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# SHAPE SHIFTERS: EXPLORING IDENTITIES IN SPACE, PLACE, AND TIME

In a world marked by rapid changes, where identities are frequently contested and redefined, the concept of shapeshifting has become increasingly relevant. As Gee (2004) suggests, shapeshifting extends beyond the realm of science fiction; it is a metaphor for the adaptive strategies individuals employ to navigate social, political, and economic landscapes. For those from historically marginalized communities, shapeshifting is not just an ability, but a necessity. These individuals are often required to reconfigure their identities, strategically deploying skills and attributes to survive and thrive in environments not designed for them.

This special theme issue of *The Educational Justice Journal* seeks to explore the multidimensional nature of shapeshifting, particularly through the lens of identity development within contested spaces and across time. Drawing on the works of Bourdieu (1986) and Yosso (2005), we examine how cultural and social capital play pivotal roles in who is afforded the ability to shapeshift, and who is systematically denied that capacity due to racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, and other intersecting forms of discrimination.

Historically, the identities of minoritized individuals have been shaped by external forces seeking to categorize and control them. However, the act of shapeshifting allows for resistance against these forces. It involves the careful negotiation of multiple identities to navigate oppressive structures while maintaining one's core sense of self. This issue responds to calls by scholars like McKittrick (2006) and Tuck and McKenzie (2015) to further unpack how space, place, and time intersect with identity. The authors in this issue challenge traditional understandings of identity by revealing how dynamic and fluid identities can be within shifting environments.

### About the Guest Editors

**Kala Burrell-Craft, Ph.D.** is an Associate Professor in the Educational Leadership program at the University of Maryland Eastern Shore where she co-leads the School of Education college-wide initiatives centered on justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion as a member of the university JEDI committee and sits on various university and college committees. She also serves as a board member with AABHE where she is co-chair of the research committee. Her research interests are related to identity development, educational spaces (urban and rural), antiracist teacher and leadership preparation (culturally responsive pedagogy), critical literacies (CRT), and social justice.

Dr. Burrell-Craft has multiple publications in peer-reviewed journals and has been awarded over eight million dollars in grants. She has been a member of AABHE since 2018 where she received third place for the dissertation award. She is a graduate of the Leadership and Mentoring Institute (LMI) Class of 2022, the award recipient of the American Association of Blacks in Higher Education's 2024 Early Career Award, the award recipient of the 2022 American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education's Best Practice for Multicultural Education and Diversity award, and a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. She also serves on the American Educational Research Association's executive board for the Research Focus on Black Education SIG and co-chair of Division G's Section 3 that focuses on Language, literacies, and representations.

**John A. Williams III, Ph.D.** is an Assistant Professor of Urban Education at Texas A&M University at College Station, in the department of Teaching, Learning and Culture. He received his undergraduate degree in Sociology and masters in Education Policy at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. His doctorate is in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis on Urban Education from The University of North Carolina at Charlotte. His research focuses on developing and replicating best practices, policies, and personnel to dismantle inequitable discipline outcomes for Black students in K-12 school environments. Dr. Williams has spent time working with teachers, school district administration, juvenile justice practitioners and community members across the country, to de-silo how we support Black children as critically conscious learners. Dr. Williams has multiple publications in peer-reviewed journals such as the Journal of Negro Education, Teacher and Teacher Education, Urban Education Research and Policy Annuals, Education Policy, and the Journal of Urban Education. Lastly, he is the founder and director of ULTRA, the Urban Lab for Transformative Research and Assessment.

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I am a graduating senior at Loyola University New Orleans studying psychology with a minor in sociology. I am from Glen Burnie, Maryland and I have aspirations of being a Clinical Child Psychologist.

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**ArCasia D. James-Gallaway, PhD - Texas A&M University**

ArCasia D. James-Gallaway is a proud first-generation college graduate, native Texan, and interdisciplinary historian of education, whose work bridges past and present perspectives on African Americans' struggle for educational justice. Her research agenda follows three overlapping strands of inquiry: the history of African American education, racialized power in history education, and gendered (anti)Blackness in education. She is the recent recipient of the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education's 2024 Early Career Award of Merit. Dr. James-Gallaway's scholarship has been supported by the Ford Foundation, American Educational Research Association, Texas State Historical Association, Baylor University, and Texas A&M University.



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## **UNDERGRADUATE PERSPECTIVES**

### **IT'S A DIFFERENT WORLD FROM WHERE WE COME FROM**

**Zora-Reign Craft**

**Myra Lewis**

**Caleb Hancock**

**Zachary Robinson**

The idea of shapeshifting is not a new term or concept. It spans across cultures—Eastern folklore, Greek and Roman mythology, Norse mythology, Celtic folklore, Native American folklore, and modern fiction (Geller, 2016). Shapeshifters are as diverse in their abilities as they are in their appearance, appearing in everything from romantic fairy tales to horror tales. This article explores how Black undergraduate students navigate educational spaces from four distinct academic environments. For us, shapeshifting means centering our identity amidst the sea of change and managing adulthood as young adults. We share the perspectives of a Black female student at a Historically Black College and University (Howard University), another Black female student at a historically white Jesuit institution (Loyola University New Orleans), a Black male student at a historically white institution (Louisiana State University), and a Black male student at a minority serving institution (University of North Carolina Greensboro).

Navigating higher education as a student of color often involves confronting unique challenges and negotiating identity in complex social spaces. For Black students, the university experience can be marked by moments of profound connection and isolating otherness. Whether attending a historically Black college or university (HBCU), a historically white institution (HWI), a faith-based campus, or a minority serving institution (MSI) these students grapple with questions of belonging, community, resilience, and self-worth. This collection of narratives captures the voices of four undergraduates—Myra, Zora, Zachary, and Caleb—each recounting their journey in forging identity, adapting to new environments, and seeking spaces where they feel seen and understood. Through their personal reflections, these students reveal not only the challenges they face but also the strength and resilience they draw from their communities, their faith, and their ability to adapt in the face of adversity.

### **Myra**

There is nothing better than feeling like you belong. This was the first time in my life that I felt I could be myself completely and unapologetically. It was college, and it was Howard University where I found home. Growing up in the South, my parents placed my younger sister and me in schools that were performing well. I attended schools in affluent areas with high scores, but these public schools had very few students who looked like me, and I experienced microaggressions from both students and teachers. The aim was always for students to achieve the best scores and gain admission to top schools. In an environment filled with numbers and subtle racism, it became unhealthy for any Black child.

If you didn't have perfect scores like your peers, who had expensive tutors and resources, you were viewed as unsuccessful—"stupid," for lack of a better word.

When choosing a school for my undergraduate studies, I knew I needed to be somewhere with value, where I could be heard, and where I felt at home. I toured several different schools, both HWIs and HBCUs. At the HBCUs, there was a palpable sense of comfort as students engaged in their everyday activities—walking to class, hanging out in the yard, and eating in the cafe—creating a sense of community. I knew I had to be there.

During my college application process, amidst the height of the Black Lives Matter movement, I resolved not to attend a HWI. I knew that for my success and education, I had to attend a Black school with students like me. I applied to several schools, got accepted to all of them, and was still questioned about why I didn't apply to Duke, Chapel Hill, or other prominent schools in my area. I just knew they weren't for me.

What people crave most in this world is community—a place to be seen, heard, and understood. I found that on the beautiful campus of Howard University. My HBCU was the place where I could connect with all the different sides of myself. There was a place for me as a dancer, a scientist, a collaborator, a leader, and somewhere just to have fun.

I loved that at my institution, there was always a place for me to present myself. I didn't fully understand the value of that until I left my campus. Living in such a diverse city like Washington, D.C., I felt an immediate disconnect from my community as soon as I walked two blocks from campus. I felt the eyes of people watching me, their assumptions questioning my intelligence, capability, and value. Going back home to North Carolina was even more extreme; I instantly felt like the only Black child in the room again, reminiscent of my elementary school days. The supportive bubble created by my HBCU is something no amount of value could replace.

Transitioning between different environments—that's the definition of a "shapeshifter." As a Black woman going from a community that uplifts and supports me on my HBCU campus to a grocery store created a "shift" in my identity. I was taught on my campus to always be myself and represent my community, but that became difficult once I left. I vividly remember during an internship in San Antonio, Texas, a graduate student questioned my curly hair and asked slightly inappropriate questions about my institution, implying it was still an "all-Black" campus. Regardless of the intention behind her comments, it was clear that she was not educated in my world and that I would have to assimilate into hers for the rest of my life. It's disappointing, honestly. No matter what graduate program, school, or job I pursue in the future, it will never feel as safe and accepting as my college campus.

I will never be fully heard the way my school hears my voice, nor will I be seen the way my campus sees me. My HBCU, Howard University, is a place that uplifts, supports, and understands what it's like to be African American in the United States. However, it isn't always as glamorous as it sounds. For so long, universities like mine have fought to mold their students into individuals who can change the world for the next generation. With generations of fighting for equal rights and freedom for African Americans, somewhere the mentality within the HBCU community became "breaking you down to build you back up." The origins of this mentality are unclear; it could stem from religion, Greek life, or the historical difficulties faced by African Americans in the U.S. Yet, this approach can sometimes focus more on "breaking you down" than on "building you back up."

From hazing to bullying to running for an executive board position, many students face experiences that can break them down when trying to succeed. This mentality has evolved from simple campus issues and academic troubles to extremes that end up on social media. The "breaking down" moments HBCU students experience often lack the "building back up" necessary to remind them of their identity, why it matters, and the value they hold in this world. Internally, the HBCU experience can feel ostracizing, which is hard in a world that barely accepts you.

### **Zora**

I think it's easy for many to feel like they are floating in a world where they do not belong or where they have no purpose. This can be especially true for young African Americans living in the stain and backlash of a horrific time in American history. Despite these notions and overwhelming circumstances, this couldn't be further from the truth. As children, we grow up learning how to navigate life—from code-switching to knowing how to respond when pulled over by police, handling microaggressions, and standing up for ourselves while being the minority in America. Yes, these things are valid and true, but they do not dominate my identity or shape the way I view the world.

The school I attend is Loyola University New Orleans. Although it is a Jesuit institution, it seems to be losing sight of its faith. When I chose Loyola, I must admit that I was drawn by financial considerations and the vivid memories of touring the campus when I was about 10 or 11 years old with my brother. I remember it being a place that seemed open, free, and filled with opportunities to truly discover the meaning of life and my identity amid it all. I can say that has been true for my experience at Loyola.

Unlike some of my peers, I haven't had specific moments where I felt marginalized or cast out in most academic settings. However, there have been times when I felt out of place due to the backgrounds and capabilities of those around me.

This had nothing to do with them but was all about my own feelings of inadequacy, conditioned by society to feel less than for my abilities in comparison to others who seemed more eloquent, had more remarkable opportunities, and so on. Throughout my four years of college, I've realized that I don't have to let external factors, or my own self-doubt convince me that what I bring is insufficient, subpar, or ordinary. I possess unique gifts, talents, and experiences that make my story extraordinary because my God is extraordinary.

Although I have not faced specific marginalization because of my skin color, I do believe I have been marginalized based on my faith. I identify as Apostolic Pentecostal. As I deepened my faith, I felt compelled to share what the Lord has shown me and done in my life. However, in academia, there seems to be a strict pushback against real truth. We accept many types of faith, but whenever I mention Jesus or incorporate Him into my work, I sense annoyance or frustration from peers or instructors.

I could have allowed these moments of pushback to discourage me, but because I know who I am in Jesus, nothing anyone says can take away my purpose in this world. The overall issue we see today stems from a lack of understanding of our true identity. We are image bearers of Christ, yet mentioning His name often feels taboo. We live in a fallen world, and it's easy to view life through a binary lens. But what if we turned our eyes to our hope in Jesus and recognized the real problem? What if we prayed against racism, sought more equality, and placed our trust in the one who doesn't change? If these things don't change, will we continue to live miserable lives, always on edge, or will we realize that we have freedom in the Lord?

Many think they are living liberated lives, controlling their emotions and not letting others affect them, but what makes you think a guarded life is freedom? Living this way only leads to domination by our minds and by forces that seek to undermine us. The Lord offers us abundant life when we put our hope in Him.

After finding Jesus and realizing I don't have to be a victim, I recognize the power I possess—not from myself, but from the One who is the Highest Power. The Lord will perfect that which concerns me, scattering anything that tries to come my way (Psalm 138:8; Deuteronomy 28:7). In the hand of the Lord, there is no promise that things will be easy; in fact, it's often the opposite. However, life becomes fruitful when you understand that this fallen world doesn't have to dictate your reality.

My hope is that everyone reading this understands that Jesus is the source of our hope. This fallen world can be brutal and may hurt at times, but we don't need to focus on what others do. Instead, we should realize that the Lord is our fortress and protector. Some may see this as ignorance, but I pray they find the true meaning of life and recognize that we are all searching for something to fill the God-shaped hole in our souls. Many fill it with knowledge, pride, accolades, or control. These things are fleeting and will eventually perish. We pursue these things because we want to feel loved, seen, and like we matter. The truth is, we all do, and every day the Lord reaches for us to show that He is in control. People will be people—they will be rude, mean, and racist—but Jesus is the God of the marginalized, specializing in bringing the lost to wholeness.

### **Zachary**

As a senior in my undergraduate program, this is an opportune time to reflect on my experiences for multiple personal and professional reasons, particularly to strengthen my self-awareness regarding my identity as an educated Black man studying among peers from different racial backgrounds. My time at this HWI has significantly shaped my educational experience in ways I never imagined.

I have encountered countless microaggressions that have become a regular part of my life, making it difficult to recall each instance. These experiences have become so normalized that even stark occurrences, which once stood out during the beginning of my academic journey, now feel commonplace. For example, being the only person of color in a classroom is almost expected. Similarly, I often find myself as the only man of color in some of my classes.

Given my academic interests in psychology, political science, and women, gender, and sexuality studies, I tend to think critically about how we socialize and make meaning of our shared and individual experiences. Thus, I often engage in spirited discussions with classmates and friends about issues of race, gender, and politics. What I have found through these informal conversations is that despite clear racial disparities in the student demographics on campus, many of my white peers still believe that the demographics are “about even,” which could not be further from the truth. One white student even told me he has seen so many Black people on campus that he thinks the representation is “about even” with that of white students. He insisted, “It's not as bad as y'all make it out to be.”

I vividly remember being the only person of color in multiple classes, surrounded by individuals who seemed unable—or unwilling—to appreciate or understand my experiences, yet who were also convinced that racial representation was balanced across the university. This leaves me questioning how best to approach this situation. My instinct tells me that it requires having a conversation with respect and empathy while remaining focused on data and facts. Unfortunately, even as individuals from marginalized racial groups share stories of discrimination, bias, and systemic barriers, these experiences are not always visible to others.

In a time when “alternative facts” and rampant misinformation abound, it is discouraging to invite further discussion. While I admit that sharing resources offering a different perspective on racial imbalances might be useful in encouraging reflection on the broader systemic nature of racial issues, this situation often leaves me feeling torn and exhausted. Although I feel somewhat motivated to enlighten my peers, I also feel it is not my responsibility. This dynamic concretizes feelings of isolation and outsidership and leads me to consider the concept of Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF) (Smith, 2003), which describes the cumulative psychological, emotional, and physical toll that individuals from marginalized racial groups experience from repeated exposure to racial microaggressions, discrimination, and systemic racism. Nevertheless, I am also resistant to admitting I experience RBF out of concern for being perceived as a victim or through a deficit lens, which could negatively impact my academic or professional experiences.

These feelings are further exacerbated by an incident where a white student called me “subhuman” after learning about a medical condition that required me to use a cane at the time. This played into the narrative that Black people are less than human. Not only was he insensitive to my disability, but what is more disturbing is that he felt comfortable enough to say such words to me, confident there would be little to no repercussions for his actions, regardless of how hurtful they were.

Before I became accustomed to these microaggressions, they often made me feel that as a Black man, I did not belong at this university. One incident that stands out was when a white staff member asked me for “proof that I didn’t steal” my parking pass. He even demanded to examine it before granting me access to campus. This moment cemented the idea that, to some, I am an outsider who does not deserve to be here. They see me as an anomaly—despite the supposed “even numbers” of Black and white students here—while I’m expected to view them as the norm. This makes the idea of equality in numbers laughable, not to mention that he was questioning my audacity in parking in a reserved lot.

Although I thought I was prepared for these challenges before attending this historically white institution, I did not anticipate their frequency or intensity. I also did not expect the emotional toll and racial environmental stress caused by these experiences. However, an unexpected positive outcome has been the strong connections I have formed with other Black students. Despite our relatively small numbers on campus, I feel more connected to my community of Black peers than I ever expected. The friendships I have developed have fostered a sense of solidarity, and the most meaningful support and thought-provoking conversations I have had have come from these peers. For that, I am deeply grateful.

### **Caleb**

Shapeshifting, to me, is the ability to change your behavior and part of your identity according to the people around you. From an early age, I learned that being Black matters in society. I attended a historically white school for most of my life, and my experiences with white peers, their parents, and teachers helped me learn how to shapeshift. Growing up, I was often one of the few, if not the only, Black boys in my class. As a result, I made many white friends, which allowed me to become comfortable around white adults and learn how to act in their presence.

When I decided to attend the University of North Carolina Greensboro (UNCG), I knew nothing about the school. Having grown up with mostly white kids and their families, I was unaccustomed to the diversity at UNCG. Outside of extended family and church, my family and I were consistently the minorities. However, at UNCG, a minority-serving institution (MSI), the diversity is so rich that, as a Black male, it's almost impossible to feel like the minority. This was a huge adjustment for me. My whole life had involved shapeshifting to fit in with white students; I had never had the chance to be myself while still fitting in. It was my first real opportunity to make several Black friends.

My journey began during peak COVID in 2020, my freshman year, when almost all my classes were online. It was challenging to socialize and meet people, especially as everyone was wearing masks and trying to avoid strangers. As COVID restrictions eased during my sophomore year, I began to attend more in-person classes. Initially, it felt unfamiliar to see so many minorities in one room, but it was exciting to experience all the different cultures and backgrounds.

One significant experience was in an in-person communications class, where we were randomly divided into groups for a semester-long project. This project was pivotal in helping me become more familiar with minorities and learn how to shapeshift while being myself. In my group, I had three partners of different races, and working with them was wonderful. As the semester progressed, I grew more comfortable and learned to navigate my identity in a diverse environment.

As a college student with a full-time job, I am always busy. I work in customer service, currently serving as an assistant manager. My role requires me to manage not only my coworkers but also customer complaints, which means I must shapeshift around people of various ages, races, backgrounds, and beliefs. I often find myself shapeshifting around my boss, as I work for a company where conservative beliefs prevail among executives and store managers. I understand this dynamic and adapt my behavior accordingly. For instance, how I interact with my minority peers and coworkers is entirely different from how I engage with my boss and white coworkers. My ability to shapeshift has allowed me to progress rapidly in my career, leading to multiple promotions and new opportunities.



Shapeshifting is a skill that can be learned through experience. The more diverse experiences we have, the more comfortable we become in various situations. My time at a historically white high school and at an MSI university has equipped me with the ability to shapeshift and adapt among people from different cultures. While I may not always feel comfortable, I am confident in my ability to navigate these challenges and embrace the opportunity to connect with diverse individuals.

### **Conclusion**

These narratives underscore the nuanced and often challenging experiences of Black students in higher education. For some, their campuses provide a supportive community that reinforces their sense of belonging, while for others, the journey is marked by the need to confront and adapt to environments where they feel marginalized. Whether through the solidarity of fellow students, the grounding power of faith, or the adaptability they have cultivated, each student has crafted a path defined by resilience. These stories reveal a powerful truth: the journey to self-acceptance and identity in higher education is complex, yet it offers opportunities for growth and empowerment. By sharing their voices, these students contribute to a broader understanding of what it means to thrive in the face of systemic challenges, reminding us of the vital role of empathy, understanding, and support in transforming educational spaces.

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**DOCTORAL PERSPECTIVES**

**VOICES OF RESISTANCE: SHAPESHIFTING AS HBCU DOCTORAL STUDENTS**

**KYRA MILBOURNE  
NZINGA CARDWELL  
VERNAJH PINDER**

Shapeshifting is a multifaceted concept that transcends code-switching, which often refers to the conscious modification of language or behavior to navigate social contexts. Shapeshifting, however, encapsulates a broader and more intricate spectrum of adaptation (McCluney et al., 2021). It entails shifts not only in race, ethnicity, and gender but also in socio-economic status, class, culture, and environmental influences. This process is deeply interwoven with one's core identity and represents a continual negotiation of the self across different contexts.

In the following autoethnographies, we explore the nuanced experiences of identity formation and the necessity of shapeshifting. These personal narratives offer insights into how individuals navigate and reconcile aspects of gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and origin. Through these stories, we shed light on the complexity of adapting to diverse environments and the critical role that shapeshifting plays in achieving both personal and communal success.

Narrative One (I'm Bahamian)

“Dum-Dum Dum-Dum Dum-Dum-Dum-Dum” echoes the rhythmic beat of the goat skin drum. Trumpets blare, cowbells jangle—a symphony that forms the heart and soul of our beloved rake ‘n’ scrape music. Dancers sway down Bay Street, adorned in costumes of crepe paper, glue, and cardboard. The crystal-clear, turquoise waters shimmer in the distance, mirroring the spirit and dreams of the Bahamian people. If you pause and listen, you can hear the tranquil sound of waves crashing against the rocks. The white (or pink) sand—depending on where you stand—feels heavenly underfoot. This is the Bahamas, where community thrives, close-knit and family oriented. As our slogan declares, “It is better in the Bahamas.”

Growing up here wasn't easy, but without this place, I wouldn't have shapeshifted into the person I am today. As an international student from the Bahamas, my cultural identity is deeply rooted in my heritage. From the funky rhythms of KB and Trez Hepburn to the fierce battles between the Saxons and Valley Boys on Bay Street, and conch salad from “under da dock,” this is what defines me as Bahamian.

I also take pride in my queerness, my resilience, and my creativity. In the Bahamas, I learned the importance of community at an early age. I saw firsthand how my community shaped my identity and raised me, along with the other kids in the neighborhood. But I knew early on that being queer would create challenges for me, so I hid that part of myself. America was supposed to be my chance for a fresh start—to live authentically. In 2015, gay marriage had finally become legal, and for the first time, I felt like happiness was within reach. Yet, things did not unfold as I had envisioned.

### **Adapting to New Environments**

In rural areas, value is often tied to one's family name and kinship. In metropolitan areas, however, it is more about socio-economic status, education level, and material possessions. Take, for example, William Ellis. Born a slave and later freed, Ellis became a millionaire who had homes in both Mexico City, where he was seen as American, and New York City, where he was viewed as Mexican (Spickard, 2022).

When I arrived in America in January 2016, I experienced snow for the first time—a thrill that quickly turned to disdain. Checked into room 1102 in Court Plaza Hall, this was where the person known as Vernajh began to take form. My initial weeks on campus were a cultural shock. Coming from a place where everyone greets one another in passing, I was startled by what seemed to be the rudeness of my peers. I quickly realized this wasn't the Bahamas, and I had to adjust.

My first significant challenge arose in the classroom. As a student eager to engage, I often responded to professors' questions. However, my Bahamian dialect and accent made it difficult for some to understand me. The constant questioning of whether English was my first language forced me to alter my speech, to slow down and eventually adopt an American accent. This was my first encounter with shapeshifting—certainly not my last.

### **Identity Negotiation**

Being queer added another layer to my shapeshifting. In certain spaces, usually male-dominated and heteronormative, I had to downplay my queerness to be heard. In other spaces, such as those dominated by women, I amplified my queerness to avoid being perceived as a threat. As Sophie Jones aptly states, "my queerness transforms me into the Other" (Jones, 2017). Constantly negotiating my identity, I navigated spaces where I hoped to fit in without losing myself entirely. Navigating my multiple identities—Bahamian, queer, international—has taught me that while adaptability is vital, compromising one's identity should not be the cost. Shapeshifting is a survival mechanism, but it also poses the danger of eroding authenticity. Learning to accept all aspects of oneself and finding spaces that celebrate, rather than tolerate, those identities is crucial.

Shapeshifting is not just about adapting to survive—it's about embracing the full spectrum of one's identity. It plays a pivotal role in achieving personal and communal thriving, but it requires spaces that value and respect all aspects of our being. Only then can individuals navigate the complexities of identity without diminishing themselves in the process.

### **Narrative Two (I'm country)**

Growing up in a small town with just three stoplights and a graduating class of 138, I had no idea how narrow my worldview was. My town, with Confederate flags waving proudly in front yards and the cheapest gas station called "Dixieland," seemed normal to me.

Black and brown families lived in the projects, colloquially known as the “Back Burner.” Despite not feeling offended or uncomfortable at the time, this environment shaped me in ways that I would later question—and that others would find offensive.

My hometown was not a place that welcomed me—it merely tolerated my existence. Without even realizing it, I had shapeshifted to survive. I adapted, blending into an environment that did not nurture my growth but saw me as a means to an end.

It wasn’t until I moved three hours away to attend graduate school at an HBCU that I understood how deeply disconnected I was from my Black identity. Suddenly, I was immersed in a culture where “Blackness” was celebrated openly. Chicken boxes were served in the cafeteria, spades was a game of fellowship, and your social status often revolved around your membership in one of the “Divine Nine” fraternities or sororities.

Instead of feeling a sense of belonging, I felt deeply out of place. My upbringing had created a false sense of identity. Although my race was Black, my mannerisms, knowledge, dialect, and worldview had been shaped by the predominantly white culture of my hometown. Spickard (2022) explains shapeshifting as the ability to transition between racial identities for various reasons, known or unknown. While race is a primary marker of identity, authenticity is equally important.

### **Adapting to HBCU Life**

Transitioning from a predominantly white small town to a Black-majority environment where prosperity was the norm among Black families created a stark contrast. It highlighted how little my race alone could define me, without the cultural and social cues that I had missed out on in my earlier years. My ability to shapeshift into different environments, without consciously trying, was due to the stark differences between the two worlds I had inhabited.

Spickard (2022) emphasizes that shapeshifting is not universally available. It is tied to the unique circumstances of migration, identity, and cultural adaptation. I found that my experiences, shaped by my earlier environment, had given me the ability to adapt, but also left me questioning my authenticity.

Navigating multiple identities provided growth and resilience but also led to dangerous levels of introspection. Muhammad Khalifa (2018) talks about leadership practices that create safe spaces for all identities. As I continue to navigate academic, professional, and social spaces, I am learning to celebrate all aspects of my identity—not as fragmented parts, but as essential pieces of who I am.

### **Narrative Three (I'm DC)**

Shapeshifting has always been a part of my identity. Growing up in one of Washington, D.C.'s toughest neighborhoods, I decided early on that I would not become a statistic. Shapeshifting was a survival skill for me, embedded in my DNA. I learned to present myself in ways that would get me ahead starting with how I appeared on paper.

My name, Nzinga, of African descent, holds deep meaning and pride. Yet, as a child, it was a source of embarrassment. My name was often mispronounced, with teachers and classmates alike struggling to say it correctly. To avoid the discomfort, I started using an alias— "Nikki"—when ordering pizza or registering for classes. This alias became my go-to identity. But it wasn't truly me. I often forgot to respond to "Nikki" because it wasn't my name—it was a mask I wore to fit in, to avoid the discomfort others had with my true identity.

### **Identity as a Coping Mechanism**

Reflecting on those experiences, I now realize that I engaged in shapeshifting to cope with imposter syndrome. Imposter syndrome is the internal belief that you are not as competent or knowledgeable as others and fear being exposed as a fraud (Flanagan et al., 2021; Pennie Sims, 2020; Peteet et al., 2015). This bias, particularly for Black women, can make us feel like we don't belong in spaces where our lived experiences are not respected or understood. I found confidence in my identity when I connected with other women of color who, like me, had beautiful and complex names. It wasn't until then that I stopped apologizing for who I was and embraced the fullness of my name and my identity.

### **Shapeshifting Without Compromising Identity**

Shapeshifting, while sometimes necessary for survival, should not come at the expense of our authentic selves. As Black women in academia, we must embrace our uniqueness—our names, our appearances, our voices—and not shrink ourselves to fit into spaces that were not designed for us. There is power in acceptance, both of ourselves and in the people, we surround ourselves with. As André De Shields once said, "Surround yourself with people whose eyes light up when they see you coming" (Copeland, 2024).

### **Conclusion**

Shapeshifting may be a necessary tool at times and for many reasons; however, one must avoid the potential to diminish your capacity to allow others around you to "shine." Claim your space or command respect by preparing yourself, being honest about your limitations, and having confidence in your abilities. Recognizing that for some no matter how well you conform to normalized standards of what a Black woman, man, or queer should be, how they should think, act, or appear will never be enough to just be. To exist while being yourself, your reality and constant companion must be the awareness that you are enough and that in itself is a state of being. The ability to shape shift extends far beyond this idea of adapting in the different spaces you are in.

Your autoethnographic insights profoundly illuminate the transformative power of identity confluence in fostering authentic self-expression. The emphasis on creating spaces where individuals, particularly those from minoritized backgrounds, can freely and fully manifest their diverse identities resonates deeply. This approach not only validates the multiplicity of personal experiences but also underscores the necessity of inclusive environments in facilitating genuine self-expression.

By advocating for such spaces, your work contributes significantly to our understanding of how identity confluence serves as a catalyst for personal and communal growth. It reflects an awareness of the nuanced ways in which individuals navigate their multifaceted identities and highlights the importance of environments that honor and accommodate these complexities. The ability to express various aspects of one's identity without compromise is crucial for personal well-being and empowerment. It allows individuals to engage with their communities more meaningfully and authentically, thereby enhancing collective empathy and solidarity. Your exploration of this theme emphasizes the need for continued advocacy and structural support in creating spaces where all identities are recognized and valued. This not only enriches individual experiences but also promotes a more inclusive and equitable society.

Shapeshifting can be a tool for resilience and adaptation, but it must not become a vehicle for diminishing our potential. We must find ways to claim our space and remain true to our identity. Recognizing that some spaces may never fully accept us is key to navigating these challenges. The ability to shapeshift, when embraced thoughtfully, allows us to navigate diverse environments with authenticity and pride—ultimately contributing to personal growth and fostering a more inclusive society.

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**CRUZANDO MUNDOS/CROSSING MULTIPLE WORLDS: EXAMINING THE POSSIBILITIES AND TENSIONS OF SHAPESHIFTING AS A CHICANA SCHOLAR**

**Jasmin Patrón-Vargas**

**Abstract**

Shapeshifting is a pre-colonial practice that stems from Black, Indigenous, and communities of color. While scholars have documented the cultural capital that communities of color hold, the practice of shapeshifting within the field of education has been understudied. Building on the ancestral traditions of communities of color, this article explores the concept of shapeshifting as it relates to negotiating one's fluid identities across space, place, and time. Specifically, I examine how space, place, and time shape my racialized and gendered experiences as a first-generation Chicana scholar and how shapeshifting serves as a navigational tool. Using Chicana/Latina feminist thought and testimonio, I explore two primary questions: 1) How have time, space, and place shaped my racialized and gendered experiences? and 2) In what ways does shapeshifting inform my ability to navigate/negotiate my identities across time, space, and place? I begin by briefly reviewing the literature on space, place, and time within the field of education. I then provide an overview of the concept of shapeshifting from a pre-colonial perspective and the theoretical concepts influencing this paper. I move on to highlighting core themes from my testimonios, including racist nativism, college sense of belonging, and socially constructed timelines. I conclude by discussing the tensions that arise from negotiating fluid identities and the possibility of shapeshifting to foster transformation in and beyond the academy.

**Keywords:** shapeshifting, race, gender, space, place, testimonio



### **Introduction**

*“Let’s stop importing Greek myths and the Western Cartesian split point of view and root ourselves within the mythological soils and soul of this continent” (Gloria Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 68).*

In the exploration of identity and experience, the concept of shapeshifting emerges as a profound and subversive practice rooted in traditions of Black, Indigenous, and communities of color. Despite its significance, shapeshifting remains understudied within the field of education. This paper honors these knowledge systems by delving into the potential of shapeshifting to produce bridges for fluid identities to co-exist across varying dimensions of space, place, and time. Specifically, I explore how spatial and temporal contexts shape my racialized, gendered, and linguistic experiences and how shapeshifting serves as a navigational tool. Using Chicana/Latina feminist thought and testimonio, I explore two primary questions: 1) How have time, space, and place shaped my racialized, gendered, and linguistic experiences? and 2) In what ways does shapeshifting inform my ability to navigate/negotiate my identities across time, space, and place? I begin by briefly reviewing the literature on space, place, and time within the field of education. I then provide an overview of the concept of shapeshifting from a pre-colonial perspective and the theoretical concepts influencing this paper. I move on to highlighting core themes from my testimonios. I conclude by discussing the tensions that arise from negotiating fluid identities and the possibility of shapeshifting to foster tenacity, wit, and power moves in and beyond the academy.

### **Race, Space, Place, and Time**

Over the last decades, scholars within the fields of geography, education, anthropology, urban studies, and sociology have begun analyzing the links between race and space, offering important insights into the manifestations of power and oppression within spaces (e.g., Bullard, 2007; Knowles, 2003; Woods & McKittrick, 2007). While definitions of space have been a point of contestation, Neely and Samura (2011) emphasize four key characteristics of space: contested, fluid and historical, relational and interactional, and infused with difference and equality. For instance, Harwood and colleagues (2018) study highlights the experiences of college students of color and how interactions largely inform their experiences on campus. Drawing from eleven focus groups and an online survey with more than 4,800 college students of color, their findings show that despite having multicultural spaces on campus, students of color experience racial hostility and exclusion on campus. Similarly, in a study of 24 Latinx teachers in South Carolina, Monreal (2012) found that teachers experience racism and hostility from colleagues and parents, who make immigration assumptions, stereotype Latinx students, and question the utility of Spanish classes. Together, these studies capture the spatially pervasive nature of racism across educational contexts.

Despite the growing number of studies analyzing space and race, Indigenous and decolonial scholars caution against settler colonial frames. Tuck and McKenzie (2014) describe settler colonialism as “a form of colonization in which outsiders come to land inhabited by Indigenous peoples and claim it as their own new home” (p. 59). Through a settler colonial lens, definitions of land are replaced by Western definitions of space (Barker, 2005; Grande, 2004). For example, Tuck and McKenzie (2014) point out that maps, while a useful tool in spatial analyses are a product of settler colonialism and, therefore, a potentially problematic spatial tool. For this reason, Indigenous and decolonial researchers argue that for examinations of space to challenge systems of oppression truly, scholars must attend to Indigenous histories of places and the ongoing process of colonization (Greenwood, 2009; Seawright, 2014; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

More recently, explorations of race and time have gained increased attention. Through these explorations, questions about the role that time, as a hegemonic instrument, plays in reproducing racial inequities have taken center (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). One approach taken in education is through the examination of capitalism and neoliberalism in higher education. Shahjahan (2015), for example, examines the link between temporality and academia. According to Shahjahan, concepts like the “tenure clock” are another instrument to control faculty of color. He argues that a reconceptualization of these concepts is necessary if we wish to work against modern forms of coloniality. Other scholars have explored the relationship between time and education to challenge neoliberal practices of testing and accountability in education. Specifically, Clark’s (2015) work offers an important look at the pressures in early childhood and care for children to be “readied” for the next stage. She urges us to consider practices that prioritize outdoor education, stories, and everyday routines.

The literature reviewed in this section highlights the intricate relationship between race, space, place, and time, revealing racialized dynamics in spatial contexts that perpetuate racial inequity. Still, decolonial scholars call attention to examinations of land. More recently, scholars in education have begun to explore the intersection between race and time. Collectively, these studies underscore the urgency of attending to spatial and temporal dimensions in understanding and challenging systemic oppression. In this paper, I extend this discourse by examining how space, place, and time shape my racial, gendered, and linguistic experiences.

- *I use Latinx instead of ‘Latina’ or ‘Latino’ is an attempt at inclusivity that acknowledges gender fluid identities.*

### Theoretical Framework

The concept of shapeshifting is rooted in Black, Indigenous and minoritized knowledge systems. For example, in Mesoamerican communities, naguals were believed to possess the ability to transform into animals. Similarly, within African traditions, shamans or spiritual leaders were believed to transform into animals to communicate with spirits, access different realms, or exert healing influences. Across these two knowledge systems was the belief that humans and the natural world are interconnected. In this way, animals were regarded as powerful spiritual entities. The rise of Christianity, however, deemed Indigenous and Black knowledge systems and spiritual practices as primitive and invalid. According to Western constructions, these spiritual practices were “superstitious” and demonic. As a result, these knowledge systems and practices were prohibited.

In this paper, I explore how shapeshifting provides a medium from which to negotiate multiple identities and navigate different contexts. I define shapeshifting as a pre-colonial practice that offers “metaphorical and physical transformation” (Aguilar, 2023, p. 95). To guide this work, I draw on spirit research. While spirit research is multifaceted, I specifically use Chicana/Latina frameworks rooted in spiritualities, including nepantla, *conocimiento* (consciousness), and spirit praxis. These concepts are primarily found in the fields of Chicanx/Latinx studies, cultural studies, and queer and gender studies.

A key feature of this work is a reclamation of the mindbodyspirit split. Contrary to Western constructions of knowledge, Latina spiritualities scholars argue that the mindbodyspirit is connected and a valid form of knowledge. This perspective is echoed in *Light in the Dark*, where Anzaldúa and Keating (2015) delve into the journey toward greater consciousness and other dimensions of reality. Using Mesoamerican practices and knowledge, such as *curanderismo* and *nagualismo*, they propose an alternative perspective of seeing reality, one in which reality and imagination meet. They argue that when we embody the spirit as a methodology of resistance against colonization, we can attain “spiritual activism” or a deep sense of *conocimiento* that pieces back the mindbodyspirit split.

Building on the work of Anzaldúa and other Chicana/Latina scholars, Zepedas’s (2022) recent book *Queering Mesoamerican Diasporas* traces queer Indigena knowledge systems and histories as an act of recovering Indigenous histories, practices and “calling our spirits back” (p. 12). Through an exploration of archival materials, ceremonial altars and decolonial artwork, and oral histories she showcases the legacy of queer Indigena cultural producers and Chicana feminist thinkers. Her work offers an important contribution to spirit research by proposing the recognition of spirit praxis as a site or path to consciousness.

At the core of these works, alongside others by various authors (e.g., Irene Lara, Norell Martínez, Vanessa Valdés, and Christina Garcia Lopez), lies a direct resistance to Eurocentric knowledge systems that prioritize linear modes of knowledge production and time. I use the concepts of *nepantla*, *conocimiento*, and *spirit praxis* to demonstrate that shapeshifting is a valid form of knowledge rooted in ancestral knowledge systems and practices of survivance.

### Methodology

To explore the process of negotiating my fluid identities via the concept of shapeshifting, I draw on *testimonio*. *Testimonio* is both a methodology and pedagogy with roots in Latin America (Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012). *Testimonio* is a method of storytelling that documents “life experiences – of struggle, of hope, of resistance, and of joy” (Pérez Huber & Aguilar-Tinajero, 2024, p. 1274) and connects them to a shared experience of a group. A key feature of *testimonio*, then, is connecting individual stories to a broader narrative of injustice for the sake of action and transformation (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). Within education, *testimonios* have been used to contribute to existing knowledge around educational issues that specifically affect Latinx communities (Burciaga & Erbstein, 2012; DeNicolo et al., 2015; Elenes, 2020; Fernández, 2016; Flores Carmona, 2018). For example, Dutro and Haberl (2018) conducted a close reading of written *testimonios* with second-grade students of Latinx descent. Their findings highlight students’ identities surrounding immigration and sociopolitical stances. Similarly, Abril-Gonzales (2020) examined Latinx youth’s *testimonio* and poems tied to immigration. The results reveal tensions in school contexts related to immigration status, access, and vulnerability. Overall, *testimonios*, as a pedagogical tool in research, have validated students’ stories and exposed social issues affecting newcomer youth (DeNicolo & González, 2015; Dutro & Haberl, 2018).

As a form of storytelling, I employ *testimonio* to theorize from my lived experiences in order to inform my epistemology and re/construct knowledge (Carmona & Luciano, 2014). The research questions guiding this paper are: (1) How have space, place, and time shaped my racialized, gendered, and linguistic experiences? and (2) In what ways does shapeshifting inform my ability to navigate/negotiate my identities across time, space, and place? While different modes of communication exist within a *testimonio* methodology, including verbal, written, performance, film, and music (Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012), I draw on written reflections based on a prompt (See Figure 1). In the following sections, I share excerpts from these reflections to highlight three core themes.

#### Driving Testimonio Prompt

- Describe a moment or situation in your childhood or adolescence when you shapeshifted. What prompted this act? What emotions/feelings did it evoke for you?
- What does shapeshifting mean to you?
- What role has/does shapeshifting play[ed] in your academic experiences and beyond?

**Driving Testimonio Prompt**  
**Cruzando Mundos (Crossing Multiple Worlds)**

In her seminal work, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa writes about *nepantla*, an Aztec (Mexican) concept. She explains that *nepantla* is an experience of navigating multiple, overlapping, and sometimes colliding social identities. I use *nepantla* to describe the process of crossing multiple mundos (worlds) and negotiating multiple identities across spatial and temporal contexts. These experiences led to *nuevos caminos of conocimiento* (new streams of consciousness). In the following subsections, I share excerpts from my testimonios, which highlight themes of race, language, sense of belonging, and gender.

**Ni de Aquí, ni de Allá**

My parents emigrated from Guerrero, Mexico to Chicago, Illinois. The first language I learned was Spanish. My parents ensured my siblings and I learned to read, write, and speak Spanish. I was proud of my ability to seamlessly roll my r's, "caRRRRo!" After all, I was raised in the *barrio* (neighborhood) of La Villita, where the majority of the residents spoke Spanish. My ability to communicate easily changed when I attended school for the first time at five. I attended my local public school, which was two blocks from our family home. Although the student composition mainly consisted of youth of Latinx descent, I quickly learned that if I wanted to be successful in school, I needed to learn English. My teachers spoke English in class, and all the school assignments were in English. My classmates also formed cliques, often based on one's proximity to whiteness. In other words, if you spoke English well, you could hang out with the cool kids, but if you did not speak English or had an accent, you were labeled a "beaner." I was divided between two worlds. At school, I spoke primarily English, but at home, I spoke Spanish. From this moment forward, I understood that I needed to negotiate my multiple identities as an emergent bilingual.

**Going to College**

My ability to shapeshift is rooted in the process of negotiating my fluid identities. That is, crossing or stepping into multiple worlds and developing the tools, skills, and attributes to adapt to new or old world(s). As I got older, the teachings that shapeshifting afforded me became more nuanced. By the time I graduated high school, I had amassed a growing number of identities and skills. Attending college, however, brought a new layer of *conocimiento* and identity. I attended a large, research-intensive university in my home state, only two and a half hours away from home. I was static. I had reviewed their pamphlets, plastered with images of diverse groups of students. I also had relatives and acquaintances who attended the university, and I was eager to gain the same independence they exuded. My excitement, however, quickly grew into apprehension.

I arrived on campus with my parents, who were just as stoked as I was. Their dream of their children becoming college graduates was becoming a reality; I was the last of my siblings to seal this dream. However, as we unloaded my dorm items, I felt a sense of discomfort. Everything seemed so unfamiliar. Most buildings featured neutral colors and seemed to be named after a White man. I felt out of place. This tension only grew larger when I attended my first classes. My political science classes were large, daunting, and dominated by White men. As a first-generation working-class Chicana from the barrio, I had difficulty relating to them. My interest in political science slowly declined, and I failed a class for the first time in my educational trajectory. I felt like a fraud. Indeed, I could continue shapeshifting, but at what cost?

I sought out opportunities that provided a sense of belonging at the university. I left my political science major and double majored in Gender and Women Studies and Latina/o/x Studies, where I became radicalized. My studies allowed me to validate my experiences and draw connections to more significant social issues. I also participated in multicultural events and research programs on campus that supported minoritized students. Through these experiences, I understood I did not have to leave behind who I was. Sure, I crossed multiple mundos daily. This time, however, I reconciled my identities. I left college still a first-generation working-class Chicana from the barrio of La Villita, but I developed a newfound ability to navigate spaces of power and contestation tactfully.

### **Tick Tock**

It is not uncommon for Mexican-descended women to receive questions like, “¿Cuándo te vas a casar? (when are you getting married?)” or “¿Cuándo vas a tener hijos? (when are you going to have children?)” As the youngest sibling, I learned about the “marriage and biological clock” before I was even old enough to conceive a child. I attended a family gathering with my parents and siblings, and a family friend, who was single in her late 20s, arrived after us. As she conversed with family members, they asked her if she planned to marry. Nervously, she laughed it off and moved on to another topic. Although I did not have the language to describe the situation then, I felt a strong sense of unease from her. The belief was/is that if you wait(ed) too long to marry, you will have infertility and die alone. Sooner than later, I, too, received the question. While I could avoid family interrogations due to my long years in school, it was not long before new socially constructed timelines or “clocks” were on the horizon. The “tenure clock” will soon begin ticking. In 2023, I began a tenure-track position. From the moment I started my position, it weighed on me that the biological clock was not the only clock ticking. The “tenure clock,” or the six- or seven-year probationary period in which tenure-track faculty are expected to develop robust research agendas, was now in full effect. I recognized that if I wanted to have children, I must now cope with the stress of meeting the biological and tenure clock.

### **Reflexiones (Reflections)**

The testimonios I share in this paper illuminate the complex process of shapeshifting. That is, navigating and negotiating multiple identities across spatial and temporal contexts. While my unique stories highlight my experiences, the themes in this paper are not isolated issues. They speak to broader discourses surrounding Latinx communities, college sense of belonging, and women in academia.

My experiences in school underscore the enduring resistance against languages other than English within educational settings. My educational experiences in elementary school reflect what race scholar Linday Pérez Huber calls racist nativism. As she explains, racist nativism describes the assigning of values to real or imagined differences in order to justify the superiority of the native, who is perceived to be White, over that of the non-native, who is perceived to be People and Immigrants of Color, and thereby defend the native's right to dominance (Pérez Huber et al., 2008, p. 81).

Within Latinx communities, the narrative of racist nativism stems from a long-standing history of xenophobia and linguicism (Cardenas Curiel & Durán, 2021). Historically, state institutions enforced English-only policies, forcing Latinx students to abandon their native language(s) (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999). While overt resistance to languages other than English has diminished, my experiences reveal subtle yet pervasive messages of linguistic hegemony within educational settings (Flores, 2016). From classroom posters to the assignments I received, I learned that my first language was undervalued in school. Additionally, manifestations of white supremacy were replicated by students, who internalized these narratives. Interactions among students demonstrated internalized racism, in which students of Mexican descent bullied other Mexican students. Research shows that it is not uncommon for students to dissociate themselves from social markers that are subordinate (Bedolla, 2003; Santiago & Patrón-Vargas, 2019). Thus, the operationalization of racist nativist ideologies was perpetuated through school interactions.

My experiences in college also shed light on the pervasive racial and gendered dynamics embedded within educational institutions. Research indicates that students' sense of belonging is intricately tied to spatial factors (Hardwood et al., 2018; Soria & Mitchell, 2015). Similarly, my experiences in college illustrate the influence of campus environments (e.g., academic buildings) to foster or hinder students' sense of belonging. The physical space, including the names of buildings and photos of White alums, reflected a culture of white supremacy. My struggle to feel a sense of belonging on campus was further compounded by patriarchy. As a woman of color in the male-dominated field of political science, it was normal for my male counterparts to receive more attention in class. Therefore, spatial experiences are not only imbued with racist undertones but reinforce ideas and beliefs about gender.

Finally, my experiences across different temporal dimensions illustrate how dominant structures and norms continue to influence women's lives. In my testimonio, I write about the added pressures to cross socially imposed timelines, particularly concerning biological and tenure expectations. While discussions around the biological clock may seem commonplace, the narrative of the biological clock serves as another tool to regulate and limit women's life experiences. As scholars have noted, the biological clock shapes women's reproductive experiences by dictating when "it is possible and desirable to have children" (Yopo Diaz, 2020, p. 775). Through this narrative, women view the biological clock as linear and irreversible, placing strict 'deadlines' on women's life paths. The burden does not end there for women pursuing academic careers on the tenure track. The tenure clock, as I highlight in my testimonio, adds further stress. According to Shahjahan (2015), the tenure clock is problematic in that it prioritizes "mind-intellect over the body-spirit" (p. 494), leading to the dislodging of the mind-body-spirit. Taken together, these biological and tenure clocks perpetuate dominant beliefs about women in academia.

### Conclusion

Although my experiences of exclusion brought painful memories, there lies beauty in nepantla. As Anzaldúa explains, nepantla – a space for those living on the margins between multiple worlds – can be a productive source for transformation. Through the process of shapeshifting, I have unearthed new streams of conocimiento that have shaped my epistemologies and pedagogies. As a navigational tool, shapeshifting has enabled me to critically examine the everchanging world, profoundly influencing my epistemologies and awareness of structures of power. As a teacher educator committed to a holistic approach, I also recognize that each student entering my classroom carries their own set of identities, experiences, needs, and assets. This understanding guides my practice, in which I create opportunities for students to share life stories in the classroom. Embracing nepantla alongside Anzaldúa invites us to step into new realms where diverse perspectives converge to reshape our understanding of identity, knowledge, and transformation.

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**STANDING ON BUSINESS: BLACK WOMEN EDUCATORS' STRUGGLES AND TRIUMPHS IN  
ACADEMIC SETTINGS**

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In a powerful and infuriating scene from cinematic history, Black NASA mathematician Katherine Johnson (portrayed by Taraji P. Henson) displays anger, defiance, resilience, and poise as she explains to her white male superior, Al Harrison (portrayed by Kevin Costner), why it takes her so long to use the restroom each day. In this scene, she describes to her white superior that each day, she has to trek a half-mile, on foot, to the “Colored” women’s bathroom because there are no restrooms for her in the building where she works. This revelation opens up her floodgates (as she stands soaking wet from her hike through the rain), and she expounds upon the additional indignities she experiences daily at NASA. From low pay to being overworked to being ostracized by her colleagues as they refuse to use the same coffee pot as her, she essentializes her second-class position in one of the most esteemed industries. After this revelation, her oblivious boss immediately takes it upon himself to relieve her of these indignities by eradicating the physical barrier of “Colored” and “White” restrooms and “Colored” and “White” coffee pots. Though fictional, this scene epitomizes the intersections of blackness and womanhood in a world made for whiteness and maleness (Silman, 2017).

However, unlike this poignant scene, Black women in hostile and racist work environments don’t have a fictional white savior like Al Harrison (Kevin Costner) to come through with his proverbial crowbar and break down the racial and sexist opposition they are contending with each day. In reality, Black women are instead contorting into mock versions of themselves and shapeshifting to survive the demands that a racist, sexist, and anti-black society has placed on them (Gee, 2004). For Black and female educators, this shift in shape has lasted for centuries and often defines us in conflicting ways in which we are strong yet seen as overly aggressive or resilient yet lacking in self-care (Moody & Lewis, 2019; Williams & Lewis, 2019; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). This often mental, physical, and psychological contorting of our authentic selves shape our experiences and well-being in complex and multifaceted manners within various sectors of education.

Black women, who make up only 7% of public school teachers in the United States (Taie & Lewis, 2022), are encouraged to enter various educational settings and institutions where they can succeed and influence students. In higher education, Black women comprise 5% of junior faculty, yet only 2% of tenured professors (Connor, 2022; Williams-June & O’Leary, 2021). Though their numbers are abysmal in these settings of learning, Black women experience heightened levels of exclusion, are targeted, challenged, often stifled, silenced, misunderstood, and exposed to a conglomerate of racial acts, microaggressions, power struggles, and discrimination (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007; Farinde et al., 2016; Ramdeo, 2023; Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2020).

Despite all of this, Black women are powerful beings, almost superhero-like in their essence, yet at what cost does this power impact their social, emotional, and physical well-being?

Essentially, these experiences lead Black women to contend with overcoming the positive and negative effects of the Superwoman Schema (SWS) (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2003; Knighton et al., 2022). Within this framework, the cultural expectations and societal pressures placed on Black women to be resilient, strong, and self-sacrificing all at once put immense pressure on them to shape themselves into dispositions that can withstand such complexities of the racialization of the spaces, places, and times in which they occupy (Morrison et al., 2017; Neely & Samura, 2011). As educators, these instances also shape Black women's pedagogical experiences through their triumphs, identities, pliability, resourcefulness, and restraints. While navigating through perplexing school settings on all levels, Black women show and continue to show their multifaceted abilities to endure, withstand, and overcome racial and gender inequities within schools. Even still, they continue standing on business.

In this piece, we highlight the experiences and perspectives of five Black women educators through a series of inquiries. This study explores the experiences of Black women educators from the PK-12 to higher education settings. Utilizing autoethnography as a qualitative method (Butz & Besio, 2009; Obaizamomwan-Hamilton & Jenkins, 2024), this study allowed researchers to work together in centering their voices and prioritizing exploring their lived experiences, expressing how Black women educators faced challenges, advocated for others, overcame oppression, and shared stereotypes and expectations. The researchers employ the Superwoman Schema framework, and our analyses show how Black women educators progress through teaching and educational environments, identifying significant themes of identity, duty to demonstrate strength, determination to achieve success, responsibility to assist others and the health issues that arose. Reflected in the experiences of each participant, we as Black women educators, share our stories to inform more inclusive, equitable, and healing practices within P-12 and higher educational settings. We lead this inquiry by asking three predominate research questions:

- How do Black women educators understand their identity and personal experiences in challenging racial environments within educational spaces?
- What insights do educational researchers gain about Black women educators through a collaborative autoethnographic research approach?
- What thoughts do Black women educators share about their teaching experiences, and what keeps them motivated?

## Literature Review

### Black Women Educators

Although Black teachers are a minority within the teaching profession, research highlights the numerous advantages Black teachers bring to the classroom (Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Cherng & Halpin, 2016; Gershenson et al., 2022). One significant area where Black teachers excel is in their cultural relevance (Gay, 2002; James-Gallaway & Harris, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Ladson-Billings (1995) advocates for integrating culture within pedagogy to provide equitable opportunities for students of color. This approach emphasizes the importance of caring for students, drawing on their prior cultural knowledge, and respecting and learning from their cultural backgrounds (Camangian, 2010; Esposito & Swain, 2009; Gay, 2010; Hollins, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999). Black teachers often have a profound understanding of the cultural contexts and experiences that resonate with Black students, enhancing instruction, student engagement, and classroom climate. This cultural competency enables them to create environments that validate students' identities and contribute to the socio-emotional development of all students (Goings & Bianco, 2016; Henderson et al., 2018; Jackson et al., 2014). Additionally, Black teachers serve as powerful role models and influencers for Black students, offering representation and encouragement for both personal and academic success (Cholewa et al., 2014; Decker et al., 2007; Egalite & Kisida, 2017; Egalite et al., 2015; Harrell-Levy et al., 2016). Lastly, Black teachers often have strong connections to the communities in which their students reside, fostering positive relationships between the school and families (Cooper, 2009). For centuries Black women such as Septima Clark, Charlotte Forten Grimke, Mary McLeod Bethune, among others, have played integral roles in shaping positive schooling experiences for not only Black students, but all students (Dillard, 2021; Love, 2019). Black women's liberatory stances within education are often at the helm of these contexts and stem from their overlapping and intersectional epistemological vantage points as Black women educators (Coles & Stanley, 2021).

Intersectionality is a framework proposed by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to conceptualize how individuals with multiple marginalized identities experience discrimination. In proposing what she describes as "compounding discrimination," or "double-discrimination," the individual within a social or political group experiences discrimination that is not based on one characteristic (e.g., race, gender, nationality, religion) (Crenshaw, 1989). Within the field of education, intersectionality helps us to understand how Black female educators' experiences with mistreatment and discrimination are distinctly different from their predominantly white female teaching counterparts and even the experiences of Black male teachers. Black female educators exist in spaces where their identities (e.g., professional, social, political) interact with systems that reinforce gendered norms serving white women, contend with micro and macro aggressions, and diminish their formal training (Harris & Leonardo, 2018). These identities are undervalued and "consistently treated as marginal or invisible" (Harris & Leonardo, 2018), illuminating the complex nature of power in social systems where the individuals experiencing discrimination are viewed as subordinates.

The experiences of Black women educators have been historically unique and complex (Bruce-Golding, 2020; Watson, 2017). In the same education system that has denied Black women—due to their intersectionality of race and gender—access to the fundamental rights of an American education, Black women have been expected to provide a quality education to others (Owens, 2022). Carrying the weight of education for others on their backs—since the Reconstruction era to the present day—Black women have worked tirelessly to hold up an educational system that literally and metaphorically holds them back (Fenwick, 2022). Despite the oppressive conditions Black women face in educational spaces, they continuously show up and perform what scholar Jacqueline Jones (1985) refers to as a labor of love, a labor of sorrow. The experiences of Black women educators are deeply complex. In a system where their identities, lived experiences, and humanity have been overlooked, they continue to show up because they understand that, particularly when it comes to the education of Black children, their presence is essential. There is an exhaustive amount of literature on the experiences of Black women in education that attest to the reality that Black women educators have meaningfully impacted various sectors of education at the expense of themselves (Acosta, 2019; Collier-Thomas, 1982; Fenwick, 2022; Samuels et al., 2021). However, despite the existing scholarship, Black women educators are still forced to show up—mask on and cape flowing—for the greater good of others.

Black women educators experience a mental and psychological toll due to their racialized experiences, which include the ongoing confrontation of negative stereotypes such as the argumentative, the attitudinal, the mammy, and the Jezebel (Pizarro & Kohli, 2020; Thomas, 2022). They exist in professional situations where their competence and expertise are challenged, and they are treated as if their cultural identity (e.g., Blackness) must be erased for them to be seen, valued, or recognized. For example, Pizarro and Kohli's (2018) study found that Black women's ability to leverage cultural capital and foster positive relationships with families and students was undervalued in schools, stating that "despite her many strengths and deep connection to the community, the administration never positioned her as a resource or a potential leader in the school" (p. 2). Acosta (2019) builds upon this, citing that highly qualified Black women educators are often relinquished to the margins in schools and are constantly placed in positions to prove their competence due to racialized and gendered negative stereotypes in schools. Farinde et al. (2016) cited multiple ways Black women educators felt unsupported by their school leaders, such as carrying an increased workload and failing to follow through on school policies.

Similarly, Peters and Nash (2021) discuss the stretching thin of Black women who often balance many roles in schools, advocating for underserved students' needs and being asked to bear additional responsibilities. Through an "intersectionality" lens, these compounded experiences with discrimination can impact their ability to be fairly evaluated and earn promotion (Campbell, 2023; Dixson & Dingus, 2008; Lisle-Johnson & Kohli, 2020; Viano et al, 2023).

For example, Campbell (2023) found that when Black women and white women were “similarly effective” in schools, Black women received lower professional ratings. These studies reveal how race and gender interact with school-based experiences for Black women, which have implications for retention and sustainability in the field. The racialized and gendered contexts in which Black women educators exist within, although not new, are lacking in understanding of the impacts residing in such spaces has on Black women educators mental, physical, and psychological health. Specifically, Black teacher burnout and its nuances need further examination. More research is needed to unpack how these educational contexts are internalized by Black women educators so that healing and redeeming solutions can be brought forth.

### **Black Teacher Burnout**

Black teacher burnout is an increasingly pressing issue within educational settings (Williams et al., 2023). Shaped by a unique set of challenges that disproportionately affect Black educators, these challenges can include but are not limited to: systemic racism, isolation in predominantly white institutions, inequitable workloads, and the emotional toll of advocating for marginalized learners (Milner, 2020). Additionally, Black women educators are often faced with the burden of being the face of racial equity in schools all while navigating such inequities for themselves. These factors contribute to higher levels of stress, emotional exhaustion, and concerning attrition rates for Black educators. Calls for systemic change and greater support are long overdue.

Black women educators often face a dual burden of racism and sexism, which can lead to increased stress and burnout. They navigate complex dynamics in predominantly white institutions, where they may feel isolated or undervalued. Williams et al. (2023) investigation through a phenomenological approach captures the differential expectations Black teachers experience. According to Williams III, Turner, Terry, Fontenot, and Richardson (2023), Black teachers experience unique challenges that can lead to either radical healing or burnout. Milner (2020) highlights the unfair, troubling, unrealistic, and controlling environments Black women educators contend with. He found that Black women educators are expected to be experts on everything, carry extra work loads without compensation, and expected to go along with practices their white counterparts deem suitable even if they do not agree. A refusal to agree with unfair or inequitable practices leads them to be labeled as not a “team player.” Mahatmya et al. (2022) reports that climate is a major factor in Black teacher burnout and attrition rates. Schools unwilling to discuss or acknowledge the race-based discrimination factors experienced by Black women educators lead to greater burnout among them.

Addressing Black teacher burnout requires a multifaceted approach that acknowledges the systemic barriers contributing to this crisis. Prioritizing the overall well-being of Black women educators will not only reduce burnout but also alleviate the accompanying health disparities that often result from chronic stress, added responsibilities, and overwork. This approach should include policy reforms that address inequities in pay, workload, and professional support, as well as creating culturally affirming school environments that are free of bias.

Additionally, providing access to mental health resources, mentorship programs, and spaces for self-care can help Black educators feel valued and supported. Ultimately, investing in the overall well-being of Black teachers is an investment in their health and longevity and the academic success and cultural enrichment of the students they serve.

### **Superwoman & Mammy**

Black women educators bear the heavy load of decades-long discrimination layered with gendered mistreatment (Farinde-Wu et al, 2020). They are often subject to systemic biases, and professional challenges that differ from those experienced by white female teachers or Black males (Farinde-Wu et al, 2020; Milner, 2020; Rauscher & Wilson, 2017). Black women are positioned “in ways that reflect negative stereotypical images” despite their credentials, qualifications, or success with students (Acosta, 2019). Ladson-Billings (2009) discussed limiting stereotypical representations of Black women such as the “Sapphire,” a woman who is masculine, aggressive, or overbearing. Others characterizations include the Mammy, a faithful servant with no complaints, caring for others while depleting the needs of herself. In Acosta’s (2019) findings, exemplary Black women educators were held to unreasonable expectations and existed within a “paradox” of being a Mammy and a Superhero in schools. In the role of superhero, they were expected to go above and beyond for both colleagues and students while taking on multiple responsibilities without proper compensation. But, as a Mammy, they were expected to be team players, even in midst of mistreatment and discrimination. These characterizations provide lenses from which Black women are perceived in professional spaces, leading to “bias” in evaluations which can ultimately impact career advancement (Acosta, 2019). Furthermore, these unrealistic expectations and negative perceptions lead to extreme exhaustion and contribute to Black women leaving the field of education (Farinde-Wu et al 2020; Milner, 2020).

Research has found that racial discrimination is linked to negative health outcomes (Williams et al., 2019). For Black women educators experiencing daily racialized stressors, there are harmful effects on their well-being, such as exhaustion (Milner, 2020), stress, and overall burnout (Rauscher & Wilson, 2017). One area of exhaustion for Black women educators is having to wear a “mask” as a form of protection from “psychologically damaging” workplace conditions, creating a shield so as not to be taken advantage of (Rauscher & Wilson, 2017). In Rauscher & Wilson’s (2017) study of occupational stressors in the field of education, Black female teachers reported that school administrators did not give them course assignment preferences. This was notably different than White female teachers, who “repeatedly described themselves as “lucky” in terms of the classes they taught, their students, and their jobs overall” (p. 224). Additionally, Black women educators were often overloaded and stretched thin, with larger classes, often with students needing much more intensive support. Both White and Black women educators in this study reported that managing students' behavior and responding to discipline issues were stressors.



However, Black women educators viewed these problems as a result of societal issues, while White women viewed undesirable student behaviors as personal assaults against them. White women were also cited as having more opportunities to raise concerns and be heard, while Black women did not have the same receptiveness from school leaders. Similarly, in Edwards's study (2024), Black teachers' work environments were found to be vastly different than their White counterparts; they were often staffed in schools with fewer resources in high-needs, urban schools and earned less compensation, even with substantial teaching expertise and tenure. As a result of their school environments, these findings reveal that Black women educators are dealing with the "physical and emotional consequences" of being worn down over time in their working environments.

### **Theoretical Framework**

When attempting to understand the similar and unique experiences of Black women educators, the researchers desired a theoretical framework that makes sense of Black women's historical and social experiences in America and how such experiences shape how Black women navigate the world from the inside out. Because the education system forces women—especially Black women—to show up in the same manner they would in the domestic realm—as nurturers and othermothers—it was important for the researchers to understand how Black women are forced to navigate the act of balancing stress and strength and the overall impact this daily balancing act has on the social, emotional, cultural, mental, and physical well-being (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Samuels et al., 2021). Using Woods-Giscombe's (2010) theoretical framework of Superwoman Schema (SWS) as a guide, the researchers could understand how Black women's struggles and triumphs in academic settings impacted their overall health and well-being.

The Superwoman Schema Framework expounds on the research conducted on the "Strong Black Woman" or "Superwoman" role and the impact these forced identities have on Black women's health (Beauboeuf-LaFontant, 2009; Black, 2008; Hamilton-Mason et al., 2009; Mullings, 2006; Romero, 2000; Thomas et al., 2004). Navigating years of degrading stereotypes such as the Mammy, Jezebel, and Strong Black Woman, Black women have been forced to exist in society with an extra dose of resilience and strength needed to defend themselves while saving others. However, even the strongest often struggle to survive. Because saving others while saving themselves has become the second responsibility of Black women, it is common for Black women to normalize or disregard the mental and physical impact of constantly feeling the need to be strong and the emotional stress that comes with this daily struggle, as a normal part of life for Black women (Nelson et al., 2024).

Woods-Giscombe's (2010) framework is beneficial for identifying characteristics of the Superwoman role that might go overlooked or disregarded. As such, SWS helps understand and identify the characteristics of a Superwoman, the contextual factors surrounding the Superwoman complex, and the perceived benefits and liabilities of this forced identity. Overall, the Superwoman role can be characterized by the obligation to manifest strength and suppress emotions. Moreover, it can also be seen as the resistance to being vulnerable, dependent—or “weak”—in the eyes of others (Woods-Giscombe, 2010). Black women have to put their capes on despite limited resources available to them. They are determined to succeed while helping others do the same (Woods-Giscombe, 2010). This need to be the backbone for themselves, their families, and their communities is a direct result of Black women feeling a sense of neglect and abandonment from people and institutions designed to protect them (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007; Thomas et al., 2004). As Woods-Giscombe (2010) breaks down, the historical forcing of Black women to be the “mules of the world”—even in education—has resulted in this need for Black women to feel as if they have to depend on themselves because they cannot depend on others (Porcher & Austin, 2021). Furthermore, because Black women have likely witnessed the struggling and suppressed emotions of their foremothers, they have inherited these traits with pride and responsibility.

When wearing the cape of Superwoman—in the eyes of Black women—there are some perceived benefits for “having it all together.” But, as Newton’s third law reminds us, there is an equal and opposite reaction for every action. While Black women can “hold their own” and carry their families and communities on their backs without the assistance or support from others, there are liabilities that come with this “benefit.” Assuming responsibility for everything around you results in having no capacity to care for yourself or the things vital to you. As Woods-Giscombe describes in her SWS study, interpersonal relationships, stress-related health behaviors, and the embodiment of stress are direct results of Black women carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders. Eventually, something will give, and what goes first is the mental and physical well-being of the Black woman—and likely everything else attached to her existence.

While Woods-Giscombe research—and associated scholarship—seeks to understand the experiences of Black women through a medical lens, the Superwoman Framework can transform the education profession by providing a new vantage point for understanding how Black women educators show up in their respective capacities. Giving name to how Black women exist and survive in educational spaces can benefit future research on this phenomenon as well as inform educational stakeholders interested in responding to the needs of educators from marginalized communities in culturally relevant ways. When the Black woman wins, society wins. Nevertheless, first, we must seek to understand the lived experiences of Black women educators and what they need from others to do more than just survive (Love, 2019).

## Methods

This study aims to explore the multifaceted experiences of Black American women in academic settings, particularly focusing on the Superwoman role. This type of inquiry is essential to understanding our unique challenges and strengths, who often navigate multiple responsibilities and societal expectations. Using collaborative autoethnography, we can capture the depth and complexity of our experiences, providing rich, detailed insights. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how we perceive our roles, the contextual factors influencing them, and the advantages and disadvantages they encounter.

### The Black Women Educators (Participants)

The survey yielded five responses (n=5). We identify as a Black woman, educator, and life-long learner and range from 27 to 47 years old. We have educational classroom experiences ranging from 4 to 16 years. We also either have a terminal degree or are completing a professional degree. Table 1 lists us by name, age, teaching experience, and level taught by educator.

**Table 1. Black Women Educators**

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Years of K-12 Teaching Experience</i>	<i>Level of teaching</i>
Elissa	47	13 years of classroom teaching	High school, Elementary school
Salandra	42	10 years of classroom teaching	Elementary, Primary
Virginia	40	16 years of classroom teaching	Elementary, Middle school
Alexes	38	10 years of classroom teaching	High school
Maiya	27	4 years of classroom teaching	High school

### Elissa

Elissa's advanced academic abilities early on in grade school, which placed her ahead of her peers, subjected her to the complexities of being different among fellow students and teachers. In the public school environment of an urban adjacent suburb, she encountered difficulties as some teachers singled her out for her intelligence. When she was selected to read to other classes, take tests outside of the traditional testing setting, or brought out of the classroom to visit upper-grade levels, Elissa's teachers would speak to her in a condescending way. These actions told her that she was doing something wrong by simply existing as a high-achieving student. Despite these adversities, she later pursued a career in education, opting to teach in urban schools where she instructed various classes. Once, Elissa began teaching, she encountered a double-standard from her peers who often looked to her for guidance on backwards instructional planning, teaching using differentiated approaches, and using technology in innovative ways. These same teachers who ask for, used, and repurposed her well-developed resources, did not give due credit or recognize her contributions. And when she elevated her concerns, she was told by her administration to work on "getting along" with her colleagues, which ignored her peers' extractive behavior.

### **Salandra**

Salandra has accumulated ten years of teaching experience, beginning her career in a suburban school distant from her hometown. Returning to the same district after some time abroad, she encountered a hostile work environment in an affluent school setting. Reflecting on her experiences, Salandra believes her strong commitment to equity and an equitable mindset are valuable assets to any educational institution. However, she faced microaggressions and various challenges at this affluent school, often being unfairly labeled as an "angry Black woman" by administrators and fellow teachers. Consequently, Salandra decided to leave this school environment and transition to a setting with a predominantly Black and Hispanic student population. Finding similar anti-equity dispositions even amongst majority-minority contexts, she now resides in higher educational spaces dedicated to preparing pre-service teachers to embody equity-based teaching practices and pedagogies.

### **Virginia**

Growing up in a rural and suburban setting in the southern United States, she encountered both overt and covert acts of racism during her school years. Her earliest memory of racism dates back to when she was as young as six years old, and she recalls a particularly impactful moment during her 7th-grade honors history class, where she faced subtle or indirect discrimination from a challenging teacher with a negative disposition. These experiences motivated Virginia to pursue a career in education. As a teacher, she prioritized meeting the needs of her students, drawing from her own experiences, and establishing strong connections with them by actively listening, attending their extracurricular events, and crafting engaging lessons that resonated with their lives. Virginia viewed it as her responsibility to support and advocate for her students and stand up for Black women educators, often speaking out on issues relevant to their experiences.

### **Alexes**

Alexes embarked on her teaching journey by instructing American and African American history at a predominantly Black school in a suburban area. While she found fulfillment in teaching Black students, Alexes ultimately felt compelled to leave the dysfunctional district. Transitioning to a new district, she took on the role of teaching Dual Enrollment/Advanced Placement courses. Here, Alexes encountered challenges where she had to assert herself against various individuals, including parents of students, often finding herself as the sole Black individual in these settings. She faced scrutiny regarding her qualifications, certifications, and degrees. Within this role, Alexes was tasked with increasing the enrollment of Black students, supporting their retention in the program, and guiding them through challenging situations. Despite feeling drained and encountering resistance, Alexes recognized the importance of advocating for herself and Black students in this environment. Following her departure from K-12 education, Alexes now dedicates her efforts to advocating for others through an educational preparation program.

### **Maiya**

Maiya's educational journey has been profoundly influenced by her two-year experience and adversity in a predominantly white school. In 5th grade, as one of only two Black students in the school, she encountered her first instance of racism, enduring derogatory language, ridicule for her attire, and mockery of her speech. The following year, she was removed from gifted classes. She faced accusations from teachers suggesting her mother's lack of concern for her education due to her enrollment back into her home district. These experiences highlighted the disparities faced by students who shared her background, prompting Maiya to become an educator in her hometown district. From that moment on, she focused on being a presence and advocating for students who resembled her, teaching English in the same school and classroom where she once was a student.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection for this study began in Spring 2024. After developing a series of questions about our teaching experiences, each co-author was given anonymous questions to share our experiences in academic settings. The questionnaire posed questions about our identities, personal experiences, and advocacy in challenging racial academic environments. It remained open for two months, allowing ample time for each participant to complete our responses.

### **Data Analysis**

The initial data analysis phase involved open coding, where we identified and categorized distinct concepts and ideas within the text responses. This process entailed breaking down the content into smaller segments, extracting key concepts, and assigning descriptive labels to capture the essence of each segment. The diverse group of Black American women in the study described their Superwoman role as multi-dimensional, discussing their perceptions of this role, the contextual factors influencing it, and the disadvantages and motivating factors for such a role. These insights were categorized into themes such as perceptions, contextual factors that influence, and the disadvantages and motivating factors of the Superwoman role. These related codes were subsequently dissected into more specific sub-themes or characteristics.

### **Collaborative Autoethnography**

Autoethnography as a qualitative method has allowed for the researchers to center themselves as subjects within larger contexts that often challenge social norms and are ground sociocultural context (Bhattacharya, 2017; Kim, 2016; Ngunjiri et al., 2010). Collaborative Autoethnography takes this a step further as it is a qualitative approach that provides researchers the space to work with one another to analyze autobiographical material to understand sociocultural phenomena within each authors' autobiography (Chang et al., 2013).

Similar to James et al. (2020) who employ counter storytelling to tell the stories of Black faculty members and Ashford-Hanserd (2020) who found it important for Black girls and women to tell their stories through research as a means of countering racist, classist, and sexist views, we too, align with the views and goals of collaborative autoethnography as a method to share our stories as well. As such, the data in this study was examined collaboratively by the Black women in this study to garner an understanding on the impact of shapeshifting while within the SWS and the impact of such a complex social identity dynamic.

### **Findings**

Our diverse group of Black American women educators in the study described our Superwoman role as multi-dimensional. As such, several interconnected themes emerged as key factors including discussing our perceptions of this role, the contextual factors influencing it, and the disadvantages and motivating factors for such a role.

### **Perceptions of the Superwoman Role**

We identified five key perceptions of the Superwoman role: duty to demonstrate strength, determination to achieve success, reluctance to show vulnerability, responsibility to assist others, and pressure to suppress emotions. Below is a breakdown of the nuances uncovered within each sub-theme.

#### **Duty to Demonstrate Strength**

Maiya: I often don't get the help I need because they think, "I got it." When I do ask for help, I am looked at as incompetent. I think I can appreciate being seen as a force, but sometimes I wish I had more support from people and not this assumption that I am a strong Black woman and don't need any help. Sometimes I'm weak. Sometimes I need help.

Virginia: When I was expecting my only child with extremely high risks, I went to my principal to have a one-on-one conversation about leaving school for mandatory bed rest. Her response was, "Gee, oh my, pregnant? I guess while you are fighting for your baby, somebody has to be fighting for your test scores. There goes our scores, but you're strong."

#### **Determination to Achieve Success**

Alexes: I did notice that there were periods in the early stages of this profession when I believed that I needed to adopt the status quo in order to be successful in my classroom with my students.

Maiya: I recognized I was sick (not to the extent, obviously, because I thought I had COVID or a cold every time) because things progressively got worse. But I still tried to be a superwoman. I showed up where I was supposed to when I was supposed to. I made sure I was producing. I had to be at my best, and I couldn't let feeling a little funny mess that up. I had to be amongst the best, representing Black women and my family. The health issue I'm facing is actually giving me more clarity and space to be more present in my life.

### **Reluctance to Show Vulnerability**

Salandra: I constantly doubted myself, and I was hyper-vigilant in my teaching environment because I felt like I was being watched. I received numerous unannounced walk-throughs in my classroom at one point. I knew they (the administration) were trying to "catch" me doing something to counter the accusations I was making against my teammates and supervisors at the time. I also worried about some of my students who were in classrooms with teachers who were mistreating them. Deciding to speak up about the mistreatment I witnessed on behalf of my littles was scary and disappointing at times. The retaliation that often followed was stressful and isolating. Teaching is already hard enough. It was even harder knowing I could not trust my colleagues and there was no one to have my back.

Virginia: There were times that I would say, my outside life was "raggedy." I would be battling health issues, family issues, or financial issues, but I would hide those struggles from my colleagues. When I was supposed to be on bedrest because my daughter was trying to come super early, I went against my doctor's wishes and returned to teaching elementary school because I believed I needed to power and push through. My doctor said that my teaching career was so stressful and toxic, that I was bound to have my daughter at the school, literally. It was not smart to try to carry on teaching during this time period, and I only lasted 3 weeks before having no choice to obey the doctor's orders. I often avoided discussing my feelings or what I had going on outside of teaching because I knew that I needed to display strength to eliminate any doubt of my professionalism and being able to handle my job responsibilities.

### **Responsibility to Assist Others**

Salandra: I feel like I am always advocating for myself and others!! All three classroom teaching experiences provided me with ample opportunity to advocate for myself and my students, particularly Black students. Furthermore, because of my identity, I feel as though I have an increased affinity for Black students. As a mother of young Black children with learning disabilities, I am especially hyper-sensitive to protecting them and ensuring they are treated equitably in school. There have been many times when I have had to step in as an advocate for my children when I felt that their teachers were letting them fall by the wayside. Again, I believe that in these instances, some teachers (particularly white women) felt threatened and did not want to communicate effectively with me.

Elissa: I was voluntold by my principal to "make my department better, coach and support" all the staff [including my department chair] as a school improvement effort. This request was an expectation and not optional. This ask also came with no additional support to help manage power dynamics with a Black woman coaching an all White English department led by a White male.

For example, I was asked by “how” did you get to do this role by multiple staff members with no acknowledgement of my receipts (students consistently improving testing scores, students gaining self-esteem and cultural validation, and implementing ways to outreach and build positive connections with families). I felt very alone especially when there were ongoing off the books meetings led by disgruntled staff following our scheduled department meetings. I was left out of the loop intentionally. I found myself with new responsibilities to help others, but I lacked support and mentorship to manage this new position. I felt isolated and trapped.

Alexis: I was the only Black person in the room when I started teaching at this school for years. Part of my advocacy at this campus was increasing the number of Black students in the Dual Credit program, helping them remain in the program, and—most importantly—protecting Black students who entered into this dangerous space. While I was doing some great work, this work was also draining. White students hated me, Black students needed me, and I was constantly in defense of me and my actions.

Virginia: As a Black woman, I have often felt the need to be obligated or the gatekeeper for Black students and other Black women, knowing the disservice, issues, and challenges we all face.

Maiya: I think I have always advocated silently and in the background by being a supporter of Black women. Like the young folks say, “I’m a girls’ girl.” I think it is important to pour into Black girls and women in these spaces so that they have the confidence to advocate for themselves. I remember one time a Black professor I had was facing opposition from the white women in the class because they felt that her course was too hard. I couldn’t advocate on a larger scale because the students’ complaints were ultimately private but I made sure to set up a meeting so I could pour into her and let her know I saw her and thought she was doing a good job.

### **Pressure to Suppress Emotions**

Alexis: I’ve just learned to show up as my authentic self and be who I am. In all honesty, I do find myself sometimes being mindful of not coming off as “too Black” or “too emotional,” but I quickly have to check those thoughts because that’s me, and I feel like it’s all in my head. Plus, I understand how white supremacy works and WSC forces people of color to “not be too much” so we can make whites feel comfortable and like they are enough—I refuse to do that!

Elissa: This is hard. As a woman, I am expected to move over for others, support at all costs, and to allow others to disrespect me without speaking up. As a Black woman, I struggle internally with not wanting to be labeled with all of the negative tropes of being angry or aggressive.



### **Contextual Factors Influencing the Superwoman Role**

Three contextual factors were identified as influencing the Superwoman role: identity, proving oneself, and challenges such as acceptance, racism, stereotypes, and interactions with other Black people.

**Identity.** We described how our race and gender intersected and were key factors shaping the Superwoman role. The findings also show that Black women view our identity as having a significant impact on our experiences in educational settings. We reported feeling pressure to take on extra responsibilities with limited resources and being expected to serve as spokespersons or advocates for Black students, colleagues, and the broader Black community. We noted that our Blackness often overshadowed our gender, with the femininity of white women being more highly valued in educational environments.

Virginia: Being a Black woman in these spaces has motivated me heavily. It has driven my passion, guided my instruction, given me a voice, and made me give students what I needed in various educational spaces. I never wanted students to feel isolated, targeted, or bored so I made sure to create lasting meaningful relationships and connections along with engaging material. On the graduate level— whew! The most challenging part has been everyone trying to check our identity, even Black folks.

Alexis: So my identity as a Black woman influences everything that I do in an educational setting. I noticed early on in my education career that the way I showed up for students, the way I showed up for myself, the way I designed lessons, the way I coach my team, and the way I lead as an educational leader was all connected to how I view myself as a Black woman in education. I became very intentional about how I showed up in this space as a Black woman. Being a Black woman again shapes and defines everything that I do, from the organizations that I associate myself with to what I write about, what I research, and what I design lessons about, all root down to what I want to happen in educational spaces for Black people and most importantly Black children.

Elissa: My identity influenced my experiences in educational settings because I was expected to be content with less, work longer and harder than others, and prove myself--even after I had already produced well above my peers. I was the "workhorse," while others were to direct where I would go--instead of me directing my own path.

Salandra: My identity influences everything I do in educational spaces as I know that my presence, tone, ideas, etc., can cause discomfort for others who harbor anti-black sentiments. My presence alone makes some feel "some type of way," combining that with challenging their deeply held beliefs about educating students of color (particularly) Black students, puts many on the defense around me.

I feel as if I am constantly trying to prove myself as capable, intelligent, knowledgeable, and nice enough, so others will appreciate my contributions. Unfortunately, it appears that no matter how knowledgeable I am or how nice I believe I am being, there is always a hate it (me) or love it (me) dynamic at play.

Maiya: They've influenced it a lot. I often don't get the help I need because they think, "I got it." When I do ask for help, I am looked at as incompetent.

**Proving self.** We recalled how we were tested in our educational settings by having to prove our skills, our concern, and our knowledge. Elissa insisted that she always had to prove herself to her colleagues because they made it a point to question her every move:

I was underestimated when I proved time and time again that I was highly competent. Even in my doctoral program, my non-Black colleagues who did not identify as women were asked fewer questions in class to substantiate their claims and given opportunities to turn work in late.

Alexes and Virginia could relate and added:

I can remember in my role as the Dual Credit/AP Teacher, when the parents would call the school and ask about my degree qualifications and certifications. Because you needed to have at least a Masters degree to teach the course. Over the course of 6 years, one the biggest questions I received from parents was rooted in what type of degrees I had and where I received my degrees. Many times my credentials have been questioned when I started a new school because comments about my age or experience come into play. I remember when I started in a new school district, they first put 'staff' on my identification card like I was just a helping worker. Some people told me it was not a big deal... to me it was. I was further offended as I looked around and other people had theirs labeled specific stating 'teacher.' At this point, I had been teaching 10+ years, and decided to use my voice to rectify the situation. I went to the office and asked if there was a specific reason my correct title was not displayed. My id was then changed to define my role as a teacher of record.

**Challenges.** Findings from the survey responses conducted with educators indicate that Black teachers facing challenges within educational environments are encountering covert racism from multiple sources, challenges with acceptance, and battling age-old stereotypes. As the conversation shifted to various challenges, others chimed in and shared their experiences of these challenges by adding:

Alexes: The major misconceptions are stereotypes that I've encountered about Black women in educational settings is that "if you met one of them, you've met all of them" and that we all act and think alike. I challenge this stereotype through relationship building and pushing back against any pressure to be exactly like another Black woman. I am all for divergent Black thought and individuality so for me it is important to show the variety of ways Black women show up into spaces unapologetically.

Salandra: I was always the "angry" Black woman, or I had an "attitude." Granted, I am not sure I addressed issues appropriately, but they were addressed! I can express myself in a way that has been seen as emotional at times especially when I care deeply about an issue. People have taken my tone to be personal when really it's more about the situation than them.

Virginia: The most common stereotype that I have encountered is labeling us as angry, single, aggressive, conspiring with other Black people, not knowledgeable, and not a team player. I have addressed each of these by communicating, working with others, building a strong rapport with my students and their families, allowing my craft to be seen letting my actions and results speak loudly.

Elissa: In working within predominantly White spaces, I experienced resentment and isolation. I believe this was in part due to my confronting inappropriate behavior speedily, and my failure to allow myself to be diminished at the expense of being a team player. For example, one of my coworkers called me "homegirl" instead of my name when everyone else was called Mr. or Mrs. And, when I pulled him aside and spoke to him about it, he looked shocked.

Alexes continues to share more experiences of challenges.

Alexes: What my advocacy has looked like has been fighting for the freedom of Black women to show up as their authentic selves and not be placed into this box of Blackness. Unfortunately, this fight for Black women to show up as their authentic selves have been against other Black folks. What I've seen recently is this mindset of the black monolith and it's been disgusting in the humanizing because in the work culture that I exist in other Black folks have tried to define what it means to be Black and if you did not fit into that narrow box of Blackness then you've been criticized for comforting whiteness or protecting whiteness.

Honestly, that's the dumbest thing that I've ever heard, and sadly, the past year or so, I have been deeply engrossed in a battle of allowing Black women to be accepted into spaces as who they are and not forced to change to be accepted by their own people. I don't care what a Black woman subscribes to. I don't care if they have conservative views, they have liberal views, if they quote unquote act right, if they talk white, if they think white, none of those things matter to me because I understand that we all have some decolonizing of our minds to do. In this journey, we don't attack other Black people because they are not where we are in our journey; instead, we pull them in, protect them, and love them even if they don't love the things that we love.

### **Disadvantages and Motivating Factors of the Superwoman Role**

The Superwoman role puts Black women's health at risk because of the ongoing pressure to meet high standards at work and in our personal lives. This constant stress can lead to physical health problems like high blood pressure, headaches, and extreme tiredness, as well as mental health issues like anxiety, depression, and burnout. Although these characteristics of the Superwoman role may have an abundance of hindrances within our lives, we explicitly define ways we are motivated to continue to show up for our students and ourselves.

**Health issues.** A key aspect of taking on the Superwoman Role is the potential impact on one's health. We shared numerous experiences of health problems, complications, breakdowns, and stress, stemming not only from the demands of teaching but also from the additional responsibilities and challenges associated with being a Black woman.

Salandra: Stress isn't even the word! At one point, I thought I was crazy. The constant conflicts I experienced with my white colleagues, the gas lighting, and dismissal of my experiences was taxing. I would cry when I came home from work when I was in K-12, often.

Elissa: I experienced stomach aches for almost a year straight when my department chair was intentionally diminishing my work---while using my work and presenting it as their own to staff in formal training. My expertise was not valued and was used in an extractive way. I also experienced migraine headaches 2-3 days out of the week for most of my doctoral journey being the only Black Woman in my academic cohort. I felt like I was constantly under pressure.

Maiya: During my time pursuing my PhD, I was diagnosed with Lupus. What made my case different was that I was diagnosed with Lupus after irreparable damage had been done to my kidneys, leading to End Stage Renal Disease. My doctors are pretty positive that I have had active Lupus for a very long time based on my biopsies; however, a stressful situation stemming from my temporary advisor caused me so much stress that the lupus was able to take over. My health took such a hit that I actually had to move home to receive dialysis and treatment from a team of doctors to maintain my health.

Virginia: Oh my... I have stories about my health issues and stress for days trying to be a super teacher and this strong Black woman. I remember one time when I was teaching 5th grade math, I was sick to where I couldn't eat or drink for weeks without being physically ill. I kept going to work, taking no days off because I had to push through and be there for my students. After about six weeks of this, my doctor called me literally at school teaching to inform me to get to the hospital immediately because my feet had begun to break out, which was an indicator of my organs possibly shutting down. Everyone commended me on being there for my students, still working hard, and going home and crashing because my body was overworked. I would cry every night, making new lessons for the next day in pain.

Alexes: A story I never share is the real reason I switched doctoral programs. The story I hid behind was that my oldest son was in high school and I didn't want to uproot him to move closer to the campus. And while that was true, what caused me to withdraw from my PhD program was that I had a mental breakdown as a result of trying to manage it all and do it all. I was still grieving the loss of my father figure, struggling to adjust to postpartum life with four kids and no longer being in the classroom as a teacher, and coming out of the pandemic. Everything was happening too fast all at once. I remember at that time I was adjuncting for two colleges and when it all came crumbling down, I called both of my deans and tried to quit both positions with class starting in a few days. Lucky for me, they all knew something wasn't right with me—my graduate advisor and Deans—and they knew I was in distress. When I was at a low point, they came in with solutions and saw my humanity which is a part of me that I feel is often overlooked.

**Hindering.** We shared ways this Superwoman role could be hindering various aspects of our lives.

Elissa: I think that my "wanting" to not bother others has impacted my ability to draw reasonable boundaries. My children always see me as "at work," even when I am with them. I have a constant feeling that I am behind, can never catch up, and will be viewed as "less than," if I am not working. I am exhausted, and I have to "work" to actually feel that I am worthy or can have reasonable boundaries.

Salandra: I believe being a superwoman is a double-edged sword. Yes, I embrace it most of the time and use it as fuel to help me accomplish goals and succeed in my daily life and struggles. At times, especially in romantic relationships, I have been accused of being "too independent." Apparently, I was so self-sufficient (at the time) I didn't leave room for my partner (at the time) to do much. I thought that was a good thing, but I guess not. It can also be stressful when you feel like you have to do everything on your own. Even when I do ask for help, sometimes, I am disappointed in the level of effort put forth and feel like I should have just done it myself. When it comes to my children and maintaining my household, I have tried to allow others to help because I have realized, I can't do everything for everybody, every day. I'm exhausted! I try to commit to self-care, but mostly that just consists of going to the nail salon or resting at home.

Alexes: People look at me and just assume that I have it all together. I am proud of where I am in life and all that I have accomplished but what people don't see is the hurt that often comes with being the person others can turn to when in need but when the tables are turned, I have no one I can go to. And I mean absolutely no one. I'm known as the person who makes stuff happen but that is so exhausting sometimes. I want to know what it feels like to have a problem and be able to pick up the phone and call someone else to solve it. I want to be able to feel what it's like to sometimes not have to worry about everyone else then worry about me. Because people think I "got it all together," this often leads to me being overlooked or often an afterthought to my family or "friends". People always wonder why and how I do all that I do and it is simple. If I don't do it, no one else will. It is what it is, I guess.

**Sister Girl as Manipulation.** Unfortunately, there is often a perceived or actual lack of support among Black women, even within spaces that should foster comfort, acceptance, and collective growth. Instead of being environments of empowerment, these spaces can sometimes be polluted by manipulative behaviors, insecurities, and competition over seemingly limited opportunities. These actions are often rooted in internalized oppression and societal pressures, making it harder for Black women to navigate these environments. While the root causes are complex and shaped by external forces, these behaviors present additional challenges that undermine solidarity and progress.

Alexes: I get so giddy when I get to share space with other Black women. However, I realized fast that you can also go from "pet to threat" with them as well. This blew my mind because when I was in the K-12 space, I had great working relationships with Black women. But now, other Black women have me in therapy questioning "am I the drama?" The lies, manipulation, and behind the back stuff has been something I have never experienced in my life

And man, it hurts because these are people that I'm looking at for a bond that I unfortunately don't have with my biological sister. I came in so open and trusting in hopes that my vulnerability would lead to community and solidarity. Instead, without going into details, I feel like I was being played so they could accomplish something but once they realized they couldn't manipulate me and I had a mind of my own, I became their enemy. And now, this Black woman who stood before them was no longer "Black" enough to be with the in crowd or I was Black with "a white mind". You know? This skinfolk that was no longer their kinfolk because I refused to be their tool. That cut deep and ruined my ability to trust. My trust has been broken so much that I am holding back on telling my story because I don't trust what another Black woman will do with my truth when it no longer serves them.

Elissa: I enter education spaces with an unrealistic expectation that my people are always my people. And that's just not the reality. I have been in spaces where it was safer for the "other" Black person to barely speak [when others were around] and disassociate themselves from my Blackness so they would not be mistreated or labeled as giving me a leg up. Although I recognize this as a survival mechanism, it makes me tremendously sad.

Maiya: It ain't really no sisterhood, at least no sisterhood I want. During one of our in-person meetings, there was a member of a D9 fraternity who recognized my backpack and wanted to say hello because he was new to the area and hadn't met many D9 members yet. After a brief exchange, he left. Following this, a professor had the audacity to lecture me on the importance of helping others take advantage of my sorority's networking power since I was so well-connected and involved. She then went on to talk about how her husband is a member of a D9 fraternity and how she recognizes how advantageous that is for him. The underlying theme there was to bring her into the sorority—not so she can do service, not to foster sisterhood, but so she can take advantage of the resources.

Salandra: Sometimes we are our own worst enemies. Unfortunately, in my experience (especially in K-12), many Black female teachers only wanted to "be Black" behind closed doors. They would rant, cry, cuss, and spill all the tea about the racist practices and microaggressions they experienced at the hands of their white colleagues (and white thinking) school leaders of color. Then, when it came time to address issues and present solutions, they were silent in meetings and often left me hanging. This saddened me more than anything as I knew they were put in a tough position: keep their jobs and be the "happy negress/mammy" or face rejection and isolation (and possible retaliation) from their white colleagues and superiors. I know that many of them needed good letters of recommendation as they were trying to be future diagnosticians, assistant principals, and administrators. I knew they didn't want to rock the boat as that would be detrimental to their careers.

Even still, it was hard knowing no one had my back (not even my own people) when I spoke up about the discriminatory practices I witnessed and endured.

Virginia: Coming into academia, I was excited to meet other educated and unapologetic Black women. Sadly, I was faced with some Black women who conform to societal expectations and encouraged us to, too. I was pumped to get a closed session with a Black woman so we could do what we do best: talk, guide, and encourage each other. However, one of my first encounters with a Black professor saddened me. That professor told me, with my beautiful freshly retwisted micro locs for this occasion, to think about changing my hair or straightening it. The professor also told me about attire, how to talk, and things we should do, all while masking these subtle digs with 'as a Black woman...." This crushed my spirit because, as a Black woman, you come into these spaces looking for the answers, the knowledge, the acceptance, and the safety. Nevertheless, that just isn't the case on many instances. The most telling part is that it indeed turns out to be your own people turning the knife in your back.

**Teaching in Higher Education.** As Graduate students, Black women educators often take on lecturing roles to gain valuable experience and familiarize themselves with the demands of the professoriate and academic life. This journey can be both eye-opening and enriching, providing insights into teaching, curriculum development, mentoring, and student engagement. We share several stories from our experiences teaching a critical multicultural course to predominantly white undergraduate students, highlighting the lessons learned and the challenges faced.

Maiya: When I was teaching the course, I had a great rapport with my students, but I noticed they still needed some help interrogating their whiteness. I invited a white women sociologist to speak to them, and she explained how she interrogated her experiences. After that, it seemed like class went to hell. For most of the class, we were able to get back on track and rapport was good because they separated me from the sociologist. However, for one of the young ladies, she could not forgive me for allowing that woman to call her out. When I got my evals, I knew it was her because I only had one negative review about how I felt white people were evil.

Salandra: When teaching critical pedagogies to predominantly white pre-service teachers, resistance is real and formidable. I've had students not only disregard me as a professional but also as a human being as well. I was threatened with "legal action" at one point if I enforced the university attendance policy as prescribed. It was crazy how many white students, who want to be teachers of diverse students, don't want to learn anything about teaching practices (like culturally relevant pedagogy) which will help them be successful.



Virginia: Teaching the class was excellent, but with some hiccups, some slight chin checks needed to be done academically. Many of the students first told me that I was their first or one of the few Black educators they had ever experienced. They would make it a point to highlight how intelligent I was, shockingly. So, during the course, the students had to complete a project interviewing someone 55 or older to capture their experience integrating schools. During one presentation, one student kept referring to Black people as 'colored folks.' I addressed it, but she kept doing it. I had to stop the presentation, and I had a short lesson on correct and respectful language, circling back to calling us Black and not colored. It was a big deal! The student wanted to keep up banter about it as if, at 20 years old, that was a term that she used regularly.

**Spirituality.** We spoke about relying on our faith, religion, and spirituality. We shared how our connection to a higher power helped us stay focused, remain calm during difficult times, and overcome challenges we faced in educational settings, fostering an internal force of motivation.

Virginia: It's simple... God! I look back throughout my career, especially when I literally exploded on my partner teacher because she accused me of cheating to the testing coordinator, and I am just thankful that God kept me. There was growth within me from reacting to every evil thing sent my way involving co-workers, parents, or administration. I am thankful for a family, a praying family, and the values they have instilled within my country upbringing. Every day, I hit the ground and pray for peace. I would do that walking into my classroom, too. I do that walking on campus because I have to be prepared for every encounter. I definitely need His power to keep me grounded and to keep me pushing on even when times are difficult. Also, a great therapist with consistent therapy keeps me focused, too.

Elissa: I center myself with my faith in God. I keep Sabbath, which gives me peace and a measure of calm, hopefulness, and gratitude. I also try to spend at least 1 hour of time with my husband, usually watching a comedy special and laughing together. We like each other as friends, and this time helps to ease both of our packed lives. I know that I have been blessed with exceptional gifts, with loving people, and with good friends. I have also recently begun to incorporate at least once a month personal connection time with groups with whom I share interests; I attend my Women of Virtue brunches to talk about real-life issues like "relationships" or how unforgiveness can manifest. I also attend my sister-girl mom's group, where we eat, drink, and talk about problem-solving for our everyday issues.

Salandra: I push through with the Lord's help! That's it! I wouldn't be here today if God hadn't continually saved me! I don't judge people with mental health struggles that are more visible than mine. One thing I have learned is that we all struggle, some of us are just better at hiding it than others. I believe my superwoman characteristics shield those vulnerable parts of me from others. People would only know my true struggles, insecurities, anxieties, frustrations, flaws, etc., if I disclosed them. I often don't. Only to a select few.

Alexes: God has been my daily strength throughout my educational journey. Heck, it is because of God that I am where I am today in my educational journey. There have been times where I have tried to do this thing called life without God and I was constantly depressed and miserable. While I still have some of "those" days, starting my morning off with a 3 mile walk and prayer and worship has helped me to make it through those days and have allowed me to see God's hand in the good and bad. Heck, it's because of God's hand that I am still employed. If it weren't for me developing this morning practice of prayer and encouraging myself, it would be hard to hold back those parts of me—as a Black woman—that are not allowed in public. You know? The angry, frustrated, sad, and "emotional" parts. Because I can't let others see me like that—well, I don't trust others to see me like that—I have to give it to God before it's time to start my work day.

Maiya: I've found God again. I strayed away in the beginning semesters of my doctorate program. I was giving myself credit for things that God had done. Like the old folks say, I was smelling myself. But in restoring my faith and my walk with God, I have found purpose, which gives me motivation; it gives me joy to where I actually enjoy getting the work done because I know I am helping people, and it brought me to a place where I feel that my goals and God's plans align.

The findings above demonstrate the various, complex, yet interconnected experiences of Black women educators. Our reflections revealed the dynamic themes and sub-themes that encompass our racialized and gendered experiences noting how our Blackness often overshadowed our gender as standards of white femininity were held up against as a barometer of measurement. In the next section, we will further the discussion on such complexities and revisit our initial research inquiries in hopes of new insights and reflections.

### Discussion

The Black educators in this article shared their perspectives and experiences on managing life, family, schooling, and career while within the confines of the Superwoman role. They described what the role means to them, identified the factors contributing to its complexity, and discussed their challenges and drawbacks in fulfilling this demanding role within an array of educational settings.

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Returning to the research questions, our key themes can be fully actualized within our initial inquiries. In reference to the first research question, how do Black women educators understand their identity and personal experiences in challenging racial environments within educational spaces, we found that our perceptions of the Superwoman role showed up through a duty to demonstrate strength, determination to achieve success, reluctance to show vulnerability, responsibility to assist others, and pressure to suppress emotions.

The “Strong Black Woman” trope embedded within SWS has been both a source of pride and an unbearable weight for us. We are often celebrated for our resilience and ability to persevere through adversity. We are seen as tireless, unbreakable figures who can do it all. Unfortunately, this carries significant emotional, physical, and psychological costs (Leath, 2019; Wheeler, 2022). The pressure to maintain the image of invincibility often resulted in burnout, poor mental health, and an overall diminished well-being. Such realities highlight the urgency in dismantling the unrealistic and harmful expectations we contend with.

Although we aimed to find educational spaces which effectively served us as Black women faculty, staff, and students, our educational environments were more often than not unsuitable for such outcomes to occur (Gist, 2017). We were fraught with an onslaught of interpersonal and structural racism which put us at intense physical and emotional risk and threatened to push us out of education all together (Kohli et al., 2022). There were numerous instances where we felt others were trying to put us “in our place” by enforcing societal expectations of what a Black woman should think, act, and engage as. In overt and covert efforts to maintain whiteness within education (Bennett et al., 2019), our Superwoman roles were at times amplified to the detriment of our true vulnerable selves.

Our second research question regarding what insights do educational researchers gain about Black women educators through a collaborative autoethnographic research approach reveals three contextual factors identified as influencing contributors to the Superwoman role. Those factors included identity, proving oneself, and challenges such as acceptance, racism, stereotypes, and facing other Black people. Our autoethnographic approach exposes these themes through the use of the inclusion of our complex narratives about our social, cultural, and epistemological positionality within. Historically, the SWS is deeply rooted in the legacy of slavery and systemic oppression (Braveman et al., 2022). In response to this generational emotional trauma (Burnett-Zeigler, 2021), we contend with modern day perceptions that Black women educators should handle anything without complaint. Whether self-inflicted or induced by environmental factors within our particular contexts, we are dehumanized and denied the right to express pain, struggle, or emotional needs. Our identities as Black women educators carry a range of emotions and lack of support from those inside and outside our perspective circles can exacerbate such emotional realities. Positioning an autoethnographic lens throughout this inquiry also allows us to release some of the hidden and underlying trauma we may have been suppressing. This process of recollecting on our experiences has been eye-opening, therapeutic and cathartic all at once. Releasing the tension and pressures from holding onto racialized trauma has been healing. The autoethnographic approach has been integral to this process.

In answering our third research question pertaining to what thoughts do Black women educators share about their teaching experiences, and what keeps them motivated, we found the Superwoman role may have an abundance of hindrances within our lives as educators. As such, we explicitly define ways we are able to continue to show up for our students and ourselves which influences our motivations. On the whole, the Superwoman role puts Black women's health at risk because of the ongoing pressure to meet high standards at work and in our personal lives. This constant stress can lead to physical health problems like high blood pressure, headaches, and extreme tiredness, as well as mental health issues like anxiety, depression, and burnout (Erving et al., 2024). The pressure to conform to the Superwoman image places immense emotional and psychological burdens on Black women. This creates a dangerous cycle where the fear of judgment or societal rejection forces us to suffer in silence.

On the other hand, despite these circumstances, Black women educators continue to draw from their sources of motivation to help them stay the course. Our connection to a higher power helped us stay focused, remain calm during difficult times, and overcome challenges we faced in educational settings. Maiya pointed out that refocusing on her spirituality was a turning point when she states:

I've found God again. I strayed away in the beginning semesters of my doctorate program. I was giving myself credit for things that God had done. Like the old folks say, I was smelling myself. But in restoring my faith and my walk with God, I have found purpose, which gives me motivation.

Within this context, centering ourselves within the spiritual realm creates an opportunity for rejuvenation, refocus, and an internal motivator to push through our harmful racialized and gendered experiences so that we may continue to press toward our goals. However, even within our spiritual centering, scholarship continues to point to a need to remedy the negative experiences of Black women educators in all educational settings (Hawkins, 2021; Mahatmya et al., 2022; Ogden, 2024). Our discussion and findings support continued investigations in this area as although retelling our experiences has been therapeutic, it is not complete without resolutions coming into focus as well. With the conclusion of this discussion, we suggest a few recommendations for P-12 and higher educational settings interested in committing to more equitable and positive environments for Black women educators.

### **Recommendations**

Supporting Black women educators in schools requires a comprehensive approach that acknowledges both the unique challenges they face and the significant contributions they make to the education system. To ensure their success and well-being, educational stakeholders must implement and be committed to targeted strategies to foster inclusivity and positive professional support. The following recommendations aim to create a more equitable and sustainable environment for Black women educators which not only benefits them but the broader school community as well.

Create support/affinity groups for Black women. Black women need spaces where they can connect with others who understand their unique struggles, fostering environments that encourage emotional honesty and mutual care (Mosely, 2018). Due to the psychological and emotional challenges they face in educational settings, having a committed space/time such as an affinity group sets the stage for Black women educators to openly (without repercussion) their experiences and obtain guidance and support from other Black women in similar positions who can offer guidance and support. Believe Black women. Our stories and experiences matter. Allies including, family members, friends, employers, and institutions, must take responsibility for not only hearing the voice of Black women but challenging the harmful contexts many Black women educators endure by promoting equity and emotional well-being. Systems of education must be committed to cultivating environments that honor the experiences and world views of Black women educators. The common practice of dismissing or gaslighting their experiences needs to cease as it only exacerbates racial inequities when they are ignored. Invest in equity initiatives within educational spaces. As equity initiatives continue to be a point of contention in educational realms, stakeholders need to prioritize even more the importance of creating and maintaining positive and inclusive educational environments for not only Black women but students and families as well. Organizations that prioritize diversity and inclusion efforts are better prepared to retain their Black women educators and recruit more highly qualified individuals. These recommendations represent only a slew of the efforts needed to reverse the trend of emotionally, psychologically, and physically harmful educational spaces for Black women educators.

### Conclusion

This collaborative autoethnographic inquiry unveiled the continued need to elevate the perspectives, experiences, and knowledge of Black women educators in P-12 and higher educational settings. Through the lens of the Superwoman Schema, we expound upon the double-edge sword of the strong Black woman. The mental, physical, and psychological shapeshifting that is a constant obstacle in the well-being of Black women educators, proves to be a superpower and a hindrance simultaneously. The myth of the Strong Black Woman may have been born out of a history of resilience and survival, but now is a source of profound harm. Why do we have to keep shapeshifting in order to be successful educators in U.S. public schools? As our experiences show, Black women are not superhuman; we are individuals with complex emotions, needs, and limits.

Should we keep up this magic trick which seems to do more of a disservice to us than to those who watch us contort ourselves out of recognition? No! We instead resolve to keep ourselves whole and authentic and still be the advocates for educational liberation we have always been. Even still, we don't have all the answers to these questions and solutions are still on the horizon. Dismantling the myths of the SWS requires collective action, both from within circles of Black women, educational spaces, and society at large. We look forward to a world where Black women, particularly Black women educators are valued for their full humanity, not just their strength. However, one thing we do know, that no matter what comes our way, no matter what obstacles we face in these public education streets, we gon' always keep STANDING on business!!!!

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**NAVIGATING IDENTITIES: IMPOSTER SYNDROME AND COMMUNAL FORTITUDE AMONG DOCTORAL STUDENTS**

Jovan T. Thomas

Imposter syndrome, a psychological phenomenon characterized by persistent self-doubt and fear of being exposed as a fraud despite evident success, is notably prevalent in high-pressure academic settings such as doctoral programs. Originating from the pioneering work of Clance and Imes (1978), imposter syndrome was first identified in high-achieving women who felt they were not deserving of their accomplishments despite ample evidence to the contrary. This sense of intellectual illegitimacy is not just limited to women; it has been observed across genders and is particularly pronounced among individuals from marginalized and underrepresented groups in academia (Cokley et al., 2013).

Doctoral students, who often find themselves in highly competitive and demanding environments, are at a heightened risk for experiencing these intense feelings of fraudulence. The stakes in doctoral education are not merely academic but are deeply intertwined with personal and professional identity formation. As such, the impacts of imposter syndrome can extend beyond individual psychological distress, influencing academic performance, career trajectories, and overall well-being. Moreover, the academic journey for doctoral students from underrepresented backgrounds can be compounded by additional layers of complexity, including cultural mismatches between their backgrounds and the predominant norms of their academic environments, as well as overt and covert experiences of discrimination or bias. This combination of high academic expectations and socio-cultural dissonance can exacerbate feelings of imposterism, making the doctoral journey particularly challenging (Bernard, Hogg, & Gurney, 2018).

The importance of community and social support systems in these settings cannot be overstated. Academic communities and peer networks play a crucial role in providing emotional and instrumental support, which is essential for navigating the challenges of doctoral studies. Tinto's (1997) model of student retention highlights the significance of integration into academic and social communities, asserting that a strong sense of belonging and community can significantly enhance student persistence and success.

This study employs an autoethnographic approach to delve into these themes, using the author's personal experiences as a doctoral student confronting imposter syndrome, catalyzed by a critical encounter with a professor that challenged the author's academic abilities. Through a reflexive narrative, this research seeks to illuminate the complex interplay between individual experiences of imposter syndrome and the supportive mechanisms of a community that together shape the doctoral educational landscape. The exploration of these personal and collective dimensions aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how imposter syndrome impacts doctoral students and how resilience is cultivated through communal support, offering insights that are pertinent for educators, administrators, and policy makers in higher education.

### **Literature Review**

Originally identified in high-achieving women by Clance and Imes (1978), imposter syndrome is characterized by persistent self-doubt and a fear of being exposed as a fraud, despite evidence of success. This phenomenon is prevalent across various demographic groups and disciplines, manifesting as a significant barrier to personal and professional development. Recent studies have expanded our understanding, showing that imposter syndrome also significantly affects individuals in new and unfamiliar roles, suggesting that transitions into roles like those of doctoral students can intensify these feelings (Smith & Huntoon, 2020). Moreover, a meta-analysis by Bravata et al. (2020) highlighted that imposter syndrome can decrease job satisfaction and increase burnout, underlining the importance of addressing this issue within academic settings to promote well-being and productivity among doctoral students.

Subsequent research has furthered our understanding of how imposter syndrome disproportionately affects minorities and women, often exacerbating feelings of loneliness and isolation in academic and professional settings (Cokley et al., 2013; Bernard et al., 2018). These studies emphasize that the pressures of minority status can intensify feelings of being an imposter, as individuals struggle not only with internal self-doubt but also with external stereotypes and biases.

### **Community and Academic Resilience**

The literature on student retention and success highlights the critical role of community and social networks in academic environments. Tinto's model of student retention particularly underscores the importance of social integration into academic communities for fostering persistence and academic success (Tinto, 1997). These communities provide emotional support, reduce feelings of isolation, and promote a sense of belonging, which is crucial for students navigating the rigorous demands of doctoral programs. Building on this, recent research by Walton and Cohen (2011) demonstrated that interventions designed to foster a sense of belonging can significantly reduce dropout rates among minority students, highlighting the potential of community-focused strategies to combat the negative effects of imposter syndrome. Research by Misra and Castillo (2014) builds on Tinto's work by exploring how specific community support mechanisms can buffer against the academic and psychological challenges faced by graduate students. Their work suggests that peer mentorship, collaborative research groups, and social gatherings can significantly alleviate stress and contribute to a more positive academic experience. These findings are particularly relevant for students who experience imposter syndrome, as communal support can directly counteract feelings of fraudulence and self-doubt by reinforcing personal and academic validation. Further, a study by Brown et al. (2019) explored the dynamics of peer networks and found that strong interpersonal connections and a supportive academic environment can mitigate feelings of imposterism by providing emotional support and fostering a collaborative rather than competitive atmosphere.

### **Autoethnography in Education**

Autoethnography as a methodological approach in educational research offers a unique lens through which to explore personal experiences and their broader cultural, social, and institutional contexts. Ellis et al. (2011) describe autoethnography as both method and product, where researchers draw on their personal experiences to understand cultural phenomena, situating personal narratives within a broader socio-cultural framework. This approach is particularly useful for studying phenomena like imposter syndrome, as it allows for a deep, contextual exploration of how personal and environmental factors converge to shape individual experiences. Recent methodological advancements discussed by Chang et al. (2016) have further refined autoethnographic techniques to ensure rigor and relevance, making it an even more effective tool for studying phenomena like imposter syndrome within academic communities.

Bochner (2000) advocates for autoethnography to critically engage with one's own experiences to challenge cultural norms and assumptions, particularly in academia. This approach not only helps in identifying the structures that perpetuate feelings like imposter syndrome but also promotes a reflective dialogue about how educational practices and policies can be improved to support diverse student populations.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts an autoethnographic approach, incorporating elements of narrative inquiry and reflexive storytelling, to explore the personal experiences of imposter syndrome and the supportive role of community among doctoral students. Autoethnography is chosen for its ability to deeply introspect and critically engage with personal experiences while contextualizing these experiences within broader cultural and academic frameworks (Ellis et al., 2011). By using the author's own narratives as primary data, this method allows for a profound exploration of the subjective experiences of imposter syndrome, including the emotional and cognitive processes involved.

### **Alice: The Balancing Act of a Mature Student**

Alice's journey through her doctoral program in Environmental Science is marked by her unique position as a mature student returning to academia after a significant career in industry. Her narrative offers valuable insights into the challenges and strengths associated with entering a doctoral program later in life, especially when confronted with imposter syndrome amidst much younger peers.

### **Background and Initial Struggles**

Alice returned to academia after spending over a decade in environmental consultancy. Her decision to pursue a doctoral degree was driven by a desire to contribute to scholarly work and influence policy through rigorous research. However, upon entering the program, Alice encountered a significant cultural and generational gap between herself and her classmates, most of whom were in their twenties. This gap manifested in various ways, from differing familiarity with the latest academic technologies to contrasting perspectives on research methodologies and priorities.

### **Feeling Like an Outsider**

Initially, Alice felt out of step with her peers, which fueled her imposter syndrome. She described feeling "old" and "outdated," worries that her professional experience was irrelevant or even a hindrance to her new academic pursuits. "I often felt like my ideas were too influenced by practical concerns, not as innovative or theoretical as my peers," Alice shared during a session. This self-doubt was exacerbated by her struggles with new academic tools and theoretical frameworks, which she felt she had to master from scratch, while her younger peers seemed to navigate these with ease.

### **Leveraging Experience as Strength**

The turning point for Alice came through the support of her doctoral advisor and a close-knit group of peers who began to see the value in her extensive practical experience. Her advisor encouraged her to integrate her industry knowledge into her research, emphasizing the importance of applied environmental solutions in academic discourse. This shift helped Alice begin to view her background as an asset rather than a liability.

In group discussions, Alice shared insights from her professional experience, providing real-world applications and implications of theoretical research. Her contributions in this context were met with enthusiasm and respect, which gradually helped rebuild her self-confidence. "I started to realize that my different perspective was not only accepted but valued. It brought something unique to the table that was missing from some of our discussions," she noted.

### **Building Communal Support**

As Alice became more comfortable in her role, she took on a mentorship position for other non-traditional students within her program. Her journey inspired her to support others facing similar challenges, fostering a sub-community within the doctoral program that focused on leveraging diverse experiences. This role not only solidified her sense of belonging but also reinforced her identity as a scholar.

### **Conclusion**

Alice's story underscores the complexities of navigating a doctoral program as a mature student with significant professional experience. It highlights the challenges of adapting to a new academic culture and the initial feelings of being an outsider. However, her narrative also illustrates the transformative power of recognizing and integrating diverse experiences within academic settings. By turning her perceived weaknesses into strengths, Alice not only overcame her imposter syndrome but also enriched the learning environment for her peers. Her journey serves as a compelling example of how age and experience can contribute uniquely and significantly to academic discourse, providing valuable lessons on the importance of diversity in higher education.

### **Ben: Navigating Minority Status**

Ben, a doctoral student specializing in Cultural Studies, brings a unique narrative to the discourse on imposter syndrome, particularly as it intersects with minority status. As a first-generation college student from an underrepresented ethnic group, Ben's academic journey is marked not only by personal achievement but also by the challenges of representing his community within a predominantly white, elite academic environment.

### **Background and Initial Challenges**

From the outset of his doctoral program, Ben grappled with dual pressures: the intrinsic challenges of rigorous academic work and the extrinsic pressure of feeling like an ambassador for his community. This dual burden was compounded by the stark underrepresentation of his ethnic group within his field, which heightened his sense of being an 'outsider' and fueled his imposter feelings. "Every seminar feels like I'm stepping into a space where I must prove I belong, not just for myself but for my entire community," Ben explained during one of the group discussions.

### **The Weight of Minority Status**

Ben's sense of imposter syndrome was intricately tied to his minority status. He often felt scrutinized, worrying that any mistake would reflect not only on his own capabilities but also negatively impact perceptions of his wider community. This additional layer of anxiety made academic engagements—such as presenting at conferences or publishing papers—significantly more stressful. The fear of confirming negative stereotypes often led him to overprepare or shy away from opportunities to showcase his work.



### **The Role of Mentorship and Peer Support**

A turning point for Ben came when he was paired with a mentor through an academic diversity initiative. His mentor, also from a minority background, had navigated similar challenges and offered both practical advice and empathetic support. This relationship proved pivotal in helping Ben reframe his academic struggles and achievements. "Seeing someone from my background succeed and lead with integrity was transformative. It helped me realize that my presence here is necessary, that my voice adds value," Ben shared.

Alongside mentorship, the communal support from his doctoral peers—his 'tribe'—played a critical role in his journey. The tribe provided a safe space for sharing experiences and strategies for managing imposter syndrome. Through these interactions, Ben learned that his feelings of fraudulence were not unique to him or his minority status but were shared across various backgrounds, which helped normalize his experiences and reduce isolation.

### **Empowerment Through Community**

As Ben engaged more with his community and mentor, he began to adopt a more empowered stance towards his academic and personal challenges. He initiated a peer support group for minority students within the university, aimed at discussing and dismantling imposter syndrome. This initiative not only bolstered his confidence but also positioned him as a leader within his academic community, further countering his imposter fears.

### **Conclusion**

Ben's story highlights the profound impact of intersecting identities—such as being a minority and a first-generation scholar—on the experience of imposter syndrome. His narrative underscores the significance of tailored mentorship and robust community support in navigating and overcoming these challenges. Through his journey, Ben illustrates how overcoming imposter syndrome involves not only personal resilience but also the active cultivation of environments that recognize and support the unique experiences of minority students. His transformation from feeling like an outsider to becoming a community leader and advocate marks a significant shift, demonstrating the potential for personal adversity to fuel communal empowerment and change.

### **Clara: The Perfectionist's Paradox**

Clara, a doctoral student in the field of Biochemistry, epitomizes the classic 'perfectionist'. Her academic journey is punctuated with notable successes—scholarly publications, presentations at international conferences, and accolades from her academic community. On paper, Clara's achievements mark her as a rising star in her field. However, her internal experience is markedly different, colored by a pervasive feeling that her successes are undeserved and could be exposed as fraudulent at any moment.

### **Background and Challenges**

Clara entered the doctoral program with a strong academic record but also with high self-imposed expectations. Early in her journey, she found herself constantly comparing her progress to that of her peers, often focusing on any perceived shortcomings in her own work. This comparison intensified her feelings of being an imposter, a sentiment she described during group discussions: "Every time I receive praise for my research, I feel like I'm just one question away from being exposed. I fear they'll find out I'm not as smart or as capable as they think."

### **Experiencing Imposter Syndrome**

Clara's imposter syndrome manifested in several ways. She often worked longer hours than her peers, driven by a fear that she wasn't doing enough. She hesitated to submit papers, plagued by thoughts that her research wasn't thorough enough or her findings not significant enough. This constant doubt led to cycles of stress and burnout, impacting her mental health and well-being. During one poignant group discussion, Clara shared an incident where she received a prestigious award for her research. Instead of feeling joy or satisfaction, she felt panic and anxiety. "I kept thinking they made a mistake. That they'd realize I wasn't the right choice and take it back," she explained. This reaction starkly highlighted the dissonance between her external achievements and her internal perceptions of those achievements.

### **Turning Point through Communal Support**

Clara's turning point began to unfold through her interactions with her doctoral community, the 'tribe'. This close-knit group of peers provided a crucial support network. As she listened to others with similar fears and shared her own, Clara started to see patterns and commonalities in their experiences, which made her feelings seem less isolating and unique.

A significant moment of change came during a series of peer-led workshops within her tribe, focusing on recognizing and discussing imposter syndrome. Through these sessions, Clara learned strategies to manage her perfectionism and reframe her achievements. Her peers helped her to understand that her constant fear of exposure was not a reflection of her actual capabilities but rather a common experience among high achievers.

### **Growth and Acceptance**

Gradually, Clara began to internalize the positive feedback and recognition she received. She started to accept her accomplishments as genuine and learned to celebrate her successes without the overshadowing fear of being a fraud. This growth was not linear but marked by ups and downs, with each positive step reinforced by the support and validation from her community.

### **Conclusion**

Clara's story illustrates the profound impact that communal support can have on an individual experiencing imposter syndrome. Her journey from pervasive self-doubt to a burgeoning self-assurance underscores the potential for transformation through shared experiences and peer support. Clara's narrative not only highlights the challenges faced by doctoral students grappling with perfectionism but also showcases the empowering role that a supportive academic community can play in overcoming these challenges. This experience is a testament to the power of community in fostering not just academic success, but also personal growth and emotional resilience in the face of deep-seated insecurities.

### **Results**

The analysis of the narratives and interactions within the doctoral student community, termed the 'tribe', illuminated several key themes regarding imposter syndrome and the power of communal support. These themes were consistently reflected in the personal stories of Alice, Ben, and Clara, each highlighting different aspects of the doctoral experience and the multifaceted role of community in mitigating feelings of fraudulence.

#### **Theme 1: Validation through Peer Recognition**

One of the most salient results was the power of peer recognition in combatting imposter syndrome. Across the board, participants reported that acknowledgment and validation from their peers significantly alleviated their self-doubt. This was particularly evident in Alice's experience, where peer recognition helped her reframe her professional experience as a valuable asset rather than a detraction. Similarly, Ben found that peer support was crucial in validating his identity and contributions, helping him to see his minority status as a strength that brought unique perspectives to his academic field.

#### **Theme 2: The Role of Mentorship in Empowering Students**

Mentorship emerged as a critical factor in the participants' journeys. For Ben, having a mentor who shared a similar background and had navigated similar challenges was transformative. This relationship provided not only academic guidance but also emotional support and a model for how to balance personal identity with academic demands. Participants emphasized that mentorship helped bridge the gap between personal experiences of imposter syndrome and the broader academic culture, offering tailored strategies to cope with and overcome these feelings.

### **Theme 3: Shared Vulnerability as a Tool for Community Building**

The study also found that shared vulnerability—open discussions about fears, failures, and insecurities—was a powerful tool for building community solidarity and resilience. Clara's story highlighted how sharing her experiences with imposter syndrome helped her and her peers feel less isolated in their struggles. These discussions fostered a supportive environment where students felt safe to express their vulnerabilities and seek help. This aspect of communal interaction was crucial for developing a collective identity that empowered individual members and strengthened their academic and personal growth.

### **Theme 4: Identity Reformation Through Community Engagement**

Community engagement played a pivotal role in the reformation of personal and professional identities among the participants. Alice, for example, used her involvement in the community to redefine her identity from an outsider to a respected elder with valuable insight. Similarly, Ben leveraged his community involvement to transition from feeling like an imposter to becoming an advocate and leader for minority students. These changes were not just personal victories but also contributed to shaping the community's culture, making it more inclusive and supportive.

### **Theme 5: Long-term Impact on Academic and Professional Development**

Finally, the long-term impact of community support on academic and professional development was evident. Participants noted that the confidence gained from their communal experiences influenced their academic performance, career choices, and professional behaviors. They reported feeling more confident in their ability to contribute to their fields, more resilient in facing academic challenges, and more proactive in seeking leadership roles and collaborative opportunities.

## **Conclusion**

This autoethnographic study delved into the nuanced experiences of doctoral students grappling with imposter syndrome, elucidating the critical role of community in navigating and mitigating these challenges. Through the personal narratives of Alice, Ben, and Clara, we have explored how imposter syndrome manifests in diverse contexts and how communal support acts as a fundamental resource for resilience and identity reformation.

The findings underscore several key insights:

- **Peer Recognition and Validation:** The acknowledgment from peers significantly helps in diminishing feelings of fraudulence, highlighting the importance of a supportive academic environment where achievements and challenges are shared openly.

**Mentorship:** Effective mentorship, especially from mentors who share similar backgrounds or have navigated similar challenges, is invaluable. It not only offers guidance and emotional support but also serves as a bridge between personal struggles and broader academic success.

- *Shared Vulnerability*: Creating spaces for the open discussion of vulnerabilities fosters a sense of belonging and mutual support, which is crucial for combatting the isolation that often accompanies imposter syndrome.
- *Community Engagement*: Active participation in a community not only helps individuals to reframe their personal identities but also strengthens the community itself, making it more inclusive and supportive.
- *Long-term Impact*: The confidence and resilience built through these community interactions have a profound long-term impact on students' academic trajectories and professional lives, empowering them to take on leadership roles and engage more fully in their fields.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how academic communities can be structured to support the psychological well-being and professional growth of doctoral students. It highlights the necessity of institutional policies and programs that foster these supportive networks, promoting not just academic excellence but holistic development. This research advocates for a shift in academic culture—one that recognizes and actively addresses the emotional and interpersonal dimensions of doctoral education, thereby enriching the entire academic ecosystem.

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**THE JOURNEY OF LIFE: SHAPESHIFTING THROUGH CHALLENGES AND TRANSFORMATIONS**

**Reginald Gray**

Life's journey encompasses individuals' diverse experiences, challenges, and transformations. The term "shapeshifter" serves as a potent metaphor for those who have grappled with issues of identity and opportunity or their absence. It signifies the capacity to adapt and evolve to thrive in varying circumstances. This narrative prompts me to contemplate my path from the tranquil streets of Grambling, Louisiana, to the vibrant avenues of Dallas, Texas, shedding light on the triumphs and adversities that have shaped my complex identity. This tale embodies personal struggles and a quest for resilience, versatility, wisdom, and justice, all encapsulated within the concept of a shapeshifter.

**Prologue**

From Grambling, Louisiana, to Dallas, Texas, my life has always been a testament to adaptation and transformation. As a young Black man navigating the complexities of identity and opportunities, I embraced the paradigm of a shapeshifter. This concept encapsulates the idea of fitting in and thriving within different environments. This narrative is a journey through a multifaceted identity, encompassing the triumphs and challenges that have shaped my path—a path paved with resilience and adaptability that can inspire others.

**Early Years: Roots in Grambling**

Growing up in Grambling, a small-town rich in history and community, set the tone for a close-knit environment where everyone knew each other. Pride in the local university, Grambling State, ran deep in that town, infusing the community with a spirit of resilience and excellence. My hardworking and resilient parents instilled a love for education and adaptability. They were my first examples of shapeshifters—gracefully and resolutely moving through the roles of parents, providers, and community members.

My parents' influence stretched beyond their immediate roles. My hardworking father and tender yet firm mother personified the principles of adaptability. They balanced obligations with such ease, teaching me that the only real strength a human being has is the ability to change with adversity. Their teachings and actions laid the foundation for my future.

I was a quiet kid at school who loved reading and had an inquiring mind. The local library became an escape, offering a window to the world beyond Grambling. Books introduced me to new cultures, ideas, and possibilities. Historical biographies and science fiction were my favorite genres, each expanding my sense of what was possible. These literary adventures fueled my dreams and ambitions, pushing me to live beyond the parameters of my small town.

Even in Grambling, I faced racism and a lack of opportunities. These experiences taught me valuable lessons in adversity, resilience, and willpower. I witnessed firsthand how systemic structures tried to hold people back based on race. These challenges did not deter me; instead, they ignited a fire in me to strive for more and overcome those barriers.

As a child, I was heavily involved in sports. Football and basketball taught me the importance of teamwork, discipline, and hard work—skills essential for any group striving for success. These lessons helped me fit into different social settings and cultivate brotherhood among my peers. Music became another outlet for expression, allowing me to connect with others and find my distinctive identity, blending my intellectual pursuits with my cultural heritage. The discipline and camaraderie I learned from sports and the self-expression and connection I found through music were invaluable in shaping my resilience and adaptability.

With its rich culture and collective spirit, the Grambling community was a constant source of inspiration. Events like the annual Bayou Classic and local parades were more than just celebrations; they affirm our shared pride. These gatherings underscored the importance of community support and belonging for personal growth and resilience. The support and encouragement from this community were instrumental in shaping my identity and preparing me for the challenges ahead.

As the years passed, my ambitions solidified. Education, deeply valued by my parents and supportive community, became my primary aspiration. I set my sights on higher education and making an impact, emphasizing the importance of learning and growth in my journey.

### **The Move to Dallas: A New Horizon**

The transition from Grambling to Dallas was both exciting and intimidating. Dallas's sprawling urban landscape and vibrant cultural scene starkly contrasted with my hometown's familiar setting. Here, I had to learn to navigate a new social and educational landscape, forcing me to adapt and continuously redefine myself. The challenges were numerous, from cultural differences to academic pressures, but each was an opportunity for growth and resilience.

At a predominantly white high school, I quickly learned the art of code-switching—the ability to speak and act one way in one situation and another in a different context. I blended in with ease on the surface while remaining true to myself internally. Academics and extracurricular activities became my saving grace. Music, in particular, became a compelling outlet for expression, allowing me to connect with others and find my distinctive identity. This fusion of intellectual curiosity and cultural heritage was vital to my growth.



Dallas offered opportunities that would have been unimaginable in Grambling: vast resources, access to thousands of people, and a diverse population. These opportunities allowed me to explore interests I had never had the capacity for. I threw myself into various activities, from academic clubs to sports teams, which helped me develop leadership skills and expand my social network.

Inspired by my interest in shaping and making a difference, I pursued economics after high school. This decision led me to Southern Methodist University (SMU), which became a transformative experience. I earned a bachelor's degree in advertising and two master's degrees in economics and applied economics. My time at SMU was marked by rigorous academic challenges, competing with peers from diverse backgrounds, which sharpened my analytical skills and deepened my understanding of economics, highlighting the transformative impact of higher education.

### **The College Years: Broadening Horizons**

At SMU, I joined the university basketball team. Being part of the team meant much more than playing games; it was about fitting into a new community and learning the values of teamwork, discipline, and perseverance. Balancing athletics and academics was tough, but it taught me valuable time-management skills and resilience. The camaraderie and friendships I formed off the court were just as important, helping me feel at home in college's vast, unfamiliar environment.

Beyond sports, I immersed myself in SMU's diverse social life. I attended white fraternity and sorority parties, Cinco de Mayo celebrations, and St. Patrick's Day parades—events that taught me about cultural appreciation and understanding. My interactions with people from various backgrounds further broadened my perspective, helping me navigate relationships in a multicultural context. I co-founded Mastaminds Entertainment LLC with my best friend, Matt Ganuchau, during my sophomore year. Our record label was born out of a desire to create a platform for local talent and merge my love for music with my entrepreneurial spirit. Juggling the responsibilities of a full-time student, athlete, and entrepreneur was challenging, but it was a labor of love that paid off in unexpected ways.

I began organizing parties to support myself financially. My business savvy and understanding of the social dynamics at SMU led me to collaborate with white fraternities and sororities, breaking down racial barriers and creating inclusive events. These parties became incredibly popular, attracting students from all backgrounds. For me, they weren't just parties but opportunities for networking and brand-building. I expanded my social network, gained business insights, and built confidence to turn challenges into opportunities.

Running a record label and organizing events equipped me with business knowledge in marketing, financial management, and negotiation. These skills were invaluable in both my academic projects and real-world business ventures. My professors encouraged me to incorporate my entrepreneurial experiences into my studies, further enriching my educational journey. The music and event business also introduced me to new technologies, including digital rights management and blockchain. I became a Blockchain IP Consultant, helping artists with NFT strategies to better manage their digital rights and monetization. This placed me at the forefront of the intersection between technology and the music industry, showcasing my adaptability and forward-thinking approach.

### **Graduate School: Mastering Economics and Applied Economics**

After completing my undergraduate degree at SMU, I pursued two master's degrees—one in economics and another in applied economics. This decision stemmed from my desire to engage more deeply with economic theory and its real-world applications. Graduate school was challenging but rewarding, refining my analytical skills and opening new avenues for growth. I extensively researched theoretical and practical economic problems during my graduate studies. Collaborating with top professors on critical projects involving market trends, financial models, and policy impacts allowed me to apply my knowledge meaningfully. These experiences, internships, and collaborations with local businesses broadened my understanding of economics. Teaching also became an essential aspect of my graduate experience. As a teaching assistant, I led tutorials and lectures for undergraduates, reinforcing my knowledge while developing my communication and leadership skills.

### **Professional Career: Shapeshifting in the Workforce**

After graduating, my career took me through diverse roles that required different skills and parts of my identity. I worked as a full-time professor at Paul Quinn College, an HBCU, and as an adjunct professor at other colleges like Navarro and Collin College. These roles allowed me to further hone my teaching skills and deepen my understanding of economics. One of my most fulfilling roles has been as a full-time professor at Dallas College, where I launched a lecture series, "Make America Think Again," focusing on critical thinking and civic engagement. This work represents my commitment to education and social justice. In balancing academia and entrepreneurship, I gained a unique vantage point on the intersections of culture, economics, and identity. From negotiating record deals to delivering lectures, I have learned to adapt and excel in different environments.

### **Struggles and Successes: Facing Racism and Sexism**

*Systemic barriers like racism and sexism have accompanied me throughout my journey. Proving my competence and credibility in academia was often expected of me in ways it wasn't for my white counterparts. These disheartening experiences only solidified my resolve to advocate for equity and inclusion. Serving on the Board of Commissioners for the Dallas Housing Authority has positioned me to effectively address housing inequality and represent marginalized communities.*

### **Epilogue**

Today, I embody the true essence of a shapeshifter. My life journey has been a series of transformations and adaptations, allowing me to navigate and thrive in various professional, personal, and social contexts. From my quiet upbringing in Grambling to my multifaceted life in Dallas, the art of shapeshifting has enabled me to embrace change, overcome adversity, and stay committed to justice and equality. I remain committed to my core education, equity, and community-building principles as I continue my journey. My story inspires others, particularly those who find themselves navigating multiple worlds. Adaptability, self-discovery, and resilience are the keys to thriving in an ever-changing world.

## SCHOLAR PERSPECTIVES

### SHAPESHIFTING IN ACADEMIA: NAVIGATING MULTIPLE ROLES AS BLACK WOMEN TEACHER EDUCATORS AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

Tiffany N. Hollis

#### Abstract

As a Black woman teacher educator at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), the experience of shape-shifting can be complex and multifaceted. It often involves navigating intersecting identities and power dynamics within the academic environment. In this context, shape-shifting may entail adapting one's demeanor, communication style, and appearance to conform to the norms and expectations of the institution, which are often influenced by white cultural standards. This could include modifying speech patterns, adjusting teaching strategies, or downplaying aspects of one's racial or gender identity in order to be perceived as competent and professional within the predominantly white academic culture. Furthermore, Black women teacher educators (BWTEs) at PWIs may face additional pressures to serve as representatives or role models for diversity, which can place a burden on them to constantly prove their worth and expertise in predominantly white spaces. Despite these challenges, many BWTEs also leverage their unique perspectives and experiences to enrich the academic environment and advocate for equity and inclusion within their institutions. They may draw on their cultural knowledge and community connections to develop curriculum that reflects diverse perspectives, mentor students from underrepresented backgrounds, and engage in scholarly research that addresses issues of race, gender, and social justice in education. However, it's important for PWIs to recognize and address the systemic barriers and biases that contribute to the need for shape-shifting among BWTEs. BWTEs at PWIs navigate place and time to advance equity, justice, and liberation while disrupting oppressive structures so that they can thrive authentically.

**Keywords:** shapeshifting, space, place, time, Black women teacher educators (BWTEs), social justice, liberation, teacher education, PWI, othermothering, Black tax

As higher education continues to diversify, the experiences of underrepresented faculty members, particularly Black women teacher educators, remain complex and fraught with challenges. Within predominantly white institutions (PWIs), Black women teacher educators (BWTEs) navigate a unique and multifaceted experience shaped by race, gender, and academic role. This paper delves into the phenomenon of "shape-shifting," an adaptive strategy BWTEs employ to navigate white-dominated institutional norms and expectations. Shape-shifting, in this context, involves altering one's demeanor, speech, and appearance to fit within an academic culture that often marginalizes expressions of Blackness and femininity (Gee, 2004).

The need to shape-shift is frequently imposed by implicit biases within PWIs that associate whiteness with professionalism and Blackness with incompetence or otherness. Collins (1986) noted that Black women have been the 'other within.' The 'other within' regarding the academic landscape shows that when a Black woman earns a tenure-track position in a predominantly white school, she is laden with service, acting as the nurturer to scores of Black students who also feel ostracized in white environments; nonetheless, she typically performs such service silently (Mawhinney, 2011).

At many schools of education, teacher candidates are trained on classroom instruction with minimal attention to the systemic barriers faced by marginalized groups, particularly Teacher Candidates of Color (TCOC). This paper explores the challenges TCOC encounter in predominantly white spaces, including systemic racism, cultural marginalization, microaggressions, and implicit bias. Consequently, professors who are disruptors often take on personal risks and bear the burden of "the Black tax"—uncompensated labor that goes unrecognized—while advocating for educational equity and justice.

TCOC navigate these barriers by forming supportive networks and affinity groups and creating counterspaces to buffer racialized and gendered experiences. Centering the lived experiences of TCOC highlights the realities of anti-Blackness in K-12 education, educator preparation programs, and future teaching roles. Consequently, this paper examines shape-shifting as both a survival mechanism and a form of resistance, acknowledging the toll it takes on BWTEs while also recognizing the strengths and contributions that Black women bring to academia.

### **The Complexities of Shape-Shifting**

Shape-shifting, for BWTEs, is an adaptive response to institutional norms that prioritize and validate white cultural standards. This process may manifest in various ways, including modifying speech patterns, adjusting body language, or adapting teaching methods to align with expectations of "professionalism." Such modifications are not merely strategic but are often necessary to gain acceptance, legitimacy, and professional recognition within predominantly white academic settings. However, this adaptive process can be emotionally and psychologically taxing, as BWTEs may feel pressured to downplay or mask aspects of their identity to avoid stereotypes and biases associated with Blackness and femininity.

The next few pages will discuss how complexities of shape-shifting shows up in the academy and how Black women teacher educators have to shape shift in order to navigate certain aspects of the academy. Shape shifting in academia could lead to role strain, being the token, cultural taxation, racial battle fatigue and being the safe space for students.

### **Role Strain and the Burden of Representation**

Beyond shape-shifting, BWTEs at PWIs often bear the weight of dual roles. In addition to their responsibilities as educators, they are frequently seen as representatives of diversity within the institution (Warren-Gordon & Mayes, 2017). This role entails serving as visible examples of racial and gender diversity, mentoring students from underrepresented backgrounds, and often being called upon to participate in diversity initiatives. While BWTEs often take pride in supporting and advocating for marginalized students, the constant need to prove their competence in predominantly white spaces can lead to role strain, leaving them feeling isolated and overextended.

This burden of representation is exacerbated by the pressures of being "the only" or "one of few" Black women in predominantly white faculty circles, a reality that limits access to solidarity and support. Furthermore, BWTEs may face heightened scrutiny of their teaching and research, which can be compounded by students and colleagues who perceive them through a lens of racial or gender bias. This scrutiny reinforces the need for shape-shifting as a defense mechanism, even as it imposes an additional psychological burden (Moore, Salas, & Miller, 2024).

Black and Brown faculty consistently face challenges being racially and ethnically diverse in institutions of higher education that are known more for being spaces that elevate and center whiteness (power structure and ruling ideology), than being inclusive or equitable spaces where Black and Brown faculty can thrive, not just survive. This phenomenon is known as the Black Tax and it certainly has an influence on the everyday experiences of BWTEs. Palmer and Walker (2020) describe the Black Tax as "the psychological weight or stressor that Black people experience from consciously or unconsciously thinking about how White Americans perceive the social construct of Blackness" (para. 2). It is a result of anti-Black racism which heuristically also represents racialized macro and microaggressions experienced by other racially minoritized groups.

**Cultural (Black) Tax**

In 1994, Padilla coined the idea of “cultural taxation” as the rare assault of experiences of ethnic faculty in academia. At its core, “cultural taxation” was a term to describe the unique set of extra encumbrances and responsibilities put upon faculty of color (FOC) (and thereby within Black faculty) by the administration to legitimize their place in the academy. These superfluous burdens demonstrate the willingness of FOC to display good stewardship and citizenship to the institution—essentially, to be good soldiers. This “cultural taxation” was one of the prices of admission and clandestine workload burdens into the labyrinthic world of academe for a faculty member of color.

Cultural taxation refers to the additional responsibilities and pressures placed on faculty of color, often related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work. Black women in academia frequently experience this as a dual burden: while they work to advance DEI initiatives, they also bear an extra weight of proving their credibility and worth. While FOC needed to pay this cultural tax in order to secure her/his role in the academy, the type of work that was completed was often unrecognized and unrewarded in the promotion and tenure process. According to Padilla (1994) there are six examples of cultural taxation in the academy for faculty of color:

1. Being the “expert” on matters of diversity; 2) Being called upon to educate majority group about diversity; 3) Serving on affirmative action task committees; 4) Serving as liaison between the institution and ethnic communities; 5) Sacrificing time from one’s work to serve as “solver, troubleshooter, or negotiator” for conflicts among administration, students, and community; and 6) Serving as translators for non-English speaking visitors to the campus. (p. 26)

Black women at PWIs undergo constant policing and monitoring of the cultural self-created unnecessary stress to the point where they often contemplate leaving their institutions (Warren-Gordon & Mayes, 2017). The plantation-like system of “free” labor and “be seen but not heard” at PWIs exclude Black women’s presence, dismisses their voices, exploits their service, and ignores the additional tenure-track challenges Black women confront—these affronts highlight the CRT tenet of interest conversion as Black women participate in service (free labor) that continues to benefit white faculty and students at the expense of Black women. Diversity efforts at PWIs appear to only tolerate and subjugate Black women rather than embrace and proliferate, which suggests that the presence of Black women at PWI is transactional, and statements of diversity and inclusion are simply buzz words that are popular in mainstream America, such as “belonging”.

Consequently, it is hard to promote and encourage belonging when the hurt and harm comes from within those same systems and people who are contributing to the harm and hurt of minoritized individuals, whether it is through policies, pedagogy, or positions.

Missing from the diversity equation is the development of authentic measures to understand Black women's plight in the academy and the struggle for respect, acceptance, and the acknowledgment that institutions of higher learning reproduce plantation-like environments. As a result, Black women often have to share shift and navigate the culture of those plantation-like environments.

PWIs should consider several factors when crafting mission statements and hiring Black women faculty should--not only tick the two diversity boxes but also recognize that the magnitude of racial and gender stressors in the academy supersede the already known inherent stressors associated with obtaining tenure. Black women at PWIs delicately balance their existence and counter the stereotypes and tropes that are often ascribed to them, to include the angry Black woman (Ashley, 2014), non-intellectual (Johnson-Bailey, 2015), and less scholarly output (Croom, 2017), which puts insurmountable pressures to succeed on them and contributes to the need to shapeshift to belong in spaces that were not created with them in mind, but where they belong. Cultural suppression and the multitude of racist acts these women encountered appear to contribute to psychological and/or social distress, which Arnold, Crawford, and Khalifa (2016) identify as racial battle fatigue symptoms, and suggest Black women are exhausted by their exclusion on the academic plantation.

### **Racial Battle Fatigue**

Race and gender mediate the consequences of justice work in the academy. Smith (2004) introduced the concept of racial battle fatigue (RBT) in the context of students in an institutional environment, like higher education. This can be extrapolated to faculty in higher education as well. The RBT framework offers that universities are operated from a systemically and historically dominant White (hegemonic) perspective (Smith, 2004). Racial battle fatigue can be defined as the psychological, physiological, and behavioral stress responses due to the cumulative impact of racial microaggressions (Smith, 2004).

Smith (2008) offered: "Racial battle fatigue addresses the physiological, psychological, and behavioral strain exacted on racially marginalized and stigmatized groups and the amount of energy they expend coping with and fighting against racism" (p. 617). People of color are physically and emotionally drained as a result of preparing against and buffering everyday racial microaggressions (Smith et al., 2006). In discussing racial battle fatigue, Smith et al. (2006) found that people of color were often so impacted by the symptoms associated with racial battle fatigue (anxiety, ulcers, insomnia, emotional withdrawal) and that a loss of confidence can occur as well as the possibility of questioning one's own self-worth. Additionally, qualitative research conducted by Smith et al. (2006) found the experience of black males on what they described as elite white campuses as frustrating feeling fearful, being shocked, and reporting signs of racial battle fatigue caused by the psychological stress they endured. Both of these ideas, academic labor costs and racial battle fatigue, are entrenched in one major idea—the extra costs associated of "doing business" for black faculty. In essence, it is the not-so clandestine and very particularized "black tax" in the academy. Black faculty must "pay to play" in a way that is required of no other faculty.



Black faculty often take on additional work assisting their (primarily Black) mentees to access networks and resources that are often veiled in the PWI context or a part of the hidden curriculum that many of them do not have access to. I have worked closely with a young woman who was the victim in a domestic abuse case, helped a young man who was the primary caregiver for his sick father and the parentified sibling for his siblings, and even helped a student get readmitted to the institution after returning from a medical leave. Not to mention the students from other areas outside of education who have been sent to me by other students to seek out assistance. Of course, I have them go through the proper channels first so as not to step on toes. Students who see how Black faculty go above and beyond often come back to let them know that they are the reason that they stayed at the institution. This contributes to retention of students from minoritized backgrounds. This kind of work, while rewarding and essential for retaining underrepresented students, also takes energy and has a psychological impact on Black faculty who help students through tough times.

### **Fictive Kinships and Othermothering as a Black Women Teacher Educator**

There are a number of ways African American women can build community on their campuses to provide support that speaks to their specific needs of working with dual-marginalized identities at PWIs. To foster an environment of support, African American women should connect with colleagues through racial and/or gender-based affinity groups. Affinity group participation that supports the needs of African American women is an intentional approach to reducing the feelings of “outsider within” on campus. These campus-based affinity groups can provide support, celebrate accomplishments, provide a safe space to share counter-stories to reduce the impact of negative interactions in the workplace (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003), and work collectively to address workplace challenges (Warren-Gordon & Mayes, 2017). In addition, mentoring programs are able to support the specific needs of African American women, share knowledge of their experiences working on campus, and provide insight on how to utilize campus-based resources through a more focused engagement.

At PWIs, African American students are generally faced with a small community of students who share their racial identity. Students with a desire to connect with same-race staff will seek out these individuals on their campuses. Regardless of staff members’ roles, students will seek them out to expand their campus community to create a network of support. Students are motivated to create a community of support that is similar to the community of othermothers that supported them from childhood through high school (Mawhinney, 2011). African American students seek out African American women that are in campus leadership roles as a way to recreate the environments where othermothering was present in their lives. These campus connections by African American students often add additional work hours to staff that are currently overworked, underpaid and overlooked by campus leadership (Warren-Gordon & Mayes, 2017).

There is an opportunity for campus administrators to increase their awareness and knowledge of the ways African American women support African American students through the practice of othermothering. It is important that universities gain a greater awareness of the needs of all students, but especially the minoritized students on their campus. Campus administrators need to gain awareness of these specific students' experiences because they will differ than students who are part of the majority population. African American students at PWIs face different challenges than majority students and campus leaders need to develop an awareness to these challenges that could negatively impact students' persistence and graduation rates.

This is an opportunity for campus leaders at PWIs to engage in conversations with African American students regarding their campus experiences inside and outside of the classroom. These conversations between campus leaders and African American students on how they connect with resources and build community that supports their academic success will bring attention to the ways African American women connect with students through the practice of othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005). Campus leaders at PWIs should engage in conversations with African American women that incorporate othermothering practices with higher education practices to gain insight on how they support and engage with students. Under the leadership and direction of African American women, there is an opportunity to educate administrators on the history of othermothering and amplify the ways it supports students' academic success and build campus community. The attention and support by campus leaders of the utilization of the cultural tradition of othermothering at PWIs has the potential to improve how the work of African American women is evaluated by campus colleagues. As the awareness of the practice of othermothering grows and is valued by campus leaders at PWIs, the work of African American women can be better accessed for appropriate financial compensation and evaluation of work performance.

My office has been considered a safe space over the years where students knew that they could get a hug, get a snack, get assistance with a problem, take a nap, and even just be and exist away from the outside world without having to walk all the way back or drive back to their dorms or apartments. If they needed food because they had run out of money on their student dining hall account or had just gone through a break up with a girlfriend, boyfriend, or had a disagreement with a parent, they would come to my office and I would show them how to do a referral for the Dean of Students Office for food, counseling, or any other service that could support them. On the other hand, the office conversations were primarily used for talking through personal issues. As a Black women teacher educator, I have often put on my counseling hat, my social worker hat, and even my student affairs hat to assist students with issues.

My office is a safe space to vent serious concerns or issues with students that had nothing to do with academics. It is seen as a space of liberation that allows students to show up and their whole selves on campus. For instance, students have even done their lashes and their weaves in my office. Students discuss a lot of concerns outside of academics, including their concerns about questioning their sexuality, being in situationships, disagreements they had with roommates, or concerns about friends and/or family members.

I provided a shoulder for students to cry on (literally), an ear to hear their issues and concerns, and a smile to welcome them as they entered my space. This has proven to be important in creating a culture of care and understanding (CCU) among students and to help them through situations by showing care and extending grace. If there were problems working through institutional red tape, students would come to my office for help. I often advocated for students in areas like financial aid for loan assistance and within academic departments to work through course-related issues. I felt that students' lives could affect their academics, and if I could support them emotionally, this would ensure that they could fulfill their academic commitment. The role of the professor and othermother as an advocate is evidence of shapeshifting to meet the needs of the students at a PWI. As a result, shapeshifting can be a double edged-sword where one side is draining and time consuming, but the other side is rewarding and it cultivates joy when BWTEs help students thrive in an environment where they often have to deal with the conformity of white standards and white norms.

### **Leveraging Identity for Social Justice and Equity**

Despite these challenges, BWTEs leverage their cultural knowledge and lived experiences to make valuable contributions to the academic environment. Many develop curricula that reflect diverse perspectives, drawing upon their community connections to enrich their teaching and research. This approach not only enhances the educational experiences of students from underrepresented backgrounds but also exposes all students to a broader and more inclusive understanding of the world. Additionally, BWTEs engage in scholarship that addresses issues of race, gender, and social justice, contributing to critical dialogues within their institutions and the wider academic field.

For BWTEs, cultural knowledge and experiences become powerful tools to resist the constraints of predominantly white academic culture. Through mentorship and support, they create spaces of belonging for students and colleagues from marginalized communities, challenging the exclusivity of traditional academic spaces and fostering a more inclusive, student-centered environment.

### Conclusion

The need for shape-shifting among BWTEs underscores the presence of systemic barriers within PWIs, where implicit biases and structural inequalities persist. These institutions often fail to recognize or address the unique challenges faced by BWTEs, inadvertently perpetuating a culture in which they must constantly navigate and conform to white-dominated norms. For PWIs to foster true inclusivity, it is essential to create institutional policies that address the biases and barriers that drive the need for shape-shifting.

This includes promoting hiring practices that value diversity in all its forms, creating professional development opportunities that increase cultural competency, and building support systems for underrepresented faculty. By fostering a climate that values the contributions of BWTEs without forcing them to conform, institutions can begin to dismantle the systemic biases that require shape-shifting as a survival mechanism.

The position Black women hold in any space presents limitations. The need for shape-shifting among BWTEs underscores the presence of systemic barriers within PWIs, where implicit biases and structural inequalities persist. These institutions often fail to recognize or address the unique challenges faced by BWTEs, inadvertently perpetuating a culture in which they must constantly navigate and conform to white-dominated norms. For PWIs to foster true inclusivity, it is essential to create institutional policies that address the biases and barriers that drive the need for shape-shifting.

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**NAVIGATING INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITY AS A BLACK FEMALE PROFESSOR ACROSS  
SPACE, PLACE, & TIME**

**Anissa Guerin**

**Abstract**

In the landscape of higher education, Black female professors face a complex interplay of challenges and opportunities within historically white institutions (HWIs). In this autoethnographic reflection, I delve into the intricacies of navigating academia as a real-life shapeshifter, continually negotiating identity within white educational spaces. Drawing upon Gee's (2004) concept of shapeshifting and the intersectionality of race and sex, I explore the nuanced dynamics shaping the experiences of Black female professors in the academy. Through critical self-reflection and personal narrative, I illuminate the unique resilience required to navigate systemic inequalities. By interrogating the intersections of race, sex, and power dynamics, I contribute to a deeper understanding of identity formation within higher education. This submission responds directly to the journal's call for papers, addressing the complexities of space, place, and time in identity exploration. By amplifying the voices of Black female scholars, I aim to advance discussions on equity, justice, and liberation within educational institutions. This reflection offers a vital perspective on the intersectionality of race and sex, highlighting its profound implications for Black female professors in the academy and emphasizing its significance in fostering equity and justice in higher education.

**Keywords:** *Intersectionality, Shapeshifting, Historically White Institutions (HWIs), Systemic Inequalities, Black Female Professors, Codeswitching*

Within the realm of academia, where knowledge is cultivated and disseminated, lies a landscape often fraught with complexities, particularly for those who exist at the intersections of race and gender. As a Black female professor navigating the intricate terrain of higher education within the academy, my journey has been one characterized by continual negotiation of identity. It is within this context that I propose to contribute an autoethnographic reflection delving into the multifaceted experiences of navigating white educational spaces as a Black female professor.

Informed by Gee's (2004) concept of shapeshifting, which encapsulates the adaptive strategies employed by historically marginalized groups to navigate dominant cultural norms, my autoethnographic reflection seeks to offer a personal narrative on the nuanced dynamics of identity negotiation within academia. Drawing upon my lived experiences and engaging in critical self-reflection, I aim to illuminate the intricate interplay between race, gender, and power dynamics that shape the experiences of Black women in educational settings. Thereby amplifying underrepresented voices in discussions of equity and liberation within higher education, fostering critical dialogue on the lived experiences of those who navigate complex social and professional environments as real-life shapeshifters.

### **Exploring Intersectional Identity in Academia**

Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), refers to the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability, and how they overlap to create unique experiences of discrimination or privilege. In academia, intersectionality serves as a critical framework for understanding the complex interplay of identities within academic spaces. The intersectionality of race and sex, in particular, has been a focal point of research and discourse within academia, revealing the nuanced ways in which individuals navigate their identities and experiences.

The intersectionality of race and sex in academia highlights the diverse challenges faced by individuals at the intersections of multiple marginalized identities. Scholars like Patricia Hill Collins (2015) have emphasized the importance of recognizing and addressing these challenges, arguing that traditional approaches to feminist theory often fail to adequately capture the experiences of women of color. Black women in the academy may face unique experiences that are distinct from those experienced by white women or black men. This intersectional perspective stresses the need for academic institutions to adopt more inclusive policies and practices that account for the diversity of experiences among faculty, staff, and students.

Exploring intersectional identity in academia holds significant importance as it allows for a more comprehensive understanding of individuals' experiences, challenges, and contributions within academic settings. By acknowledging the intersections of various identities such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and disability, scholars can better address the complexities of discrimination and privilege (Crenshaw, 1989). This approach is essential for recognizing and addressing the unique forms of marginalization experienced by individuals at the intersections of multiple identities (Collins, 2015). Incorporating intersectional perspectives into research and teaching practices not only enhances the quality and inclusivity of scholarship but also contributes to broader goals of social justice and equity within academic institutions (Cho et al., 2013). Furthermore, it empowers marginalized voices and informs policy decisions aimed at promoting diversity and inclusion (McCall, 2005; Nash, 2008). However, negotiating identity in academia can be fraught with challenges. Marginalized individuals may encounter bias, discrimination, and microaggressions based on their intersecting identities. For example, a female person of color may face double discrimination in academic settings, contending with racism and sexism from peers and colleagues (Gee, 2004). Moreover, the pressure to conform to dominant norms and expectations within academia can create feelings of isolation and imposter syndrome among marginalized individuals (Gee, 2004). These challenges underscore the importance of creating supportive and inclusive academic environments that validate the experiences of all members of the academic community.

### **Autoethnographic Reflection**

As a Black female professor navigating the academy, my experiences have been shaped by a complex interplay of personal identity, institutional culture, and systemic inequalities.

Within these spaces, my presence often stands out amidst a sea of whiteness, highlighting the stark contrast between my own racial and gender identity and the dominant culture of academia. Reflecting on my experiences, I am keenly aware of the complexities of intersectional identity and the ways in which race, gender, and other intersecting identities intersect to shape my interactions and experiences within the academy. As a Black woman, I have the potential to face dual burdens of racism and sexism, facing unique challenges that are distinct from those experienced by counterparts of other races and ethnicities. This critical self-reflection has deepened my understanding of the ways in which power and privilege operate within educational spaces. I explore the pervasive pressures to perform while combating stereotypes such as the 'Black Angry Girl,' negotiating the practice of codeswitching, confronting isolation, and enduring microaggressions. These experiences underscore the intersectional challenges of race and gender within educational spaces, revealing the need for more inclusive and equitable practices.



### **Different Strokes for Different Folks**

One concept that sheds light on the intricate process of negotiating identity in academia is "shapeshifting," as articulated by linguist James Paul Gee (2004). Gee (2004) describes shapeshifting as a form of code-switching where individuals from marginalized backgrounds adeptly navigate diverse social contexts and power dynamics. In academic settings, shapeshifting involves modifying language, behavior, or appearance to align with prevailing cultural norms or expectations. For instance, a Black female professor may engage in shapeshifting or code-switching between my home community and academic environments, adjusting linguistic styles and cultural cues to establish rapport and credibility. This phenomenon underscores the multifaceted strategies Black women employ to negotiate their identities within the complex terrain of academia.

Having been raised in Louisiana with deep roots in Black Creole culture, my upbringing has imbued me with a unique linguistic and cultural identity. Our language, often referred to as "broken French," possesses a distinct beauty and tone that reflects our heritage and community bonds. While I take pride in my cultural roots, as a Black female faculty member in the academy, I frequently find it necessary to engage in shapeshifting or code-switching for strategic reasons, particularly in navigating predominantly white institutional environments. Academia, especially in historically white institutions (HWIs), often adheres to specific communication norms that may not align with the linguistic and cultural styles of Black faculty members, like myself.

Code-switching allows me to adapt my communication to fit these mainstream norms, thereby enhancing my professional credibility and effectiveness in conveying expertise. Moreover, code-switching serves as a survival strategy in professional landscapes where perceptions of professionalism and competence can be influenced by communication styles. By utilizing a more standard or formal language, I aim to mitigate potential biases or stereotypes that could hinder my career advancement. This strategic adaptation helps me navigate the nuances of academic interactions, from classroom communication to administrative meetings, where clarity and conformity to the dominant communication styles are valued. Additionally, code-switching enables me to effectively communicate with diverse audiences within academia, including students, colleagues, and administrators who may not be familiar with or accustomed to African American Vernacular English (AAVE), my heritage, or other Louisiana cultural expressions.

Adjusting my language and communication styles ensures that my messages are understood and respected in various academic contexts.

Beyond professional survival and effective communication, code-switching also represents a nuanced negotiation of cultural identity. It allows me to navigate between different linguistic and cultural settings while maintaining my cultural authenticity and strategically positioning myself within the academic hierarchy. This enables me to assert my expertise without compromising my identity or background.

In practice, code-switching among Black female faculty in academia is a multifaceted strategy driven by the need to navigate institutional norms, enhance professional opportunities, ensure effective communication, and affirm cultural identity (Gee, 2004). It highlights the complexities of identity and power dynamics within academic environments, where linguistic and cultural diversity intersects with professional expectations and career aspirations. While it can be a survival strategy for navigating challenging or unfamiliar environments, it can also pose challenges to one's sense of authenticity and belonging.

### **Pressure to Overperform**

Having worked in higher education for over a decade, I have consistently felt the intense pressure to excel, understanding that anything less than excellence was not an option. As a Black woman, this pressure was compounded by societal expectations. Research underscores that Black women encounter heightened standards and obstacles in professional settings due to the intersecting dynamics of race and gender (Crenshaw, 1989). Many Black women resonate with the sentiment that we must work harder and achieve more to be perceived as equal to our white and male peers (Lewis, 2020). In each position or promotion I have attained, I keenly felt the need to validate my competence. This sentiment is widespread among minority professionals who are acutely aware of the stereotypes and biases that influence hiring decisions (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). Making mistakes was simply not an option; I was determined to demonstrate unequivocally that hiring me was the right decision (McGee, 2015).

During my first year as an Assistant Professor, I also assumed the role of doctoral program coordinator—typically reserved for senior faculty. This dual responsibility demanded a delicate balance of teaching, research, administrative duties, and several projects, which could at times feel overwhelming at times. Nonetheless, I approached these challenges eagerly, driven by a desire to contribute meaningfully to the university despite the added pressures and responsibilities. Research indicates that Black women faculty often confront systemic barriers to career advancement, such as limited mentorship opportunities and support networks tailored to their specific needs (Griffin, 2021). Consequently, many rely heavily on their own efforts and resilience to succeed in academia (Turner et al., 2019). In summary, I believe the experiences I encounter reflect a nuanced interplay of race and gender dynamics that profoundly shape my career path. These experiences inform the strategies employed to achieve success in demanding environments.

### **Fighting the “Angry Black Girl” Stereotype**

Black women contend with pervasive negative stereotypes in mainstream American culture, particularly the portrayal of the “angry Black woman,” which depicts them as aggressive, irritable, irrational, domineering, hostile, and unintelligent without cause (Ashley, 2018). These stereotypes have deep historical roots and are perpetuated through global media representations.

As a Black female faculty member, I am acutely conscious of how I present myself during faculty meetings and campus events. When engaging in scholarly debates, I am hyper-aware of my tone, voice, and demeanor, knowing that maintaining composure is crucial to avoid falling into the stereotype trap. This stereotype often emerged as a response to external stressors and historical injustices faced by Black women (Ashley, 2018).

In discussions and interactions, vigilance is essential because Black women may find themselves at the receiving end of unfair treatment, with limited support or defense (McDonough, 2018). Historical feminist movements have frequently overlooked the unique challenges and perspectives of Black women, further complicating their experiences in academic and professional settings (McDonough, 2018). As expressed in McDonough's study, "It's not easy being a Black woman who believes in something strongly and isn't afraid to convey it.

Every time we stand up for ourselves, express an opinion or have a viewpoint that makes some uncomfortable, we're deemed 'angry,' 'hostile,' or 'uncooperative'" (McDonough, 2018). This sentiment reflects the frustration many Black women feel when their assertiveness is misconstrued as aggression. Avoiding confrontations becomes a survival strategy. Colleagues have been surprised by my composed responses even during emotionally charged debates, an adaptation necessary for survival that other racial groups may not have to consider (McDonough, 2018). Navigating the stereotype of the angry Black woman demands constant vigilance and strategic social navigation, underscoring broader issues of race, gender, and representation in academic and professional contexts. Unlike their counterparts from majority racial groups, Black women often face a double-bind dilemma where assertiveness that would be seen as confident or authoritative in others might be interpreted as intimidating or hostile (Crenshaw, 1989; Lewis, 2020). The necessity to manage these perceptions skillfully is a survival strategy born of historical and ongoing systemic biases that depict Black women as less deserving of respect and fair treatment (Smith, 2017). This challenge requires Black women not only to excel professionally but also to navigate social dynamics with an acute awareness of racial and gender expectations (Smith, 2017). Moreover, this adaptation is not just about personal advancement but also about challenging and reshaping institutional norms and biases. By demonstrating competence, composure, and resilience, Black women in the academy can redefine stereotypes and pave the way for future generations (Griffin, 2021). In essence, the adaptation required for survival is a strategic blend of assertiveness and composure that demands a level of vigilance and resilience that may not be as imperative for those who do not face similar stereotypes and biases in their professional lives.

### **Microaggressions**

Microaggressions are pervasive in academic environments, manifesting as subtle yet impactful actions or remarks that unintentionally convey discriminatory attitudes (Sue et al., 2007). These experiences are notably prevalent in my interactions within academia.

For instance, I frequently encounter instances where I am mistaken for administrative staff or a student rather than recognized as a professor, which reflects assumptions about my professional status based solely on my appearance. Moreover, there are occasions when my qualifications are questioned, leading to a persistent need to assert my expertise and legitimacy in my role. This assumption that youth equates to a lack of experience or knowledge undermines my professional standing and requires continual affirmation of my credentials. These experiences may be compounded by broader societal biases, potentially influenced by stereotypes regarding race and gender.

Research indicates prevalent stereotypes associating Black individuals with intellectual inferiority and laziness (Devine & Elliot, 1995), and pervasive beliefs about women's incapacities in academic and professional settings (Eagly & Carli, 2007). These stereotypes can influence perceptions and interactions within academic spaces, presenting additional challenges for individuals who, like myself, identify as both Black and female.

Beyond personal experiences, there are institutional implications as well. The underrepresentation of Black educators in academia, particularly in positions of authority, poses a barrier to student engagement and rapport-building. In the United States, Black female professors remain significantly underrepresented in higher education institutions. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022), Black women constitute 4% of full-time faculty positions across various academic disciplines. Therefore, many students may have limited exposure to Black professors or educators, leading to initial assumptions or stereotypes about academic authority based on race and gender. These perceptions can manifest in students mistaking me for a graduate teaching assistant rather than recognizing my role as a professor. In addition, questioning my feedback and judgment in ways that my white colleagues may not have experienced.

Addressing these challenges requires proactive efforts to combat stereotypes and foster inclusive academic environments. Central to this effort is encouraging students to confront and reconsider their own preconceived notions about race, gender, and academic authority. By creating meaningful interactions and positive experiences that highlight my capabilities as an educator and mentor, I aim to reshape perceptions based on merit and professionalism rather than stereotypes. I aspire to contribute to a transformative educational experience where respect and recognition are based on the quality of instruction and mentorship provided, irrespective of race or gender. While navigating microaggressions and stereotypes in academia presents ongoing challenges, I remain committed to promoting inclusivity and challenging biases through education, engagement, and the cultivation of new perspectives. By fostering environments that value diversity and meritocracy, I aim to empower students and colleagues alike to appreciate the contributions of Black women educators based on their expertise and dedication to academic excellence.

### **Amplifying the Voices of Black Female Scholars in White Educational Spaces**

In predominantly white educational spaces, the voices and experiences of Black female scholars often face marginalization and erasure (Gee, 2004). However, there is a growing recognition of the importance of amplifying these voices to challenge dominant narratives and promote greater equity and inclusion within academia. As a Black female professor, I am navigating these spaces, I am committed to using my platform to elevate the voices of marginalized individuals and push for meaningful change.

One way to amplify the voices of Black female scholars is through mentorship and support networks. By connecting with other Black female academics and providing mentorship to emerging scholars, we can create spaces for mutual support, encouragement, and collaboration. These networks serve as vital resources for navigating the challenges of academia and advocating for systemic change. Additionally, Black female scholars can use their research and scholarship to center the experiences of marginalized communities and challenge dominant discourses. By conducting research that highlights the intersecting forms of oppression faced by Black women, we can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of power dynamics and social inequalities. This research has the potential to inform policy debates, shape institutional practices, and promote social justice within educational spaces. Furthermore, Black female scholars can contribute to discussions on equity, justice, and liberation in academia by actively engaging in advocacy and activism. By leveraging positions and platforms, we can mobilize collective action and effect meaningful change within institutions and beyond. In conclusion, amplifying the voices of Black female scholars in the academy is essential for promoting greater equity, justice, and liberation within academia. By fostering mentorship networks, conducting research that centers on marginalized experiences, and engaging in advocacy and activism, we can create more inclusive and equitable academic environments.

### **Conclusion**

“Living life as a black woman requires wisdom because knowledge about the dynamics of intersecting oppressions has been essential to black women’s survival. Black women cannot afford to be fools of any type for Other objectification as the Other denies us protections that white skin maleness and wealth confer.” Collins, 2002, p.257. In conclusion, my journey as a Black female in academia has been deeply shaped by the intricate interplay of race, gender, and institutional dynamics. Navigating these complexities has required resilience, determination, and a constant negotiation of identity in spaces where diversity and inclusion are ongoing challenges. Throughout my career, I have confronted pressures to overperform and combat stereotypes, while also navigating microaggressions and the need for strategic adaptation. Despite some of the challenges, teaching is not merely a job for me; it is my passion and purpose. It is a calling that drives me to educate, inspire, and empower students from all backgrounds.

Through teaching, I aim not only to impart knowledge but also to foster critical thinking, empathy, and a commitment to social justice. My dedication to creating inclusive and equitable learning environments stems from a belief in the transformative power of education to challenge stereotypes, dismantle barriers, and cultivate understanding. Looking forward, I am committed to advocating for systemic change within academia, promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion at every level. By amplifying the voices of underrepresented scholars, mentoring the next generation of academics, and challenging institutional norms, I strive to contribute to a more just and equitable academic community. As I continue on this journey, I am guided by the belief that education is a catalyst for positive change. It is through teaching and scholarship that I seek to make a meaningful impact, advancing knowledge, and advocating for social progress. By sharing my experiences and insights, I hope to inspire others to join me in creating a future where diversity is celebrated, equity is ensured, and every individual has the opportunity to thrive. In essence, teaching is not just my profession; it is my vocation, an integral part of who I am, and the legacy I aim to leave in academia and beyond.

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**BLACK ON BOTH SIDES: TEACHING IN K-12 AND HIGHER EDUCATION CLASSROOMS AT  
PREDOMINANTLY BLACK AND PREDOMINANTLY WHITE SCHOOLS**

**ArCasia D. James-Gallaway  
Chaddrick James-Gallaway**

**Abstract**

In this reflexive essay, we recast our years as K-12 classroom teachers in predominately Black schools to assess how those formative experiences have subsequently shaped our pedagogy in predominately and historically white schools. Drawing on Aimee Cox's conceptualization of shapeshifters alongside other perspectives rooted in Black studies, we begin by considering the relationship between shapeshifting and Blackness in our professional lives as critical Black, differently gendered pre-tenure professors at a conservative research-intensive university in the South. Tracing our pedagogical practices and orientations from our time as K-12 classroom teachers to higher education instructors, we subsequently demonstrate the stakes we have in the work we currently do. Next, we discuss how our evolving political commitment to intersectional racial justice ultimately helps us reconcile the specific form of shapeshifting we enact with a more confident and transparent embrace of our Blackness. We shapeshift not with the expectation that we will transform racist structures or transcend systemic racism, but in an effort not to lose ourselves by trying to fit into a space that was designed to exclude us. As we rewrite the socially constructed meanings affixed to our bodies, we accept that this revision will be illegible to some—if not most—for only certain persons have the visual capacity to see us for who and what we are.

**Keywords:** *racial realism, Black faculty, pre-tenure faculty, higher education pedagogy*



### Introduction

For Black higher education professors working at predominately white institutions who previously taught in predominantly Black K-12 settings, how is their current pedagogy shaped by these prior experiences? In which ways does race—specifically Blackness—inform how they engage with their current students and construct their pedagogical identity? What differences and similarities do they deem meaningful across these two contexts? Guided by these questions, this essay explores how we, Black tenure-track professors at a research intensive, historically white institution; navigate the current environment in which we work, drawing on our experiences as former K-12 classroom teachers at predominately Black schools. The issues we raise in this essay are important in part because few scholars have critically analyzed the pedagogy of college or university faculty relative to race and in its relationship to their previous formal teaching experiences. Additionally, little scholarship to date has examined the link between the instruction of higher education faculty and their previous experiences as educators. More specifically, little literature is available discussing the role of race or Blackness regarding these matters.

The purpose of this essay, then, is to explore how our Black identity has influenced our professional lives as two critical, Black, differently gendered, pre-tenured professors. In addition to our race and critical scholarly orientation, our pre-tenure status exacerbates the precarious nature of our professional lives, as faculty without tenure suffer greater vulnerability and less job security than our tenured counterparts. To support our analysis, we emphasize the part shapeshifting, as articulated primarily by Black feminist scholar Aimee Cox (2015), has played in our careers and what it means to us. In essence, we aim to demonstrate how our evolving political commitment to intersectional racial justice ultimately helps us reconcile the specific form of shapeshifting we enact with a more confident and transparent embrace of our Blackness. That is, we shapeshift not with the expectation that we will transform racist structures or transcend systemic racism, but in an effort not to lose ourselves by trying to fit into a space that was designed to exclude us. As we rewrite the socially constructed meanings affixed to our bodies, we accept that this revision will be illegible to some—if not most—for only certain persons have the visual capacity to see us for who and what we are.

We proceed with a brief section that highlights the space we occupy in terms of institutional setting, and then move on to discuss the conceptual underpinnings on which we rely for this essay, namely, shapeshifting (Cox, 2015), racial realism (Bell, 1992), second sight (Du Bois, 1903), and Otherness (Wynter, 2003). This framework allows us to underline the Black feminist perspectives (Gumbs, 2016) that we posit are consistent with each concept individually, and they exemplify how a Black feminist vantage point can help Black men live more justice-oriented lives (hooks, 2004).

Next, we share our individual narratives, beginning with Chaddrick's and moving on to ArCasia's. Both narratives begin with context about our K-12 teaching experiences and bring readers forward to our present work as faculty members. The following section highlights the responses our narratives offer relative to our guiding questions and implications of this essay for pedagogical studies across the K-12 and higher education spectrum. To close, we reemphasize this paper's key takeaways.

### **Where Are We?**

Understanding the important role context plays in any investigation, reflexive or otherwise, that intends to examine the ways individuals or groups navigate a social setting, we feel it is also imperative to underline the unique environment within which we currently work: at a conservative research-intensive university in the South. This research emphasis is important to note because a great deal of our professional success at such an institution depends on our scholarly productivity beyond teaching and service. Furthermore, we are employed in Texas, which comes with many other complex considerations for professors like us. The 2024 Niche College Rankings ranked Texas A&M University the 2nd most conservative public university in the nation (NICHE, n.d.). In many ways, this conservatism ranking represents a badge of honor for many long affiliated with the institution, including alumni and those who wish to be "Aggies." Such conservative values and the centuries of imperialist white supremacist capitalistic patriarchy (hooks, 2004) "that made America great" sharply misalign with our own view of history and the way we understand systemic oppression. As a result of this conservative environment, we find ourselves constantly navigating such tensions as we seek to survive within a nation, state, and institution uninterested in meaningfully addressing historic wrongs.

For both of us, the school at which we now teach is quite different from the ones at which we taught early in our careers. This current setting is not only at a different educational level, but it also is a historically white, research-intensive institution that is a member of the Association of American Universities, making it one of the most distinguished and prestigious universities in the country according to typical metrics. Perhaps most importantly, both Black students and Black faculty are said to make up approximately 3 percent of the student and faculty population, respectively (Yenor, 2023). To add, recent efforts by the state legislature have banned programmatic initiatives intended to further diversity, equity, and inclusion at Texas' public colleges and universities. While these moves have for the time being protected scholarly research and teaching, the sentiment and intentions of many who wield political power over the state are clear regarding the needs of Black learners, their communities, and those invested in supporting Black education writ large (James-Gallaway, 2024).

**Conceptual Orientation**

The work of several scholars situated within the Black studies tradition helps us illustrate the nature of our work, how it has perpetually been tied to Blackness, and what stakes we have in it. When Black feminist sociologist Aimee Cox published her book *Shapeshifters* (2015), she, drawing on Schreiber (2012) explained that “shapeshifting is defined as a method used to ‘find solutions, master concentration, recall, recontextualize ideas, and map out plans’” (p. 29); Cox linked shapeshifting to the choreography associated with moving through a space such that the people, the space, and the processes involved are subject to transformation. We deem Cox’s findings from this study on the young Black women in a Detroit homeless shelter with whom she worked especially useful for considering how differently gendered educators move through different sites with particular (seemingly subversive) political commitments. This undertaking is marked by the second sight that Black sociologist and activist William E. B. Du Bois (1903) discussed in his essay about, in part, the veil, which is linked to African Americans’ double consciousness with regard to race and racism in the United States. In essence, the color line, as Du Bois described, that long ordered and continues to organize U.S. society has impacted our teaching, even in settings that were predominately Black. This status as the Other, according to Black studies and Black feminist scholar Sylvia Wynter (2003), has long informed the way Blackness connotes Otherness across the western world. Ideas about who can be fully human, or Man as she explains, and treated as such are determined largely by one’s ontological relationship to Blackness, a configuration that supplies the full array of humanity to those whose existence is absent Blackness. In terms of the day-to-day choices Black educators like us make vis-à-vis our pedagogy, Derrick Bell’s classic essay on racial realism (1992) invites readers to rethink what it means to measure Black humanity based on the willingness to fight racial oppression while knowing the outcome: defeat. Because racism, antiBlack racism specifically, is endemic to US society, Black people are unable to annihilate it (Bell 1992; 1995); we can, however, challenge it and the very notion of the color line itself (Du Bois, 1903). In doing so, we assert our status as fully human despite claims that we are not. The way we go about contesting our inhumanity (Wynter, 2003) constitutes a form of shapeshifting—of resistance (Cox, 2015).

**Chaddrick’s Narrative****K-12**

My path towards the classroom was atypical. Unfortunately, I participated in the educational organization Teach for America (TFA). TFA’s neoliberal foundation is predicated on commodifying and privatizing the education system (Brewer & Cody, 2014; Lahann & Mitescu Reagan, 2011; Lefebvre & Thomas, 2017; Sondel, 2015). Because TFA believes in decentering collegiate teacher education training, I was not trained in a college classroom or via a traditional teacher educator program. My pedagogical experience was premised on a 6-week training session at Georgia Tech University. Each day, aspiring TFA teachers were bused to our onsite location, where we would instruct summer school. Afterwards, we were inundated with professional development training that insisted the way to be a successful teacher required us to treat students like objects and not people.

After I finished this part of my journey, I transitioned to New Orleans, where I taught in a “no excuses” charter management organization named Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP). Scholars explain that “no excuses” charter management organizations employ rigid behavior and disciplinary measures and a longer school day (Golann, 2015; Kerstetter, 2016), with KIPP specifically branding itself as an institution that uses penal-based punishment (Lack, 2009). With time, I came to see that this approach to discipline stemmed directly from antiBlack “racialized surveillance technologies” (C. James-Gallaway, 2022, p. 67), context that stirred me to more consciously invest in developing a subversive pedagogy with my students.

These professional development trainings and my first semester at KIPP made one thing overly clear: I was not there to teach children, but to control students within a system of stringent penalization. This observation was painfully evident early on because, as I would soon learn, antiBlack racism in the US is a permanent condition (Bell, 1992) animated largely by the veil Du Bois (1903) wrote about. I was placed in a KIPP school and assigned to teach 8th grade special education. Early on, I witnessed how majority white administrators and teachers oversaw the majority Black student body, seeking to control the bodies, minds, souls, and voices of students (C. James-Gallaway, 2022). These educators believed that the best way to educate Black students was to control and surveil them through antiBlack authoritative discipline. Students had little bodily autonomy; they could not do tasks I took for granted as a student, like speaking, walking, or even completing their coursework without a teacher's command. Alongside the constant surveillance of educators, the school, which was comprised of a majority Black student body, walked in chain gang like lines within and outside their classrooms (Haley, 2013), often had silent lunches, limited recess time, a strict dress code, and no room to voice criticism of their treatment without harsh consequences. The institution, the majority white administrators, and teachers believed that without controlling every moment of these Black students' time in school, little academic progress would be possible (C. James-Gallaway, 2022). If students did not precisely follow all adults' commands, their teachers were to deduct payment from their weekly “paychecks.” This payment device represented a demerit system intended to incentivize student compliance, advancing the fallacy of meritocracy as educators promoted working hard and following commands with earning money; at the same time, they linked the inverse with losing money from one's paycheck (C. James-Gallaway, 2022). If a student lost too much money from their paycheck, they would then have to attend a mandatory in-school detention while students who earned enough money were able to attend a celebratory event. Although the white teachers who enforced these practices were never educated under such conditions, they believed this was best for the Black children within the school. Witnessing Black children experience education in this way at the behest of a charter organization created and operated by majority white employees angered me immensely. It angered me because the employees of the institution had in most cases been deemed fully human by the prevailing educational system and thus had not been subject to

Otherness in the ways our Black students were (Wynter, 2003). I could not ethically practice the rules of the KIPP school because I knew this approach to discipline and learning was incompatible with Black humanity and because I did not learn under such authoritarian practices. Furthermore, I did not become an educator to police Black students; thus, I set out on my own path towards resistance, as I did not believe my Black body could educate or discipline Black students in the ways my KIPP employers saw fit (C. James-Gallaway, 2022).

Though I did not know it at the time, one central aspect of my teaching was rooted in Black fugitive pedagogy. Like many others, my K-12 or undergraduate education did not teach me about the history of Black education, which, as I have come to learn, was a Black fugitive endeavor (Givens, 2021; Gumbs, 2016). Historically, Black educators used fugitive pedagogy to reject antiBlackness within schooling spaces and to uplift the souls of Black children during the 19th and 20th centuries (Givens, 2021). This vital task for Black educators reflected their understanding that their students would have to navigate an antiBlack U.S. society (James-Gallaway & Harris, 2021). However, these actions would put Black educators directly in opposition to white administrators, school boards, and educators who wanted Black students to learn materials that denigrated and distorted Black peoples (James-Gallaway, 2019). Thus, Black educators relied on their subversive pedagogy to undermine the antiBlack curriculum.

Like Black educators that taught decades before me under different and incomparable racially dangerous circumstances (Givens, 2021), my students (aged 12-16) and I relied on Black fugitivity, as antiBlackness was a pervasive undercurrent at the school. The students I taught were inquisitive and thus asked questions about the structure of the school; if my schooling experience was like theirs; if the rules could be different in my classroom and in our interactions. The brilliant and critical students I taught challenged me to restructure our classroom and interactions in a humanizing way because we collectively disagreed with the rules of the school. As a result, I, not yet having the language to articulate such, relied on a Black fugitive pedagogy within my own teaching practice to subvert the dehumanization of Black students that the school relied on for power and control. This meant rejecting the authoritarian-minded disciplinary practices of the institution and using “communication and transparency” (C. James-Gallaway, 2022, p. 71) within student interactions to uplift the voices of students. It meant operating on co-created rules within our shared classroom space as well as outside. It also meant recognizing that despite our fugitive practices, we could still be harmed by the KIPP school. As such, we could not act like the rules did not exist when other teachers or administrators were watching. We were good actors; we still maintained the school’s rules until we were outside watchful eyes. Even during teaching evaluations, my students knew that our classroom would need to operate like the others within the school for me to keep my job.

Shapeshifting (Cox, 2015) in such a way was a testament to our evolving Black feminist-inspired vision of justice (Gumbs, 2016; hooks, 1994, 2003, 2010; James-Gallaway, 2024). As a teacher at a KIPP school, I learned that my work is to support those who are being actively harmed by those in positions of power; that it is important to turn that power over to those who are afflicted, in this case, to the students. I also learned that there were a lot of adults who maintained sexist, racist, classist mindsets that negatively impacted the students we were supposed to serve.

### **Higher Education**

My engagement of Black fugitive pedagogy in the K-12 space has informed and continues to inform my current pedagogy as a higher educator instructor. Because I am presently a university faculty member and due to the white supremacist, conservative atmosphere of Texas politics and education, I am not at liberty to detail my Black fugitive practices in this section. I take this action to protect when, where, and how I evoke Black fugitive pedagogy writ large. My actions reflect the shapeshifting (Cox, 2015) I have enacted and continue to enact because I have adapted my teaching from that suitable for K-12 students to what I deem best for higher education learners; all the while, I have remained committed to the power and importance of Blackness and Black education in a way that I believe enriches the learning experiences of all students with whom I interact. However, I will discuss my journey towards two critical theoretical frameworks, why I use them, and how they connect to my experience as an 8th grade teacher. I do so because these frameworks shape my pedagogy, praxis, and approach to instruction more broadly.

The goal of my scholarly work is to reduce the dehumanization of students, with a particular focus on Black students. One issue I noticed as an 8th grade teacher was how the majority-white teachers and administrators routinely dehumanized Black students, practices that were heightened by additional marginalities like social class, gender, mental/physical/emotional ability. Due to religious conservatism, some elder Black teachers and administrators often struggled to accept lesbian, gay, and bisexual students' identities. As an educator within the school, it was clear to me and many of my students that most if not all students faced various forms of dysconscious antiBlack racism (King, 1991). Thus, as I transitioned out of the K-12 environment, I figured one place to make change would be where individuals go to learn about practicing or researching different forms of education.

Since leaving the 8th grade classroom, I have raised my level of critical pedagogical practices and orientations through engaging subversive theoretical frameworks. I was initially introduced to this material in my graduate coursework. Two classes that transformed the way I see the role of research, education, and the world were Black Feminisms and Critical Race Theory, both of which were taught by two critical Black women scholars. These two courses allowed me to put language to the expansive world of education that Black people experience.

These two areas allowed me to comprehend systemic oppression from the bottom (Matsuda, 1987) and across multiple modalities of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill-Collins, 2000). Doing so gave me a deeper understanding of how various forms of oppression function within institutions, structures, and interpersonal relationships.

Both my former teaching experiences and graduate coursework have influenced my pedagogy in dynamic ways. As noted previously, in real time I witnessed the dehumanization of Black students within a “no excuses” KIPP charter school. Adults were the ones causing this dehumanization through the systems and structures they created, and through interpersonal student-teacher engagement. Given this context, I view as my first objective in my current work with student to push them as they enter my classroom to question the mindset they bring to education. Before I begin each semester, I seek out critical course materials (e.g., videos, readings) that introduce students to subaltern thinkers whose scholarship seeks to upend the status quo (e.g., Stuart Hall, Hortense Spillers, Sylvia Wynter, Derrick Bell). Most importantly, I build course content to include the works of scholars whose fields have relegated them to the margins for focusing on racial matters. Furthermore, my courses rely heavily on the history of a topic from a critical perspective. A focus on historical foundations roots out ahistoricism and allows students to infer about the past, present, and future of education given the pervasiveness of oppression. Importantly, for many if not most of my students, this learning experience is the first time they have been exposed to these kinds of ideas or been asked to think in such a provocative or counterhegemonic way.

Following these steps allows for the deliberate construction of a critical classroom space that is intent on dismantling imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy in education and the world. Throughout the semester, I do not engage with students in a “you are wrong; I am right” dynamic, but through a specific Black feminist pedagogical tool to which I was introduced in graduate school. There, I started to extend my understanding of power relations within the classroom. I began to search for alternative modes of teaching. This search sent me down a trail of readings by feminist scholar-activist bell hooks. One major focus of bell hooks’ pedagogical perspective is the removal of the educator-as-dictator from the classroom with the aim to create a community of reciprocal learning (hooks, 1994; 2003; 2010). Educator-as-dictator is a vital construct within the system of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy that harms all elements of learning and teaching (Gumbs, 2016; James-Gallaway, 2024).

Thus, within my coursework and student interactions, I encourage student leadership and autonomy as much as possible. For me, this means that within the classroom, I do not seek to stand in front of a podium and lecture endlessly. Instead, I encourage students to lead the class and explain what they saw or learned from the materials we engage. Meanwhile, I, too, share what I learned while connecting multiple threads of thinking that students bring up during discussion. Motivated by my first students, my shapeshifting (Cox, 2015) as such creates a more open, fluid classroom space that in turn supports my students to endeavor in the same. While I have faced and will continue to face opposition from students (colleagues and administrators) who uphold a white supremacist worldview, I know that I have exposed them to important content and ideas to which they may return and grapple whenever, if ever, they are ready.

### **ArCasia's Narrative**

#### **K-12**

I have always been practical. I know I think in smaller steps rather than in big bounds, so when I identify something I would like to do or accomplish, it has always been in my nature to first assess whether that goal feels attainable and then, if so, plan backwards to achieve it. Deciding to become an educator was no different. It was a very rationale choice based on the persistent issues I was witnessing in the institution of education at the time. These observations hit a peak for me during my time as an undergraduate in part because this was when I had to select a major and craft an intellectual and practical focus in terms of my career path.

A number of contemporaneous issues around me informed my choice to become an educator, including the Black undergraduate classmates I was watching be placed on academic probation or dismissed altogether despite having graduated at the top of their (mostly urban, mostly Black) high school classes; though I did not yet have the language, I viewed these as symptoms of a deeper, endemic issue related to what I would come to understand as antiBlackness (Bell, 1992), issues that centered on the color line (Du Bois, 1903). Raised in what some might consider the height of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) frenzy and having schooled in Texas, I knew firsthand what it meant to have your entire future hinge on your test performance (i.e., high stakes testing) (Apple, 2006; Causey-Bush, 2005). For example, I was supposed to walk the stage alongside a Black high school classmate whose 3.2 GPA proved insufficient for him to graduate because he had failed his Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) test; as a result, his life and career trajectory were injured beyond repair. I also knew early on that this approach was ineffective, especially for Black students, and that education is not a business. However, seeing it payout after high school convinced me that I had to do more than complain or remain appalled. In addition, I also felt I needed something to stand on in terms of experience if I hoped to move the needle at all, and I reasoned that nothing could give me better experience than K-12 classroom teaching. Accepting education as an area that my skillset was well suited to, I moved forward with transforming it from an area of interest into a career, and the central force motivating my focus was what I would come to later articulate as Blackness, which I was watching be disregarded at too many points in the formal educational process.



Adding education as an additional major mid-way through my undergraduate studies, I decided on earning my credential the traditional teacher-education route so I could access the training necessary to best support the Black students I was set on working with. My preservice teaching program, however, was incredibly traumatizing, details of which I have written about elsewhere (A. James-Gallaway, 2022; James-Gallaway & Turner, 2021; Vlach et al., 2022). To summarize, I was the only Black student in my cohort, and I was regularly accused of fabricating racism and mocked for highlighting the plight of Black students. For the purposes of this paper, suffice it to say that I quickly learned that the issues with the education system were deeply rooted in white supremacy and antiBlackness and that Texas was but one of many places in which such was occurring. Thus, I elected to join the Teach for America (TFA) program largely because I wanted to see firsthand how educational issues I witnessed and experienced differed across geographic contexts and to ensure I would be placed in a majority Black, under-resourced school setting that would give me the insight I knew I needed to better understand the most pressing issues and begin to consider approaches to redress. I entered TFA, however, well-aware of its pretense, so much so that I quickly and confidently showed my hand by asking the recruiter who met with me why he so swiftly left his classroom in the Rio Grande Valley if the experience and his students were, in fact, as fantastic and transformative as he told me my experience would be. I was familiar with its neoliberal antics and “grit” ideology, which emphasized rugged individualism and “getting kids [of Color] out” (Carter et al., 2023). Nevertheless, I was honest with myself about leveraging the program for what it could teach me about the group whose needs I felt merited more concerted and informed attention: Black children.

I would like to say or believe I was prepared for or could reasonably predict what my professional life would entail, but I was not and could not; it was by all accounts a very mixed bag. In all honesty, I still firmly believe no one could prepare for what one’s life as a teacher (or student for that matter) would involve or demand in the school in which I was placed. Thankfully, the school’s population was precisely what I had hoped it would be; it was 98% Black and nearly 95% of students qualified for free or reduced lunch. Moreover, excluding the all-Black para-professionals, the staff was nearly half Black and the administration included only one non-Black person. This school was no typical public school, however; it was an all-boys charter school in a small “urban” city on the east coast. An integral detail is that in the community, this school’s reputation centered on it being the final lifeline before a young Black boy was sentenced to a stint in a juvenile detention center. A significant number of our students had been previously expelled from other local schools, and parents sent them to us with the hope that we could meet their educational—and socioemotional—needs. To add, the school nurse once shared with me that nearly half of our students were being prescribed ADHD or ADD medication. Hence, as one might imagine, the behavioral needs of this population were significant, so the school elected to employ many of the same tactics Chaddrick’s KIPP school did; these sub-humanizing behavioral techniques expected, for example, children to walk silently in straight lines with their hands behind their backs, pivot around corners, and endure literal ostracization from their class by sitting at the edge of the classroom and forbidding their peers to speak with them if they misbehaved.

The broader context within which all of this happened was steeped in a ferocious sexism that pervaded virtually all aspects of the school; in short, the boys were trained and encouraged by male staff members to disrespect and objectify women with nonchalant regularity. As I entered the classroom, I brought the critical approach to instruction that I had started to develop as a preservice teacher. Keeping race at the center, I sought to engage with my students in a way I had wished my K-12 educators had engaged with me: as a learner eager to make racialized sense of their world, as one who needed to learn to decipher the world in terms of its inequitable power relations. At its core, my pedagogy aimed to help my students build the skills they needed to see that they could, in fact, practice agency and self-determination, ultimately liberating themselves. I tried to accomplish these admittedly lofty goals while struggling with my de-prioritization as a social studies teacher whose perceived irrelevance relegated me to the margins as a full-fledged teacher without a dedicated classroom like my math and English Language Arts colleagues. Nevertheless, I did what I could to teach my students, blending the useful parts of my educator-preparation training with my majors in sociology, history, and minor in African American Studies. These intellectual instruments aided me tremendously in working with my students to build a critical framework for them to read their world in terms of power and justice. I wanted them to cultivate the skills and language to critique mainstream narratives that glorified genocide and white supremacy in ways I was never asked or expected to. As I have detailed elsewhere (Griffin & James-Gallaway, 2018), my intention with my students was for them to be able to deconstruct oppression anytime they encountered it. At a school with no functioning or staffed library and no textbooks, I located various textbooks and extracted excerpts that discussed common narratives, including those on Christopher Columbus' "discovery" of the Americas. Armed with insights from scholars like Howard Zinn (1980) and James Loewen (1995), I guided my students through the historical distortions and outright lies that littered many documented interpretations of the past. They compared accounts from traditional textbooks to those from individuals like Bartolome de las Casas and other Indigenous-centered histories that counter the heroic Columbus narrative. These kinds of exercises proved to be generative gateways for us to unpack all kinds of issues related to subjugation.

It was in this space that I developed into a Black women educator who worked to carry on the legacy of the Black women teachers during segregation (James-Gallaway & Harris, 2021). Like them, I encouraged and nurtured my students because I believed in their capacity to change the world if they so choose. We talked directly and honestly about race and racism in the lives of the people we studied and in our own. After my first year as I found my footing and stood witness to the toxic sexist climate in which we were working, I pushed myself to discuss with my students how racism intersected with sexism. I required my students to reflect on their own lives and experiences as legitimate areas of study and sources of knowledge, using this insight to make connections to the material we were investigating.

I told them they were powerful and capable, and many believed me. At the same time, they helped me see myself as a real teacher with gifts to share, one who could learn much more from the students in my charge than I could ever teach them. It was an empowering experience that was cut short due to the highly toxic, sexist work environment and conditions in which we were forced to operate, details too lengthy and complex for the space permitted in this paper.

### **Higher Education**

Alongside 90% of my colleagues, I was forced out this school, which was shuttered shortly after our departure. Subsequently, I sought to find answers to larger questions about education, questions I knew the classroom would not permit me to explore. I also knew I wanted to contribute on a larger scale to knowledge production because I knew that the way many researchers understood and framed Black children and Black communities was flawed and, thus, in need of attention. I also knew I could bring with me many of the lessons my students had taught me to bear on my next professional endeavor as a higher education scholar and instructor. For additional context, I sought to become and am an education foundations professor who specializes in the history of education and supports preservice and in-service teachers for work in a variety of social contexts. It did not matter to me what racial setting I was placed in to do my work as a higher education faculty member because my students taught me that everyone who traffics in education can benefit profoundly from considering the plight of Black children and their learning needs. I intended to allow this view to lead the way, and I understood that shapeshifting to meet this new challenge would likely push me to further consider that “by the body’s placement in a space, the nature of the space changes” (Cox, 2015, p. 29).

One of the oddest aspects, at least to me, of higher education is that little if any real teacher training is provided or mandated for college and university instructors. Accordingly, I, like most of my colleagues, was never formally trained to teach at this level. The “apprentice” model of graduate education saw me serve as the instructor of record (i.e., primary instructor who is responsible for assigning final grades) for different courses; in them, however, virtually no feedback on my teaching or mentorship was supplied. Nevertheless, despite the very different student body I was teaching, I felt somewhat confident in my abilities given my time as a K-12 educator. My “teacher training” for higher education put me face-to-face in one case with a student body that largely mirrored the preservice teacher cohort that had harassed and gaslighted me during undergrad. And this group, one I encountered in Illinois, delivered much the same toxicity as my preservice teacher cohort had shown a few years prior in Texas. Like Malcolm X said, “as long as you South of the Canadian border, you South” (Hunter & Robinson, 2018, p. 2).

Overwhelm and trepidation are reasonable responses for faculty like us who work in environments like the one in which we find ourselves. The commitments that brought me to the classroom as a K-12 teacher and currently motivate my research agenda alongside the lessons my first students taught me about the fight for racial justice, however, continue to pay dividends and inform my pedagogy as a higher education instructor. Higher education has given me the opportunity to hone my deployment of Black feminist pedagogy, which I describe as “an emancipatory intervention that explicitly prioritises Black women’s and girls’ varied standpoints, knowledges, perspectives, and lived experiences in teaching and learning [and]... is not singularly concerned with the consciousness-raising instruction of Black women about Black women by Black women but offers a set of learning strategies and commitments that all can adopt and embody;” it also “challenges the traditional classroom in which students are taught to conform to institutionalized power and to preserve white, western cultural values” and advances a holistic perspective that includes academic learning as part of a broad nexus of student needs (James-Gallaway, 2024, p. 4-5). If anything, I have shapeshifted (Cox, 2015) into an educator who is less willing to appease the white gaze. I tell students that I am a Black woman who employs a Black feminist pedagogy that cannot be untethered from my instruction.

My time with my first students showed me just how capable and brilliant Black middle school boys can be, so I draw inspiration from them to encourage my present students, who are years older and have had the luxury of more years of formal schooling, to see everyone, including themselves, as raced despite society often deracializing whiteness, and thus white people. These commitments are similarly apparent in the way I show up to teach. I combine my awareness that my presence in the classroom, virtual or otherwise, as an instructor at a predominantly and historically white institution that was established to exclude African Americans and women—not to mention Black women—is a counter to the prevailing racial order with an understanding that my positionality compels me to bring my whole, critical self to my students and their learning endeavors. Furthermore, my syllabi center on oppression and issues of racial justice; my students learn about related issues via the perspectives and experiences of individuals and groups marginalized along the lines of race, sexuality, gender, and class. They are required to analyze this material with systems of privilege and deprivation in mind, considering subordinated perspectives.

Maybe most importantly, my teaching is catalyzed by the Black students who have faced and continue to face sub-humanizing educational contexts, those who routinely interact with teachers that openly despise them in systems designed to destroy them and their brilliance—those who view them as the Other, as non-human (Wynter, 2003). Although the work I did with my first students showed me what is possible when one or a few educators conspire to undermine the prevailing system of Black under- and mis-education, they also demonstrated the grave limitations of an individual approach to educational amelioration that produces a reactive, haphazard remedy to longstanding issues.

As a result, I teach teachers to consider, as they develop their pedagogy, the plight of these Black children in all they do, showing them that such consideration will ultimately serve the interests of all students they have the opportunity to work with. My first students taught me that if I want to do right by them, I do not have many other options.

### **What we are saying and what it means**

In our collective work, we remain motivated by our first students, who resisted their own destruction each day. Having both taught in underserved contexts where the state was working to subjugate Black peoples in multiple ways, particularly those educational, we learned firsthand how our students understood resistance and how they went about practicing it. They showed us that resistance can and often does take many forms, and the one they allowed us to witness alongside them was resistance through the preservation of their humanity, of Black humanity (Bell, 1992). In reflection, it does not seem to us that our students resisted with the intention of completely overturning the systems of oppression we were living and learning about, but they pushed back with the objective of asserting their personhood—because that was challenge enough to white supremacy. That, as they portrayed, embodied the racial realism Derrick Bell (1992) wrote about, the same racial realism that animated our ancestors who languished under enslavement and in the century of Jim Crow immediately after. Today in our work with our current students, who look much different than those we originally worked with, we carry forward the spirit of the Black freedom struggle because we understand that this objective has the potential to benefit everyone. With intersectional racial justice at its core, this form of resistance is multifaceted, but it centers on race, on Blackness, and its innate significance.

We found ourselves shapeshifting (Cox, 2015) in a way that was cognizant of the veil Du Bois (1903) wrote about, and we refused to be defeated by it. This way of seeing double, as it were, clarified that our “second sight” might be one of our most powerful instruments for responding to our oppression, enabling us to assume a form consistent with the political commitments our first students implanted in us. Our first students gave us strong grounding that has since guided our path as educators who now work at the higher education level. In this sense, we accept that dominant society views us as the Other, and, thus, our Otherness, as Sylvia Wynter (2003) explained, makes us vulnerable to all manner of attacks from disgruntled students, administration, colleagues, and the state itself. Reckoning with our Otherness through the lens of our initial experiences as classroom educators showed us how important and powerful it can be to prioritize Blackness, even and especially when doing so comes with great risks.

In doing the research and reflection required to write this paper, we realized that there is little to no literature that discusses the connection between one’s K-12 classroom teaching and their higher education instruction. For us, our time in the K-12 classroom was foundational to the instructors we have since grown into, and we are unable to decouple our pedagogy from these formative experiences as K-12 educators.

Although it is less common for academics outside those in the field of Curriculum and Instruction to have taught at the K-12 level prior to their employment as scholars in higher education, we suspect there are some who have. While Chaddrick's experience as a current higher education scholar with previous K-12 classroom experience may be unique, we believe the research community could greatly benefit from learning about other, similar experiences to better understand how teaching experiences in different contexts shape what happens in college and university classrooms. We, thus, call for more work, conceptual, reflexive, and empirical, that investigates this topic.

To conclude, we have used the space allotted us in this essay to explore some of the salient linkages threading together our teaching experiences in K-12, predominantly Black environments with those we have had in higher education as professors at a historically white university. We have demonstrated that white supremacist, antiBlack oppression occurred in both setting types, conditions with which no one should have to contend. Underlining the unique socio-political positions we occupied and occupy in both spaces as critical, differently gendered Black pedagogues with an unrelenting commitment to Black flourishing, we have highlighted some of the key considerations we weigh in our fight against Black subjugation. Ultimately, as we strived to make apparent, the lessons our first students taught us about what it means to be Black and to embrace one's full humanity in the midst of utter chaos is largely what continues to motivate us in our professional journey as academics. Our earliest students showed us how unproductive it is to live in fear when you are living right—when you know you are doing right. They showed us that refashioning a message for an audience should not affect the essential message being delivered. For us, we know that message to be the full, complex humanity of Blackness—of Black children, communities, and learners—and we know that because we are committed to remaining Black on both sides.

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**NAVIGATING THE BLUES: THE RESISTANCE AND IDENTITY EVOLUTION OF BLACK MALE EDUCATORS AS SHAPESHIFTERS IN EDUCATION**

**Richard Warren**

**Abstract**

Recent studies have underscored the critical impact of Black male educators on educational outcomes, notably enhancing both student academic performance and their future aspirations (Hart & Lindsay, 2024). Despite their considerable influence, these educators face significant challenges, including a notable underrepresentation in teacher training programs (National Teacher and Principal Survey, 2021) and the highest attrition rates in the educational workforce (Snyder et al., 2014; The Education Trust, 2015). This article centers on those Black male educators who persist in the profession, exploring their resilience and patterns of retention. It delves into their lived experiences and the evolution of their identities within the educational sphere, employing Clyde Woods' (2017) "blues epistemology" as a conceptual framework. This qualitative approach situates African American identity within a context of resistance to systemic oppression. The article investigates the ways in which these educators navigate their roles, emphasizing the interplay between their identity, resistance, and retention. It seeks to shed light on how these educators continually adapt and reshape their identities in response to the unique challenges and demands they encounter in the educational landscape. By doing so, the article contributes to broader discussions on equity, justice, and liberation in education, offering valuable insights into the mechanisms of resistance and the ongoing journey of identity transformation among Black male educators in the workplace.

**Keywords:** *Black male educators, educational outcomes, resilience, retention, identity*

### Introduction

The educational landscape in the United States has long been marked by systemic inequities and challenges, particularly for Black male educators. Despite representing a crucial element of diversity within schools, Black male educators constitute only 2% of the teaching workforce (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). This underrepresentation highlights the need to understand their unique experiences and the systemic barriers they face. This phenomenological study delves into these experiences, exploring how Black male educators navigate identity conflicts and resist oppressive structures, aligning their actions with the principles of "blues epistemology." Research consistently shows that Black male educators play a vital role in fostering inclusive and supportive educational environments. They often serve as role models, particularly for Black students, and contribute to a more culturally responsive pedagogy (Milner, 2012). However, the professional journey of Black male educators is fraught with challenges. Studies indicate that they are often pigeonholed into roles as disciplinarians or athletic coaches, limiting their professional growth and reinforcing racial stereotypes (Brooks, 2016). This study aims to illuminate these challenges and the strategies employed by Black male educators to overcome them.

The significance of this study is underscored by the broader context of educational inequity. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2019), schools with a higher percentage of Black students are more likely to have inexperienced teachers and fewer resources. This disparity not only affects the quality of education that Black students receive but also places additional burdens on Black male educators who often find themselves in these under-resourced environments. Understanding their experiences is crucial for developing policies and practices that support both educators and students. Blues epistemology, a framework rooted in the historical and cultural experiences of African Americans, provides a lens through which to view the resilience and resistance of Black male educators. This theoretical framework emphasizes the importance of lived experiences and the ways in which individuals navigate and resist systemic oppression (Moten, 2003). By applying this framework, the study captures the depth and complexity of the participants' experiences, highlighting their strategies of resistance and survival within the educational system.

This study also employs a phenomenological approach to capture the essence of the participants' experiences. Through in-depth interviews and focus groups, the narratives of Black male educators reveal the personal and professional challenges they face and the strategies they use to overcome them. By synthesizing key themes from these interviews, this manuscript aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Black male educators navigate identity conflicts and systemic barriers. The insights gained from this study are intended to inform educational policy and practice, ultimately contributing to a more equitable and inclusive educational system.

### Review of the Literature

The literature on Black male educators consistently reveals the unique challenges they face, including racial isolation, high expectations to serve as disciplinarians, and the burden of being role models for Black students (Goings & Bianco, 2016). These challenges are compounded by systemic racism and implicit biases within educational institutions (Brown, 2012). Researchers have noted that Black male educators often experience a dual pressure to succeed and to represent their race positively, a phenomenon that can lead to significant stress and burnout (Dancy, 2014).

Despite these challenges, the presence of Black male educators is crucial in providing culturally relevant pedagogy and mentorship, which can significantly impact the academic and social outcomes of Black students (Lynn, 2006). Studies show that Black male educators bring unique perspectives and teaching methods that resonate with students of color, fostering a more inclusive and supportive learning environment (Howard, 2013). Furthermore, their presence challenges prevailing stereotypes and provides positive role models for all students, contributing to a more diverse and equitable educational landscape (Milner, 2015).

Travis Bristol's research highlights the systemic barriers Black male educators face, such as racial discrimination and lack of professional support (Bristol, 2015). Bristol & Mentor (2018) further elaborate on how institutional practices often marginalize Black male teachers, limiting their career advancement and professional development opportunities. These systemic issues not only hinder the professional growth of Black male educators but also affect their ability to positively impact their students. Jupp and Lensmire (2016) emphasize the importance of racial literacy in addressing these challenges. They argue that educators and policymakers need to develop a deeper understanding of race and its implications within educational settings. This racial literacy is crucial for creating environments where Black male educators can thrive and where their contributions are valued. Kohli (2018) also underscores the need for critical racial awareness in teacher education programs, suggesting that without it, efforts to diversify the teaching workforce will remain superficial and ineffective.

The work of Brockenbrough (2015) explores how Black male educators navigate their professional identities within historically white institutions. He notes that these educators often engage in acts of resistance to counteract the marginalization they experience. This resistance is not only a means of survival but also a way to challenge and transform oppressive structures within the educational system. Similarly, Lewis (2006) discusses how Black educators use their cultural knowledge and experiences to resist and navigate systemic barriers, contributing to a more inclusive educational environment. Siddle-Walker (2000) provides historical context to these challenges, highlighting the long-standing struggles of Black educators within the American educational system. Her research shows that despite the desegregation efforts of the mid-20th century, Black educators have continued to face significant obstacles. This historical perspective is crucial for understanding the contemporary experiences of Black male educators and the systemic nature of the barriers they encounter.

Goings & Bianco (2016) highlight the critical role of mentorship and support networks in the professional development of Black male educators. They argue that these support systems can help mitigate the effects of isolation and discrimination, providing Black male teachers with the resources and encouragement they need to succeed. Similarly, Bridges (2011) emphasizes the importance of professional communities that support the unique needs of Black male educators, fostering their growth and resilience. Thomas & Warren (2017) discuss the impact of culturally responsive teaching practices on the experiences of Black male educators. They argue that these practices not only benefit students of color but also validate and support the professional identities of Black teachers. By incorporating their cultural knowledge and experiences into their teaching, Black male educators can create more engaging and relevant learning environments for their students. Simmons et al. (2013) highlight the psychological toll of systemic racism on Black male educators. Their research shows that the constant need to prove oneself and counteract negative stereotypes can lead to significant stress and burnout. This psychological burden underscores the need for systemic changes that support the well-being of Black male educators and recognize their contributions to the educational system.

A unique aspect of this manuscript is its exploration of Black male educators as "shapeshifters" within the educational system. This concept refers to the adaptive strategies these educators employ to navigate different roles and expectations in response to systemic pressures. While previous research has touched on the resilience and resistance of Black male educators, there is limited exploration of how they consciously and strategically modify their behaviors and identities to fit various contexts. This study aims to fill this gap by providing a deeper understanding of the shapeshifting phenomenon and its implications for Black male educators.

The narratives of Black male educators reveal a complex interplay of identity, resistance, and resilience. By understanding and addressing the systemic barriers they face, educational institutions can create more inclusive and supportive environments. This, in turn, will not only benefit Black educators but also enrich the educational experiences of all students. The concept of Black male educators as shapeshifters adds a unique dimension to this study, highlighting their adaptive strategies in navigating oppressive structures. This phenomenon has been underexplored in existing literature, indicating a significant gap that warrants further investigation.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in "blues epistemology," a theoretical framework that emphasizes resilience, resistance, and the articulation of lived experiences of Black individuals facing systemic oppression (Moten, 2003). Rooted in the cultural and historical experiences of African Americans, blues epistemology draws on the rich tradition of blues music and its role in expressing and coping with the hardships of life. This framework underscores the importance of storytelling, emotional expression, and the resilience embodied in the blues tradition, offering a lens through which to understand the experiences of Black male educators.

Blues epistemology provides a unique perspective on the adaptive strategies employed by Black male educators, framing these strategies as acts of resistance and survival. It acknowledges the ways in which these educators navigate and resist systemic barriers, drawing parallels between their professional experiences and the historical struggles depicted in blues music. By viewing their experiences through this lens, we can better appreciate the depth of their resilience and the cultural significance of their actions.

Furthermore, blues epistemology emphasizes the importance of community and collective experience. This aspect of the framework highlights how Black male educators draw strength from their cultural heritage and their connections with others who share similar experiences. It situates their personal narratives within a broader communal context, illustrating how individual acts of resistance contribute to a collective struggle for justice and equity. This communal perspective is crucial for understanding the solidarity and support networks that sustain Black male educators in their professional journeys.

Finally, applying blues epistemology to this study allows for a deeper exploration of the "shapeshifting" phenomenon. This concept refers to the adaptive strategies Black male educators use to navigate different roles and expectations within the educational system. Blues epistemology provides a framework for understanding how these educators modify their behaviors and identities in response to systemic pressures, highlighting the resilience and creativity involved in such adaptive processes. By examining their experiences through this lens, we can gain new insights into the complexities of their professional identities and the strategies they employ to thrive in challenging environments.

### **Methodology**

#### **Phenomenological Inquiry**

This study employs a phenomenological approach to capture the essence of the lived experiences of Black male educators. Phenomenology, as described by Creswell (2013), seeks to understand how individuals perceive and make sense of their experiences. It is particularly suited to exploring deep, complex experiences and uncovering the meanings that participants attach to them. Von Eckartsberg (1998) emphasizes the importance of describing the lived world of the participants in a rich, detailed manner, allowing researchers to grasp the core of their experiences.

Wertz (1984) adds that phenomenological inquiry involves immersing oneself in the participants' world to understand their subjective experiences. This method requires a deep engagement with the participants' narratives, focusing on their personal stories and the meanings they ascribe to their experiences. Vagle (2014) further elaborates on the iterative process of phenomenological research, which involves moving back and forth between data collection and analysis to refine and deepen the understanding of the phenomena under study.

### **Study Context**

The context of this study is the educational landscape of the United States, specifically focusing on various educational settings where Black male educators work. These settings include rural, urban, and suburban schools, where the challenges of systemic racism and educational inequities are particularly pronounced. The study aims to explore how Black male educators navigate these environments, focusing on their experiences of identity conflicts and systemic barriers.

### **Participants**

The study involved nine Black male educators working in different educational roles, including teachers, administrators, and educational leaders. The participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a diverse range of experiences and perspectives. This diversity allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the challenges and strategies employed by Black male educators. The educators ranged in age, years of experience, and geographic location, providing a broad spectrum of insights into their professional journeys. Each participant was invited to share their experiences through in-depth interviews and focus groups. This combination of data collection methods allowed for a rich, multifaceted understanding of their experiences. The interviews provided detailed personal narratives, while the focus groups facilitated discussions and reflections on common themes and shared experiences.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection involved conducting semi-structured interviews and focus groups with the participants. The semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility, enabling participants to express their thoughts and experiences freely while ensuring that key topics were covered. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. The focus groups were conducted with groups of three to four participants, fostering a collaborative environment where educators could discuss their experiences and reflect on shared challenges and strategies. These sessions lasted approximately two hours each and were also audio-recorded.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis process involved coding the interview and focus group transcripts using both etic and emic approaches (Lett, 1990). The etic approach involved applying pre-determined codes based on existing literature and theoretical frameworks, while the emic approach focused on identifying themes and patterns that emerged organically from the participants' narratives. The coding process was iterative, involving multiple rounds of analysis to refine and deepen the understanding of the data. Initially, open coding was used to identify broad themes and patterns in the data. This was followed by axial coding, which involved grouping the initial codes into more specific categories and subcategories. Finally, selective coding was employed to identify the core themes that encapsulated the essence of the participants' experiences. Given that we used a phenomenological method, we found it critical to employ bracketing (Tufford & Newman, 2010), or setting aside our assumptions of the participants' experiences. Bracketing allowed us to focus on the participants' perspectives without being influenced by our preconceived notions. This process involved being constantly aware of our own biases and assumptions and deliberately setting them aside during the data collection and analysis phases.

### **Reflexivity**

Reflexivity, as described by Hopkins (1989), involves being aware of one's social location and how it influences the research process. In this study, reflexivity was crucial for ensuring that the researchers remained focused on the participants' experiences rather than their own interpretations. The researchers engaged in regular reflexive journaling and discussions to maintain awareness of their biases and ensure that the participants' voices were accurately represented.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the study. Participants were provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks before giving their informed consent. Confidentiality was maintained by assigning pseudonyms to participants and ensuring that all data were securely stored. The researchers also obtained approval from the relevant institutional review boards before commencing the study.

### **Trustworthiness**

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed multiple strategies, including member checking, triangulation, and peer debriefing. Member checking involved sharing the preliminary findings with the participants to verify the accuracy and resonance of the interpretations. Triangulation was achieved by using multiple data sources (interviews and focus groups) and analytical methods (etic and emic coding). Peer debriefing involved discussing the findings and interpretations with colleagues to ensure rigor and credibility.

### **Limitations**

The study acknowledges several limitations. The sample size, though sufficient for phenomenological research, may not capture the full diversity of experiences among Black male educators. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of bias, as participants may present their experiences in a particular light. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the experiences of Black male educators and the systemic challenges they face.

## **Findings**

### **Navigating Identity Conflicts**

One of the predominant themes that emerged from the interviews was the challenge of navigating identity conflicts. Participants frequently discussed the tension between their professional roles and their personal identities as Black men. "I always felt like I was walking on eggshells," explained Malik, a high school teacher with ten years of experience. "There were so many people waiting for me to make a mistake or say the wrong thing". This feeling of heightened scrutiny was a common experience among the participants. "As a Black man in education, I felt like I had to be twice as good to get half the recognition," stated Jamal, an elementary school principal. This sentiment highlights the pressure Black male educators feel to constantly prove their competence and worth in historically white educational environments. Another participant, Darnell, a middle school science teacher, described the internal conflict he experienced. "I had to navigate my identity as a Black man while also trying to fit into the historically white culture of the school. It was like I had to wear a mask every day just to be accepted". This metaphor of wearing a mask captures the emotional labor involved in maintaining a professional facade while grappling with personal identity.

### **Systemic Barriers**

The participants also highlighted various systemic barriers that hindered their professional growth and effectiveness. These barriers included discriminatory policies, lack of support, and limited opportunities for advancement. "I was often overlooked for promotions despite my qualifications and experience," noted Andre, an assistant principal. "It felt like my contributions were not valued in the same way as my white colleagues". Several educators pointed to the lack of professional development opportunities tailored to their needs. "The training sessions were not relevant to the issues we faced as Black male educators," explained Terence, a high school math teacher. "We needed support in dealing with racial biases and creating inclusive classrooms, but those topics were rarely addressed". Discriminatory policies also posed significant challenges. For example, Jeffery, an elementary school teacher, recounted how dress codes disproportionately targeted Black students. "The school had strict rules against cultural attire like durags and bonnets, which unfairly penalized our students. I had to constantly advocate for changes to these policies".



### **Acts of Resistance**

Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated resilience and engaged in acts of resistance to counteract systemic barriers. Malik shared a powerful story of challenging discriminatory dress code policies at his school. "I stood up in a staff meeting and questioned why we allowed hats with fish hooks but banned bonnets and durags. It led to a policy change that allowed our students to express their cultural identity". Christopher, another participant, described his efforts to implement more inclusive teaching practices. "I always felt like the curriculum didn't reflect the experiences of our Black students. So, I started incorporating more culturally relevant materials and created lesson plans that resonated with them". This proactive approach not only improved student engagement but also fostered a more inclusive learning environment. The participants also highlighted the importance of mentoring and supporting other Black educators. "I made it a point to mentor new Black teachers and help them navigate the challenges we face," said Jamal. "It's important to build a community where we support each other and share strategies for success". This sense of solidarity and mutual support was a recurring theme in the narratives.

### **Faith and Spirituality**

In addition to the predetermined themes, several new themes emerged organically from the participants' narratives. One such theme was the role of faith and spirituality in sustaining resilience. "My faith has been a source of strength for me," shared Darnell. "It helps me stay grounded and focused on my purpose, despite the challenges". This connection to spirituality provides a coping mechanism and a sense of purpose.

### **Family Support**

Another emergent theme was the impact of family support. Terence discussed how his family's encouragement played a crucial role in his career. "My family has always been my biggest cheerleaders. Their support gives me the motivation to keep going, even when things get tough". Participants frequently mentioned how their families' encouragement helped them persevere through difficult times. "My wife and children have been my rock," shared Jeffery. "Their unwavering support gives me the strength to face the challenges at work". The strong family bonds provided a source of emotional resilience and motivation. This highlights the importance of a strong support system in fostering resilience and perseverance.

### **Self-care and Mental Health Awareness**

Participants also emphasized the need for self-care and mental health awareness. "I've learned to prioritize my mental health," noted Jeffery. "Taking time for self-care and seeking professional help when needed has been essential in managing the stress of my job". This theme underscores the significance of addressing mental health issues and promoting well-being among educators.

### **Mentorship**

The role of mentorship emerged as a crucial theme. Participants stressed the importance of having mentors who understood their unique challenges. "Having a mentor who had gone through similar experiences was invaluable," said Terence. "They provided guidance, support, and a sense of camaraderie". This highlights the need for mentorship programs that specifically support Black male educators.

### **Specialized Networks**

Participants also highlighted the importance of creating supportive networks among Black male educators. "We need to support each other and share our experiences," said Jamal. "Building a network of Black male educators has been essential for my professional and personal growth". These networks provided a space for mutual support, sharing strategies, and collective advocacy.

### **Community Involvement**

Finally, participants discussed the impact of community involvement. "Engaging with the community and building relationships with parents and students outside of the classroom is vital," shared Terence. "It helps create a sense of trust and collaboration". Community involvement not only supported student success but also fostered a more inclusive and supportive educational environment.

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of Black male educators, highlighting their resilience, resistance, and adaptive strategies. The narratives reveal the complexities of navigating identity conflicts, systemic barriers, and acts of resistance. By employing a phenomenological approach and incorporating blues epistemology, the study offers a unique perspective on the challenges and triumphs of these educators.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study highlight the complex interplay of identity, systemic barriers, and acts of resistance experienced by Black male educators. These educators navigate identity conflicts and systemic obstacles while employing adaptive strategies that align with the principles of blues epistemology. The concept of Black male educators as "shapeshifters" emerged as a critical theme, showcasing their ability to adapt to varying roles and expectations within the educational system. This adaptive behavior is essential for their survival and success in historically white educational environments.

The participants' experiences of navigating identity conflicts resonate with the broader literature on racial identity and professional roles. Jupp and Lensmire (2016) emphasize the importance of racial literacy for educators, which involves a deep understanding of race and its implications within educational settings. This study supports their findings by demonstrating how Black male educators must constantly negotiate their identities to fit into professional spaces that often marginalize them. The pressure to conform to stereotypes, such as the disciplinarian or the "angry Black man," underscores the need for increased awareness and training on racial biases within schools (Brown, 2012; Howard, 2013).

Systemic barriers, such as discriminatory policies, lack of support, and limited professional development opportunities, were significant challenges identified by the participants. These barriers align with the findings of Bristol (2015) and Goings & Bianco (2016), who highlight how institutional practices often marginalize Black male teachers. The participants' accounts of advocating for policy changes and inclusive practices demonstrate their resilience and commitment to creating equitable educational environments. These acts of resistance are crucial for challenging and transforming oppressive structures within the educational system (Brockenbrough, 2015; Lewis, 2006).

The role of mentorship and support networks emerged as a vital theme, echoing the findings of Goings & Bianco (2016) and Simmons et al. (2013). Participants emphasized the importance of having mentors who understand their unique challenges and can provide guidance and support. This underscores the need for targeted mentorship programs that cater specifically to the needs of Black male educators. Additionally, the significance of family support and faith in sustaining resilience highlights the multifaceted nature of coping strategies employed by these educators (Dancy, 2014; Lynn, 2006).

This study provides valuable insights into the experiences of Black male educators, emphasizing their resilience, resistance, and adaptive strategies. The concept of shapeshifting offers a unique perspective on how these educators navigate systemic barriers and identity conflicts. Future research should further explore this phenomenon and its impact on the well-being and career progression of Black male educators. By addressing the systemic issues highlighted in this study and supporting the diverse needs of all educators, we can work towards creating a more equitable and inclusive educational system (Kohli, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

### **Implications**

The findings of this study have significant implications for educational policy and practice. One of the primary implications is the need for increased representation of Black male educators at all levels of the education system. Research indicates that having diverse educators can positively impact student outcomes, particularly for students of color (Milner, 2012; Lynn, 2006). Policies aimed at recruiting and retaining Black male educators are essential to address their underrepresentation. These policies should include targeted recruitment efforts, financial incentives, and support networks to ensure that Black male educators feel valued and supported in their roles (Goings & Bianco, 2016).

Professional development tailored to the unique challenges faced by Black male educators is another crucial implication. The study highlighted the lack of relevant professional development opportunities that address issues of racial bias and cultural competence. Incorporating training on implicit bias, culturally responsive teaching, and racial literacy into professional development programs can help create more inclusive and supportive environments for Black male educators (Jupp & Lensmire, 2016; Kohli, 2018). Such training should be mandatory for all educators to foster a deeper understanding of race and its implications within educational settings.

Policy reform is also necessary to address the systemic barriers identified in the study. Discriminatory policies, such as dress codes that disproportionately target Black students, need to be revised to promote equity and inclusion (Brown, 2012). Additionally, the implementation of restorative justice practices over punitive disciplinary measures can help create a more supportive school environment (Howard, 2013). Educational institutions should actively involve Black educators in the policymaking process to ensure that their perspectives and experiences inform policy decisions (Bristol & Mentor, 2018).

Finally, the establishment of mentorship and support networks for Black male educators is vital. The study underscored the importance of mentorship in navigating professional challenges and fostering resilience. Educational institutions should develop structured mentorship programs that connect Black male educators with experienced mentors who understand their unique experiences (Goings & Bianco, 2016; Simmons et al., 2013). Additionally, fostering a sense of community among Black male educators through support groups and professional networks can provide the necessary emotional and professional support to help them thrive in their roles (Dancy, 2014; Bridges, 2011).

By addressing these implications, educational policymakers and practitioners can create a more equitable and supportive environment for Black male educators. This, in turn, will not only benefit the educators themselves but also enhance the educational experiences of all students, particularly those from marginalized communities.

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**ONE FOR ALL: THE INTERGENERATIONAL EXPLORATION OF RACIALIZED EXPERIENCES IN SCHOOL FOR A SHAPESHIFTED BLACK FAMILY**

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**Abstract**

The racialized experiences of Black folx in the U.S. and abroad are well documented in the literature, yet, the richness of these experiences is best articulated through stories passed down throughout the years. With each passing generation, there exists a parallel phenomenon where different generations of Black folx in the U.S. experience similar trials and triumphs as it relates to various societal systems. One such system that continues to define and redefine, traumatize, liberate, and restrict is education. The purpose of this narrative exploration rests with one research question: How are the intergenerational experiences of racialization in education shaping the individual and collective identities of a multigenerational Black family? While the concept of shape shifting (Cox, 2015) often centralizes the phenomenon or action to one person transforming themselves to protect their identity in hostile spaces, this study sheds light on how the refinement of shapeshifting has become a transferrable legacy within our family.

**Keywords:** *shapeshifting, Black, school, narrative, racialized*

**One For All: The Intergenerational Manifestation of the Black S.O.U.L.**

“For trees to grow in Brooklyn, seeds need to be planted” – Talib Kweli

Du Bois early in the 20th century crystallized a monumental phenomenon that Black folks persist through, which often offers great insight while withstanding societal oppression. He posits that for Black people, the construction of their identity exists in a duality of views. Whereas typically an individual views themselves from their perspectives, Black people are also under the surveilling eyes of white people in a predominately white society. Thus, this veil allows Black people to see themselves not only through their own eyes but in the fragmented imagination of a predominately white society which sees Black people's existence as an unblotted stain on their societal progress, particularly in the U.S. This fragmented reality has been on displace since before the Continental Congress legalized the sovereignty of white immigrants ability to subdue and control the land of Indigenous people, whose social and cultural heritage educated colonist on how to survive. The identity of enslaved Africans was one of nothingness in the face of white supremacy; yet the social, cultural, emotional, and educational prowess of these enslaved people did not wither away in the face of dire circumstances. How enslaved Africans constructed their own identity required a fundamental understanding of the mechanisms that white society enacted to foster anti-Black ideologies, and their fugitive mechanisms to ensure that their individual and collective knowledge was securely passed on to future generations through storytelling.

The art of storytelling preserves and articulates the Black experience in forms that remain resilient to the constant oppressive forces that subjugate Black people in various arenas in life. It is the story that offers lessons, knowledge, skills, and wisdom for Black people in an apparatus that permits a transference, even if the individual who was in the story is not the person telling the story to the current or next generation. The oral history is to be of the benefit of the tribe or village, dispensed often by the griot (storyteller) according to Western African history. It is the hope that the story informs the current and future generations of not only the challenges or problems of old but also situates these generations to effectively surpass and support the older generation. These acts (s) for Black people are critically important as the effort to erase the contribution and cultural knowledge remains constant. In particular, as Black people enter into more prominent roles in society (i.e., government, administrators, CEOs, etc.) and into what we would consider hostile territory, they have and will continue to be subjected to racialized experiences. Racialized experiences are defined as intentions, processions, or procedures by which racial identities are systematically constructed; often elevating one group to a superior status while subjugating other groups to inhuman-like treatment and conditions. While people of color in the U.S. have always existed in a racialized state, for Black people, this racialization is heightened by the fact that each society's shift towards justice, requires them, their bodies, and their identities to be the sacrificial lamb (i.e., Emmitt Till, Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, Sandra Bland, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Michael Brown, George Floyd, and Crispus Attucks).



One historical shift occurred after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision which legally ended Jim Crow in the U.S. Essentially, it became illegal to segregate on the basis of race in any public location. Where this would have the most significant ramifications was in traditional public schools. Millions of children who were once separated by race would now be forced to learn in “integrated schools”. This decision while it brought about new possibilities for Black people in the U.S., also created a new opportunity for Black children and their families to enter into a new state of racialization; having to enter into schools and communities that were not welcoming and consistent reiterated messages of Black children’s inferiority. Integration became synonymous with Black children being the first, in many cases, to enter into predominately white educational spaces and experience trauma while constructing conscious mechanisms to protect their own identity from the harshness of racialization. Thus, in connecting Du Bois’ double consciousness with Cox’s shapeshifting framework and the art of storytelling in Black communities, it is possible that an intergeneration framework exists where Black children are not forming their identities solely through the lens of racialized experiences. Rather, through storytelling the racialized experiences of older generation Black folk become a new veil that is displayed to the younger generation of Black children to aid in their ability to shapeshift beyond the capabilities of prior generations. One’s experience(s) become the tapestry for which current and future generations view artifacts to improve upon their experiences and to construct identities that are more impervious to socialization.

Thus, this intergenerational narrative inquiry approach for this study sought to explore how Cox’s concept of shapeshifting, became a transferrable legacy within three generations of a Black family, as it relates to K-12 schooling. The research question that drove the study was; how are the intergenerational experiences of racialization in education shaping the individual and collective identities of a multigenerational Black family? The significance of this study exists in the fact that there are a limited number of studies that explore the lived experiences of Black children who integrated predominately white schools – through two generations, and there are few studies that critically examine how the art of storytelling has aided Black folks to push back on racialized attempts across multiple generations in education. Following a cogent literature review of racialized experiences for Black folk in the U.S., the role of education in identity formation is our conceptual framework shapeshifting which was formed by Cox (2015). This manuscript concludes with forward-facing recommendations for Black children and families, in addition to schools and community stakeholders.

## Literature Review

### **Racialized Experiences of Black Students in the U.S. Education System**

“To all the teachers that told me I’d never amount to nothing” – Notorious B.I.G.

That is a summary of how the U.S. education system has treated Black children. Whether it was the refusal of slave owners to allow Black people to become educated for fear of a revolt (they happened regardless); the outright murdering of Black people for becoming literate, the burning down of schools; the stripping away of funding for Black schools in the south after the end of the Civil War; the outright refusal to properly fund segregated Black schools during the Jim Crow era; the refusal to integrate Black children into predominately white schools, the constant refusal to include the histories and contributions of Black people in the curriculum, or the disproportionate rate at which Black children are suspended from schools – Black children have always been racialized by the U.S. education system in one form or another (Williams, 2024). Hochman (2019) denotes that racialization is the process by which racialized groups are formed. He denotes that rather than focusing on understanding the concept of race itself and stopping there, theorists and racial realists must contend with the underpinnings of how groups are forced (willingly or unwillingly, either from an external or internal force) into a subgroup. This subgroup-hood is attached to inferiority either in how this subgroup is treated or how this subgroup can access opportunities in various aspects of life (i.e., housing, labor, health, and for the purposes of this article, education). Race can be a biological category, yet the so-called biological differences between races do not describe how even in a school where the majority are Black students (biological), they still receive substandard treatment as compared to other biological races, even though they constitute the majority of the “power”. This is where racialization plays a key role, as the processes within schools enforce a racial hierarchy that values the lives and contributions of non-Black more than Black students.

As indicated previously, Black students have always been racialized and these experiences can occur in various forms. For example, Black children and their families are often stigmatized for attending underfunded schools, also known as Title I schools. Black children are penalized for attending urban schools, as they are pathologized as having severe challenges and barriers. If Black children are not attending a traditional public school, they often run the risk of being double penalized. They are seen as selling out for not attending a public school, and if the school they are attending is predominately White, they often are forced to endure the trauma placed upon them by the curriculum, teachers, administrators, and peers who are either culturally unaware of the support Black children need in these spaces, or are willfully practicing anti-black sentiments. Beyond these challenges exist systemic barriers that constantly reinforce the deficit ideologies and treatment towards Black children.

A sizeable systemic barrier to Black children thriving in an education system is the failure to acknowledge that the systems, policies, and procedures throughout various school districts in the U.S. were not designed by or for Black children (Fairclough, 2004). There is this constant notion within educational discourse that if minor tweaks are made to some systems (teacher preparation, classroom management approaches, class sizes, etc.), Black children will instantly begin to thrive in the system. This notion is a fallacy, as research denotes that various components in education serve to subvert attempts to enact equity toward Black children (Davis et al., 2024). Again, despite no wrongdoing by Black families and children to deserve such treatment, the racialization of Black folk is persistent and pervasive throughout the history of education in the U.S. As evident by prior research, it is not a matter of when Black students will be racialized by the U.S. education system, rather it is a matter of how it will be done and to what extent are the consequences of this phenomenon longstanding. If Black students are racialized in a system that is forced upon them (i.e., education), then it is feasible to assert that within this outcome is the undeniable trauma that is afflicted on Black students and their future generations.

### **The Transmission of Racialized Experiences Intergenerationally**

Far from being isolated, the racialized experiences of individuals are transmitted through various means. Research contends that racialization and the experiences formed from it are passed down explicitly through lessons and stories, or implicitly through mannerisms, perceptions, and the othering of certain racial groups. For example, Spanierman (2022) asserts that for White parents, the socialization (i.e., racialization) of other groups occurs through silence, color-blind ideologies, or implicit or explicit messaging about one or multiple non-white groups. These approaches are often passed down to their children without the children being able to resist or combat these processes – they are just viewed as a normal way of interacting with the world. In other research, Ferrer et al. (2017) offer an intersectional examination of an aging Filipino woman in Canada, whose lived experiences in the labor market situated her in an environment opposite to what she was used to. Seeking to support her family, she remained the sole breadwinner based on prescribed racialized experiences of her family: women were managing the aging parents without complaint. This not only traumatized and relegated her to intense physical jobs, but her body aged faster and harsher as she succumbed to the experiences she encountered while conducting labor.

These examples offer a nuanced glimpse at how racialization and the experiences stemming from these processes are not unidirectional. Rather, there is a lateral and vertical transmission of these experiences, particularly for racial/ethnic groups that have historically encountered oppression (Ferrer et al., 2017). The transmission of these experiences influences how individuals, particularly those from racialized groups, come to construct, maintain, and evolve their own racial identity. This influence is compounded in the context of education, as individuals spend 12 years of their lives developing an identity through the lens of schools, teachers, administrators, librarians, and other education stakeholders. The negative impact on identity formation via the education system is explicated below.

### **The Role of Education in Identity Formation**

Identity formation plays a pivotal role in who we are, how we come to understand our identity in connection with others, and how we interpret the world around us. For racialized groups, individuals construct their identity through a multiplicity of experiences in the areas of community (peers and friends), home (family), and community institutions (i.e., education). Through these areas (lenses), individuals develop their identity, peel away pieces (values, norms, culture, etc.) of their identity that they deem ineffective, and accumulate artifacts that solidify their sense of self-worth. Crocetti (2017) and colleagues (2008) denote that people typically form and revise their identity over time and through three processes: how they make and affirm commitments, how they actively contemplate their commitments, and how individuals compare current and past commitments to determine which ones are not satisfactory in their lives.

As we contemplate this identity formation process, particularly for racialized groups, actively engaging within institutions that purposefully cause harm can be detrimental to their identity development. For example, when institutions explicitly segregate Black children from the general public, it sends an explicit message that their existence is not warranted. Those messages can be interpreted in many ways, but if viewed through identity development, the individual would strip away elements of their identity that do not serve to support or promote their well-being. Rather than being viewed as an asset, Black children are forced to assimilate or acculturate rather than being allowed to thrive and develop. Viewed often as “the problem,” as DuBois states, if Black children underperform at school, it is not a surprise – rather it is a confirmation of the poor manner in which Black children are raised. Rather than the system of education being intensely critiqued, educators regularly see negative outcomes such as school discipline disparities, a lack of representation in gifted and talented courses, the overrepresentation of Black children in need of special education services, and low academic performance as indictments toward Black children..

This pathologizing of Black people establishes an ethos for Black children that to be successful - academically and socially in schools - their cultural values, norms, and beliefs must conform and be viewed as acceptable and safe to those within the education system. As indicated before, the deconstruction of the Black identity through education is not a one-stop phenomenon. Generations of Black children have entered into and exited (either successfully or unsuccessfully) the U.S. education system, never fully matriculating through with a Black identity that hasn't been tested, torn, burned, bent, and worn down. Extrapolating this reality with the fact that, as stated prior, identity development is not one-directional but unilateral. Thus, the crucifixion of the Black identity that current Black students are experiencing is compounded by decades of this phenomenon in education. Without the proper support and resources that affirm the existence of the Black identity, and children's right to formalize their identity free of persecution, Black children will not only continue to be seen as the problem, but they will more than likely see their identity itself as a problem.

### Conceptual Framework

#### Shapeshifting

Cox (2015) proffers the conceptual framework known as shapeshifting to explain the various mechanisms that seek to deprive Black girls and women of their sovereignty, autonomy, lived experiences, and ability to carve out identities that affirm their self-worth. She insists that the dominant discourses that "other" Black girls and women through stereotypes, misogynoir tropes, demonization, and adultification are based on a rich pathology within the U.S. and abroad that blames Black girls and women for their plight in society. Even when Black girls and women contort their identity, sense of self-worth, and ideas to match a patriarchal and anti-Black society, validation is fleeting, as their self-destruction and reconstruction are never enough to be seen as citizens in the U.S. and abroad. Rather, as a form of agency, resistance, and liberation, Black girls and women re-create their identities—void of the aforementioned deterrents—to instill in themselves an enduring sense of pride, empowerment, liberation, and safety. Cox's framework is derived from eight years of fieldwork at a Detroit homeless shelter, where workshops in poetry and dance served to cultivate the residents' internal ethos of resisting and dismantling the prescriptive narratives placed on them.

Shapeshifting as a framework has been utilized primarily to examine how Black girls and women resist, persist, and sustain their well-being in anti-Black environments. For example, Joseph et al. (2019) utilize this framework to advocate for the inclusion of Black girls' humanity in learning and growth in mathematics classrooms, while Gist and colleagues (2018) illuminate this framework when critiquing how education at large attributes great academic feats by Black children as heroic, without challenging the barriers in place and the neoliberal ideology that hard work conquers all. The barriers within and around the education system seek to script how, when, and why Black bodies should be celebrated and demonized (Apugo et al., 2023). Elements of Cox's framework are visible throughout the Black diaspora. From how Black children dress, the music they listen to, and how they communicate all the way to code-switching, shapeshifting is not a singular modality that occurs identically for all Black children at the same time or in the same manner. Thus, we enter into this work not only to explore intergenerational racialized experiences with education but to illuminate how shapeshifting occurred, transformed, and liberated multiple generations in one Black family. The questions posed to each member were: What experiences in education did you feel racialized your identity? How did you come to understand and implement approaches that supported your identity development intergenerationally? To what extent did you instill forms of protection (shapeshift) to your identity as you underwent racialized experiences in K-12 education spaces?

### Methodology

#### Research Design

Narrative inquiry as a method seeks to systematically unpack, describe, and explore the personal experiences of an individual or individuals in order to better understand a cultural experience (Clandinin & Caine, 2008). The ability to discover the self, and how the self interprets, reacts, and conceptualizes an experience or experiences offers a unique view into how individuals interact with the world around them. People are influenced by their community and the larger society differently and thus interpret or come to various values, beliefs, and thinking differently as well. How and why the aforementioned aspects occur is directly tied to social constructs that are deeply rooted in one's culture. Socioeconomics, religion, region, gender, race, education, and other elements indirectly and directly alter individuals' perspectives beyond the typical Western, white, male heterosexual canon that is portrayed so often in the media and through literature. The approach offers an alternative, a way to understand a wider angle of how the world is for many individuals through collective stories.

Narrative inquiry merges autobiographic information (stories) to glean perspectives about past experiences. Various artifacts such as pictures, journals, notes, and recordings aid in helping individuals recount how they perceived certain events through their relationship with their own values, beliefs, and shared experiences with those connected to the event itself. Adding to a growing literature base, this study uses an intergenerational approach, which is suitable for understanding racialized experiences in education—across space and time—and how those experiences formalized innovative and robust shapeshifting mechanisms employed by each subsequent generation. The intergenerational approach allows the researchers to explore divergent meanings of experiences and illuminate various challenges and emotions, particularly in relation to the individual and collective response to racializing experiences through the individuals' K-12 educational journey (Song & Wu, 2024).

These experiences, as noted earlier, shape how individuals construct their identity, but also serve to inform individuals of how to protect their identity. Little (2020) indicated that children do not naturally inherit their cultural identity, and to that extent, neither is racial identity automatically passed on from parent to child. Cultural, racial, and ethnic values, practices, and beliefs, when transmitted from one generation to the next, are negotiated and resisted by future generations (Blackledge & Creese, 2008). Through the intergenerational lens, the contextual fabric within a family can be analyzed to ascertain how the transmission of certain values and beliefs occurred and to what extent the future generation accepted, rejected, or negotiated certain values and beliefs. What emotions arose as each subsequent generation encountered a racialized experience in education, with a fundamental understanding of the previous generation's approach to identity formation and resistance? How have future generations returned more evolved values and beliefs regarding identity construction, resistance, and shapeshifting to older generations?

### **Data Collection**

Data collection occurred from June 29th until July 8th, 2024, at a family gathering. This gathering is a significant tradition, as it revolves around the brothers' (John and Matthew) childhood where they would have parties for the 4th of July celebration and John's birthday at the end of June. In this tradition, the family gathers together at Matthew's home to celebrate legacy, discuss future endeavors, and ensure that the younger generation is equipped and prepared to begin the upcoming school year. This year was also a celebration of Domino (John's oldest daughter) graduating from high school and attending Howard University in the Fall.

Data collected from this study revolved around a multilayered reiterative focus group and interview process. The lead researcher individually interviewed each of the family members separately, first starting with the matriarch, then his brother, and then his daughters. Upon interviewing each member, focus groups (family sit-downs over dinner, car rides, movie watching) occurred in which members discussed identity formation, racialization, elements gleaned about resistance, and shapeshifting. Each of the stories was documented and transcribed. Members were allowed to review the transcripts for authenticity and add contextual notes and comments to elements that may have appeared unclear. If members had additional information about their stories or experiences, they were allowed to contact the lead researcher to add further clarity or comments. This ensured that if additional insights, emotions, or memories emerged after the interviews and focus group, individuals would feel comfortable sharing these items.

### **Participants**

The participants include Marilyn, who is the mother of John and Matthew, and the grandmother of Domino and Soledad; John, who is the father of Soledad and Domino; Matthew, who is 3.5 years younger than John and is the uncle of Soledad and Domino; Soledad, who is the youngest child; and Domino, who is the oldest child.

Marilyn was born and raised in East St. Louis, Illinois. The middle child with four siblings, her father was a truck driver, deacon, and former military. Her mother was considered a jack of all trades: a nurse, homemaker, and home cleaner for predominately white families around the St. Louis metro area. Both of her parents were born in the 1920s in Mississippi. Born in 1956, two years after the Brown v. Board decision, Marilyn would experience the ramifications of this legal ruling eleven years later in 1964. It was her third-grade year when she was bused across town from a predominately Black school to an all-White school in East St. Louis. Born in East St. Louis, John's mother (Marilyn) and father (John) lived in East St. Louis until 1987, when his family moved to the outskirts of the city known as Belleville (although the house was zoned for East St. Louis schools, but we will discuss that later on). From PreK until the moment he graduated high school, he always attended a Catholic school. This was a conscious choice made by his mother, whose educational experiences in East St. Louis schools made her realize that outside forces (white flight) had diminished certain opportunities for public schools after she graduated.

Up until 3rd grade, John attended what would be considered racially diverse schools or predominately Black schools in East St. Louis. Upon learning about the disparate treatment by one teacher, Marilyn decided to transfer John (who had already been through two other schools since first grade due to closures) to a predominately white Catholic school in a segregated city known as Belleville. After two years, Matthew would eventually end up at the same school as John; however, he spent one year (Kindergarten) in a predominately Black public school in East St. Louis. They both would spend the remaining years in all-White schools until college.

Lastly, Domino and Soledad were born in Urbana, Illinois – a diverse college town home to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Domino, born in 2006, and Soledad, born in 2009, experienced vastly different preschool experiences. Domino attended a predominately White Catholic preschool for one year, while Soledad attended an all-Black Catholic preschool for a year. Both would transfer schools and migrate across multiple states during their K-12 education. As Black girls, they experienced a time when many thought racism was ending due to the election of President Obama, and another time when racist acts increased during the term of President Trump.

### **Data Analysis**

The data was analyzed by the lead researcher to identify themes related to racialization, identity formation, education, and intergenerational transmission of protective shapeshifting techniques/approaches within the family. A thematic analysis was applied to ascertain patterns of meaning in the responses provided by each of the family members and across their responses. Key to any thematic analysis is the subjective experiences of the researcher in making meaning of the data. The lead researcher's role in this process is detailed in the next section. From the transcripts, codes were extracted. The thematic analysis was best suited for this study as it is atheoretical and can be applied across multiple theoretical frameworks and paradigms (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Additionally, a thematic analysis is flexible in that it allows the researcher the ability to draw multiple meanings while not being constricted to structural issues within a study such as sample size, data collection methods, and research question(s). Themes were formed around key aspects in the areas of shapeshifting, racialized educational experiences, and intergenerational transmission of protective approaches.

### **Reflexivity and Positionality**

As the lead researcher, the methodological approach used requires a level of reflexivity and a transparent explanation of one's positionality. My Blackness has always existed in a state of refinement through pragmatic reflection and reflexive experiences. How I view the world around me and how the world sees me is deeply rooted in my experiences in education, my hometown East St. Louis, Illinois, and my growing understanding of Black identity through the lived experiences of other Black people.



In conceptualizing this study, it is my own experience in predominately white private Catholic schools, where often I was the “first” to do many things that crystalized how I resisted attempts to pathologize my Blackness. What does it mean to be the first, when in reality, you are part of an experience or a community where it is the last to partially accept Black people into the fold? How does it feel to be the problem, when in reality, that statement reflects a continuous struggle to remove the problem label from oneself without complicating problems for oneself in constructing one’s label (identity)?

Having seen race and racism, and experienced racialized experiences at an early age, the “difficult” discussions that many adults seem to want to escape are apathetic to me. These are discussions I have never had the option to opt-in or out of throughout my life. Thus, any biases that may be present are the culmination of the racialized experiences that I have thrived past, witnessed, or protected my friends, family members, and colleagues from. Drawing from Bell’s (1995) racial realization, when he openly admits that racism is an endemic disease for which no cure is in sight, I view efforts to resist while retaining one’s identity as a crucial component that should be passed down from generation to generation to ease the burden of racism on Black children.

### Findings

#### The “First” Phenomenon

“Paid the cost to be the boss,” James Brown

“I vividly remember being in school with all Black kids, and then one day, I found myself on a bus riding to a new school across town where Black people did not go to”, stated Marilyn. “We were the first kids to be assigned to a white school in East St. Louis and I did not like it one bit” she went on to add. For Marilyn, being the first meant leaving the comfort and peaceful confines of her school, where most of her friends went, and where most of her community lived, to a place where she was not accepted and barely tolerated. On numerous occasions, Marilyn would remind her two sons how each bus ride and from school meant being called every racial slur under the sun and having rocks thrown at the bus. Being the first to integrate also came with a badge of uncertainty. She states, “We just did not know what to expect nor did we know how much our schools lacked until we went to their schools.” It was one thing to hold onto concepts and ideas about race and racism based on societal pressure and experiences. It was another type of experience to have your race thrown into your face in a space that is supposed to be filled with learning – every single day. Previously, all her teachers were Black, and now she would be in a classroom where one Black teacher was expected to teach all the Black children regardless of what age or grade level they were in. She indicated that all of the Black kids would be in one room, in the basement every day of the week. Time seemed to flow differently in the basement of her school. Additionally, each of her school-aged siblings was bussed to different schools across East St. Louis. “Each of us had to deal with being Black in our way without the collective unity of being together in one school,” she stated.

Marilyn indicated that this busing only lasted three years, and then suddenly she was back to her old school.

"It was weird, I had spent all these years protecting myself, my identity, while trying to secure a safe spot in the school in regards to integration, to have myself just pushed back into my old school. There was no briefing, no warning, and certainly no "I'm sorry this is happening to you". We were just expected to continue to go to school as if those years did not exist."

This experiment had its consequences. Marilyn admits that she felt slighted, to say the least. "It appeared as if they just used us to meet a mission, and when they did not need us anymore, they dumped us back where we came from," she states. The level of education she received at the White school did change her personally, but at what costs? Coming back to a segregated school meant de-assimilating, something that she struggled with. This shell of an identity she built for her educational experience in the White school was no longer needed, or so she thought. "Working ten times harder just to keep up, because we were behind as it was when we went to the white school" and, "while I hated being there just because of how they explicitly or covertly treated us, it shaped how I viewed being Black from there on out," she stated. This phenomenon of going into hostile environments would not end with Marilyn's generation, a testament to how little society has changed, she states from when she was bussed over.

### **The Second Generation of Shapeshifting and Yet...Still the "First"**

For John and Matthew, the charge was simple: don't mess things up. Now, that came with a plethora of do's and don'ts which was complicated by contextual factors beyond their understanding - at first. For me (John), going to school was fun. "There was never a time where I did not want to be in school, to the point where I had trophies for perfect attendance multiple years, and never missed a day of school in high school. Prior to attending my last elementary school, I interacted with racial groups from all parts of the world because of the private schools I attended." Remember, Marilyn chose to send her sons to private schools because she saw the difference in education quality between public schools in East St. Louis and private schools. However, when investigating my last school in East St. Louis and other schools, she saw that it had succumbed to dumbing down the curriculum for students rather than lifting them up. I hated leaving because, this time it felt different, and sure enough, it was.

While I was not the first Black person to enter that school, it sure felt like it. In 1995, I was the first Black male to graduate, and the second Black person to graduate (the first one graduated the year before). I remember coming to school and literally having to explain the existence of Black people to every boy, girl, adult, teacher, custodian, etc. While some White children did not know who I was or what Black people were all about, it was quickly made known to me that some had a deficit perspective of Black people.

It was different from my mother's experience in that, racism was both explicit and undercover, with the majority of macro and microaggression occurring in how I was treated. Rather than calling me a nigger, I was deemed one of the good ones (mind you that got a couple of people in trouble). Rather than interacting with me, I vividly remember some children whom I became "associates" within the first few weeks, ignoring me after a while because their parents found out I was Black. My first reaction to all this was pure exhaustion, but I always had a reprieve. If I could just make it to the final bell, I would be picked up by my grandparents and I could go back to "my" reality. Well, that did not last long as soon my grandparents would not be able to pick me up from school and I was forced to go to latchkey (an afterschool program).

Man....I was HOT. Seething. So mad that the first day I was supposed to report to Latchkey, I ran away. I didn't get far (maybe three blocks) and stopped at a dentistry office to call my mom to let her know where I was. Needless to say, that night was bad. My exhaustion grew because I was tired. Tired of interacting with White people, tired of having to explain myself, tired of being alienated, tired of having to learn their culture, values, ideas, and perspectives, and tired of having to work harder just to stay above water. After school was my break from Whiteness, from having to codeswitch, from having to realign myself to their expectations, because messing up was not an option in my household. What also complicated my feelings was the fact that there was another Black boy in my grade who was always getting in trouble. He was the standard of bad (although he really was not bad, most of the time misunderstood) and I knew I could not be associated with that pattern. Thus, the only option was not to work at things twice as hard, I had to work 50 times harder to keep myself outside of that racialized orbit of deficit that many students and teachers held against me.

Interestingly, my brother felt this same weight and the weight of being my brother as well. "Man, when I came to the school everyone already knew you and what you were about. They were looking for reasons to tear me up, mainly because I came in smarter than my classmates," said Matthew. The year Matthew spent in public school gave him an academic advantage when he moved schools. While he was not the first Black boy the private White school saw, he was the first Black boy they ever witnessed be considered gifted academically. He notes, There were times where they knew I had the right answer or I performed better than the rest of the class. Most of the teachers would purposely use that opportunity to put me down only because I was Black. Even some of my classmates would use the opportunity to call me an "good nigger" or one of the ones we liked. While those experiences had me ready to fight, I knew that fighting was not an option. Marilyn was not having that.

He was right. Enduring racialized experiences in the classroom was not accompanied by any sense of reprieve or relief inside and outside of school. Both of us were trained not to succumb to the idea that we were less than any other child in that school, regardless of race. To thrive, in spite of it, we were constantly reminded of the harshness of racism that my mother experienced in the 60s.

The label of being Black was not a stigma to us. The label of being from East St. Louis was not a hindrance to us because the previous generation had already shared their experience and interpretation of these experiences. Our excellence was the standard because that bar was higher than the one set by society and some of the teachers who taught us. Besides, at this point, it was just Marilyn raising us, and every Black child knows not to have their mother come up to school for anything negative. We both knew that being the first in many ways was a lonely road in that we needed to both adapt but not lose who we were evolving into as we grew up. These experiences would narrow our focus not only on who we wanted to be but how we wanted to go about being “that” person concerning our Black identity. We never transcended racism, however, at an early age we formed dispositions and safe guards that would help us weather hostility, while still remaining open minded to White peers and teachers who genuinely cared about us.

While we never fully shared how we felt about those K-12 years, this inquiry helped us realize that we were both shapeshifting not based on a restrictive education environment, not based on White normative values, but because of what was instilled in us by previous generations in our family. Additionally, we found out through this process that we were shapeshifting through each other’s experiences. Matthew realized what I had worked for, not being what their notions of Black were. For myself, I saw my brother as having an unbridled confidence in who he was early on, not as just my brother, but as a Black genius in his own right. This level of confidence, genius, and centered Black self-concept would grow as the next generation entered the K-12 space.

### **A Newer Generation of Shapeshifting**

As the daughter of John, nieces of Matthew, and granddaughters of Marilyn, Domino and Soledad entered the world with a hefty weight of expectations. Similar to Marilyn, John, and Matthew, Domino and Soledad would shift schools multiple times during their lifetime. While the prior generations shifted for educational attainment, Domino and Soledad would move for economic mobility with their father from Champaign, IL, East St. Louis, IL, Charlotte, North Carolina, and finally College Station, Texas – all within a span of six years. Interestingly, their experiences through each of the phases of life would echo a similar tone: shapeshifting not to meet the pressure in school but to achieve their individual goals.

Domino, being the oldest, would spend one year in a predominately White private catholic preschool, and then three years in a diverse public school prior to moving to East St. Louis, IL. Similar to generations before her, she would be one of the few Black students in her classroom in her preschool. Domino states,

I would always ask myself why everyone looked different than me. Also, I had what I considered at that time a weird name. Kids, teachers, and anyone who heard it would ask me why and how I got the name. However, any of these questions were put to rest as I knew how to “do” school well.

“Do” school for Domino was to come to school, not cause trouble, and excel in her academics. Excel so well that before taking the gifted and talent test in the 2nd grade (to which she failed the actual test, but was recommended by a teacher to get in) she would regularly be called in by child psychologists to take tests at the local university. As her father, I quickly realized that, compared to me at that age, Domino required a different type of learning environment that focused on cultivating inquiry and taking calculated risks. This type of constructivist approach seemingly did not go too well with her teachers throughout her K-12 environment.

Domino: I would continuously ask teachers questions to the point that they would brush me off. Their assignments became too easy, and I wanted more. As I got older, I began to realize that the more I learned, the more I became comfortable with my identity as a Black girl in these spaces. What made it challenging is that the further I went in my educational journey, I saw fewer Black students, particularly Black boys. I would enter into classrooms and often be the first Black girl my teachers saw who excelled. I would be delighted when I saw other Black students in my classes as I got to middle and high school.

As she contended with being the only one in honors courses, she also experienced a level of discomfort because it took her longer to complete assignments and to understand concepts than many of her peers. Several times in middle school and high school, because of the lack of understanding from her teachers (many of whom had few interactions with a wide range of cultures) she would internalize how teachers treated her for not moving as fast as everyone else. Domino stated, “I hated the way some teachers would make me feel. They treated me as if I was dumb, but I KNEW I was not dumb. My folks would always remind me that if it takes you two or twenty hours to learn a concept, everyone learns differently. I constantly sought perfection, and through the years, I realized it was not me who was the problem. The problem was the way education devalues Black children who do not see themselves in the content that is provided or how it is being taught. Having a supportive family that dialogued with me during my triumphs and struggles help realize who I was, and how being Black is never something that be fully eroded. When I had problems concerning racism and sexism, I brought them home and my folks openly discussed it with me.”

For Domino, this was a significant shift in how her race and gender were always a threat in the classroom. She admits that her schools were never really a safe space for all children. She realized this in middle school when her social studies and English teachers continuously avoided bringing up topics in the curriculum that deal with race. Domino noted, “any time I would ask for books to read about Black people, suddenly the room fell silent. It was like I was cursing out loud in class and needed to be reminded, that Black people’s experiences are not curriculum worth.” This concept of “silencing Blackness” was prevalent in the schools that Marilyn, John, and Matthew attended – which were predominately White.

Shapeshifting, for Domino, was more of her diving deeper into her Black experience at home and in school. She became fascinated about all subjects and when teachers in her middle school and high school would reveal scholars, scientists, or leaders, she would instantly search for Black scholars, scientists, and leaders who lived at the same time as the ones mentioned to her in class. Domino stated, "The students in my class did autobiographies on John Kennedy, and I wanted to do mine on Angela Davis, Coretta Scott King, and James Baldwin." These individuals represented who I was and offered me a glimpse of "Blackness unchecked", she stated. She believes this confidence is the direct result of watching her previous generations form identities that were not tarnished by bad experiences in school.

I saw my father get his doctorate, my grandmother started her own business, and my uncle worked at a Fortune 500 company. My thoughts were, if they can do it, I can do my own thing as well. My father would have me read the Philadelphia Negro, Critical Race Theory, Patricia Hill Collins, and other texts that did not see being Black as a burden. While I would often ask why, I realized as I went through high school that these texts provided me the ability to evolve who I was not based on bad experiences but based on what I wanted my Blackness to mean to me.

As Domino traversed through her school and eventually graduated from high school, she realized that her responsibility was to ensure that her experiences of being the "only one" in school while being gifted would not transfer over to her younger sibling. "Everything they taught me, every saying or perspective they provided me I offered up to my younger sister – and just like younger sisters do, she didn't listen" she stated.

But did she? In conducting these interviews and focus groups, Soledad would be the last to offer up her experiences in school concerning race, gender, and educational achievement. Soledad indicated that her identity as a Black girl never really came into question until high school. She felt that before that, she would go to school, get the grades she needed, and repeat the process year after year. "It was not until high school when I would be questioned not because I was doing something completely wrong in class, but because I did not respond the way they saw other Black students interact to things," Soledad indicated. When asked to clarify that remark, she stated, "Again, I am not going to have my parents come up to the school for anything I did wrong. I got in trouble many of times with teachers because when they said, "I am going to call your parents" I would say go ahead. I was not trying to be smart, but if you believe they are going to automatically side with you because you are the teacher then you clearly do not understand how to communicate. This happened my first year in high school when the teacher saw me making a stern face at her when she was reprimanding some of my friends in class. The teacher was White, and when she saw me just look at her, and then look back at them, she told me to see her after class. Mind you, I looked at her with a stern face because that is always how my face is, emotionless half the time. It could be considered a resting "b" face, but that's my face and that is how I choose to wear it."

Soledad states that the teacher then told her it was an option to come to speak with her outside the classroom. She stated that she knew it was a trick because if she left the classroom without speaking with the teacher, she would have received an office referral for a detention. In speaking with the teacher, Soledad stated that the reason she was called to the hallway was that the teacher did not like the “expression on her face”. After revealing this explanation, the teacher indicated that she would be contacting her parents about what happened. Soledad explains that these types of interactions were normal for her, not because she was non-compliant, but because she did not fit the stereotype of what they saw Black girls should be in class: silent and obedient. “I told her she could contact my parents, and she looked shocked as if she was surprised that I was not afraid or willing to apologize for just being in class and making a face”, she stated. Soledad notes that these types of experiences are normal not just for her, but for other Black girls that she interacts with in school. “I know that I am Black by the way some teachers treat Black kids in our school. It’s like they do not know how to relate so they have to treat us differently than non-Black kids,” she stated.

Throughout the conversation, Soledad repeatedly indicated that “I know my mission and I know who I am”, which is to get an education and to get out. Despite the experiences being an almost a weekly occurrence in her life at school, Soledad stated that it does not get to her. She stated, I find teachers who care about me. I learn from those teachers who see my race and what I bring to the table as a benefit to the classroom. Those are the classes I enjoy. Those are the people that I choose to be around. It is the same with my classmates. I don’t hang around people who want to destroy my Blackness because it somehow offends them.

Unbothered. That word was uttered by Soledad towards the end of the discussion. Unbothered by experiences that attempted to bring her down or make her question the core of who she is. Soledad echoed many of the sentiments that her older sister mentioned during the conversation and indicated that much of what she does in the classroom and on her sports teams is due to her seeing and hearing conversations between Domino, her father John, and her uncle Matthew. She also indicated that while many of these conversations were in passing, she would pair what was being said with older conversations with her grandmother when she was younger. She ended the conversation by stating, “I knew that these types of experiences would happen, but I cannot change or prevent them, I can only stand on who I am and how I slay.”

## Discussion

The aforementioned findings come from seeking to understand how three generations experienced racialization through education and what protective factors were implemented that allowed these individuals to shapeshift and not self-destruct. The findings reveal two salient themes around intergenerational mentoring and purposeful resistance.

### Intergenerational Mentoring

Each of the participants offered what can be described as intergenerational mentoring: learning from current and past experiences by family members who were exposed to various forms of racism. For example, Soledad articulated how she learned to weather actions by teachers or other students from listening to conversations with her older sibling, her father and uncle, and her grandmother. While these conversations were not always explicitly directed towards her, they reveal the power of communication and counternarratives as forms of empowering younger Black children. Racism appears in many forms, and unfortunately, Black children are forced to encounter multiple dimensions of racism in education (Williams, 2024). Understanding that these experiences will occur is important. However, what the findings underscore is the open communication between generations about what is required to keep one's identity intact despite the numerous inevitable racialized experiences that one will encounter in school. As seen through Marilyn's recount, the lack of explanation of why certain decisions were made (busing) led to a greater internalization of racialized experiences than what Domino and Soledad reveal. Whereas John and Matthew experienced a second rendition of being the only Black children in schools, Domino and Soledad found themselves often being the only Black children in their advanced courses. Both types of experiences of isolation in racialized settings can inflict harm on children, regardless of where they are in their journey to develop their identity. However, whereas Marilyn was forced to endure, John and Matthew were forced to just persist, the findings show how both Domino and Soledad actively found refuge with supportive networks and their family. Research shows that intergenerational support can provide a narrative to children that their culture, values, and beliefs are important despite societal notions that indicate otherwise (Song & Wu, 2024). This type of support – through mentoring – is often absent in scholarship about Black children and Black families.

### Purposeful Resistance

Racism is real, it is present, and it is harmful despite any notion that this discriminatory construct/action has dissipated. For Black people, the sentiment and expression of anti-Blackness exists for all Black students regardless of how old they are. The findings support a litany of studies and experiences by Black people regarding the relatively young age at which racism exposes itself to them. For Marilyn and John, it was at the age of 8, for Matthew it was at the age of five. Each of their transitions into racialized learning environments marked a time when education and resistance against racism became complimentary pursuits.



Both John and Matthew directly benefited from Marilyn's lived experiences, similar to many Black children in the U.S. The notion of, "You have to work twice as hard to get half as far" was a constant reminder that resistance requires a greater effort and toll. Rather than allowing overtly or covert racist actions or sayings to unravel the hard work put in, John and Matthew aligned their practices to resist through achieving. As Matthew indicated, he knew he had to work harder not because he was lacking, but to push back on any potential racialized experience that may occur for him either misbehaving or not achieving academically.

The extension of "high performance" as a form of resistance was also visible with Domino and Soledad. Their enrollment in honors or advanced placement courses was a disruption to the racialized and gendered ideology that persists in education. To be young, Black, a girl, and gifted is not often portrayed in today's society as a positive. Scores of studies highlight how Black girls' pursuit of a quality education is situated within the confluence of racism and sexism, and both of these -isms either silence Black girls, shatter their self-efficacy, or remove them from the classroom completely (Blake et al., 2011; Blake et al., 2022). Still, what is visible between the generations is the transition from resistance as survival, to resistance through achieving, to resistance as a form of shapeshifting. Domino and Soledad both actively resisted vocalizing their displeasure – accurately – to teachers and administrators. Their resistance was not a matter of accident but rather through the culmination of knowledge and wisdom from previous generations of how to attack multiple forms of racism and sexism in their classroom.

These findings align with research that discusses how Black people are physically, emotionally, cognitively, spiritually, and academically required to shoulder a heavy load, which typically results in diminished well-being (Boyd-Layne & Burch, 2019; Smith et al., 2007). These findings show racialized experiences in education are dangerous, and despite numerous attempts to "sensitize" teachers to Black children in teacher education, schools, whether private or public, are not constructed in a manner to prevent racialized experiences. Thus, the recommendations we put forth are not necessarily new or novel, nor do they focus on the systems and actors that create these experiences. Rather, they draw from the lived experiences of multiple Black people and, thus, are for Black people renewed self-determination.

### **Recommendations and Conclusion**

First, as Black parents must ultimately send their children to schools, regardless of the demographics of the students and educators, they need to have open and honest dialogue with their children. This dialogue needs to be continuous and open to investigate how children learn about racism and what they feel before, during, and after racialized experiences. Simply knowing that racism (and any other ism) that a Black child may encounter is insufficient given the multiple modalities (in class, on social media, in their community) that racism can present itself. In these conversations, parents of Black children must offer approaches to Black children that affirm that Black children are valuable members of the household and their community. Additionally, these conversations should be age-appropriate and offer approaches to Black children to actively resist racism in a manner that they are comfortable with applying in their social context.

Second, both Black parents and Black children should understand that there is not a “one-size-fits-all” approach when protecting one’s self from racialized experiences in schools. Whereas some students may feel comfortable with speaking up in class, some students may want to engage in some type of therapy with avenues that affirm their identity. This can be through seeing Black-aligned therapists, interacting with mentors, engaging in sports, video games, anime, music, or any other type of outlet; Black students deserve environments that pour into their soul and identity with an immeasurable richness. The concept of saying, “Well I went through it, so you can get through it” is unfair to Black children and it legitimizes the idea that these racialized experiences are justified to the academic and social maturation of Black children. Cox’s work underscores how various outlets poured into Black women, rather than dehumanizing them. All generations of Black people must be searching for avenues to affirm Black children and equip them with the necessary tools to not only survive racialized experiences but to thrive past them.

Finally, the efforts by Black children in schools will always face scrutiny no matter what academic growth they display. Often, the pursuit of an “A” in class comes at a cost, particularly for Black children who must interpret a curriculum that does not represent them. This cost is due to the pressure of having to perform and behave better in class so as not to be labeled and stereotyped as the loud, ignorant, underachieving, disrespectful Black child. For those raising Black children, recognize the effort that Black children are putting forth and let them know that their best is always going to be good enough, regardless of what grade they receive. What Black children face in their classrooms is different than what Black parents and Black grandparents endured in many different ways. Having a supportive home life helps Black children to feel comfortable with being vulnerable, a benefit they are hardly afforded in school and society. This allows Black children to openly discuss who they are and critically examine how they examine the world they live in. This offers them the opportunity to develop their sense of agency, afforded by the unrelenting support they receive at home. How Black children shapeshift and inform their identity development is a direct result of what is poured into them from those whom they consider their family. The transmittal of intergenerational knowledge and ways of knowing is not for the sake of one; rather, it is the responsibility of the one (each generation) to impart these things for the benefit of all current and future Black generations so that no Black child will ever need to shapeshift again.

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**EPILOGUE: SYNERGIZING SHAPESHIFTING TO MOVE US FORWARD**

John A. Williams III

Synergy - a word that explains the exponential potential and possibilities when two or more elements, factors, components, or ideas cohabit in a particular space. We often use the word to showcase how individual efforts, when working together formalize greater results than if these individual efforts were conducted separately. An excellent example of this concept can be seen with the automobile. While the automobile revolutionized travel, its use was fairly limited in the early 20th century. This was not due to a sheer lack of innovation. Simply, the automobile in of itself was not capable of traversing the rugged terrain, whereas horses still performed well on all types of terrain. If any type of inclement weather occurred automobiles would be stuck in the mud for some time, requiring multiple people to help dislodge it upon the land drying up. The automobile required a partner. Something to partner with and allow it to reach its full potential as the earliest automobile could reach a top speed of 10 miles per hour. For reference, the average human being can run around 7 miles per hour, and at top speed, humans can reach up to 20 miles per hour. The automobile was not a convenience...until humans started paving roads with asphalt. Now, the use of paved roads was not anything relatively new, as even Mesopotamians used this item. It would not be until the proliferation of automobiles in the early 1900s that asphalt would revolutionize humans' ability to travel shorter and longer distances faster than a horse without having to travel by train. Two inventions and one synergistic collaboration have collectively transformed the manner in which humans travel by air, land, space, and sea.

Synergy. The collective efforts of articles in this special issue underscore how shapeshifting by itself is relatively ineffective. To change, alter, or revise one's self has little meaning if done in isolation and for the mere convenience of one's survival. Shapeshifting requires a partner. A collaborative agent that amplifies its power, essence, and influence. What these articles reveal is that shapeshifting in itself appears selfish, yet the collective ethos around these articles underscores how shapeshifting synergizes the efforts of many to improve the conditions of current and future generations. These articles critically address long-standing barriers in our societal fabric, and instead of discussing only the inequitable experiences in education, the authors poignantly offer solutions and recommendations. These recommendations individually offer a path forward at each educational level (high school, undergraduate, doctoral, and professoriate). Yet when synergized, the recommendations carve out approaches to identifying marginalizing phenomena (e.g., racialized experiences, imposter syndrome), and specific approaches to diminish if not neutralize these phenomena without sacrificing one's racial identity.

First, these articles explore the themes of belonging, community resilience, and self-worth - all necessary components that synergistically galvanize one's ability to shapeshift. These themes are especially highlighted in Lewis et al., Milbourne et al., Redwine Johnson et al., and Thomas. Each article offered a collective examination of how transitioning into different higher education settings, as students, came with hardships that attempted to devalue individuals' racial, spiritual, and gendered identities. These hardships were mitigated by their ability to find a community that affirmed their being and by seeking mentorship that taught them how to navigate this new terrain. The aforementioned articles offered a collective examination of shapeshifting, while the articles by Patrón-Vargas, Hollis, Guerin, Warren, and Gray, offer an individualized perspective on how journeys in historically white spaces offer alienating experiences even with institutions that are presented as "safe spaces". Their articles highlight the importance of communal and ancestral grounding: knowing who you are and anchoring one's self in principles and practices that nurture one's identity. Individuals from marginalized communities often find themselves "recruited" to alienating spaces without being provided the necessary support that affirms who they are and the community they come from.

Second, we find in this special issue that shapeshifting is not a one-size-fits-all strategy, nor does shapeshifting have an official start and end date. Authors James-Galloway and Galloway offer a cogent summarization of their twin positionality on Blackness, as they transition from doctoral students, K-12 educators, to now teacher educators as doctors. Although they have traversed the educational landscape from K-12 to higher education, they exist in a reality where shapeshifting resolidifies their research agenda, positionality, and pedagogical approaches. How they teach is Black-centered, what they research is Black people, and what reaffirms their existence is Blackness. This article should remind us that to be Black is not a deficit and the ability to shapeshift is grounded in having a robust understanding of history from an Afrocentric perspective. Each of these respected scholars' ability to remain firm in their stance on racial justice stems from a well-informed knowledge of where they came from. The transference of knowledge, or the ability to shapeshift, is also present in Williams et al.'s article about intergenerational shapeshifting. The article sheds light on three generations' worth of K-12 experiences, where shapeshifting transitioned from a survival tactic, a resilience tactic, to a thriving tactic. What their findings underscore is the essential need to communicate multiple methods of shapeshifting to current and future generations, in a manner that is both applicable and salient.

Finally, the collection of these articles injects shapeshifting as a verb, action, and a phenomenological approach to systematically navigating multiple interlocking forms of oppression in society. Rather than passively existing through life, suffering each form of oppression in silence, these scholars offer nuanced approaches to protecting oneself. Whereas whiteness actively and passively weaponizes race and racial identity, shapeshifting rebuffs the concept that one's race and racial identity are constricted to white racial constructs. The scholars' identities were forged through complex experiences, and rather than regressing, they actively sought to empower others - through shapeshifting. Additionally, these stories serve as guiding lamp posts. These narratives should inform those entering into and those who are currently enduring hostile racialized spaces. The spaces that offer a hostile intentionality do not deserve to feast on your identity and humanity. You do not and should not suffer in silence while your humanity is stripped away. You should not feel as if adapting to protect one's mental wellness is a form of weakness or that it is anti-black. Rather, rest and reprieve are also forms of resistance. Observation to acquire transferable skill sets for the betterment of the community is a form of resistance. These hostile spaces should not be afforded the ability to see your entire self, only to try and strip you down. Throughout this special issue, the scholars actively chose to present who they wanted to be in spaces that were not kind or supportive to historically marginalized groups. Simultaneously, they found and cultivated spaces that afforded them the privilege of not having to utilize shapeshifting techniques to survive. The idea behind shapeshifting is powerful by itself. However, when it is coupled with the idea of establishing a critical mass of individuals passing along their abilities to current and future generations, it is only then that historically marginalized groups can have a space of their own. Shapeshifting is the vehicle (automobile) and when coupled with a pathway or space (asphalt) shapeshifting allows individuals to become shapeshifted: Molded in a manner that allows them the opportunity to operationalize a multitude of experiences, capabilities, entities, and strategies across various racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, linguistic, spiritual, and cognitive realms, to actively resist, persist, rest, and thrive through any time, space, and place.