Humanizing Higher Education: A Path Forward in Uncertain Times

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2022 ASHE Presidential Address

Humanizing Higher Education: A Path Forward in Uncertain Times

Joy Gaston Gayles

Abstract: Humanizing Higher Education was the 2022 conference theme for the Association for the Study of Higher Education. This presidential address takes a forward look back on higher education within a global context and in the aftermath of a global health pandemic, making an argument for the need to humanize higher education. The address offers a definition for dehumanization and discusses manifestations of dehumanization in institutional cultures. The article concludes with a model for humanizing higher education as a path forward in uncertain times.

Keywords: Humanizing, Dehumanization, Higher Education

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Dedication: This presidential address is dedicated to my children, Angel and Jaden Gayles. Everything I do is to make the world a better place for you.

Introduction

"You can't really know where you are going until you understand where you have been" (*Maya Angelou Quotes*, n.d.). This quote reflects my approach to this presidential address. Before discussing humanizing higher education, we must first understand where we have been to help us think about what humanizing higher education can mean as a path forward in uncertain times. The Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) will be 50 years old in 2025. In that short period, we have changed and evolved, yet, some things have remained the same. ASHE was born from the American Association of Higher Education to foster scholarly inquiry of the highest standards and increase knowledge and understanding about postsecondary education. We've done this as a scholarly community, but not without growing pains. I appreciate how past president Kay Moore framed her assessment of ASHE in 1984, characterizing us as a thoughtful space where we come together as scholars to struggle with the puzzlements, predicaments, and paradoxes of higher education endemic in our work, and I would add endemic in our lives (Moore, 1984).

Where We Are Headed

I firmly believe that what happens in our global society trickles down into all of the microcosms of society, including higher education. The past two and a half years in this COVID-19 era, marked by heightened socio-political unrest and violence, have caused many of us to think about where we are headed as a society, as an association, and as people. In my remarks at the 2021 ASHE closing meeting and the welcome letter for this year's conference program book, I articulated some of what we have experienced in this COVID-19 era. All of those experiences have implications for higher education.

Experiencing crises is like a double-edged sword. Crises can bring great hurt, harm, and pain to people and communities. At the same time, crises can ignite our hearts and minds and motivate people to fight for change. In other words, crises can provide a turning point–an opportunity for us to do things differently because it's clear that what we have been doing is not working. The key is our ability and capacity to turn pain into power, which is not easy, but necessary for building a world that is equitable and just for all of us.

The mental health crisis is real and presents an opportunity for change. On my campus, we have experienced more student deaths in one semester than I've ever experienced in my career. In reopening campuses after the shutdown, we fell into the business-as-usual trap, bringing students back to campus, trying to recreate what we had before the pandemic, not realizing and accounting for the gravity of the pandemic(s) on the hearts and minds of people (Lonsdorf, 2022). What about the campus/university environment changed to accommodate for what we know are serious COVID-19 impacts on students, staff, faculty, people, and communities?

The global health pandemic exposed pandemics that were already present—pandemics/crises that some of us have the privilege of choosing not to acknowledge. Police violence, racial injustice, and socio-political unrest, to name a few, were problems before the global health pandemic. Because most of the world was forced to stop literally, except for essential workers who had to risk it all for the health and safety of others, the global health pandemic provided an opportunity for people to witness what has always been present and happening. What was "new" to some was business as usual for others.

Yet through the trauma and hurt, it feels as if we are at an inflection point where change is inevitable. History reminds us that it's always darkest before the dawn of a new day. It is certainly dark right now, and it's been dark before. What I know for sure is that being a change agent will require us to tap into our power, the power we have but don't always feel like we have, in ways that will help us direct change in positive ways. Doing so also will require us to get clear on who we are, where we are going, and how we will get there. It will force us to reckon with the realities of our times and determine what it means for the future. Reckoning implies that we must be truthful with ourselves and each other about the world we live in, what's happened, and what's still happening to people in our global ecosystem.

Signs of The Higher Education Times

In his 2002 ASHE presidential address, Bill Tierney predicted what higher education would look like in 2027 (Tierney, 2003). I was surprised, but not surprised, at how much of his prediction rang true in 2022. One of his predictions involved access to higher education and that by 2027, we'd be forced to accept the divide between the haves and the have-nots as a social fact. Not only is Bill's prediction true, but the reality is actually worse. Today political leaders are institutionalizing, legislating, and baking into society the dehumanization of minoritized people by creating policies that erase, oppress, and control minoritized populations (López, et al., 2021; Rodrigues, 2023). Such practices ensure a lack of access and limited social capital that makes people, especially marginalized people, *feel* powerless and as if we can't do anything about it. This phenomenon is serious because as legislation that has afforded freedoms and civil rights, particularly for minoritized people, is being overturned, we find ourselves questioning and asking, "what's next?" how can we stop it?

Tierney (2003) also predicted growing problems in faculty governance and the erosion of academic community among faculty, particularly our mutual responsibility to each other, our institutions, and our role in society. The competitive nature of the academy, exacerbated by neoliberal capitalist values and the corporatization of higher education (Giroux, 2015), has people selling their souls to be productive, win "prestigious" awards, jump on money trains, over-promise things, hustle for worthiness, and compro-

mise their values. People don't realize that these dynamics driven by hyper-individualism and hyper-competitiveness create and contribute to a toxic work culture for everyone.

Perhaps Tierney's (2003) prediction didn't go far enough. Professional track faculty are growing in number and are overworked and underpaid (Jaschik, 2021). There is growing government interference with academic freedom and the conflation of academic freedom with First Amendment rights (Arnett, 2022a; 2022b; Ward, 2023), which seem afforded only to those with privilege and power. It's quite interesting that *certain* groups are concerned with academic freedom to the extent that it protects whiteness in the academy (Arnett, 2022b; Ozias & Pasque, 2022). I remain baffled as to how academic freedom does not and has never been extended to those telling the truth about the history of this country (Jaschik, 2023)—how perspectives shared by the people who experience oppression and the research methods used to bring these perspectives to light are not valued or considered valid forms of knowledge (Griffin et al., 2011; Kelly et al., 2017). It brings to the forefront who gets to determine what is considered knowledge, what forms of knowledge are valued and not, and for what purpose. It becomes crystal clear that forms of knowledge and ideologies that support and maintain white dominance and patriarchy in society and the academy are normalized, valued, and upheld through policy, rules, regulations, and practice (Ward, 2008). What falls outside of the hetero-patriarchal white norm is criticized and devalued through rhetoric (Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018).

The Need to Humanize Higher Education

The 2022 presidential theme, humanizing higher education, came from an authentic space. Yet, the idea and need for humanizing spaces and places are not new. When I think about what it means to humanize higher education, it's more about the process, the people, and the materials (e.g., land, water, air, and sky) that connect people, space, and place. It's more about *HOW* we do research. This is not to say that specific topics are not important. In 2017 you heard past President Shaun Harper declare Power to the People. In that declaration, he clearly stated that as a scholarly community, we should NOT study topics that don't matter to people, especially people who have been placed on the margins of society.

Further, when conducting research, we have a responsibility to people not to cause harm. Research for us but not by us is critical to my point. It's also why positionality matters—it helps us think through how our presence impacts people, space, and place (Tachine et al., 2016). One's positionality should go beyond simply naming our identities (Milner, 2007). We must deeply consider our relationship with the communities we are studying. It is irresponsible to collect data by gazing upon the real experiences of

people, many of whom have been traumatized, for selfish purposes such as getting grant money, establishing centers, and publishing. The purpose and intentionality of the work we do in research and practice should be to see our humanity as one with people we get to study and to be in partnership with communities to strengthen opportunities and empower people. ASHE scholars Nancy Acevedo-Gil, Susan Muñoz, and Amanda Tachine engaged this topic in their 2022 ASHE research methods workshop—humanizing participants and communities throughout the research process. I appreciate that this work is grounded in Indigenous, critical race, and anti-colonial perspectives and ways of knowing to help us think about reciprocity in practice and praxis and how we can apply these approaches to work alongside people and communities—to engage in what Gina Garcia has named servingness (Garcia, 2020). When I think about the need to humanize higher education, it's more about how we treat people, space, place, and materials in the research process and what it means to be responsible with how we design studies and the tools we choose to use.

Unearthing the Lie

Before we talk about humanizing higher education as a path forward in uncertain times, we first must have a hard conversation about what humanizing higher education is NOT. To set the context, I want to share a story about an eye-opening experience. In spring 2022, Dr. David Stovall delivered the keynote for the Don C. Locke Symposium at North Carolina State University. All of what he shared was powerful. He discussed the need to "unearth the lie," which stuck with me. He made us think about the difference between education and schooling. Many of our children experience schooling in the k-12 system (Valenzuela, 2010). Going through school, I was never taught or invited to ask critical questions. For many of us, we learned to be critical at home or grappled with our conflicting experiences at the cafeteria table, trying to figure out amongst ourselves what just happened and why (Tatum, 1997). EDUCATION, however, is about teaching students to ask critical questions—in essence, unearthing the lie. Stovall shared that the root of the word education, "edu" means to "bring out," yet we live in a world that wants to silence and punish people for recognizing and speaking out about their realities and lived experiences. Dr. Stovall referred to this as an intentional attack on critical consciousness—an attack on bringing out—an attack on the true meaning of education. Another critical piece to unearthing the lie involves naming dehumanization and ideologies that perpetuate systemic oppression.

Dimensions of (De)Humanization

So what is dehumanization? In very simplistic terms, dehumanization is characterized by redefining people who are targets of oppression as less

human (Haslam, 2007; Kteily & Landry, 2022). In essence, people have been taught, schooled, and socialized to believe that people who hold marginalized identities are less human than people who hold privileged identities. When people are considered "less than human," it somehow makes it "OK" in the minds of those with privilege and power to treat them differently, to accept behaviors that would otherwise be unethical, unfair, and harmful. We see this with food insecurity, homelessness, lack of access to clean water, and housing projects, to name a few examples. Let me say clearly and plainly: it is never OK to dehumanize another person or group. I will come back to this point.

So what does it mean to be less human? In society, being less than human manifests in various ways, from reducing the full humanity of people to assigning inhumane characteristics to people to the language we use and how we use it to pathologize vulnerable populations. One of the worst historical manifestations of dehumanization is the three/fifths compromise decided upon at the 1787 Philadelphia convention for the purpose of settling a dispute between representation and taxation concerning enslaved peoples. In essence, states wanted to count enslaved people for representation purposes but did not want to be taxed because slave owners and slave codes reduced enslaved people to property instead of people (Anderson, 2016). Thus, the three/fifths compromise determined that every three out of five enslaved people would be counted,[1] essentially reducing the full humanity of people to property for control, taxation, and representation purposes. Despite its painful history, even today, reducing the full humanity and assigning inhumane characteristics to people happens all the time. You might remember the H&M racist ad incident (Stack, 2018). Putting a Black child in clothing associated with animals is never a good idea. Doing so further ingrains anti-Blackness and dehumanization by associating Black and Brown people with animal-like characteristics.

We need language to communicate. Yet language is often problematic and perpetuates dehumanization, particularly when we co-opt language that describes symptoms or disorders and use those same terms to label and pathologize people. Alcoholism, addiction, schizophrenia, autism, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are all disorders people experience to varying degrees. Yet we use these exact terms to label people as alcoholics, addicts, autistic, and schizophrenics. When we do this in society, we do not stop to think about how we are also reducing the full complexity of a person, a whole human being, to their symptoms or a disorder. Humans are so complex—so beautifully and wonderfully made; yet, we don't make space for that fullness. Instead, society forces and socializes people to fit the entire complexity of their being into a white normative box for control and financial gain purposes.

[1]U. S. Constitution, (original draft), Art. 1, Sec. 2.

More troubling is how we treat people who experience symptoms and disorders. Instead of increasing our knowledge and understanding about disorders and getting people the help needed to minimize and manage triggers and symptoms, people call the police. People end up being murdered because they have been dehumanized and reduced to less than human, which again allows people to make it OK in their minds for a person to be killed, dehumanized, not given the benefit of the doubt, and stripped of their rights and freedoms. People with guns arrive at the scene first, instead of social workers or people trained to treat social disorders. We've seen it so many times: police have guns, they are afraid (even though they have guns), they are not trained to *help* all people, and depending on how they were raised, they too see some people as less than human. In these cases, they use excessive force and violence that sometimes ends traumatically in an unnecessary murder. Then, because we live under a racial caste system (Wilkerson, 2020), society has made it "OK" not to hold people with privilege and power accountable for murdering and dehumanizing people (Metzl, 2019; Vasiljevic & Viki, 2013).

What I am describing is moral disengagement, which are strategies people use to trick themselves into accepting behaviors that would otherwise be unethical, inappropriate, harmful, and unfair (Vasiljevic & Viki, 2013). You all have seen it, and many of us have experienced it. The fragility, the tears, the denial, the victim blaming, and the distortion of consequences (DiAngelo, 2018). These techniques are moral disengagement tactics used to justify, make excuses for and dismiss violence, especially when violence is inflicted on vulnerable populations. Such strategies have a way of distracting people from the real issues related to unjust murders and inappropriate, harmful, and unfair treatment of people. I call them tactics of mass distraction.

Dehumanizing Ideologies

Now that we have established a working definition for dehumanization, I want to shift to how dehumanization shows up in society and nice places like education. Ideologies are interconnected systems of ideas, beliefs, values, assumptions, and principles that form the foundation of knowledge—what people know and how they know it (Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018). I recently gave a talk at my alma mater, The Ohio State University, where I stated an old but still relevant saying: knowledge is power. The very nature of who is afforded opportunities to participate in the knowledge discovery and creation process is rooted in privilege and power.

When dehumanizing ideologies form the foundation of what we know, it is dangerous because these same dominant dehumanizing ideologies rooted in whiteness and heteronormativity also shape, fuel, support, and perpetuate systemic oppression (Omi & Winant, 2014; Ozias & Pasque, 2022). For so long, white, heteronormative, patriarchal forms of knowledge have dominated academic discourses—creating boundaries for what is considered knowledge

and sending messages about who can participate in the knowledge-creation process. When we rely so heavily on knowledge informed by dominant ideologies, knowledge moves from mere discovery to POWER. When we talk about decolonizing course syllabi, it's in response to the realization that what we teach and what is in our course syllabi matters. When the curriculum includes white studies only, it's dehumanizing to everyone, including white people, who miss out on the contributions of intellectuals whose stories and contributions have been erased, ignored, dismissed, and stolen. When students are not exposed to indigenous, diverse, and critical perspectives that help them think critically about what's happening in the world around them and how it applies to educational problems, then we are not truly educating—we are schooling people. In other words, we are socializing people into a school of thought, contributing to the colonized mind, and perpetuating the status quo. While that might be the goal for some, please know that it is *NOT* education.

In fighting the power, we have to check ourselves through reflexive praxis and communities of support, not the kind of support communities that fuel hyper-individualism by telling you you're the greatest thing since sliced bread or constantly feeding our fragile egos. I'm talking about communities that will call you in with love and hold you accountable if you are really about fighting systemic oppression. I can count on my tribe to call me out to bring me in when I've missed something critical or don't articulate something quite right. They push my thinking and help sharpen my critical consciousness in ways that I cannot do alone or by surrounding myself with people who give me praise and accolades 24/7. Some people want to appear as if they're fighting the status quo. Trust me when I say people can see right through you. You can't fake authenticity. You either do the real work or move out of the way of people doing the real work.

Dehumanization in Institutional Cultures

Humanizing higher education is not a new idea, per se. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher reminded us in Episode 4 of the ASHE presidential podcast series (Johnson & Commodore, 2022) about Terry O'Banion's work in the 1970s on humanizing education (O'Banion, 1971). Although O'Banion focused on community colleges, the implications span across postsecondary education. What I appreciate in this piece is the articulation and naming of higher education as a machine designed "to grind the bones of students" [faculty and staff, too] to make what he calls "societal bread" (O'Banion, p. 657). The production model of higher education is rooted in whiteness and white heteronormative values that don't serve people well.

The great resignation, I believe, is in response to the machine culture that has always been present in higher education—a culture that prioritizes productivity over humanity (Schroeder, 2021; Varghese, 2022). After experiencing a global health pandemic that urged people to revisit the realization

that tomorrow is not promised, we now see people opting out of the machine culture. People are intentionally unplugging from the academic machine and choosing to plug into work that aligns with their values. The production model of higher education is so dehumanizing that it is making people sick at heart to take part in it. The notion that we have to put our bodies on the gears, wheels, and levers to make the machine work —a machine we don't own, one that doesn't care about our humanity, only what we can produce is disheartening. Through the great resignation, people are sending a message to those who own the machines that they want off the machine and that unless something changes, they refuse to keep powering it.

There are some very clear indicators of the production model in higher education and how it centers production over humanity. Decision-making in higher education is often based on producing rather than improving and saving people's lives. The global health pandemic provides a recent and clear example. In the discussions about changing and adapting in response to the shutdown and how to serve students and various higher education constituents, discussions and decisions were heavily enrollment-driven (Asmelash, 2020). Because the existence of higher education depends on acquiring capital, discussions were about expanding surveillance, creating policies to monitor remote teaching, and working to ensure that the quality of teaching and learning and maintaining institutional prestige were not sacrificed. It would have been nice to have institutional leaders also talk about the shutdown as an opportunity to rethink *how* higher education institutions can be transformed to be more equitable and just. Instead, the discussions centered around how not to lose money, revenue, and students.

When production is centered over people, little thought is given to how we treat students in the academy. Students come through machine university, and after 4-5 years, they are "turned out" to fit industry or stalled until they somehow disappear (O'Banion, 1971). Some disciplines have a weed-out culture that intentionally sends people away who conflict with the machine. Instead of adjusting the machine, we try to change, problematize, and pathologize people, and force them to fit the machine. If you are a minoritized person, it's a machine that wasn't designed with us in mind. In Viola Davis' book "*Finding Me*" she talks about the fact that all of her training at some of the most prestigious performing arts schools in the country taught her to shed the cultural parts of her existence—the parts of herself that make her human, that make her great, that represent who she is as a Black woman (Davis, 2022). I refuse to let academia murder my spirit or strip me of who I am (Aya, 2003; Williams, 1987).

Because institutions depend on capital accumulation, it creates spaces where there is hyper-competitiveness for limited resources, people are exploited for their talents (in the name of production), and hyper-individualism runs rampant (Giroux, 2002; 2015; Museus & Sasaki, 2022). Hyper-com-

petitiveness does a number on people. People buy into the ludicrously high premium that higher education puts on our work—asking us to do more and more with less, which sets up a super competitive environment filled with tension, toxicity, and unhealthy conflict (Slaughter et al., 2004). Hyper-competitiveness will also trick us into thinking that exploiting students, graduate students, and student-athletes, for example, is "OK!" It's not. The fact that student athletes can generate millions of dollars for institutions, yet many Black athletes leave college without a degree and can't find employment after college is unethical (Gayles et al., 2018). This exploitative system has been in place for centuries, and we're just getting to the point of starting to do the right thing by compensating student athletes for their name, image, and likeness (Comeaux, 2018).

Hyper-individualism creates a toxic culture in which academics wield violence against each other daily, and it doesn't matter if it's intentional or not: it's still violence. Hyper-individualistic people feel the need to hustle for worthiness in environments that will never really love and appreciate us the way our hearts desire. The moment you stop hustling is the moment the praise stops. People leave institutions for various reasons after making so many great contributions through their work. When they leave, it's almost like they were never there. Yet we continue to get caught up in hyper-individualism. It's about me, me, me—rather than considering how what I do and how I show up impacts people, space, and place: my colleagues, students, staff, and the overall environment. When we don't get our way, we litigate, and we use our privilege and power to logic bully colleagues when we don't agree with them or when we are trying to push an agenda. We play victim and villain at the same time and engage in manipulative tactics to get what we want, we lie, talk about people, and spread rumors to make ourselves look better than others and to get people to like and side with us. It's all bad! If we are not careful, critically conscious, and engaging in reflexive praxis regularly (Foste & Tevis, 2022), we will get caught up in these tactics of mass distraction that dehumanize people, space, and place.

This kind of toxicity spreads through academia like a virus fertilizing ripe spaces for dehumanization and institution-sanctioned violence to occur. We often feel it, but we are also on the hamster wheel in this machine culture—"too busy" to do anything about it or engage in the kind of self-reflection that puts us in touch with our own lives and how we show up for ourselves and others. If we're not careful, we risk doing what Freire (2017) warned about in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. When the oppressed gain power, they adopt the tools of the oppressor. "And we know the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde, 1984, p. 1).

Working in such toxic environments is hell for those of us striving for equity and justice in teaching, research, and practice. It is equivalent to what Amanda Gorman (Gorman, 2021) describes in her brilliant poem, *The Hill*

We Climb, where we constantly try to find light in what feels like never-ending shade. We are constantly braving the belly of the beast, all while realizing that the "norms and notion of what JUST IS, is not JUST-ICE." The racial realities that Amanda Gorman spoke about in this poem also reflect the racial realities in higher education institutions. We can't count on higher education institutions to inherently do the right thing and do equity and justice work in earnest. The toxicity we see and experience in the academy flies in the face of what we need and want as humans—to experience real community, thrive, and connect to our ancestors and each other. Doing equity and justice work in toxic, hypercompetitive, hyper-individualistic environments requires that we find ways to resist systemic oppression and institution-sanctioned violence and find ways to resist amplifying the toxicity and competitiveness that we breathe in daily.

Humanizing Higher Education: A Path Forward in Uncertain Times

The last part of my presidential address will focus on a working model for humanizing higher education as a path forward. Actualizing and engaging the model will require a reckoning. I love how Wilson Okello and colleagues framed the reckoning when they wrote "living freely does not mean that we do not acknowledge the pain of trauma experienced from [systemic oppression]; instead, it means reckoning with it, naming it [honestly], and supporting each other in resisting it" (Okello et al., 2022, p. 536). I also appreciate Brené Brown's work on how people move through the reckoning in *Rising Strong* (Brown, 2015). She talks about the importance of owning our stories and getting curious about what our emotions tell us, particularly when we experience an event that stimulates a strong emotional reaction. Emotions, particularly those we don't like, can make us uncomfortable. Instead of stuffing emotions down or pushing them away, we need to get curious about our emotions and wrestle with them to help us understand ourselves in the context of our experiences. When we do not engage our emotions, we are essentially denying our stories. "When we deny our stories, they define us. When we OWN our stories, we get to write the ending" (Brown, 2015, p. 182).

Indigenous Knowledge and Values

First, humanizing higher education is informed by Indigenous ways of knowing that call us to take responsibility and care for the land (see Figure 1). Given that the land has been here the longest, we can learn much from it relative to maximizing our existence. I talked with Heather Shotton last year about the presidential theme, and she encouraged me to read *Braiding Sweet Grass*. The author, Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), a botanist, does a phenomenal job using storytelling to communicate the connection and

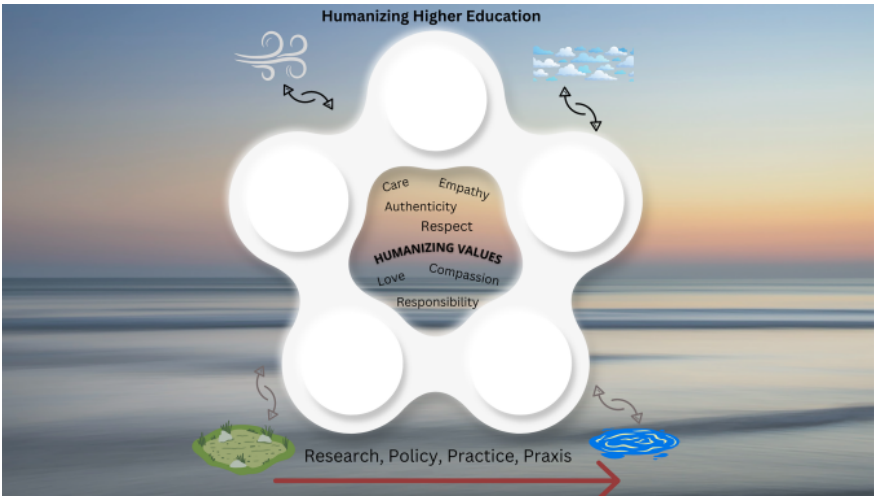

Figure 1. Humanizing Higher Education Model: Context and Values

reciprocity between the land and humans and what we can learn from the land.[2] In her book's final section, Kimmerer talks about burning sweetgrass as a symbolic ritual that washes recipients in kindness and compassion to heal the mind, body, and spirit.

Values

Values are the starting place for a humanizing higher education model. Humanizing values are at the center of what it can mean to humanize higher education (see Figure 1). If we truly want to disrupt systemic oppression and model what it can look like to live, be, and know differently, we need a model that prioritizes care, empathy, love, responsibility, compassion, respect, authenticity, healing, hope, collectivity, solidarity, and community. These values are important because they run contrary to systemic oppression that functions to destroy community and solidarity. To enact humanizing values, we have to start with ourselves. Many of us are unaware of how our presence impacts others, and dare I say, some of us don't care. Therefore, critical self-reflection and reflexivity are radical forms of resistance to dehumanization, systemic oppression, and white supremacy (Foste & Tevis, 2022).

Dr. Tenisha Tevis recently gave a thought-provoking talk during our courageous conversations in community series at NC State on reflexive praxis. I love how she framed the values question in terms of values and rhythms. Many of us can identify our values and discern if they are humanizing or self-serving

[2]Video clip shown during presidential address: GIFTS OF THE LAND | A Guided Nature Tour with Robin Wall Kimmerer | The Commons KU

(maybe). The question of rhythms was eye-opening and caused us to reflect on what we do daily and how our rhythms mapped on (or didn't map on) to our values. Thinking about the extent to which our expressed values reflected our rhythms and the overlap between our personal and professional values is at the heart of reflexive praxis. Here's the thing. If what you do daily does not align with your expressed values, then are your expressed values really your values? For example, many Colleges of Education nationwide have declared a commitment to anti-racism, which can be considered a value and a practice (Kendi, 2019). If what you do in your personal life, your rhythms don't reflect this value, then can you really say you value anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion when you only live and practice these value at work but not in your personal life? My point is that your rhythms—what you do consistently and regularly—determine your values. If you want to shift your values or have congruence/integrity/authenticity, you must check your rhythms, including in your research, teaching, and practice.

Healing

We have experienced so much trauma over the last few years and, for many of us, over our lifetimes. A model for humanizing higher education must include space for healing—a space to center healing the wounds from the trauma we've experienced (see Figure 2). So what does healing praxis look like? What are the healing-centered lessons and practices, and how are they realized, enacted, and embodied? Self-care, letter writing, and community care are examples of healing praxis that I've seen in the literature and that function as possibility models for healing (Kiyama et al., 2022; Okello et al., 2022; Quaye et al., 2019). Self-care is a healthy and necessary strategy, particularly for marginalized people who experience microaggressions and trauma regularly. Self-care in this context is not the same self-care linked to grit and resilience that we see in the positive psychology literature. Such notions of self-care do not consider the impact of systemic oppression on people's lives—people who have always had to be resilient and "gritty" not because they chose to but because it was the only way to survive and persevere. For minoritized people, self-care is not self-indulgence. It is critical for self-preservation (Lorde, 2017). It's how we armor ourselves to fight for justice and manage/cope with the stress so we can live.

I'm also inspired by written letters as healing. We've seen letter writing in the work of Maya Angelou (*Letter to My Daughter*) and Imani Perry (*Breathe: A Letter to My Sons*). We've also seen this methodological healing practice in higher ed in the work of Stephen Quaye (2019), Wilson Okello (2022), Cameron Beatty (2020), among other scholars, who have modeled letter writing as healing spaces (Beatty et al., 2020; Kiyama et al., 2022). I appreciate that letter writing places us at a sweet spot between critical reflection and action—a space where people can express their raw emotions

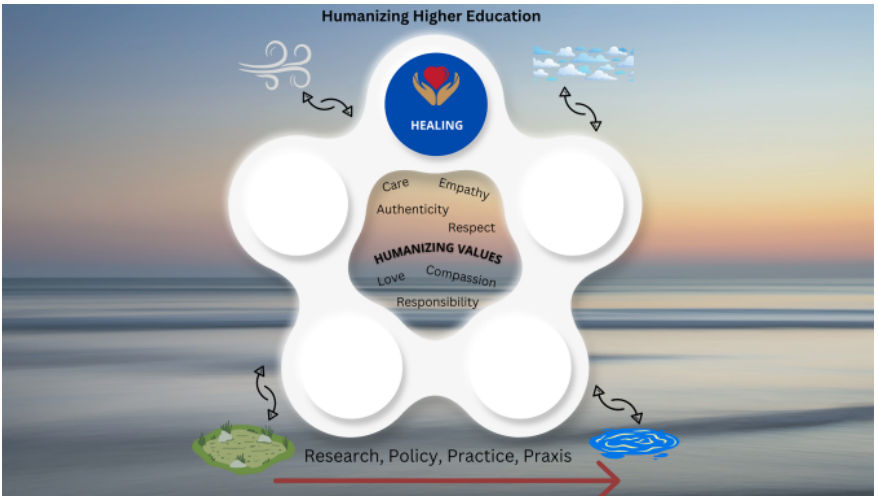

Figure 2. Humanizing Higher Education Model: Healing

in response to observations and patterns of systemic oppression and offer alternative possibilities for living freely. It's a space where we can remember, re-imagine, dream, and create and explore possibility models along the hill we climb (Dillard, 2012).

Critical Hope

Critical hope is another necessary component of humanizing higher education. Critical hope is one's capacity to hold on to a sense of hope while simultaneously experiencing and fighting against systemic oppression and dehumanization (see Figure 3). It's not simply being optimistic in a bad situation or what some scholars call toxic positivity. I like Carl Grant's definition of critical hope as one's "ability to maintain hope in a meaningful existence when [it feels like our] existence has lost all meaning" (Grant, 2020, p. 65). Critical hope sustains us amidst racism, anti-Blackness, misogynoir, and racial battle fatigue. It frees up space to think strategically about how best to fight against systemic oppression and maintain self-preservation simultaneously.

So, where does critical hope come from? How do you tap into it amidst actively fighting against systemic oppression? Critical hope comes from a deep place within my soul, a place of remembering (Dillard, 2012), the part of me that comes alive when walking in my purpose and being my authentic self. I also tap into it when I'm in community with others—when my energy and spirit connect with other people's energy in a space of love and care. In these spaces, we can dream and be creative explore possibility models for healthy and whole ways of being and knowing. It's a place of energy and vibrance that's life-giving.

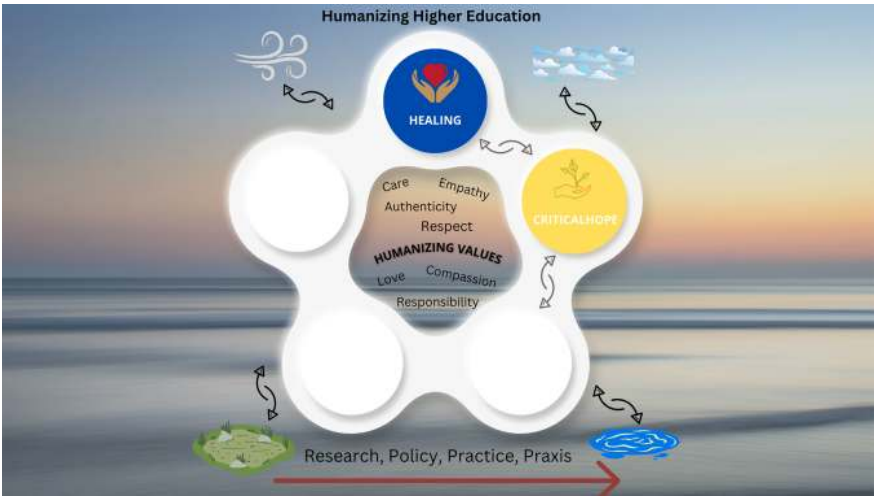

Figure 3. Humanizing Higher Education Model: Critical Hope

Solidarity and Collective Action

Finding solutions to complex problems will require greater solidarity and collective action. Solidarity opens the space for us to hold struggle and possibilities together. It also represents spaces where people can resist divisive competition tactics characteristic of toxic neoliberal cultures together. Solidarity represents people coming together, where energies and souls connect, create for good and justice, and fight systemic oppression wholeheartedly. Solidarity sets the stage for collective action in research and practice (see Figure 4).

As I think about collective action, I'm reminded of Audre Lorde (1984), who stated that systemic oppression comes in different forms. Yet, the common denominator is that oppression always seeks to divide and control the oppressed. Because systemic oppression dehumanizes and destroys community and connection, collective action must work to restore humanity and collectivism. In other words, collective networks require centering community and solidarity to advance justice. Collective action also requires a hard shift away from manifestations of systemic oppression such as hyperindividualism and hypercompetitiveness that run rampant in neoliberal capitalist cultures. People must also understand that when we take on these behaviors and buy into the stories they tell us about ourselves and our worth in connection to what we produce, we perpetuate and reinforce the central tenants of systemic oppression.

I also appreciate that collective action can be a space for healing. When we come together and create spaces where we can collectively engage in

critical reflection through an ethos of love and care about how to do equity-centered—justice-centered research scholarship and practice —I just think, wow, what a powerful possibility model. I've seen glimpses of this kind of collection action when I read about Black relational love praxis (Nash, 2019; Okello et al., 2022) and endarkened feminist epistemology (Dillard, 2000) that center mutuality and critical accountability as a way to move reflexivity beyond the egocentric self toward collectivism. It's powerful because when we can do that, we are critically conscious about our existence relative to how we show up in the world and influence others. Endarkened feminist epistemology and Black relational love praxis also recognize that the academy can be void of passion and connection in its objective pursuit of *truth*, which translates from little to no space for community, shared vulnerability, and care in teaching, research, and practice. I also see Twitter spaces like @TheRealHipHopEd, led by Chris Emdin and Tim Jones, as places where scholar leaders unite in vulnerable ways—where hard conversations are coupled with joy, laughter, love, and synergetic communication in a collective space (www.hiphoped.com).

Community

The last piece of the model for humanizing higher education is community (see Figure 5). The old saying goes: united we stand, divided we fall. Systemic oppression and white supremacy function to dehumanize, distract, and destroy community. Such tactics of mass distraction keep people divided and fighting amongst themselves, which is how systemic oppression is designed to work. Living in a neoliberal capitalist society that pits people and groups against each other keeps us fighting for limited resources instead of coming together as a community to strategize and support each other in constructive ways to disrupt and dismantle systemic oppression. If we let it, systemic oppression prevents us from being in community and getting the support and encouragement we need from each other to keep fighting for social change. When we are connected in community, it allows space for deep critical reflective conversations where we can dream and imagine new ways of being, thinking, and knowing that have the power to liberate us from oppression.

I read Patricia Hill Collin's book *Black Feminist Thought* (Collins, 1990) often because it inspires me. As she talked about the phenomenon of "outsiders within" in reference to Black women working as housekeepers for white families and having a particular knowledge about a dominant group without gaining or having access to the power afforded to the dominant group, there is an important insight. While living as outsiders within, coupled with housing discrimination, Black people were segregated in communities. I was inspired by what happened in those communities. Collins described it as a group-based collective standpoint where they generated a collective body of wisdom that they used to survive as Black women and to resist oppression

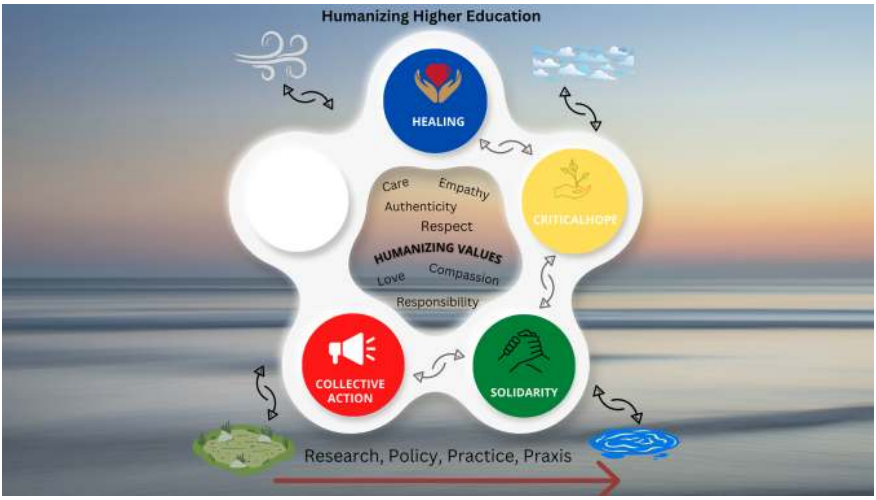

Figure 4. Humanizing Higher Education Model: Solidarity and Collective Action

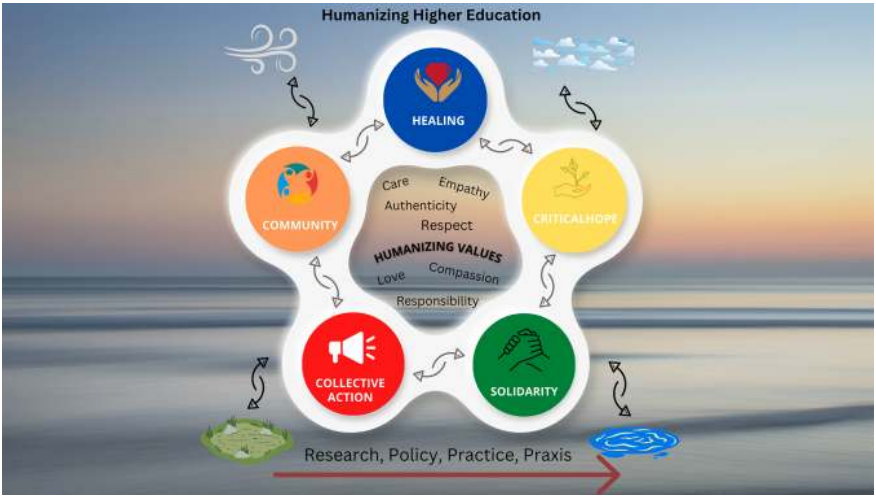

Figure 5. Humanizing Higher Education Model: Community

and white normative values, attitudes, and practices that did not reflect who they were or wanted to be. These communities provided space for them to bring their wisdom together collectively, to (re)member together, to create new knowledge grounded in their values and experiences, and to form ways of thinking, being, and knowing that led to creative strategies for affirming themselves and resisting oppression (Dillard, 2012). Models like this have implications for us today and remind us of the power of community even amidst struggle.

Concluding Thoughts

I'll close by simply stating that we have a lot of work to do as a community of scholars and practitioners. I hope this model for humanizing higher education will inspire us to be more thoughtful and intentional in research, teaching, practice, and praxis. I also hope this model opens up space for us to resist and challenge the status quo, collectively; doing so will lead to innovative and creative solutions, and possible models for knowing and doing better now and in the future. When you know better, do better (*Maya Angelou Quotes*, n.d.).

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