Written by Irma McClaurin
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Having recently returned from my 40th college reunion, I am reminded of Charles Dickens’ opening lines to A Tale of Two Cities —“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair…;” A fair enough description of my college reunion.

Pictured: Author circa 1972.

Some of my classmates are no longer with us. The fragility of others was readily apparent. One woman I met was an interloper. Her class would not meet for another few years. However, having developed brain cancer that had metastasized and spread throughout other parts of her body, and also part of an experimental drug therapy program, she was taking no chances, and had decided to return sooner rather than later. It didn’t matter that she knew few

of the attendees. She was happy to be there and reminiscence. Her cheerfulness was heartbreaking.

The bane of my return was getting lost. Half of the campus was unrecognizable to me because so much has changed since I was a student. Over the last decade, renovations have occurred and new buildings have sprung up everywhere—the campus has blossomed. We used to be able to tell South campus from North campus because each had their own unique architecture. It used to feel like a small community. Now all the buildings are glass, of similar designs, and spread all over the campus—and my internal GPS wasn't working.

Reunions are supposed to be interludes of nostalgia— a chance to connect with the past…in a good way; sometimes an opportunity to remember the past differently, better, if possible. At least that was my assumption, especially since this year was also the third Black alumni reunion. In the end, it was disappointing in many respects. The Black Alumni events overlapped with Class events, and some of us found ourselves having to decide if we were part of our class or Black. Some Black alumni chose not to attend one of the events, and others split their time between the two that conflicted—one hour here, one hour there. That scheduling blip highlighted one of what I have coined as the "dilemmas of diversity"—we are asked to segment ourselves in ways that those who are the normative white alumni never have to do.

I learned some hard lessons from this Reunion. Time has a way of softening memories of days past. But once you are back in that college space, the memories return, and encounters with certain individuals are strong reminders of why you had second thoughts about returning. You realize as you go to the events that you really were friends with very few people, and most of them didn't come. You also discover that you still don't fit. As the nights lengthen and people have had a few beers, glasses of wine, or maybe just a coke, you realize that your ideas are vastly different than those of people who may look like you but think very differently.

What's most jarring is the realization that your approach to how you think Black alumni should engage with the institution is on a very different page from those of other Black alumni in attendance. Why? First, there aren't that many of us. The college I attended in the Heartland only enrolled Black students en masse beginning in 1969. Prior to that there had been one in late 1800s, two or three in the 1950s, four in the early 1960s, and then eighteen of us who entered in 1969. Since the sixties, we now total around 600 hundred (living and dead) Black

alumni across the 150 year history of the institution.

So why are all Black alumni not on the same page? Because, contrary to popular beliefs, Black people do not constitute a homogenous group; we do not all think the same or have consensus on how we should resolve problems. We experience life and oppression through our own life lenses that include differences of age, gender, socio-economic status, sexual preference, careers, political ideas, social expectations, and how we were socialized or learned to handle experiences of racism. In the words of anthropologist Brackette Williams, we may be "skinfolk," but we are not necessarily "kinfolk." Reunions remind us that while we may have shared a common college experiences, the bond of skin color or attending the same college does not automatically result in consensus on what we believe should be strategic approaches to confronting problems or issues.

There were some good moments of engagement at the reunion. But for the most part, it was a strong reminder that not much has changed within institutions of higher education and its commitment to diversity. The rhetoric is correct, almost seductive in that everyone has mastered diversity etiquette. But there are some troubling facts: the number of U.S. Black faculty hasn't grown significantly in 40 years (at my alma mater or nationally)—and some current or newly graduated Black students were still describing the same experiences of isolation and alienation as some of their Black alumni counterparts 40 years earlier.
There were also discoveries; one of which was that between the years 1969-1973, the Black student group on campus was under surveillance by the FBI. Wow. What a revelation. What were we doing?

We were demanding that the college enroll more Black students; we were demanding that the curriculum be more relevant, inclusive, and teach us about the contributions of Blacks and other non-whites; and we protested the fact that there were some professors who treated us with disrespect or did not grade our papers fairly, because they carried their own stereotypes into the classrooms.

The demands that came out of two Library take-overs in the Heartland in the early 1970s did have some positive outcomes; it was Black students who did the research and designed courses in Afro-American Studies that eventually led to a concentration program (which, unfortunately, has since been dismantled).

Our efforts laid the groundwork for the future formation of Ethnic Studies, Women’s Studies, and later GBLT Studies (that latter two which continue to thrive); the establishment of a Black Cultural Center (which still stands and whose future remains to be seen); and some small increases in the hiring of Black professors, and most recently the hiring of “people of color”—a term I still have difficulty comprehending. Unfortunately, hiring does not translate into tenure and sustainability. So 40 years later, the number of non-white faculty, especially Black faculty, who are members of historically underrepresented groups in the U.S., has increased, but not by much.

The experience of Black students at predominantly white institutions is still an area ripe for research and analysis. Dr. Kesho Scott of Grinnell College is working on just such a book that chronicles and analyzes the experiences of Black men over five decades and how they coped with being sometimes the only one or two on campus, as well as the emotional journey they have taken to come to terms with their college years.

College reunions may be fun for some—a glorious walk down memory lane, a nostalgic romp in the current moment with faded memories. For others, like me, they are filled with ambivalence, and somewhat overrated. It will be some time, if ever, before I travel to one again. Best I console myself with faded and nostalgic memories of days long past rather than confront the harsh reality that after 40 years, my college memories should probably be assigned to an era that is long gone, and left undisturbed.

TO A GONE ERA

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1969-1972. The FBI spied on
Concerned Black Students
(CBS)
governing triumvirate, composed of Sophomore Linda Copeland and
Seniors Frank Thomas and Gregg Coggs.
To: SAC, Omaha
From: Director, FBI
CONCERNED BLACK STUDENTS (CBS)
GRINNELL COLLEGE
GRINNELL, IOWA
EXTREMIST MATTERS

their land: