

## **Epilogue: Synergizing Shapeshifting to Move US Forward**

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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-Gallaway and Gallaway 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.