of Minnesota speech laboratory. Sailstad’s task was to create a new kind of center that would expose students from underresourced, segregated high schools to modern, job-ready literacies. He trained a cadre of teaching fellows who were “writing and speech experts” (“No English Department”). Norfolk’s *Journal and Guide* reported that “The counselors participate in all projects . . . from round tables to creative dramatics . . . and work alongside students in the



best democratic tradition” (“No English Department” 11). Reports on the fellows’ work suggest an approach that was individualized, experimental, technology-rich, and multimodal (*Hampton Institute Communications Center* 1; Sailstad 1–4) (Fig. 1).

Hampton’s general education program reflected a conviction that traditional curricula—favoring the classics, prescriptive grammar, and theme writing—alienated working-class students. Sharon Crowley frames this historical move away from belletristic English education as a shift in emphasis away from *expression* and toward *communication* (Crowley 171). MacLean described his pedagogy at the 1938 NCTE Annual Convention in a speech “What’s Wrong with Us English Teachers?” His answer: “Plenty” (“What’s Wrong” 655). Teachers’ traditional educations did not prepare them to teach literacies that would matter to young people (661). Instead, Hampton’s curriculum located its instruction in the English of popular media: comic books, magazines, radio, and films (656). By studying English-in-use, Hampton students would attain literacies that prepared them to participate in democracy and compete in the modern economy.

In the Communications Center, Director Sailstad engaged this mission by advancing a project of economic mobility. Classes in radio, speech, drama, literature, journalism, and writing assigned practical projects that were “immediately and functionally meaningful to students,” Sailstad explained (1). “Instead of writing themes,” one newspaper reported, “students write letters to prospective employers and customers, and in their oral work learn selling techniques, telephoning, interviewing, dramatics and radio broadcasting” (“Trustees May Put O.K. on Work of Hampton Prexy” 2). Students wrote, produced, and performed radio scripts in the center’s studios that were broadcast daily into campus dormitories (Sailstad 3) (see Fig. 2). The campus radio station issued a variety of entertainment, war, and educational programming. Students also



**Fig. 1.** Students Carl B. Fountain and Ruth B. Dess walk into a Communications Center studio. Behind them are a radio studio control room and the Writing Laboratory. This image and Fig.2 were part of a half-page photospread touting the center that ran in the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* newspaper in 1942 (“Hampton Institute Communications Center” 11). This photo is used courtesy of the *New Journal and Guide*.



**Figure 2.** Students record in a Communications Center radio studio. Pictured, from left to right, are James Pittman, Director Robert J. Sailstad, Isaac B. Ridley (background) in the control room, Esther Merle Jackson, and Carl B. Fountain ("Hampton Institute Communications Center"). This photo is used courtesy of the *New Journal and Guide*.

aired political programming—addressing contentious topics like hiring discrimination, civil rights, the segregated military, crime, and problems in labor union organizing. They raised many of these topics in the series *Forum of the Air*, which consisted of thirteen episodes aired by WGH in Newport News in early 1944. Supporting these endeavors, teaching fellows recorded students as they practiced speech laboratory assignments and then conferenced with each (Sailstad 2). The course's instructors and teaching fellows would work with any students on these projects individually and in small groups, both at prescribed times and during open hours.

#### GOING PUBLIC: NEWSPAPERS BRING HAMPTON'S CENTER TO AMERICAN READERS

Along with creating the Communications Center in 1941, President MacLean enacted a series of reforms that re-envisioned the institute. He raised admissions standards, desegregated campus facilities (breaking Jim Crow laws in the process),

fired 62 underperforming instructors, kicked out 150 underachieving students, recruited a highly qualified biracial faculty, and installed a new curriculum (Gillespie, “Virginia Scrapbook” 4; MacLean, *Never a Dull Moment* 80). MacLean even asked permission to spend a fifth of the school’s ten-million-dollar endowment on additional changes, a request that trustees initially granted (*President’s Report 1941* 3–4, 11, 17–19). At the same time, Hampton welcomed the US Naval Training School to campus. Despite pushback from the segregated navy, MacLean insisted that the training school be racially integrated (Gillespie, “Scrap Book” 4). Together, Hampton’s curricular transformation and its collaboration in the war effort sought to open the doors to middle-class jobs. To achieve this aim, MacLean, the former journalist, relied upon the press to sway supporters to his side. The strategy produced mixed results.

The Communications Center made its newspaper debut in August of 1941, when the United Press Syndicate issued a one-paragraph item announcing the opening of the new center and noting its “scientifically designed writing laboratories” (“Hampton Expands Study”). The item ran in at least twenty newspapers, all aimed at predominantly white audiences in Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Montana, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Texas. Surrounded variously by comic strips, sporting news, and articles about the encroaching war, the Hampton piece appeared to be a convenient way to fill a few stray column inches for newspapers whose other coverage seems far removed from Hampton, Virginia. In the two years that followed, coverage of the Communications Center shifted almost entirely to the African American press. Those newspapers turned readers’ attention to the center’s political implications.

Such stories found homes in an expanding number of venues, as African American newspapers exploded in popularity in the years leading up to World War II. Circulation doubled between 1933 and 1940: from 150 newspapers and about 600,000 in circulation to 210 newspapers and 1,276,000 in circulation (Washburn 140). Press historian Patrick S. Washburn estimates that during the war, between 3.5 and 6 million African Americans read the newspapers every week. Those figures constitute about one-quarter to one-half of all African Americans (US Census Bureau). Press coverage highlighted wartime racial inequities and sowed the seeds of the Civil Rights Movement. The articles surrounding DuBois’s July 1942 *New York Amsterdam Star-News* column about the Communications Center offer an illustration: to the column’s left is an editorial mourning the execution of sharecropper Odell Waller, convicted by an all-white jury of killing his dishonest white landlord. To its right sits a cartoon connecting Waller’s fate to Virginia’s poll tax, which prevented poor African Americans and whites from serving on juries (Tapley). Opinion pieces on the facing page argue

that racism was hampering the country's war effort and call for the government to eliminate hiring discrimination in defense industries. By way of comparison, the *New York Times* editorial page from the same date shares the *Amsterdam Star-News'* concern about the war but remains silent on the Hampton Communications Center, Waller's execution, the poll tax, and fair hiring.

African American newspapers featured granular reporting about the goings-on at HBCUs, covering everything from faculty sabbaticals to the firing of a lunch lady. One can imagine that readers may have felt a heightened sense of ownership over HBCUs as a result. Millions of readers would have learned about the Hampton Communications Center thanks not only to DuBois's attention but to Hampton Institute's own diligent public relations. At the peak of its prominence in January of 1942, the Communications Center was featured in long, laudatory articles and photo spreads that ran in African American newspapers in Cleveland, Chicago, Philadelphia, Norfolk, Richmond, and Baltimore.<sup>1</sup> This coverage came just two weeks before these same newspapers would report that Hampton's trustees were taking a confidence vote on the institute's president, concerned that his reforms were too radical. In its article about the Communications Center, the *Philadelphia Tribune* proclaimed,

Amid the speed and confusion of a world at war, Hampton's Communications Center is doing a job which must be done. Young Americans—and particularly young college graduates—must be able to talk and write well if they are able to provide the nation with [the] type of leadership we now need at a time of crisis and later in the years of reconstruction. (“Hampton Makes Learning Fun”)

Norfolk's *Journal and Guide* trumpeted the center as a key in “the sudden emergence of Hampton Institute as one of the most outstanding progressive institutions of higher education in the United States” (“Hampton Embarks”). The *Chicago Defender* described it as “the first college unit in the country to co-ordinate all work done in reading, writing and speech” (“Hampton Inst. Undergoes”). The center that these newspapers depicted for readers across the country represented a new experiment in literacy instruction—an experiment that would soon move from the news sections to the editorial pages.

#### HAMPTON'S “CRITICAL METAMORPHOSIS”: DUBOIS'S CONVERSION FROM CRITIC TO SUPPORTER

Repeatedly in its history, Hampton University became the screen onto which national debates about African American literacy were projected.<sup>2</sup> To understand why the Communications Center's experiment became so charged, it helps to situate it in the long-running national debate, famously argued by Booker T.

Washington and W. E. B. DuBois on the question of the “Hampton Idea.” They would set the terms of discussion about African American education for decades. Washington codified his beliefs in an address to the 1895 Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta. There, he made a pact with white segregationist leaders that Southern states would provide African Americans basic industrial education and basic legal protections if African Americans, in turn, would accept segregation and not agitate for suffrage or social equality (“Atlanta Compromise” 281–3). The fullest expression of Washington’s stance appears in his 1901 autobiography *Up from Slavery*. There, Washington echoes Hampton founder Samuel Armstrong’s belief that industrial education would uplift African Americans without threatening Southern whites’ status. Thus, his recurring theme is the danger of receiving education unfit for one’s station. He describes the foolishness of freed slaves longing to learn Greek and Latin, writing, “They knew more about Latin and Greek when they left school, but they seemed to know less about life . . .” (Washington, *Up from Slavery* 88).

DuBois, a Harvard-educated professor, led the opposition to Washington’s “Atlanta compromise.” He critiqued accommodationist industrial education in speeches delivered at HBCUs throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century. DuBois issued a scathing retort to Washington, a Hampton alumnus, in a talk at the Hampton Institute in 1906 and was not invited back to the campus for 30 years (DuBois, *The Education of Black People* 15). In that speech, DuBois charged that “Hampton is the center of this, as I regard it, educational heresy” because the school’s philosophy posited a false choice between gainful employment through industrial education and alienation through higher education (11). When finally invited back to Hampton in 1936, DuBois found a school grappling with conflicts between traditionalists who wanted to maintain a white-led industrial school and progressives who agitated for change. By 1942, he judged that Hampton was undergoing a “critical metamorphosis” (Letter to Malcolm S. MacLean 1). He now counted himself a supporter of “the new Hampton under President MacLean” and the Communications Center in particular (“As the Crow Flies” 6).

In the months leading up to the war, MacLean and Sailstad crafted a pedagogy for the Communications Center. They brought with them from the University of Minnesota General College a conception of literacy designed to suit an HBCU at a moment of social upheaval. Their curriculum drew from two movements in higher education that Sharon Crowley examines in *Composition in the University*: general education and communication programs. The University of Minnesota had developed a communications skills program in 1932 as part of its general education curriculum. Around the same time, Stephens College

in Missouri launched its own communications program (Johnson 167). Beyond those two, Crowley finds that “very few” communication skills courses existed in American universities before 1943. Though Hampton Institute is not named in her study, it was certainly one of those few. Crowley identifies six more universities that added communications skills to their curricula by the 1943–44 academic year. Noting this trend, Crowley argues, “While all of this activity was no doubt stimulated by professional interest in general education, the emphasis on communication itself was a direct result of the rhetoric of war.” Like Hampton’s Communications Center, these six other programs responded to the perception that weaknesses in communication education were hurting the Allied powers’ fight against the Axis propaganda machine (Crowley 169).

Unlike these other schools, however, Hampton Institute, as an HBCU, had an additional responsibility to teach the political and economic literacies their students would need to negotiate the Jim Crow South and a segregated military. Classes replaced required textbooks with the latest magazines, books, and movies, along with field trips (Sailstad 4). This practice meant that students developed literacies that were situated in the contexts of their cultural moment. They would graduate prepared to become, as a 1942 Communications Center report claimed, “top-flight writers, teachers, actors, radio announcers, public relations experts, etc.” (Hampton Institute 12). But knowing one’s profession would not be enough for Hampton graduates. They would need to negotiate barriers in businesses and unions. During the war, Hampton students were exposed to a stream of speakers who espoused the importance of organized labor and African American business cooperatives. It was a curriculum tailor-made for African Americans working against the economic and social status quo in the Jim Crow South; it announced that Booker T. Washington’s Atlanta compromise was a thing of the past.

#### “THE CAMPUS IS UPSET”: LOCALS RESIST REFORM

Hampton’s new curriculum received early approval from the institute’s supporters, as high-profile initiatives like the Communications Center garnered positive press. But by 1942, a backlash mounted, and press coverage of the administration and the Communications Center grew contentious. The white faculty members who had been ousted by MacLean mobilized opposition among local business owners and trustees. They stoked segregationists’ fears of miscegenation by claiming that they were fired for “refusing to dance with colored persons” (McCullum 20; Gillespie, “Scrapbook”). Members of the Board of Trustees, the Hampton community, faculty, donors, and even some alumni protested that

the “new Hampton” was changing “too fast” (“Grads Blast Hampton Critics”).

Despite protests, MacLean forged ahead, insisting that the board release the endowment funds he needed to complete his reforms. Trustees began dragging their feet (MacLean, *President’s Report to the Board* 44). And in January of 1942, the controversy finally boiled over. Hampton’s old-guard vice president resigned, announcing that he had “lost confidence in the present administration” (Smith 1–2). MacLean seized the opportunity to name R. O’Hara Lanier, an African American dean, the new vice president (*Never a Dull Moment* 79). Following the resignation, Alumni Association representatives met trustees in February 1942 to charge that MacLean was pushing change too quickly and the industrial arts curriculum was suffering (Pleasant 98). A group of 150 alumni convened a “stormy” two-day meeting at the Hampton YMCA that July to air their concerns. At the meeting, the Alumni Association formed a committee of trustees, alumni, and administrators to assess, in the words of reporter Obie McCollum, whether MacLean was “leading Hampton Institute to a greater glory or a dark age” (20).

In the wake of this incendiary alumni meeting, DuBois penned his “As the Crow Flies” column, throwing his support behind MacLean and the Communications Center. The piece confronted the backlash head on:

The campus is upset, the community is upset, the students are upset: and the reason for this is simply because a number of old ideas and methods have suddenly been chucked into the rag bag. . . . All sorts of excuses are made by the lazy and reactionary not to have this unification of teaching and clarification of ideas adopted. But it is already adopted. It is already going on, and unless alumni have less sense than I think they have, we are going to see the teaching of English revolutionized in Hampton and the South. (6)

This “unification of thinking” with a “clarification of ideas” signaled the political valences of the Communications Center’s approach. The center would teach literacies that advanced a more ambitious idea of economic mobility than Hampton’s traditional industrial curriculum. Despite the drumbeat of upset that DuBois describes, MacLean continued to leverage the center to raise Hampton Institute’s profile on the national stage. As the Communications Center came to symbolize MacLean’s reforms, the additional exposure opened the institute’s literacy project to attacks from traditionalists who benefitted most from the economic status quo that industrial education promoted. Unfortunately, MacLean chose this moment to change his strategy. Instead of continuing to feed stories to the sympathetic popular press as a check against his critics, he began to work behind closed doors in the federal government’s effort for fair hiring. It was a decision that would lead to his removal from Hampton.

THE OGDEN MOVEMENT: THE NORTH INTERVENES  
IN SOUTHERN EDUCATION

From the beginning at Hampton, MacLean understood his mandate from Roosevelt as uniting the causes of African American higher education and World War II defense industry mobilization. MacLean used his Hampton platform to launch national campaigns for these causes. After all, what good would it be to prepare Hampton students for white-collar careers if those professions remained closed to them? For students to apply the literacies they learned at the Communications Center—to compete for jobs in booming communications fields—the country itself would need reforming. In using his platform at Hampton to advocate for these reforms, MacLean brought the tensions between Hampton's old guard and progressives to a head.

At the start of his presidency, MacLean and the institute's then-dean R. O'Hara Lanier insisted that, in lieu of inauguration festivities, Hampton would host the Conference on the Participation of the Negro in National Defense. Lauded by President Roosevelt, the conference drew more than 2,000 participants, including Eleanor Roosevelt. Attendees heard speaker Aubrey Williams of the National Youth Administration describe the employment discrimination facing young African Americans in the boom times leading up to the war:

Negro youth is faced with the same difficulties that white youth faces, but added to these are the prejudiced barriers set up by many employers and the discriminatory practices set up by the labor and trade unions. What is the result? Only two per cent get skilled jobs as against eight per cent for white youth—less than ten per cent get semi-skilled jobs against twenty per cent for white youth. And when they do get full-time jobs, the Negro Youth averages 49 hours a week for a wage of \$8.75, while the white youth averages 44 hours for a wage of \$15.71. (qtd. in Prattis 4)

These statistics would have caused some conference participants to shift uncomfortably in their seats, particularly Hampton Institute trustees from Northern companies that profited from low-wage African American labor. Disparities in Jim Crow higher education were not solely perpetuated by Southern segregationists. The money trail led northward: industrialists guided Southern HBCU literacy pedagogy throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

The symbiotic relationship between Northern support of Southern industrial education and Jim Crow labor inequality first took root at Hampton Institute. A friend of Hampton founder Samuel Armstrong, New York City department store executive Robert C. Ogden, rallied Northern industrialists to Armstrong's cause. Beginning in 1901, Ogden sponsored annual train trips from New York City to the South to tour HBCUs. The trips mobilized moneyed interests to-



ward the cause of Southern education and sparked the “Ogden movement” of reform. Members of the Ogden movement founded the Southern Education Board (SEB) in 1901 and the General Education Board (GEB) in 1902. The latter, backed by hundreds of millions of dollars from John D. Rockefeller Jr., was chartered by Congress in 1903 and given a startlingly expansive purview over Southern education policy for African Americans and whites. It would, the charter enumerated, open and fund new schools, form partnerships with and fund educational organizations, employ teachers, own real estate, collect data on education and issue reports, be exempt from taxes, and select its own members (212–5). The GEB declared triumphantly, “Under the authority thus conferred, the entire field of education in the United States—taking the word ‘education’ in its broadest significance—is open to the General Education Board” (4).

SEB and GEB members used their influence to populate boards of trustees of Southern HBCUs, including Hampton’s.<sup>3</sup> Many had strong allegiances to Hampton’s industrial education that promised to elevate without equalizing African Americans. In their writing, these turn-of-the-century industrialists deployed Booker T. Washington’s Hampton idea toward staunching the flow of the Great Migration northward, as a ready pool of African American laborers would bolster their financial interests in the South. As Ogden explained, “Our great problem is to attach the Negro to the soil and prevent his exodus from the country to the city” (qtd. in Anderson 374).

GEB Chair William H. Baldwin was even more specific about the advantages of educating African Americans for labor: “The union of white labor, well organized, will raise the wages beyond a reasonable point, and then the battle will be fought, and the Negro will be put in at a less wage, and the labor union will either have to come down in wages, or Negro labor will be employed” (qtd. in Anderson 376). Baldwin, president of New York’s Long Island Railroad, came south to develop the Southern Railroad (Anderson 376). A workforce educated under the Hampton idea would provide him with low-wage workers whose competition for jobs could bust white labor unions. The structural inequalities that GEB members like Baldwin promoted in their education policy would sustain antagonism between white and African American workers.

#### HAMPTON STUDENTS LEARN TO ORGANIZE

The literacies that the Communications Center advanced presented a clear departure from the General Education Board’s vision. MacLean announced to the Hampton Institute Alumni Association in March 1942 that “[w]e are revising as we think wise the whole trade school setup” (“Hampton Preparing” B2). In particular, Hampton’s students would be taught not only written and oral

literacies, but also the political literacy needed to desegregate labor unions. By the 1940s, some influential African American unions, like the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, had formed. Membership in these unions stood at 200,000 in 1940 and grew more than sixfold by the middle of the decade (Jones 236). The Urban League and the NAACP took the fight against employment discrimination to the courts and Congress. Hampton Institute began organizing too.

In 1940, students formed a campus chapter of the NAACP (“NAACP at Hampton Takes Form” 5). The following spring, the institute hosted a talk by Brooklyn YWCA Executive Secretary Anna Arnold Hedgeman in which she underscored the role of unions in battling hiring discrimination against African American women. Hedgeman declared “that Negro women must be continually conscious of social and labor legislation, that they must scrap continuously for better educational facilities in all the fields in which they are interested, that they must know more about trade union organization and continuously attempt to become integrated within the trade union movement” (“Job Problems” 1). MacLean himself shifted his focus with respect to women’s education. While at Minnesota, he wrote about preparing women for homemaking; at Hampton, the focus was on women entering the workforce. This shift reflected the demographic reality in 1940: while only about one-quarter of American white women worked, close to 40 percent of African American women in the South were wage earners (Bureau of the Census 15).

Matters of union organizing were a frequent concern of Vice President R. O’Hara Lanier. During the war, Lanier treated students to a stream of speakers who discussed labor organizing.<sup>4</sup> The Communications Center also taught union organizing as a political literacy. No matter how accomplished students were, they would not secure jobs without understanding how to integrate white unions and leverage the power of African American unions. When the head of the Baltimore Urban League toured the Communications Center in 1942, he declared his delight at seeing students not only preparing for professions but actively learning about the role of trade unions as gatekeepers of skilled-labor careers (Lewis 20).

As World War II loomed and defense industries ramped up production, African American leaders saw an opportunity to exert more pressure for fair hiring. In the summer of 1941, labor leader A. Philip Randolph and the NAACP planned a march on the capital to protest employment discrimination. To head off the protest, Roosevelt reached a compromise with Randolph and NAACP Executive Secretary Walter White: he would create the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) if they would cancel the march. Roosevelt issued executive order number 8802, prohibiting employment discrimination in companies accepting federal war contracts. He charged the FEPC with investigating

claims of discrimination. In February of 1942, Roosevelt appointed Malcolm MacLean to chair the commission.

**“WHY MACLEAN RESIGNED”: THE FEPC FACES  
OPPOSITION FROM BOTH SOUTH AND NORTH**

As MacLean’s leadership at Hampton Institute grew more tenuous—his vice president had just resigned—he would bring his paired causes of education and employment equality to the national stage. The FEPC’s work consistently dominated the pages of African American newspapers. Civil rights leaders pressed the commission to act as the engine of systemic change that would improve African Americans’ economic prospects long after the war ended. MacLean led successful hearings in New York and Chicago before chairing the FEPC’s first Southern hearing in Birmingham in May of 1942. Under threat from the Ku Klux Klan and segregationist Alabama Governor Frank Dixon, the Birmingham hearing dimmed hopes for change. In their statements at the hearing, some commissioners eschewed a larger social role for the FEPC. They professed their interest in merely solving short-term war manpower shortages. MacLean’s own noncommittal statement both failed to placate segregationists and inflamed the African American press. Newspapers criticized MacLean for being more interested in helping President Roosevelt solidify white Southern congressional support than fighting for fair employment.

Nonetheless, while resisting activist rhetoric in the press, MacLean worked behind the scenes to expand the commission’s reach in the causes of fair hiring and desegregation. With Roosevelt’s blessing, MacLean crafted an ambitious proposal to increase the FEPC’s budget more than twelvefold and establish regional offices (Beecher 250). Before the proposal could go through, however, Roosevelt bowed to pressure from Southern members of Congress to weaken the commission. The FEPC’s budget would now be subject to congressional approval. In response, a raft of African American newspaper editorials charged the president with mollifying Southern congressmen—whose support he would need for re-election in 1944—by giving them the power to choke off FEPC funding (Fig. 3). African Americans’ frustration with government backsliding on civil rights rose during the months following the Birmingham hearings. At the same time, white racist backlashes led to violence against African Americans in the military, in newly integrated factories, on city sidewalks, and in public housing. That summer of 1943, the worst race riots of the war broke out in Harlem, Detroit, Mobile, Beaumont, St. Louis, Baltimore, Los Angeles, and twenty other American cities (Jones 236).



Figure 3. The Baltimore *Afro-American* published this editorial cartoon in the wake of Roosevelt's restructuring of the FEPC. Southern congressmen, placed in control of the FEPC's budget, are imagined here as buying wolves ("Out to the Wolves" 15). The drawing depicts Roosevelt's decision as a betrayal of vulnerable African Americans, represented as the president casting out into a snowstorm a woman carrying a baby. Cartoon used courtesy of the *Afro-American*.

As the war’s momentum tipped toward the Allies in 1943, the White House demonstrated less urgency to integrate African Americans into the war effort. African Americans, disenfranchised by poll taxes and literacy tests in some states, were not a sufficient voting bloc to sway federal decision making; just 3 percent of those eligible were registered in the South (“MacLean Takes Navy Post” 4A; “Timeline”). MacLean himself decided to back Roosevelt in public but continue to fight to preserve the FEPC’s autonomy behind closed doors—an uncharacteristic choice for someone who delighted in cultivating a public persona as a maverick. His decision damaged his reputation. Still, some coverage suggested, MacLean’s public acquiescence ran deeper than the desire to ingratiate himself to the president. Baltimore *Afro-American* columnist Clarence Toliver, long-time chronicler of the institute’s politics, recounted sources who told him that, in fact, pressure to accept a weakened FEPC came not from Southern segregationists but from the Northern industrialists who populated the institute’s board (5). During his time at the helm of the commission, MacLean seldom passed up an opportunity to criticize Northerners’ involvement in systemic employment discrimination. In a 1942 essay he coauthored with R. O’Hara Lanier, they blame the perpetuation of whites-only labor unions on Northern philanthropists: “Employers, some of whom have given a great deal of money to philanthropic support of Negro education, either ignore the problem or pass the buck to the unions” (36). Their words exposed discrimination in Northern companies on whose boards those Hampton trustees also served.

MacLean stepped down from a weakened FEPC in January 1943. That same week, he also resigned the Hampton presidency and accepted a lieutenant-commander commission in the US Navy. The day MacLean’s dual resignations became public, NAACP Executive Secretary Walter White penned a front-page article in the *Chicago Defender* entitled “Why MacLean Resigned.” White cited opposition to racial integration policies on campus and the firing of underperforming white faculty members. Another major cause of opposition, as White’s article noted, was Hampton’s curricular revamp: adding “courses that would enable those who took them to go into jobs in modern life” (1). He pointed to the Communications Center’s radio workshop as an example of those controversial reforms. Here, again, a national civil rights leader inserted the Communications Center into an argument about the type of literacy education that would foster social change. The political stakes of the Communications Center’s work were as obvious to White as they were to DuBois. By preparing African American students for white-collar professions, Hampton was pressuring industries to end hiring discrimination. In making plain that goal, MacLean awoke enough backlash to make his leadership at Hampton Institute and on the FEPC untenable.

While the Hampton reform project extended beyond the Communications Center, the center symbolized those reforms. It became a locus for national arguments about the aims of literacy instruction for African Americans—and by extension, a site for contesting whether HBCUs should educate students for a hoped-for future in which fair hiring would make middle-class jobs widely available. The trustees made their wishes known by choosing as MacLean’s replacement New Yorker Ralph P. Bridgman, who rejected his predecessor’s project of reform. Averring that MacLean had gone too far, Bridgman vowed that his administration would discourage students from continuing their fight for racial justice and instead teach them to integrate into the society as it is (“Hampton’s President Sounds Discordant Note” A8). Bridgman’s sentiments summoned the ghosts of Hampton’s industrial arts past—Armstrong, Ogden, and Washington—and closed the door on MacLean’s chapter at the institute. Nevertheless, the Communications Center would continue on as a sign to students that politics and literacy were inseparable.<sup>5</sup>

#### COMPLICATING “THE HOAX OF LIBERATION”

The Hampton Institute Communications Center’s story is exceptional—for its era or for any era. Its prominence is easiest to grasp if we imagine what the corollary would look like today. Picture an upstart multiliteracy center at a small HBCU in a small Southern city. The college’s new president, looking to solidify his reputation as an innovator, stocks the center with all the latest media technology. The school’s ambitious public relations director manages to get the attention of newspaper editors. Soon, articles about the center appear in big-city and small-town newspapers everywhere. Even the NAACP’s magazine, *The Crisis*, runs a short piece. Millions across the country read about the center. The military sends a film crew get footage of staff and students to include in a documentary lauding HBCUs’ contributions to the war effort. Suddenly, this local literacy experiment has gone national. High school teachers stream in during the summer to learn about what the center is doing. The staff launches a successful podcast. When the major writers and politicians of the day visit campus, they make a point to tour the center. Some of its administrators go on to become some of the most influential educators of their day.

Imagine further that a controversy about educational reform bubbles up on the campus. The controversy spreads to the town, alumni, and the national media. Public intellectuals begin writing editorials, weighing in. A couple of them, perhaps Ta-Nehisi Coates and Roxanne Gay, even publish editorials in national newspapers that cite the multiliteracy center as evidence in favor of the

reforms. Amidst the swirl of this controversy, the university president is soon pushed out. For a few intense years, all eyes are on this center.

This is the contemporary equivalent of Robert J. Sailstad's experience as the first director of the Hampton Communications Center. For today's writing program administrators, who are accustomed to toiling in relative obscurity, Sailstad's experience may seem like a world apart. Certainly, the publicity his center received was anomalous. Still, the Communications Center's work was arguably no more transformative than the literacy instruction efforts carried out by other HBCUs of the period. The differences were the symbolic weight that Hampton Institute carried in historical debates about African American education and the public relations savvy of its president. Thrust into the role of exemplar, the Communications Center dramatized the political consequences of literacy instruction in HBCUs that taught students to wield mass communication to intervene in discriminatory systems.

The role that the Hampton Communications Center and HBCUs more broadly played in this era of experimentation is ripe for further research. Searches of recently digitized African American newspaper archives reveal a number of underexamined sites. They include Bennett College's Remedial Clinic and Radio Program; the Alabama State Teachers College writing and reading laboratories; the Johnson C. Smith University radio program and the Morgan State College communications laboratory, both founded by English Professor Arthur "Clif" Lamb in 1942 and 1947, respectively; Fisk University's communications laboratory, opened in the mid-1940s; and Talladega College's writing laboratory and college-community speech clinic. Among these, and indeed among all American institutions of higher education, Hampton was the most public, controversial site of progressive pedagogical experimentation in communication skills and general education during the war years. By 1948, more than 200 institutions had added courses in communication skills (Berlin 96). And, like the few that preceded Hampton and the many that followed, Hampton explicitly defined its approach to literacy instruction as a democratic project. Yet, its inclusion in the history of general education programs challenges contemporary critiques of those programs.

In their histories of composition studies, Sharon Crowley and William Spanos critique claims that general education played a democratizing role in the many schools that adopted such curricula during World War II. While general education was developed to educate citizens to advance deliberative democracy in the Deweyan spirit, Crowley and Spanos argue that once the United States entered the war, general education bent toward educating citizens to parrot an uncritical defense of a static notion of democracy against its Axis and later Cold

War opponents. Crowley terms it the “hoax of liberation” (186). The story of the Hampton Institute Communications Center troubles this critique. The editors of the Norfolk *Journal and Guide* captured the contradiction when they responded to President Bridgman’s assimilationist call for students to integrate into the South as it is. “Unless he means that they should accept integration into American life as a second-class citizen—denied the benefits of democracy and Christianity—his thesis is contradictory, because before one can live an ‘integrated’ life in the American economy, one must achieve integration. That is the basic reason for the continuing struggle” (“Hampton’s President Sounds Discordant Note”). Hampton’s communication arts curriculum, as well as those at other HBCUs, encouraged African American students to represent the realities of life under Jim Crow across the airwaves, in student newspapers, and through labor organizing. They learned to become writers and speakers who could leverage popular media to fight for jobs in regions and industries that blocked them. The resistance this project faced, not only from Southern segregationists but also from Northern industrialists, suggests that the Communications Center encouraged students, civil rights leaders, and millions of African American newspaper readers to critically shape a contested, evolving notion of democracy during a time of global upheaval.

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#### NOTES

1. This study relies on digitized newspaper archives. Given how few newspapers are digitized, the actual number that ran articles on the center is likely higher than the figures cited here.

2. Hampton became a locus for advancing African American education rights beginning in the Civil War. The first school for escaped slaves in the Civil War South took place on the site of Hampton University’s campus. In 1861 Union soldiers captured Fort Monroe, where African American Virginian Mary Peake then gathered escaped slaves under a tree and taught them to read and write. The tree was also the site of the first reading of Lincoln’s “Emancipation Proclamation” in the South in 1863. Five years later, Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute was founded on that site. The Emancipation Oak still grows there today.

3. In fact, eight of the passengers who traveled on Ogden’s train trips in 1901 and 1902 were appointed to Hampton Institute’s board. Through the 1940s, most of the institute’s trustee meetings actually took place in New York City because it was closer to home for most board members. On Hampton’s 1941 board, Northerners outnumbered Southerners 13 to 6, and whites outnumbered African Americans 16 to 3.



4. Hampton’s emphasis on union desegregation drew scrutiny to its top administrators. Both MacLean and R. O’Hara Lanier found themselves named on a 1944 watch list assembled by a House subcommittee investigating communist labor sympathizers (Special Committee on Un-American Activities 1207, 1250).

5. In the decades that followed, Anne Cooke and then Hugh M. Gloster directed the Communications Center. Each shaped Hampton students’ sense of culture by advancing the canons of African American theater and literature. From there, Cooke and Gloster launched influential careers: Cooke as the first chair of the Howard University Drama Department and Gloster as president of Morehouse College.

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